

Art, Censorship and Nuclear Warfare

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ABSTRACT

The traumas of nuclear warfare, from 1945 to the end of the Cold War, are not merely calamities of the past. They still have contemporary consequences, contaminating the health, lives and memories of the many nuclearized cultures in Japan, Oceania and other places. The author argues that looking at past and present artworks representing the nuclear age helps us to understand nuclear nations' biopower and its lasting effects.

If something positive can come out of the dreadful nuclear accident at Fukushima's power plant in 2011, it is the revival of interest in nuclear matters seen in its aftermath. The arts participate in this revival. In 2016, for example, the United Nations headquarters in New York City exhibited *Chernobyl: Tragedy, Lessons, Hope*. Such an exhibition is instrumental in increasing awareness of the civilian catastrophe, yet it elicits the question of why military nuclear traumas so rarely become the topic of exhibitions, or at least outside of Japan. These traumas still have consequences today, and artists have produced significant artworks that convey particularly well the inhumanity of nuclear weapons, especially in places where the traumas occurred. This article discusses some of the pivotal works and the reasons for their lack of visibility through three "past" traumas: A-bombs, Cold War tests, and the effects of uranium mining—which exist alongside and in addition to any civilian or military use of the atom.

HIROSHIMA: THE "CITY OF CORPSES"

Having had two cities almost entirely destroyed by nuclear weapons, Japan hosts a profusion of thoughtful artworks, some produced by direct witnesses of the 1945 bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the visual arts, works by Makima Kenzo, Yamamoto Keisuke, Takamasu Keisō and the Marukis (Iri and Toshi) with their Hiroshima Panels series, directly represented the catastrophes' aftermath [1]. Literature played

a particularly central role: *Genbaku bungaku* (A-bomb literature) is a genre regrouping works on the bombings, mostly produced by artists who were also *hibakusha* (bomb survivors), which spreads over several generations, since some were only children in 1945. The genre is also inclusive, from songs and poetry to photography, literature, cinema and paintings (such as those by the Marukis).

Ōta Yōko's *Shikabane no machi* (City of Corpses, 1948) is representative of the genre, and Ōta is usually referred to as "the" A-bomb writer. In the novel, she describes the blast she witnessed, the destruction and the suffering of the burned and agonized victims. In one instance, she details the piles of corpses she and her family had to walk through to reach the hospital, where they hoped their injuries would be treated. The corpses were bloated, stinking and rotting in the summer heat and swarmed by flies and maggots.

She also describes some of the survivors, and takes care to describe women in particular:

The women were an ugly sight. A girl was walking about naked, with nothing on her feet. A young girl had not one strand of hair. An old woman had both shoulders dislocated, and her arms hung limply. . . . People were no longer vomiting up everything, as had been the case yesterday; but there were people whose whole bodies were covered with broil-like burns—skin hanging off, bleeding, exuding an oil-like secretion. They had all slept naked on the sand, so sand and blades of grass and bits of straw and the like were pasted onto the putrid-looking flesh of their burns [2].

After reading some of the A-bomb novels, the reader realizes something quite evident: the impact on the civilians and, thus, on women's and children's bodies. It is precisely this aspect that is so often forgotten. Matsuo Sachiko, a *hibakusha* from Nagasaki who regularly testifies in official proceedings, illustrated this impact on civilians, recounting the terrible sight of ash-burned, bloated and decaying bodies she witnessed at the age of 11, before explaining that something left an even stronger experience with her: behind her house, a pregnant woman's body was decaying. Her skull could

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be seen and then the baby's skull. No one did anything to cover them up, but that was because there was nothing to cover them up with [3]. Matsuo Sachiko was 85 years old at the time of her 2018 speech, and one question is pressing in Japan: How will the testimonies continue to be spoken and heard after all of the *hibakusha* have died?

Because of the dreadfulness of the suffering, the lack of circulation of decades of *hibakusha* testimonies outside of Japan is surprising. In the 1980s, A-bomb literature's many works were canonized in Japan through the publication by Holp Editions of a collection of more than a dozen thick volumes regrouping hundreds of novels, songs, poetry, and theoretical works. But out of these, only a handful of novels or poetic works were translated into English (mostly in the 1990s). Of the visual testimonies of Yamahata Yōsuke, who took pictures of Nagasaki one day after the bomb, and of the many other photographers who portrayed the victims after the war, only the mildest have circulated.

One central reason for this invisibility is Japan's alliance with Nazi Germany and its actions as a feared colonial empire. Susan Sontag also analyzed the problem of nationalism (and the idea that evil always lives elsewhere) when she analyzed in 2001 how photographs of lynchings of African Americans began to be discussed even as discussion of several other national calamities was avoided. The pictures first allowed for the acknowledgment of the monstrosity of chattel slavery and continuing violence against African Americans in the United States—an unarguably pressing necessity even today. Yet, while this represents “a benchmark of civic virtue,” Sontag explains, “acknowledgement of the American use of disproportionate firepower in war (in violation of one of the cardinal laws of war) is very much not a national project.” And yet, as she stated: “The children of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were no less innocent than the young African-American men (and a few women) who were butchered and hanged from trees in small-town America” [4].

Another reason for the lack of circulation is censorship. In Japan, for about 10 years, beginning on 21 September 1945, General Douglas MacArthur and the General Headquarters of the Supreme Commander enforced a Press Code, censoring and regulating publications on the bombings in the media and the arts. One of Ōta's chapters was censored, and she later recounted her encounter with the censorship officers in a cynical fashion in *Sanjō* (Montaintop, 1955). Other A-bomb writers, such as Hara Tamiki and Nagai Takashi, attempted to publish directly in English to circumvent censorship in Japan, while Shōda Shinōe distributed her poetry book illegally.

By the time censorship was lifted in Japan, the Cold War had begun, and thus the focus of attention had shifted to the Pacific, but censorship continued. In the United States, the Atomic Energy Act of 1946 took effect, and in France, the “Très Secret Défense” also shrouded in secrecy the country's Cold War military nuclear activities. Meanwhile, antinuclear artworks by none other than Robert Rauschenberg, Salvador Dalí, Pablo Picasso, Yves Klein, Nancy Spero and William S. Burroughs were produced in the U.S. and Europe. In spite of these, the lasting effect of censorship is such that even today, the Oceanian victims are still invisible.

PACIFIC GLOOM

Contemporary Pacific literature does not mince words when revealing the actual human and ecological impacts in Oceania. Marshallese poet and visual artist Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's verses in *Iep Jältok: Poems from a Marshallese Daughter* (2017) are beautiful and sharp, and depict miscarriages, leukemia and lingering radioactivity that added to the historical traumas: the lies from the militaries, a forced exodus, the rain of radioactive ashes contaminating the displaced population and the contamination of islands that remain uninhabitable. In “History Project,” which is based on archival material she read when she was 15, Jetñil-Kijiner writes about the “jellyfish babies,” so named because they have no head, no bones and skin “red as tomatoes” when born:

I read firsthand accounts
 . . .
 the miscarriages gone unspoken
 the broken translations
 I never told my husband
 I thought it was my fault
 I thought
 there must be something
 wrong
 inside me [5]

In another poem, “Monster” (2017), performed in front of the Genbaku Dome in Hiroshima, Jetñil-Kijiner relates that there were already 574 stillbirths and miscarriages in 1951, compared to 52 before the bombs. And the problem persists. In “Bursts of Bianca” and “Fishbone Hair,” she describes her young niece Bianca's struggle with leukemia, and her death, including how Bianca learned the English words for the disease: “Most Marshallese / can say they've mastered the language of cancer” [6]. Unarguably, the Cold War's nuclear power still contaminates lives today, although the Oceanians were not official enemies of the imperialist powers that contaminated them. In addition, Oceanians had and still have a closer relation to nature, in which natural elements are seen as personifications that must be respected. The Marshallese and Polynesian societies are also matrilineal, which perhaps makes the contamination of women and children (who are more sensitive to radioactivity) even more shocking to their members. Jetñil-Kijiner explains that “Iep Jältok” in her title refers to a basket whose opening faces the speaker, as well as to girls and to the Marshallese matrilineal society as a whole.

The French nuclear program in the area fares no better than the American one. In French Polynesia, Tahitian writer Rai Chaze in *Vai: La rivière au ciel sans nuage* (Vai: The River with Sky without Cloud, 1990) also portrayed leukemia and contaminated landscapes and food. The metaphor for the nuclear test is one of rape, perpetuated by “intelligent” men who then looked away from the permanent pain and consequences:

In the island of the night, the soil trembled. The light of the intelligent people has risen over the flows like a mushroom. . . .

Boom! . . . The wall was cracked and the sea sprung out. The intelligent men danced the ball of fear. From their apocalyptic costume, they colored the inner thighs of their pants in yellow. To the violin of the sirens, they quivered, they shivered and reeled, drunk of panic until that earth became quiet.

Bloated by pain, the island of the night became quiet, exhausted. The sea rose, with a salty taste, muffling the whining of her wounds. . . .

The intelligent men closed their eyes not to see [7].

The metaphor of rape is accentuated by the word “violin,” which is phonetically similar to “rape” in French (“violer / nous violons”), and by the word “siren,” which also means “mermaid.” Here, Chaze’s writing also criticizes what is now called “rape culture” in patriarchal societies. This culture of sexual violence spread via colonization, as the Polynesian writer Chantal Spitz reminds us: “there was no brothel before . . . there were no prostitutes before” [8].

The nuclear traumas add to the impact of more than a century of colonization that the poet Henri Hiro protested in vain in the 1970s, when continental France moved its nuclear program from the Algerian desert to the Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls after the Algerian War of Independence. Patriarchal and colonial power thus has deep-rooted effects. Moreover, the embarrassing problem of nuclear waste repositories for the materials used during hundreds and hundreds of atmospheric and underground tests remains and still spreads contamination now: Constructed decades ago, they are no longer secure. The effects of the Cold War thus continue to unfold, in addition to the dangers of global warming and the sinking of several Pacific islands.

In spite of their importance, these issues do not permeate elsewhere in the world and, more specifically, to the nuclear nations at the origin of the tests. One particular turning point in Jetñil-Kijiner’s poems occurs where she writes about the use of goats and pigs for nuclear tests, the pictures of which had circulated in the U.S. and provoked outrage over animal abuse:

At 15

I want radioactive energy megatons of tnt and a fancy degree
anything and everything I could ever need
to send ripples of death through a people who put goats
before human beings
so their skin
can shrivel
beneath the glare
of hospital room lights
three generations later [9]

The pictures of effects on the Marshall Islanders themselves hardly circulated because censorship was, and always is, the nuclear age’s darkest and most invisible power (even involving some of the power plant accidents). Most declassified images and films are of mushroom clouds. Thus, the lack of visibility of Pacific islanders and Japanese *hibakusha* should not be attributed solely to the invisibility of radioac-

tivity, or even to language barriers to the circulation of the testimonies.

Countering past and present censorship is an absolute necessity. Pacific island artists such as Jetñil-Kijiner, Alexander Lee and Viri Taimana, for example, produce contemporary visual artworks that challenge this silencing. Yet silencing remains strong in patriarchal and colonial societies: Self-censorship is expected of the women concerning stillbirth and abortions and is at times regulated via juridical and carceral systems. Self-censorship is also expected of the colonized and decolonized nations (something brought to light in feminist and anticolonial movements of the 1960s but still being negotiated to this day). Finally, these patriarchal and colonial systems continue even today with the issue of the extraction of uranium ore.

IS URANIUM MINING GREEN?

In his famous 1939 letter to President Roosevelt, at the start of the Manhattan Project, Albert Einstein mentioned a mine in the then-Belgian Congo as a possible counter to the Nazi takeover of the Jáchymov mine in Czechoslovakia, which was the only inland Western mine at the time. (The United States began mining inland, in or near Native American lands in Arizona, New Mexico and Utah, for example, along with Canada—also taking ores on Indigenous lands—in the 1940s.) After the Second World War, France mined its colonies and former colonies in Madagascar, Congo and Niger (the Nigerian mines are still being operated). The United Kingdom mined aboriginal lands in Australia before moving on to South Africa and Namibia.

From the beginning of the nuclear age, such issues were depicted in the arts. In *Radium* (1937), Austrian writer Rudolf Brunngraber compares the life of a scientist studying radium hoping to make a living by advancing radium cures to the greed and wealth of a banker and shareholder of a mining company in the Belgian Congo, Pierre Cynac. Cynac’s hopes for a global monopoly of minerals are rejuvenated when he reads about a U.S. mining company and syndicate that mines radium in Colorado and Utah, since one of his “Negro boy[s]” had excavated a stone impressive by its “orange-red color”: a piece of uranium ore [10].

Thus, the European colonial system and its “abolished” slave trade gradually transmuted:

Instead of the old “factories” or trading-stations, run by agents who were always ready to use the lash, there was a more orderly colonial Government, and mining companies and the Bourse du Travail held sway in the land. . . . Though nominally free labourers, the thousands of black boys who, under the orders of a few dozen whites, labored in mines and at the blast-furnaces were substantially slaves, being the victims of a system of contract labour upon whom the “contract” had been arbitrarily enforced [11].

Even though it was written in 1936, *Radium* is particularly interesting: Firstly, radioactive ores were indeed exploited in the Belgian Congo (in Shinkolobwe), as mentioned by Einstein in his letter to Roosevelt. Secondly, *Radium* also briefly touches upon another real case by depicting the plight of

the Radium Girls. The Radium Girls were hundreds of female U.S. factory workers, as young as 16 years old, who were trained to use their mouths to make a fine point on paintbrushes to be able to apply radium paint on dial clocks, in Orange, New Jersey, and Ottawa, Illinois. Their demise was very quick and remains a classic case of class and gender exploitation. Notably, some corporate scientists even tried to attribute their disease to syphilis.

A few decades later, the impact of military (followed by civilian) nuclear programs on Indigenous lands can be detected via the photographs of Robert Del Tredici and Toyosaki Hiromitsu of the Atomic Photographers Guild. Their photographs and lengthy captions tell the story of cancers among miners and their families, crippling accidents and deaths of newborns in the United States, Canada, certain African nations and elsewhere. Mining in the 1930s (and even the 1960s and 1970s) was plagued by lack of appropriate safety standards. Workers (including white workers) and nearby villages were contaminated. These artworks thus visualize what Marsha Weisiger analyzed decades later in the effect of uranium mining on a Navajo family, the Clys. After a mother had passed away from cancer, a grandmother sick with cancer was forced to place her grandson in the care of missionaries (who refused him any connection with his own culture or knowledge of his biological family) [12]. The patriarchal and colonial dynamics are here at play. Tracy Brynne Voyles has also analyzed the mines and the lives of the Navajo Diné and Pueblo Indians in New Mexico, when she describes the “*affect* of power relations between colonizer and colonized [and how] it has shaped experiences, bodily health, and life expectancy of the Diné long after the problem should have been rectified.” The uranium mining violated the land, the people and their culture. It involved “American insistence [on] recognizing the political leadership only of men . . . [and] to undermine the strong position of women in the tribe” [13]. Many native tribes are also matrilineal, as in Oceania.

CONCLUSION

There is thus a patriarchal and colonial “biopower” over people. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Michel Foucault examined the evolution of capital punishments from bodily torture, in which the sovereign exercises its power of “letting live or taking life away,” to carceral systems, psychological expertise and “painless” executions. In “Necropolitics” (2003), Achille Mbembe refers to the notion of biopower described

in Foucault’s lecture “Il faut défendre la société: Cours au Collège de France” (1975–1976). In this lecture, Foucault refers to Nazism and, for Mbembe, both Nazism and colonialism are systems of biopower, some of which developed in modern warfare with the use of depleted uranium (DU), for example, designed to “quickly [cripple] the enemy’s capability” [14]. Through DU, as well as chemical weapons and the destruction of life-support systems, the future soldier is targeted via women’s wombs. Another of Mbembe’s examples is the destruction of a petrochemical complex near Belgrade during the Kosovo war that led to pregnant women being directed to abort and others to avoid becoming pregnant for two years. In the nuclear age, “biopower” goes beyond national borders, and focuses on regulating the land and bodies of civilians that are also “innocents” (as opposed to “convicts”). It focuses on the enemy (for Japan) and the colonized (Oceania), and in a territory outside of the aggressor’s juridical system.

This nuclear biopower still exists. The consequences of the use of DU during the Gulf War was portrayed in a 2012 photo essay by Christian Werner (published in *Time* magazine in 2014) that made visual what Mbembe described in words. Taken in Basra, Fallujah and Baghdad, the pictures are of children with tumors, leukemia and deformities; of stillborn babies; and of children’s graves. The insistence of patriarchal societies on regulating women’s bodies in giving or not giving birth (to living, dead or dying babies), and in inscribing their power physically onto the female body, are also forms of biopower, atomizing the so-called nuclear family. Inevitably, this has consequences for men too. “Gulf War Syndrome” follows “shell shock” and “PTSD” in the lexicon of “side” effects of modern warfare. Many American prisoners of war also died at Hiroshima, and military men as well as women were exposed during the Cold War tests. Victimhood is not always easy to define, but what is now evident are the contemporary consequences of past wars and the weight of history upon the present.

Colonialism, imperialism, racism and patriarchy are intricately woven and thus ontologically necessary to consider for the atomic age. Finally, for victims to gain visibility, censorship must be abolished, and there must also be a reversal of focus from the aggressor to the victim to equally acknowledge them. Debates and narratives in the U.S. and Europe too often focus on the actions of the scientists and militaries of the atomic age, rather than those of the victims. In this task, the arts have a role to play, especially given that many nations are still developing nuclear weapons.

References and Notes

- 1 Note that for all Japanese names, I use the traditional order (family name preceding given name).
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