Special Section: Artists and War

Art, Censorship and Nuclear Warfare

Gabrielle Decamous (researcher). Email: g.decamous@gmail.com.

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Abstract
The traumas of nuclear warfare, from 1945 until 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 atomized cultures in Japan, Oceania and in other places. I argue 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, 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 begs the question why military nuclear traumas so rarely become the topic of exhibitions in the West. These traumas still have consequences today, and artists have produced significant artworks that convey particularly well the inhumanity of nuclear weapons, particularly in places where the traumas occurred. The following article discusses some of the pivotal works and the reasons for their lack of visibility in the West through three “past” traumas: The A-bombs, the 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”

With two cities almost entirely atomized, 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 right after they happened. Literature played a particularly central role: the Genbaku bungaku (A-bomb Literature) is a unique 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 described the blast she witnessed, the destruction, and the suffering of the burned and agonizing victims. In one particular 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 under the heat of the summer sun and among swarms of flies and maggots.

She also described some of the survivors, and took 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 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.” [1]

After reading some of these A-bomb novels, something becomes 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 Sashiko, a hibakusha who regularly testifies in official settings, illustrated this impact on the civilians when she described the terrible sight of the ash-burned, bloated, and decaying bodies she saw at the age of eleven, before explaining that “one more experience left an even stronger experience on me. Behind my house, a pregnant women’s body was decaying. Her skull could 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.” [2] Matsuo Sashiko was eighty-five years old at the time of her 2018 speech, and one question presses in Japan: How will the testimonies continue to be spoken and heard when all of the hibakusha will have died?

Because of the dreadfulness of the suffering, it is surprising to see a lack of circulation of decades of hibakusha testimonies in the West. In the 1980s, A-bomb literature’s many works were canonized in Japan through the publication of more than a dozen thick volumes of hundreds of novels, songs, poetry, and theoretical works. But out of these, only a handful of novels or poetry were translated in 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 in the West.

One central reason for this invisibility can be attributed to the fact that Japan was allied with Nazi Germany and was 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 at the same time as discussion of several other national calamities was avoided. The pictures first allowed for the acknowledgment of the monstrosity of the slavery system by some Euro-Americans---an unarguably pressing necessity even today. Yet, while this represents “a benchmark of civic virtue,” Sontag explains, “the 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.” [3]

Another reason for the lack of circulation is censorship. In Japan, for about ten years, beginning on September 21, 1945, General Douglas MacArthur and the General Headquarters of the Supreme Commander enforced the Press Code, censuring 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 shortcut the censorship in Japan, while Shōda Shinoe distributed her poetry book illegally.

By the time censorship was lifted, the Cold War had begun, and thus the focus of attention had shifted to the Pacific, but censorship continued. In the US, 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, anti-nuclear artworks by no other than Robert Rauschenberg, Salvador Dalí, Pablo Picasso, Yves Klein, Nancy Spero and William S. Burroughs were produced in the West. 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 didn’t mince words when revealing the actual human and ecological impacts in the area that is still radioactive today. Marshallese poet and visual artist Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner’s verses in *lep Jāltok: Poems of a Marshallese Daughter* (2017) are beautiful and sharp, and depict miscarriages, leukemia, and lingering radioactivity that adds to the historical traumas: the lies from the militaries, the forced exodus, the miscarriages, the rain of radioactive ashes contaminating the displaced population, and the contamination of islands that are still uninhabitable to date. In “History Project,” which is based on archival material she read when at the age of fifteen, Jetnil-Kijiner writes about the “jellyfish babies,” so named because they have no head, no bones, and skin that is “red as tomatoes” when born:

> I read first hand account
> (…) 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* [4]

In another poem, “Monster” (2017), performed in front of the Hiroshima dome, Jetnil-Kijiner relates that there were already 574 stillbirths and miscarriages in 1951, compared to fifty-two before the bombs. And the problem is lasting. In “Burst 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 because “Most Marshallese / can say they’ve mastered the language of cancer.” [5] Unarguably, the Cold War’s nuclear power still contaminates today’s lives, and the targeting of civilians continues, except that 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, as well as more respect for women than patriarchal societies. The Marshallese and Polynesian societies are matrilineal, which perhaps makes the contamination of women and children (who are more sensitive to radioactivity) even more shocking to their members. Jetnil-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. 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 the ‘intelligent’ men who then looked away to 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. [6]

The metaphor of rape is accentuated by the word “violin,” which is phonetically similar to “rape” in French (“violet/ nous violons”), and by the word “siren” which also means “mermaid” (or the a symbiosis between woman and nature). This 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 was no prostitutes before . . .” colonization. [7]

The nuclear traumas add to the impact of more than a century of colonization that the poet Henri Hiro had protested in vain in the 1970s, when continental France moved its nuclear program from the Algerian desert to the Morurua 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 contaminates their future: constructed decades ago, their safety didn’t last. The effects of the Cold War are thus still unfolding in our contemporary era, on top of global warming and the sinking of several Pacific islands.

But giving visibility to the past and continuing atomization of lives here is too challenging. One wonders why all these issues do not permeate to the West. One particular turning point in Jetnil-Kijiner’s poems is when she writes about the use of goats and pigs for the nuclear tests, the pictures of which had circulated in the West and had provoked an 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 [8]

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 for some of the power plant accidents). Most of the declassified images and videos are of mushroom clouds. Thus, the lack of visibility of the Pacific and Japanese hibakusha should not be attributed solely to the invisibility of radioactivity, or even to language barriers when it comes to the circulation of the testimonies.

Countering past and present censorship is an absolute necessity. Pacific artists such as Jetnil-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 anti-colonial movements of the 1960s but still being negotiated to this day). Finally, these patriarchal and colonial systems continue around issues of uranium ore and its extraction.

Is Uranium Mining Green?

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

From the beginning of the nuclear age, such issues were depicted in the arts. In Radium (1936), Austrian writer Rudolf Brunngraber compares the life a radium scientist 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 US mining company and syndicate that mines radium in Colorado and Utah, since one of his “Negro “boy[7]”“had excavated a stone impressive by its “orange-red color”: a piece of uranium ore. [9]
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.” [10]

Though written in 1936, Radium is particularly interesting: first, radioactive ores were indeed exploited in the Belgium Congo (in Chinkolobwe), 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 factory workers, as young as sixteen years old, who were trained to sharpen paintbrushes in their mouth to be able to apply radium paint on dial clocks, in Orange, New Jersey and Ottawa, Illinois. Their demise was very quick and the effects of it remain a classic case of class and gender exploitation. Notably, at the time, some corporate scientists even tried to explain their disease was caused by 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 from the Atomic Photographers Guild. Their photographs and lengthy captions tell the story of cancers of miners and their families, crippling accidents and deaths of newborns in the US, Canada, some African nations and more. Mining in the 1930s (and even the 1960s and ‘70s) was plagued by lack of appropriate safety standards. Workers (including Caucasians) and nearby villages were contaminated. These artworks thus visualize what Marsha Weisiger analyzed decades later, the effect of uranium mining on a Navajo family, the Cly’s. After the mother had passed away with cancer, a grandmother sick with cancer is forced to place her grandson in the care of missionaries (who refuse him any connection with his own culture or knowledge of his biological family). [11] The patriarchal and colonial dynamics are here at play. Tracy Bryne 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 solved.” The uranium mining violated the land, the people, and their culture. This was an “American insistence [on] recognizing the political leadership only of men … [and] to undermine the strong position of women in the tribe.” [12] Many native tribes are also matrilineal, just like 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--76). 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.” [13] 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 campaign that led to pregnant women being directed to abort and others to avoid being 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 visualized what Mbembe described in words. Taken in Basra, Fallujah, and Baghdad, the pictures are of children with tumors, leukemia, deformities, of stillborn babies, and of children’s graves. The insistence of patriarchal societies in 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 POW 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 are 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 important to consider for the atomic age. Finally, for victims to gain visibility, censorship must be shortcut, and there must also be a reversal of focus from the aggressor to the victim to equally acknowledge them. Western societies 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


**Biographical Information**

Gabrielle Decamous is Associate Professor at Kyushu University in Fukuoka, Japan, and is the author of “Invisible Colors: The Arts of the Nuclear Age” (MIT Press, 2019), which explores nuclear-related artworks from Marie Curie to Fukushima. Decamous was also the recipient of a Hilla Rebay International Fellowship, for her work with curators at museums in New York, Bilbao, and Venice.