

Grievability and Nuclear Memory

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Nuclear Wounds

Without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life. Instead, “there is a life that will never have been lived,” sustained by no regard, no testimony, and ungrieved when lost. The apprehension of grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of precarious life.

—Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009)

Since 1945, nuclear weapons have been tested on all continents except for South America and Antarctica. Although “it is the nature of bombing to be indiscriminate,”¹ Aboriginal, Indigenous, and First Nations people have been the disproportionate victims of these weapons. They also continue to face nuclear waste dumps, uranium mines, and other nuclear projects on their land. This radioactive colonialism ensures that violence persists and is etched into the knowledge of people, place, and country, and that the single “event” of a nuclear detonation is far from over.

Official records provide ample evidence to document how state policies, practices, and attitudes marked Aboriginal people as not fully human. For example, the Maralinga nuclear test site in Australia was “chosen on the false assumption that the area was not used by its traditional Aboriginal owners.”² People living downwind (“downwinders”) of the Nevada Test Site in Utah during the US atomic weapons testing program,³ including First Nations communities, were considered “a low-use segment of the population.”⁴ These racist assumptions and statements, one tiny example from the archive of the nuclear landscape, constructed the people (and the lands they inhabited) as disposable. Fast-forward to today’s uranium mining and toxic waste dumping, which also unfold on stolen lands: radioactive colonialism continues because colonialism persists.

In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler discusses how some lives are regarded as grievable and others are not, how some lives can be removed from the norms of what constitutes a valuable life, or indeed to be seen as a life at all or fit a

prescription of recognizable “personhood.”⁵ Her lens reminds readers how, through the act of removing a person from personhood, lives once lost cannot be grieved. Yet, in this short reflection, I briefly outline how specific art practices can potentially function as an intervention, or “shift the very terms of recognizability in order to produce more radically democratic results,” and how these projects can provide unofficial records of atomic atrocities.⁶

The number of nuclear-related arts projects that are critically political continues to grow. In Australia some of these are exhibitions and projects like the *Black Mist Burnt Country* (BMBC) national touring exhibition,⁷ the Nuclear Futures community arts project,⁸ Lynette Wallworth’s virtual reality film *Collisions*,⁹ the *Kulata Tjuta* (*Many Spears*) installation,¹⁰ and others. Internationally, a range of related contemporary art practices are documented in the *Nuclear Culture Source Book*.¹¹ However, one group that has been at the forefront of photographic documentation, committed to making visible all aspects of the nuclear age, is the Atomic Photographers Guild (APG), which has been exhibiting work internationally since the 1980s, and of which I am a proud member. Robert Del Tredici, one of the APG’s founders, describes its original mission to put a face on “this culturally invisible, damnably everlasting bomb of ours: to make the invisible visible.”¹²

The APG has also built an extensive archive from 1945, the dawn of the nuclear age, to the present. Two of the world’s first atomic photographers are part of this crucial archive: Berlyn Brixner, the official photographer/filmmaker at Los Alamos National Laboratory who documented the Trinity Test, and Yoshito Matsushige, a Japanese photojournalist who was just 2.7 kilometers from the hypocenter of the Hiroshima blast on August 6, 1945.¹³

As part of this archive, members of the APG have documented people across the nuclear orbit, the founders of nuclear weaponry (scientists, engineers, politicians) as well as the victims, survivors, and the many activists who pushed back. However, the guild’s emphasis has been on “nuclear weapon mass-production, atomic testing and proliferation, nuclear power, reactor accidents, radioactive waste containment, irradiated landscapes, and radiation affected populations,”¹⁴ showing what Del Tredici calls “our darkest, most enduring legacy.”¹⁵

Many members of the APG dedicated their lives to documenting and circulating the very real and disastrous effects of nuclear weapons testing on civilians and workers living in the shadow of the bomb. Colorado-based photographer Carole Gallagher left New York City, where she worked as a successful photojournalist, and moved to Utah, where she lived for seven years to archive the story of the downwinders of the nuclear testing program in Nevada. As is the case internationally, civilians living near atomic testing sites were not



Figure 1. West End of Miyuki Bridge, 2.2 kilometers from the hypocenter. Survivors gather in front of the police station in Sendamachi to receive assistance from police officers. Photo: Yoshito Matsushige. Permission granted by the Atomic Photographers Guild.

informed of the danger. To the contrary, during the 1950s and 1960s, the nuclear bomb was a symbol of prosperity, power, and growth. Citizens and tourists of Las Vegas (just sixty-five miles away) were even encouraged to witness the spectacle of the blasts from hotel rooftops.¹⁶

With in-depth interviews and black-and-white photographs, Gallagher's book is an exposé of lives destroyed by radiation and an example of what Blake Fitzpatrick of the APG describes as "the radical dehumanization of the other, rendered as irradiated specimen and research data."¹⁷ This kind of work makes visible the ways in which atomic weapons destroy lives and places in an "incomprehensible destruction of the human subject."¹⁸ Another example of attempts to mark nuclear histories that are cemented literally into the earth are the memorial plinths at nuclear testing sites all around the world. Yet these plinths, plaques, or objects of some kind inform the visitor only that a bomb was tested there, on which date, and how big it was (its yield). It may also indicate a potential radiological hazard; for example, at Maralinga in South

Australia, the plinth also provides a warning that “RADIATION LEVELS FOR A FEW HUNDRED METRES AROUND THIS POINT MAY BE ABOVE THOSE CONSIDERED SAFE FOR PERMANENT OCCUPATION.” These memorial plaques do not often indicate (or name) the victims and survivors of these tests, how many people were affected, or indeed why these nuclear tests were carried out. “If anything,” says Mick Broderick, associate professor of media analysis at Murdoch University, who has visited many nuclear testing sites globally, “the perpetrator nations celebrate their scientific and military endeavours as part of preventing general war.”¹⁸ Only the peace parks in Hiroshima and Nagasaki have extensive information on and memorialization of the impacts of the US nuclear bombs dropped on people in these two Japanese cities in August 1945.



Figure 2.
Taranaki Test Site, Maralinga, South Australia 2011. Photo: Jessie Boylan.

Indeed, at the site of the first-ever atomic test in Alamogordo, New Mexico, no mention of Japanese or First Nations victims is found on the memorial plaque. Instead, it says, simply: “TRINITY SITE WHERE THE FIRST NUCLEAR DEVICE WAS EXPLODED ON JULY 16, 1945.” In his PhD thesis, “Making Visible: Photography, Witnessing, and the Nuclear Era,” Fitzpatrick writes that this kind of language and official memorialization seeks to erase “the politically destabilizing reminder of nuclear destruction from the pages of public memory. . . . The historical and ideological stance written into the Trinity monument is one of selective amnesia.”¹⁹



Figure 3.

Trinity Test Site, Nevada, 1988. Photo: Peter Goin. Permission granted by the author.

Marking nuclear testing sites with less than rudimentary information renders the act and the history unreadable. Fitzpatrick writes, “Unreadability is a form of forgetting that results from the severed historical contextualisation and archiving of ‘empty historical shells [that] continue to linger in an age that has outlived them and that now can hardly make sense of them.’”²⁰

The APG has spent decades attempting to ensure that nuclear weapons and their victims are not discussed purely as symbols.

Australian Nuclear Memory

Between 1952 and 1963 the British government carried out an atomic testing program at Maralinga and Emu Field in South Australia and the Monte Bello Islands off the coast of Western Australia. Along with twelve major nuclear tests, up to seven hundred minor “dirty” trials were also conducted. The siting of Britain’s atomic tests required the notion of *terra nullius* (empty land)—a concept at the root of many atrocities in Australia, and which still lingers in Australian society and culture. Aboriginal communities, workers, and civilians continue to be deeply affected by these tests. The land, while now a tourist destination, is contaminated and permanently uninhabitable.²¹

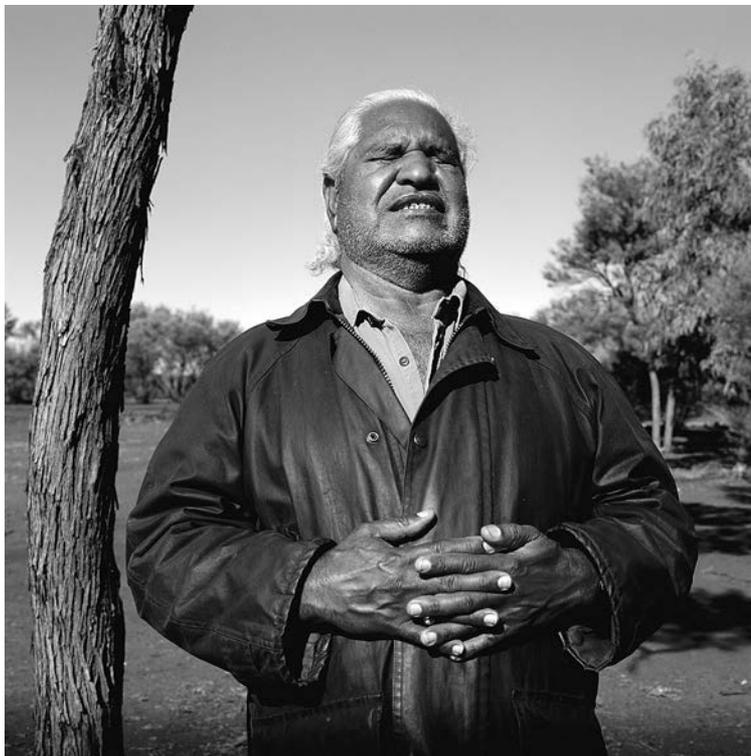


Figure 4.
Yami Lester, Walatinna Station, South Australia,
2006. Photo: Jessie Boylan.

Yami Lester, a Yankunytjatjara man, was ten years old, living at Walatinna Station when Totem One was detonated at Emu Field in South Australia in 1952.

He became blind as a result of the “black mist” that many Aboriginal people remember falling on their communities during the testing period. I met Yami in 2006 while on a Friends of the Earth’s “Radioactive Exposure Tour,” which, since the 1980s, has taken hundreds of people into the South Australian outback to learn about the impacts of the nuclear industry on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and the environment.

Yami became a friend and someone I was lucky enough to visit at Walatinna until he died in 2017. This photograph of Yami became the centerpiece of an exhibition called *Inhabited*,²² which was created as a response to the government’s decision to make Aboriginal land (“the middle of nowhere”) in the Northern Territory the site for a national radioactive waste dump.²³ *Inhabited* was made up of life-sized portraits and audio interviews to allow audiences

to hear directly from those whose story was being told. This photograph was also part of the *Black Mist Burnt Country* exhibition, which commemorated the British atomic tests in Australia, with work by over thirty Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists across the mediums of painting, printmaking, sculpture, photography, new media, and music spanning seven decades.

When I traveled to Maralinga in 2011, alongside nuclear-veteran-turned-whistleblower Avon Hudson, my intentions were to show a place that still exists yet is fundamentally out-of-sight and out-of-mind for most Australians. My work from this journey culminated in a short video, *Maralinga Pieces*, and a photographic series, *Operation Buffalo*. Both explore the physical and meta-physical remains of Australia's atomic testing ground, and seek to ensure that these very sites do not get erased from the national historical record.



Figure 5. Video Still from *Maralinga Pieces*. Avon Hudson at Taranaki Test Site, Maralinga, South Australia, 2011. By Jessie Boylan.

From 2014 to 2016 I was a key artist, workshop facilitator, and documenter in the community arts project Nuclear Futures (NF), which linked artists with atomic survivor communities across six

countries. Combining community-led initiatives and collaborative art-making, the NF mission centers resistances by people most affected: “We want to extend previous sharing of stories amongst nuclear survivors, with focus on the theme of community resilience—exploring how experience of the bomb translates into community development and international campaigns for peace and disarmament.”²⁴

NF produced an artistic showcase that helps the story go far. A 360-degree screen, eight meters in diameter, was built to show two immersive projections responding to two different aspects of the Maralinga story. The first work, *Ten Minutes to Midnight*, drew on archival footage from the Imperial War Museum in the United Kingdom and spoke to the experience of the Australian and British servicemen involved in the tests and their families. This work was made in close consultation with Hudson, who helped guide the story. The second work, *Ngurini (Searching)*, explored the forced relocation and inter-generational response of Pitjantjatjara Anangu people; first, second, third, and fourth generations now live in the Yalata and Oak Valley communities on the far west coast of South Australia. *Ngurini* was made in collaboration with the community members from Yalata and was led by the stories and experiences of the families affected by the tests.

The project debuted at a moment when a new Royal Commission into the Nuclear Fuel Cycle was announced and new nuclear developments were on the table. The NF project centers the radical capacity of art and communities to enable a re-turning and a reimagining of historical events.²⁵ This shifts not only conceptualizations of the past but our present *and* the future or, as Edwardo Cadava suggests, “the breaks, within history, from which history emerges.”²⁶



Figure 6. *Ngurini (Searching For Home)*, Installation at QUT “The Block,” Brisbane, Queensland, 2015. Photo: Jessie Boylan.

APG, NF, and *BMBBC* reclaim and embed forgotten and erased lives and landscapes, destroyed by the nuclear age, back into history. By documenting, archiving, and collating the impacts of the nuclear era and its victims and survivors, these projects, which are directly accountable to survivors' knowledge and agency, counter official state records and replace those who have been removed into history, ensuring previously ungrieved lives can become grievable. Forms of collective protest and land- or site-based community memory work, these projects disrupt official histories and are rebellious in their processes and outcomes.²⁷ Making visible resistances to radioactive colonialism is a form of knowledge making and an example of cultural work that attempt to remember histories and people, and forms of violence, that the state aims to erase.

Notes

1. Howard Zinn, quoted in Elin O'Hara Slavick, *Bomb after Bomb: A Violent Cartography* (New York: Charta, 2007).
2. James McClelland, William Jonas, and Jill Fitch, *Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia* (1985), sec. 125.
3. For more on "downwinders," see, e.g., lib.utah.edu/services/geospatial/downwinders/ (accessed August 15, 2018).
4. As stated in a "top-secret AEC memo," Carole Gallagher, "Nuclear Photography: Making the Invisible Visible," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 69.6 (2013): 43.
5. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), 6.
6. Butler, 6.
7. See blackmistsburntcountry.com.au/.
8. See nuclearfutures.org/.
9. Made in collaboration with the Morgan family from the Pilbara in Western Australia. See www.col-lisionsvr.com/.
10. Made by made by artists from the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara lands. See www.abc.net.au/news/2017-10-13/tarnanthi-festival-shines-light-on-maralinga-bomb-blasts/9045144 (accessed August 16, 2018).
11. The *Nuclear Culture Source Book* "brings together contemporary art and ideas investigating the nuclear Anthropocene, nuclear sites and materiality, along with important questions of radiological inheritance, nuclear modernity and the philosophical concept of radiation as a hyperobject" (nuclear.artscatalyst.org/content/nuclear-culture-source-book [accessed August 16, 2018]).
12. Robert Del Tredici, *Behind the Atom Curtain: Life and Death in the Nuclear Age* (Perth: Western Australia, 2012).
13. See atomicphotographers.com/about/ (accessed August 16, 2018).
14. atomicphotographers.com/about/.
15. Harris Fogel and Robert Del Tredici, *Behind the Atom Curtain: Life and Death in the Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Sol Mednick Gallery, University of the Arts, 2012).
16. Laura Bliss, "Atomic Tests Were a Tourist Draw in 1950s Las Vegas," Citylab, August 8, 2014, www.citylab.com/equity/2014/08/atomic-tests-were-a-tourist-draw-in-1950s-las-vegas/375802/.
17. Blake Fitzpatrick, "Making Visible: Photography, Witnessing, and the Nuclear Era" (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 2002), 101.
18. Blake Fitzpatrick, email message to author, August 17, 2018.

19. Fitzpatrick, "Making Visible."
20. Gerhard Richter, quoted in Fitzpatrick.
21. The Maralinga Tours website proclaims: "Not Kazakhstan, not Nevada . . . but South Australia's Maralinga . . . Maralinga Tours—an insight into our hidden past. Learn about a very, very dark chapter in Australia's history" (maralingatours.com.au [accessed June 27, 2016]).
22. See, further, jessieboylan.com/inhabited/.
23. Brendan Nelson, then environment minister, quoted in Lindy Kerin, "Government Earmarks Land in Central Australia for Nuclear Waste Dump," *AM* transcript, ABC, April 28, 2006, www.abc.net.au/aml/content/2006/s1625871.htm.
24. See nuclearfutures.org/about/ (accessed August 15, 2018).
25. Karen Barad, "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-turning, Re-membering, and Facing the Incalculable," in *Eco-Deconstruction: Derrida and Environmental Philosophy*, ed. Matthias Fritsch et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 236.
26. Quoted in Fitzpatrick, "Making Visible," 1.
27. Paul Brown, "Rebellious Art," paper presented at the symposium "South Australia's Nuclear Past, Present and Future" (University of South Australia, September 8, 2018).