

Nuclear colonialism

In addition to occupying vital spaces, the Department of Defense requires continuous training exercises, weapons tests, and equipment production to ensure its capacity to wage war. These activities—which underlie and renew US military power—often occur far from official war zones, subjecting civilians at home and abroad to war-making technologies. Perhaps the most egregious environmental atrocities are committed in the course of testing, producing, and disposing of nuclear weapons. Atomic weapons testing in the Marshall Islands, the US Southwest, and elsewhere had caused—and continues to cause—a range of illnesses, congenital disorders, and forced migrations.



Mushroom cloud produced by the “Baker” nuclear test at the Bikini Atoll.

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Moving Day, Bikini to Rongerik. The population of Bikini Atoll was moved to Rongerik on 7 March 1946. Photograph from Joint Task Force One, Operation Crossroads, the Official Pictorial Record (New York: W. H. Wise & Co), p. 21.

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Photograph from Joint Task Force One, Operation Crossroads, the Official Pictorial Record (New York: W. H. Wise & Co), p. 21. *Moving Day, Bikini to Rongerik. The population of Bikini Atoll was moved to Rongerik.*



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The impact of US nuclear testing had been particularly heavy on two regions: the Pacific Island region of Oceania, and communities located near uranium mines and test sites in the US Southwest. “Under colonialism,” writes one environmental historian, “the Pacific Island region has been used as the First World’s nuclear weapons laboratory and intercontinental ballistic missile testing range for over fifty years. Nuclear activity—consisting of hundreds of nuclear detonations—has occurred almost continuously from 1946 to 1996, and intercontinental

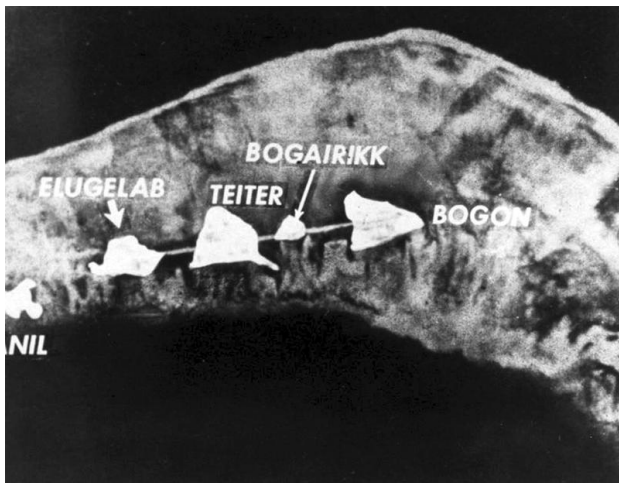
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missile testing continues today.... As a result of the testing, six islands were vaporized and fourteen others were left uninhabitable” (Kuletz 2002, 127–28). In addition to testing weapons, the US is also accused of deliberately exposing island environments and populations to radiation in order to obtain scientific knowledge in a medical experiment code-named Project 4.1 (Kuletz, 2002, 129). More broadly, scientific observations of irradiated life forms on the Bikini and Enewetok Atolls played a pivotal role in the development of the science of ecology by enabling researchers to observe changes in controlled and relatively isolated island environments (Deloughrey 2013).

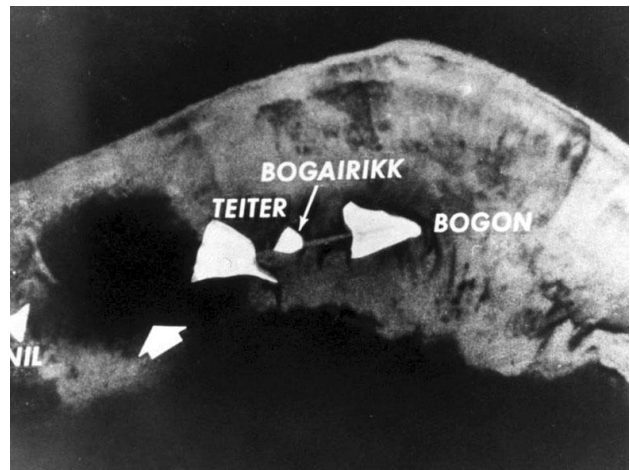


The Island of Elugelab in the Enewetok Atoll, Marshall Islands *before* the US Ivy Mike hydrogen bomb test (1952).

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A crater is all that remains *after* the detonation of the US Ivy Mike hydrogen bomb test.

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Along with the Pacific Proving Grounds, the US Southwest had also been transformed into a vast nuclear laboratory and dump. Following the discovery of rich uranium deposits in Monument Valley, the Grants mineral belt, and other parts of the Southwest, the Department of Defense initiated mining, research, testing, and disposal operations throughout the region. As a result, uranium miners and millers—as well as “downwinders” who live near such operations—had developed high rates of radiation-related illnesses. Many of these activities occurred on or near Native American traditional lands; as Western Shoshone Chief Raymond Yowell explains, “the radiation has caused Shoshone, Ute, Navajo, Hopi, Paiute, Havasupai, Hualapai and other downwind communities to suffer from cancer, thyroid diseases and birth defects. We are now the most bombed nation in the world” (quoted in Kuletz 2001, 237). Native Americans in the Pacific Northwest had also been disproportionately affected by irradiated air, water, and soil resulting from the Hanford nuclear weapons

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production site in Washington state.

The poet Simon Ortiz, a native of Acoma Pueblo, worked in uranium mills and mines after graduating from high school. In “Our Homeland, a National Sacrifice Area,” Ortiz blends poetry and memoir to convey the effects of uranium mining on the Native Americans who worked in and lived near the mines. The poem that frames his meditations describes a feeling of illness that overtakes the poet returning home to this irradiated terrain: “I was sick / feeling a sense of ‘otherness.’ / How can I describe it? / An electric current / coursing in ghost waves through me?” (1992, 337). In contrast to familiar representations of Native Americans as “others” (popularized, for example, in the John Ford westerns filmed in Monument Valley), Ortiz describes a haunting feeling of otherness in the landscape transformed by the nuclear escalation of the Cold War.

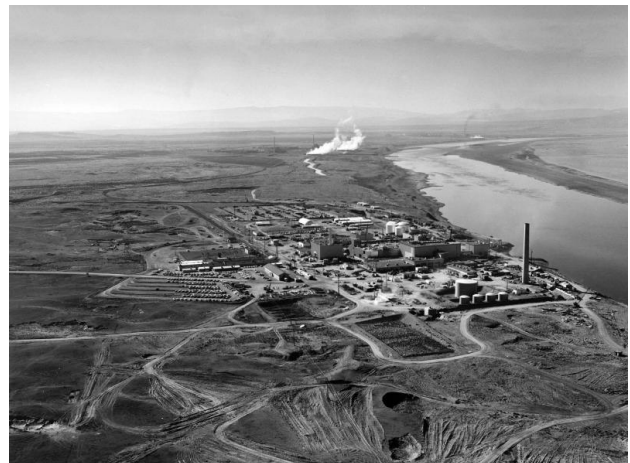


Photograph showing uranium mill tailings pile in Shiprock, New Mexico.

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Reactor at the Hanford site along the Columbia River in Washington.

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By disproportionately targeting indigenous peoples and other vulnerable populations within and beyond the US, nuclear colonialism has forged international and transracial solidarities. Women, who are disproportionately affected by radiation and many other pollutants, have played a prominent role in many anti-nuclear protests. Referencing her family’s high rates of breast cancer and her participation in civil disobedience at the prohibited Trinity site in New Mexico, Terry Tempest Williams claims affiliation with “women from all over the world” and with “Shoshone grandmothers,” imagining an international, transracial coalition of women united in resistance to US militarization (1992, 287). Commenting on the presence of the Nuclear-Free and Independent Pacific Movement at an anti-nuclear event organized by Native Americans in the Southwest, Kuletz writes:

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As they had done with Kazakhs, who had been the victims of the Soviet Union's testing program, as well as other indigenous nuclear subjects, the Western Shoshone had invited a large contingent of Pacific Islanders (composed of people from different island nations) to join them in protest over nuclear colonialism, and to support indigenous sovereignty movements globally. (The Western Shoshone's traditional homelands have been used for over nine hundred nuclear detonations.)... I was aware of a larger field of inquiry and, indeed, a larger field of transregional identity—one linked to the international network of indigenous rights and sovereignty.
—Kuletz 2002, 132

While such affiliations are complex and uneven (Williams and her Mormon family are, after all, settler colonists and not Shoshone), they nevertheless build the groundwork for demilitarization and environmental justice activism on a scale that transcends the NIMBY (“not-in-my-backyard”) attitudes that frequently circumscribe environmental action.

Nuclear testing and development is only the most spectacular example of the illness, discomfort, and risks that are unevenly distributed by US military exercises and equipment production. For example, colonized communities have struggled to end live fire training in locations such as Guam, Hawai'i, and Vieques. If we consider oil as military equipment and note that the Department of Defense is [the world's largest oil consumer](#), then global climate change, hurricanes, oil-related wars, and oil spills such as the Deepwater Horizon catastrophe may all be counted among the everyday hazards that have been essential to the US's capacity for conducting foreign wars.

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