

Notes on Nuclear Weapons & Intersectionality in Theory and Practice

A WORKING PAPER

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TYPESETTING IN L^AT_EX WITH TUFTE DOCUMENT CLASS

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Abstract

The political economy and narratives sustaining nuclear weapons and the threat of their use rely upon gendered and racialised myths about power and perpetuate grave harms to humanity and the environment. Understanding and resisting nuclear weapons and achieving nuclear abolition require an intersectional approach in theory and practice that can illuminate how these weapons are part of a broader system of oppression and inequality underscored by militarism, capitalism, patriarchy, and racism. Feminist, queer, Indigenous, antiracist, and postcolonial experience, activism, and scholarship can provide tools for deconstructing and reconstructing what is considered normative in nuclear weapon discourse and practice and building norms for nuclear disarmament. This paper explores activist strategies and scholarly work from a variety of perspectives and experiences that rebel against currently hegemonic systems of thought, and seeks to apply them to the struggle to abolish nuclear weapons. The paper argues that challenging social ordering and logics of knowledge production, including through breaking binaries and elevating the work of those who have been deliberately marginalized in nuclear discourse, can help achieve nuclear abolition and contribute to other abolitionist projects seeking justice for all.

I.

Introduction

To refuse nuclear weapons, we have to refuse much more than nuclear weapons.

Raymond Williams¹

Abolition requires that we change one thing: everything.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore²

Seventy-five years ago, the United States detonated the first ever nuclear weapon in a desert of New Mexico, *Jornada del Muerto*—Journey of the Dead. Three weeks after this test, the US government dropped two atomic bombs on Japanese cities: one on Hiroshima, the other on Nagasaki. In the decades that followed, the countries developing nuclear weapons detonated thousands of bombs around the world, contaminating lives and land for generations.

Those who possess or desire nuclear weapons argue that the mere possession of the bomb prevents conflict and deters attack. They insist on talking about nuclear weapons in the abstract, as magical tools that keep us safe and maintain stability in the world. But nuclear weapons are not abstract. They are made of radioactive materials. They are made to destroy flesh and bone. They are designed to turn human beings into shadows. To melt the skin from our bodies. To reduce entire cities to ashes. The abstraction of nuclear weapons into instruments of politics and power is an exercise in patriarchal discourse, employing techniques such as gaslighting, victim blaming, denial of lived experience, and gendered assertions about credibility and rationality to stifle alternative perspectives.

The bomb itself is, I believe, the most extreme expression of violence and control of the patriarchal, racist, and capitalist world order. To the majority of people struggling daily under this oppressive order, the abolition of nuclear weapons may not seem like a priority. When faced with the violence of settler colonialism, imperial intervention, war, the carceral system, poverty, displacement, environmental devastation, and violence in our homes and communities, nuclear

¹ Raymond Williams, "The Politics of Nuclear Disarmament", *New Left Review*, No. 124, Nov/Dec 1980.

² Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Change Everything: Racial Capitalism and the Case for Abolition* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022).

weapons may seem like an abstraction. But these weapons are part of the spectrum of institutionalized violence. Even without being launched, they are used to project the power and invincibility of their possessor. They are the pinnacle of a state's monopoly on violence, the ultimate signifier of domination. In addition, we cannot lose sight of the fact that these weapons can manifest the most violence in a single moment—the most death, destruction, and despair.

Thus, it is important for those resisting injustice and oppression to pay attention to the role nuclear weapons play in our world order, at the intersection of patriarchal, racist, colonial, and capitalist oppressions. Even more so, it is crucial for those opposing nuclear weapons to pay attention to the ways in which the critiques and strategies of resistance of these oppressions can help inform, guide, and shape the work to abolish nuclear weapons. This means privileging voices and perspectives of those who are usually overlooked, ignored, or ridiculed, changing perspectives about what is realistic and rational, and offering alternative ways to organize and engage in relationship in international society. Doing so means changing the conversation, changing the location of conversations, and diversifying the participation in conversations about nuclear weapons.

Consciously or not, those engaged in the project of banning nuclear weapons through the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons learned from feminist, queer, and Indigenous struggles, resulting in new international law that is already impacting the political, legal, and economic framework of nuclear weapons. Much more work remains to be done, and the more we can learn from each other's theories and practices of action and participation, the better impact we will have across a range of social justice struggles.

From the civil rights movement to Black Lives Matter, from the suffrage movement to Me Too, from the first gay and lesbian marches to the Queer Liberation movement, from the American Indian Movement to Idle No More and Standing Rock, we can see how social movements build, shift, evolve, and learn over time. Change is iterative, contested, and ongoing. The antinuclear movement has persisted for seventy-five years, undergoing ebbs and flows of its numbers and reach over time. But the hope for nuclear abolition lies more broadly in the efforts of all activists for social justice.

Everyone demanding disarmament and abolition of police forces; everyone calling for a redirection of military spending towards collective care; everyone envisioning a more equitable, just, and peaceful world order—all of their efforts are collaborative with the efforts for nuclear abolition. Whether deliberate or not, our work for peace, social and economic justice, decolonisation, and environmental protection is entangled. Our fates are woven together: the world we seek

to build—a world of solidarity, health, and well-being across peoples and our shared planet—is not compatible with a world with nuclear weapons and the other technologies of violence in today’s stockpile.

About this paper

This paper explores some of the economic, racist, and patriarchal dimensions of nuclear weapons. It sets out some of the existing literature and thought from feminist, queer, and Indigenous theoretical frameworks and begins to examine some of the key lessons from related theory and activism that could bear upon antinuclear organizing. In addition, antiracist and postcolonial experience, activism, and scholarship is essential to the process of deconstructing and reconstructing what is considered normative in nuclear weapon discourse and practice.

This paper builds upon early work that has explored the structural features of the nuclear arms race and nuclear war. From E.P. Thompson’s *Exterminism and the Cold War* to Alva Myrdal’s *The Game of Disarmament*, other theorists and practitioners have well-articulated the driving factors of the military-industrial complex in nuclear strategy and the development of nuclear arsenals; others have explored the relationship between nuclear weapons and colonialism, imperialism, and power. This paper draws on these works but also seeks to bring in additional perspectives and understandings of structural violence and intersectional oppressions.

This is not to say that these theories, approaches, or frameworks of action are monolithic or absolute, or that all of their manifestations are unproblematic. Each have their own internal dialogues and disagreements. Nor is my intention to appropriate or co-opt analysis or theory from those who work to overcome other structural and physical oppressions and apply it to a single-issue challenge that may or may not seem to give anything back to their struggles. Rather, my intention is to begin to learn from others working against multiple injustices that manifest in systems of patriarchy, racism, and colonialism. This paper captures my initial attempts at learning from feminist, queer, and Indigenous theory and activism; much more engagement and dialogue are necessary, including other disciplines and critical approaches not addressed here. What I hope will be useful is a recognition of the various processes and relationships people from various perspectives and experiences have engaged in to revolt against hegemonic normative structures and systems of thought, and to challenge social ordering and logics of knowledge production in order to give “social and political difference their discursive power.”³

³ David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, “What’s Queer About Queer Studies Now?” *Social Text* 84–85, Vol. 23, Nos. 3–4 (Fall–Winter 2013), 3.

II.

Economic and social fetishization of nuclear weapons

Estimates from experts suggest the nuclear-armed states spend from about 2 billion to 35 billion USD each per year.⁴ The cost of modernization of nuclear forces in the nuclear-armed states is budgeted to run into the billions—and in the US case, over one trillion—dollars.⁵ Who is profiting from all of this? It is private companies that build nuclear weapons and their delivery systems and manage nuclear weapon laboratories. Most of these companies also produce other goods and are open to public investment. 325 financial institutions from around the world are investing hundreds of billions into the companies that generate and sustain nuclear arsenals.⁶

In order to secure our continued complicity, an economic justification, as well as a security justification is deployed: employment rates. The myth is that jobs are created and retained in the sustenance of the military industrial complex. But studies have shown that the weapons industry creates fewer jobs per dollar than the median manufacturing industry.⁷ Military spending benefits further the one percent, the wealthy few rather than the general public because it further redistributes wealth—most of the money invested in weapons and other aspects of militarism come from government revenue through taxation. Compare the increases in military spending to decreases in social spending in many countries engaged in weapon production and warfare. There are social costs associated with the development and production of weapons, the major burden of which will always “be borne by the most vulnerable sections of society.”⁸ Austerity in the United Kingdom, for example, decimated public sector jobs—the employees of which are majority women—as well as social welfare. It is estimated that women have borne the brunt of cuts, approximately 86 percent.⁹ These cuts have been implemented at the same time the government decided to renew the Trident missile system, which is projected to cost 256 billion USD.¹⁰

⁴ *Assuring destruction forever: 2022 edition* (New York: Reaching Critical Will of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 2022).

⁵ See Jon Wolfsthal, Jeffrey Lewis, and Marc Quint, *The One Trillion-Dollar Triad – US Strategic Nuclear Modernization Over the Next Thirty Years*, James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, January 2014.

⁶ Susi Snyder, *Shorting our security—Financing the companies that make nuclear weapons* (Utrecht: PAX and International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, 2019).

⁷ Robert W. DeGrasse, *Military Expansion, Economic Decline* (New York: Council on Economic Priorities, 1983), 32.

⁸ Kumkum Sangari, Neeraj Malik, Sheba Chhachhi, and Tanika Sarkar, “Why Women Must Reject the Bomb,” *Out of Nuclear Darkness: The Indian Case for Disarmament* (New Delhi: Movement in India for Nuclear Disarmament, 1998).

⁹ Philip Alston, the UN’s rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, said, “If you got a group of misogynists in a room and said how can we make this system work for men and not for women they would not have come up with too many ideas that are not already in place.” See Robert Booth and Patrick Butler, “UK austerity has inflicted ‘great misery’ on citizens, UN says,” *The Guardian*, 16 November 2018.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Piper, “UK nuclear deterrent to cost 256 billion, far more than expected,” *Reuters*, 25 October 2015.

Economic justifications for nuclear policy

As theory and myth, nuclear deterrence has likely been so successful because it provides a solution to the problem of what to do with nuclear weapons. Economies and careers are bound up in sustaining a rationale for the maintenance of nuclear weapons. These weapons are catastrophic to use, so their existence needs to be justified. In short, deterrence provides an easy answer to an impossible question—that is, how can the money and privilege and prestige they offer and entail and supply and absorb be justified? One way to justify nuclear weapons is to create a theory that we need them in order to never use them. That we need them to prevent war. That by reinvesting in them regularly, making new kinds, building more facilities—we are ensuring security, stability, and safety for all. It inevitably leads to what Robert J. Lifton and Richard Falk describe as nuclearism: “a political and psychological dependence on nuclear weapons to provide an impossible security.”¹¹

Over time, through relentless political and academic repetition, the value assigned to nuclear weapons as “deterrents” has come to be treated as intrinsic to the weapon itself. This is because they have become what Marx would describe as “fetish objects.”¹² Just as money, in Marx’s analysis, is the mature expression of commodity fetishism, nuclear weapons are the mature expression of the fetishism of force. They are the physical embodiment of power, suggests Anne Harrington de Santana, just as money is the physical embodiment of social value, of wealth. “Just as access to wealth in the form of money determines an individual’s opportunities and place in a social hierarchy, access to power in the form of nuclear weapons determines a state’s opportunities and place in the international order,” she writes. “In both cases, the physical form of the fetish object is valuable because it serves as a carrier of social value. In other words, the power of nuclear weapons is not reducible to their explosive capability. Nuclear weapons are powerful because we treat them as powerful.”¹³

This fetishization occurs through a process. Nuclear deterrence is not an inherent quality of nuclear weapons. It is a concept that we ascribe to nuclear weapons. Thus some academics argue we need to look at and talk about nuclear weapons as “social objects”—objects that are embedded in a network of relationships, interests, and identities, objects that we infuse with meaning *based on* these relationships, interests, and identities.¹⁴

¹¹ Robert J. Lifton and Richard Falk, *Indefensible Weapons: The Political and Psychological Case Against Nuclearism* (New York: Basic Books, 1982).

¹² Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*.

¹³ Anne Harrington de Santana, “Nuclear Weapons as the Currency of Power: Deconstructing the Fetishism of Force,” *The Nonproliferation Review* 16, no. 3 (2009): 327.

¹⁴ Nick Ritchie, “Relinquishing nuclear weapons: identities, networks and the British bomb,” *International Affairs* 86, no. 2 (2010): 466.

Nuclear identities

Those of us listening to governments talk about nuclear weapons at the United Nations and other international spaces can see this process very clearly. It sometimes feels as if the diplomats representing nuclear-armed or other nuclear-supporting countries believe that if they say the same thing over and over again, they can make it true, even if the majority of other governments believe the opposite. The nuclear-armed assert that nuclear weapons make us safe, while most of the rest of the world says they increase insecurity. Back home in the nuclear-armed states, academics and policymakers are churning out rhetoric and war planning that asserts nuclear deterrence as fact and nuclear weapons as the golden ticket to national security.

“What makes nuclear weapons so valuable are the social and political processes through which they have been endowed with certain meanings,” explains Shampa Biswas. “The weapons themselves don’t provide material protection or security; indeed the weapons may make one more vulnerable and insecure.”¹⁵ Nuclear weapons, even though talked about as if they will never be “used” because they are just for “deterrence,” are “nevertheless considered indispensable, and in arms races induced by panics, they are accumulated in ever-increasing numbers to provide a magical sense of impossible omnipotence that can overcome the paralysis.”¹⁶

Preserving “national security” through nuclear deterrence is the main purported motivation for acquiring, possessing, and brandishing nuclear weapons, but in reality the nuclear weapon fetish seems to have much more to do with questions of national identity than security. Images of prestige and political power, coupled with domestic political dynamics, play a significant role in embedding nuclear weapons in the politics, economics, and culture of certain countries.¹⁷ The bomb is a “social institution, with wide-ranging cultural, environmental, and psychosocial, as well as geostrategic effects.”¹⁸ A decision to deploy and maintain nuclear weapons is generated by an idea of the state as an important player on the world stage and an idea of nuclear weapons as a crucial element of being such a player.

In this context, nuclear weapons are assigned particular meanings that must be strengthened and sustained in order to maintain a country’s identity. In short, the thinking goes, if we want to be an important world power, we must have nuclear weapons as a representation of our power and as a means of enabling us to act in the world.¹⁹ Nuclear weapons have become signs of national power; the “preeminent national fetish” designated as not just the “ultimate arbiter of state security” but also as “the one true sign of ‘superpower’ status.”²⁰

¹⁵ Shampa Biswas, *Nuclear Desire: Power and the Postcolonial Nuclear Order* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 124.

¹⁶ Biswas, *Nuclear Desire*, 125.

¹⁷ See for example Peter Lavoy, “Nuclear myths and the causes of nuclear proliferation,” *Security Studies* 2, no. 3 (1993); Scott Sagan, “Why do states build nuclear weapons? Three models in search of a bomb,” *International Security* 21, no. 3 (Winter 1996/1997): 54–86; Stephen Meyer, *The Dynamics of Nuclear Proliferation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Jacques Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Ritchie, “Relinquishing nuclear weapons”; and Nick Ritchie, “Valuing and Devaluing Nuclear Weapons,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 34 no. 1 (2013): 155–159.

¹⁸ Joseph Masco, *The Nuclear Borderlands: The Manhattan Project in Post-Cold War New Mexico* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 17.

¹⁹ Nick Ritchie, “Relinquishing nuclear weapons.”

²⁰ Bryan C. Taylor and Judith Hendry, “Insisting on Persisting: The Nuclear Rhetoric of Stockpile Stewardship,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 11, no. 2 (2008): 314; Biswas, *Nuclear Desire*, 131; Carol Cohn and Sara Ruddick, “A Feminist Ethical Perspective on Weapons of Mass Destruction,” in *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Religious and Secular Perspectives*, eds. Sohail H. Hashmi and Steven P. Lee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 19.

The knot of nuclearism

Nuclear weapons are also given value as they relate to a country's institutional role in the world—for example, the fact that the five countries recognized by the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as “nuclear weapon states” are also the five permanent members of the UN Security Council is no coincidence. States with imperial ambitions and a sense of invulnerable power use nuclear weapons to coerce other states on matters of international relations. These bombs are not “hidden away in silos and subs awaiting a dreaded day of possible use, but instead are one of many tools used by imperial states to maintain global inequalities between states and within states.”²¹ Interviewing British nuclear policy-makers for his research, for example, Nick Ritchie found that “the possession of nuclear weapons imbues a subtle political confidence and has a quiet, implicit, intangible effect on the political decisions of other states, not as a crude, overt means of exercising influence, but as a deeply embedded, unstated form of political authority.”²²

This production and maintenance of identity through nuclear weapons means that many segments of society are invested in the enterprise. It is within this system that even the leaders of nuclear-armed states themselves are trapped. In a letter to US President Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1963, Soviet Premier Khrushchev eloquently described the “knot of war” that their two countries had tied and urged both sides to “untie the knot.” He wrote of the risks of pulling the knot so tight “that even he who tied it will not have the strength to untie it.”²³ While the two nuclear “superpowers” avoided destroying the entire planet that day, Kennedy and Khrushchev failed to achieve what both men stated they wanted: an end to the arms race and the elimination of nuclear weapons.

Similarly, US President Reagan and Soviet Communist Party General Secretary Gorbachev came as close as the leaders of these two countries ever came to agreeing to eliminate their nuclear weapons. At a summit in Reykjavík, Iceland in October 1986, the two sides put forward various proposals, including the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals. But Reagan, under pressure from the US military-industrial complex, would not agree to limit research on the Strategic Defense Initiative (aka Star Wars), an anti-ballistic missile system that the United States said was defensive but that the Soviet Union perceived as offensive. Thus, the talks ended without any agreement or any limits on nuclear weapons. It was by and large a wasted opportunity that would have changed the course of history.

As Myrdal wrote a decade before this incident, “The leaders have become prisoners of their concession to special interests and of their

²¹ Darwin BondGraham, Jacqueline Cabasso, Nicholas Robinson, Will Parrish, and Ray Acheson, “Rhetoric vs. reality: the political economy of nuclear weapons and their elimination,” in *Beyond Arms Control: Challenges and Choices for Nuclear Disarmament*, ed. Ray Acheson (New York: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 2010), 9–10.

²² Ritchie, “Valuing and Devaluing Nuclear Weapons,” 157.

²³ Daniel Ellsberg, *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 219.

own propaganda.”²⁴ Rather than saving “succeeding generations from the scourge of war,” as was hoped with the founding of the United Nations in 1945, it appears that the “institutional madness” of the nuclear war machine has been passed on to each succeeding generation. A handful of governments have tied their knots of war so tightly that we are still struggling to untie them more than 70 years later.

²⁴ Alva Myrdal, *The Game of Disarmament: How the United States and Russia Run the Arms Race* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 124.

III.

Nuclear weapons, colonialism, and racism

The history of nuclear weapons is a history of colonialism. The United States conducted over 1050 tests, including at the Nevada Test Site, which is in the traditional land-use area of the Western Shoshone and South Paiute.²⁵ The Western Shoshone are known as “the most bombed nation on earth”: 814 nuclear tests have been done on their land since 1951.²⁶ The US government also detonated nuclear devices near the Aleutian island of Amchitka in southwest Alaska; Rulison and Rio Blanco, Colorado; Hattiesburg, Mississippi; and Alamogordo and Farmington, New Mexico; as well as in the Pacific at the islands of Bikini Atoll, Enewetak Atoll, Johnson Island, and Christmas Island.²⁷

The Soviet Union conducted about 715 tests, mostly at the Semipalatinsk Test Site in Kazakhstan. The United Kingdom conducted 45 tests in Australia on Indigenous territory, as well as in the Pacific and at the Nevada Test Site in the United States. France conducted 210 tests in Algeria and French Polynesia. China conducted 45 tests at the Lop Nor test site in Xinjiang. India conducted six tests at Pokhran, and Pakistan six at Ros Koh Hills and the Chagai District.

The myth of “empty land”

The common thing throughout the majority of nuclear testing, especially that done abroad, is the impact it had on the people living in those locations. “The testing sites chosen were viewed by these nuclear weapons states as ‘open’ or ‘empty’ spaces with little vocal resistance,” writes Australian scholar and activist Dimity Hawkins. “But these traditional lands were neither empty nor silent.”²⁸

“Governments and colonial forces exploded nuclear bombs on our sacred lands—upon which we depend for our lives and livelihoods, and which contain places of critical cultural and spiritual significance—believing they were worthless,” said 35 Indigenous groups in a statement to the negotiations of the nuclear weapon ban

²⁵ *United States Nuclear Tests: July 1945 through September 1992* (Las Vegas, NV: US Department of Energy, National Nuclear Security Administration Nevada Field Office, September 2015).

²⁶ Taylor N. Johnson, “‘The most bombed nation on Earth’: Western Shoshone resistance to the Nevada National Security Site,” *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 26, no. 4 (2018): 224–239.

²⁷ Kyle Mizokami, “America Has Dropped 1,032 Nuclear Weapons (On Itself),” *The National Interest*, 30 August 2018.

²⁸ Dimity Hawkins, “Nuclear weapons testing in the Pacific: lessons for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons,” unpublished paper in author’s possession, draft as of 21 May 2018, 11.

treaty in July 2017. Delivered by Karina Lester, a Yankunytjatjara-Anangu woman from South Australia, the statement explained that Indigenous people “were never asked for, and we never gave, permission to poison our soil, food, rivers and oceans.”²⁹

Human and ecological harm

If we look just at testing in the Pacific, a clear pattern emerges. Between 1946 and 1996, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States tested over 315 nuclear weapons on largely remote, rural and First Nations communities across the Pacific. These tests contaminated vast areas in the Marshall Islands (Bikini and Enewetak islands), Australia (Monte Bello, Emu Field and Maralinga), French Polynesia (Moruroa and Fangataufa), and the Pacific islands of Kiribati (Christmas island), Kalama (Malden) Island, and Johnson Atoll.

As a result of the testing, Pacific Islanders suffered displacement followed by malnutrition and near starvation, lost access to traditional food sources, as well as being exposed to radioactive fallout. They were subjected to medical experiments and have suffered greatly from the health impacts of the testing. In Australia, the 600 so-called minor trials,³⁰ as well as the 12 atmospheric nuclear tests, spread contamination of uranium, plutonium, beryllium and other toxic substances over a wide area in the South Australian desert.³¹ A Royal Commission report found that there was a failure at the first of the UK bomb tests in Australia’s Monte Bello islands to “consider the distinctive lifestyles of Aboriginal people.”³² The Commission notes that the British did inadequate surveys of the numbers of Aboriginal communities—in fact they recorded that there were just 715 people within the immediate 150km area of the test site of the first Monte Bello tests, “excluding full-blooded Aboriginals, for whom no statistics are available.”³³

Hawkins argues that these cases expose three different, but incredibly similar stories about the relationship between the testing governments and the people upon whom they tested nuclear weapons. “One could be seen as a breach of the global trust placed in an administering authority,” she notes, while “another showed a gung-ho readiness to comply with the wishes of a former colonial master. The last revealed a relentless adherence to perceived colonial privilege alongside collaboration by local political interests.”³⁴

Gendered impacts

Furthermore, these tests have had gendered impacts. Studies on women’s health in the aftermath of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki

²⁹ Indigenous Statement to the UN Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty Negotiations, June 2017.

³⁰ Minor trials were nuclear tests intended to investigate the effects of fire or non-nuclear explosions on atomic weapons.

³¹ Nic Maclellan, *Banning Nuclear Weapons: A Pacific Islands Perspective* (Melbourne: International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear weapons, 2014).

³² Jim McClelland, *The Report of the Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1985), 122.

³³ McClelland, *The Report of the Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia*, 118.

³⁴ Hawkins, “Nuclear weapons testing in the Pacific,” 10.

bombings, nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands and in Kazakhstan, and the Chernobyl nuclear power disaster provide useful but incomplete analyses of ways in which women are uniquely impacted by radioactive violence. In particular, high rates of stillbirths, miscarriages, congenital birth defects and reproductive problems (such as changes in menstrual cycles and the subsequent inability to conceive) have been recorded. A possible link between breast cancer in young women and women who were lactating at the time of exposure to nuclear radiation has also been found to exist.³⁵

In 2012, Calin Georgescu, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Implications for Human Rights of the Environmentally Sound Management and Disposal of Hazardous Substances and Wastes visited the Marshall Islands to assess the impact on human rights of the nuclear testing conducted by the United States from 1946 to 1958.³⁶ He found that the full effects of radiation on Marshallese women might have been underestimated. Among other things, the bathing and eating habits of women potentially played a role in their higher rates of contamination. The Special Rapporteur found that women often bathed in contaminated water, which may have been overlooked as a possible means of exposure, as was the fact that women eat different parts of fish than men, such as bones and organ meat, in which certain radioactive isotopes tend to accumulate. The Special Rapporteur also notes, “Apparently, women were more exposed to radiation levels in coconut and other foods owing to their role in processing foods and weaving fibre to make sitting and sleeping mats, and handling materials used in housing construction, water collection, hygiene and food preparation, as well as in handicrafts.”³⁷

For more than sixty years, radiation exposure was measured based on the people primarily developing and testing nuclear weapons: adult white men. Nuclear regulators, including the International Committee for Radiological Protection, use what is called “Reference Man” to evaluate exposure. This model is based on adult white men—officially, “between 20 to 30 years of age, weighing 70 kg, is 170 cm in height, and lives in a climate with an average temperature of from 10 °C to 20°C. He is a Caucasian and is a Western European or North American in habitat and custom.”³⁸ Only one study from the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki assessed impacts of radiation based on age and sex. Analysts such as Mary Olson, who now leads the Gender and Radiation Project, have found that sex and age are “potent factors influencing the outcome of radiation exposure.”³⁹

³⁵ See for example Sebastian Pflugbeil, Henrik Paulitz, Angelika Claussen, and Inge Schmitz-Feuerhake, *Health Effects of Chernobyl: 25 Years After the Reactor Catastrophe* (Berlin: German Affiliate of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, April 2011); Reiko Watanuki, Yuko Yoshida, and Kiyoko Futagami, *Radioactive Contamination and the Health of Women and post-Chernobyl Children* (Chernobyl Health Survey and Healthcare for the Victims – Japan Women’s Network, 2006); and Whitney Graham and Elena I. Nicklasson, “Maternal Meltdown: From Chernobyl to Fukushima,” *Inter Press Service*, 26 April 2011.

³⁶ Calin Georgescu, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Implications for Human Rights of the Environmentally Sound Management and Disposal of Hazardous Substances and Wastes*, Human Rights Council, Twenty-First Session, Agenda Item 3, Promotion and Protection of all Human Rights, Civil, Political, Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Including the Right to Development, 2013.

³⁷ Georgescu, *Report of the Special Rapporteur*, 73.

³⁸ *Report of the Task Group on Reference Man*, International Commission on Radiological Protection, No. 23 (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1975), 4.

³⁹ Mary Olson, “Human consequences of radiation: A gender factor in atomic harm,” in *Civil Society Engagement in Disarmament Processes: The Case for a Nuclear Weapon Ban* (New York: United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, 2016), 32.

Disproportionate impacts on First Nations

Similarly, the key reference guide for radiation exposure is not adequate for measuring possible exposure amongst Indigenous populations. In the United States, for example, due to differences in diet, activities, and housing, the radiation exposure of Native Americans is not well represented in the Department of Energy dose reconstructions. It leaves out exposure to radioactive iodine from eating small game, while exposures from drinking milk and eating vegetables have not yet been properly estimated for these communities.⁴⁰

But the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapon testing and production on the US Indigenous population are well documented. The Diné/Navajo Nation saw cancer rates double from the 1970s to the 1990s due to nuclear weapon testing as well as uranium mining and milling in the southwestern US. Abandoned uranium mines in the region continue to pollute water supplies.⁴¹ Uranium mining on Lakota lands in South Dakota is believed to have contributed to high levels of sterility, miscarriages, cancer, and other diseases on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Radioactive waste from the Sequoyah Plant in Gore, Oklahoma, was spread on Cherokee lands. The list goes on.⁴²

⁴⁰ Eric Frohberg, Robert Goble, Virginia Sanchez, and Dianne Quigley, "The Assessment of Radiation Exposures in Native American Communities from Nuclear Weapons Testing in Nevada," *Risk Analysis* 20, no. 1 (March 2000): 101–111.

⁴¹ Laicie Heeley, "To make and maintain America's nukes, some communities pay the price," *PR1*, 30 January 2018.

⁴² See "Nuclear War: Uranium Mining and Nuclear Tests on Indigenous Land," *Cultural Survival Quarterly Magazine*, September 1993.

Nuclear discriminations

There are also social costs associated with the development of nuclear weapons, the major burden of which will always "be borne by the most vulnerable sections of society," as Indian antinuclear feminists have argued. "While the inevitable cutbacks in social security and welfare will hurt and damage all poor people, the proportion of the poor who are steadfastly denied a fair share of even the scarce resources, will undoubtedly become larger."⁴³

Nuclear weapons increase the insecurity of the most vulnerable populations of the world. They may never be used in war again, but even still their pursuit wastes massive human and economic resources; involves exploitative conditions for uranium mining and radioactive waste storage; involves land appropriation and destruction for testing; and has produced radioactive waste. "While radiation may not discriminate," Shampa Biswas notes, nuclearism "does discriminate along lines of class, race, and geography, leading to the differential valuation of human bodies involved in nuclear production."⁴⁴

⁴³ Sangari, Malik, Chhachhi, and Sarkar, "Why Women Must Reject the Bomb," 48.

⁴⁴ Biswas, *Nuclear Desire*, 167.

Postcolonial resistance

Despite all of this suffering, those who have been subjected to nuclear testing, and to the harms of nuclear weapon development, have not been silent victims. Far from it. Almost immediately after the tests in the Marshall Islands, for example, islanders were voicing concerns about their relocation and the effects of the testing. In 1954, after the devastation of the US government's Castle Bravo test, they presented a petition to the United Nations Trusteeship Council calling for the cessation of all nuclear tests on the islands. Since then, the country's advocacy has continued in a range of forms, including petitions, court cases, and lobbying through regional and international forums.⁴⁵ In 1990 the Marshall Islands entered a Compact of Free Association with the United States,⁴⁶ but the Marshallese continue to seek effective remedy from the US government in relation to nuclear testing (more on this later).

Reports of fallout across the Pacific led to some of the most sustained protests against nuclear testing in the world, particularly in the early 1970s when the French were still conducting atmospheric nuclear tests. Periodically, regional governments made strong stands against the nuclear testing, such as when Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji took a case to the International Court of Justice in 1973–1974 to force France to end atmospheric testing.⁴⁷ Many Pacific nations created sanctions against French products and French airlines, which were picked up around the world. Algerians have also taken action against the French government for its testing there, with a major human rights organization in Algeria contacting the Human Rights Council in 2017 requesting it look into France's conduct of 17 nuclear tests in the Algerian desert.⁴⁸

African-Americans organizing against nuclear weapons in the United States have frequently connected their work to both antiracism initiatives at home and anticolonial initiatives abroad. Coretta Scott King, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., W.E.B. Du Bois, and other civil rights leaders elaborated on the inseparability of nuclear disarmament and the end of colonial empires, while Bayard Rustin travelled to Algeria to help organize protests against French nuclear testing there with the US civil rights movement.⁴⁹ "Black leftists held firm in their belief that the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were inextricably linked to colonialism and racial equality," writes Vincent Intondi in his study of Black antinuclear activism.⁵⁰ They saw that colonialism, institutionalized racism, and segregation "each grew from the same seed and represented a form of violence," said scholar Jacqueline Castledine.⁵¹

US Indigenous activists have argued the same. "Colonization isn't

⁴⁵ Hawkins, "Nuclear weapons testing in the Pacific."

⁴⁶ "U.S. Relations With Marshall Islands," US Department of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Fact Sheet, 27 December 2016.

⁴⁷ Gough Whitlam, *The Whitlam Government 1972–1975* (Ringwood, Victoria: Viking Press, 1985), 611–613.

⁴⁸ "Algerians take steps to prosecute France for nuclear tests," *Middle East Monitor*, 15 February 2017.

⁴⁹ Vincent Intondi, *African Americans Against the Bomb* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

⁵⁰ Intondi, *African Americans Against the Bomb*, 22.

⁵¹ Jacqueline Castledine, *Cold War Progressives: Women's International Organizing for Peace and Freedom* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 17.

just the theft and assimilation of our lands and people, today we're fighting against nuclear colonialism which is the theft of our future," remarked Leona Morgan of the Diné/Navajo Nation in Nevada.⁵² The Western Shoshone Nation, which has long protested the bombing of its lands at the Nevada Test Site,⁵³ today continues its resistance against nuclear colonialism by fighting off a nuclear waste disposal site commissioned for Yucca Mountain in southwestern Nevada.⁵⁴ Indigenous activists have also commented on the connection between the struggles of Water Protectors fighting the construction of pipelines and those fighting to keep uranium in the ground. Tom Goldtooth, Executive Director of the Indigenous Environmental Network, noted:

Our Native Nations are on the frontlines fighting a colonial energy system that does not recognize treaties and Indigenous rights, our spiritual cosmologies and the protection of water of life. The link here is a world digging up uranium. In the northern plains, there's uranium in coal with dust particles that are radioactive. There's even radioactivity within hydro-fracking waste. Water is being contaminated and it's flowing into the Missouri River. Spirituality is very important as an organizing tool for us, within an industrialized world that has no understanding of the Indigenous natural laws that guide our traditional Indigenous societies. It's a systems change challenge we are dealing with, that will require all people, all cultures to work together.⁵⁵

Nuclear imperialisms

Yet even with the protests and legal actions taken by survivors of aggressive nuclear testing by the colonial powers, nuclear weapons have had a colonizing impact on certain peoples and governments. "Nuclear weapons pervade our thinking," laments Indian activist and author Arundhati Roy. They "control our behaviour. Administer our societies. . . They are the ultimate colonizer."⁵⁶ The nuclear non-proliferation regime arguably helps produce and maintain this sense of nuclear colonialism. This relates to the inequalities between nuclear-armed and non-nuclear-armed states written into the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)—to be discussed more in the next chapter—but goes beyond it to the very conception of nuclear weapons themselves, and of who is qualified—as "rational" actors—to possess them.⁵⁷ This order is guided above all else by "deeply and profoundly internalized prejudices about the global distribution of reason and trust."⁵⁸

As Carol Cohn and Sara Ruddick have pointed out, a clear distinction between the Self, which has a right to possess nuclear weapons, and the Other, which is too unpredictable to possess them, does nothing to prevent proliferation and only makes it more difficult to

⁵² Ian Zabarte, "Indigenous Peoples Condemn Nuclear Colonialism on 'Columbus' Day," *PopularResistance.org*, 10 October 2016.

⁵³ See for example Johnson, "'The most bombed nation on Earth,'" and "Protest, Dissent, and Witness at the Nevada Test Site," *Online Nevada Encyclopedia*.

⁵⁴ Matthew Neisius, "Western Shoshone Nation Opposes Yucca Mountain Nuclear Repository," *Commodities, Conflict, and Cooperation* (Fall 2016 and Winter 2017).

⁵⁵ Ian Zabarte, "Indigenous Peoples Condemn Nuclear Colonialism on 'Columbus' Day."

⁵⁶ Arundhati Roy, *The Cost of Living* (New York, Toronto: Modern Library, 1999), 101.

⁵⁷ Biswas, *Nuclear Desire*, 177.

⁵⁸ Biswas, *Nuclear Desire*, 179.

reduce the perceived value of nuclear weapons as a source of power. When governments act as though their “power and security are guaranteed only by a large nuclear arsenal,” they “create a context in which nuclear weapons become the ultimate necessity for, and symbol of, state security.” And when nuclear-armed states “work hard to ensure that other states don’t obtain nuclear weapons,” they “create a context in which nuclear weapons become the ultimate arbiter of political power.”⁵⁹

The inequitable, racist, colonial nuclear world order is not just a historical fact. It is one of the dominant paradigms present in discourses and practices around non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament today. During the process to ban nuclear weapons, for example, where diplomats from the global south together with those of a few European countries led the way,⁶⁰ the nuclear-armed states and their nuclear-supportive allies were quick to argue that these pro-ban countries had no relevant security interests that would entitle them to speak out on this subject. So at the same time as the nuclear “powers” rode roughshod over the security interests of the inhabitants of the countries and Indigenous nations they bombed, leaving contamination of land, water, bodies, and politics for generations to come, they claimed in international discussions that these same people had no grounds upon which to speak on the subject of nuclear weapons. This incredibly blatant racist approach to nuclear weapon discourse and negotiation has everything to do with colonial power and nothing to do with the lived reality of people around the world.

⁵⁹ Cohn and Ruddick, “A Feminist Ethical Perspective on Weapons of Mass Destruction,” 19.

⁶⁰ The core group of countries leading on the nuclear ban treaty were Austria, Brazil, Ireland, Mexico, Nigeria, and South Africa; other extremely active countries included Guatemala, Jamaica, New Zealand, and Thailand. Norway and Switzerland were early supporters that dropped out after changes in government.

IV.

Patriarchy and the bomb

The denial of lived reality is a classic patriarchal technique. Feminist scholars have long studied the connections between militarized or violent masculinities, the quest for dominance in international relations, and nuclear weapons. Carol Cohn's "close encounter with nuclear strategic analysis" starting in 1984 led to illuminating articles in *Signs* and the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* about the gendered discourse on nuclear weapons.⁶¹ These articles provided the foundations for a feminist analysis of nuclear war, nuclear strategy, and nuclear weapons themselves. She described the "sanitized abstraction and sexual imagery" including metaphors that equate military and political power with sexual potency and masculinity—such as "vertical erector launchers, thrust-to-weight ratios, soft lay downs, deep penetration, the comparative advantages of protracted versus spasm attacks," and discussions about how "the Russians are a little harder than we are."⁶² She and Sara Ruddick suggested that this type of highly sexualized language serves to "mobilize gendered associations and symbols in creating assent, excitement, support for, and identification with weapons."⁶³ It is also "a way of minimizing the seriousness of militarist endeavors, of denying their deadly consequences."⁶⁴

The masculine mythologies of nuclearism

In later years Cohn, along with Ruddick and Felicity Ruby, expanded the inquiry into the sense of masculine strength afforded by nuclear weapons. They listened to a Hindu nationalist leader after India's 1998 nuclear weapon tests, who explained, "we had to prove that we are not eunuchs." They argued that statements like this are meant to "elicit admiration for the wrathful manliness of the speaker" and to imply that being willing to employ nuclear weapons is to be "man enough" to "defend" your country. They also examined how disarmament is "feminised" and linked to disempowerment, weakness

⁶¹ Carol Cohn, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals," *Signs* 12, no. 4 (Summer 1987), 687–718; and Carol Cohn, "Slick 'Ems, Glick 'Ems, Christmas Trees, and Cookie Cutters: Nuclear Language and How We Learned to Pat the Bomb," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (June 1987): 17–24.

⁶² Cohn, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals," 693.

⁶³ Cohn and Ruddick, "A Feminist Ethical Perspective on Weapons of Mass Destruction," 19.

⁶⁴ Cohn, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals," 696.

and irrationality while militarism and attaining nuclear weapons is celebrated as signs of strength, power, and rationality.⁶⁵

In her study on the valuation of nuclear weapons, Catherine Eschle illuminated how masculinised understandings of security and political leadership can be coupled with anxieties about sexual performance and reproduction and with the enforcement of “expertise” as an elite capacity through “technostrategic speak.”⁶⁶ Eschle also highlighted the ways in which “the protector” is coded as masculine and “the protected” as feminine in discourses that defend nuclear weapons as necessary for security. She argues that these discourses reinforce and play into fantasies of “real men” and masculinity as defined by “invulnerability, invincibility, and impregnability.”⁶⁷ She and Claire Duncanson elaborated on how such gendered stereotypes guide the framework of security from a “realist” perspective on international relations and set the stage for a masculinised approach to security that accords status to nuclear weapons as both markers of masculine domination (capable of inflicting violence) and masculine protector (capable of deterring violence).⁶⁸

The connections between dominant frameworks of realist theory, the valuation of nuclear weapons, and patriarchal norms are important. The nuclear-armed states, and some of their allies, work hard to discredit those who demand the abolition of nuclear weapons and ground this demand in a critique of the links between realism, militarism, and masculinity. The process to develop the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), adopted in 2017, provides an excellent case study in patriarchal resistance to nuclear disarmament, through which proponents of nuclear weapons seek to use a logic of rationalism and power to defend their possession of these weapons whilst seeking to “feminise” opponents of nuclear weapons by claiming they are emotional and irrational. Leading up to TPNW negotiations, the representatives of nuclear-armed states berated governments and activists pushing to ban the bomb. The nuclear-armed and their allies ridiculed the treaty proponents’ perspectives on peace and security, accused them of threatening the world order, and suggested they are delusional. In one case, a Russian ambassador suggested that those wanting to prohibit nuclear weapons are “radical dreamers” who have “shot off to some other planet or outer space.” In another, a UK ambassador said the security interests of ban-proponents are either irrelevant or non-existent. A US ambassador asserted that banning nuclear weapons might undermine international security so much it could even result in the use of nuclear weapons.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Carol Cohn, Felicity Hill, and Sara Ruddick, *The Relevance of Gender for Eliminating Weapons of Mass Destruction*, The Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission, No. 38 (2006).

⁶⁶ Catherine Eschle, “Gender and Valuing Nuclear Weapons,” Working Paper for *Devaluing Nuclear Weapons: Concepts and Challenges*, University of York, Department of Politics, 20–21 March 2012.

⁶⁷ Eschle, “Gender and Valuing Nuclear Weapons.”

⁶⁸ Clare Duncanson and Catherine Eschle, “Gender and the Nuclear Weapons State: A Feminist Critique of the UK Government’s White Paper on Trident,” *New Political Scientist* 30, no. 4 (2008), 545–563.

⁶⁹ Ray Acheson, “Patriarchy and the Bomb: Banning Nuclear Weapons Against the Opposition of Militarist Masculinities,” in *The Gender Imperative: Human Security vs State Security*, eds. Betty A. Reardon and Asha Hans (New York: Routledge, 2019), 392–409.

Patriarchal techniques of nuclearism

These assertions are a study in patriarchy and patriarchal techniques—including victim-blaming and gaslighting. For example, the US government's suggestion that banning nuclear weapons could result in nuclear war is reminiscent of men who assert that women who have been victims of sexual assault must have been acting or dressing a certain way to be "asking for it." The message is clear: if you try to take away our toys of massive nuclear violence, we will have no choice but to use them, and it will be your fault. Meanwhile, Russian and French representatives described the desire to prohibit nuclear weapons, and the focus on the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons, as being "emotional."

The nuclear-armed states resist the conversation about the humanitarian impacts because this discourse focuses on what nuclear weapons actually do to human bodies and the planet. Looking at the physical and environmental impacts of nuclear weapons undermines the abstraction of these weapons as deterrents and refocuses attention on the fact that they are tools of genocide, slaughter, and extinction. The assertion that the humanitarian impacts discourse is emotional is an easy way for (invariably male) representatives to dismiss and discredit those raising it. In effect, it is an act of gaslighting. This is the practice of denying lived reality, of questioning the capacity of an individual to really understand what they are saying, given their emotional investment, and insisting on a truth that is fiction. This practice of denial aims to destabilize and delegitimize the perspective of those who challenge the fiction.

Gaslighting in the realm of nuclear weapons has been practiced since the beginning of the atomic age. The discourse of deterrence denies the lived reality of those who have experienced the intergenerational harms of nuclear weapons use and testing. It insists that nuclear weapons are for security not genocide, and its adherents, in classic patriarchal form, insist that anyone who thinks otherwise is being emotional, overwrought, irrational, or impractical.⁷⁰

Privileging power through discourse

What is considered to be realistic, practical, and feasible is determined by those who hold power in a given situation. How these concepts are measured and used to describe reality relies exclusively on those who control the mainstream discourse or narrative. In the context of nuclear weapons, this is men and women of incredible privilege; elites of their own societies and in the global community—such as politicians, government personnel, military commanders,

⁷⁰ Ray Acheson, "The Nuclear Ban and the Patriarchy: A Feminist Analysis of Opposition to Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons," *Critical Studies on Security* (30 April 2018), 1–5.

and “national security” practitioners and academics. It is definitely not the people affected by nuclear weapons development, testing, stockpiling, use, or threatened use.

Within the constructs of the “national security” elite, disarmament seems impossible—like a utopian vision of a world that cannot exist because, the argument goes, there will always be those who want to retain or develop the capacity to wield massive, unfathomable levels of violence over others. Therefore the “rational” actors need to retain nuclear weapons for protection against the irrational others. In a recent example, in 2018, the US government began asserting that all of the past commitments it has made to nuclear disarmament are out of date and out of step with today’s “international security environment”—as if the security environment is not directly related to the US government’s own actions, including its build-up of its nuclear arsenal. The current US administration has articulated a new approach to nuclear weapon policy, which is focused not on what the United States can do for nuclear disarmament but what the rest of the world can do for the United States in order to make it, as the most heavily militarised country in the world, feel “safer.”⁷¹

This approach to international relations and disarmament insists upon the notion that states, as coherent units, must always be at odds with one another, rather than collectively pursuing a world in which mutual interdependence and cooperation could guide behaviour through an integrated set of common interests, needs, and obligations, considerations that characterise human security.⁷² But “security can’t be possessed or guaranteed by the state,” argue Duncanson and Eschle. “It is a process, immanent in our relationships with others and always partial, elusive, and contested.”⁷³

This question of relationship is important to feminists, queer activists, and Indigenous perspectives, amongst others. Security is not an object or an achievement, it is a process that depends on the interactions of many moving parts. In this understanding, security cannot be reached through weaponisation but through our relationships to one another and with our environment—and these are always changing, as are we. “*How* we live, *how* we organize, *how* we engage in the world—the process—not only frames the outcome, it is the transformation,” writes Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Ray Acheson, “Moving the nuclear football, from 1946 to 2019,” *NPT News in Review* 16, no. 2 (2 May 2019), 1–2.

⁷² Acheson, “Patriarchy and the bomb.”

⁷³ Duncanson and Eschle, “Gender and the Nuclear Weapons State,” 15.

⁷⁴ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota, 2017), 19.

V.

Confronting the continuum of violence

Understanding the relationship between nuclear weapons and power, the role that the bomb plays in our current world—not as a relic of history but as an immediate and tangible threat to all life—is crucial to advancing toward abolition. This includes witnessing and renouncing nuclear weapons as part of the broader continuum of violence that so many of us confront every day: among other things, the systems of white supremacy behind nuclear weapon development and use; the patriarchal control possessors claim to derive from nuclear weapons; the economic tragedy of billions wasted on bombs at the expense of human well-being; the impacts a nuclear weapon detonation would have on our climate, food production, and environmental sustainability.

From here, we can oppose nuclear weapons not just as material objects in their own right, but as deadly cogs in a bigger system of violence and injustice. Our activism against the bomb is not “just” a demand for nuclear abolition, but for the disruption and dismantlement of the economic, political, and cultural systems that make nuclear weapons possible, that make them seem desirable, and that hold up all the other structures of violence that prevent us from developing equitable societies of care and nonviolence.

Nuclear weapons and white supremacy

The policies and practices of nuclear weapon development, testing, and use, described earlier, are policies of radioactive racism. The same racist ideology that enables certain governments to explode nuclear bombs, dig up radioactive materials, and bury nuclear waste on Indigenous lands, Pacific islands and North African deserts also lies within carceral systems and border controls.

The dismissal of survivor testimony as expert contributions to nuclear weapon discourse or policymaking is mirrored in the exclusion of Black, Latinx, Asian, Arab, as well as LGBTQ+ and other peo-

ple with lived experience of police brutality, from decisions about policing and community safety. Similarly, patronising racism is on display when nuclear-armed states argue that countries of the “global south” have no legitimate security interests when it comes to nuclear weapons—that they should just be quiet and let the “adults” handle things.

Nuclear weapons and carceral systems

Beyond the embeddedness of white supremacy, nuclear weapon policy and activities also hold other similarities to carceral systems of policing and incarceration. As much as the bomb is a coloniser, it is also a prison. The justifications for nuclear weapon possession, told over and over to our populations and entrenched within our economies and politics, cage our imaginations along with our bodies and our futures.

Just as many people find it difficult to imagine security without police or prisons, many also find it difficult to imagine security without nuclear weapons. Yet, as Angela Davis notes, there is widespread “reluctance to face the realities hidden within [prisons], a fear of thinking about what happens inside them. Thus, the prison is present in our lives and at the same time, it is absent from our lives.”⁷⁵ Likewise, many people acknowledge that nuclear weapons are horrible, yet claim they are a “necessary evil.” They accept the abstract notion that nuclear weapons “keep us safe”—because the bomb is for them out of sight and out of mind, and not something that they have ever experienced themselves. They exist, but they are meant to never be used. Thousands have been detonated, but on Black and brown bodies, near poor communities, on Indigenous lands.

The persistence of the faith that nuclear weapons bring security, force fed to us by the state as dogmatic Truth, is also similar to the faith in carceral systems to keep people safe. In both cases, we must ask, whose security do they serve, and against what or whom do they offer protection? Much like police forces only bring stability and order to the capitalist class, to those with property and wealth that require “protecting” from the masses, nuclear weapons only bring stability and order to the warmongers who seek the capacity to destroy the world in order to preserve their dominance of it.

Responses to violence and inequalities that are witnessed are also similar. In the face of police brutality, some politicians or even activists suggest that the police can be reformed. With more body cameras, with better training, with more prosecutions and accountability, we can improve the operation of police. Whether these assertions are well intentioned or a deliberate tactic to defuse protest and demands

⁷⁵ Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 15.

for change, they rest on the notion that the structure itself is fine and its operation just needs to be tweaked. Likewise, there are plenty of advocates for nuclear arms control, calling for reductions of nuclear arsenals done to a “reasonable” level, or for the cancellation of modernisation programmes and development of new missiles or bombers, or for cutting some of the budget for nuclear weapons.

But as with police reforms, none of these adjustments get to the heart of the problem—which is that carceral systems and nuclear weapons both are extremely violent tools to oppress, control, and kill human beings. The problem is not simply the budgets or the size or the policies of police forces, the prison system, or nuclear arsenals—the problem is that each of these is *designed to cause harm*. You cannot reform away something when it is the fundamental nature of that thing.

Nuclear weapons and border imperialism

Nuclear weapons are part of the toolkit for maintaining the inequitable privileged world order, a radioactive line between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” In terms of nuclear weapon possession, but even more acutely, in terms of access to wealth and power. For the most part, nuclear weapon possessors and supporters are among the wealthiest countries in the world; most are located in the global north. With the exception of Brazil and Mexico, the 15 countries with the highest GDPs are all nuclear weapon possessors or support the US nuclear weapon programme through alliance agreements.

As economic inequality between states, and between people within states, has skyrocketed, borders have become essential tools to “protect and secure not individual nations but the international class of wealthy nations,” as Jeff Halper explains in *War Against the People*.⁷⁶ To this end, most wealthy countries, particularly the United States, Australia, and the European countries that are part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, are engaged in violent suppression of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.

These countries are spending billions on “border security” to keep people out. Notably, some of the same companies developing militarised surveillance apparatus for borders are also involved in weapons production, including nuclear weapons. For example, Leonardo, an Italian arms company, supplies drones to EU coast-guard agencies. It is also involved in the production of medium-range air-to-surface missiles for France. So is Thales, a Dutch company that also produces radar and sensor equipment and is currently developing border surveillance infrastructure for the European Border Surveillance System. The increasing militarisation of borders is

⁷⁶ Jeff Halper, *War Against the People* (London: Pluto Press, 2015).

a boon to the military-industrial complex in the United States, Israel, and across Europe, creating new markets for weapons and other technologies of violent repression, coercion, and control.

Companies in the United States that manage the nuclear-industrial complex are also invested in the militarisation of borders directly. Sandia National Laboratories in New Mexico, for example, has been part of the system for building and managing the US nuclear weapon arsenal since 1945; it was also commissioned in the early 1990s to draw up plans to militarise the US-Mexico border. It recommended militarised responses such as the construction of a triple-layer border wall, systematic checkpoints, and electronic surveillance, among others. Sandia was initially run by AT&T, then Lockheed Martin, and now by a subsidiary of Honeywell.⁷⁷

In addition to the corporate entanglement of border militarism and nuclear weapons, the policies and tactics of “border security” have also arguably been influenced by nuclear weapon policies, in spirit if not literally. Both rely on a theory of “deterrence” to justify their cruelty. The increasing global battlescape of “border security” is all part the effort of wealthy Western governments to work together to make sure that migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers have as difficult time as possible entering their countries or even making it to their shores. But much like the theory of nuclear deterrence, deterring migration simply does not work. People desperate to survive gang violence or armed conflict or climate change or economic despair will undertake dangerous actions to try to secure a better life—any life—for themselves and their families.

The border-related deterrence policies of the United States—such as shutting down border crossings near urban areas, for example—have driven people to cross instead through the desert, where many die of thirst, hunger, or exposure. The deterrence policies in Europe have driven many to making dangerous crossings of the Mediterranean Sea, at the bottom of which many bodies of refugees now lie. The deterrence policies of Australia have likewise drowned many migrants coming from Southeast Asia and have left the rest in perpetual internment in squalid conditions in “offshore” prisons. Over 75,000 migrants are known to have died since the mid-1990s.⁷⁸ Many more have disappeared, or the deaths simply haven’t been recorded.

Nuclear weapons are about death, not deterrence; border imperialism is callous indifference to human life. Both nuclear weapons and borders are about maintaining power and privilege for some at the expense of the lives of others—in the case of nuclear weapons, potentially everyone. Both are about maintaining a political and economic world order built on, and reliant upon, extreme inequality and violence.

⁷⁷ John Carlos Frey, *Sand and Blood: America’s Stealth War on the Mexico Border* (New York: Bold Type Books: 2019).

⁷⁸ “Migrant deaths and disappearances,” Migration Data Portal.

VI.

Deconstructing and reconstructing normativity

We can already see the value in feminist theory to understanding the gendered underpinnings to the valuation of nuclear weapons. I believe that queer, Indigenous, Black, and postcolonial experience and activism are also essential to the process of deconstructing and reconstructing what is considered normative in nuclear weapon discourse and practice.

One process that many of these traditions or approaches seem to have in common is the attempt to disrupt the status quo and build something in its place through challenging what is considered normative and credible. This effort includes a refusal to remain within the language and location of power—essentially, changing the conversation and the playing field. It also means insisting on diversity in the discourse, which is the only way to truly change the parameters of what is considered normative and credible. Put another way, these approaches encourage us to change the conversations that are happening, to change the location of these conversations, and to diversify the participation in these conversations, in order to envision real and radical change.

Changing the conversation helps us deconstruct, disrupt, and change normative frameworks of thought and action. In her groundbreaking study of gender, queer feminist scholar Judith Butler argues, “The naturalized knowledge of gender operates as a preemptive and violent circumscription of reality.”⁷⁹ What is posited to be factual and normal is prescribed by those who maintain a privileged position of dominance and control. “To the extent the gender norms [. . .] establish what will and will not be intelligibly human, what will and will not be considered to be ‘real,’ they establish the ontological field in which bodies may be given legitimate expression.”⁸⁰ Power is not static; it operates in the production of frameworks of thought. In challenging power, Butler suggests we need to not just critique the *effects* of institutions, practices, and discourses that the powerful create. We need to ask what possibilities emerge when we challenge

⁷⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), xxiii.

⁸⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxiii.

the assertions of what is normative, to challenge what is taken in mainstream understandings to be common ground or absolute reality. “No political revolution is possible without a radical shift in one’s notion of the possible and the real,” says Butler.⁸¹

Creating this shift does not happen without effort—ideas and logics do not just change on their own. It requires concerted work by people to frame things differently and to mobilise others to embrace new possibilities. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes about the concept of grounded normativity in the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg culture, an ethical framework of being that generates “profoundly different conceptualizations of nationhood and governmentality—ones that aren’t based on enclosure, authoritarian power, and hierarchy.”⁸² She explains, “Grounded normativity isn’t a thing; it is generated structure born and maintained from deep engagement with Indigenous processes that are inherently physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual.”⁸³ This speaks to the idea that what is normative cannot be asserted by someone, it is based on the lived collective experiences of people in relationship with one another.

When diplomats from non-nuclear armed countries came together with antinuclear activists, atomic bomb survivors, and representatives of the Red Cross and other humanitarian agencies, they developed a “new normal” of *how* to work together, and of *what* was possible to imagine and create together. Taking a human-focused approach to nuclear disarmament, and thereby challenging the dominant state-centred approach to international peace and security, was instrumental in banning nuclear weapons. The purposeful deconstruction of nuclear weapons as weapons of terror and massive violence through what became known as the humanitarian initiative led to the vast majority of states being ready and willing to negotiate a legal prohibition on nuclear weapons.⁸⁴ Just as the humanitarian initiative undermined the perceived legitimacy of nuclear weapons, a feminist, queer, and antiracist analysis of nuclear discourse helps to deconstruct nuclear weapons as symbols of power and tools of empire. It can show that the enshrinement of nuclear weapons as an emblem of power is not inevitable and unchangeable, but a gendered social construction designed to maintain the patriarchal, racist, and capitalist order. This kind of analysis highlights the social constructions inherent in the valuation of nuclear weapons and thus helps to deepen arguments for nuclear disarmament.⁸⁵

Challenging normative discourse and logic is also helped by *changing the location* within which these discussions take place. Queer and Indigenous activists have articulated challenges to the dominant understandings and social orderings of sexuality, gender, rights, race, and citizenship not just through courts and other

⁸¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxiii.

⁸² Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 22.

⁸³ Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 23.

⁸⁴ See for example Alexander Kmennt, “The development of the international initiative on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons and its effect on the nuclear weapons debate,” *International Review of the Red Cross* 97, no. 899 (2016), 681–709; Matthew Bolton, “Special Section Articles: Civil Society, Humanitarianism and Nuclear Weapons,” *Global Policy* 7, no. 3 (2016), 380–410.

⁸⁵ Ray Acheson, “Foregrounding Justice in Nuclear Disarmament: A Practitioner’s Commentary,” *Global Policy* 7, no. 3 (2016), 405–407.

social institutions of the powerful but also through outright challenges to those institutions. For example, for some queer activists it is not sufficient for LGBT rights to be “recognised” or “tolerated” by heterosexist societies when queer lives are being destroyed and diminished in multifaceted ways. LGBT activists who do focus on “petitioning for rights and recognition before the law” have been accused by some other queer activists of collaborating with mainstream nationalist politics of identity, entitlement, inclusion, and personal responsibility.⁸⁶ These latter activists argue that strategies built upon possibilities of incorporation and assimilation of the marginalised into dominant structures become about making the status quo more accessible for more privileged members of marginal groups, while more vulnerable members of these communities continue to be stigmatised and oppressed.⁸⁷ “Because the logic of the sexual order is so deeply embedded by now in an indescribably wide range of social institutions,” argues Michael Warner, “queer struggles aim not just at toleration or equal status but at challenging those institutions and accounts.”⁸⁸ Queer politics may offer an approach based not on integrating into dominant structures but on transforming “the basic fabric and hierarchies that allow systems of oppression to persist and operate efficiently.”⁸⁹

Similarly, some Indigenous activists maintain that it is not sufficient for Indigenous communities to be granted certain rights on certain land by the very settler colonial governments that conducted campaigns of genocide against them. They fight for environmental protections and rights as citizens of First Nations, not of the states that continue to steal, rape, murder, and destroy their bodies, land, and water with which they live.⁹⁰ This is also reflected in some queer Indigenous organising, which is sometimes wary that “defining gender or sexual liberation in civil rights or multicultural inclusion” is seen as making “the settler state the horizon of freedom and reinforces settler authority on Native land.” In contrast, “Two-Spirit organizing differs by engaging settler institutions from the locations of sovereign Native peoples.”⁹¹

Some Indigenous activists and scholars in Canada and the United States directly link the colonial and imperialist structures to heteropatriarchy, arguing that colonists introduced social hierarchy based on patriarchy in Indigenous communities as a way to enforce colonial domination.⁹² This included, among other things, removing women from positions of leadership and authority and committing gender-based violence—particularly sexual violence against women and two-spirit people—in order to colonise bodies as well as land.

Some Indigenous scholars recognise the Indian Act as part of this problem, arguing as Simpson does that the system of Chief and

⁸⁶ Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz, “What’s Queer About Queer Studies Now?”, 11; also see Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 2003).

⁸⁷ Cathy J. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *GLQ*, Vol. 3 (1997), 437–465.

⁸⁸ Michael Warner, “Introduction,” in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xiii.

⁸⁹ Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” 437.

⁹⁰ Nick Estes, *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (New York: Verso, 2019); Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen, “Introduction,” in *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*, eds. Driskill et al. (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press 2011), 1–28.

⁹¹ Scott Lauria Morgensen, “Unsettling Queer Politics: What Can Non-Natives Learn from Two-Spirit Organizing?” in *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*, eds. Driskill et al. (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2011), 143.

⁹² See for example Estes, *Our History is the Future*; Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*.

Councils set up across Canada, for example, “is a colonial system that has targeted Indigenous women through blood quantum (double mother rule), sexuality (who you marry defines your identity), and gender (you’re a women so you can’t vote or run in election).”⁹³ The systems set up by the heteropatriarchal settler colonial state are not systems in which those seeking protection from the violence inherent to those systems will receive it. The settler colonial state makes sure it always dominates the spaces in which it interacts with indigenous populations. As Simpson writes, “The state sets up different controlled points of interaction through its practices [...] and uses its asymmetric power to ensure it always controls the processes as a mechanism for managing Indigenous sorrow, anger, and resistance, and this ensures the outcome remains consistent with its goal of maintaining dispossession.”⁹⁴

This is also how the nuclear-armed states manage processes in order to maintain control and dominance. Diplomats and activists alike get excited about a rare UN Security Council meeting on nuclear weapons or the next moment to deliver a statement to a high-level meeting, but the traditional spaces in which international interactions on nuclear weapons occur are regulated and do not challenge the power of those that possess the bomb. Similarly, the ways that a settler colonial state may try to promote indigenous culture in a narrative about the “multicultural mosaic” of the country, without challenging the dispossession upon which the state is based, is reminiscent of how the nuclear-armed and their allies call for “bridge building” and “dialogue,” fundamentally arguing that the radicals opposed to nuclear weapons need to calm down and get back in line.

Thus, those opposing these systems need to get creative about how and where they struggle for change. This lesson was imperative in turning to the UN General Assembly to prohibit nuclear weapons. The international diplomatic forum in which nuclear disarmament negotiations are “supposed” to take place—the Conference on Disarmament, based at the UN in Geneva—is closed to activists and to the majority of UN member states. It has only 65 states as members, and each is given an absolute veto over every decision the forum can take, including the establishment of its agenda. No substantive work has taken place in this forum since 1996, yet the nuclear-armed governments maintain that it is the only forum in which questions of nuclear weapons can be credibly discussed. By taking the issue to the General Assembly, the rest of the world’s governments rejected the structure of oppression imposed upon them by the nuclear-armed, forging a new path outside of “credible” channels in order to allow the voices and interests of those not in control of massive world-destroying arsenals to not only be heard, but to hold court.

⁹³ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “Queering Resurgence: Taking on Heteropatriarchy in Indigenous Nation Building,” Mamawipawin, 1 June 2012.

⁹⁴ Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 45.

This change in location was also imperative in terms of how diplomats worked to change their own government's policies. In the early years of working towards the nuclear ban treaty, diplomats and activists gathered outside of established institutions to discuss, think, and learn. In these small group discussions at various sites in the world, the individuals involved could work with each other to develop arguments and strategies to take back to their own national institutions in order to bring their government on board with pursuing and even leading the way for a new treaty. If this initial work had taken place within preexisting processes or institutions, the idea of banning nuclear weapons would probably have been shut down before it had a chance to crystallise into a credible policy goal. It allowed people to come together to discuss what established forums considered to be radical or unrealistic, and helped turn it into the clearest solution to a seemingly intractable problem.

Consciously or not, the decision to turn to alternative forums places in the foreground politics where the nonnormative and marginal position becomes the basis for progressive change. It is arguably a queering of process, in which those marginalised do not "search for opportunities to integrate into dominant institutions and normative social relationships, but instead pursue a political agenda that seeks to change values, definitions, and laws which make these institutions and relationships oppressive."⁹⁵ Learning from Indigenous knowledge, this type of shift also needs to be a process that allows participants to connect to the land, water, and sky, which the humanitarian discourse on nuclear weapons indeed brought us closer to realising.

Essential to the task of challenging *what* is considered normative and from *where* challenges can be mounted is to change *who* is included in the conversation—*diversifying participation*. In dissenting from normative frameworks of heteropatriarchy and colonialism, for example, some Indigenous queer and feminist scholars and activists work to interrogate and challenge what or who is a subject, what or who is considered credible and legitimate, what or who can be a source of knowledge and intellectualism. In this work, they critique the intellectual frameworks colonial regimes employ in order to suppress identities and opposition, and "hold heteropatriarchal legacies accountable to change."⁹⁶

In the context of nuclear weapons, the dominant voices are men representing government or academic institutions in nuclear-armed states—people who directly benefit from the production of theories and perspectives that justify the possession and continued development and modernisation nuclear arsenals. The denial and dismissal of the perspectives of those who oppose nuclear weapons, particularly those who have suffered from the development, testing, and use

⁹⁵ Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," 444–445.

⁹⁶ Driskill, Finley, Gilley, and Morgensen, "Introduction," 19.

of these bombs, is rampant.

Where some progress has been made in recent years is in a concerted push for the participation of women in nuclear weapon-related dialogue and negotiations. The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, for example, recognises that the “equal, full and effective participation of both women and men is an essential factor for the promotion and attainment of sustainable peace and security,” and expresses the commitment of its states parties to “supporting and strengthening the effective participation of women in nuclear disarmament.” Such calls for “women’s participation” in the fields of nuclear weapon policy and other militaristic pursuits are often premised on a legitimate concern at the lack of gender diversity in these discussions or institutions. But “adding women” is not only insufficient, it also risks further legitimising the institutions, practices, and policies that many seeking “gender equality” would arguably like to change.

A recent study published by New America paints a portrait of the sexism and gendered stereotypes in the nuclear policy field.⁹⁷ The field is dominated by cisgender heterosexual white men who compose a self-described “nuclear priesthood” that espouse normative masculinised perspectives on security and weapons. “A number of interviewees described working with the priesthood as especially draining or restricting, and they changed their careers in order to move forward,” the study reports. But for the most part, it seemed that women (mostly white, cisgender women) seeking access to the nuclear policy institutions were more inclined to try to gain favour with and impress the priesthood, seeing it as an important challenge. Former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michèle Flournoy argued, “there are some very clear rites of passage. You had to master the orthodoxy. And you had to master the technical details before you could have an opinion.” Many also showered praise on the very few women who had succeeded in this sector, celebrating those who crossed the divide from “feminine” arms control to “masculine” nuclear war planning. Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear and Missile Defense Policy Elaine Bunn explained, “There was the soft, fuzzy arms control side and then there was the real military side, the deployment side, and I felt like I had to prove my bonafides on the other side.” She remembered a mentor telling her if she was going to stay in the Defense Department, she needed to “do the targeting, the hard side of this, not just the arms control side,” or she would not be taken seriously.

When it came to thinking about their positions and perspectives structurally, it did not seem that many of the women interviewed for the study had spent time on this. Only one woman, a graduate fellow

⁹⁷ Heather Hurlburt, Elizabeth Weingarten, Alexandra Stark, and Elena Souris, *The “Consensual Straitjacket”: Four Decades of Women in Nuclear Security* (Washington, DC: New America, 2019).

at the National Nuclear Security Administration, had any depth to her responses. Mareena Snowden argued that as a woman of colour, she wanted to interrogate the impacts of nuclear policies not just on women but also on Indigenous communities and communities of color. “We detonated some of our strongest weapons in Bikini Atoll and in Micronesia and the Marshall Islands. It wasn’t the suburbs of Montana that we were doing that in,” she noted. “Whether it’s criminal justice policy or national security policy, when we talk about who is a valuable life, black and brown people are the last in the line of that list.” But overall, those interviewed apparently “expressed ambivalence as to the utility of this framework in the nuclear context, emphasizing that the consideration of differential group affects is often dismissed by policymakers who do not consider civilian impacts to be important or useful.” The women who dismissed the relevance of gender analysis to nuclear weapons “suggested that the field is too theoretical to be used to talk about civilian impacts, and that the analysis of leadership and decision-making in nuclear proliferating states is more relevant.” One even said that nuclear weapons have had a positive impact on women and others because of the number of women that they have saved through nuclear deterrence.

While perhaps an extreme perspective, the majority of women who do “make it” into these circles, who climb the ranks in “nuclear security” or other militarised jobs, do seem to tend to embrace and uphold the normative framework of thought and practice rather than to challenge it. As of January 2019, for example, the Chief Executive Officers of four of the United States biggest weapon producing companies—Northrup Grumman, Lockheed Martin, General Dynamics, and the weapons-wing of Boeing—were women. Meanwhile, the Pentagon’s top weapon’s purchaser—the Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs—as well as the Undersecretary for Nuclear Security are also women.⁹⁸ These women are not challenging the patriarchal structures and systems that have created the militarised world order—they are actively maintaining it and profiting from it.

Nor do these women believe they should have to “carry the burden” of changing these policies just because they are women. In the New America study, several of the women interviewed felt they were dismissed by male colleagues on the assumption that they would favour weapon cuts or disarmament, and had to prove, as NATO Deputy Secretary General Rose Gottemoeller sought to do, that “women aren’t afraid of nuclear weapons.”⁹⁹ As a case in point, the US nuclear weapon team under the Obama administration included women in the roles of Secretary of State (Hillary Clinton), Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security

⁹⁸ David Brown, “How women took over the military-industrial complex,” *Politico*, 2 January 2019.

⁹⁹ Hurlburt et al., *The “Consensual Straitjacket.”*

Affairs (Ellen Tauscher), Assistant Secretary of State for Verification, Compliance, and Implementation (Rose Gottemoeller), Special Representative of the President for Nuclear Proliferation (Susan Burk), Permanent Representative to the United Nations (Susan Rice), and Permanent Representative to the Conference on Disarmament (Laura Kennedy). Yet the Obama administration pursued the biggest nuclear arms buildup since Reagan and vociferously opposed negotiations of a nuclear weapon ban treaty. Meanwhile, in March 2019, the Minot Air Force Base celebrated an “all-women missile alert,” during which only women were responsible for launching nuclear missiles at the site for 24 hours. For the occasion, they donned a special patch with Wonder Woman emblazoned on it. One of the women who took part in the mission said, “There’s a lot of beauty in an all-female crew standing together as a part of history to accomplish the mission for the three ICBM wings.”¹⁰⁰

As Cynthia Enloe says, “You can militarise anything, including equality.”¹⁰¹ Women have often been advocates of nuclear weapons, even leveraging their position as mothers and wives to justify this support. In 2018, for example, Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson told the US House Armed Services Committee that more women should be in the military because mothers are naturally protective. “We are the protectors; that’s what the military does. We serve to protect the rest of you, and that’s a very natural place for a woman to be.”¹⁰² When she was the US Ambassador to the United Nations, Niki Haley similarly appealed to her status as a mother to justify her defence of nuclear weapons. “First and foremost I’m a mom, I’m a wife, I’m a daughter,” she said at a press conference where she opposed the negotiation of an international treaty prohibiting nuclear weapons. “And as a mom, as a daughter, there’s nothing I want more for my family than a world without nuclear weapons. But we have to be realistic.”¹⁰³ She identified the desire for disarmament with her womanhood but connects her desire to “protect” her family to the “necessity” of retaining nuclear weapons.

This idea that this is *realistic*, that this is the only credible policy available, is inherent to the normative security discourse deployed in nuclear-armed states and by many of their allies. Adding women to the discussion does not, on its own, challenge the normativity of these claims. This is because the women gaining access to these discussions are primarily from the same class, background, perspective, and identity as the men that are already there. The vast majority of women who hold any positions within the nuclear or broader “security establishment” in the United States are white, heterosexual, cisgender, middle- or upper-class women. They are primarily interested in climbing the ladder and “breaking the glass ceiling,” not in

¹⁰⁰ Heather Ley, “Team Minot wonder women,” *Minot Air Force Base*, 12 March 2019.

¹⁰¹ Julian Hayda, “Women Now At Top of Military-Industrial Complex: A Feminist Reaction,” *WBEZ 91.5 Chicago*, 8 January 2019.

¹⁰² Brown, “How women took over the military-industrial complex.”

¹⁰³ “U.N. Considers a Historic Ban on Nuclear Weapons, But U.S. Leads Boycott of the Talks,” *Democracy Now!*, 30 March 2017.

challenging or reconfiguring the instructions or structures to which they have been granted admittance.

Liberal feminism is “dedicated to enabling a privileged few to climb the corporate ladder or the ranks of the military,” through which it “subscribes to a market-centred view of equality that dovetails with corporate enthusiasm for ‘diversity,’” write feminist scholars Nancy Fraser, Cinzia Arruzza, and Tithi Bhattacharya.¹⁰⁴ Rather than abolish social hierarchy, liberal feminism “aims to feminize it, ensuring women at the top can attain parity with the men of their own class.” This kind of feminism speaks from the logic of equality, not justice. It does not see merit or purpose in dismantling the structures of power, but simply gaining equal access to them.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson similarly critiques calls for more women Chiefs in the Indian Act structure. She argues the Act was designed to remove women from leadership roles. “Are we going to make a dent in colonialism by replacing male Indian Act Chiefs with female ones or Queer ones? What difference does it make which gender holds up the colonial system? Don’t we need individuals, communities and nations that are no longer willing to prop up an unjust system that is designed to destroy the fabric of our nations?”¹⁰⁵

The structures of security and militarism should be addressed similarly. Women are as socialised as men are into militarised ideas of security, of politics infused with the notion of threat. The solution to “threats and enemies” is increasing the role of military and militarising the role of police, and one way to legitimise this is to make them sites of “equal opportunity” for participants of different identities.

Establishing this legitimacy is also a key reason why state actors sometimes even embrace the language of their critics—describing themselves or their foreign policy as feminist. Assertions of “feminist foreign policy” or “feminist leadership” in governments that continue to promote the arms industry and arms trade, participate in wars or military interventions, and/or refuse to come to terms with their status as settler colonial states, serve to reinforce the legitimacy of these governments and undermine feminist objections. “The adoption of the label ‘feminist’ does not require that states are substantially remade,” notes academic David Duriesmith, “nor that they change the masculinist nature of their institutions, but instead seems to occasionally result in the cynical use of gender programming to legitimise other forms of violence that they themselves inflict.”¹⁰⁶

None of these concerns, however, means that the language, theory, or work of feminism is unhelpful to political change. On the contrary, it is clear that intersectional feminism has much to offer in the project of dismantling the structures of militarism, patriarchy, colonialism, racism, capitalism, and other sites of discrimination and

¹⁰⁴ Nancy Fraser, Cinzia Arruzza, and Tithi Bhattacharya, “Notes for a Feminist Manifesto,” *New Left Review* 114 (Nov–Dec 2018), 117.

¹⁰⁵ Simpson, “Queering Resurgence.”

¹⁰⁶ David Duriesmith, “Promoting Ally Politics in the Liberal State during the Age of Paleo-Masculinism,” *The Disorder of Things*, 17 April 2019.

oppression. In their “Notes for a Feminist Manifesto,” Fraser, Arruzza, and Bhattacharya articulate a feminism of solidarity across race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and more. They speak directly to militarists that identify as feminists, saying, “there is nothing feminist about women who facilitate the work of bombing other countries and backing neo-colonial interventions in the name of humanitarianism, while remaining silent about the genocides perpetrated by their own governments.” They point out, “Women are the first victims of war and imperial occupation throughout the world. They face systematic harassment, the murder and maiming of their loved ones, and the destruction of the infrastructures that enabled them to provide for themselves and their families. We stand in solidarity with them.”¹⁰⁷

The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), founded more than a century ago in the midst of a world war, has always stood in solidarity with the bombed over the bombers. At an international gathering in 1919, WILPF members expressed regret that the terms of peace proposed at Versailles “should so seriously violate the principles upon which alone a just and lasting peace can be secured”—that is, “militarism as a way of thought and life, the privatised arms industry and recourse to war rather than dialogue.”¹⁰⁸ WILPF spent the next hundred years working for peace and disarmament and against the arms industry, capitalism, racism, and environmental destruction, and continues to do so today. WILPF was a member of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), which led the efforts to achieve the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. During this period of work, ICAN included many women, queer-identified folks, activists of the global south, representatives of affected Indigenous communities, atomic bomb survivors, and others who had experienced the impacts of nuclear weapons. This was part of a concerted effort to diversify the participation in conversations about these weapons.

¹⁰⁷ Fraser, Arruzza, and Bhattacharya, “Notes for a Feminist Manifesto,” 132.

¹⁰⁸ Christine Chinkin, “Are we asking the right questions? Reframing peace and security,” London School of Economics, Centre for Women, Peace and Security Blog, 4 March 2019.

VII.

Solidarity in critique and activism

All of this points to the importance of taking an intersectional approach to issues of equality, justice, and security. This is yet another lesson we can draw from feminist, queer, and Indigenous activism. While mainstream discourse may try to silo activist “causes,” it is in the recognition of the complementarity of our struggles that we can find the most resilience in our understandings of the world, and our strategies to change it. Many of the Water Protectors at Standing Rock identified the oppressor not just as the US government, the military, or capitalist corporate interests. They understood that heteropatriarchy, racism, and imperialist pursuit of empire are at the core of the challenges they face in trying to protect our land and water from the violence of pipelines.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, some queer activists see political promise in a “broad critique of multiple social antagonisms, including race, gender, class, nationality, and religion, in addition to sexuality” and in “a broadened consideration of the late-twentieth-century global crises that have configured historical relations among political economies, the geopolitics of war and terror, and national manifestations of sexual, racial, and gendered hierarchies.”¹¹⁰

Intersectional antinuclearism

In the context of nuclear weapons, this means recognising that campaigning for nuclear disarmament without understanding the racist, patriarchal, and capitalist injustice these weapons represent in international relations and local experiences does a disservice both to fighting for disarmament and for justice. Our critique of nuclear weapons needs to also be a critique of the settler colonial state, which believes that it can conduct nuclear tests or store nuclear waste on stolen lands. It needs to be a critique of racism, with attention to the bodies and lands upon which nuclear weapons are tested and used. It needs to critique patriarchy, with a mind to how nuclear weapons are gendered, how they are used to reinforce social hierarchies, con-

¹⁰⁹ Estes, *Our History is the Future*.

¹¹⁰ Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz, “What’s Queer About Queer Studies Now?” 1.

trol, and domination.

The bottom line, as Audre Lorde says, is that our activism can't be single-issue, because we don't live single-issue lives. Integrating work against nuclear weapons into other movements, and effectively supporting the work of movements for social justice and environmental preservation within the work against nuclear weapons, means recentring different perspectives and approaches in our work, as described above.

An intersectional approach to nuclear disarmament also means ensuring that the voices and perspectives of those who experience the violence of nuclear weapons and of the intersection of these oppressions are leading our critiques and our work. This includes looking to the lessons of others that have struggled to make change from non-normative and marginalised positions, learning from them and being led by them.

Confronting "realism" as racism

In 1955, Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein issued a manifesto against nuclear weapons in which they stated, "We have to learn to think in a new way."¹¹¹ Much "new thinking" has been undertaken—but it is rejected as radical or naïve by those that dominate the so-called realist frameworks of theory about nuclear weapons, theories that hold nuclear deterrence to be the only credible and rational policy approach. Thus the question we face today isn't so much about how we think or what we think about nuclear weapons. It's about who articulates this thinking, and how seriously they are taken by those who have dominated the discourse for so many decades.

In pretty much any nuclear weapon-related forum in which representatives of the nuclear-armed states actively participate, only the voices of the nuclear-armed or their closest allies are treated as credible. Their thinking is all that matters. The room is quieter when they speak. When the ambassadors of the United States or Russia take the floor, you can hear a pin drop. When a representative of Equatorial Guinea is speaking, it sounds like a mosh pit on the conference room floor.¹¹² This has meaningful implications—about who is listened to, who is respected, who is taken seriously on these issues. Whose perspective, voice, and engagement matters.

Those who participated in the negotiations of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons had a different experience in this regard. While not a perfect process, there was legitimate, respectful exchange amongst all states in the room. Everyone was heard, everyone listened. Debates were serious and extensive. Formal exchanges with civil society experts opened up space for voices and perspectives that

¹¹¹ Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein, *The Russell-Einstein Manifesto* (London, 9 July 1955).

¹¹² This example, and much of the writing that follows here, is drawn from Ray Acheson, "Creating the environment for 'new thinking'," *NPT News in Review* 16, no. 3 (6 May 2019).

added value to these discussions. Survivors didn't just give testimony, they offered policy. Young diplomats from the global south led their delegations; women, including women of colour, chaired working groups.

Yet this process is shamed as being “not inclusive”—because the nuclear-armed states boycotted it and ordered their allies to boycott, too. The negotiations are ridiculed for only including “not really serious states.”¹¹³ Every time a small island developing state or an African nation signs or ratifies the TPNW, jokes erupt on Twitter about how much safer the world is now that such-and-such insignificant country has renounced nuclear weapons.

The same happens when certain civil society groups speak to or write about traditional nuclear weapon forums and processes. Certain groups and individuals are acceptable—mostly those who are accustomed to operating within the corridors of power in Washington, DC or other nuclear-armed capitals and keep their requests as minimalist as possible; preferably those who formerly held high-ranking government or military positions. People within these positions tend to come from similar backgrounds, identities, and experiences, and those who do not tend to toe the line so as to be granted or maintain their privileged positions.

In this context, “new” ideas are whatever the empowered discourse says they are. The US delegation is positing its recent “Creating the Environment for Nuclear Disarmament” initiative as new thinking. The US government has explained that CEND “grew out of an effort to think creatively but realistically about how to move forward on nuclear disarmament.” It argues that the “traditional, numerically-focused ‘step-by-step’ approach to arms control has gone as far as it can under today’s conditions.” Reductions have run their course and now the security environment is too unfavourable to go any further.¹¹⁴

The idea that the nuclear-armed states have done what they can is of course not actually a new idea. They have been saying this in various ways for at least the past decade. The idea of looking at what motivates the acquisition and retention of nuclear weapons, as the US is calling for, is also not new, nor is the idea that the “security environment” is not doing so well. Seeking to prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons in today’s “security environment” is not about ignoring that environment, as the nuclear-armed states assert. It’s about recognising how fraught it is and trying to make the situation a bit less intense. It seems to many of us that dialing down the capacity for mass murder by getting rid of nuclear weapons should help improve the security environment.

“Nuclear weapon states feed on each other’s threat perceptions,”

¹¹³ “Swedish FM attacks signatories of Humanitarian Initiative: ‘Not Serious States,’” International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, 7 May 2013.

¹¹⁴ Ambassador Robert Wood, Permanent Representative of the United States to the Conference on Disarmament, Statement to the 2019 Non-Proliferation Treaty Preparatory Committee, United Nations, New York, 2 May 2019.

wrote former Austrian ambassador Alexander Kmentt. The nuclear-armed states “provide the rationale for one another to retain nuclear weapons,” and “have proven themselves to be unable to make this mental switch in the 25 years since the end of the Cold War.”¹¹⁵ This inability to operate constructively in the modern age helps explain the French government’s demands, for example, that those calling for nuclear disarmament “must explain how they are going to preserve stability and security without a nuclear deterrent, in the face of resurgence of threats, without risking high-scale conventional warfare.”¹¹⁶

What France and the other nuclear-armed states ignore is that most of the world does not believe in nuclear deterrence, as is said clearly by most governments at every intergovernmental discussion on nuclear weapons. Nuclear deterrence is a theory purported by certain political, military, and academic folks within nuclear-armed and nuclear-enabling states. It’s a theory that can be and is constantly disputed, debated, and dismantled. As others have written, nuclear deterrence is a faith-based theory: it “works as a construct in which simply the belief in the power of nuclear weapons to deter is—in fact—the deterrence.”¹¹⁷

The debate about deterrence has lasted as long as the nuclear age. And while debates over theories are not necessarily “winnable,” learning from the experiences and argumentation from people outside of the nuclear policy sector is essential to inform and advance our thinking about nuclear weapons. For example, one of the best articulations I’ve read against nuclear deterrence comes from Gwen Benaway, an Anishinabe/Métis trans woman writing about traumatic childhood abuse and what it revealed to her about the concept of deterrence:

I know a knife can sometimes stop violence from happening through the threat of further violence. There are moments in life where a knife is all you have. A sharp edge can mean the difference between suffering immense harm or walking away alive. Of course, the trouble with a knife is that once you pick it up, you can never put it down without fearing retaliation from the other party. You look for bigger knives and sooner or later, someone’s blood is on your hands.¹¹⁸

Conclusion: Breaking binaries to break the bomb

Intersectionality and solidarity are imperative for nuclear abolition. We must ask, who gets to be heard in debates about nuclear weapons? Whose perspectives and arguments are listened to by the orthodoxy? Who gets to change discourse? Who gets to have any kind of influence over normative thinking? Engaging with ideas about power, violence, and privilege is as important for the nuclear

¹¹⁵ Alexander Kmentt, “Avoiding the Worst: Reframing the Debate on Nuclear Disarmament,” European Leadership Network, 14 June 2014.

¹¹⁶ Ambassador Yann Hwang, Permanent Representative of France to the Conference on Disarmament, Statement to the 2019 Non-Proliferation Treaty Preparatory Committee, United Nations, New York, 2 May 2019.

¹¹⁷ Ken Berry, Patricia Lewis, Benoît Pélipidas, Nikolai Sokov, and Ward Wilson, *Delegitimizing Nuclear Weapons: Examining the Validity of Nuclear Deterrence* (Monterey, CA: James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, 2010), 29.

¹¹⁸ Gwen Benaway, “Repair,” *Guts Magazine*, 3 May 2019.

weapon debate as it is for any social, political, or economic issue we face in the world today, and engaging as many diverse perspectives and experiences as possible can only help build a more comprehensive, coherent critique of and solutions to the problem of nuclear weapons.

It also brings us back to the question of institutions, and whether we try to operate within structures of existing power or create alternatives. The lessons learned from a range of activist projects suggest we should not simply rely on established institutions to “allow” us to participate, or that we should settle for minor accommodations within those institutions. A critique of nuclear weapons in the locations and with the language of nuclear weapon proponents will not work. At best it may help achieve slight reductions in the numbers of warheads or missiles, or the establishment of arms control regulations and non-proliferation initiatives. It does not get us to abolition.

Only by situating our critique in the struggles of Indigenous, queer, feminist, and antiracist activists can we start an honest accounting of what nuclear weapons are, what they do, and who they are really “for.” Only by rethinking our relationship to existing institutions, which tend to coopt participants into the status quo rather than providing opportunities for participants to change things “from the inside,” can we start to think about alternative spaces and relationships to engage in meaningful processes.

Challenging or exploring the limitations of binaries would also be a useful element of this work. The sex/gender binary is already actively complicated by feminist, queer, and Indigenous studies. Furthermore, these traditions tend to locate their struggles in multiple sites of oppression—heteropatriarchy, capitalism, racism, etc.—rather than in simple binary narratives. Examining how such challenges to binaries can be useful in antinuclear theory and activism will be important: for example, the binary between nuclear-armed and non-nuclear-armed states—though already complicated somewhat by the category of states that support nuclear weapons but do not possess them, this binary suggests these categories of countries are either static or timebound. Further, exploring how antinuclear work can help further challenge binary approaches to sex, gender, power, and oppression would be useful.

Binaries enable hierarchies. Gender binaries are accompanied by racial, religious, and other hierarchies. Binaries put people in boxes. They constrain how we can be, look, act, and feel when we are contained within certain bodies. Undoing gender helps us undo normative, hierarchal structures that oppress and cause harm.

This, in turn, can help the broader project of nuclear abolition. Deconstructing gender and dismantling militarised masculinities in

particular cuts away the foundations of state violence. It undermines the idea that “security” achieved through nuclear weapons is necessary or desirable. Divesting from binaries means refusing to buy into idealised notions of strong men and passive women, of men needing to be providers and protectors and women needing protection.

The ideas presented here are not meant as answers but as the beginning of a conversation about how anti-nuclearism—as a movement and a goal—can be more effective in strategy, more reflective and inclusive, and more supportive of other social justice work. Emerging from the (missile) silo of single-issue antinuclear organizing is imperative. While the work to bring into force, implement, and universalize the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons must continue, we must simultaneously work to deconstruct and transform the structures that enable a select handful of governments and corporations to possess these weapons.

It at the intersection of many abolitionist projects that we can find hope and inspiration for dismantling both the bomb and the political, economic, and cultural scaffolding that have facilitated its existence for seventy-five years. Viewing nuclear weapons as a metaphor and a grotesque physical manifestation of all the hate, fear, and violence in our world, we must place them within the spectrum of violence of which it is a blinding hot, radioactive part.

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