

Theresa Meerwarth Gabriele Schwab's  
*Radioactive Ghosts: A*  
Review

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, the release of treated radioactive water from the Fukushima nuclear power plant into the Pacific Ocean as well as Christopher Nolan's much anticipated blockbuster *Oppenheimer* have reignited public conversations about nuclear threats. In January 2023 the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* set the Doomsday Clock, the symbol for human self-destruction, at 90 seconds to midnight, the closest to apocalypse it has ever been since its creation in 1947, and polls report that fears of a nuclear holocaust have surged to the highest level since the end of the Cold War. Despite this renewed interest in nuclear weapons and nuclear catastrophes, public attention to existential threats of the nuclear age is still seeped in a sense of apathy, rather than political demands or public upheaval.

Responding to these myriad complexities and issues, Gabriele Schwab's 2020 book *Radioactive Ghosts* is a timely study tackling the unfinished history of the nuclear age. The book is haunted by ghosts of past nuclear catastrophes and ghosts of possible future apocalypse. Traveling the paths of academic discussion and autobiographical recollection simultaneously, Schwab explores how the nuclear age leads to the formation of what she calls "nuclear subjects" pointing to subjectivities that are tethered to a traumatic haunting from the past and future and which address the repressed nuclear violence "that profoundly shapes our being in the world" (2020, xi).

Schwab's specific invocation of the ghost produces a variety of apparitions, combining the ontological and epistemological insecurities of the atomic age with the intimate ruptures of psychic life, and zooming in on

the different scales of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic experiences. As such *Radioactive Ghosts* sits well within a rich cultural studies tradition that employs the ghost as a tool for critical thinking: As a “figure of return” (Blanco and Peeren 2013) the ghost questions linear temporality of past, present, and future. Ghosts also reveal what is hidden from sight, most aptly to shine a light on injustice, violence, and repression (Gordon 2008). The ghost hence troubles distinctions between visibility and invisibility, presence and absence and is far from distinct to the political realm of human existence. With a nod to Achille Mbembe (2003), the ghost points to the political marginalization of the ‘living dead’, who are simultaneously abused by and uphold the racist-capitalist system that has turned them into disposable outsiders and ‘ghosts’ in the first place. Following Derrida’s ‘hauntology,’ ghosts also trouble a permanent notion of being by invoking questions about temporality, revelation, or justice. Accordingly, *Radioactive Ghosts* leads readers through an array of critical investigations, unpacking the nuclear in relation to race, gender, colonialism, ecology, and even posthuman transspeciesism. The book is an intriguing study within the field of nuclear criticism, highlighting the intricacies of psychopolitical consequences in nuclear politics.

Drawing on Achille Mbembe’s 2019 book *Necropolitics*, Schwab develops the concept of ‘nuclear necropolitics’ as a theoretical anchor, expanding on Mbembe’s discussion of sovereignty and the power over life and death. Nuclear necropolitics, Schwab argues, inaugurate a new form of ‘slow violence’ that affects human subjects both physically and mentally. She writes, “[t]he power of nuclear weapons can now be used to dictate not only who may live and who must die from a nuclear attack but also how some people must live with and die a slow death from the lingering effects of nuclear contamination” (2020, 18). In this sense, the creation of ‘sacrifice zones’ for atomic weapon tests or resource extraction are examples of nuclear necropolitical violence. To Schwab this demonstrates that in the nuclear age human lives are unevenly valued precisely because nuclear sovereignty designates specific populations and territories as disposable. The ontological insecurity generated by the inauguration of the atomic bomb, therefore profoundly shapes a sense of “being in the world” that works both collectively and individually, since nuclear necropolitics “has defining and lasting consequences [...] for biopolitics and the larger ecology of mind and planetary life that molds the formation of subjectivity” (xi). In this sense, Schwab expands existing discussions of nuclear politics by introducing a clear focus on the relationship between sociocultural experiences and subjective formations of psychic trauma.

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*Radioactive Ghosts* draws on classical works within the field of nuclear criticism and critical theory, including the writings of Jacques Derrida, Achille Mbembe, Jonathan Schell, and Arundhati Roy. Schwab combines these insights with works on trauma citing Robert Jay Lifton as well as Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, to raise intriguing questions about the politics of the archive and the emergence of a haunted nuclear imaginary. In aiming to link these different strands of thinking comprehensively through the lens of psychoanalysis, Schwab's ambitious book develops a complex framework for approaching the nuclear imaginary with the help of exhaustive examples, ranging from activism to pop culture, to literature and personal experience. Schwab herself describes the book's design as "rhizomatic" with "feedback loops between chapters to revisit particular issues in light of new perspectives drawn from different, yet interrelated theoretical debates" (xv). However, her focus on the impact of the nuclear age on psychic life undeniably sets Schwab's book apart from other scholarship in the field.

Drawing on psychoanalysis, Schwab theorizes the role of the 'nuclear unconscious' for the formation of said 'nuclear subjectivities.' The concept of 'nuclear subjectivities' builds on the beginning of the nuclear age with the first detonation of the Manhattan Project inaugurating an "ontological, psychological and epistemological break" (xiv). By depicting the Manhattan Project as a moment of rupture, Schwab convincingly outlines that the nuclear age is marked by an ontological insecurity that alters human subjectivity and thereby transforms the human species itself (21). "Nuclearism," she writes, "marks the formation of subjectivity so pervasively that it presents a challenge to reconceptualize all notions of the subject and its environment, including psychoanalytic ones" (39). At the core of her theory of nuclear subjectivities is the concept of a traumatic nuclear unconscious. Comparing the traumatic events of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the US military in 1945 with the nuclear catastrophes of Chernobyl and Fukushima, Schwab identifies structural similarities of subjectivities formed after both nuclear war and nuclear accidents that "are marked by certain features that include a pervasive epistemology of deceit and denial, a fascination with the nuclear sublime, a devastating awareness of the psychic toxicity of living in a nuclear zone, and a haunting from the future" (162–163). In this sense, Schwab interrogates nuclear trauma and memory via the subject's psychic defenses, including fantasy, amnesia and disaster fatigue. She explains that:

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[i]n relation to the nuclear threat, familiar psychic defense mechanisms, such as splitting, doubling, dissociation, denial, moral inversion, deceit, psychic encryption, forgetting, and, in some cases, even traumatic amnesia, have become common conditions of human functioning in everyday life (xiii).

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Schwab insists these psychic defense mechanisms, described through a wide array of examples, happen on an individual as well as on a collective level. The fact that the legacies of the Manhattan Project notable permeate from the individual to the collective and back to the individual again is an important aspect of her psycho-political approach and her interest in breaking down scales of trauma.

Scale is, inherently, a very pressing matter in Schwab's book. First, the nuclear challenges every notion of scale from the outset: from the atom, the tiniest element, to the magnitude of the effects of nuclear weapons into the vast cosmos and possibility into deep futures, the scale of nuclear violence challenges the boundaries of human imagination and experiences. It is exceedingly difficult to grasp the impact of radioactive material whose half-life goes far beyond the cognitive and conceptual capacities of most. As the nuclear not only requires but demands new modes of thinking across extreme scales, Schwab draws on Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects* and, with a nod to Deleuze and Guattari, on 'the molecular' to insist that nuclear necropolitics operate on the level of macropolitics and micropolitics at the same time (2020, 214). This multiscale approach leads Schwab to conclude that

[t]he fact that we deal simultaneously with a monumental hyperobject and with molecular animacies allows us to understand why it is so hard to grasp the terrifying scope and scale of nuclear necropolitics, let alone tell its stories (215).

Nuclear threats in other words are not simply inconceivable because of their extreme scales but also difficult to challenge, because this inconceivability is also pervasive and ubiquitous—like being, death, or time itself.

*Radioactive Ghosts* challenges a common sense of temporality and, with its focus on nuclear haunting, reconceptualizes notions of linear time. Drawing on her previous work in *Haunting Legacies. Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (2010), Schwab compares transgenerational trauma caused by traditional war that originates in the past to nuclear injury, emphasizing the specificity of nuclear haunting as not only encompassing the past and the present, but also the future. Given that

radioactivity's overwhelming half-life extends human life/death into the deep future, the "slow violence" of past nuclear contamination, the ongoing danger of nuclear wars and catastrophes, as well as the fear of future annihilation, marks radioactivity as "being ontologically an "undead" materiality" (45) that creates a "double haunting from both the past and future" (79) with vast implications for the psychopolitical realities of individuals and collectives.

Schwab's analysis extends to specific forms of historical discrimination. In particular she examines the link between anti-nuclear resistance and the African American fight for civil rights. Drawing on Achille Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason* (2017) as well as the works of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Martin Luther King Jr. (an avid anti-nuclear activist in his own right), Schwab highlights the efforts of these thinkers to "trac[e] the roots of both racism and nuclearism back to colonialism and imperialism" (90) insisting on a 'critique of nuclear reason.' Schwab cites the attempts of Black thinkers to demonstrate the link between racist oppression and the nuclear military industrial complex via the notion of "economic warfare" (90) whereby excessive military budgets in the service of the nuclear arms race directly impact Black disenfranchisement through the elimination of social funds, programs, and services. The struggle against nuclear violence, she concludes, is therefore inseparable from the Civil Rights Movement's fight for social, economic, and racial justice (2020, 104). In other words, nuclear politics are subsumed with questions of race, class, and gender. Unpacking nuclear violence is therefore inherently linked to intersectional analyses.

Schwab's intersectional analysis of the discriminatory system of nuclearism links the nuclear subject to wider formations of differential power, including climate change, colonialism, and reproductive health. Drawing on Karen Barad, Schwab insists on the materiality of haunting crucial to understanding the entanglements of nuclear politics with other (raced, classed, gendered) forms of violence, and emphasizes the interplay between nuclear power and structural injustice. For example, Schwab explains that the 'success' of the Manhattan Project was only made possible through the colonization and exploitation of indigenous lands and peoples, accentuating that nuclear mining and the production of nuclear weapons repeat colonial gestures of resource extraction and biopolitical violence. Stressing this continuity of nuclear colonialism, Schwab also highlights the link between nuclear politics and present fights against water injustice, such as the resistance movement at Standing Rock.

To Schwab unpacking nuclear violence further invariably exposes gendered fantasies of life and death that blur the boundaries between body

and bomb. In particular, Schwab addresses the relation between reproductive politics and gendered subjectivities in the nuclear age, concluding that “[t]he long-term and transgenerational effects of radioactive contamination on reproductive functions, of course, affect women disproportionately” (128). At the same time, nuclear contamination invokes what Schwab calls the “phantasm of the mutant body” (129), which anticipates a posthuman future via antinuclear discourses on motherhood. However, on the other end of the heterosexist spectrum gendered fantasies of the nuclear also put into focus a “male centered politics of reproduction” (118). Following Michel Carrouges’s concept of the “bachelor machine” heralding the two first atomic bombs “as new babies” and revealing tacit fantasies of male self-generation “in competition with women’s reproductive powers” (119), Schwab explains how the Manhattan Project can be seen as “the culmination of new technological weapons that support the myth of the triumph of masculine technology over nature and the feminine” and as “an almost orgiastic culmination of male fantasies of conquest” (120)—à propos *Oppenheimer*. Scholars of queer theory might find the focus on male vs female biology lacking, but Schwab’s main point in highlighting these poles is ultimately aimed at critiquing sustained fantasies of *male* reproduction at the core of nuclear fetishization. Schwab demonstrates how gendered fantasies of technological birthing feed into ongoing reproductions of the nuclear sublime, as it drives the excessive militarization of the nuclear sector post 1945. At the crux of this apocalyptic imaginary, to Schwab, crucially lies a concocted “superior adaptability” (129) that circumvents women’s reproductive advantage on one hand and uninhabitable toxic environments of radioactive contamination on the other.

*Radioactive Ghosts* develops this focus on trans-species imaginaries, situating contemporary nuclear politics within “the larger context of the molecular turn in the life sciences” (xiv). Building on Michelle Murphy’s concept of chemical infrastructure and Mel Chen’s concept of animacies, Schwab explains that the book is currently the only study “that has theorized this molecular turn in the formation of nuclear subjectivities” (xiv). Mobilizing literature and art on phantasms of mutations and metamorphosis, Schwab expands Marx’s concept of “species being” and Robert J. Lifton’s concept of the “species self,” replacing them with the less anthropocentric concepts “transspecies being” and “transspecies self.” By arguing that the nuclear danger goes far beyond humans alone, Schwab demonstrates “an awareness of the entanglement of species in relation to threats of extinction and the concomitant struggle for survival” (240). As a result, she pleads for a new ethics of care that includes other living species and transcends environmental speciesism.

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Ultimately, willingly or not, *Radioactive Ghosts* invokes nuclear imaginaries and addresses key concerns of apocalyptic discourse: Staying true to the etymological meaning of apocalypse as a form of revelation, the book uncovers the many layers of injustice, violence, and repression invoked by the nuclear. While both apocalyptic and nuclear imaginaries invite a prefiguration of extinction, the apocalypse is commonly conceptualized as a spectacularly catastrophic event. *Radioactive Ghosts*, on the other hand, shows that ends of worlds can also be durational and slow. Schwab summarizes the apocalyptic outlook of the book as follows:

the nuclear age is haunted by the specter of extinction, the challenge is to imagine extinction within its sociopolitical parameters without succumbing to the lures of the apocalypse [...]. Denying the specter of extinction, in other words, would be as detrimental to understanding the nuclear challenge of our time as embracing its phantasmatic lure. Only an irreducibly social conception of ontology can avoid this double trap (258–259).

In other words, while Schwab insists on acknowledging the political urgency of imagining extinction, she also challenges her readers to focus on new beginnings, on the power of story-telling, and on productive (and adaptive) practices of worlding. In this light, the book ultimately reads as a call for resistance—a determination for survival, collectivity, alliances and alternative ethics of care despite the ever-looming threat of extinction—eyes wide open but without falling into despair.

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**Theresa Meerwarth** is a research associate at the Käte Hamburger Centre for Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Studies (CAPAS), Heidelberg University. She is currently a doctoral candidate at the Faculty of Modern Philology where she is working on a thesis about representations of national socialism in the writing of Roberto Bolaño. Her research focuses on conceptions of the uncanny in relation to the apocalypse. She is interested in decolonial theory, gender studies, and haunting.

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