

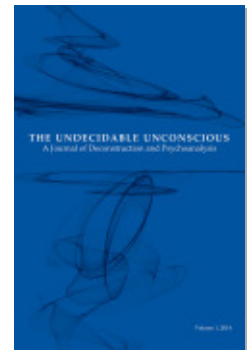


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Nuclear Necropolitics

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Haunting from the Future

Psychic Life in the Wake of Nuclear Necropolitics

GABRIELE SCHWAB

The breaking of the mirror would be, finally, through an act of language, the very occurrence of nuclear war. Who can swear that our unconscious is not expecting this? Dreaming of it, desiring it?

—Derrida, “No Apocalypse, Not Now”

I have chosen Derrida’s provocative invocation of what I will call the “nuclear unconscious” as a stepping-stone toward a larger exploration of the legacies of the Manhattan Project and its impact on the formation of subjectivity. The nuclear age, and especially nuclear disasters like those of Chernobyl and Fukushima, continue to mark the cultural imaginary profoundly and nourish the fantasies and phantasms that structure subjectivity more generally. I will argue that “nuclear subjectivities” and the “nuclear unconscious” also challenge psychoanalysis to reconceptualize its notion of the subject and his or her environment.

“Just as the unsuspected reality of the subatomic world contributed to changing science’s conception of itself, so the reality of environmental processes must lead psychoanalysis to change its own conception of itself as both scientific and therapeutic” (2000, 136), writes Alan Bass in his analysis of Hans Loewald’s “Psychoanalysis in Search of Nature.” Insisting that a psychoanalytic theory of unconscious processes needs to be grounded in a theory of nature, Loewald states: “Nature is no longer simply an object of observation and domination by a human conscious

mind, a subject, but an all-embracing activity of which man, and the human mind in its unconscious and sometimes conscious aspects, is one element or configuration" (Bass 2000, 137). If Freud demonstrated that conscious mind is unable to perceive psychic reality directly, nuclear subjectivities compel us to extend this insight to material reality. The materiality of radioactivity is literally invisible, yet those affected by it, and especially those who are dying from it, experience it as a deadly material agency. In this respect, nuclear subjectivities assume an almost allegorical function in relation to the trans-individual subject-formation in today's precarious ecologies. The material world, including nature as well as techno-scientific objects, can no longer be seen as an outside to this subject-formation. Rather, the boundaries between the subject and the material and immaterial forces that he or she encounters are continually renegotiated in processes of dynamic exchange.

These processes also challenge conventional notions of objectivity in psychoanalysis. Seen from the perspective of Loewald's theory and its elaboration by Bass, conventional assertions of objectivity appear as a defensive attempt to control the dynamic exchange between inner and outer nature by rendering it static (Bass 2000, 138). In this respect, the traditional objective sciences belong to the genealogy of the (Western) colonizing project of dominating and domesticating nature. According to Bass, the mind's substitution of static objects for differentiating processes in order to create perceptual certainty is a form of fetishism. By contrast, Bass sees psychoanalysis offering a "powerful theory of the intersection of mind and nature." As he points out, this ecology favors *natura naturans* (nature as active process) over *natura naturata* (nature as the assembly of created objective entities). In other words, a psychoanalytically informed ecological theory—in the larger sense of Gregory Bateson's "ecology of mind"—belongs into the genealogy of postmodern fluid onto-epistemologies. Matter—or more specifically, material objects, including textual or artistic materialities—is endowed with an impersonal agency that becomes as formative of the ego and the

unconscious as the fantasies and phantasms that emerge from the subject's encounter with them. We know about nature and reality, argues Loewald, by "being open to their workings in us and the rest of nature as unconscious life" (Bass 2000, 140). According to Loewald, the traditional subject-object opposition as well as the rigid opposition of psychic and material reality belong to a pre-psychoanalytic conception of mind (2000, 140). The origin of individual psychic life is a trans-individual field that includes not only others but also "nature as unconscious life" more generally.¹

Freud's theory of "nature as unconscious life" rests heavily on his agonistic model of Eros and Thanatos. Nuclear subjectivities compel us to rethink the psychoanalytic theory of life and death in the context of today's nuclear necropolitics.² To the best of my knowledge, it was Jacques Derrida who first addressed the issue of a "nuclear unconscious." In his rarely discussed early essay "No Apocalypse, Not Now" (published in 1984 in the special issue of *Diacritics* on nuclear criticism), he speaks about the possible future occurrence of nuclear war, asking the pointed question I used in my epigraph: "Who can swear that our unconscious in not expecting this? Dreaming of it? Desiring it?" (1984, 23).

When I first read the essay, I stumbled over the almost shocking "Desiring it?" Could we truly harbor an unconscious desire for nuclear war? And wouldn't such a desire be the ultimate manifestation of the death drive? Derrida emphasized that at this point in history the vision of a "remainderless destruction," that is, a total nuclear war that would destroy our species, if not all life on Earth, cannot be anything but a fantasy, a phantasm. I am interested in exploring what role the nuclear imaginary plays in the formation of subjectivities and subjections after World War II and the inauguration of the so-called nuclear age with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. "No single instant, no atom of our life (of our relation to the world and to being) is not marked today," says Derrida, "by the cold war arms race" — Derrida calls it a "speed race" — "and by the nuclear imaginary that engenders it and is engendered by it" (1984, 20).

Thirty years after Derrida made this strong assertion, we still

live with the legacy of the Manhattan Project and the fantasies and phantasms of nuclear destruction. While the overt Cold War and the debates about the nuclear arms race have ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, we now live in the shadow of the fallout of the so-called benign use of nuclear power and the nuclear disasters of Chernobyl and Fukushima. In what follows, I will revisit Derrida's "No Apocalypse, Not Now" in order to raise a sequence of questions regarding the impact of the trans-generational legacies of the Manhattan Project and the ensuing nuclear necropolitics. The nuclear age is now marked by global nuclear power industries, the irresolvable problems and dangers of storing the obsolete weapons arsenal as well as the nuclear waste from power plants, and the specter of the production of nuclear arms by so-called rogue states or terrorist organizations. Thirty years ago, Derrida reminded us that the (phantasm of) the nuclear war triggers not only the "senseless capitalization of sophisticated weaponry" but also "the whole of the human socius today, everything that is named by the old words culture, civilization, *Bildung*, *schöle*, *paideia*" (1984, 23). Not much has changed in this respect, only that, except in the immediate aftermath of nuclear disasters, the discourses of nuclear war or nuclear catastrophes have largely moved underground. Have we managed, as Derrida feared, to domesticate the terror of the death machine?

I want to return to these submerged legacies of the nuclear imaginary via the detour of testimonies by those for whom the nuclear threat has become a reality, namely, the survivors of Chernobyl. More specifically, I explore the fact that even those who have gone through the real horrors of nuclear destruction cannot escape the nuclear phantasms Derrida places at the center of his analysis. Looking at such phantasms, I will trace the impact of the nuclear imaginary on the formation of postnuclear subjectivities.

The phantasms that aggregate around the nuclear imaginary range from apocalyptic to idyllic scenarios. The power of an apocalyptic imaginary is related to a haunting from the future that comes from the global destruction of sustainable ecologies. At the same time, however, it is necessary to disentangle the apocalyp-

tic imaginary from notions of a haunting from the future. "No Apocalypse, Not Now" was written at the height of the nuclear arms race. Derrida insists that the massive stockpiling and capitalization of nuclear weaponry and the (apocalyptic) fantasies of a nuclear war are not two separate things. Calling the nuclear war "an event whose advent remains an invention" (1984, 24), Derrida invokes a haunting from the future that requires one to rethink the relationship between knowing and acting. Imagining nuclear war seems to become a precondition for (collective) actions that may be able to avert it. Yet the imagination of a remainderless destruction depends upon the performative and persuasive power of texts, discourse, and figurations. "The worldwide organization of the human socius today hangs by the thread of nuclear rhetoric. . . . The anticipation of nuclear war . . . installs humanity . . . in its rhetorical condition," Derrida writes. He concludes that the imagined remainderless destruction would foreclose any cultural or symbolic "work of mourning, with memory, compensation, internalization, idealization, displacement, and so on" (28).

Because of its apocalyptic undertones, however, nuclear rhetoric is immensely commodifiable. The uncanny attraction to the nuclear imaginary, including fantasies about a remainderless destruction, has generated its own rhetorical and figurative history. Thirty years after the catastrophic accident, Chernobyl, for example, has been commodified and exploited for astounding disaster tourism. Francesco Cataluccio (2012) calls his chapter on Chernobyl "The Disneyland of Radioactivity." More than fifteen thousand people visit Chernobyl and Prypjat every year; the areas have become the site of films and novels whose apocalyptic imaginary draws on a "nuclear sublime" (see Masco 2006). The latter is marked by a fundamental ambivalence: on the one hand, there are the terrors and dread of life in a contaminated zone and the illnesses, deaths, and psychic toxicity that come with it; on the other hand, we find people with a pervasive sense of recasting the disaster zone as an idyll of freedom, a zone outside the law that generates a new conviviality with other species and a flourishing of new life philosophies. Cataluccio speaks of a "postnuclear

optimism" expressed in assertions that around Chernobyl plant life seems to thrive, the fields are planted again, and people have moved back to the contaminated areas (see Cataluccio 2012, 132).

This commodification of a nuclear aesthetic of ruins bears upon Derrida's insistence on the "fabulously textual" nature of the problem of nuclear power and the question of how we are to get speech to circulate in the face of the nuclear issue. "Nuclear weaponry depends," he writes, "more than any weaponry in the past, it seems, upon structures of information and communication, structures of language, including non-vocalizable language, structures of codes and graphic decoding" (1984, 23). We may ask then how literary or artistic works or even oral histories and "ethnographies of the future" (Strathern 1992) relate to apocalyptic phantasms on the one hand and the foreclosed mourning of a remainderless destruction on the other. Derrida links the two through the "paradox of the referent" (1984, 28): Like nuclear war, literature is "constituted by the same structure of historical fictionality, producing and then harboring its own referent" (27). This is why, Derrida argues, literature and literary criticism must be obsessed by the nuclear issue, albeit not in a naively referential sense. "If, according to a structuring hypothesis, a fantasy or a phantasm, nuclear war is equivalent to the total destruction of the archive, if not of the human habitat, it becomes the absolute referent, the horizon and the condition of all the others" (28). While, according to Derrida, the symbolic work of culture and memory, their work of mourning, limit and soften the reality of individual death, the "only referent that is absolutely real is thus of the scope or dimension of an absolute nuclear catastrophe that would irreversibly destroy the entire archive and all symbolic capacity" (28). In the absence of but under the compulsion to imagine this catastrophe, literature then cannot but produce "concord fictions" (Kermode 1966), that is, fictions that convey the sense of such an ending in ever-new modes of indirection by inventing, as Derrida says, "strategies of speaking of other things, for putting off the encounter with the wholly other" (1984, 28). Because of this paradox of referentiality, Derrida believes, "the nuclear epoch is dealt with more 'seriously'

in texts by Mallarme, of Kafka, or Joyce, for example, than in the present-day novels that would offer direct and realistic descriptions of a 'real' nuclear catastrophe" (27).

Apocalyptic texts and films, and the apocalyptic imaginary more generally, inevitably entail a form of symbolic domestication of the ultimate threat of nuclear destruction. They may perform a displaced anticipated mourning of the end of our planet and of human life along with that of most other species, but they cannot convey the horrors of an "absolute self-destructibility without apocalypse, without revelation of its own truth, without absolute knowledge" (Derrida 1984, 27). Perhaps the difference between the more narrowly referential works about nuclear disasters and the experimental texts Derrida invokes lies in the fact that the former try symbolically to contain the terror of remainderless destruction, while the latter try to evoke them via structural approximations, indirections, and displacements. Samuel Beckett, for example, uses indirection to evoke a possible nuclear catastrophe in works such as *Endgame* (1958), *Happy Days* (1961), *The Lost Ones* (1972), and "Catastrophe" (1994) by tracing the nuclear imaginary per se as it manifests in the dark comedy of humans who are haunted by the vague and brittle knowledge of the likelihood of catastrophes that would end the precarious lives on their planet. Beckett's visions are evocative rather than referential and performative rather than conclusive, thus radically undercutting any of the familiar thrills and consolations of an apocalyptic imaginary. It is their very darkness that is replete with a haunting from the future.

In contrast to experimental literary texts, oral histories are first and foremost histories of survivors. Rather than creating fictions of a full-scale nuclear war, they testify to the material and psychic impact of nuclear catastrophes. As the testimonies of survivors demonstrate, they too must install themselves in the rhetorical condition of nuclear destruction. This rhetorical condition is inseparable from a traumatic psychological condition that I call "haunting from the future."

In the early 1990s, journalist Svetlana Alexievich gathered the

oral histories of Chernobyl survivors. She ends her book with the following words: "These people had already seen what for everyone else is still unknown. I felt like I was recording the future" (2005, 236). In a similar vein, anthropologist Adriana Petryna, in *Life Exposed*, speaks of Chernobyl's "zone of exclusion" as "machines for designing the future" (2002, 26). If the testimonies of Chernobyl survivors can be read as allegories of a haunting from the future, we may ask how psychoanalysis theorizes the unconscious impact of pending yet predictable catastrophes.

After the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986, the nearby town of Pripyat was evacuated and declared a contaminated "zone of exclusion." Secretly, however, many of its citizens returned and resettled there illegally. In what follows, I trace the emergent subjectivities and "political economy of emotions" (Scheper-Hughes 1993, 203) of Chernobyl survivors, reading them as hallmarks of a posthuman future determined by a political economy based on "expendability" (Petryna 2002, 219), "sacrifice zones" (Churchill, 1997; Masco, 2006), and the global production of disposable people.³ Chernobyl survivors share a sense of living perpetually in the shadow of death and madness in a world in which "the order of things was shaken" (Alexievich 2005, 37) In the testimonies of these survivors, certain features emerge that mark nuclear subjectivities: the psychic toxicity of living in a nuclear zone, an epistemology of deceit and denial, and a fascination with the nuclear sublime. The condition of a haunting from the future encompasses and links all other features.

Joseph Masco's concept of the "nuclear sublime" resonates with Derrida's notion of nuclear fantasies and phantasms. Masco highlights a fascination with nuclear power that generates a particular philosophical sense of the increasing precarity of life on our contaminated planet while simultaneously nourishing a fascination with the sublime power of unfathomable destruction. "Chernobyl . . . happened so that philosophers could be made" (Alexievich 2005, 93), says one of the disaster's survivors. "It's . . . a philosophical dilemma," says another. "A perestroika of our feelings is happening here" (93). Cataluccio portrays the zone

as an area of “extreme emotions” (2012, 126), replete with the strange attraction and freedom that come when all familiar orientations become obsolete. The forms of life that flourish in “the zone” are marked by intensities that provoke a philosophical attitude toward life, a radical contemplation of the human condition and confrontation of mortality or its inverse, a willful embrace of the lures of the nuclear sublime and its apocalyptic phantasms.

“Sometimes I turn on the radio,” says one of the survivors. “They scare us . . . with the radiation. But our lives have gotten better since the radiation came. I swear! Look around: they brought oranges, three kinds of salami. . . . What’s it like, radiation? Some people say it has no color and no smell. . . . But if it’s colorless, then it’s like God. God is everywhere, but you can’t see Him. They scare us! The apples are hanging in the garden, the leaves are on the trees, the potatoes are in the fields. . . . I don’t think there was any Chernobyl. They made it up” (Alexievich 2005, 52).

The invisible danger that emanates from radiation has an element of the uncanny. Paradoxically, it creates a feeling of hyper-vigilance while maintaining the lure of deniability. Radiation as invisible matter is a material force in the world that possesses vibrancy, albeit one that cannot be experienced, except in its deadly force on all things living. Survivors apprehend radiation as a “vibrant matter” (Bennet 2010) only indirectly through mass-media warnings and coverage of dangers, through the circulating rumors in the community, and finally through its deadly impact on their or others’ bodies. The likening of radiation to a godlike substance highlights not only the fundamental ambivalence of the nuclear sublime but also its inevitable entanglement with willful denial and self-deception and a larger epistemology of deceit. Transformed into a godlike omnipresence, the invisible danger of radiation is neutralized and contained in a familiar structure of quasi-religious belief. Ultimately, nothing is new in the nuclear Garden of Eden. And yet, nothing will ever be the same. Like Benjamin’s *Angelus Novus*, an Angel of History is blown toward a forever-contaminated future he cannot see because his face is turned toward the ruins of past nuclear devastation.

At the same time, however, people are keenly aware of the fact that they live in a world where, as one of the survivors says, "the order of things was shaken." After the nuclear disaster, nothing will ever be as it was before. More than ambivalence, this is actually a paradox reminiscent of imaginary transitional spaces that suspend the laws of the real. The "zone of exclusion" outside Chernobyl is literally a space beyond the law, since the people who have returned to live there do so illegally and clandestinely. Unmoored from their former lives and social worlds, they enjoy a paradoxical freedom. Shared by both soldiers and civilians, tropes of freedom are among the most common rhetorical invocations of a nuclear imaginary. A returnee to Pripjat says: "I was running away from the world. . . . Then I came here. Freedom is here. . . . I fell in love with contemplation. . . . I go to the cemeteries. People leave food for the dead. But the dead don't need it. They don't mind. In the fields there is wild grain, and in the forest there are mushrooms and berries. Freedom is here" (Alexievich 2005, 64).

This "freedom" generates a new conviviality with animals and, almost paradoxically, a new connection with the natural world. Survivor Sergei Gurin says: "A strange thing happened to me. I became closer to animals. . . . I want to make a film to see everything through the eyes of an animal" (Alexievich 2005, 64). Human subjectivity can no longer be neatly separated from its entanglement with that of other species. The surviving animals are a sign of life in a zone of catastrophic loneliness, bare survival and living death, a space that is uncannily familiar, yet radically alien at the same time. It is as, if in the zone of exclusion, science fiction has become the condition of the present. In nightmares about being evacuated, Kovalenko finds herself in an unknown place that's "not even Earth" (28). Her testimony about her lonely companionship with animals and plants expresses the core of the nuclear subjectivities that emerged in the wake of the Chernobyl disaster: the disbelief about the uncanny invisible power of radiation, the clinging to life in the wake of catastrophe, the symbiotic bond of survival with animals who, unlike humans, can sense radiation, and the precarious denial that creates a simulated re-

turn to normality. "What radiation? There's a butterfly flying, and bees are buzzing" (31), Kovalenko says, and starts crying. The body's affect counters the denial of the mind. Perhaps the future belongs to insect societies that can live underground until the contamination is less lethal.

With their superior sensory organs for the registration of radiation, animals also function like nature's own dosimeter. Sensing the nuclear explosion, bees stayed in their nests for three days, and wasps only came back six years later (Alexievich 2005, 53). Other species succumb to a fate similar to that of humans. The vanishing of May bugs, maggots, and worms is an indicator for radioactive contamination. After the disaster, people find mutated fish, especially pike, in the rivers around Pripjat. Phantasms of the mutated body signal a return of the dark underside of the phantasmatic idyll of a postnuclear Eden, thus highlighting what is repressed in the nuclear sublime. Phantasms of the mutated body can be seen as a radicalized version of Lacan's phantasms of the fragmented body. While the latter testify to the precarity of the formation of the ego, phantasms of the mutated body signal the precarity of life in the nuclear age as well as the transgenerational genetic damage, thus functioning as allegorical hallmarks of nuclear subjectivities and the nuclear unconscious.

The zone of exclusion has thus become a mutant transitional space of the living dead, a death world that has radically changed the nature and status of the human, other living species, and technologies. The soldiers who are brought in to patrol the evacuated zones encounter Pripjat and the surrounding villages as ghost towns, death worlds marked off-limits, with sealed up houses and abandoned farm machinery. Animals have become dangerous carriers of radioactive materials, destined for extermination. A commander of the guard units who calls himself "the director of the apocalypse" tells of "empty villages where the pigs had gone crazy and were running around" (Alexievich 2005, 46) and where native plants—burdock, stinging nettle, and goosefoot—were taking over the untended communal graves of radiation victims.

Life in the zone of exclusion has created new types of assemblages between humans, animals, plants, and technology that reveal beyond doubt that it is no longer possible to define the boundaries of the human in isolation from other living species as well as, centrally, human technologies. To begin with, Chernobyl was a technologically induced disaster, but it also turned out that radiation destroys the technological tools humans have created to domesticate nature. A helicopter pilot describes the scene near the Chernobyl reactor: thin roes and wild boars move in slow motion eating contaminated grass. Next to them, a ruined building and a field of debris with an assemblage of dead machinery: "The robots died. Our robots, designed by Academic Lukachev for the exploration of Mars. And the Japanese robots—all their wiring was destroyed by the radiation" (Alexievich 2005, 51).

Characterized by the logic of death worlds, new makeshift assemblages between humans, animals and technological objects manage survival in the zone. These assemblages exist in a transitional mode of being between life and death. Together with the corporeal effects of radiation, grief and catastrophic loneliness turn humans into walking dead, their ambition of exploring Mars with robots shattered before their very eyes. Radioactive animals walk in slow motion, emaciated by contaminated plants. Erosion breaks technological objects, turning them into obsolete debris, ruins that testify to a force stronger than any hard material. Genetic mutations affect all living species, either immediately or transgenerationally. Epidemic cancers cast a shadow of death over everything.

"You can't understand anything without the shadow of death" (Alexievich 2005, 191), says Chernobyl photographer Victor Latun, who concludes with a forceful recourse to the nuclear sublime: "Some say that aliens knew about the catastrophe and helped us out; others that it was an experiment, and soon kids with incredible talent will start to be born. Or maybe the Belarussians will disappear, like the Scythians. We're metaphysicians. We don't live on this earth, but in our dreams, in our conversa-

tions. Because you need to add something to this ordinary life, in order to understand it. Even when you're near death" (193).

These invocations of a nuclear sublime testify to the fascination with nuclear power as something beyond comprehension, something unfathomable, surreal, alien. "We heard rumors that the flame at Chernobyl was unearthly, it wasn't even a flame. It was a light, a glow," says Viktor Latun (Alexievich 2005, 191). The collapse of all categories of measuring and judging one's world may well feel like an artificially induced madness (*versania*).⁴ It is no longer possible to distinguish between reality and fantasy, between real danger and freely floating fear. Not only can radiation block the function of certain organs; it can also block certain functions of the mind and induce something akin to a specific nuclear repression at the level of "nature as unconscious life" — to reiterate Loewald's term. Rumor reigns supreme; a new "life of public secrets" (Petryna 2002, 73) emerges along with "informal economies of knowledge" (213). When people find pike in the lakes and rivers without heads or tails, rumors are spreading that something similar is going to happen to humans: "The Belarusians will turn into humanoids" (Alexievich 2005, 129). A teacher says: "The fear is in our feelings, on a subconscious level" (119). An ever-present, pervasive unconscious fear generates what Masco called the "psychic toxicity" of radioactive ecologies. "It's not just the land that's contaminated, but our minds" (183) says another Chernobyl teacher.

Psychic toxicity has many facets beyond the mere internalization of fear. It also translates into various forms of denial necessary to continue with everyday life. The very fact that the danger of radioactive toxins is invisible and that everything seems normal on the surface enhances the ability of denial. Combined with the official cover-up, a collusive willful denial facilitates living on borrowed time. The normality, however, is but a precarious facade that masks the fact that the zone is a death world. Chernobyl, I argue, must be seen within the context of a more general sociopolitical production of ever-increasing death worlds with populations condemned to a form of death-in-life. Life in "the zone" is a radical manifestation of what

Achille Mbembe has described in terms of a new form of necropolitics. The latter emerges under contemporary conditions of global mobility in which entire populations are targeted, their living spaces sealed off and cut off from the world and transformed into zones of exemption, abandonment, and exclusion (Mbembe 2003, 30). What Mbembe says about African states that can no longer claim a monopoly on violence and the means of coercion within their territory is also true for other parts of the world. Many countries around the world generate urban militias, private armies and separatist groups that claim the right to exercise violence and kill. As the sovereign right to kill is privatized, "coercion itself has become a market commodity" (Mbembe 2003, 30). The Zone has become a similar space populated by outlaws . . . not only those who return legally to live there but also scavengers who run a black market selling radioactive materials, including contaminated meat and vegetables in Moscow or even across the border in other countries (32).

Mbembe traces this new dissemination of necropower back to the new linkages that have emerged "between war making, war machines, and resource extraction" (33). In this context, the Manhattan Project may well appear as an inaugural event. The building of the first nuclear weapon during World War II was dependent upon uranium as the prime resource. Its extraction in the service of war as well as the nuclear tests happened on indigenous lands that were designated as sacrifice zones. To the extent that the indigenous inhabitants were not protected from the lethal consequences, they were treated as disposable populations. This nuclear necropolitics is undoubtedly related to the emergence of an unprecedented form of governmentality that consists in the management of multitudes, a governmentality that Mbembe links directly to the new geography of resource extraction (34).

The Chernobyl disaster is, of course, also intimately tied to the extraction of uranium and the management of multitudes in the aftermath of the disaster. As the oral histories of survivors clearly demonstrate, the management of the multitudes affected by ra-

dioactive contamination was performed by a veritable war machine of soldiers, citizens and scientists who oversaw the evacuation of people, the burial of the dead under cement covers, the cordoning off of a vast zone of exclusion, and the shooting of surviving pets. In addition, organized crime flourishes on the illegal trade of radioactive goods, headed by criminals who, similar to warlords, arrogate the sovereign power over life and death. As Mbembe argues, this necropolitics and necropower lead to the “creation of death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (40). Humans are left with the legacy of a world in which peace has become the continuation of war with other means.

To understand the connection between necropolitics and a neoliberal economy based on resource extraction we need a “political ecology” (Latour 2004) that encompasses politics, economy, and psychology. I have chosen Chernobyl’s “zone of exclusion” as a prime example of such necropolitics. Nuclear subjectivities emerge within the larger context of today’s increasingly spreading necropolitical spaces around the globe. They assume allegorical valence in relation to a haunting from the future and a world to come that, while anticipated by a nuclear imaginary, has entered the space of the real with catastrophes such as Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Chernobyl and Fukushima. Derrida’s seminal question: “Who can swear that our unconscious in not expecting this [nuclear war]? Dreaming of it? Desiring it?” (Derrida 1984, 23) reminds us that the death drive looms large in theories of nuclear subjectivities just as it looms large in Mbembe’s theory of necropolitics. Ultimately, I would argue that today’s nuclear necropolitics follows a logic of the death drive that we can only counter by strengthening the forces that affirm life. As the oral testimonies of Chernobyl survivors demonstrate, nuclear subjectivities show an incredible resilience and hold on life. The problem, however, is that this resilience is inextricably intertwined with denial. “No Apocalypse, Not Now” could almost be taken as a silent mantra that straddles the boundaries between the two.

Epilogue

Will the growing anti-nuclear movement turn the nuclear economy around in time to save the planet? Or is it too late, as Rosalie Bertell worried more than two decades ago, to reverse human extinction or “species suicide” (Churchill 1997, 346)? Will we end like Samuel Beckett’s last humans, buried like Winnie in a desert under a merciless sun on an earth that has lost its atmosphere? Are we indeed straddling the boundaries between denial and resilience by conjuring the inverse idyll of *Happy Days*? Or will some “lost ones” survive, hovering in a cylinder in outer space, looking down upon a dead earth? Perhaps Sergei Gurin, the cameraman from Chernobyl was right when he said: “We’re all—peddlers of the apocalypse” (Alexievich 2005, 112).

NOTES

1. “What is needed is a natural science that realizes that the interpretation of nature in terms of (individualistic) consciousness limits our view, granted that . . . it appears to enhance man’s domination of nature” (Bass 2000, 142).
2. I use the concept of necropolitics in the sense defined in Mbembe (2003).
3. The concept of “sacrifice zones” is central to Masco’s *The Nuclear Borderlands* as well as Churchill’s “Cold War Impacts on Native North America.”
4. For the concept of *vesania* see also Lyotard (1988).

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