A Nuclear Refrain

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A Nuclear Refrain is a piece of “spatial fiction” that challenges vital but neglected issues around the concept of Mutually Assured Destruction and the concomitant policy of nuclear deterrence. We issue this challenge via the extension of our geographical imaginations into the past, present, and future.

The UK’s 2016 decision to replace its Vanguard submarine fleet, as a major step towards renewing its Trident nuclear weapons system, ignored a barrage of public protest. Whatever the other political issues in play, the lengthy process of Trident replacement will surely vex British and, indeed, global politics for generations. Political, economic, ethical, and military disagreements will rumble on and on, building to raging arguments
and further waves of public protest at key decision-making moments.

In the story that follows, we consider nuclear deterrence through three less familiar but revealing frames:

- The emotional and embodied;
- The yearning for lost empire and the workings of the British establishment;
- The limits and potential of democracy.

Although it is a rigorous critical analysis of deterrence, we present our consideration as a work of fiction, short-circuiting the usual academic structures and strictures on writing style and content. Our aim is to reach an audience beyond academia as well as within. We also wish to incite different ways of thinking about how we can “stage” scholarly interventions. Inspired by Charles Dickens’ A Christmas Carol, we transport a UK policy-maker in time and space to engage with arguments and emotions around how nuclear deterrence not only perpetuates an existential threat, but also limits our
potential as individuals, relational groups, and democracies. Previewing publication, one reader commented that our story was “an uncomfortable hybrid between academia and fiction.” And that was exactly our intention, because we believe that discomfort can be a vital spur to re-thinking persistent and intransigent issues like nuclear deterrence for academics, activists, policy-makers, and disengaged citizens alike. Thus, we wish to provoke debate about how nuclear deterrence restricts the development of trusting and caring societies, both within and beyond national borders. We also hope that what follows is a good read!