

Contesting Nuclear and Climate Imperialisms in the Pacific

Thursday, 6 June 2024 09:00 (1h 30m)

This panel explores nuclear and climate politics in the Pacific as a crucial nexus of gender, race, and imperialism. Inspired by the work of critical scholars such as Teresia Teaiwa and Alice Te Punga Somerville, and brought together by the FemNukes online collective, panellists analyse how Pacific political resistance to nuclear imperialism and climate catastrophe constitutes a total social fact, informing all aspects of contemporary life in Oceania. The panel will develop new conceptualisations and chronologies of nuclear and climate imperialisms and the local and transnational struggles against them; uncover previously hidden or marginalised archives of resistance; and present ethnographic studies of the complex and ambivalent ways that nuclear and climate imperialisms are visualised and narrated. Presenters are all committed to challenging hierarchies within the field of IR, and ask how scholarship can benefit the marginalized communities most impacted by, and most active against, contemporary imperialisms. In addition to focusing on Indigenous activism, all the contributors are attentive to the voices and subjectivities of women, non-binary, and working-class people in the Pacific. Collectively, they underline how nuclear and climate imperialisms and resistances to them continue to (re)shape the communities and lands of the Pacific and resonate over space and time.

Chair: Becky Alexis-Martin, University of Bradford, UK

Papers:

Anais Maurer, Rutgers University, US

Pacific Post/Apocalypse: From Nuclear Colonialism to Carbon Imperialism

This paper analyzes how Pacific people's transgenerational struggle against nuclear weapons recontextualizes the global fight against climate change by underscoring the environmental racism at the root of both existential threats. Bombarded with the equivalent of one Hiroshima bomb a day, every day, for half a century, Pacific islands have already undergone the environmental collapse looming over the rest of the globe. Yet stories of this ocean on fire by Pacific nuclear survivors reveal an alternative vision of the apocalypse: instead of individualism and toxic masculinity, they center mutual assistance, cultural resilience, South-South transnational solidarities, and Indigenous women's leadership. These multilingual stories should be shared the world over, particularly in other frontlines against petroculturalism. Unlike antinuclear activists and climate militants in the global North who barely talk to each other, Pacific environmental activists today draw from their experience of the nuclear apocalypse to cultivate resilience and regeneration in times of climate collapse. Oceania was the first continent to see its environment destroyed by thermonuclear fire on a previously unimaginable scale. It is also the first continent to imagine the new world emerging from the ashes of the old one.

Charlotte Weatherill, Open University, UK - 'Operation Hurricane': Narrating climate change as part of the 'imperial mess' and colonial violence wrought in the Pacific

In 'Two Hundred and Fifty Ways to Start an Essay About Captain Cook', Alice Te Punga Somerville writes about colonialism in Aotearoa and the Pacific as a story that can be told in endless different ways, each way having its own message. Number 223, 'In Montebello Islands', discusses the British nuclear weapons testing programme. The tests were called 'Operation Hurricane', and Te Punga Somerville writes, "It is tempting to call the whole imperial mess of the past five centuries 'Operation Hurricane'" (Te Punga Somerville 2020, 42). From this prompt, this paper asks what happens if you tell the story of climate change in this way. In doing so, the colonial history becomes the present, where coloniality and resistance entwine, and the 'way out of the mess' has to be found in a fight against the whole imperial operation. In this chapter, I retell the history of colonial violence in the Pacific region, framing it as part of the same historical politics of disposability, all of which has a counter history of resistance and solidarity. The violence of climate change is confronted and defied through new stories and a rejection of the fantasies of invulnerability upon which coloniality relies.

Mililani Ganivet, The British Museum and University of East Anglia, UK

Marie-Thérèse and Bengt Danielsson's archives: a potent force to redraw the historiographical lines in mapping anti-nuclear resistance in French-occupied Polynesia

The Kon Tiki Museum hosts the archives of Marie-Thérèse and Bengt Danielsson, two staunch anti-nuclear activists who played a prominent role in the anti-nuclear movement in French-occupied Polynesia during the height of the testing period. Known for their opus *Poisoned Reign: French Nuclear Colonialism in the Pacific* (first published in 1986), the Danielsson couple gathered materials and documented the anti-nuclear movement while raising awareness globally about the danger of its consequences. And yet, most of their archival documents are untapped resources and remain unseen. This paper seeks to investigate the potency of this archival source and suggest three potential analytical frameworks they could be used. I argue that if investigated and fully used, it could not only shed a new light on the transnational nature of imperial nuclearism, but it could also shift the current historiographical discourses on anti-nuclear resistance in French-occupied Polynesia.

Catherine Eschle, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK

Weaving a Transoceanic Web: Antinuclear Solidarities between Greenham Women and Indigenous Pacific Communities

This paper examines the solidarity relations constructed in the organisation Women Working for a Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific (WWNFIP). Close attention to this UK-based network, active between 1984 and 1999, is important for two reasons. First, it challenges accepted understandings of the spatial and temporal boundaries of feminist anti-nuclear activism, and of the identities and ideologies of participants in it. Second, it offers important lessons for present-day activism because of its focus on the role of colonial and post-colonial relations of power, and on Indigenous Pacific peoples' experiences and knowledge. In previous publications, I have examined the textual representation of identity and connection in the archive of newsletters produced by the group between 1984 and 1999. In this paper, I focus on interview testimonies to explore how participants conceptualised relations between Pacific women and UK-based allies, to unpack the material underpinnings and impacts of these relations in the women's everyday lives, and to trace their affective and political legacies.

Lis Kayser, University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Nostalgia for Colonial Sexual Desire: Camouflaging Gendered Power Imbalances on the Former Nuclear Base on the Hao Atoll, French Polynesia.

While most gendered analyses of the colonial legacy of nuclear testing in the Pacific focus on indigenous female communities' engagement in regional anti-nuclear movements and their resistance against decades of exploitation and exposure to radiation, this paper takes a different route. Based on fieldwork at the Hao atoll in French-Polynesia, the paper explores the gendered, racialized, and colonial politics of former nuclear bases and asks how they continue to inform the nuclear memory of local female communities. In the early 1960s, the French military transformed Hao into a military support base and airplane decontamination station for nearby nuclear weapons testing. Observing that women and non-binary people in Hao often fondly spoke of the nuclear testing era as a "golden age," this paper acknowledges women's complex, sometimes ambivalent experiences of nuclear testing as simultaneously disempowering and empowering. Inspired by Cynthia Enloe's concept of the "camouflage of normalcy," I argue that nuclear nostalgia is conditioned by the French military's transformation of Hao into a militarized space of social inclusion and (colonial) sexual desire, which was a strategy to camouflage the uneven colonial (sexual) relationship of the military with Polynesian (female) islanders and its objectification of the Polynesian female body.

Track Classification: Global Nuclear Order Working Group