

PREFACE

When I began this project in 1998, I sought to challenge conventional narratives of “the nuclear age” as a technological and a geopolitical rupture. According to those narratives, splitting the atom promulgated a new world order that replaced imperialism with “the bomb.” But it was clear that colonialism remained central to the nuclear order’s technological and geopolitical success. Even a short list of atomic test sites makes the point: Bikini Atoll, Semipalatinsk, Australian Aboriginal lands, the Sahara, French Polynesia. Yet these spectacular displays told just part of that story.

The history of uranium production, rarely addressed in any depth, suggested that imperialism was much more deeply and lastingly woven into the fabric of the nuclear age. Congolese uranium powered the Hiroshima bomb. Uranium in the Commonwealth helped Britain maintain nuclear relations with the United States after the war. France mined uranium in its African colonies. Uranium also played a key role in more recently established colonial relationships, such as that between South Africa and Namibia. Examples abounded: East Germany and the Soviet Union, Adivasi lands in India, First Nation lands in Canada, and on and on.

What, I wondered, had global nuclear development meant for local communities in the so-called third and fourth worlds? How did it reflect and shape relationships between “developing nations” and “nuclear powers”? To keep the project manageable as I set out to explore this history, I limited myself to Western imperial relationships. Because I wanted to learn from the people who worked in or lived near the mines, I chose places where conducting oral interviews and field research was feasible. In addition to Gabon, Madagascar, Namibia, and South Africa, my initial sites included the Navajo Nation and Australia’s Northern Territory.

As my research continued, I concluded that a single book covering all these places would be too unwieldy. The evidence I'd collected in Gabon, Madagascar, Namibia, and South Africa had begun to coalesce around an argument that addressed not only the power of nuclear things, but also the positions of African nations in transnational technological systems and the complex challenges faced by African workers who participated in those systems. Still, my geographic coverage was limited. Violence around uranium sites and other political tensions meant that neither Niger nor the Democratic Republic of Congo was conducive to archival research or fieldwork on this topic. I could therefore address them only in the limited way made possible by secondary literature and documentation available in US and European archives.

My work was strongly shaped by my collaboration with Bruce Struminger, a medical doctor with an interest in anthropology who worked at the Indian Health Service in Shiprock, New Mexico. Together we filmed a series of interviews with people who'd worked at uranium mines in Namibia, South Africa, and the Navajo Nation. I owe him a very special acknowledgment for teaching me about occupational health research and for being part of this project, off and on, for four years.

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