

Jack Rondeau
University of Leeds, United Kingdom
ll16j4r@leeds.ac.uk

Pramod Nayar, *Nuclear Cultures: Irradiated Subjects, Aesthetics and Planetary Precarity* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 198pp.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozona.2023.14.2.5230>



Pramod Nayar's *Nuclear Cultures: Irradiated Subjects, Aesthetics and Planetary Precarity* is a comprehensive contribution to the fields of ecocriticism and environmental humanities. The book establishes a "nuclear culture" by compiling an array of different literary-cultural texts ranging from literary fiction to survivor accounts, reportage, manga and auto/biography. It reads these "literary-cultural texts that make up the nuclear cultures" as "present[ing] an unrelenting prognosis of nuclear harm to the entire planet" (9). Hence, the threat of nuclear disasters to the survival of the planet is constantly foregrounded throughout the book, which steadily builds towards a concluding theorisation about our precarious planetary position. Nayar's work is a timely intervention in the growing field of nuclear criticism. It elaborates upon Robert A. Jacob's notion of the "global hibakusha"¹ (2022) by claiming that "we are all, in a sense, nuclear subjects" (55). Nayar's understanding of "nuclear subjects," however, differs slightly from Gabriele Schwab's recent definition in *Radioactive Ghosts* (2020). *Nuclear Cultures* focuses on reading accounts of nuclear disasters through an aesthetic lens, rather than analysing, as Schwab's text does, the psychic harm that emerges in response to the material dangers of nuclear power. Yet, in its engagement with thinkers such as Ursula Heise and Lisa Lynch, *Nuclear Cultures* insists on figuring the planet through a model of anti-nuclear eco-cosmopolitanism.

"Nuclear cultures" exists as a "subset of what has been termed the 'nuclear humanities'," and is concerned with the fate of "nuclear subjects" (2). In keeping with much of the existing work on nuclear criticism—which is often positioned between deliberating over the potential threats of nuclear warfare and accounting for disasters that have already occurred—Nayar assembles a "nuclear culture" comprised of different literary-cultural texts, each of which features a "prognosis of planetary precarity" (2). However, despite this shared prognosis, the book's eclectic corpus of texts sometimes lacks clear direction. For example, chapter three argues that the

¹ "Hibakusha" is a Japanese term originally used to describe the surviving victims of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, more recently, the term has been broadened in its usage to include anyone who has been exposed to radioactive particles, whether it be through nuclear testing, production, or disasters like Chernobyl and Fukushima.

biographies of J. Robert Oppenheimer should be read as critical resources. Nayar contends that these texts “produce a persona” of the “maker-of-the-bomb” and therefore should be read as “scientific and cultural work[s]” (96). Yet, it is not clear how the move towards reading the biographies of atomic scientists as cultural works enables us to combat the threat of planetary precarity. Nor is it clear how these cultural works comply with the more convincing concept of an “irradiated aesthetics” that is otherwise central to the book (103).

The concept of an “irradiated aesthetics” is developed in chapters two and four, and provides a framework for understanding the effects of nuclear disasters beyond their initial occurrence. An “irradiated aesthetics” is attentive to “the image—visual, verbal—of the scarred, burned, injured bod[ies],” and “the toxic somatography of atomic trauma [that] captures a constant play of visible/invisible, inside/outside when speaking of the injured and the dead in atomic disasters” (18). By navigating this double bind between “visible/invisible, inside/outside”, an “irradiated aesthetics” captures “a state of *permanent crisis*, whose scale is at once visible/visual (...) and invisible” (102, 103). Nayar’s use of the double bind here is critical. An “irradiated aesthetics” enables one to begin to materialise the “invisible” scale of nuclear disasters, and consistently emphasise the catastrophic threats inherent to the nuclearization of the planet.

This leads to the final chapter of *Nuclear Cultures* which culminates in an urgent call to address our position of planetary precarity. Nayar claims that “there are *no* safe places or safe times from nuclear disaster and all parts of the planet are linked in entangled histories of nuclear precarity” (142). He concludes by claiming that we should reconsider the function of “extinction iconograph[ies]”—such as the Doomsday Clock and the radiation symbol—as “signal[ing] a planetarity” where our “future (time) remains linked to the rest of the planet” (171, 179). This reading of nuclear extinction iconographies aims to capture the constant threat of nuclear annihilation by establishing easily identifiable symbols of the planetary stakes at play.

One limitation of *Nuclear Cultures* is its singular insistence on the catastrophic dangers of nuclear power. As a result, all nuclear scenarios are reduced to their devastating possibilities, without a sustained consideration of the potential for harnessing nuclear power as a productive source of energy. Though there is a brief reference to Oppenheimer’s original view that the goal of atomic energy should be the enlargement of human welfare, this is quickly overshadowed by a reiteration of the exploitative “terror of nuclearization” (93). Additionally, although Nayar is alert to the environmental threats of nuclear disasters, his project is largely human-oriented. Hence, there remains room for a developed consideration of the more-than-human as constituting nuclear subjects, especially in the context of planetary precarity. Incorporating a new materialist approach, by considering an intra-active relationship between the human, the more-than-human and the planet, would extend Nayar’s argument beyond an anthropocentric model.

Nevertheless, *Nuclear Cultures* is an urgent book about an issue that affects each of us. It is a book about “a planet in peril” (179). The vast range of source

materials that comprise *Nuclear Cultures* demonstrates how the pervasive threat of nuclear disasters regularly informs contemporary cultural texts. Nayar's book is also alert to a variety of nuclear events, ranging from the military bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to the nuclear spills in Chernobyl, and the displacement of indigenous peoples in the Marshall Islands. The environmental risks of nuclear disasters are often captured through the insistence of the threat of complete planetary destruction. Yet Nayar is most convincing in his aesthetic readings of nuclear effects on human bodies. These readings often materialise the immaterial force of radiation by paying attention to burns, scars and prolonged illnesses, before mapping these destructive forces beyond the body and onto the surrounding environment. *Nuclear Cultures* is thus a useful resource for researchers engaged in the fields of ecocriticism and the environmental humanities – particularly those working in nuclear humanities and/or aesthetics.

Works Cited

Jacobs, A. Roberts. *Nuclear Bodies: The Global Hibakusha*. Yale University Press, 2022.
Schwab, Gabriele. *Radioactive Ghosts*. Minnesota University Press, 2020.