Vielen Dank! Und Danke auch an Freunde und Freundinnen,
Kolleginnen und Kollegen.

Es ist mir eine große Ehre, heute mit Ihnen zu sprechen!
Und vielen Dank, dass sie bis zum Ende bleiben.

And now to English, and sorry to the interpreters for this moment of confusion!




The Forgotten Faces of the Atomic Lie

To begin at the beginning

Linda Pentz Gunter
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I am Linda Pentz Gunter with the American NGO Beyond Nuclear. We also have a news website, Beyond Nuclear International, where many of the stories I am going to tell you today can be found.

Our theme today is the Atomic Lie. Shortly after the 1979 Three Mile Island accident here, the famous cartoonist, Jules Feiffer, made this drawing shown on the red button. So you see it is by no means a new theme!

My favorite piece of fictional writing of all time, is the play for voices, *Under Milk Wood,* by the Welsh writer, Dylan Thomas.

It opens like this:

To begin at the beginning.

If you want to put human faces to the story of nuclear power, you have to begin at the beginning. That's why those who continue to promote nuclear power never begin at the beginning. Because if they do, they meet the faces of the people who are the first witnesses to the fundamentally anti-humanitarian nature of the nuclear age.

When we begin at the beginning, what do we find? We find uranium. We find people. And we find suffering.

When we begin at the beginning, we are on Native American land, or First Nations land in Canada. Aboriginal land in Australia. The Congo, now the site of a new holocaust with 5 million dead, the fighting mostly over mineral rights. We are walking on the sands of the Sahel with the nomadic Touareg. We are among impoverished families in India. In Namibia. In Kazakhstan.

We see black faces and brown faces. Almost never white faces — although uranium mining also happened in France and in Eastern Germany.

Mostly, we find people who already had little and now have lost so much more. We find people whose ancient beliefs were centered in stewardship of the earth, whose tales and legends talk of dragons and serpents and yellow dust underground that must never be disturbed.

We find Dadbe, a cousin of the Rainbow Serpent, a mythical ancestor of the Aboriginal people of Australia, who believed that if Dadbe is disturbed, then a great disaster will strike.

And yet, it was they who were forced to disturb Dadbe —in Australia, in Africa, in Indian country. As they unearthed uranium — the lethal force that would become the fuel for nuclear power and for nuclear weapons — they were being made to destroy the very thing they held sacred. And their lives were about to be destroyed by it, too.

We are seeing a genocide. Because a genocide is not just a massacre. A genocide is also the erasure of a people culturally. It is the destruction of a way of life, often also a language, a belief system.

It was at that moment, when we first dug uranium out of the ground, that nuclear power became a human rights violation. And it never ceases to be one, along the entire length of the uranium fuel chain, from uranium mining to processing, to electricity generation, to waste mismanagement.

When we being at the beginning in the United States, we are on Navajo land. Or Hopi, Zuni, Laguna, Acoma, Lakota. And others. Windswept, arid islands of indifference and abandonment. A destination reached on a forced march to exile, the Trail of Tears.

Indian reservations in the United States. The most deprived, neglected, poverty-ridden, outlawed lands in the country. Exiled and condemned, to no running water, even today, no electricity, spiraling into alcoholism, the highest unemployment and suicide rates, domestic abuse. Where young Native girls disappear at an alarming rate, often at the hands of white predators trespassing on Indian land. Where Covid 19 is killing people at a higher rate than anywhere else in the country.

It’s a Third World that, like the beginning of the nuclear story, is rarely talked about. It’s an America that America would rather not acknowledge exists.


Lewis Yazzie
Seraphina Nez

And it was here that Native Americans, beginning in the late 1940s, began to mine for uranium. Without protective gear. Without warning or knowledge of the dangers. They were told it was their patriotic duty.

So they breathed in the radon gas, and wore their radioactive dust-covered clothes home for their wives to wash. And they died. In their hundreds. And so did their families. Unacknowledged as victims of the arms race or of the nuclear power industry, they have had to fight for compensation and cleanup ever since.

Laws have been passed, but they are slow and convoluted and there is still a very very long way to go.

Arlit, Niger

In Niger, in Arlit, a dusty desert town in the Sahel, people live in shacks with no water or electricity, the walls sometimes built, as this dwelling was, with radioactive scraps foraged from the uranium mine site. Children sit on radioactive stools. Discarded radioactive metal is refashioned into forks and spoons.

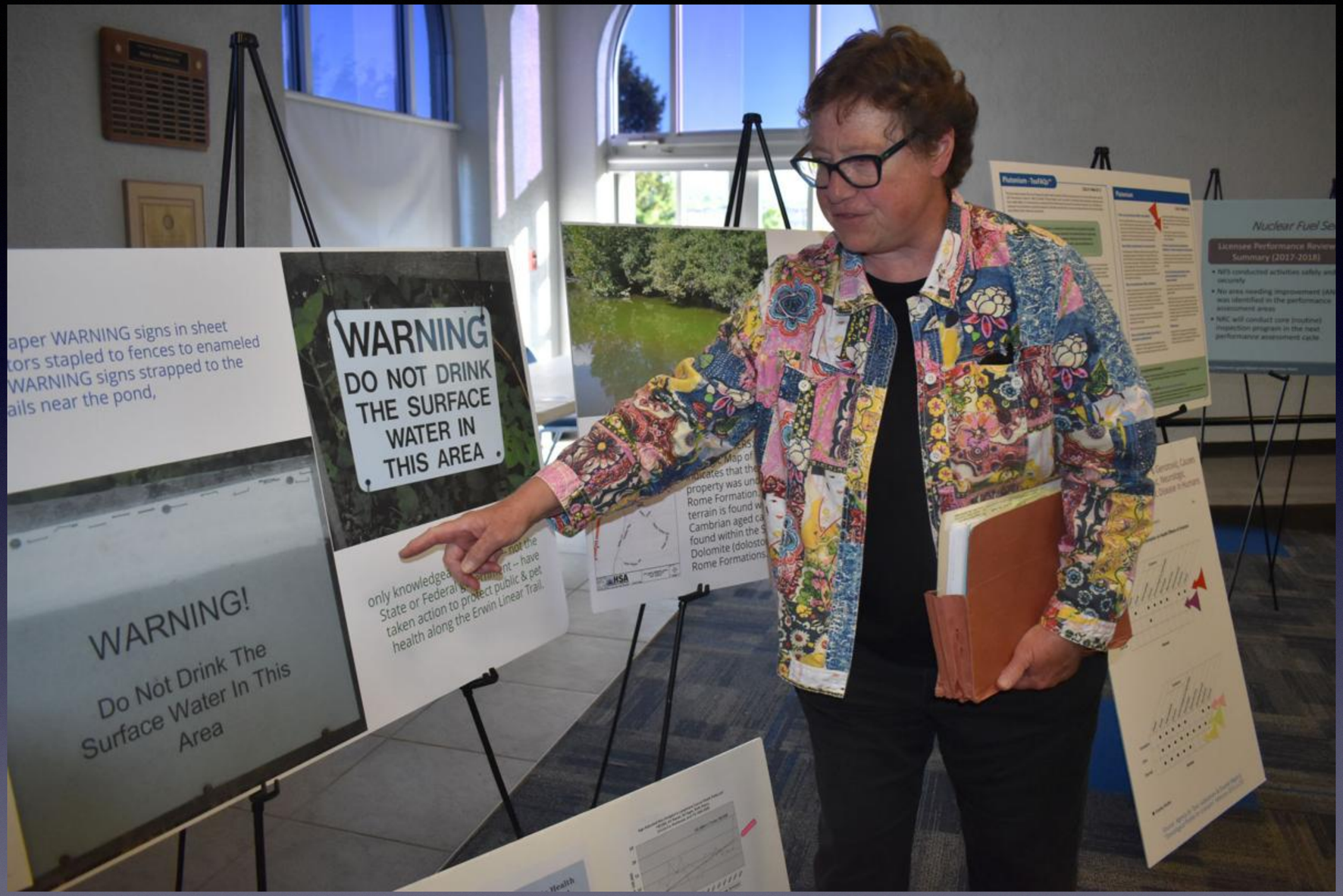
In the distance there is a mountain. It isn't real. But it's not a mirage either. It's a tailings pile, ravaged by the Sahara winds, scattering radioactivity far and wide.

And Areva, now Orano, which mines there, makes millions,
their executives lighting their swank Paris apartments overlooking the Seine with the nuclear powered electricity fueled by the sweat and toil of people whose children pick up radioactive rocks from the sandy streets and whose fathers die in the local hospital where the Areva-hired doctors tell them their fatal illnesses had nothing whatever to do with exposures at the mines.

Jaduguda, India

When Guria Das died in her village in Jaduguda, India, she had the body of a three-year old. She was 13. She could not speak. She could not move. Nearby, the Uranium Corporation of India, Limited — whose acronym appropriately spells out UKILL — keeps working its six uranium mines, its tailing ponds leaching poison into a community ravaged by disease and birth defects, but who are told, of course, that their problems having nothing whatever to do with the uranium mines. It's a story that repeats, over and over, wherever you find uranium mining. The corporations profit and then they deny.

This is the beginning. But it's not the only part of the atomic lie that the nuclear power industry would rather keep hidden. Let's move on. And back to the United States.



Erwin, Tennessee

We go to Erwin, Tennessee, home to a facility that processes weapons-grade uranium fuel into fuel for nuclear power plants. There are many stories here, too many to be purely coincidence. Heartbreaking stories that were collected and published. Here is what one person wrote:

“I know we ate radiation straight from Mama's garden. Our beloved little dog died of cancer. My dad died at 56 with colon cancer. Our next door neighbor died of colon cancer; I doubt she was 60. A friend and close neighbor had extensive colon cancer in his early 30s. I had a huge lymphoma removed from my heart at the age of 30. My brother had kidney failure in his early 30s. My sister and I both have thyroid nodules and weird protein levels in our blood that can lead to multiple myelosis.”

And then that fuel gets loaded into a nuclear power plant.

And the story continues.

We are in Illinois in the early 2000s, where far too many children, living between two nuclear power plants, are suffering from brain cancer. Childhood brain cancer is extremely rare. Here there are numerous cases and they are rising. The children are taken away to Chicago for medical treatment. And they die there. So their deaths are not recorded in the statistics of their local community. In this way, their deaths have nothing whatever to do with the nuclear power plants.

Shell Bluff, Georgia

In Shell Bluff, Georgia, a poor African American community fought to stop the construction of the Vogtle 1 and 2 nuclear reactors. They lost. Then they fought again — against two new reactors — Vogtle 3 and 4 — and lost again.

“We noticed that lots of folks started coming down with cancer," remembered longtime Shell Bluff resident, Annie Stephens. "My daddy, mama, sister, two brothers died of cancer, and another living brother now has cancer. My aunt, a cousin, and other folks down on the river died of cancer.”

It is small consolation that Vogtle 3 and 4 have been a financial fiasco, still unfinished, years behind schedule and billions of dollars over budget.

Washed out evacuation route
Port Gibson, MS

In Port Gibson, Mississippi, a town in the poorest county in the poorest state in the country, 70% of the tax revenue from the Grand Gulf nuclear station there goes to 47 other, richer, whiter counties in the state. In Claiborne County, 87% black, with a 46% poverty rate there is one, under-resourced hospital that can barely cope with its daily patient load, especially now, let alone a nuclear emergency. And when we visited, this is what the evacuation route for that poor black community looked like: washed out and impassible.

The faces of those whose lives are destroyed by nuclear power plants aren’t always human ones. Even without a nuclear accident, the routine operation of reactors takes a daily toll on animals. In 2001, we looked deeply into this.

Whose face did we find at the top of the list of endangered species harmed and killed by operating coastal nuclear power plants?

Here it is. The ancient sea turtle, alive alongside the dinosaurs, and doing fine until humans invented trawl fishing and plastics and coastal nuclear power plants where sea turtles are sucked into intake pipes, hurled and battered, arriving in cooling canals where, if they have survived the ride, they can get caught on netting and suffocate.

And the official response simply mirrors the loss of humanity found in all official decision- making around nuclear power. If nuclear plants are allowed to kill 2 sea turtles a year but they are killing 3 or 4 or 5, we won't punish them. We won't force them to install expensive prevention devices. We'll just make killing 3 or 4 or 5 sea turtles a year the new legal limit.


Blue Natu

What does this remind you of? Of the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Before that fateful day on March 11, 2011, the legal radiation exposure limit for the Japanese public was 1 millisievert a year. Still too high. But after the disaster, when cleaning up the radioactive contamination proved an impossible task, the Japanese government just raised the exposure limit. By 20 times.

So now it is 20 milisieverts a year, unsafe for anyone, but especially babies born and still in the womb, and children and women.

An undeniable violation of human rights.

And the Fukushima story includes animals, too. When evacuations began, animals were left behind, never to be retrieved. Dairy cows, tethered in their milking sheds, slowly died of starvation. It’s hard to show a picture like this. But it’s even harder to say that this is something we are willing to accept, as part of the deal for using nuclear power.

Some farmers didn’t accept it and continued to tend their cows even though they could never sell the meat or milk. To abandon their cows would be a betrayal, a loss of our fundamental humanity. And of course, they also knew that slaughtering the cows meant they disappeared from view — exactly what the Japanese government wants to see happen to the Fukushima disaster itself.

Before Fukushima there was Chernobyl and before that Church Rock and before that Three Mile Island. And before that Mayak. And after these, where?


T.N.T.

What was Church Rock? It’s the least known major nuclear disaster and it brings us back to where we started — to the Navajo community. It happened on July 16, 1979, just over 3 months after the Three Mile Island nuclear accident, and, ironically, on the same date and in the same state as the first ever atomic test, the 1945 detonation, Trinity.

At Church Rock, ninety million gallons of liquid radioactive waste, and eleven hundred tons of solid mill wastes, burst through a broken dam wall at the Church Rock uranium mill facility, creating a flood of deadly effluents that permanently contaminated the Puerco River, an essential water source for the Navajo people. It was the biggest release of radioactive waste in U.S. history. But it happened far away in New Mexico, to people who didn’t count. Just one more chapter in the quiet genocide.

And Chernobyl. Which we are marking this weekend. Where to begin? The atomic lie was at its most powerful then, after Chernobyl, selling us on the idea that only a handful of liquidators died as a result. No one else.

But there were many many others who died. And many who were sickened, suffering all their lives. Some of them were brave enough to tell their stories to Svetlana Alexievich, a Belarusian investigative journalist. She put their accounts, their testimony, in her book, Chernobyl Prayer. 500 of them. Their pain. Their fears. Their loss.

These are the faces that are NOT seen by the pro-atomic pundits, when they sit in their ivory towers, their glass-enclosed corner offices with the splendid view; when they drink their fine wines at their meetings of experts. These are the faces they dare not look at, who expose their great lie, who say... this:

“Can you imagine seven bald girls together? There were seven of them in the ward. No, that’s it! I can’t go on! Talking about it gives me this feeling....Like my heart is telling me: this is an act of betrayal. Because I have to describe her as if she was just anyone. Describe her agony....We put her on the door. On the door my father once lay on. Until they brought the little coffin. It was so tiny, like the box for a large doll. Like a box.”

Chernobyl. Again, not just people, but animals, too. Barn swallows are sterile. Bank voles are not reproducing as they should. And the dogs left behind there, as they were at Fukushima, are, many generations later, living shorter lives. But it’s not just local animals. Reindeer herds belonging to the Sami people in Finland are still radioactive. So are wild boar in Germany.

Chernobyl. It remains the world's worst nuclear power plant accident. But that record could still be broken. Here in the US they are talking about extending the licenses of nuclear power plants not just for 60 years, or 80, but out to 100 years. 100 years for a technology that is both dangerous and obsolete. And which will go on producing radioactive waste, lethal for millennia, for which we have no safe, longterm plan.

In countries like France and the United Kingdom, some of that waste has been reprocessed, a chemical bath that separates out the plutonium and uranium, reducing the amount of highly radioactive waste left over but greatly increasing the volume of other gaseous and liquid radioactive wastes.

Where do those wastes go? Into the air and into the sea and into living breathing organisms. Including children. Around both the La Hague reprocessing site in Northern France and the Sellafield reprocessing site off the northwest coast of England, leukemia clusters have been found, especially among children.

Children played in radioactive tide pools on English beaches. Carbon-14 hung like an invisible lethal fog over the dairy farmers of Normandy. But no matter the evidence, the nuclear industry, and its supporters in government, denied and lied and downplayed. ‘The doctors don’t know what they are talking about’; ‘the science isn’t sound’; ‘it can’t be proven’. ‘It can’t be us’.

‘You are exaggerating’, hysterical, radiophobic’.

The mountains of radioactive waste produced at the end of this chain of atomic lies has to go somewhere. Or stay where it is. Either way, the outcome is a bad one. Should it be stored, buried, locked away or retrievable? Who takes care of it? And for how long?

And so we return to the lands of Indigenous people, and communities of color

Yucca Mountain — for a time the chosen destination for America's high-level radioactive waste —ripples across Western Shoshone Land in Nevada. We are back in the dreamtime with stories of serpents. The Shoshone call Yucca Mountain — Serpent Swimming Westward. It is a sacred place. It is also theirs by treaty, a treaty the United States has chosen to ignore. To break.

There is nothing out there, claims the US government. But the eyes of the Western Shoshone look closer. They see. And what they see are:

Quaking Aspens, a tree species that dates back 80,000 years. Thyms Buckwheat, a plant that only exists on 5 acres there, and nowhere else on Earth. There is the desert tortoise and the Devils Hole Pupfish, a fish that somewhere in its evolutionary history went from salt water to fresh water. And of course there are people. Native people. Trying hard to preserve this precious corner of their history and the land they look after.


HIBOUX
SOUTIEN
aux hiboux
DE BURE

And so we keep searching. In Cumbria in England. In the Gobi desert. In Finland, a deep geological repository is under construction, even though no one can be sure if it will work, or how it can be marked so curious future generations don’t excavate it.

In Bure, France, nature protectors calling themselves owls, built houses in treetops in the forest that would be crushed to make way for a nuclear repository.

And in New Mexico and Texas there are Latino communities faced with the prospect of hosting the country’s reactor waste “temporarily”, at so-called Consolidate Interim Storage sites. But given we haven’t found anywhere else for the waste, it likely won’t be temporary. And once again, it is a minority community which must assume this burden.

We are searching for a place where that radioactive waste can just be somewhere called “Away.” “Elsewhere.” “Not here.” “Gone.”

It will never be gone.

But sometimes there are victories. Sometimes we do defeat the atomic lie!

In 2012, the Skull Valley Goshute Indian tribe in Utah, despite being offered a huge bribe to take nuclear waste, which split the tribe, were able to reject it.

At Gorleben in Germany, a massive encampment, blockades and protests ensured that a nuclear waste repository would not be built there.

Again in Germany, at Wackersdorf, led by an unlikely Bavarian bureaucrat turned radical, a reprocessing plant was never built.

In Northern Quebec, Canada, the youth of the native Cree learned the truth about uranium mining and blocked a proposed mine there.

And, for now, Yucca Mountain remains a pointless, expensive hole in the ground.

Italy has voted against nuclear power twice in national referenda, rejecting it by 84% in 1987, a year after the Chernobyl disaster, and again in June 2011 by 94%, just months after the Fukushima disaster. You might say that the nuclear lobby there has a poor sense of timing!


NO!!! alle Scorie
la Basilicata Difende il suo FUTURO
CGIL
BASILICATA
40

In Italy again, in November 2003, 100,000 people mobilized to defeat a proposed high-level radioactive waste dump in Scanzano Jonico, a small southern town in the Southern province of Basilicata. They occupied the site and the train stations and blockaded the main highways. Once a malaria-ridden swamp, the people of Basilicata had toiled to transform it into a cradle of organic winemaking and eco-tourism. It took just two weeks of protests before the Italian government canceled the plan.

And then of course there is Österreich! Austria. A little landlocked nuclear-free island in the middle of Europe. A model of good sense. And the maker of very good cakes! No nuclear power plants. No nuclear waste storage. No transport of nuclear materials through the country.

But as we know, these successes can be fragile, fickle, passing. The great Atomic Lie is still alive, still slithering through the halls of our governments, still poisoning the minds of willing, gullible listeners in positions of power.

So we can’t stop. We can’t rest. This fight isn’t over. It may never be. We are the ones who are here now, the voices of reason, whispering on a breeze that will keep blowing, until our breath ceases and others take up the clarion call.

We may feel like Cassandras, screaming to be heard, never to be believed.

But all we can do is keep telling these stories. Make sure they are heard. And we must tell them until there are no more atomic lies. Only then can we finally live in a nuclear-free world.

Also, vielen Dank! Und ich hoffe wir können bald zusammen sein.