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Fallout, security, and alternative planetary futures

Masco, Joseph. 2021. *The Future of Fallout, and Other Episodes in Radioactive World-Making*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 440, ISBN 978-1-4780-1114-9.

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The Future of Fallout, and Other Episodes in Radioactive World-Making is a bold attempt to unravel a set of mechanisms that make contemporary crises seem inevitable and unremarkable. Its focus is nuclear warfare and environmental devastation in the U.S., and in particular a security culture and violent technopolitical order that impede alternatives to current ideologies of permanent war. By skillfully bringing into view historical moments when other avenues were momentarily open but quickly foreclosed, Joseph Masco gestures towards different understandings of (postnational) security and encourages us to imagine another planetary future. Written for a broad academic audience, the book is a 440-page-long tour de force, convincingly argued through a combination of ethnographic descriptions, conversations, media analyses, historical accounts and extensive visual material, together comprising 17 chapters of varying length, the majority of which are distributed between four parts.

Following a prologue that summarizes the book's main arguments, the first chapter, "The Age of Fallout," outlines a critical framework departing from radioactive fallout's connection to conceptions of an earth system totality. An illustrative example is the first U.S. hydrogen bomb experiment in 1952, which produced a fallout cloud that laid bare hitherto imperceptible interactions between earth, ocean and atmosphere. Along with later experiments, these detonations were "planetary-scale environmental events" (31). While the term terraformation is often associated with outer space, Masco suggests that nuclear nationalism and petrochemical capitalism, through their various cumulative and recursive effects, have already conducted a

terraforming project here on Earth. However, the author also identifies a lag between the material fact of fallout and collective recognitions of fallout's long-lasting implications. This lag is "a major psychosocial achievement of the industrial age" (33), extricating the consequences of fallout from the realm of politics.

Against this backdrop, Part I, "Dreaming Deserts and Death Machines," foregrounds an amalgamation of nuclear nationalism and settler colonial visions of empty space. Over four chapters, and with reference to Pueblo voices and a tour in a former nuclear testing site, Masco elicits the psychosocial spaces of insecurity that have emerged as a consequence of U.S. militarism, focusing on new forms of toxicity, dispossession and collective endangerment, including how infrastructural, imaginary and mass mediated mechanisms have given way to new grounds of power and modes of self-fashioning. For instance, the third chapter, "States of Insecurity," demonstrates how Nuevomexicano participation in the U.S. plutonium economy, while allowing access to middle-class life, has simultaneously subjected northern New Mexico to Anglo-American and U.S. governmental interests. In accounting for this process, Masco points to a link between security and practices of national sacrifice, whereby the nuclear standoff of the Cold War worked to rule out the possibility for alternative definitions of security whilst also blocking attention to internal settler colonial relations.

The second part, "Bunkers and Psyches," attends to the infrastructures that have helped to reproduce a militarized nuclear society, along with frontier mentalities and assumptions about American exceptionalism. The bunker has been particularly effective in this regard, yielding fantasies about armored spaces, invulnerable bodies and an understanding of military technoscience as the only means to guarantee a collective future. The seventh chapter, "Life Underground," provides illustrative examples of the ways in which the underground bunker has been transformed "into a site of both global power and social dreaming" (137); a place where the future is held hostage and reimagined. Thus, as an answer to the question of how nuclear fear has gradually "remade American society as permanently insecure, even as the United States has become the most powerful military and economic state on earth" (137), Masco suggests that U.S. military spending never aimed to end violence but to prepare citizens to endure it, thereby spurring ever-more calls for security and the concomitant militarization of national life.

“Celluloid Nightmares,” which is the title of Part III, investigates how films have helped to instill apocalyptic images of the end. These shape understandings of collective danger and become the grounds for interpreting other crises, such as global warming. Central are the countless rehearsals of absolute forms of danger in American popular culture, and how these engender indisputable countersubversive sentiments. Accordingly, in the twelfth chapter, “Catastrophe’s Apocalypse,” Masco draws a connection between Guillermo del Toro’s 2013 blockbuster *Pacific Rim* and President Ronald Reagan’s fantasy about Cold War antagonisms as surmountable through the arrival of new forms of extraterrestrial threat. These fantasies naturalize assumptions about threat as constituting the basis for community and belonging. In doing so, they also shift focus away from actual, ongoing forms of destruction. While “Americans focused on the immediacy of nuclear war in the twentieth century,” these omissions downplayed “other incremental but existential dangers” (263) caused by the rapid growth of consumer society.

The last part, “After Counterrevolution,” analyzes retired intelligence professionals’ repositioning of Cold War confrontations in relation to the War on Terror, as well as the role of Big Data surveillance in reordering the global security space. How the ensuing political deadlock becomes sustained is exemplified in the seventeenth chapter, “The Crisis in Crisis,” where the author points to the way narratives about crisis and existential danger have turned into a counterrevolutionary force: “instead of the crisis/utopia that empowered the high modernist culture of the mid-twentieth century,” the U.S. is now entrapped in “a crisis/paralysis circuit” (342) that has increasingly curtailed the political horizon. Against narratives about permanent crisis, the section offers an understanding of crisis as an effect of political, financial, technological and militaristic processes—an infrastructural achievement that, in so being, might also be redirected. In this connection, Masco suggests that we begin to articulate alternative futures and, in this way, help galvanize the necessary collective action for generating them.

In unfolding these arguments, the book occasionally draws on short ethnographic accounts and conversations, for instance with Pueblo members raising their concern about environmental justice, or a Cold Warrior turned guide in a former nuclear test site in Nevada. There is also an interesting episode on the author’s personal experience of a burglarized apartment in Chicago,

which develops into a discussion on counterterror and domestic surveillance. Still, most of *The Future of Fallout, and Other Episodes in Radioactive World-Making* oscillates between descriptions of large-scale developments and critical analyses of terms such as danger, crisis and apocalypse. As with all forms of writing, there is a price to pay: there is not much to find here for readers seeking the nitty-gritty of ethnographic encounters. But, to be fair, this is obviously not Masco's objective. In tackling issues around large-scale disasters, atomic revolution and U.S. national security, the book is instead a timely contribution to nascent discussions on the planetary. It productively analyzes some of the ways in which certain imaginaries have taken shape so as to draw out alternative possibilities.

Chakad Ojani received his PhD in Social Anthropology from the University of Manchester. His doctoral research was an ethnographic study of fog capture and atmospheric attunements in coastal Peru. Chakad is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, where he is undertaking a project on Swedish outer space infrastructures and imaginaries.



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