Nuclear Nomadologies: Curating an Inclusive Social History of the British Nuclear Test Veterans

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Introduction

Curation plays an important role in our public representation and understanding of nuclear warfare. This paper critiques the curation practices associated with British nuclear weapons testing, as a historic event that presents complex dynamics of inclusion, exclusion and power-play (Alexis-Martin, 2019, McLellan, 2017). Furthermore, it considers the ways that nuclear test veteran identities can be constructed, reproduced and contested within the exhibition space, through our exhibition "Over the Fence…to the other side of the world" at the Peace Museum, UK. Exhibitions of this nature have historically been subject to militarisms that rigidly present the state actors of nuclear warfare in selective ways, and that often neglect to feature individual veterans' stories and nomadologies of nuclear weapon testing (Garoian, 2001; Deleuze et al, 1986). When thinking of their nomadologies, we draw on Deleuzian notions that their personal identities are not rooted in one place or limited to a single fixed worldview, and that the experience and depiction of being a nuclear test veteran is complex and diffuse.

This militarised narrative of the nuclear object is not a uniquely British phenomenon, and research has previously been undertaken at US nuclear warfare museums and exhibitions to understand motivations for this discourse. Issues have been identified that relate to curatorial power, inclusiveness, and security issues (Taylor, 1997; Taylor, 2002; Gerster, 2013; Bogaard, 2015). Taylor was the first American scholar to identify a contest of '…ideological narratives seeking authority over the meaning of nuclear symbols', during his study of Los Alamos National Laboratory's Bradbury Science Museum (Taylor, 1997 p119). His research revealed that conflict centred on activist challenges of dominant narratives and dialogues that pertained to nuclear history; and he described how cultural memory has been constructed and transformed within this space to better serve the nuclear-ideological and institutional interests of Los Alamos (Taylor, 1997). Bogaard's work has recently called for a contemporary reconsideration of inclusiveness, in light of the Cold War nuclear rhetoric and its historical representation within museums (Bogaard, 2015). She questions how inclusive a museum can be, when a curating a history that is still veiled by nuclear secrecy (Bogaard, 2015). Her research of sites created by the Manhattan Project National Historical Park Act argues that "…museums can play an important role in furthering dialogue, not by erasing differences but by embracing polyphony as a new form of truth" (Bogaard, 2015 p25).

The materiality of nuclear weapons, and the pioneering science and technology of the bomb are prescient within exhibitions of Cold War and nuclear weapon history. However, there is another story that is seldom told within public exhibition spaces: that of the lower echelons of people who worked on the bombs and the local communities which were affected. For these servicemen, Aboriginal and Islander communities, there is little recognition of their experiences. There is also little representation of their own personal archives from these events, despite their cultural and social significance

to history (Ashmore et al, 2012).

In total, the British government conducted 64 nuclear weapons tests in Australia and the Pacific Islands between 1952 and 1963, in an attempt to prove that the country was as technologically advanced and significant as the USA and the USSR (Cirincione, 2007). 20,000 servicemen participated in this work, and a third of these members were conscripted (Maclellan, 2017). The experiences of the atomic veterans were shaped by the conditions, risks and consequences of life in the nuclear military industrial complex. A diminished health and safety culture, combined with a culture of secrecy, has had a long-lasting impact upon these men and their families (Alexis-Martin, 2019). An exhibition that provides insights into their community experiences provides an important way for those who worked on nuclear weapons testing to have their work and experiences publicly recognised and memorialised (Alexis-Martin et. al. 2019).

For Aboriginal and Islander communities, there is a significant gap in exhibition recognition of their lives and experiences of the bomb. This is particularly evident in the UK. While exhibitions such as "Object Journeys" at the British Museum recognise the impact of colonial harms in Kiritimati, an atoll affected by the British nuclear weapon test series, they do not explore the ways that militarisation and nuclear imperialism affect these places and their people (British Museum, 2017). However, there is still little debate within science or humanities about the inherent nuclearity of this historic series of events, and their long-term consequences to indigenous people worldwide (Hecht, 2006). Our exhibition, "Over the Fence…to the other side of the world", tries to address this deficit by presenting a co-produced and diverse understanding of British nuclear test veteran, Aboriginal and Islander experiences, through a polyphony of different voices. For this reason, we presented our exhibition within the pacifist space of the Peace Museum, to facilitate all voices being heard.

The Peace Museum is the only accredited museum of its kind in the UK, and is a prominent member of the International Network of Museums for Peace (Peace Museum, 2019a). It tells the stories of those '…who have tried to bring an end to extremism, conflict, war and inequality; [and] to create social justice, peace and cohesion' (Peace Museum, 2019a). In its press release, the Peace Museum's curators described our exhibition as, "…looking over the fence of AWRE to the other side of the world to tell untold stories of soldiers involved and explore the human cost of Britain's involvement in The Cold War and its wider impact on the peace movement." (Peace Museum, 2019b). By collaboration with this organisation, we were able to facilitate a humanising process of object storytelling, providing insights into the humanity of servicemen's and islanders' experiences, despite the arguable inhumanity of the nuclear weapon tests. This paper weaves interviews with co-curators into the story of our exhibition's production, as we helped to give voice to the objects in our collection.

Co-creation and co-curation

We took a collective and collaborative co-curation approach to "Over the Fence", which involved consultation and in-depth discussion with community members who shared their archives with us (Ashmore et al, 2012). One of the ways for us to make sense of the lived experiences of nuclear test veterans was to draw upon the personal understandings of members of the British Nuclear Test Veteran's Association (BNTVA). The BNTVA is a charitable organisation that provides information and support for people who have worked with or who have been affected by the British nuclear weapons tests worldwide, and is notable for providing solidarity and

community support to the families and descendants of those who have been affected by the nuclear weapon tests. We undertook conversations with nuclear test veteran community members and included objects from the BNTVA archive in our exhibition. In order to provide both community and professional expertise, we also drew upon established academic cultural and social knowledge of the British nuclear weapon tests (Dr Becky Alexis-Martin), and the professional and personal understandings of a veteran descendant and curator (Mr Wesley Perriman). By taking this approach, we were able to juxtapose and review conventional academic narratives, alongside prior oral histories of nuclear test veterans (Alexis-Martin et. al. 2019). A further noteworthy member of our team was Ms Stephanie Alexander, who undertook our object and event photography. It is noteworthy that this team presented a co-curation that was intersectional and reflective of the challenges faced by the nuclear test veterans (Spivak, 1999).

Our collective work was nomadological in a Deleuzian sense, in that it aimed to de-territorialise the "war machine" of nuclear weapon testing (Deleuze et.al, 1986). Nomadic approaches create structures that collapse, but also open creative lines of flight. In the context of our exhibition, the process of presenting veteran objects, we also aimed to represent the nomadologies of the nuclear test veteran – in unfettered travel across militarised space, in work and play, and in life and death.

Object histories in discussion

In discussion with the co-curators, various aspects of the process of making visible the lives of the nuclear test veterans stood out. This is significant, as the British nuclear weapon tests themselves are veiled by a culture of secrecy. Perriman described his understanding as follows, during our conversation:

> *'First of all, it's raised awareness, the amount of people I've spoken to who have said they hadn't even realised we tested a bomb, and the scale of how much testing we had done, surprised them'.*

This lack of public knowledge is perturbing, but not unexpected, due to the nature of the tests. Perriman went on to highlight specific inclusions, with emphasis on the hidden and obscure aspects of the British nuclear weapon test series, demonstrating its nomadological nature:

> *'I'm glad we included lots of stuff from the earlier tests, which is not as well-known. We have a lot from Operation Totem…[discussing other nuclear exhibitions]…The National Archives, for the nuclear testing we did, it was very limited. It just told the story of the bombs going off, not the story of the men involved. It's as though those involved are forgotten. However, until recently those people would have been under the Official Secrets Act – perhaps in the 1990s, this stuff wouldn't have come out."*

An example of an unusual object from the British nuclear weapon test series (Alexander, 2019).

Perriman felt that the quantity of artefacts reflected the number of survivors across each test, on the basis that those who did not survive may have had their collections sold or otherwise distributed. The concept of the orphaned artefact – an artefact without a history or narrative – arose during our conversation. As a deceased veteran's son, this provoked complex emotions for him pertaining to provenance:

'There is one item in the exhibition that is very sad, as it's orphaned – the tankard from HMS Resolution. I bought it from an online auction, and it has no provenance. The seller just said "came from a house clearance in Portsmouth….what has been lost? Where is the representation of the whole community?'

Wesley then went on to discuss the significance of our exhibition to his own personal identity, as a nuclear test veteran's son:

> *'It's what I've grown up with, it's a story I've wanted to tell for over thirty years. It has given an opportunity for me to learn more about my father, and look for a reason why he's not here anymore. It is also trying to share with other people in our [nuclear] community that this stuff is important, and to share these stories with the general public…If we lose it, we don't learn from it. If we don't keep these things together in collections, we can't learn from them.'*

He disclosed afterwards that much of his own father's paraphernalia from the tests had been split up after his death. This exhibition has provided him with an opportunity to not just strengthen his professional curatorial practice, but also to metaphorically regroup in light of this, and to help others to learn about the work that his father undertook.

We went on to discuss the hidden role of local communities, during the tests:

> *'It's very much part of all this – it's not just the veterans themselves, it's their families, the people they met – which includes the indigenous people. This is also their story – except it's far worse as they are an underrepresented community [who were affected by nuclear weapons testing]. You only see indigenous people's stories in Australia, you don't see them here. I don't think, universally, we have as much understanding as to how to read these paintings [by indigenous artists] as we should, what things are meant to represent. Once you know how to read these, they become more harrowing'.*

I also spoke with Ms Stephanie Alexander about the photography process, from photo-archiving to taking shots of our exhibition event. She described the different processes required to undertake photography for our exhibition:

> *'It is a different mind-set doing the archiving…it's initially emotionless looking at them through the lens, but it's different when you are actually looking and learning from them. When you take the object out the box, the story behind it distracts you. You sit and look through the albums and magazines. Some of it is really moving, especially the [original veteran's] photography, as it was someone else's life for a year or so. You can't quite imagine what it would feel like to be there with a bomb going off, it's mind-blowing'.*

The concept of moments lost emerged, as an important trope for all of us, as academic, descendant curator and photographer. Stephanie crystallised this idea during our conversation:

> *"Looking through the lens, you try and capture the moment, but you are not within the moment, despite being there – it's like looking at a memory while the memory is forming. It comes from the heart rather than the brain – event photography [such as the Peace Museum exhibition opening] is almost the opposite of archival photography, as it's [archival photography] about putting your emotions aside and getting clarity – whereas event photography is about instinct and capturing a moment".*

Stephanie emphasised the need for objects and images to be preserved, and the importance of memory and memorialisation to both the nuclear test veteran community, and the general public:

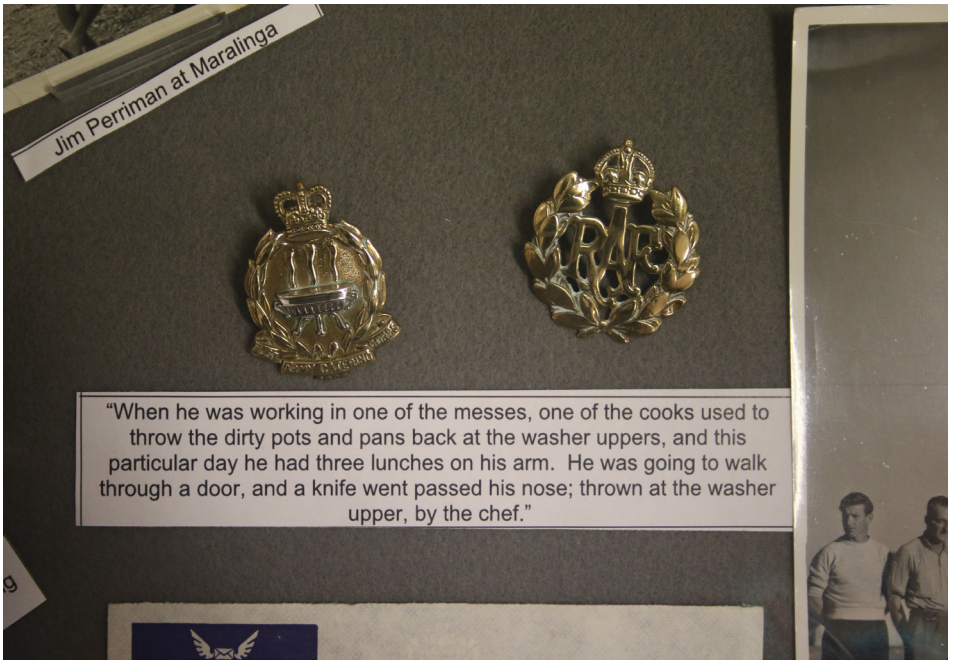
> *"It lets people get glimpses of this time, so you can see what they were doing at that time …So we don't lose what's left of people when they die. It's a way for them to live on after and keeps part of them alive, their memories and experiences".*

Sharing Stories

It is evident from our conversations that co-curation helped to embed academic knowledge and represent the cultural links from object to photography, and to the

personal. This was embedded and presented by including narratives from nuclear test veterans themselves, of their time working with the bomb. These quotes were anonymised to protect veteran identity, and some individuals were still concerned about the implications of sharing what they perceived to be “government secrets”

A small plaque was included within the exhibition, which stated ‘The quotes in this exhibition are taken from our British nuclear test veterans, as part of the UK Nuclear Families study undertaken by Dr Becky Alexis-Martin and funded by the NCCF. These quotes are anonymous, and they tell the story of the “nuclear every-man”, and his experiences of the nuclear weapon test series.’ Quotes presented a start, finish and end across the nuclear weapon test series, providing a testimonial of sorts, while also replicating the nomadic and life-changing cycle of becoming a nuclear test veteran, travelling to test the bombs, travelling home, becoming unwell and the process of mourning, memorialisation and death. They were selected to represent both the sensational and banal elements of being a nuclear test veteran.



An example of the nuclear test veteran testimonials included within “The Other Side of the Fence…” (Alexander, 2019).

By presenting our objects in conjunction with previously un-curated snippets of nuclear test veteran history, the exhibition humanised the object in every sense, by giving our objects voice and deeper meaning, beyond their material histories. For orphan objects, it offered an opportunity to re-curate and recreate what it meant to be a nuclear test veteran through their shape, form and identity.

Conclusions

Our exhibition, "Over the Fence…to the other side of the world" at the Peace Museum, UK has presented opportunities to include previously neglected cultural objects relating to and narratives of nuclear test veteran life. This exhibition differs from previous exhibitions that consider Britain's nuclear deterrent, as we do not glorify nuclear weapons. Instead, we collectively challenged existing nuclear ideologies, by providing authentic nuclear test veteran dialogues to accompany our collection and including the community in its construction. This approach helped to give voice to a neglected British community, in a way that did not essentialise or misrepresent their lived experiences. It also provided a more humanistic and pacifist narrative, through object-matched oral histories. However, many challenges remain that relate to both inclusions and exclusions within 'Over the Fence…', for instance, a lack of insight into the hidden labour of nuclear test veteran wives, despite the exhibition's comparative intersectionality and inclusion.

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