

FORUM

# Who forms the mass in mass destruction?

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## Abstract

This essay revisits the question of mass destruction through the perspectives offered by postcolonial thinkers.

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My second elder brother, his family, my sister, who had meanwhile joined us, and I all got in the wagon and we left the Toshogo Shrine and went towards Nigitsu. As we were going from Shirashima past the entrance of Asano Garden, my second elder brother caught sight of a body in the vacant lot toward the West Parade Ground. It was clothed in yellow pants that were familiar to him. It was Fumihiko, his son. Fluid flowed from a swelling on the boy's breast the size of a fist. His white teeth were dimly visible in his blackened face, and the fingers of both hands were bent inward with the nails boring into the skin. Beside him sprawled the body of a school-boy and that of a young woman. They lay slightly apart. Both had become rigid in their last positions. My second elder brother stripped off Fumihiko's nails and his belt for a keepsake. Placing a name card on him, we left the spot. It was an encounter too sad for tears.<sup>1</sup>

Being merciless, they were merciful. It is unreasonable to demand that 2,000 B-29s, with lesser loads of destruction, be employed over a period of months to accomplish what two planes, with two bombs, could do in two days.<sup>2</sup>

## Keeping safe

Reading, in translation, some of the Japanese accounts of the nuclear destructions of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, I falter as words and phrases gaze back at me. As I underline, circle, and star some, leaving others unscarred, I wonder if I am assembling my own 'keepsakes', a fingernail here, a belt there. Tamiki Hara (1905–1951), writer born in Hiroshima, caught in Hiroshima on the day of the explosion, poet, steeped in Russian literature, graduate of English literature from Keio University, feels a need to record what he sees around him that day, the day on which, as his poem notes, 'the world [was] stripped of all in an instant.'<sup>3</sup> Coming to the scene three quarters of a century late, what am I looking to sense and record?

<sup>1</sup>Tamiki Hara, 'Summer flower' [1947], trans. George Saito, in Kenzaburo Oe (ed.), *The Crazy Iris and Other Stories of the Atomic Aftermath* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), pp. 37–54 (pp. 50–1).

<sup>2</sup>Editorial, 'For this we fought', *Chicago Tribune* (11 August 1945), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup>Hara, 'Summer flower', p. 51.

I am less fazed by the words the *Chicago Tribune* strings together so smoothly. The world it fights for is a familiar one. Here, less is more. Mercilessness, done well, is mercifulness. Here, if two cities (and nearly 200,000 people) can be disappeared with two planes, dropping two bombs, in two days, why would you, rational being that you are, stretch that over many months, with many more planes, carrying heavier loads with lesser destructive capacity? A world, still raw from being 'stripped of all in an instant', is quickly draped with reasonableness. And no shame attaches to that cover-up.

### Love in the fingertips

We learn, early, how to leaven the world through the edicts of the *Chicago Tribunes*. We debate nuclear destruction in high school competitions, in graduate research papers, and, when prominent enough, in scholarly books. It is useful, of course, to practise the arts of debate. And as a teacher and researcher, I don't find it difficult to see why political issues ought to be debatable. But is the logic of debate the only horizon of humanness we share? What of the horizons that Tamiki Hara points to, those 'too sad for tears'? How does one engage issues that are immersed in that zone?

Kyoki Hayashi (1930–2017), Nagasaki born, writes in *The Empty Can* of her high school classmate Kinuko and what she carried with her to class after the atomic bombing of Nagasaki:

I remembered the girl who came to school with the bones of her parents in her school bag. The girl had kept the bones in a lidless empty can that had been seared red by the flames. To keep the bones from falling out she had covered the top with newspaper, and tied it with red string. When the girl arrived at her seat, she took her textbooks out of her school bag. Then she took out the empty can picking it up carefully with both hands, and placed it on the right side of her desk. When classes were over, she would put it back into the bottom of her school bag, again with both hands, and go home. At first, none of us had known what was in the empty can. And the girl did not show any sign of wanting to tell us, either. After our exposure to the A-bomb, the number of things we couldn't talk about openly had increased, so although it weighed on our minds, no one questioned her about it. The love we could see in the girl's fingertips when she handled the can made us feel all the more reluctant to ask.<sup>4</sup>

We notice something. It weighs us, but we do not question people about it. If we are able to discern its distinctiveness ('picking it up carefully with both hands', 'the love in the girl's fingertips when she handled the can'), we hold back even more. The 'world is stripped of all in an instant', and yet, from the fragments, from the burnt bones of her parents and a seared empty lidless can, some newspaper, and a red string, Kinuko keeps safe, 'carefully with both hands', a loving connection.

What should we debate here: the reasonableness or unreasonableness, the pros and cons, of Kinuko's response? Maybe zones that are 'too sad for tears' teach us new ways of sensing and holding each other. Perhaps they teach us to read fingertips and keep safe fingernails.

### Sentencing nuclear destruction

Sven Lindqvist writes not of a story but of a sentence:

I have studied that sentence for several years. I have collected quantities of material that I never have time to go through. I would like to disappear into this desert, where no one can reach me, where I have all the time in the world, to disappear and not return until I have understood what I already know.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Kyoko Hayashi, 'The empty can' [1978], trans. Margaret Mitsutani, in Kenzaburo Oe (ed.), *The Crazy Iris and Other Stories of the Atomic Aftermath* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), pp. 127–43 (pp. 141–2).

<sup>5</sup>Sven Lindqvist, 'Exterminate All the Brutes': *One Man's Odyssey into the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of European Genocide* (New York: New Press, 1996), p. 3.

I am driven too by a desire to ‘understand what I already know’: a desire to make sense of those who sentence Hiroshima–Nagasaki as a reasonable event, a debatable topic, one with pros and cons. I wish to get to what we may have not understood yet. There is no lack of material on this issue, but which sentence or two should I select from that rubble?

Anticipating my desires, John Berger (1926–2017) reaches out, so unlike Sven, I do not need to disappear into the desert. In an essay written in 1981, Berger observes:

We find it ridiculous or shocking that most of the pages concerning, for example, Trotsky were torn out of official Soviet history. What has been torn out of our history are the pages concerning the experience of the two atom bombs dropped on Japan.<sup>6</sup>

Berger takes care to point out that it is not the facts but the meanings that are missing:

Of course, the facts are there in the textbooks. It may even be that school children learn the dates. But what these facts mean – and originally their meaning was so clear, so monstrously vivid, that every commentator in the world was shocked, and every politician was obliged to say (whilst planning differently), ‘Never again’ – what these facts mean has now been torn out.<sup>7</sup>

To rip apart the meaning of facts while leaving the facts intact: what form of historical writing achieves that?

For Berger, we know the facts about Hiroshima, but we do not know their meanings with the clarity and ‘monstrous[...] vivid[ness]’ with which we knew them once. Hence, his essay, titled ‘Hiroshima,’ opens thus: ‘The whole incredible problem begins with the need to reinsert those events of August 6, 1945 back into living consciousness.’<sup>8</sup>

The weight of that sentence sinks into me slowly. An event has been ‘torn out’ of our ‘living consciousness’ and must be ‘reinsert[ed]’. But if something has been ‘torn out’, especially from a ‘living consciousness’, can it be simply put back? What skill, what loving care, is needed to reattach it, tears and all, into the body of political thought? How must we ensure that what has been put back reacquires consciousness?

We are talking of an archival injuring that memorializes facts meticulously while draining them of the blood of meaning. We are talking of more and less nuanced ways of restoring/re-storing an amputated consciousness. Let us begin then not with a sentence but with words, maybe only one word, maybe with the deadened meaning of mass in mass destruction. Who, or what, congeals as the *mass* in sentences plotting mass destruction?

## Amassing

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon observes: ‘The relationship between colonist and colonized is one of physical mass. Against the greater number the colonist pits his force.’<sup>9</sup> If mass, following Fanon, is the majority of people (‘the greater number’) that the colonist finds himself amidst, then what about this engagement necessitates the ‘pitting’ of ‘force’?

One possibility is that this ‘greater number’ strikes the colonial self as a resource, one that could, given the right pressure, yield value for empire. Of course, implicit here is the possibility that this relationship need not be one of pressure at all. The colonist could engage the ‘greater number’ not as material to be pressed into value but as distinct beings to be in conversation with. But that requires an orientation not constituted through sensibilities of supremacy and self-interest.

<sup>6</sup>John Berger, ‘Hiroshima,’ in Lloyd Spencer (ed), *The Sense of Sight: Writings by John Berger* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), pp. 287–95 (p. 291).

<sup>7</sup>Berger, ‘Hiroshima,’ p. 291.

<sup>8</sup>Berger, ‘Hiroshima,’ p. 287.

<sup>9</sup>Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, [1961] 2004), p. 17.

The self-consciously critical among the colonists acknowledge this tension and, as in the case of George Orwell in 'Shooting an elephant',<sup>10</sup> articulate its disturbing effects insightfully. In this essay, set in colonial Burma, Orwell highlights what it means to be 'hated by large numbers of people' in his role as an officer of the British Empire. Imposing multiple names on the people resisting his 'service' – names that belittle the Burmese and mass them into barely differentiated lumps ('sneering yellow faces', 'evil-spirited little beasts', and 'prostrate peoples') – he reads them as directing a range of negative emotions at him: hatred, bitterness, insults, sneers, and jeers, all of which he tries to dismiss as an 'aimless, petty kind' of force. Their hatred is not (yet) credible as force.

While Orwell admits to 'hating' the British Empire for its 'tyranny', he also 'rages' against the Burmese for making his 'job impossible'. As hatred and rage pull him in different ways, the tension releases murder in one direction only:

With one part of my mind I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny ... with another part I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts.<sup>11</sup>

Against the empire he serves, Orwell's 'hatred' transforms into a political judgement ('the British Raj [w]as an unbreakable tyranny'). But against the Burmese who resist his service, the rage spurts out, not as political disparagement but as joyous violence ('the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts'). All of which, Orwell acknowledges (like Fanon) to be the 'normal by-products of imperialism'.<sup>12</sup>

After he has narrated the incident central to the essay (the shooting of the elephant), an incident that he sees as revealing the 'real nature of imperialism' to him, Orwell comments on the aftermath:

Afterwards, of course, there were endless discussions about the shooting of the elephant. The owner was furious, but he was only an Indian and could do nothing. Besides, legally I had done the right thing, for a mad elephant has to be killed, like a mad dog, if its owner fails to control it. Among the Europeans opinion was divided. The older men said I was right, the younger men said it was a damn shame to shoot an elephant for killing a coolie, because an elephant was worth more than any damn Coringhee coolie. And afterwards I was very glad that the coolie had been killed; it put me legally in the right and it gave me a sufficient pretext for shooting the elephant. I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool.<sup>13</sup>

There is self-criticality here ('solely to avoid looking like a fool') but also callousness and racist contempt ('only an Indian and could do nothing', 'an elephant was worth more than any damn Coringhee coolie'). Powerful emotions (fury, madness, control, and shame) flow through the paragraph. But, strangely enough, while an assumed racial supremacy differentiates the Europeans from the Burmese, the Indians, and the animals, there is also a recognition of pain and suffering across the hierarchical spectrum.

The colonized mass (Burmese, Indian) lack the complexity that would emerge in a more equal and dialogical relation, but Orwell's account, racist as it is, is not totally denuded of all feelings for the other or of criticism of the self. What is striking about this essay is that even as it minimizes the multiple facets of the colonized in relation to the colonizer, passages in the story highlight some human features, distribute some limited agency, and attribute some social powers to the actors named. Orwell even depicts the suffering of the elephant as it lay dying (and I do not say this sarcastically).

<sup>10</sup> George Orwell, 'Shooting an elephant', in George Orwell (ed.), *A Collection of Essays* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954), pp. 154–62.

<sup>11</sup> Orwell, 'Shooting an elephant', p. 155.

<sup>12</sup> Orwell, 'Shooting an elephant', p. 155.

<sup>13</sup> Orwell, 'Shooting an elephant', p. 162.

What starts out as a ‘physical mass’, the vast undifferentiated outside of the colonizer’s world, the world of the ‘greater number’, slowly morphs into a differentiated racial order and a social world that is vividly alive. This social world is a colonizer’s world, constituted as it is through a discourse not in dialogue with the colonized, but even within these limited parameters, the mass has faces, guts, feelings, emotions, and agency. The colonizer might be a European supremacist but he recognizes, however, minimally, his own limitations as well as the lives and hates of the other.

This is a racism that postcolonial discourse is intimately familiar with and Fanon marks as a ‘racism of contempt’, a ‘racism that minimizes’,<sup>14</sup> without fully erasing, the other. From this perspective (one from which it is possible to assert that ‘an elephant was worth more than any damn Coringhee coolie’), the world of the colonized is amassed as a resource; it is mined, stripped, and transformed, through force, into values for empire.

Not everything about the other is destroyed, but the growing taste for joyous violence (‘to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest’s guts’), imagined as it is, is a sign of other potentialities.

## Exhibiting

Fanon identifies another feature of the colonizer–colonized relationship in addition to the one linking them through mass and force: ‘The colonist is an exhibitionist. His safety concerns lead him to remind the colonized out loud: “Here I am the master”’.<sup>15</sup>

The need to ‘remind the colonized out loud’ is an integral aspect of colonial exhibitions. Reminding implies a prior set of exhibitions, an archive of mastery, that the colonist, anxious about safety, brings to explicit awareness. But if there is already an archive of mastery, why the loudness? Can’t the colonist evoke memories of mastery more tunefully? Perhaps the colonist is loud because he is uncertain about his recitations reaching the other. Perhaps the colonist needs the scaling up – the shooting of the elephant – not to evoke mastery but, as Orwell confesses, ‘solely to avoid looking a fool’.<sup>16</sup>

Shoot an elephant, bring down a mass; maybe the other will stop seeing you as a fool?

Aimé Césaire, in his *Discourse on Colonialism*, lists other such compensatory exhibitions.<sup>17</sup> He cites, among others, the examples of Colonel Montagnac (‘In order to banish the thoughts that sometimes besiege me, I have some heads cut off, not the heads of artichokes but the heads of men’) and Count d’Herisson (‘It is true we are bringing back a whole barrelful of ears collected, pair by pair, from prisoners, friendly or enemy’).<sup>18</sup> Besieged by thoughts, Colonel Montagnac has ‘some heads cut off’. Maybe he needs the heads to reassure himself of his mastery. Maybe he needs them to avoid looking a fool to others. Whatever it is, one head won’t do. Nor does one ear for Count d’Herisson. Both need volume, both need scale. The amassed flesh of the other is the premium which assures mastery or insures against appearing as fools. This insurance in flesh was sought in the Belgian Congo<sup>19</sup> too and also in more contemporary cases such as Việt Nam<sup>20</sup> and Iraq.

Paul Fussell acknowledges this tradition. In a discourse that generally tiptoes around the issue of atomic destruction, his loudness comes at us from the title itself: ‘Thank God for the Atom Bomb’.<sup>21</sup> The atom bomb saved his life and the lives of soldiers like him who would have had to fight the ‘fanatical’ Japanese otherwise. Isn’t that enough? What else is there to discuss here? Building on this narcissistic view, he offers us examples of the horrors of war, horrors that allow only those who

<sup>14</sup>Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 110.

<sup>15</sup>Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 17.

<sup>16</sup>Orwell, ‘Shooting an elephant’, p. 162.

<sup>17</sup>Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, [1955] 2000), p. 40.

<sup>18</sup>Césaire, *Discourse*, p. 40.

<sup>19</sup>Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

<sup>20</sup>James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986).

<sup>21</sup>Paul Fussell, ‘Thank god for the atom bomb’, in Kai Bird and Lawrence Lifschultz (eds), *Hiroshima’s Shadow* (Stony Creek, CT: The Pamphleteer’s Press, 1998), pp. 211–22.

have experienced them to judge if the atom bombs ought to have been dropped or not. Dissenting opinions are banished by reminding the readers insistently that those dissenters were not at the forefront of the battlefield as he was.

Highlighting the experiential horrors of war in this vein, Fussell detours, somewhat unexpectedly, into the protocols of exhibitionist violence:

Marines and soldiers could augment their view of their own invincibility by possessing a well-washed skull, and very soon after Guadalcanal it was common to treat surrendering Japanese as handy rifle targets. Plenty of Japanese gold teeth were extracted – some from still living mouths – with Marine Corps Ka-Bar knives, and one of E.B. Sledge's fellow marines went around with a cut-off Japanese hand. When its smell grew too offensive and Sledge urged him to get rid of it, he defended his possession of the trophy thus: 'How many Marines you reckon that hand pulled the trigger on' (It's hardly necessary to observe that a soldier in the ETO [European Theatre of Operations] would probably not have dealt that way with a German or Italian – that is, a 'white person's' – hand). In the Pacific the situation grew so public and scandalous that in September 1942, the Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet issued this order: 'No part of the enemy's body may be used as a souvenir. Unit Commanders will take stern disciplinary action...'<sup>22</sup>

Soldiers 'augment their view of their own invincibility' by displaying body parts of the other. And 'it's hardly necessary to observe' who or what that other is. Fussell uninhibitedly depicts the shared borders of Europe, hidden behind that 'hardly necessary'. War, brutality, and mutual killing are at play in both the European and the Pacific theatres of operation, but it is only in the latter, that is with the mass of Japanese flesh but not German or Italian, that violence takes the form of carving and displaying bits and pieces of the enemy. Fussell tries to reinsert the experiential aspects of war into our living consciousness, but what his operation exhumes are the racialized bodies buried there. Displaying pieces of the enemy necessitates it be an Other. Exhibitionist violence requires carving, from the fleshy materiality of this other, customized pieces that signal mastery over the colonized.

Racialized violence crafts the accumulated materiality of the colonized into souvenirs. Historically, and concretely, this means chopped heads, amputated hands, sliced ears, lynched bodies and cleaned-up skulls – souvenirs that are loud enough to 'augment their view of their own invincibility'.

## Dissolving

If Fanon's sentences identify the forms colonial force takes in relation to the 'greater number', forms such as an amassing of bodies or a crafting of flesh, then Aimé Césaire's illustrative sentences regarding the latter – illustrated '[not] because I take a morbid delight in them, but because I think that these heads of men, these collections of ears, these burnt houses, these Gothic invasions, this steaming blood, these cities that evaporate at the edge of the sword, are not to be so easily disposed of'<sup>23</sup> – hone in on what survives colonial violence.

Césaire teaches us that colonial forces pressing on the physical mass ('the greater number') leave residues: remains that cannot be 'easily disposed of', remnants that can neither be forgotten nor fully disappeared. Those remains might be at the level of individual beings ('these heads of men, these collections of ears') or at the level of entire cities ('these cities that evaporate at the edge of the sword'). And these residues that are not 'easily disposed of' revive questions about colonial power and its depredations. It is anxiety about such resurrections that leads not just to the assassination

<sup>22</sup>Fussell, 'Thank god', p. 217.

<sup>23</sup>Césaire, *Discourse*, p. 41.

of an anti-colonial leader such as Patrice Lumumba but also to his dismemberment and dissolution in acid, a dissolution whose only reported remains were a tooth kept in Belgium for nearly 60 years.<sup>24</sup>

In the documentary *The Forgotten Bomb*, Steve Leeper (Chairperson later of the Hiroshima Peace Culture Foundation) remembers that when he first saw the model of the destruction wrought by the atom bomb in Hiroshima, in 1984, he was disappointed that there were still some buildings standing.<sup>25</sup> Why, he couldn't help wondering, were some structures still surviving? Was the bomb not powerful enough to wipe everything out? Leeper's perspective shifts after he reads a book called *Children of the A-bomb*, but as he observes of his initial parochialness: 'We are not into seeing the suffering. We only see the power.' In 2020, Patrice Lumumba's daughter, Juliana Amato Lumumba, wrote to the Belgian king to remind him of other ways of relating to each other, ways that she hospitably attributes to both cultures: 'In our culture as in yours, the care given to someone's remains is a sign of respect for that human being. ... So why, year after year, is Patrice Emery Lumumba condemned to remain a dead person without burial, having only a date on a tomb?'<sup>26</sup>

Colonial power is besieged and haunted by what hasn't been fully 'disposed of'. That anxiety, the prospect of a residual that might return, intensifies its need for absolute mastery in the present. It produces a craving for the joyous violence, the exhilaration ('Thank God for the Atom Bomb!') of disappearing the other forever, dissolving him/them fully, and through such dissolute practices silencing questions about the coloniality of the self.

In engaging the 'greater number' as a 'physical mass', the absolute dissolution of that mass is the apotheosis of colonial force.

### The human substrate

'There were no battles in Hiroshima and Nagasaki' reads the first sentence of the first chapter in Susan Lindee's *Suffering Made Real: American Science and the Survivors at Hiroshima*.<sup>27</sup> Lindee's surprising opening shifts the frame away from those connected to the dropping of the atom bombs (nation-states, policymakers, and scientists) and onto those on whom they were dropped. We look around rather than down. We find ourselves immersed among the 'greater number' rather than seeing them amassed at a distance. Lindee's next few lines move us closer:

At 8.15 A.M. on August 6, 1945, Hiroshima was a busy, functioning urban center with a large population and complex support and emergency systems. One minute later, Hiroshima – its central four square miles – was gone. On 9 August, the Urakami Valley of Nagasaki was similarly transformed.<sup>28</sup>

Three sentences depicting the disappearance of whole neighbourhoods in two minutes: the sudden ('One minute later') vanishing ('was gone') of human beings ('a busy, functioning urban center with a large population'), support systems ('complex support and emergency systems') and substantial portions ('four square miles') of two thriving cities.

The *mass* of mass destruction – that which *is* at 8.15 a.m. but *is not* at 8.16 a.m.: human beings plus support systems plus substantial portions of cities.

What remains at 8.16 a.m.? And what endures after 8.16 a.m.?

<sup>24</sup>Jean-Yves Kamale and R.A.F. Casert, 'Belgium to return tooth to family of slain Congolese icon', Associated Press (10 September 2020), available at: <https://apnews.com/article/belgium-patrice-lumumba-b2c0721f220d9bab67982e2d5b437e1b>.

<sup>25</sup>*The Forgotten Bomb*, documentary directed by Stuart Overbey (United States: Cinema Libre Studio, 2012).

<sup>26</sup>Kamale and Casert, 'Belgium to return tooth'.

<sup>27</sup>M. Susan Lindee, *Suffering Made Real: American Science and the Survivors at Hiroshima* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 3.

<sup>28</sup>Lindee, *Suffering Made Real*, p. 3.

Lindee again:

For those who survived, the unthinkable became the commonplace. They had been eating an orange, working in a garden, or reading a book. Minutes later they wandered without feeling, past corpses, neighbors trapped in burning mounds of rubble, or children without skin ... Hiroshima survivor Wakashi Shigetoshi has written that the suffering he saw around him in the immediate aftermath of the bombing 'no longer moved me in the slightest. At that time human beings on the point of death were no longer human: they were mere substance. And the man watching them lost his humanity, and also became a substance.'<sup>29</sup>

Unlike in the case of Orwell's 'Shooting an elephant', the force pitted against a 'physical mass' fuses the 'greater number' into a 'substance'. That substance is a substrate for the exhibition of the power of nuclear weapons. Distinctly separable beings congeal into a mass: women, schoolchildren, soldiers, toddlers, combatants, non-combatants, Japanese, Koreans, American POWs, pacifists, war-mongers, militarists, monarchists, poets, professors, horses, dogs, cats, trees are all fused into a common lump materiality. The major part of that lump evaporates (testifying to the dissolving power of the atom bomb) while the minor parts continue as 'mere substance' (testifying to its residual and enduring effects).

Racialized violence is the congealing of humans into a substrate for the workings of the newest weapons. Such transmutations are the deliberate(d) outcomes of the practices of knowledge/armament workers, who solve technically 'sweet' and 'lovely' and 'beautiful' problems in the physical sciences by 'thingifying' neighbourhoods and ecologies and their fellow beings en masse.<sup>30</sup>

The atom bomb is the scaled up exhibition of Aimé Césaire's equation: 'colonization = thingification.'<sup>31</sup> It is thingification and dissolution made loud.

### Dissolute solutions

A year after the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, John Hersey wrote a remarkable book on the effects of the assaults. Titled *Hiroshima*, this book appeared first as a special issue of *The New Yorker* in August 1946.<sup>32</sup> Hersey, born in China, was one of the few Americans willing to see through and beyond the 'racism of contempt' to the humanness and suffering of the victims of the nuclear attacks. In his story, Hersey follows the lives of six individuals as they deal with the complexities of the nuclear aftermath. The article and the book had a significant impact on American understandings of the atomic bombings, providing 'a generation of students with their most moving – and often their only – representation of an atomic bombing from the point of view of those who survived it.'<sup>33</sup> Hersey thus helped differentiate and recuperate, maybe even resuscitate, some parts of the 'mass', some portion of the 'greater number' that survived the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.

To the writer Mary McCarthy, however, Hersey's apparent humanization of the survivors was an 'insipid falsification' of the 'truth of atomic warfare.'<sup>34</sup> Atomic warfare, she argued in a letter to the editor of *Politics*, put the very 'continuity of life in question', and Hersey, instead of confronting that 'moral hole', had treated it as if it were a natural disaster. In doing this, he had rendered the bombings 'familiar and safe'. To do 'justice' to the atomic bombings, McCarthy asserted, Hersey

<sup>29</sup> Lindee, *Suffering Made Real*, pp. 3–4.

<sup>30</sup> In the words of Robert Oppenheimer: 'From a technical point of view it [the hydrogen bomb] was a sweet and lovely and beautiful job'. Quoted in Freeman Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 89.

<sup>31</sup> Césaire, *Discourse*, p. 42.

<sup>32</sup> John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985).

<sup>33</sup> Michael Yavenditti, 'John Hersey and the American conscience', in Kai Bird and Lawrence Lifschultz (eds), *Hiroshima's Shadow* (Stony Creek, CT: The Pamphleteer's Press, 1998), pp. 288–302 (p. 288).

<sup>34</sup> Mary McCarthy, 'The Hiroshima *New Yorker*', in Kai Bird and Lawrence Lifschultz (eds), *Hiroshima's Shadow* (Stony Creek, CT: The Pamphleteer's Press, 1998), pp. 303–4.



would have needed 'to interview' not the six survivors but 'the [hundred thousand plus] dead'.<sup>35</sup> Hersey may or may not have done enough, but Mary McCarthy deserves admiration for alerting us, as early as 1946 itself, to the dangers involved in taking our eyes off the main issue: the 'truth of atomic warfare'.

What then is the truth of atomic warfare as it bears on mass destruction, on the destruction of a mass?

Time for a sentence from Achille Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason*, which charts, concisely, the long history of the destruction of colonized lives. Mbembe writes: 'And we will examine the gesture of race that, notably in the case of people of African origin, consists in dissolving human beings into things, objects, and merchandise.'<sup>36</sup> If the 'gesture of race' lies 'in dissolving human beings into things, objects, and merchandise', Mbembe's signalling of this gesture as 'notab[le] in the case of people of African origin' takes me to 1781 and to the case of the *Zong*.<sup>37</sup>

The *Zong* was a slave ship from which 133 'people of African origin' were thrown overboard in order to collect the 'value' written into them as 'insured cargo', cargo that could legally be 'destroyed' in an emergency. As Jeremy Krikler notes:

[T]he *Zong* has come to exemplify evil beyond imagining. It does so for a number of reasons. Not only did the ship see the mass murder of defenceless people, those responsible for the atrocity (or seeking profit from it) were relatively unashamed, to the extent of openly admitting to (and justifying) the murders in court. And, finally, the owners of the ship sought to capitalize on the murders by claiming insurance on the massacred slaves.<sup>38</sup>

Among the 133 people, there was one survivor who climbed back and ten who chose to jump overboard themselves.<sup>39</sup> Is it unseemly to highlight McCarthy's point here that the truth of the mass destruction would lie not with the recovered story of the sole survivor, important as that is, but with the 132 'dissolved'?

What a careful exploration of the 'gesture of race' reveals, in the case of the *Zong*, is a regime in which racialized human beings, concrete flesh-and-blood people with names, histories, and relationships, could be thrown overboard into the seas, 'in three separate acts on different days'<sup>40</sup> in order to realize other values written into them. Even as they were extinguished as persons, their 'substance' was seen as acquiring commercial value: 30 pounds per body.<sup>41</sup> Human beings are 'dissolv[ed] into things, objects, and merchandise', and their transmutation is debated, legitimately, in the courts of law, the contestation confined to the recovery of economic value, not murder.

There is continuity in the scholarly protocols now addressing mass destruction: 'the absence of shame', the 'justification' and 'capitalization' of the murders as well as the debatability of the claims behind human dissolution. There is continuity in the underlying regime too: a racialized regime in which humans are deliberately dissolved in 'great number' to distil political values and shame is nowhere on the screen.

What differentiates 1781 from 1945 is the scaling up of mass (from 132 to 100,000+) plus the instantaneity of dissolution (compressing time to 60 seconds or less). And maybe the pervasiveness of 'reasonableness' as *the* formula for solving problems 'too sad for tears'.

<sup>35</sup> McCarthy, 'The Hiroshima *New Yorker*', p. 303.

<sup>36</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 11.

<sup>37</sup> For a theoretical discussion of the case of the *Zong*, see Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); for a poetic engagement, see M. NourSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> Jeremy Krikler, 'The *Zong* and the Lord Chief Justice', *History Workshop Journal*, 64 (2007), pp. 29–47 (pp. 29–30).

<sup>39</sup> Anita Rupprecht, 'Excessive memories: Slavery, insurance and resistance', *History Workshop Journal*, 64 (2007), pp. 6–28 (p. 13).

<sup>40</sup> Krikler, 'The *Zong*', p. 29.

<sup>41</sup> Rupprecht, 'Excessive memories', p. 13.

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