



# Épistémocritique

## Revue de littérature et savoirs

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## Vizenor's *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57* (2003) and Lindsey A. Freeman's *This Atom Bomb in Me* (2019)

👤 Lombard David - 🕒 19 janvier 2023 -

📁 [La Revue \(https://epistemocritique.org/category/la-revue/\)](https://epistemocritique.org/category/la-revue/) / [Volume 21 - Crises : climat et critique \(https://epistemocritique.org/category/la-revue/volume-21-crisis-climat-et-critique/\)](https://epistemocritique.org/category/la-revue/volume-21-crisis-climat-et-critique/)

**Abstract:** After identifying some of the aesthetic, rhetorical, and ontological pitfalls of the nuclear or atomic sublime (the over-aestheticization of nuclear risks and the resulting absence of any sense of responsibility) this essay undertakes narratological and rhetorical analyses of one novel, Gerald Vizenor's *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57* (2003), and one creative memoir, Lindsey A. Freeman's *This Atom Bomb in Me* (2019). As this article shows, the two works offer alternate ways of representing and critiquing the beguiling but dangerous nuclear sublime while shedding light on a wide array of notions that are intimately associated with atomic culture but have yet remained understudied from this perspective, at least in the fields of (American) literary studies, ecocriticism, and the environmental humanities. These include the dichotomies invisibility/visibility (or absence/presence) and whiteness/color, and the related trope of silence. By engaging with non-dominant traditions and cultures (Anishinaabe; Japanese) and elaborating complex metaphors in the case of Vizenor, or in multisensorial experiences which draw on theories from new materialisms in Freeman's, the two works converge to suggest that experimentation in the contemporary novel and memoir can lead to an ecocritical revision of the dominant and ocularcentric nuclear sublime, and of the risks it aestheticizes and conceals.

**Introduction: "We Must Somehow Articulate or**

[Die Pflanzenwelt im Fokus der Environmental Humanities](#)

(<https://epistemocritique.org/die-pflanzenwelt-im-fokus-der-environmental-humanities-le-vegetal-au-defi-des-humanites-environnementales-deutsch-franzosische-perspektiven-perspectives-franco-allemandes/>)

Die Pflanzenwelt im Fokus der Environmental Humanities. Le [...]

[Biological-Time, Historical Time](#)  
(<https://epistemocritique.org/biological-time-historical-time-2/>)

Biological Time, Historical Time: Transfers and Transformation in [...]

(<https://epistemocritique.org/category/recensions/>)

**Appels À Contribution**



## Image-Forth this End-Game Genre of the Nuclear Sublime”

Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the mushroom cloud, Chernobyl and Fukushima, the risks of another nuclear disaster, or the everlasting threat of nuclear war: these are some of the most well-known figures that evoke the unthinkable or what scholars such as Frances Ferguson, Rob Wilson, and Peter B. Hales have termed the “nuclear” or “atomic sublime” (Ferguson 1984; Wilson 1989; Hales 1991). These literary scholars are interested in “the commitment of the sublime notion of crisis” or the sublime as a way of “imagin[ing] total annihilation” (Ferguson 1984, 7). More specifically, there is a “posthumous perspective” in the sublime moment, Ferguson and Richard Klein argue, inasmuch as the terror first experienced in the face of the sublime object contemplated in classical theories of the sublime—be it an overpowering natural landscape or the overwhelming pending threat of a nuclear war—is then transformed into what Kant refers to as “aesthetic well-being” or the “immense pleasure of confronting the greatest forces, the vastest distances in the universe, and surviving, quite deliciously, unharmed” (Klein 2013, 85). What they suggest, however, is that, in the sublime moment, danger or threat is never truly experienced but merely imagined as the emblematic unthinkable or unspeakable (Ferguson 1984, 6), and therefore never treated as a tangible or materialized object or reality.

This “sublime of the mind” was introduced as early as in the work of Longinus and updated by seventeenth-century thinkers, and later most influentially by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant under the common label of the “natural sublime,” which aestheticizes nature as representative of an overpowering divine force.<sup>1</sup> In Burke’s and Kant’s theories, for example, the sublime or the “delightful horror” it produces may only be observed from a safe distance, away from

[Pour en finir avec l’anthropomorphisme ? \(appel à contribution\)](https://epistemocritique.org/pour-en-finir-avec-lanthropomorphisme-appel-a-contribution/)  
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12 Jan 2021

Appel à contribution pour la revue XXI/XX – Reconnaissances littéraires, n° 3. Les propositions de contribution, d’une longueur de 300 mots [...]

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4 Jan 2021

Date limite: 15 mai 2021  
Direction : Claire Pignol et Christophe Reffait  
Michel Serres disait que ce qui l’intéressait chez Jules Verne, ce n’étaient [...]

[II Congrès International ILICIA: « Littérature, science et transivité »](https://epistemocritique.org/ii-congres-international-ilicia-litterature-science-et-transitivite/)  
([https://epistemocritique.org/ii-congres-international-ilicia-litterature-science-et-](https://epistemocritique.org/ii-congres-international-ilicia-litterature-science-et-transitivite/)



the allegedly threatening object (Burke 1998, 67; Shaw 2017, 54–62). Recent environmental crises, however, call for a revision of the natural sublime. As Lee Rozelle puts it in his redefinition of the notion as the “ecosublime”: “We must decide whether we will live within the symbolic frame or the *material*—the simulated or the *sustainable*” (Rozelle 2006, 2, emphasis added). Although it might be humanity’s fate to live both in the simulated *and* the sustainable, the nuclear sublime still strongly leans to the former and not the latter, and specifically emerges in the United States as “the American commonplace or common sense of an *unspeakable* force that cannot be—by any power of the imagination, however transcendental, overcome” (Wilson 1989, 410, emphasis added). As a result, Wilson encourages writers, poets, and literary scholars to “articulate or image-forth this end-game genre of the nuclear sublime, with all of our collective resources of language and wit” (416) or, in other words, to find an imaginative way of overcoming the deceitful aesthetic mode of the nuclear sublime and of *speaking*, unveiling its destructive force.

Peter B. Hales furthers Wilson’s take on the nuclear sublime by emphasizing that the mushroom cloud and the nuclear sublime have become both unthinkable *and* quotidian, that is “so deeply imprinted in the myths and matrices of the postwar era that it has come to seem natural, a fundamental, even a necessary aspect of everyday life” (1991, 5). Hales analyzes a series of American photographs—mainly from *Time*, *Life*, and *Newsweek*—which shows the impactful visual potential of the nuclear sublime and thus remains “profoundly aesthetic, rather than ethical, moral or religious in tone” (1991, 9).<sup>2</sup> More precisely, Hales highlights the confusing absence of a notion of *responsibility*, which he describes as characteristic of both the natural and the nuclear sublime in which “no ultimate responsibility need be taken” by the “American man” (16). Besides, he also touches upon the notion of “terrible beauty,” which is

[transitivite/](#)

2 Déc 2020

II Congreso Internacional ILICIA: “Literatura, ciencia y transitividad” 26 y 27 de marzo de 2021 Fin del plazo de presentación [...]

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## Colloques

### Conference

[American Fiction in the Face of Technical Innovation · Paris · Janvier 2020](#)

[\(https://epistemocritique.org/conference-american-fiction-in-the-face-of-technical-innovation-%c2%b7-paris-%c2%b7-janvier-2020/\)](https://epistemocritique.org/conference-american-fiction-in-the-face-of-technical-innovation-%c2%b7-paris-%c2%b7-janvier-2020/)

Chères amies, chers collègues, Nous avons le plaisir de vous inviter au colloque : Contemporary American Fiction in the [...]

### Journée d'étude

#### [Biological](#)

[Perspectives in 21st-century Literature and Performance \(7/6/2019\)](#)

particularly relevant to any understanding of the complex and paradoxical nature of the nuclear sublime inasmuch as “terror and beauty, together, begot a terrible beauty, one that needed the guiding hand of an authoritative and authoritarian military father-figure” (19). Terrible beauty, at least in Hales’ account of the atomic sublime, confuses (or obliterates) the subject’s sense of responsibility: it aestheticizes the bomb and radiation or, as Stanley Kubrick’s 1964 movie title would put it, it makes you “stop worrying and love the bomb.” The nuclear sublime also borrows from the natural sublime in that it involves visual and distant observation of atomic phenomena. For example, Hales explains, Americans did not have to witness the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings since they “occurred at a safe distance from American shores.” (1991, 20). Even the tests executed in American deserts contributed to shaping the mythos of an “uninhabited” and yet “stunning” and “sublime landscape” (20) while, as Joseph Masco argues, Americans were both “aggressors and victims” because they were also exposed to the physical dangers associated with the explosions (2006, 60–66). What is more, the powerful and terrible beauty of the “atomic explosion” overcomes the weird or gothic imagination of transformations into irradiated monsters because “no gothic horror, it seems, could eradicate its majestic beauty, its resonance with the numinous, Absolute, its freedom from moral imperatives” (25).

As a result, the question as to how the nuclear sublime can be “articulate[d] or image-forth[ed],” or perhaps even countered or defeated, remains unanswered. Photographs and their (over-)aestheticization of nuclear and irradiated landscapes, Nicole Shukin explains, do not constitute a viable solution because “the pursuit of visibility inadvertently participates in the logic of ‘the enlightened earth’ that nuclear energy disastrously escalates” (2020). Besides, this pursuit focuses its efforts on the “representational,” on

[\(https://epistemocritique.org/journee-detude-biologique-perspectives-in-21st-century-literature-and-performance-7-6-2019/\)](https://epistemocritique.org/journee-detude-biologique-perspectives-in-21st-century-literature-and-performance-7-6-2019/)

Chers collègues, En 2019 et 2020, le séminaire « sciences et littérature » de la Sorbonne Nouvelle reprend ses travaux sur l’imaginaire [...]

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## | Séminaires

[II Congreso Internacional ILICIA: “Literatura, ciencia y transitividad” 26 et 27 mars 2021](https://epistemocritique.org/ii-congreso-internacional-ilicia-literatura-ciencia-y-transitividad-26-et-27-mars-2021/)

[\(https://epistemocritique.org/ii-congreso-internacional-ilicia-literatura-ciencia-y-transitividad-26-et-27-mars-2021/\)](https://epistemocritique.org/ii-congreso-internacional-ilicia-literatura-ciencia-y-transitividad-26-et-27-mars-2021/)

ILICIA International Conference plantea en esta nueva edición diversas propuestas de estudio dedicadas a los vínculos y espacios transitivos generados [...]

[La lyre et le compas :](#)



what can be made *visible* or *present*, rather than on the “ontological” aspects of the nuclear crisis (Shukin 2020). Indeed, the visibility/invisibility or presence/absence contrasts are frequently discussed in contemporary accounts of the sublime that deal with visual arts, such as in Jennifer Peeples’s analysis of Edward Burtynsky’s *Manufactured Landscapes* (2003) as representative of the “toxic sublime,” or of our ability to contemplate Anthropocene awe-inspiring landscapes while recognizing their toxicity (Peeples 2011, 375; Lombard 2019, 11).<sup>3</sup> Some nuclear and toxic phenomena are often referred to as “invisible” or “absent”, dichotomies such as presence/absence therefore oppose what can be seen, understood, and more effectively evaluated (visible; present) to what is unseen, abstract, misunderstood, and of which the effects, be they negative or positive, may not be perceived, assessed, or questioned (invisible; absent). As Akira Mizuta Lippit would put it, phenomena of radiation and toxicity exemplify a form of “avisuality,” that is “not a form of invisibility, in the sense of an absent or negated visibility: not [...] the antithesis of the visible but [...] a specific mode of impossible, unimaginable visibility” which remains “unseen” (2005, 32). Representations of these forms of environmental disruption therefore run the risk of aestheticizing the industrial and capitalist systems that induce them and of minimizing their effects through sublimation (Fressoz 2021, 290). In other words, they may reveal the limits and dangers but also the affordances, of what can be expressed, interpreted, and studied in terms of the sublime, visibility/invisibility, and presence/absence, especially if visibility is achieved when the object or phenomenon is physical or *material*. Apart from Lippit and Shukin, several critics have attempted to study the nuclear and radiation in relation to light and/or (in)visibility. Elizabeth DeLoughrey, for example, expands the notion of “heliography” to refer to “the discursive practice of writing about light as well as [to] the inscription of our bodies as

[une rencontre fortuite ? Dissection des rapports entre littérature et mathématiques.](#)  
(<https://epistemocritique.org/lyre-compas-rencontre-fortuite-dissection-rapports-entre-litterature-mathematiques/>)

Par Marion Renaud En comparant les usages de l’imagination en littérature et en mathématiques, je m’emploierai à tenter d’en [...]

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## | Parutions

[Parution: PLASTIR N° 60](#)  
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6 Avr 2021

Plasticités Sciences Arts a le plaisir d’annoncer la parution du soixantième numéro de son revue de transdisciplinarité humaine PLASTIR ! [...]

[Nineteenth-Century French Studies vol.](#)



they are created, visually ordered and perceived, and penetrated by radiation” (2009, 484). Such a materialist and ecocritical approach was later further developed in the works of other (eco)critics such as Molly Wallace (2016), Jessica Hurley (2020), and Fiona Amundsen and Sylvia C. Frain (2020), who have sought to counter the nuclear sublime by veering toward new orientations in nuclear criticism. Building on Wallace’s “materiality of risk” (2016, 15), Hurley proposes the concept of “the *nuclear mundane*”, which “makes the nuclear visible both in its extent and reach into every aspect of everyday life and in its contestability, as something that can be named and challenged” (2020, 9, emphasis in original). In addition, the “nuclear mundane” better integrates “postcolonial theory” and tries to account, as opposed to notions such as “nuclear universalism” (Yoneyama 1999) and “nuclear exceptionalism” (Hecht 2010), for the significant impact that nuclear technologies have had “on Indigenous land” as well as on “poor communities and communities of color,” (3–16) a concern that is in line with Gerald Vizenor’s critique of dominant cultures that this essay will discuss in the next section. Hurley, but also Amundsen and Frain, evidence the necessity in the field of environmental humanities—as well as in related fields such as nuclear, postcolonial, and Indigenous studies—to deconstruct the “control of visibility” exerted by the U.S. government when it comes to nuclear damage while rendering “visible the overwhelming invisibility of Indigenous experience” (Amundsen and Frain 2020, 126–41). Reimagining the nuclear, in other words, forces us to go beyond the aesthetic project of making atomic phenomena visible by critically interrogating the literary inflections of the sublime as well as by evaluating the various ways through which such phenomena can be made textually visible and interpreted, be it by means of the sublime or of other (complementary) rhetorical strategies and methods.

In this essay, I consider the genres of the experimental novel and the

[49 n° 1-2](#)

(<https://epistemocritique.org/nineteenth-century-french-studies-vol-49-n-1-2/>)

8 Fév 2021

The Editorial Board of Nineteenth-Century French Studies is pleased to announce the publication of volume 49 numbers 1-2 (Fall-Winter 2020-2021). [...]

[Alliage n°81, «](#)

[CosmicomiX »](#)

(<https://epistemocritique.org/alliage-n81-cosmicomix/>)

8 Jan 2021

« En combinant en un seul mot les deux adjectifs cosmique et comique, j’ai essayé de rassembler différentes choses auxquelles je [...]

[Res Futurae, 16,](#)

[2020 : « Fictions de mondes possibles : les formes brèves de la science-fiction »](#)

(<https://epistemocritique.org/res-futurae-16-2020-fictions-de-mondes-possibles-les-formes-brevs-de-la-science-fiction/>)

4 Jan 2021

Sous la direction de Jean Nimis et Yves Iehl. Les formes brèves (récit ou



creative memoir as resourceful sites for investigating the affordances and limits of the sublime as a strategy for representing (and critiquing) environmental changes and toxic phenomena such as nuclear disasters and radiation. The first section will undertake an analysis of Native American (Anishinaabe) writer and scholar Gerald Vizenor's experimental novel *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57* (2003). *Hiroshima Bugi* has been defined as a "kabuki novel" because its sections involving the character of Mifune Browne, also known as "Ronin," "depend on highly dramatic scenes, elaborate imagery, and stylized expressions analogous to that which would be used in traditional Japanese kabuki theater" (Jimenez 2018, 267). Ronin's sections are also followed by narratives by Manidoo Envoy, which offer explanations on Ronin's performances in the "Hiroshima Bugi," the kabuki theatre that he designed. In what could be termed "a spirit of experimentation" (Bergthaller et al. 2014, 273), Vizenor deploys complex metaphors drawing on both Anishinaabe and Japanese traditions and conceptual neologisms as means of rendering and critiquing the multifaceted history of the nuclear and the elusiveness of its (sublime) aesthetics.<sup>4</sup> Through a rhetorical and narratological analysis of Vizenor's novel, this essay will question the expressive and critical potential of highly figurative language when used to describe or even condemn the absence of responsibility that is produced by the rhetoric of the atomic sublime.

In the second section, this essay will turn to Lindsey A. Freeman's memoir *This Atom Bomb in Me* (2019). As inevitably human-centered and descriptive of "an extra-textual reality" in a dynamic that "is actively constructive rather than passively mimetic" (Couser 2011, 55–74), memoirs are promising case studies to analyze the contemporary rhetoric of the nuclear sublime. More specifically, Tom Lynch's conceptualization of the memoir as an "eco-memoir" that "involves the writing of self into place and place into self"

épisode de série TV) qui mettent [...]



[Poésie et astronomie : de l'Antiquité au romantisme](https://epistemocritique.org/parution-poesie-et-astronomie-de-lantiquite-au-romantisme/)  
(<https://epistemocritique.org/parution-poesie-et-astronomie-de-lantiquite-au-romantisme/>)

4 Jan 2021

Sous la direction de Florian

Barrière, Caroline

Bertonèche Avant-propos

de Marc Lachièze Rey

Une initiation aux

mystères de l'univers à

travers le regard [...]

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## Groupe De Recherche

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The Center for Cultural

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suggests that the memoir is “an ideal genre for the cultivation of an ecological awareness and bioregional identity” (Lynch 2020, 119). While, as Couser argues, the main affordances of memoir are that it can “immortalize—or at least memorialize—actual people” and “accuse and condemn” destructive behaviors, this eco-memoir helps to “memorialize” irradiated places and make them matter to readers in their attempt to critique ecologically irresponsible behaviors. In other words, while the conventional memoir focuses on an individual’s *Bildung*, the eco-memoir also revolves around place-building—or world-building—and often by reexploring places that may have been neglected or forgotten. Inspired by new materialist trends and concepts in the environmental humanities such as “vibrant matter” (Bennett 2010) and “trans-corporeality” (Alaimo 2010), which view humans as constantly “intermeshed” (Alaimo 2010, 2) with non-human materiality, author and sociology professor Lindsey A. Freeman writes what she terms “sociological poetry” (2019, 7), or what could be defined as memoiristic prose fragments or vignettes. Freeman’s vignettes are reminiscent of Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies* (1957)—to which she also frequently refers—especially because she tries to dissect the meaning of the various but related atomic symbols of her hometown, Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Through a rhetorical and narratological analysis of Freeman’s recent memoir, this article will show that the previously discussed myths and dangers, namely aestheticizing through terrible beauty or “petrified awe” (Shukin 2020), which may have the effect of disempowering the subject and causing the absence of a sense of responsibility, mainly persist because of the connection between the self and the toxic place that is established by means of the genre of the eco-memoir. Freeman, however, offers leads to alternate, new materialist approaches that seek to complicate and enrich the nuclear sensorium (of Oak Ridge) by involving both “higher” senses (sight and hearing) and “lower” senses (touch and smell), and by linking

University will be devoting his 2017-2018 annual research seminar to the Medical Humanities. They [...]



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## | Soutenances

[Ernest Renan : savoirs de la nature et pensée historique](https://epistemocritique.org/ernest-renan-savoirs-de-la-nature-et-pensee-historique/)  
(<https://epistemocritique.org/ernest-renan-savoirs-de-la-nature-et-pensee-historique/>)

présentée et soutenue publiquement par Azélie FAYOLLE Sous la direction de Mme Gisèle SÉGINGER (Professeure, UPEM), le 29 novembre 2019, [...]

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« [Le paradigme communicationnel : de la cybernétique de Norbert Wiener à l'avènement du posthumain](https://epistemocritique.org/le-paradigme-communicationnel-de-la-cybernetique-de-norbert-wiener-a-lavènement-du-posthumain) »  
(<https://epistemocritique.org/le-paradigme-communicationnel-de-la-cybernetique-de-norbert-wiener->

and discussing mixed (but interrelated) feelings and affects customarily associated with the sublime and the Anthropocene such as overwhelm and confusion (Purdy 2015, 421).<sup>5</sup>

Together, Vizenor's experimental novel and Freeman's eco-memoir formulate a critique of the nuclear sublime as an aesthetic mode because it does not account for the problematic and, as Hurley (2020), Amundsen and Frain (2020) have also claimed, multicultural complexity of atomic culture and history. On the one hand, the experientiality of Vizenor's novel, which combines intricate metaphors with rich references to non-dominant cultures, sheds light on the complexity of the nuclear as an object of colonial domination over Indigenous people, thus showing what highly metaphorical language and other cultures can do to deconstruct the aesthetics of the nuclear sublime. On the other hand, Freeman's memoir possesses a "referential relationship to the real" that is similar to photographs', which she also includes, but that is complemented by the rhetorical potential of her text which, although it also relies on the author's memory, expands the "limits of representation" to verge on critical analysis (Amundsen and Frain 2020, 130). Both works suggest that the nuclear sublime simplifies the atomic sensorium and the emotional as well as affective responses to nuclear phenomena by only conveying fascination or "lightheaded amazement" (Wilson 1989, 416) without creating any senses of responsibility or of environmental awareness, and thus engage in more effective forms of socio-political and ecological criticism.

## I. Denouncing Destruction and Dominance: The Ethics of Absence and the Natural/Nuclear Sublimes in *Hiroshima Bugi*: Atomu 57

While Hsinya Huang focuses on "radiation ecologies" in *Hiroshima Bugi* and the ways Ronin relates nuclear devastation to his family history, and Jeanne Sokolowski explores how the novel constructs a

[a-lavènement-du-posthumain/](#)



« Le paradigme communicationnel : de la cybernétique de Norbert Wiener à l'avènement du posthumain » Sara Touiza-Ambroggiani  
Université Paris 8 (LLCP)  
[...]

[RACONTER LE VIVANT : UN ESSAI DE ZOÉPOÉTIQUE NARRATIVE \(XXe-XXIe SIÈCLES\)](#)

(<https://epistemocritique.org/raconter-vivant-de-zoeopoetique-narrative-xxe-xxie-siecles/>)

Madame Marie Cazaban-Mazerolles défendra le 25 mai prochain à l'université de Poitiers une thèse en littérature comparée portant le titre [...]

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## | Événements

[Il Congrès International ILICIA: « Littérature, science et transitivité »](#)

sense of identity in relation to notions of victimization and ultranationalism (Huang 2017; Sokolowski 2010), this section analyzes Vizenor's use of complex metaphors as a means of enriching our understanding of what can be considered as absent or invisible, which also further complicates discussions on dominant/non-dominant cultures as well as "the pursuit of visibility" that the nuclear sublime aestheticizes and obscures through its terrible beauty.

Due to the complexity of the novel and to help us better understand Gerald Vizenor's imaginative take on nuclear history, this section starts with an overview of the novel's main characters, structure, and context before undertaking a closer narratological and rhetorical study of the author's metaphors and use of the sublime as related to the presumably dichotomous notions of presence and absence. Set in the post-World War II era, the novel alternates between chapters in which Ronin Browne narrates what he does in Hiroshima and elaborates on his critical obsession with its Peace Memorial, and others told by Manidoo Envoy. The two first-person narrators meet as Ronin searches for his father, whom he never met, and they spend a month living together at the Hotel Manidoo, "a hotel of perfect memories for wounded veterans" such as Ronin's deceased father and his friend Manidoo Envoy (Vizenor 2003, 8). While Manidoo Envoy is described as a Native American, Ronin is a *hafu*, half Japanese and half foreign, in this case half Native American. Ronin's mother, Okishi, was a Japanese woman, a boogie (hence the *bugi* in the title) dancer, and his father, Orion Browne, also known as Nightbreaker, was a Native American stationed in Japan as an interpreter at the end of the Second World War. Ronin became an orphan during the war and was adopted by the White Earth Reservation in the United States.<sup>6</sup> While the Manidoo Envoy chapters provide biographical and background details as well as sources to support Ronin's complex metaphors on Hiroshima and

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II Congreso Internacional ILICIA: "Literatura, ciencia y transitividad" 26 y 27 de marzo de 2021 Fin del plazo de presentación [...]



[III CONGRÈS MONDIAL DE LA TRANSDISCIPLINARITÉ VIRTUEL – DU 30 OCTOBRE 2020 AU 17 SEPTEMBRE 2021](https://epistemocritique.org/iii-congres-mondial-de-la-transdisciplinarite-virtuel-du-30-octobre-2020-au-17-septembre-2021/)  
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nuclear disasters, Ronin's sections describe his return to Hiroshima as an adult.

At the very beginning of the novel, Ronin defines the Atomic Bomb Dome or the Hiroshima Peace Memorial as his "Rashomon," which is a reference both to the gate built in Nara and Kyoto in 789 and to the term Rashomon itself which has come to "designat[e] something resembling or suggestive of Akira Kurosawa's 1950 film *Rashomon*," also explicitly mentioned in the novel, "especially in being characterized by multiple conflicting or differing versions, perspectives, or interpretations" ("RASHOMON"). Ronin describes the gate as representative of "fierce beauty," which is reminiscent of the concept of "terrible beauty," as he claims that "the Rashomon Gate was in ruins too, more than eight centuries ago" and "brutally so old it has turned aesthetic, the fierce cruelty of beauty" (2003, 1). While the dome is ground zero, the A-bombing event is time zero ("Atomu One") in Ronin's *Atomu*, his personal calendar of "fake peace" that starts in 1957. The kabuki-style story he tells comments on his activist interventions at the peace memorial, which include, for example, setting the Pond of Peace on fire; all of them are aimed at condemning the promoters of what he calls "fake peace" and the dark tourists who, so he claims, cannot comprehend the nuclear history associated with the memorial. While Ronin's sections are highly metaphorical, Manidoo Envoy supplements them with numerous academic and artistic references, supposedly to help the reader understand the points Ronin tries to make. However, Manidoo Envoy's additions further complicate our understanding of the depicted events while indirectly suggesting that traditional literary criticism may fail to explain the intricacies and implications of nuclear history.

As Chris Jimenez explains, "'Hiroshima' has become a central starting point by which readers may begin to comprehend the

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terrible implications of the nuclear age” and “literary practice—even in its disfiguration—is a vital means by which Anglophone writers [such as Vizenor] manage and recuperate from nuclear disaster” (Jimenez 2018, 264). In his article, Jimenez makes a series of points on the global aesthetics fostered by Vizenor, the juxtaposition of abstract with academic writing, Vizenor’s concepts of “survivance” and “victimry,” and dark tourism. Ronin’s chapters, he explains, consist in the “historical aestheticization of nuclear disaster” insofar as they heavily rely on “highly dense language with suggestive but opaque visual language and obscure literary and cultural references” (268). In order to aestheticize nuclear history, Vizenor makes use of several metaphors in Ronin’s sections, including the images of the “ghost parade” of dead children or *hibakusha*, a Japanese term used to describe the people who were affected by the Hiroshima and Nagasaki explosions and radiations, the “black rain,” the “invisible tattoos,” and the chrysanthemum flowers. The metaphors also relate to Ronin’s approach to death and to the emotion of fear, which are fundamental to our understanding of Vizenor’s treatment of presence and absence. Indeed, such a view of death and fear infuses the metaphors with intricate meaning, I argue, so they do not (only) rely on mere (over)aestheticization of nuclear history and/or phenomena.

“We are separated from sense of presence because, [sic] fear of death,” Ronin claims, “consider instance, nuclear wounds, morning, [sic] fear of death vanishes,” “Samurai warrior [sic] never shamed by fear, [sic] death” (198). This passage illustrates Ronin’s attitude toward the “fear of death,” which he circumvents by following the “bushido” or “the way of the samurai” that considers death as an option in the form of the “seppuku” or “hara-kiri” suicide to preserve a sense of honor (36). However, his conceptualization of death is imaginative and metaphorical since Manidoo Envoy argues that “Ronin is a storer of death, and by the evocation of bushido, his many deaths are imagic, an eternal end and tricky resurrection by



another name, in another character and presence,” as “death is his kabuki theater, his native giveaway spirit” (36). The idea of an oxymoronic “eternal end” is particularly relevant here since it refers to permanence and resurrection instead of the limit or end of life that a Christian understanding of death, for example, would entail. While “eternity” or infinity is also a significant feature in the traditional sublime, Vizenor’s metaphor overcomes Kantian “mathematical sublime” affects of incommensurability or unlimitedness, which cause the subject to be “overwhelmed by spatial or temporal magnitude” (Shaw 2017, 82), through references to Japanese (“bushido”; “kabuki theater”) and Anishinaabe (“tricky resurrection,” as an allusion to the Indigenous trickster too; “native giveaway spirit”) ancestral traditions.

Besides the “fear of death,” which appears as a Western/Christian (e.g., because of the judgement in the afterlife in Christianity) and destructive product in the novel, the image of the “black rain,” caused by the A-bomb explosion, is depicted as responsible for exposing people to radiation and for stealing away the “natural fear of thunder” and the “pure pleasure of rain” (78). What Ronin describes as a “natural fear” suggests a positive emotional response to natural phenomena such as rain and thunder, which has been replaced by the Western negative fear of death. In a way suggesting a shift from the natural to the nuclear or even toxic/poisonous, Ronin adds that “Hiroshima was incinerated by a *nuclear thunderstorm*, and the hibakusha were *poisoned* by the rain” and then the children resurrected as ghosts (78, emphasis added). Besides the obvious radioactivity of the “black rain” that is said to have fallen after the atomic bombings, Ronin alludes to the “black rain of culture”, an allusion that is directly followed by a reference to Western/Christian symbology: “No, not the ecstatic fear or perverse pleasure of stigmata. There was nothing aesthetic to bear by reason or creative poses” (4). In this short extract, Ronin



associates the ecstasy and overwhelming affects customarily associated with the apparition, be it visible or invisible (e.g., feeling the pain of the wounds without any external mark), of the stigmata with the negative emotions of “fear”, which is reminiscent of the sublime, and “perverse pleasure”. Instead of relying on the aesthetics of the stigmata of a “religion based on reason” (Velie 2008, 157)—i.e., “nothing aesthetic to bear by reason”—, Ronin avoids the pervasiveness of “the black rain of” Western and/or Christian dominant cultural traditions by suggesting that his art builds on a significantly different one.<sup>7</sup>

Ronin’s resurrected beings, the ghost children, as opposed to Jesus Christ who did not reappear after his ascension, live “at the ruins of the Atomic Bomb Dome” and produce “an *eternal* motion of moral silence” inasmuch as “the memory of their gentle touch is an ethereal presence over Hiroshima” (65, emphasis added). Again, adjectives such as “eternal” and “ethereal” are evocative of the sublime, but the ghost children’s presence is described as “moral” and virtuous rather than worshipped or exalted, as it would be the case in religious devotion to a deity. “The virtue of their death, innocence, absence, and silence,” he explains, “is not in a statue, memorial stones, or in the sincere origami cranes, but in the ‘eternal visionary ghost parades of the nuclear dead in Hiroshima’” (66). Despite their invisible and intangible ghost form, the children manage to “touch” people and mark history in a different way than physical memorials do.<sup>8</sup> In other words, combining gothic beings (the ghosts) with sublime rhetoric, the novel suggests that absence and silence possess an ethical and political power, and that the figurative, metaphorical, and invisible contribute more ethically to nuclear history than the materialized, concrete peace memorials do. The opposition between the ghosts and the peace memorial may also be interpreted as stressing the absence of responsibility characteristic of the nuclear sublime insofar as the memorial only emblemizes



the destructive power of the man-made atomic weapons without explicitly condemning its use by the United States. In that sense, Vizenor contrasts non-dominant (Anishinaabe; Japanese) with dominant (white American/Christian) voices by reversing the roles, suggesting that it is the former that is ethical and not the latter. This is illustrated in a passage in which the “atomu children” are in fact present without being physically visible inasmuch as they are virtuous kami spirits which “creat[e] a sense of eternal peace and a natural presence, an imperial reverence and silence that inspired ravens, mongrels, and tricksters” and caused the “nationalists” to be “shamed for their dominance” (149–50). Even more controversially, Ronin wants the Japanese government to be allowed to have atomic weapons, just like the nations which choose to keep them, because “the possession and renewal of nuclear weapons” generates “active peace” as opposed to the “passive peace” promoted by dominant “traditions and simulations of peace” (13). Manidoo Envoy highlights, however, that “nuclear deterrence” puts humanity at risk of “annihilation” (11), and the ghosts’ ethical presence does not foster nuclear proliferation but, rather, act as reminders of the destruction and death caused by atomic weapons.

Interestingly, the kami spirits (i.e., gods or spirits in Japanese Shinto) are inseparable from the nonhuman insofar as Ronin “presents the sentiments of humans, animals, and birds in the same sense of moral reality” (64). The kami spirits are also reminiscent of the natural sublime since Manidoo Envoy describes them using various words from the rhetoric of the sublime such as “the spirits of a *vast, eternal* nature” which are “*superior,*” “*venerated* at many shrines” and “courted as *unworldly* visitors” (63, emphasis added). The shrines produce, Manidoo Envoy adds, “*transcendent* powers, a sense of *continuity*, stability, and the management of *uncertainty,*” while “Ronin is a master of uncertainties and survivance” (63, emphasis added). What Vizenor describes by means of the kami





spirits and such nouns and adjectives is an overpowering natural sublime that suggests a fraught relationship between superior animate natural spirits and humans. More precisely, he refers to such natural sublime phenomena as a “moral reality,” thus again conjuring the idea of an inspirited ethical power which contrasts with the dominant nuclear sublime. Although it produces other tensions and power relations between humans and nonhumans, Vizenor’s spiritual version of the natural sublime appears as a more viable and less dominant counterpart of the nuclear sublime because the kami spirits produce a sense of moral responsibility itself conflated with a sense of reverence toward the non-human spirit.

This version of the natural sublime is mainly expressed through the trope of “natural presence” as opposed to the “death by silence” (4). The contrast provided by the image of the chrysanthemum flowers is particularly pertinent here since, in some countries, these flowers are placed in cemeteries after someone passed away whereas, in the novel, they are sold in front of the peace memorial. More specifically, the phrase “death by silence” echoes the “passive peace” as well as consumerism since homages (such as flowers) and diplomatic gestures, in Ronin’s sense, only obscure and make us forget about the responsibility of dominant nations and cultures. This responsibility can be explicit (e.g., for the destructive use of nuclear weapons) or more abstract (e.g., for the erasure of other traditions from Anishinaabe or Japanese cultures). In contrast, Manidoo Envoy explains that “Ronin wears invisible tattoos as marks of singularity of the ghosts of atomu children, as invisible as his tattoos, and to honor hibakusha survivance” (104). The concept of survivance is particularly relevant in this extract inasmuch as it is related to Vizenor’s representation of absence and presence, as he explains in a book chapter entitled “Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice”: “Native Survivance is an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion,” it is the



“continuance of stories, not a mere reaction,” and “survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry” (2008, 1). Survivance, Manidoo Envoy confirms, is a “vision and vital condition to endure, to outwit evil and dominance,” it is “wit, natural reason, and ‘perfect memory’” and ensures “tragic wisdom” (36). “Natural reason,” he says, “is an active sense of presence, the tease of the natural world in native stories” or “the use of nature, animals, birds, water, and any transformation of the natural world as direct references and signifiers in language” (36). “Perfect memories” or ethical representations of nuclear history proliferate through the objective experience of natural reason so that it can become “collective memory” (Vizenor 36). The latter could in turn be interpreted itself as a form of “*effervescence collective*” (Durkheim 1990, 301) through which individuals and their own subjective memories complete each other so the collective process of memory-making results in a more accurate, “exact imagination” (Vizenor 36) of nuclear history. What the numerous metaphorical compounds suggest is that “survivance” is guaranteed through what Ronin understands as an accurate and non-dominant account of nuclear history.<sup>2</sup> In this process, figurative literary language plays an essential role in producing “exact imagination,” and such language is directly inspired by natural elements themselves described in terms evocative of the natural sublime.

As Manidoo Envoy puts it, Ronin’s “chance and tricky metaphors are the traces, the actual connections, and not a separation of the authentic” since “the perception of the real must be sincere” (69), thus bridging the ontological gap between the physical or present and the unreal or absent. By means of complex metaphors and cultural references, *Hiroshima Bugi* displays how power differences influence the way we experience and perceive the natural or nuclear sublimines as well as nuclear history. As a consequence, countering or



defeating the nuclear sublime could involve or even require a complex process of decolonization, of deconstructing relations between dominant and minoritarian groups. In addition, the novel emphasizes that (Western) ontological limitations which establish strict distinctions and separations between the real and unreal, the physical and abstract, and presence and absence could obstruct any “spirit of experimentation” or, in other words, any attempt to imagine viable alternatives to the potentially dominant and destructive aesthetic and rhetoric of the nuclear sublime. While “survivance” is a rhetoric of constructive, collective remembering, the nuclear sublime may invest a beguiling but dangerous aesthetic and rhetoric of effacement which removes any sense of responsibility.

## II. Unveiling Secrets and Risks: Invisibility and the Nuclear Sublime/Sensorium in *This Atom Bomb in Me*

Lindsey A. Freeman’s approach builds on theories from the burgeoning subfield of new materialism which both further problematize the nuclear sublime while offering another materialist account of the presence/absence dichotomy deployed by means of different narrative techniques made possible by the genre of the creative memoir. In *This Atom Bomb in Me*, Freeman conveys memories of her childhood and upbringing in Oak Ridge through a sociological approach to writing. Oak Ridge, also known as the “Secret City,” is a city in Tennessee of about thirty thousand inhabitants that is (in)famous for serving as one of the three sites of the Manhattan project built to create the world’s first atomic weapons. Freeman also adds that it became a place where most nuclear weapons were and are being built, and “a center for medical research, nuclear storage, national security, and the emergent nuclear heritage tourism industry” mostly thanks to the “Oak Ridge National

Laboratory (ORNL) and the Y-12 National Security Complex” (2019, 6).



<https://epistemocritique.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Lombard-Image-1.jpeg>

As she explains from the very beginning of her memoir, the city is full of symbols that revolve around atomic power such as the “atom-acorn assemblage” (image 1) which is “the totem of the town” that “marks a shared culture and sweeps [its inhabitants] in its substance” (1–2). More precisely, Freeman describes the atom-acorn as representative of the past, present and future of Oak Ridge, thus highlighting the lasting and pervasive potential of atomic power, as can be read in the following quotation: “The atom-acorn is a concentration of all the Oak Ridges that have happened, never happened, might happen, and are happening, combined with the ways in which we have made sense of these happenings” (2). Interestingly, the “totem” incorporates traditional elements of the natural/visible sublime, namely the oak leaves and the ridge lines of hills, and an abstract representation of the unseeable/atomic sublime, that is the atom, both against a stylized background of an ambiguous sunrise or nuclear explosion. Freeman then verges on new materialist thinking by claiming that “the atomic sensorium” (6) is interconnected or entangled with human and non-human permeable



corporealities.<sup>10</sup> “I carry it in my body,” she concludes, “it is both outside and inside, material and immaterial, pulsing and still” (6). What she wants to explore, she explains, are the “affects” related to an “overwhelm[ing]” atomic culture as well as methods for “thinking and writing that tries to perform both the visible and invisible” (9–10). In other words, nuclear culture and the “atomic sensorium” are described as what Timothy Morton terms “hyperobjects,” or often invisible and pervasive “things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (Morton 2013, 1) such as air pollution or global warming, which she endeavors to apprehend and critique through her writing.

Freeman’s memoir unfolds as a series of different but related vignettes respecting a loose narrative arc which both reconstructs the author’s memory and complicates the problematic of the nuclear sublime. One of the first topics, already discussed in her short introduction, is the contrast between visibility and invisibility. Freeman first alludes to this opposition in the vignette “Mister Rogers’ Arms Race” by means of a quotation from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *Le Petit Prince* used by Mister Roger in his TV program “Conflicts”: “that which is essential is invisible to the eye” (21). This quote can be compared with another one from Toni Morrison, mentioned in “The Ghost of Homecoming,” suggesting that “invisible things are not necessarily not there” (46).<sup>11</sup> Throughout the narrative arc, Freeman makes use of the invisibility/visibility, absence/presence, and whiteness/color dichotomies. In the same vignette, for example, she narrates how her grandmother used to conceal her mother’s former dates on photographs with “Wite-Out,” a practice which she found both “hilarious” and disturbing (45–46). Comparing whiteness with Mondrian’s paintings of white squares, Freeman explains that she “hated” white because “the white marked the end for those spaces—they would be white and nothing else” and therefore her “mother



would only have [her] father and no one else” (46). While whiteness creates “exaggerated absence,” with which Freeman associates a troubling and uncomfortable feeling, colors do not (46).

In “Two Photographs, March and April 1968,” Freeman further explores the notion of whiteness as dissimulating the risks associated with the nuclear in reflections on two black-and-white photographs of the truck her “grandfather drove during his tenure as an atomic courier for the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC)” (88), which both position themselves in relation to the rhetoric of the sublime.



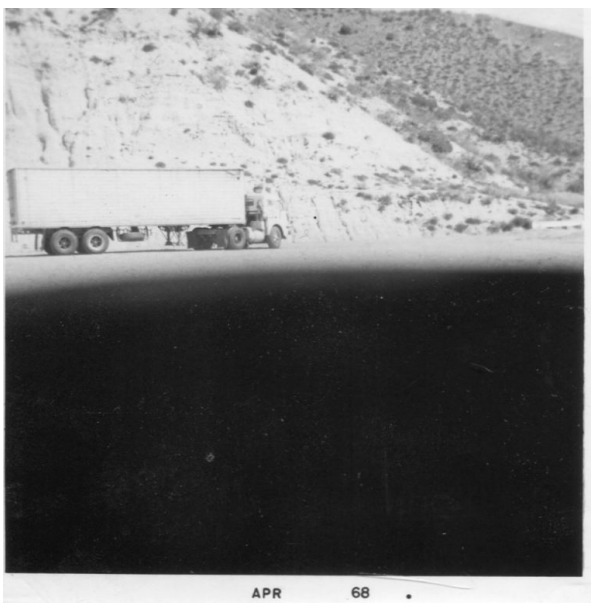
<https://epistemocritique.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Lombard-Image-2.jpg>

*This image is from Lindsey A. Freeman's private collection.*

In the first photograph (image 2), the truck is close, and Freeman writes that “the machine looks alive and friendly; the headlights are round and seemingly innocent, the driver’s-side door is open in a welcoming gesture” (88). The front of the truck displays the word “white,” and she describes her grandfather “popping up through the top of the cab” as “the strangest element,” or “Athena, the goddess of handicraft and warfare, who was born from the head of Zeus”



(88). This image represents innocence and friendliness, without including anything that could be interpreted as sublime, except for Freeman’s allusion to her grandfather as strange or to the divine in the form of the “head of Zeus” (88). It is, however, as Freeman explains, the second shot (image 3), taken from a “distance” which resolutely builds on the rhetoric of the (nuclear) sublime by giving “a real sense of the vehicle’s size and length, something that would not have been grasped from the first photo alone” (88), on which the truck is much closer.



<https://epistemocritique.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Lombard-Image-3.jpeg>

*This image is from Lindsey A. Freeman’s private collection.*

The unidentified black effect below the truck also “heightens the unknowableness of the image” (88), highlighting “the absolute mystery of what is inside” the truck (90). Echoing “The Ghost of the Homecoming,” the truck is then referred to as an “enormous Wite-Out bottle on wheels” which, complemented by the rhetoric of the traditional sublime (“unknowableness,” “absolute mystery,” “enormous”), obscures the dangers of its radioactive content through whiteness.



Allusions to a form of dangerous mystery reminiscent of the nuclear sublime and of its distinctive features of invisibility, secrecy/mystery, and terrible/overwhelming power are included throughout the book and, unlike what the photographs interpreted above suggest, are sometimes presented in a way that allows the possibility of unveiling the risks associated with the nuclear. In the vignette “Carl Perkins,” for example, Freeman evokes how, in “the Manhattan Project days,” the city of “Oak Ridge was absent from commercial maps” and how Perkins, the rockabilly icon, “avoided naming the city in his song,” which to her “made the city more powerful, a secret once again” (60). Then, in “Katy’s Kitchen,” she discusses the eponymous secret project of a storage unit for uranium disguised as “a mysterious blue barn with an odd concrete silo at its hip,” which stresses “the hidden potential of the terrible material swarmed and nested in [her] imagination,” to such an extent that she “learned to question every barn, every seemingly benign structure dotting atomic Appalachia” (62). The vocabulary used in these descriptions often borders on the rhetoric of the sublime inasmuch as words such as “hidden,” “terrible,” “mysterious,” and “powerful” appear as fit for characterizing military endeavors to keep the Manhattan Project secret. The objects described—the trucks, Carl Perkins’s song, the blue barn—provoke mixed feelings of repulsion, fascination, and suspicion. The “Space Dogs” vignette exemplifies this ambivalence even more explicitly as here she claims that she was “both repelled and fascinated” by the story of Laika, the Russian dog that was sent to space, while she “couldn’t help thinking of [her own dog] Pepper in space, wondering about his chances out there” (53). Such contradictory feelings are produced in what I term the *conspicuousness of risk*, a moment characterized by the partial unveiling or debunking of the nuclear sublime through literary inquiry into affects, emotions, and feelings, which results in the undermining or diminution of the nuclear sublime’s emblematic





power of concealing danger and risk. Interestingly, it is the rhetoric of the sublime itself that Freeman deploys to investigate the intricacy of these affects, emotions, and feelings which threaten the mythos of the atomic sublime. Indeed, because the sublime seems to fascinate Freeman, it functions as an incentive for her critical interrogation of the risks and dangers associated with atomic power and culture.

The sublime, however, is not the only aesthetic category Freeman refers to in her memoir. Echoing the weird through concerns over “strange” (Fisher 2016, 8) transformations of non-human bodies into monstrous beings, Freeman explains in the vignette “Expecting the worst, not getting it” that her expectations of irradiated deer as “radioactive monsters”—a phrase she uses in a description of a “Recurring Dream” as they have “undergone a nuclear metamorphosis after eating radioactive fish” and turned into “hideous beings, shuffling, zombie-like creatures” (45)—turned out to be false insofar as she witnesses a deer being born and describes it as a “beautiful spectacle” (59). In this passage, the weird has replaced powerful nuclear sublime affects insofar as references to metamorphosed “hideous” and “zombie-like” creatures “denaturaliz[e]” social realism to create an imaginary that no longer produces awe or fascination (Fisher 2016, 107). Such weird imaginary, however, is the produce of the broader mythos of the atomic sublime and the nuclear sensorium suggesting that exposure to radiation will transform animals and people into horrid monsters. In “Radioactive Frogger,” for instance, Freeman explains that the nuclear sublime imagination reached a larger audience when, in 1991, “about one hundred radioactive frogs escaped from a pond containing legacy nuclear waste from ORNL” and the public was “disappointed” when the frogs looked like regular frogs especially after the exaggerations of the press and of folk singer Fred Small, who “wrote a song about it with a jokey tone that felt off” (100). In



this description, the public is unaware of the real risks caused by radiation, only “disappointment” at the idea that they will not be able to see weird radioactive frogs is mentioned. The *conspicuousness of risk* is not directly achieved as Freeman ironically comments on Small who only years later “became a Unitarian Universalist minister and wrote a very sincere song about Hiroshima” (100). By means of this conclusive remark, Freeman suggests again that the nuclear sublime and its mythos delay or impede environmental awareness and action.

More practically, the conflation between the imaginary of the weird and the atomic sublime shows an encounter between the imaginative and the *material* sublimes, between what is imagined—i.e., radioactive, and dangerous monsters—and what is seen—i.e., irradiated and toxic, but, in the end, regular-looking animals—, and the demystification of the former that eventually happen at some point in time and led Small to write his song about Hiroshima. Another compelling example of the contrast between imaginative and material aspects of the sublime is evoked in relation to another aesthetic category, the *gothic*, in both “The Ghost of the Homecoming” and “The Ghost of Wheat.” While, as previously discussed, Hales argues that “no gothic horror” could suffice to counter the nuclear sublime, Freeman suggests that the “phantoms” created by the “Wite-Out,” and the story of the “Ghost of the Wheat”—referring to “the spirit of a farmer whose land was forcibly taken by the government” to make space for the Manhattan Project—function as forms of resistance to the nuclear sublime. As representatives of the past, these ghosts transform the nuclear sublime into a form of “storied matter,” “a material ‘mesh’ of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces” (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 1–2). In other words, Freeman includes “The Ghost of Wheat” as “part of [her]



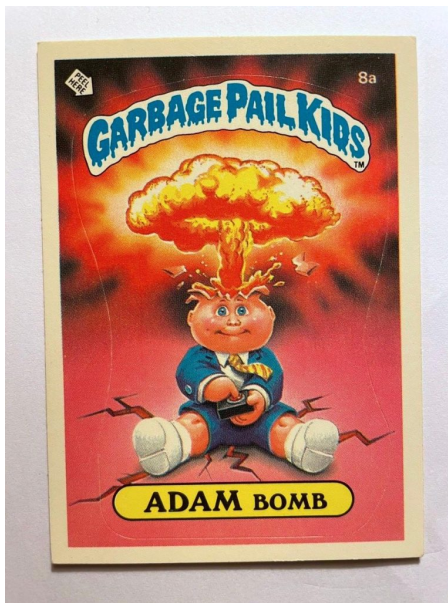
nervous system, as well as the nervous system of Oak Ridge, unruly, a bit paranoid, sometimes matter, sometimes spirit” (48), which also becomes an emblem of the “pre-atomic past” (47). The gothic ghost, despite its white spirit-like look, epitomizes this web of “signifying forces,” as well as of the pre-atomic past, and the consequences of the post-atomic era, in a way that parallels Vizenor’s *hibakusha*’s ethical power. Ghost stories in Freeman’s memoir also complicate the visible/invisible binary, as does her approach to silence when she “realize[s] that silence is a kind of ticking too” (69). This quote also contrasts with Vizenor’s phrase “death by silence,” itself related to the politico-ethical power of the dead children, which highlights that radiation does not need to be seen or heard to affect non/human bodies. In that sense, Freeman ties in with Vizenor’s approach to the dichotomy absence/presence insofar as both of their imaginative representations of ghosts and silence emphasize the agential, animistic, and ethical power of ghosts.<sup>12</sup> While the US government and the nuclear sublime, as both authors suggest, contribute to establishing secrets and lies which hide and confuse the risks of radiation, the tropes of absence and silence emerge in these works of non/fiction as effective critical tools that are complementary to the rhetoric of the sublime and serve to foster ecological awareness. Freeman’s innovation, however, lies in her attempt to combine such tropes with different aesthetic categories such as the sublime, the weird, and the gothic.

Still, one way of deconstructing or resolving the visibility/invisibility dichotomy while overcoming the limits of Western ocularcentric culture that stands out in Freeman’s memoir is her specific attention to the “lower” sense of touch and, to a lesser extent, the sense of smell. In “Hypercolor,” for example, she argues that “colors are not only known visually but are also felt” (98). “The absence of evidence of preteen mitts upon us or the nonexistence of our own handprints touching others,” she writes, “made us a kind of



invisible, a failure, unable to make our mark” (98). In this extract, Freeman introduces a haptic dimension since the absence of our “handprints touching others” is responsible for what she refers to as “invisibility” or as a “failure” to achieve a complex understanding of the multiple “colors” defining our bodies and environments.

The potential of touch is also mentioned in “Atomic Mary and the Atomic Uncanny,” which brings together the nuclear sublime and the uncanny insofar as “the Atomic Mary statue on the grounds of St. Mary’s Catholic Church” that she depicts becomes “the oracle of the unthinkable”: in a state of admiration, Freeman imagines that by “trac[ing] the atomic by her feet with [her] index finger,” the statue would come to life, touch her and make her radiant (or radioactive) too (76–77). Touch serves the purpose of making the nuclear sublime—emblemized by the atom symbol on the statue—visible, of confronting the unthinkable.



(<https://epistemocritique.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Lombard-Image-4.jpeg>)

In a more tragi-comic tone, Freeman comments on the “Garbage Pail Kids” stickers trading cards and, more specifically, on the example of the “pressing” of the launch button in “Adam Bomb” (image 4): “The Garbage Pail Kids illustrated all kinds of terrible things that could happen to a person, hundreds of our unconscious



fears laid out in bright colors” (104). Colors are mentioned as contributing to the unveiling of the “unconscious fears” that the nuclear sublime obscures. What is more, the sense of touch is involved because the cards are collectables, “malleable macabre objects” that “could be kept as a card or peeled off as a sticker and stuck almost anywhere” (104). The sense of smell is also evoked as “they smelled sweetly stale because of the brittle piece of pink bubble gum that came, like a stowaway, in their packaging” (104). These collectables were revelatory, especially “Adam Bomb,” which Freeman describes as “creat[ing] an explosion but also a pause” since “it exploded the continuum of history” (106). “The pressing” of the red button, she writes, “was a reminder of what could happen and a reminder of what already had” (106). Despite the grotesque and sublime aspects of the card, namely the explosion of Adam’s head (grotesque) resulting in a mushroom cloud (nuclear sublime), the act of pressing the button still feeds on the state of fear installed by the nuclear sublime but in a way that leads the author to question the historical and material consequences of atomic power: “Riding in the back seat of the twentieth century, I was acutely aware of the destructive power of nuclear technologies” (106). What is more, the Garbage Pail Kids contrast with the “all’s-right-with-the-natural-world” logic of the Cabbage Patch Kids that it spoofs, and the “pressing” of the button in “Adam Bomb” contributes to raising awareness of the possible (and imminent) dangers associated with nuclear weapons. With the risk of granting too much figurative meaning to the cards, one could also associate the name “Adam” with the original sin, which would imply that the creation of atomic weapons can put an end to humanity and, as the apocalyptical creaking ground on the image suggests, to the world as we know it. As a result, Freeman’s vignettes actively involve the senses of sight, touch, and smell to overcome the possible limits correlated with the absence/presence dichotomy, thus proposing effective resistance to the beguiling but dangerous nuclear sublime.

## Conclusion: Mapping Common Ground Between



## Experimental Narration and Memoiristic Explorations

Various narrative and rhetorical approaches allow to represent and critique the atomic sublime and, more largely, nuclear culture. Vizenor's complex metaphors, deployed in *Ronin's* sections and then further explained by *Manidoo Envoy*, support the main goal Vizenor associates with survivance: creating a collective memory of a terrible nuclear history and culture that would not be stained by dominance or control over the human or nonhuman, imperialism, or hypocrisy. If kabuki theater is described as direct and engaging, as opposed to the rhetoric of the natural or nuclear sublime, Vizenor's style remains highly metaphorical, abstract, and difficult to interpret. One may wonder if such complexity may not run the risk of over-aestheticizing the nuclear crisis and of confusing instead of informing readers, which would ultimately contribute to further embedding the mythos of the atomic sublime in our imaginaries and mindsets. Vizenor's intricate approach to the narrative of nuclear culture, however, combines Anishinaabe and Japanese genres and traditions in a way that provides absence, mostly represented by the children's ghosts, with agency and ethical power to counter dominant cultures. If the answers to the question as to how the nuclear sublime can be defeated may not have been found, Vizenor stresses that any attempt to find these answers will not be an easy task for both writers and literary scholars in that it will require a substantial conceptual apparatus that would best account for the environmental and (post)colonial dimensions of nuclear history.

In the last pages of her memoir, Freeman describes the atomic as "something terrifying but not without its pleasures" (106–107), which is reminiscent of the Burkean "delightful horror" caused by the sublime (Burke 1998, 67). This passage illustrates the author's general ambivalent stance on atomic power throughout her memoir,



which combines feelings and affects of fear, confusion, and overwhelm with fascination, admiration, and pleasure, or is best defined as “a sense of vulnerability combined with an attraction [she] struggle[s] to understand” (108). However, she argues that, today, she feels more “uncomfortable” and that she is “attuned to the creepy and creeping resonances of an atmosphere of danger” and “hyperaware of the atom bomb inside [her]” (108). Freeman claims that creepiness and discomfort, affects which make use of the strange or extraordinary to “denaturaliz[e]” social reality (Fisher 2016, 107), may have replaced the fascination she had for the powerful nuclear sublime. In *This Atom Bomb in Me*, the nuclear sublime therefore acts both as a concealing force which obscures the tragic effects of atomic power and radiation, and as an incentive for further investigation on the widespread and overpowering aspects of atomic culture. Freeman undertakes this investigation through an exploration into (1) new materialist trends which view humans, nonhumans, and technology as intermeshed, (2) contiguous aesthetic notions such as the weird, the gothic, and the uncanny, and (3) the “lower” senses of touch and smell. Such literary explorations result in a less apologetic, eulogistic, and ocularcentric, and thus more complex, nuanced, and critical take on the nuclear sublime than what works which strictly focus on the visual aspects of the sublime may offer. In addition, Freeman’s imaginative deployment of the dichotomies of visibility/invisibility, absence/presence, and whiteness/color serves as a rhetorical strategy for representing and reflecting upon the various and problematic aspects of the nuclear sublime and, more largely, upon the crisis of environmental disasters which often appear or are described as invisible and yet pervasive “hyperobjects” (Morton 2010; 2013).<sup>13</sup> Even though they are scattered throughout the narrative arc, these metaphors presented in the format of vignettes are connected, which strengthens Freeman’s general argument that the atomic permeates “nervous systems,”



bodies, and culture. Through her imaginative discussion of the pervasiveness of radiation, Freeman does not (merely) fall for the distant observation and (over-)aestheticization of nuclear phenomena in an approach that would have been comparable to the classical sublime. On the contrary, she demystifies the mythos of the nuclear sublime while shedding light on the devastating effects of inhabiting toxic places, which erases any hope for Kantian “aesthetic well-being” and represents the “atomic world” as a world in ontological crisis that is still far from achieving ecological stability.

Both works highlight a necessity for the “spirit of experimentation” that Bergthaller and others have identified as characteristic of the environmental humanities. While Vizenor draws on non-white worldviews to display the agential potential of the unseen nonhuman, Freeman explores new materialist thinking and various affects to achieve the conspicuousness of risks that are associated with the nuclear sublime. The metaphorical language, tropes of ethical absence and silence, non-linear structures, and references to non-dominant cultures, new materialism, and “lower” senses of touch and smell deployed in these literary works are examples of the many ways both experimental fiction and (eco-)memoir can contribute to critiquing or possibly debunking problematic aesthetics such as the nuclear sublime, no matter how firmly they have been established.

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<sup>1</sup> Mobilizations of the natural sublime in arts are numerous, including in literature. My book *Techno-Thoreau*, for instance, offers a series of both secular (e.g., an analysis of a passage from Ron Rash's *Saints at the River*) and religious (e.g., William Bartram's description of wilderness as "untrammelled," "divine," and "infinite" in his *Travels*) examples of how it can be deployed (Lombard 2019, 20–32).

<sup>2</sup> When it does not refer to the branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of beauty or of the sublime (i.e., "aesthetics"), the term "aesthetic" in Hales's article and throughout this essay is related to issues of representation. Hales's comment, for example, suggests that the atomic sublime offers pleasing or attractive representations of nuclear phenomena that are devoid of any critical outlook. As this essay will try to show, an embodied or multisensorial approach to landscapes can provide an experience that is no longer solely aesthetic but also affective because of the more diverse and complex affects and emotions it can produce.

<sup>3</sup> By "Anthropocene Landscapes," Saul and Waterton refers to "those that display the ravages of modernity's violence" (2019, 143). This



violence can take various shapes, ranging from unfettered deforestation to human waste, and pollution or to the destruction of biodiversity. I would argue, however, that the adjective “Anthropocene” does not inevitably entail that humans are destructive actors in any environment but that their participative and possibly transformative forces in the landscape they occupy or inhabit can no longer be disputed.

4 Bergthaller et al. argue that the representational and ontological challenges raised by the Anthropocene call for experimentations in the field of the environmental humanities, that is for theoretical and methodological approaches which explore a wider spectrum of, for example, cultures, traditions, disciplines, and narrative/rhetorical techniques (Bergthaller et al. 2014).

5 As historians David Howes and Constance Classen argue, the “lower” senses of taste, touch, and smell have “attract[ed] little attention in Western society” compared to the higher senses of sight and hearing, whereas all of their sensations participate in the same “interactive web of experience” that complicates and enriches “sensory practices” (2014, 5). Analyzing descriptions of feelings, emotions, and affects produced by multisensorial experiences in literary works such as Freeman’s memoir opens the way for innovative, more nuanced, and critical interpretations of the sublime and of nuclear culture.

6 The White Earth Indian Reservation is located in northwestern Minnesota and was created in 1867. It is still inhabited by the White Earth Band, one of the six bands that constitute the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe (Ojibwe or Anishinaabe are other words for “Chippewa”).

7 Although the Anishinaabe borrowed elements from Christianity, among other religions, Alan Velie highlights that Vizenor understands American Christianity’s storytelling as “humorless” and “tragic,” which contrasts with “trickster stories” and their “communal” and “comic” components (2008, 157). Linda Lizut Helstern also argues that references to Christianity in *Hiroshima Bugi* contribute to Vizenor’s project of “deconstruct[ing] ideologies” of “peace and victimry” as well as “the true believers who perpetrate them” (2008, 183).

8 The ghosts’ ethical presence echoes Jacques Derrida’s formulation of “hantologie” (“Hanter ne veut pas dire être présent”), which also explains how past theories and cultures can still influence and/or transform the present (Derrida 1993, 255).



9 In *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuses*, Durkheim questions the idea of “survivance” in animistic worldviews, calling it “hardly intelligible” insofar as it suggests that the physical body can continue to live as a spirit that would be its “double.” Vizenor, however, seems to suggest in *Hiroshima Bugi* that a form of materialized absence such as a ghost could exist and shed light on important political and ethical issues (Durkheim 1990, 86–87).

10 In her memoir, Freeman explicitly refers to Jane Bennett’s theory of “vibrant matter,” which “articulate[s] a vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans to see how analyses of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due” (2010, viii).

11 This quote alludes again to Derrida’s take on hauntology, to which I refer in the first section of this essay.

12 This approach echoes sociologist Avery F. Gordon’s book *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, in which she also challenges the understanding of ghosts as silent absences. Absences can be “seething,” she writes, presences can be “muted,” and ghosts, through what she terms “haunting,” can act as active and visible reminders of forms of “social violence” that occurred in the past (2008, xvi–21).

13 The effect of such “hyperobjects” are even less possibly perceived in time, being often outcomes of “slow violence,” that is a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, [...] of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, [and] that is not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon 2011, 2). It is also worth noting that these two concepts, which are frequently quoted in ecocritical scholarship, echo the incommensurability and ineffability of the sublime.

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