

# On Forgetting Fukushima

Robert Jacobs



Advertisement in downtown Fukushima City (by author, 2015)

This month the media and social networks are busy remembering Fukushima on the fifth anniversary of the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown, but what we are really observing is the beginning of the work of forgetting Fukushima. Fukushima is taking its place alongside the many forgotten nuclear disasters of the last 70 years. Like [Mayak](#) and [Santa Susana](#), soon all that will be left of the Fukushima nuclear disaster are the radionuclides that will cycle through the ecosystem for millennia. In that sense we are

*internalizing* Fukushima into our body unconsciousness.

Forgetting begins with lies. In Fukushima the lies began with TEPCO (the owner of the power plants) [denying](#) that there were any meltdowns when they knew there were three. They knew they had at least one full meltdown by the end of the first day, less than 12 hours after the site was struck by a powerful earthquake knocking out the electrical power. TEPCO continued to tell this lie for [three months](#), even after hundreds of thousands of people had been forced to or voluntarily evacuated. Just last week TEPCO [admitted](#) that it was aware of the meltdowns much earlier, or to put it bluntly, it continued to hide the fact that it had been lying for five years (I've written about the dynamic behind this [here](#)).

The government of Japan had such weak regulation of the nuclear industry that it was completely reliant on TEPCO for all information about the state of the plants and the risks to the public. [It was reduced to being an echo chamber](#) for the denials coming from a company that was lying. The people living near the plants, and downwind as the plumes from explosions in three plants carried radionuclides high into the air and deposited large amounts of radiation far beyond the evacuation zones, had to make life and death decisions as they were [being lied to](#) and manipulated.



Clouds hang over Fukushima City (by author, 2015)

Lying about nuclear issues is not unique to Japan or Fukushima. It began with the first use of nuclear weapons against human beings, in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. When announcing the first attack President Harry Truman referred to Hiroshima as a "military base," and said it was chosen specifically to avoid civilian casualties. Hiroshima was a naval base (in a country whose navy was already destroyed), but the truth is that the city was chosen to demonstrate vividly the power of the super weapon and the bomb was aimed at the city center, the area most densely populated with civilians. After the war the US claimed that these attacks, in which over 100,000 people were killed instantly, actually *saved lives*.

The most powerful legacy of Chernobyl, besides its long-lived radiation, is the widespread use of the word "radiophobia" by nuclear industry apologists to describe the public response to large releases of radiation: fear. Look for this word and sentiment in the many articles being published this month about Fukushima. When you see it, or read the claim that more people were harmed at Fukushima by their own irrational fears than by radiation, you are seeing the work of forgetting turn its cruel wheels. Behind those wheels are the shattered lives and emotional wellbeing of hundreds of thousands of people whose communities were

destroyed, and whose families were ripped apart by the Fukushima disaster. People whose anxieties will rise every time they or their children run a high fever, or suffer a nosebleed or test positively for cancer. People whose suffering-at no fault of their own-is becoming invisible. Soon when we talk about Fukushima we will reduce the human impact to a quibbling over numbers: how many cases of thyroid cancer, how many confirmed illnesses. Lost-hidden-forgotten will be the hundreds of thousands of people forced to flee their homes, in many cases permanently, and try to rebuild their shattered lives. Public relations professionals and industry scientists will say that these people did this to themselves (see [here](#), and [here](#)). And the curtain will draw ever downward as we forget them.

This is the tradition of nuclear forgetting.

The production sites of the [Manhattan Project](#) are being transformed into Disney theme parks of American exceptionalism; their local legacies of cancer and contamination becoming footnotes without citation sources lost amidst the museum exhibits and commemorations hailing the greatness of American science and engineering. The actual goal, and accomplishment, of destroying two cities and the hundreds of thousands of people living in them, barely receives brief mention at the end of the celebration: confirmation of the successful application of American power and justice that the victims brought upon themselves. In America we honor the memory of the architects of this mass murder, and we forget the victims.

Some of the difficulty in remembering those affected by nuclear disasters is systemic, and some is strategic. Radiation is difficult to understand. Exposure to radiation embodies what [Rob Nixon describes as slow violence](#), "formless threats whose fatal repercussions are dispersed across space and time."<sup>1</sup> The slow impact of the catastrophe of nuclear disaster

dislocates it from the disaster itself. The news cameras of the world were focused on the Fukushima Daiichi plants while they were exploding, but as the fallout of those plumes settled to earth, other catastrophic events drew our collective gaze elsewhere. Most health effects from exposure to radiation unfold over years and blend into the low moan of tragedies that afflict people in their personal lives, uncoupling from the events that caused them by our perception of the passage of time.

widely distributed radioactive particles, such as the situation facing people living downwind from the Fukushima plants. In addition to thyroid cancer, ingestion cancers that are caused by internalized particles tend to appear as lung cancer, bowel cancer, stomach cancer, throat cancer and cancers of other parts of the body that process what we swallow and inhale. These cancers are common and have multiple origins, allowing nuclear apologists to obfuscate the role that radiation may have played. This is strategic forgetting.



**A girl who has been isolated at a makeshift facility to screen, cleanse and isolate people with high radiation levels, looks at her dog through a window in Nihonmatsu, Northern Japan, March 14, 2011 (Reuters/Yuriko Nakao**

This dynamic has been useful to those promoting nuclear power, and discounting the health impacts of exposures to radiation since the advent of nuclear technologies (see [here](#)). Many of the cancers that progress out of these exposures result from the internalizing of radiological elements and then surface as ingestion cancers, such as thyroid cancer whose causation cannot be directly demonstrated on a case-by-case basis. When numbers spike, as in the case of thyroid cancers, some scientists claim that this is merely the result of more intensive screening. This manipulation of ambiguity is the bread and butter of the denial of the health effects of

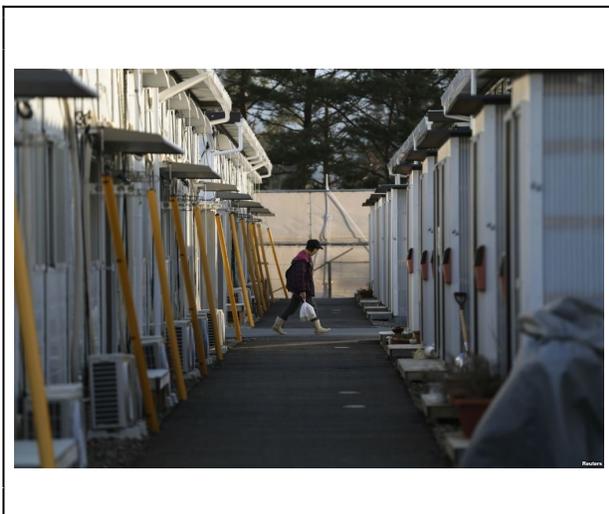


**A malfunctioning public Geiger counter in Fukushima City (by author, 2015)**

We have to do more than remember Fukushima, we have to learn how to remember Fukushima. To do this we must learn to see the [impacts of radiation exposures](#) before they become vaguely visible as cancers nestled in health population statistics (for example at

Chernobyl and Hanford). Already higher than normal rates of thyroid cancer have been detected in children living in the plumes of the Fukushima explosions. But before we are reduced to arguing about numbers of attributable cancers (as at Chernobyl), we need to learn to see the larger and subtler manifestations of radiation disasters in the human community. Meanwhile, the psychological and emotional legacies of radiation exposures can be as devastating as some of the physiological impacts. Multi-generational families that are split into separate "temporary" accommodations, children that are taught they must avoid contact with nature, marriages dissolved by the conflicting financial requirements for one parent to keep a job while another takes the children away from radiological hazards, and lifelong anxiety over each illness because of uncertainty over one's exposure all disrupt families, communities and individuals.

Hundreds of thousands of lives have been disrupted by the Fukushima disaster, leaving people who must pick up the pieces and carry on by themselves.



A woman walks in a temporary housing complex where evacuees from the Miyakoji area of Tamura are living, at Funahiki area in Tamura, Fukushima prefecture, April 1, 2014. (REUTERS/Issei Kato)

There is good reason to fixate on the clusterf\*#k that is the remediation of the Fukushima site, and to track the ceaseless entry of radionuclides into the ocean that will continue for decades, the still lethal melted nuclear cores of the plants will need to be removed and contained (a process that will take numerous decades) and the flow of radiation into the sea will continue to effect the local ecosystem and the food chain in the Pacific Ocean. However, we should not allow our gaze to remain fixed on the nuclear plants, we must learn to see the deep wounds to society that are left to heal in darkness. We must learn to bring the whole of the population and ecosystem that suffer from radiological disasters into the light of our awareness and concerns. We must grieve for all that has been lost and we must hold government and the TEPCO Corporation responsible for assisting those whose lives have been shattered. We can demand corporate and governmental compensation and medical monitoring for those whose health and wellbeing have been compromised, for those displaced from their homes by radiation, and for those who have lost their livelihood because of the contamination and loss of public faith in the food they grow or fish they catch. We can remember all of those who have been affected. And we can learn how to understand the long, slow violence that follows behind the compelling first week of the nuclear disasters yet to come.

Recommended citation: Robert Jacobs, "On Forgetting Fukushima", *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 14, Issue 5, No. 1, March 1, 2016.

**Robert Jacobs** is a Professor of History at the Hiroshima Peace Institute and the Graduate School of Peace Studies of Hiroshima City University. He is a historian of science and

technology focused on nuclear technologies and radiation technopolitics. His books include, *Nuclear Bodies: The Global Hibakusha* (Yale 2022), and *The Dragon's Tail: Americans Face the Atomic Age* (Massachusetts 2010). He has published and edited multiple books and articles on nuclear history and culture. In a previous life he was a chef and worked in the organic produce industry.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rob Nixon, "Slow Violence, Gender and the Environmentalism of the Poor," *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies*, Vols. 13:2-14:1 (2006-7): 14.