

ABSTRACT

Nuclear Forms: Poetry, Politics, and Ecology

What was the Cold War? A historian might explain how it was period of oscillating escalation and denouement that significantly altered the world's geopolitical landscape. An ecologist might answer that the Cold War marks the beginning of the "Great Acceleration," a period in which the speed and quantity of consumption and production expanded exponentially, forever changing the relationship between humans and the earth. And a literary scholar might tell you this was a period that saw the transition from modernism to postmodernism and the significant expansion of the literary canon. Rarely, however, are these three formulations of the same critical period thought together—to the great detriment of how we understand our present historical, cultural, and ecological conditions. My dissertation weaves these histories together while interrogating and expanding them in order to theorize a new account of the Cold War period in America. I do so by focusing on the place where geopolitics, ecology, and cultural production most clearly and confoundingly intersect: nuclear power. However, rather than simply tracking overt representations of "the Bomb," I tend to the latent, hidden, and undertheorized forms of nuclear power, from its radiating afterlives to its buried and forgotten wastes. I argue that, by examining how poetry addresses the contradictions of nuclear power across this dynamic period, we arrive at a complex alternative narrative of the Cold War that in turn helps us redefine the relationship between literature, geopolitics and ecology. The result is a retheorization of the Cold War as a historical period, a reconceptualization of nuclear power's figurative, energetic, and material forms, and a new account of how poetry registered and responded to the environmental and political changes of this period.