

# Critical Education

Volume 6 Number 18

September 30, 2015

ISSN 1920-4125

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## *Secret Sharers*

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Citation: McCrary, N. E. (2015). Secret sharers. *Critical Education*, 6(18). Retrieved from <http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/criticaled/article/view/185170>

### **Abstract**

*This story of stories is more about the gatekeepers of knowledge than public education in the United States per se. It is a story within a larger story about complicity, blind obedience, and misplaced trust. It takes place in a secret city in the rural South, described by one inhabitant as surrounded by: "...barbed wire, spies, privation, and the biggest secret the nation ever kept." This was a city called paradise by some, where workers came from all over the United States, secret sharers who had uprooted themselves "... live sealed in privacy, under military dictatorship, driven by wartime urgency for a project only a fraction of us understood."*



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the Institute for Critical Educational Studies and housed at the University of British Columbia. Articles are indexed by EBSCO Education Research Complete and Directory of Open Access Journals.

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After little more than half a century that included four major wars, President Eisenhower warned the American people of a rapidly growing military industrial complex in the United States.

...we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. *Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.* (Eisenhower, 1961)

Certainly a free public education for all, one that is equitable in which resources are distributed fairly, is hopeful in producing *an alert and knowledgeable citizenry*. In fact, an important aim of public education in the United States has long been in service of an engaged democratic citizenry. Unfortunately, many believe that public education in the United States is quickly becoming corporate education and, should that happen, short-term capital gain will become the driving force rather than the creation of informed and active citizens (Chomsky, 2013; Giroux, 1999; Tierney, 2013).

This story of stories, however, is more about the gatekeepers of knowledge than public education in the United States per se. It is a story within a larger story about complicity, blind obedience, and misplaced trust. It takes place in a secret city in the rural South, described by one inhabitant as surrounded by: "...barbed wire, spies, privation and the biggest secret the nation ever kept." This was a city called paradise by some, where workers came from all over the United States, secret sharers who had uprooted themselves "...live sealed in privacy, under military dictatorship, driven by wartime urgency for a project only a fraction of us understood (Searcy, 1992)."

*Write it all down, she said, write everything I tell you.* My mother was slipping in and out of consciousness as she was dying of cancer and asked my younger brother to take notes as she recounted her work in a secret city (17 miles long, 7 miles wide, with 75,000 inhabitants) between 1943 and 1945. She insisted all of her co-workers had died of cancers. She worked with a cohort of 12 women who wore dosimeter badges that recorded daily radiation readings in deep basements at the Y-12 enrichment and processing plant. Sworn to secrecy, these women dutifully performed their assigned jobs. There were secrets, kept for nearly 30 years, about leaving their dosimeter badges at home when the radiation reading was too high the day before. The private contractors and the government knew these workers were being exposed to lethal doses of radiation that not only would cause their eventual deaths but also would affect genetic changes for generations.



Patricia O'Connor McCrary (front row far left) and her cohort of women who worked on the *Manhattan Project*, Oak Ridge, TN 1944.

This story is not told chronologically. It reaches back and forth across time and place, through personal accounts, official policies, asking what we have learned and how might we act on that knowledge toward a more sustainable future. As Arundhati Roy (2004) insists: “The American way of life is not sustainable [because] it doesn't acknowledge that there is a world beyond *America*.” Roy, a writer and activist from India, has written and spoken eloquently about the potential of the American people to change the world, to demand peace, to embrace justice. She speaks about how we appear to others in hopes of awakening citizens of the United States to call our leaders to the task of improving conditions for all. More than any other citizenry, Roy says *Americans* have the opportunity to move the most powerful leaders in the world toward a greater good, to end war, to feed the hungry, and to educate all children.

Roy reminds us with urgency to examine ourselves, our privileges, our mistakes, and to tell and retell these truths. She does so, not so much to criticize the United States, but rather to call us to action, continually reminding us that we are the only citizens who can save the world from total destruction. Her appeal is much like Eisenhower's warning in 1961: *Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together*. Both seek to awaken us to truths we may not speak but certainly share in the collective consciousness of the United States. For, when we keep hard truths secret, we leave lessons to be framed by profiteers who would have us act on false assumptions. When we view truth as unpatriotic, peace-talk as disrespectful of our brothers and sisters serving in the military, we subvert a most critical conversation and may be more likely to repeat mistakes of the past, risking the destruction of the very republic so many died to protect. It is no longer possible for

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the United States to proceed as we have, with so little regard for the rest of the world, without terrible consequences. The intent here is to illuminate and to resist a long and unsustainable path toward the illusion of preserving a way of life that cannot endure. Contemporary thinkers, such as Arundhati Roy, who dare to unveil how we in the United States appear from the perspectives of others, awakens us to an urgent critical viewpoint that is too often lost in our privileged day-to-day lives. Eisenhower recognized the *meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense* and was compelled to warn us of the potential for dire consequences.

The Manhattan Project, the dropping of *Little Boy* on Hiroshima, and the subsequent bomb, *Fat Man*, dropped on Nagasaki, which was not to stop the war but to seize the opportunity to test a different kind of bomb, changed everything, except, according to Albert Einstein, *the thinking of the people*.

The experiences of the women working on the Manhattan Project were as bizarre as any. The secrets they kept for many years veiled their shares in the murder of 240,000 people (according to some estimates). Half of the victims died the first day of the bombings, the other half died from burns and radiation sickness over the following months. Most were unsuspecting citizens. As art so often does, Picasso's *Guernica* illuminates the experience on the ground of the first aerial bombing of a civilian city during the Spanish Civil War in 1937. It was not a nuclear bomb, nor did it contaminate the city of Guernica for generations to come, but it was dropped from above on unsuspecting citizens. Exhibited for the first time in Paris in the summer of 1937, *Guernica* horrified some. Depicting the devastation of the city by the Nazi army, *Guernica* might have given the world caution, yet by August 1945 the United States dropped the first nuclear bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. Three days later we tested another type of nuclear bomb, dropping the plutonium-based implosion bomb on Nagasaki even though we knew the war was essentially already over.



*Guernica*, by Pablo Picasso 1937 (11' X 25.6'), Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain

As children, my brothers and I saw our mother's fears grow as Christmas cards told of another woman diagnosed with cancer. One-by-one the women in her cohort from Y12 died from breast or lung cancers or lymphoma. Each time my mother heard of another coworker with cancer, she would recall the working conditions in Oak Ridge. Their jobs were to record radiation levels during the enrichment process. They would enter the plant through tall barbed wire fences, go several levels underground and spend their days reading and documenting

radiation levels in just their *street clothes*, with no protective clothing. She told us once she opened a door in the basement of Y12 and saw a “full size train” moving on underground tracks. As they checked out each afternoon, they presented their dosimeter badges and were told whether to wear them the following day. All they knew was that they were part of a top-secret war effort. With husbands off to war and young children to feed and house, they needed jobs and they were proud to contribute to the war effort.

The intersections of power and privilege unfold throughout their stories. As women, these workers at Y12 were sharers in the production of the first nuclear bomb dropped indiscriminately on civilians but they did not share in knowing the intent or trajectory of their labor. Their generation of women largely observed a conventional role in society. Most had been schooled to think their charge was to serve silently, asking few questions and trusting men to know best. As working class women, largely untrained for working outside the home, they were lucky to have jobs. It was never theirs’ to question the work of men, particularly well-educated men like the scientists who had descended on this small town in East Tennessee. These women grew-up during the Great Depression, determined to work hard, live frugally, and silence their strength. Little did they know that their own lives and those of their children were compromised every day they worked at Y12 and returned home bringing increased doses of radiation to their families.

Knowing what they had done in Oak Ridge, the United States government set aside a fund to support the healthcare of the workers at Y12 and other nuclear facilities, yet failed to tell anyone it existed. Most victims died with no support and the funds remained obscure for nearly 30 years. After all, it was *blood money* that satisfied the intent to support victims, if not actually doing so.

Given that these places and deeds appear disconnected: Oak Ridge, TN, Hiroshima, Japan, Guernica, Spain, Picasso, my mother’s cohort at Y12, they intersect around important, albeit simple, questions such as: What have we learned? Who benefits from war? What sort of consciousness permits the making and dropping of bombs indiscriminately (now with unmanned drones)? What narratives or false narratives preceded and followed such events?

Philosopher, Hannah Arendt, a victim herself of the *purification* of Germany under Hitler’s totalitarian regime, offers insight through the notion of *the right to have rights*. She says that in war or resistance, we should ask what we are fighting *for* rather than what we are fighting *against*. Arendt’s answer: when we fight for the *right to have rights*, we fight for the basic principle of human solidarity. In other words, solidarity is not found in the rights of some but in our collective struggle for the rights of all.

Arendt also discusses morality as the actualization of consciousness or thinking with oneself. Put simply, she proposes that such thinking requires an interaction with self in a manner that an inner plurality exists and demands agreement. For example, Socrates is said to have preferred death to living apart from his inner self or his *thinking partner*. Arendt found that evil flourishes in mindlessness. She explained that Nazi war criminals, particularly Eichmann, could say nothing nor show any emotion during his trial because he had disconnected from his *thinking partner* and thus could and was convinced to act on orders without question.

Accounts from public interviews with workers in the Manhattan Project indicate most were shocked when the bombs were dropped in Japan and they realized they had been part of making those bombs. Such unknowing complicity in what many believe were crimes against humanity was a source of confusion and sadness for my mother. Would she have worked at Y12

had she known they were producing a nuclear bomb to drop on civilians? Would so many have kept their work secret had they known? Workers were faced with such unanswerable questions as they became increasingly aware of their connection to the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Perhaps, some would have severed the relationship with their *thinking partners*. Many may have found other work, being unable to tolerate separation of inner morality from the reality of what they were producing.



Public sign at the entrance to the Y-12 plant in 1944, Oak Ridge, TN

Thinking people, those who maintain an active relationship between inner thought and external experience are unable to act mindlessly. It is only in the disconnected self that we are able to act on orders without question, that we are instruments of the powerful, or that we are able to commit crimes against humanity with little disturbance. So disturbing was my mother's sense of complicity, that she dictated every detail to my brother with dying urgency. *Write down everything I say, every detail.*

Those notes were packed away along with family photos and old Christmas cards. Years later National Public Radio (NPR) ran a story about a largely untapped fund set aside in the early 1950's to support healthcare for thousands of workers exposed to deadly levels of radiation while working on the Manhattan Project. After hearing that story on NPR, my brother recovered the notes my mother dictated 15 years earlier. He was able to help many victims file claims and receive relatively small compensation. Most had already died and their descendants were able to claim only a percentage of the original amount.

The etymology of peace includes the Hebrew *shalom*, meaning safety, welfare, and prosperity. It is often used as a verb connected to agreement or covenant (*pacisci*), a compact, treaty of peace. At times, such as the 1960's in the United States, peace became the cry of resistance from a generation. Cries for peace have also symbolized unpatriotic citizens or

weakness in the face of adversity. Of late, it seems peace has become nearly obsolete on a global scale. It is used more often in religious contexts, in prayers and rituals but rarely in the secular. Yet, as its etymology suggests, peace is both a noun and a verb. At once, peace is object and action. As a covenant, peace requires agreement and mindful action or praxis. Perhaps most challenging is that it requires agency or the belief we can indeed live peacefully. Arundhati Roy says: "...change will come. It could be bloody, or it could be beautiful. It depends on us."

It may be that Arendt's *inner dialogue* is actually what so many religious call prayer, a dialogue with God or the divine within us. However termed, it seems that thinking with ourselves is a source of agency and a way of knowing peace. Once internally recognized, it may be realized among us as a covenant and a promise. We can enact communities of peace, hopeful communities that weigh action against the extent to which it leads to safety, welfare, and prosperity for all.

When I am quiet, I often hear my mother's voice and I wonder if it was necessary to build that last bomb, to drop it on Nagasaki, to lose her so young, to incinerate the people in that city across the globe. Was it necessary to keep those secrets from the workers in Oak Ridge? Was it fair? Who decides what can be known? Who decides to live in peace or war? Is it the power to control information or to wage war that is prized; or is it the strength to enact peace that we seek? Is it simply the hunger for accumulating capital that disregards peace in favor of conflict? Such questions are being asked around the world. When people begin to see the concentration of wealth narrow as their own safety, welfare, and prosperity diminish, revolutions happen. Sadly, most revolutions involve violence rather than patient and steady resistance and in violence ideas are often lost along the way. Yet ideas are the only real tools we have to change the world and ideals, such as peace, the only guidance for building great ideas. It really is up to us to think, to read, to know, and to pursue the dialogic with ourselves and among us. As Hannah Arendt says, "justice must not only be done but must be *seen* to be done." Justice must be imagined as an achievable ideal before it can be enacted.

In *The Cost of Living*, Arundhati Roy offers a thoughtful and hopeful *prayer*.

To love. To be loved. To never forget your own insignificance. To never get used to the unspeakable violence and the vulgar disparity of life around you. To seek joy in the saddest places. To pursue beauty to its lair. To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple. To respect strength, never power. Above all, to watch. To try and understand. To never look away. And never, never, to forget. (pp.134-135)

*To respect strength, never power*, is one of the most hopeful ideas I know.

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[criticaleducation.org](http://criticaleducation.org)

ISSN 1920-4175

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