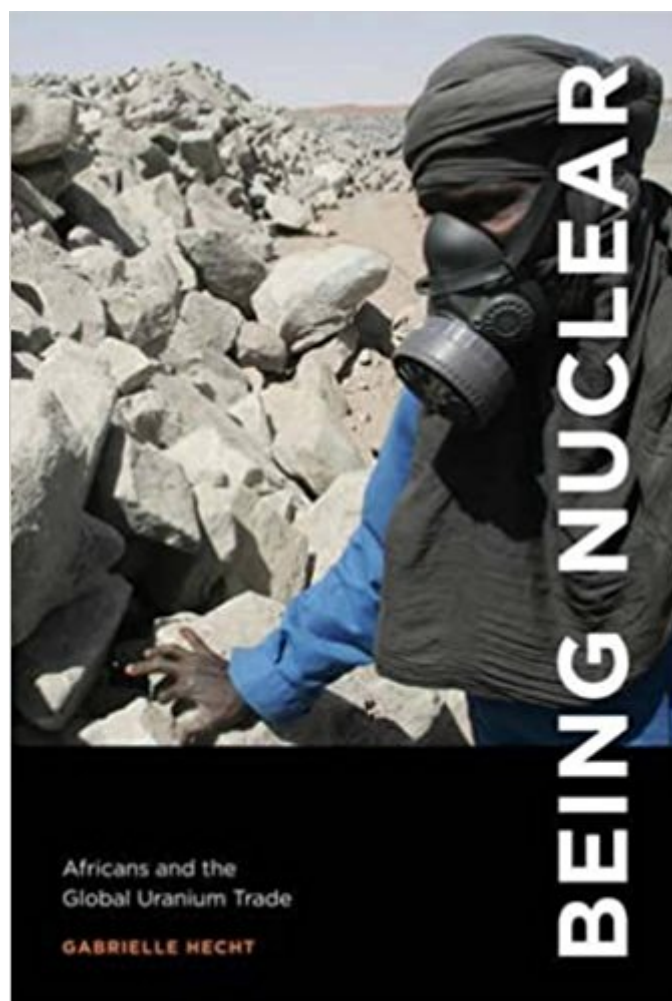


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# Being Nuclear: Africans And The Global Uranium Trade (MIT Press)



## Synopsis

Uranium from Africa has long been a major source of fuel for nuclear power and atomic weapons, including the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. In 2003, after the infamous "yellow cake from Niger," Africa suddenly became notorious as a source of uranium, a component of nuclear weapons. But did that admit Niger, or any of Africa's other uranium-producing countries, to the select society of nuclear states? Does uranium itself count as a nuclear thing? In this book, Gabrielle Hecht lucidly probes the question of what it means for something--a state, an object, an industry, a workplace--to be "nuclear." Hecht shows that questions about being nuclear--a state that she calls "nuclearity"--lie at the heart of today's global nuclear order and the relationships between "developing nations" (often former colonies) and "nuclear powers" (often former colonizers). Hecht enters African nuclear worlds, focusing on miners and the occupational hazard of radiation exposure. Could a mine be a nuclear workplace if (as in some South African mines) its radiation levels went undetected and unmeasured? With this book, Hecht is the first to put Africa in the nuclear world, and the nuclear world in Africa. By doing so, she remakes our understanding of the nuclear age.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Gabrielle Hecht's *Being Nuclear* is a monumental new study of the geopolitics of uranium. It profoundly shifts how we think about things marked 'nuclear,' underscoring the complex historical

and technopolitical work embedded in any use of the term. Beautifully written and meticulously researched -- a major contribution. (Joseph Masco, University of Chicago; author of *The Nuclear Borderlands: The Manhattan Project in Post-Cold War New Mexico*) This impassioned, broad-ranging, and beautifully written book puts the bodies of ordinary people at the very center of a sweeping study of the geopolitics and cultural anxieties that surround all things nuclear. *Being Nuclear* reorients the study of occupational health by calling attention to vital questions of knowledge production, activism, and governance in a postcolonial world. (Steven Epstein, Professor of Sociology and John C. Shaffer Professor in the Humanities, Northwestern University; author of *Inclusion: The Politics of Difference in Medical Research*) *Being Nuclear* is nothing short of pathbreaking. Hecht's analysis of the techno-politics of African uranium production presents a critical and convincing rethinking of the global nuclear order. This is a very smart book, based on daunting and original research, on a topic of genuine importance. (Julie Livingston, Associate Professor of History, Rutgers University) Hecht has written the first history of nuclear Africa which, given the importance of the subject and the obstacles she faced, is a major achievement. (Jock McCulloch, *Journal of African History*) Not only does the book stand out as one of the most comprehensive attempts to study the history of uranium mining in Africa, it also caters to an expansive academic audience -- from historians of science and technology and sociologists and anthropologists of science, to those taking a broader interest in labour rights, public health issues and mining corporations. (Jayita Sarkar *The British Journal for the History of Science*) *Being Nuclear* has very important things to say about the legacies of empire. Hecht persuasively shows how global nuclear agencies reproduced colonial logics and inequalities... It seems destined to become essential reading for those interested in uranium and Africa, as well as in issues of global nuclearity. (*Journal of Modern History*)

Gabrielle Hecht is Professor of History at the University of Michigan. She is the author of *The Radiance of France: Nuclear Power and National Identity after World War II* (MIT Press).

Hecht writes on the invisibility of nuclear risks to workers in the industry on the surface, but the book and its theoretical arguments have relevance far beyond the limits of the nuclear topic at hand. The book is dense but read the first chapter to get an excellent situation of the arguments and summary of each chapter ahead. From that point, the detailed individual chapters can be read independently.

This work is an absolute essential not only when attempting to discover integral facts about the

uranium trade in Africa, but to illuminate the history of uranium and its status as either a nuclear or banal commodity. From investigating the nebulous ways in which this ore was initially priced to revealing the ways in which its 'nuclearity' and health hazards were ambiguously or opaquely handled, especially in the light of Africa's invisibility in neocolonial eyes, I believe the truth of the history of the uranium trade should be standard knowledge for all, and, especially for those who truly wish to examine the past, present and future of the nuclear industry. If so much of the inner workings of this trade have been hidden from the general public, how then should the general public be willing to place its faith in the reassurances of those who propose the ultimate safety and ethical soundness of this as a power source.

This is a very well written book about the sourcing of Uranium from African countries for use in both nuclear weapons and power plants. The author does this by telling the story of the Uranium mines in Gabon, Congo (Zaire), Niger, and South Africa. The second half of the book focuses on describing the bad labor conditions in the mines; the first establishes a line of argumentation about "nuclearity" which is an historically contingent concept that relates developments in the Cold War and later the post September 11 world to the way people think about the uranium deposits in Africa. The author provides particularly interesting insights about how the "market" for uranium developed. She highlights the importance of the dual-use nature of uranium and the limited visibility of the trade in uranium for weapons use. The book provides useful background for understanding the defense of the apartheid regime in South Africa by Britain and the United States and attempts by the administration of George W. Bush to justify the war in Iraq in 1993 by citing transfers of "yellow cake" from Niger as evidence of the resumption of the Iraqi nuclear weapons program.

Ms. Hecht's newest book, BEING NUCLEAR: AFRICANS AND THE GLOBAL URANIUM TRADE, is thoroughly researched, and becomes a fascinating, knowledge rich read for even a layman. It is daring and informative, and confronts real life issues and their consequences.

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