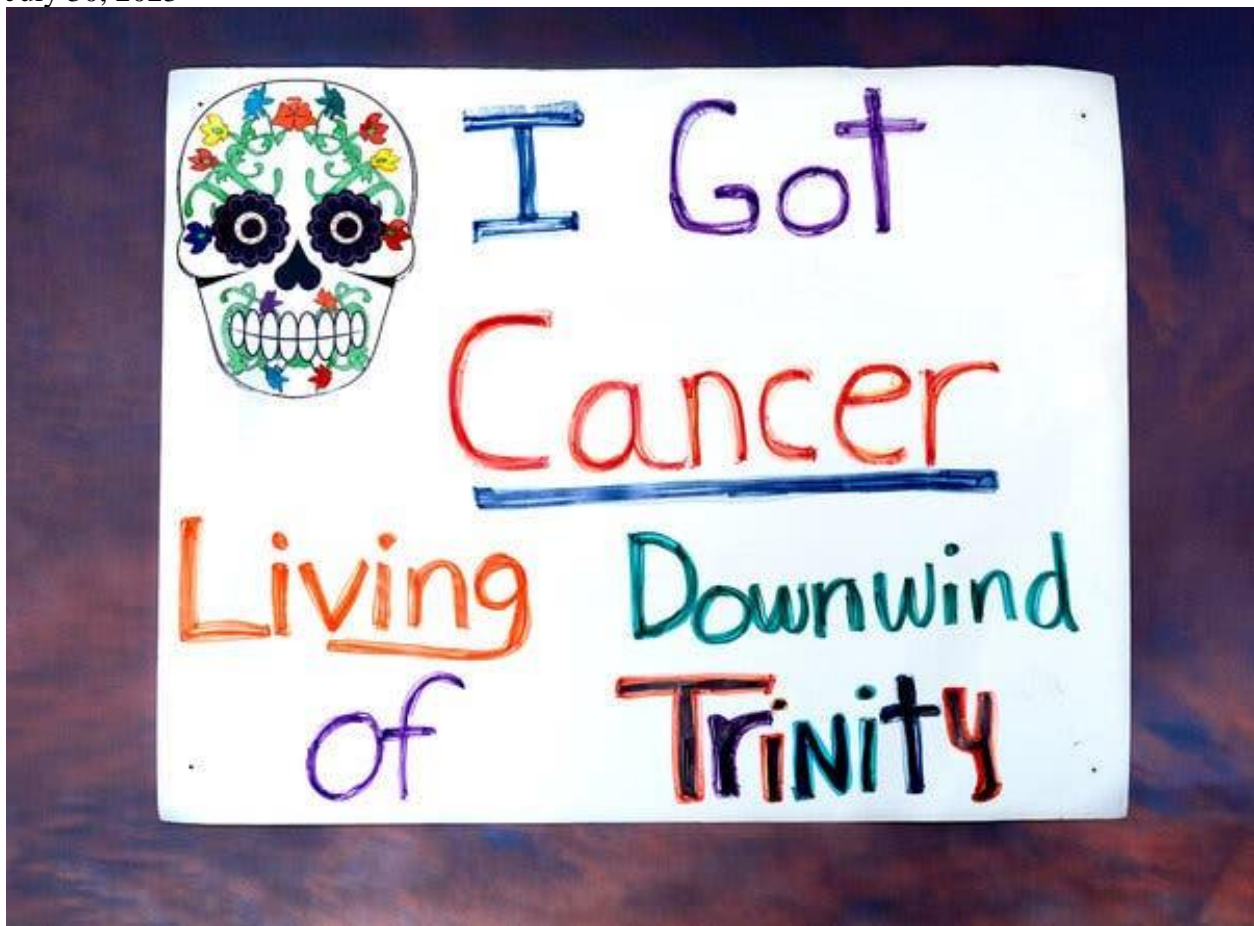


OPINION

GUEST ESSAY

What ‘Oppenheimer’ Doesn’t Tell You About the Trinity Test

July 30, 2023



A sign once carried by a victim of radiation from the 1945 atomic bomb test in New Mexico on display at the New Mexico History Museum in Santa Fe in 2019. Credit...Robert Alexander/Getty Images

By Tina Cordova

Ms. Cordova, a co-founder of the Tularosa Basin Downwinders Consortium, wrote from Albuquerque.

July is a hard month for a lot of us here in New Mexico, where thousands of people's lives were upended by the test of the world's first nuclear bomb. The events of July 16, 1945, weigh heavily on us. And why wouldn't they? They changed everything. The people of New Mexico were the first human test subjects of the world's most powerful weapon.

This July has been more tense than usual, as our community waited for the release of "Oppenheimer" — and some recognition of what we have endured over the last 78 years. When I watched the film at a packed screening in Santa Fe, I saw that wasn't to be. The three-hour movie tells only part of the story of the Manhattan Project, which developed the bomb, and conducted the test code-named Trinity that day in July. It does not explore in any depth the costs of deciding to test the bomb in a place where my family and many others had lived for generations.

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One film can't do it all, but I can't help feeling that the retelling of this story, as it stands, is a missed opportunity. A new generation of Americans is learning about J. Robert Oppenheimer and the Manhattan Project, and, like their parents, they won't hear much about how American leaders knowingly risked and caused harm to the health of their fellow citizens in the name of war. My community and I are being left out of the narrative again.

The area of southern New Mexico where the Trinity test occurred was not, contrary to the popular account, an uninhabited, desolate expanse of land. There were more than 13,000 New Mexicans living within a 50-mile radius. Many of those children, women and men were not warned before or after the test. Eyewitnesses have told me they believed they were experiencing the end of the world. They didn't reflect on the Bhagavad Gita, [as Oppenheimer said he did](#). Many simply dropped to their knees and recited the Hail Mary in Spanish.

For days after, they said, [ash fell from the sky](#), contaminated with 10 pounds of plutonium. A [2010 study](#) by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that after the test, radiation levels near some homes in the area reached "almost 10,000 times what is currently allowed in public areas."

That fallout has had [devastating health consequences](#). While I know of no people who lost their lives during the test, the organization I co-founded has documented many instances of families in New Mexico with four and five generations of cancers since the bomb was detonated. My family is typical: I am the fourth generation in my family to have had cancer since 1945. My 23-year-old niece has just been diagnosed with thyroid cancer. She is a college student studying art. Now her life, too, has been upended.

Despite this, New Mexicans who may have been exposed to radioactive fallout from Trinity have never been eligible for compensation under the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act, a 1990 federal law that has provided billions of dollars to people exposed during subsequent tests on U.S. soil or during uranium mining.

“Oppenheimer” leaves out other stories, too. The Manhattan Project and the nuclear weapons industry used the promise of a better life to entice thousands of people in the Southwest into the uranium mines that supplied the Manhattan Project. The miners went to work each day without adequate safety gear, while supervisors wore it from head to toe. Miners seldom left the mines during their shifts, even to eat lunch. They drank the contaminated water inside the mines when they were allowed to take breaks.

Many of the farmers of the Pajarito Plateau in northern New Mexico, after being displaced through eminent domain so that the Los Alamos laboratory could be built, were bused up the mountain to the lab site to do the dirtiest jobs, including building the roads, the bridges, the facilities. When those were complete, many were given new jobs at the lab, including janitorial work. Their wives and other Hispanic and Native American women were enlisted as domestic workers who cleaned the houses, cooked the meals, filled the baby bottles, and changed the diapers in the remote compound while the bomb was being developed.

Their sacrifices are still part of our lives today. I wept during the scenes in the film leading up to the detonation and during the test itself. I could hardly breathe, my heart was beating so fast. I thought about my dad, who was 4 years old that day. His town, Tularosa, was idyllic back then. After the test, after radioactive ash covered his home, he carried on as he always had drinking fresh milk, eating fresh fruit and vegetables that grew in the contaminated soil. By age 64, he had developed three cancers that he didn't have risk factors for, two of which were primary oral cancers. He died at the age of 71.

“Oppenheimer” portrays the scientist as the flawed man that he was. But the film doubles down on the silence we've been living with for eight decades about the loss of life and health that was a consequence of the development and testing of the atomic bomb. While the families in my community continue their wait for some wider recognition of what they endured — including coverage by the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act — we are left with a film that declines to bear witness to our truth.

This, too, is the legacy of J. Robert Oppenheimer and the government he worked for. I will never be able to forgive them for wrecking our lives and walking away.

Read more about Oppenheimer and the Trinity test.

[Trinity Nuclear Test's Fallout Reached 46 States, Canada and Mexico, Study Finds](#)
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Opinion | Kai Bird
[The Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer](#)

July 17, 2023

Christopher Nolan and the Contradictions of J. Robert Oppenheimer

July 20, 2023

Tina Cordova is a seventh-generation New Mexican, born and raised in Tularosa in south-central New Mexico. In 2005 she co-founded the [Tularosa Basin Downwinders Consortium](#), which works to bring attention to the negative health effects of the Trinity test.

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