



LAURA NADER

LETTERS TO AND FROM
AN ANTHROPOLOGIST

ANTHROPOLOGY

"Laura Nader's depth is impressive.

Her range of fields is amazingly bold: energy, physics, law, anthropology, feminism—I could go on.

Laura Nader is the first of its kind and indexes shifting terrain in the discipline and in other intellectual topics."

—JOHN BORNEMAN,

Princeton University, author of *Cruel Attachments*

"Offering an up close and engaging view into the life and thinking of one of anthropology's most inspiring scholars, the spirited and often incisive correspondence that has flowed from Laura Nader's typewriter shows what it means to communicate with conviction and without reserve. While Nader has never been afraid of speaking truth to power, her letters reveal the dignified role that disagreement can play in democratic and scholarly discourse."

—ERIK HARMS,

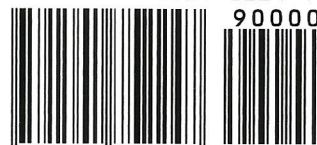
Yale University, author of *Luxury and Rubble*

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Laura Nader documents decades of letters written, received, and archived by esteemed author and anthropologist Laura Nader. She revisits her correspondence with academic colleagues, lawyers, politicians, military officers, and many others, each piece offering unique and insightful perspectives on a variety of social and political matters. She uses her personal and professional communications to examine complex issues and dialogues that might not be available by other means. By compiling these letters, Nader allows us to take an intimate look at how she interacts with people across multiple fields, disciplines, and outlooks.

Arranged chronologically by decade, this book follows Nader from her early career and efforts to change patriarchal policies at the University of California, Berkeley to her efforts to fight against climate change and minimize environmental degradation. The letters act as snapshots, giving us glimpses of the lives and issues that dominated culture at the time of their writing. Among the many topics that the correspondence in *Laura Nader* explores are how a man on death row sees things, how scientists are concerned about and approach their subject matter, and how an anthropologist ponders issues of American survival. The result is an intriguing and comprehensive history of energy, physics, law, anthropology, feminism, and legal anthropology in the United States, as well as a reflection of a lifelong career in legal scholarship.

November 5, 1975

Charles J. White

Special Committee on Youth Education for Citizenship
American Bar Association
Chicago, Illinois

Dear Charles White:

I have put off answering your letter of August 25 vacillating between tossing the thing out and trying to communicate what I think is wrong with your Teacher Training Notes.

Mainly such memos, outlines, etc., which most professionals churn out are lacking in substantive information, while focusing on procedure and organizations' administration which is a technique like it or not of avoiding why we are doing all this in the first place. Analyze the words in these pages. There is no reference to citizens, to the troubles they face, or to the problems that we as a nation face. A workshop is only interesting if it has a subject matter, who cares whether it is two weeks, three weeks, or more. Who is it that we are teaching? The word children doesn't appear. The reason the guts of the matter don't appear is because programs like ours end up feeding on themselves, while the purpose of the program is to expose professionals like ourselves. That is the problem with schools in general, just look at Berkeley, the second richest school district in the world is in the red with professionals screaming for more.

In sum, if I were a bright teacher and saw this I would have tossed it into the basket.

Sincerely yours,

Laura Nader
Professor of Anthropology

November 19, 1975

Dear Dr. Nader:

I am presently a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Marshall Islands, and though my specific job here is to assist with the formation of a small atoll-wide consumers cooperative and copra warehouse, I have recently stumbled upon something that provides the basis for my writing you stone-cold.

The atoll on which I will spend another year (Utirik) is one of the two populated atolls in the Marshalls which received a dose of radioactive fallout from a so-called "incident" in March of 1951. According to the Atomic Energy Commission (now ERDA), the "incident" occurred because of "wind shifts"

which carried the fallout in an easterly direction instead of the predicted westerly direction. And even I accepted this line of reasoning perpetrated by the AEC until I read the 1972 Congress of Micronesia's Report on Rongelap and Utirik which probed a little deeper than the AEIR would have liked.

It turns out that several details surrounding that particular test in March, 1954 have been left unexplained, and for that reason I would like to initiate proceedings for a class action suit against the AEC (and possibly against the Dept. of Defense also), and would be appreciative of any advice you might be able to offer.

To elucidate the issue I will divide the "incident" into three categories (1) the decision to test despite missing wind information, (2) the absence of pre-test warnings and precautions to the nearby local inhabitants, and (3) the delay in the evacuation of those radiated.

By far, it is the first category that remains the most enigmatic even to this day. The nuclear test in question was the second of the hydrogen tests (code-named "Bravo"), and because it was to be a fission-fusion device (instead of the less-powerful fission and fission-fusion devices prior to the hydrogen test series) it was expected to be greater than any of the preceding seventy tests. And it was by a factor of three.

Now comes the peculiar part: The AEC was lacking wind information from the 90,000ft level and above, and despite this vital void in wind information the decision was made to proceed with the test. A statement from a meteorologist at the Nevada Grounds during the time of the 1954 test is quite revealing, and indicates that "with our sophisticated weather equipment we can almost determine where the fall-out will land" (quoted from the Congress of Micronesia's Report). Additionally, the AEC's excuse of "wind shifts" does not make sense, because if there were indeed shifts in the wind that would presuppose their knowledge of the wind's activity. But in fact, they had no such knowledge.

In the second category, it is curious to note that there was no consideration at all given to the island populations near the test site of Bikini Atoll. Several people here and on Rongelap received radiation burns which could have been either avoided or minimized had the people been forewarned to stay indoors or submerged in the lagoon in the event of accidental fallout. In fact, there are reports that some people even tasted the snow-like precipitate to determine what it was. A preparatory briefing with the nearby island populations by the AEC would have reduced the level of exposure, and would have reduced the consequent effects which I will discuss momentarily.

The third category centers around the evacuation of the local inhabitants following the test. It took a full forty-eight hours to evacuate the people of

Rongelap and seventy-five hours to evacuate the people of Utirik, even though the AEC knew "something went wrong" just fifteen minutes after the test. This may be a moot point, but I think perhaps they could have done better.

As far as the medical problems associated with the radiation, all has been relatively quiet until recently with only a few reported cases of stillbirths and miscarriages. About a year ago, a young man from Rongelap died of leukemia, and though the AEC is tight-lipped about his death, they do admit the possible connection between his leukemia and the effects of radiation (I would be curious to see how a similar death would be brushed off so casually with a Beverly Hills family). Also, during the last ten years numerous cases of nodules on the thyroid gland (some malignant) have been discovered, and though only five have been detected from Utirik, (all female. . .) about twenty have been detected in Rongelap. And this from a combined population of only 1,000 people.

Dr. Nader, I am a recent graduate of the University of California at San Diego where I studied anthropology, and having read George Foster's *Applied Anthropology* I feel obligated to scratch the surface of what I feel to be an AEC white-wash. I ask for your assistance, and/or advice with the proposed class action suit, and by now you are probably wondering why I have decided to write to you. Well, I guess a part of the reason has to do with my brother Michael (a pediatrician) having taken some courses through the School of Public Health. He mentioned a few people who he had run across, one of whom was Dr. Margaret Mackenzie, and the other was Ralph Nader's sister/anthropologist. And in all honesty it was your brother who vicariously tilted the odds in your favor, though I would be anxious to chat with Dr. Mackenzie upon my return.

I have appealed the case to a cousin of mine who lives in Los Angeles. She is a professor at UCLA's School of Law, and shares a private practice with her husband, and they are both anxious to take the case immediately. My only hesitation is with their proposed terms: they will take the case on a contingency basis with a fifteen percent fee. Now, if these people win their case, they would most likely be awarded a considerable sum of money (e.g., the Bikini people now living on Kili were recently awarded a three million dollar trust fund), and I for one would not like to have to explain to the people here about the disappearance of fifteen percent of their money.

Am I being too idealistic in thinking that they could be represented for a smaller slice of pie?

Please let me know your feelings on this matter, and if you cannot find either the time or desire to help pursue with the uncovering of a suspected "can of worms" (e.g. Nixon), I will understand. And on the other hand, if you

do decide to help, I (and the Utirikese and Rongelapese) will be very much indebted to you.

Please give it some thought.

Very truly yours,

Glenn H. Alcalay
Peace Corps
Majuro, Micronesia

December 8, 1975

Dear Laura:

Sorry to miss you Friday (Dec. 5). I waited around the Christmas tree in Fairmont lobby from 11 to 11:20 at which point I figured you had been delayed.

What I wanted to discuss with you were your experiences with our discipline as a closed system. It is remarkable when you think of it, that Lloyd Warner started studying American culture and American institutions 45 years ago. It looks as though the field may have gone backwards in this regard.

What continues to amaze me, though I don't know why it should—is that there are practically no (if any) peoples in the world whose lives have not been radically altered by Western technology. Furthermore, most “primitive” people don't want to be “studied” by Western anthropologists. As you suggest there is something condescending about the way we go about it. Some but not all of this antagonism is political, of course. But whatever the cause, who in the devil are anthropologists going to study?

Incidentally, regarding this pressure to conform, once at a large party I was castigated by a leading figure in our field for not doing what other anthropologists do, for not going out and finding myself a “primitive” tribe to study.

I spent several years with the Navajo and the Hopi when I was young under the auspices of a man who grew up on the reservation, in the days when the Indians were still killing occasional Whites and who had forgotten more about the Navajo than all the anthropologists I know put together. His first languages were Navajo and Spanish. At any rate, at the end of the first two years on the reservation it hit me that I not only would never know most of the important things about the Navajo (there wasn't time to learn them), but also that there was no suitable frame of reference in or outside of European anthropology for describing what I did know.

It wasn't until 20 years later that I developed the theories and descriptive frameworks that appeared in *The Silent Language*. Even this is not really