The nascent field of Memory Studies emerges from contemporary trends that include a shift from concern with historical knowledge of events to that of memory, from 'what we know' to 'how we remember it'; changes in generational memory; the rapid advance of technologies of memory; panics over declining powers of memory, which mirror our fascination with the possibilities of memory enhancement; and the development of trauma narratives in reshaping the past.

These factors have contributed to an intensification of public discourses on our past over the last thirty years. Technological, political, interpersonal, social and cultural shifts affect what, how and why people and societies remember and forget. This groundbreaking series tackles questions such as: What is 'memory' under these conditions? What are its prospects, and also the prospects for its interdisciplinary and systematic study? What are the conceptual, theoretical and methodological tools for its investigation and illumination?

Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad (editors)
MEMORY IN A GLOBAL AGE
Discourses, Practices and Trajectories

Brian Conway
COMMEMORATION AND BLOODY SUNDAY
Pathways of Memory

Richard Crownshaw
THE AFTERLIFE OF HOLOCAUST MEMORY IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Yifat Gutman, Adam D. Brown and Amy Sodaro (editors)
MEMORY AND THE FUTURE
Transnational Politics, Ethics and Society

Mikyoung Kim and Barry Schwartz (editors)
NORTHEAST ASIA'S DIFFICULT PAST
Essays in Collective Memory
On 19 March 1949, the ‘atomic city’ of Oak Ridge, Tennessee was opened with a tiny mushroom cloud. A standard ribbon cutting ceremony executed with a snip of scissor blades would have been far too gauche for this science city of the future. In its place, a mini-simulacrum of an atomic bomb blast was ignited, setting ablaze the scarlet ribbon that stretched across the city’s main gate. As part of the Atomic Energy Commission’s (AEC) ‘Operation Open Sesame’ the ribbon burning helped to usher in a new phase of visibility for the former secret city of the Manhattan Project. This spirit of openness marked a drastic change for Oak Ridge, the city responsible for producing all of the uranium-235 that went into the atomic bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima. From 1943–49, Oak Ridge operated as a completely closed federal military reservation, unmapped and invisible to the Rand McNally universe. Although the AEC referred to Oak Ridge’s transition as part of a process of normalization, ‘Operation Open Sesame’ was a spectacular event with 10,000 people in attendance, including numerous celebrities and politicians, such as the movie stars Marie McDonald and Rod Cameron, as well as Senator Brien McMahon of Connecticut and Vice President Alben Barkley (Figure 9.1).

For those who were able to travel to Oak Ridge for the celebration, it must have been quite a red-letter day. In addition to the gate-opening ceremony, another premier event was held; the first museum of atomic energy opened its doors. The inauguration of the American Museum of Atomic Energy was carefully planned to coincide directly with the opening of the town; in fact only two hours separated their respective public introductions. The timing was intended to solidify a particular version of the events leading up to and following the end of World War II. The museum’s first displays were devoted to ‘The Atom and Man,’ and the goal was to ‘operate the museum as part of a public education program on atomic energy’ (ORAU, 2010).

The museum’s message was future oriented, utopian. Atomic energy was going to revolutionize our everyday lives. Fissionable materials would not only be used for bombs, they would also heat our homes, fuel our cars and provide limitless clean energy forever. Sometimes, though, forever has a brief shelf life. Aided by events such as the Chernobyl disaster, and the Three Mile Island incident, as well as the recognition of the many health problems that plague downwinders in the American West, the idea of nuclear energy as an unproblematic energy source has receded into memory.

In many ways the future of atomic energy is a thing of the past. This sentiment is clear from the American Museum of Science and Energy’s (AMSE) current slogan, ‘Where Science and History Meet.’ The same could be said of the town itself. Oak Ridge was once a city of the future, a prototype for an ideal American town designed by the firm of
Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, as well as a new type of scientific community dedicated to producing the fissionable materials of tomorrow. While Oak Ridge is still a destination for world-class physicists and a site of federal nuclear storage and research, the town has taken on a much more historic gloss. This chapter will argue that Oak Ridge, a former utopia, is now experiencing its half-life, the slow erosion of its cultural significance. Meanwhile, local groups along with the Department of Energy are working to delay this process through rituals of remembrance, such as festivals and memorials, as well as through institutions like the AMSE. I will argue that these attempts to remind the world about Oak Ridge have an unmistakably nostalgic character and rely mostly on conjuring memories of 'The Greatest Generation', those who lived through the Great Depression and then went on to fight in World War II or to support the war on the home front. This nostalgia is dangerous because it suppresses opportunities to revisit many important issues facing the USA and beyond, including the storage, use and proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Yet is it actually possible in the early twenty-first century to be nostalgic for the atomic bomb? Are good memories of the mushroom cloud still possible, amidst all the terrible nightmares and the mounting evidence of destruction? If Oak Ridge, Tennessee, one of the key production sites for the Manhattan Project, is any indication, then, yes it is possible. But does Oak Ridge's trajectory from atomic utopianism to atomic nostalgia point to something larger than the question of atomic bombs or atomic energy? More generally, are the atomic spaces of the last century becoming nostalgic spaces, staring backwards instead of looking toward the future? Is this kind of scientific utopian thinking, of which Oak Ridge is clearly an example, a thing of the past, accessible only through old movies or museum displays? If so, what might these displays of atomic nostalgia look like in the future?

In order to address these questions I will focus on the AMSE as a window to the changing attitudes toward atomic energy and atomic utopianism. While Oak Ridge's nostalgic shift can be seen through many lenses and social institutions, such as histories, documentaries and newspapers, as well as the annual Secret City Festival, I argue that the museum provides the best vantage point with which to view the phenomenon, as it marks one of the first self-conscious attempts to both narrate the city's past and to articulate the possibilities of atomic energy in the future. In order to describe the utopianism that was attached to the everyday lives of Oak Ridgers, as well as the work that was done in the secret uranium factories, it will be necessary to make an argument for Oak Ridge as a utopian landscape. Then, using a combination of archival and ethnographic research, I will show how the AMSE has changed over the years from a forward-thinking utopian space to a display of atomic nostalgia, mirroring the arc of the town itself, as well as the national narrative. Lastly, I will argue that the changing outlook of Oak Ridge can tell us something about the future of nostalgia for the Bomb in the USA.

Oak Ridge as utopia

The anthropologist, Margaret Mead, writing in 1968, recognized that what she found in the small city of Tennessee was a new type of living arrangement not yet seen in the USA, a new variety of utopia, the first scientific community:

The segregation of those with special interests is an old tradition in the United States in the form of communities of the religiously dedicated, communities of artists, communities in which the political utopians have experimented. But the community of scientists and technicians specifically, concerned with such problems as the development of atomic energy, the instrumental bases of automation, the space sciences, is new - only as old as Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

(Mead 2005, p. 188)

When we think of the utopian history of the USA we tend to think in terms of religious enclaves, transcendental communities and the counter-cultural communes of the sixties and seventies, places such as the Oneida Community, Brook Farm and Drop City. These utopias existed outside of the dominant American culture, either by actively resisting the state or by choosing to live independent lives alongside the prevailing socio-political apparatuses of federal, state and local governments. Oak Ridge marks a distinct break with this tradition in American utopianism in that it was actually established by the federal government. Residents of Oak Ridge were not seeking an alternative from the mainstream American culture; in fact Oak Ridge was a community of heightened patriotism dedicated to the Allied cause of World War II. It sought not to smash the dominant American value system but to skirt the cultural norms, but to celebrate and defend them. Yet Oak Ridge was no less utopian in its aims. First, as an isolated community of workers dedicated to a single industry, Oak Ridgers were living in a planned environment designed as a precursor to the suburbs that would radically reshape the American landscape in the decades to come. Then,
after the war, Oak Ridgers displayed utopianism in their belief that our lives could be completely remade and reorganized through the development of atomic energy, and that they would have some responsibility for this transformation.

Absent from cartographic representation or newspaper columns, hidden to protect it from possible enemy attack, Oak Ridge, Tennessee was the first ideal scientific community in the USA; Francis Bacon's (1919) New Atlantis brought to life. The industries of Oak Ridge were devoted to nuclear physics and to solving the problem of how to create an atomic bomb before the Axis powers. Meanwhile, the planners of Oak Ridge sought to produce an ideal American town, nearly overnight. Their goal was to provide as much comfort and stimulation as they could to the residents in order to ensure productivity in the atomic factories, while at the same time maintaining a high security military reservation.

Despite the restrictions placed on residents, including the inability to talk about their jobs, security checks at city gates and the possibility that whomever you socialized with could be a government informer, many people describe this period of life in Oak Ridge as idyllic. As long as Oak Ridge remained 'the city behind the fence,' many of its residents saw it as utopian, an island of culture, prestige and intelligence tucked away from the surrounding communities and the outside world. Oak Ridge was an ideal city where unemployment was non-existent, where the school system was far above the national average and where universal healthcare provided the most advanced medical services available. Meanwhile a free bus system criss-crossed the city, taking residents not only to work, but also to the plethora of cultural opportunities available at nearly all hours from symphonies to dances to organized sports leagues. Perhaps these advantages, especially during the scarcity of wartime, explain why many were in opposition to the opening of the gates and why they were hostile to the process of normalization that the AEC initiated in 1949.

Once the city was normalized, the problem of Oak Ridge became a question of identity; its challenge was to sell its uniqueness, both as a crown jewel in national security and as a global player in scientific brainpower. Initially, Oak Ridge sought to present itself as playing a key role in the future of atomic energy. Then, as the Cold War slowly thawed, attention was directed toward the preservation of the town's utopian moment, its role in the historic Manhattan Project, as one of the three top-secret cities devoted to building the first atomic bomb. From the first opening swing of the gates, Oak Ridge has sought to celebrate and legitimize its role in winning World War II and in the development of atomic energy, and since the very beginning the town has attempted to tell this story through the AMSE. In the following, I will trace the museum's initial atomic optimism to its current state of atomic nostalgia. I will argue that both dispositions are mystifying positions that thwart critical analysis of the use of the atomic bomb against Japan, as well as the problematics of nuclear energy in general.

Atomic utopianism on display

The American Museum of Atomic Energy offered a spectacular and sexy introduction to the possibilities of atomic energy and scientific advance ment. The message of the museum was clear: our lives are getting better all the time thanks to science and technology. Left out of this celebration was any discussion of the destructive elements of scientific progress or the gruesome after-effects of the atomic bombs that were dropped on Japan. The true horrors of war and the potential dangers of fissionable materials both at home and abroad were hidden behind the overt utopianism of the displays.

While the museum's focus was 'The Atom and Man,' the virtues of scientific and technological knowledge in general were celebrated. For example, there was a robotics exhibit featuring a set of mechanical hands that could take care of light tasks. In the (near) future there would be no need for such exertions. The first person to demonstrate the dexterity of the robotic digits was the actress and chanteuse Marie 'The Body' MacDonald; she volunteered her cigarette. As the Hollywood vixen gracefully leaned forward, her cigarette protruding from its elegant holder, the paper was ignited and successfully lit, as elegantly perhaps as Clark Gable could have done (McCarthy 1987, p. 379).

Long after opening day the museum continued to be a curiosity for visitors, both local and from very far away, attracting those who were interested in science and energy, as well as those who wanted to get closer to the power of the atom. One way that visitors were able to increase their proximity to atomic energy was through some rather odd souvenirs. For example, between 1949 and 1967 visitors could walk away with an irradiated dime — the charge would be neutralized by the time they reached the parking lot — but for a few seconds they could possess a bit of radiation, hold it in their hands and put it in their pockets. Even Miss Universe of 1966, Aspasia Hongskula of Thailand, got in on the action as you can see in Figure 9.2. However, the irradiated dimes were not the only souvenir that promised owning a bit of atomic energy (even if untapped); during the fifties and sixties visitors could
also purchase uranium ore from the gift shop. Encased in plastic and embossed with the museum’s logo, tourists were able to take away the raw material for producing an atomic bomb (ORAU, 2010). As the spectacle of celebrities on opening day obscured some of the ugly truths regarding the atomic bombing of Japan, later the souvenirs worked to domesticate the dangers of radiation in general, after all how bad could it really be if you could carry it around in your pocket?

Originally located in a former wartime cafeteria, the American Museum of Atomic Energy was the first atomic museum in the USA; now there are many, including the National Museum of Nuclear Science and History in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the Atomic Testing Museum in Las Vegas, Nevada, and the B- Reactor Museum in Richland, Washington. These museums are important in that they are among the only cultural institutions still discussing nuclear weapons. They influence the American public’s ideas about the history of the bomb, while at the same time they seek to legitimize this history for an international audience. The fact that these museums remain largely uncritical and nationalistic damages the possibility for debate regarding the US nuclear past, present and future.

With the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War the AEC felt a need to control the message surrounding the atomic bomb and atomic energy in general. Along with the Oak Ridge Institute of Nuclear Studies, the AEC created the first atomic museum with the initial stated goal of educating the public by providing information in non-scientific terms. For the first two months of the museum’s existence there was a lot of ‘educating’; more than 15,000 visitors from across the USA and from 25 foreign countries visited and absorbed the nationalistic and pro-nuclear message on display (ORAU, 2010). From the beginning the AMSE sought to put into context the intricacies of the Manhattan Project and the work that occurred in Oak Ridge at the uranium production plants. It aided in the crystallization of a very recent memory for the residents, and created a story for outsiders to absorb. The exhibits put a positive spin on the decision to use the atomic bomb against Japan, as well as the production of uranium for peacetime purposes and security, thus legitimizing Oak Ridge’s role during World War II, the Cold War and beyond. The museum was utopian in its vision that atomic energy could provide a safer and better future for all. This sentiment is echoed in the slogan ‘Atoms for Peace!’ that was used by the museum in the fifties and sixties.

The American Museum of Science and Energy

By the seventies nuclear sloganeering had lost much of its original purchase in the USA. Nationally, the emotions of bewilderment, fear, dread and ambivalence replaced the hopefulness once attached to atomic energy. The cries of ‘Not in my backyard!’ drowned out those who still whispered ‘Atoms for Peace!’ Yet, many Oak Ridgers past and present remained convinced that their unique history as a secret city of the Manhattan Project is akin to a technological Shangri-La. This image of an idyllic existence is perhaps no more apparent than in the series of rooms at the AMSE that detail Oak Ridge’s role in the Manhattan Project. This portion of the museum came to fruition in 1975, when the museum moved from its first location in the ramshackle wartime cafeteria to a new modern two-storey building. Replete with black and white photographs, objects and products from the forties, this wing celebrates American victory culture, consumerism and citizenship (Jackson and Johnson 1981, p. 31). It is a space where nostalgia reigns.

Yet, it should be noted that the ‘Secret City’ room is not completely a provincial affair; from 1975 to the present, in addition to images of local life there are also displays of national newspaper headings and various
documents and images from World War II. Since 2008, to enter the 'Secret City' room the visitor must first snake through a curvilinear structure that begins with a mounted television screen flashing black and white images of the Third Reich. Once inside the visitor is confronted with a plexiglass display, where Nazis goosestep across the visual plane, the mini-mustached Hitler performs his famous salute, the itinerary of the Enola Gay is mapped and a brief description of the first atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima is offered. To counter the villains, who are easily recognized, the museum casts the heroes of World War II: the US military 'our boys overseas,' Oak Ridgers, along with other Americans who are 'doing their part for the war effort' and the international cohort of scientists—'the greatest minds in the world'—who worked on the side of the Allies.

The most famous of these minds resides in the skull of Albert Einstein, who appears more times in the museum than any other historical actor. Through the figure of Einstein, the AMSE's outlook toward the atomic bomb and the scientific uses of nuclear energy can be easily ascertained. Einstein's presence is reassuring; of all the nuclear physicists, he is the most recognizable, his genius the most trusted and his corporeality the most comforting. Typically pictured as wild haired and sweater clad, he plays the comforting grandfather to Oppenheimer's rakish and slightly unsettling charms. From the opening scene of the museum Einstein plays a starring role, a painting of the scientist hangs in the mezzanine directly above the information desk. The scientist pops up again in the portion of the museum dedicated to the Y-12 National Security Complex, here Einstein is a ghostly image visible in the background of a poster that shouts 'Defending The Free World,' where he looks over some papers with fellow scientist, Leo Szilard.

The third most obvious placement of Einstein exists on the lower level of the AMSE where the scientist is rendered in the Madame Tussaud style, next to him a card states: 'He laid the groundwork for splitting atoms.' There is also a copy of a letter that he wrote from Long Island to President Roosevelt in 1939, urging development of an atomic fission program. Left out, however, is Einstein's correspondence to Roosevelt in 1945 requesting that the program be stopped. The complexity of his feelings toward the bomb are missing, making it appear as though Einstein had given a rousing endorsement. This absence countered by his omniscient presence throughout the museum makes it appear as though not only, does Einstein wholeheartedly support the Manhattan Project, but also all the US Homeland Security measures that have been taken at the Y-12 plant in response to the 'global threat of terrorism,' as proclaimed by the museum's displays. As with Marie 'The Body' MacDonald, the celebrity spectacle of Einstein helps to distract the visitor, to distance and obscure the dangers of nuclear materials, and to mask the realities of the destructive pasts and potentials of nuclear weapons.

Atomic nostalgia in black and white

In 2009, Oak Ridge's nostalgic sheen was polished until it glowed. Sixty years had passed since the gates to the town were opened ceremoniously by ribbon burning. In order to mark the occasion on 21 March, a historical re-enactment of the event was held, complete with the original speeches and even girl scouts dressed in the uniforms of the forties. Although the turnout was quite low in comparison to the gate opening of 1949, a ritual of remembrance was undoubtedly performed. In keeping with the original day, the celebration of the town's openness was followed by a special event at the museum. The AMSE hosted a showing of the new documentary by Keith McDaniel, Operation Open Sesame: Opening the Gates of the Secret City, and a retro admission price of a quarter was charged.

In the summer of 2009, to celebrate the dual anniversary of the gate and museum openings, the AMSE held a retrospective exhibit of the photographs of Ed Westcott, the official Army photographer for the Manhattan Project. Westcott was the only person allowed to take pictures of the creation of the town, as well as the only photographer given access to the top-secret factories and their workers. Westcott's highly staged photographs depict patriotic sentiments, a protestant work ethic and wholesome family values. Positioned in the first room of the museum, they set the tone for the visitor. Perhaps more than any other object in the museum display, these photographs evoke nostalgic emotions, the longing for the golden age of American culture.

The exhibit features two-dimensional Kodak teenagers in letter sweaters and knee-length skirts doing 'the twist,' women tending Victory gardens and swarms of smiling workers filing out of the K-25 plant during a shift change, among other evocative photographs of mass sacrifice for the war effort. One of the most recognizable images is that of the 'Calutron Girls,' snapped by Westcott in 1945. The 'Calutron Girls' photograph shows two rows of young white women working in the Y-12 plant, monitoring multiple dials embedded in tall, gray metal columns. In addition to illuminating the role of the generic (white) worker, the photographs provide evidence that women played a part in the war effort; Rosie the Riveter lays down her rivet gun to observe an
electromagnetic separation dial." Row upon row of these women can be imagined in multiple rooms stretching out like so many Tiller girls across the stage.29 The description that the German sociologist Siegfried Kracauer gives to the Tiller dancers could easily be applied to the workers in Oak Ridge: 'These products of American distraction factories are no longer individual girls, but indissoluble girl clusters whose movements are demonstrations of mathematics' (1995, pp. 75–6). The image conveys the enormous scope of the Manhattan Project and its labor intensity, where everyone is doing her part to achieve a collective goal (Figure 9.3).

The image of the Calutron Girls and the rest of the collected photographs offer a very idealized version of the work that was done at the atomic factories, even the African-American workers, who were given the least desirable jobs on the reservation, including carrying coal or collecting the garbage, smile at the camera. Perhaps not surprisingly, there is no counter-balancing exhibit of the destruction of the cities of Japan. Alone in another room is one figurative photograph of a Japanese sufferer. The entire business of the Manhattan Project from start to finish is simplified: it is depicted in black and white. While an in-depth analysis of Westcott's catalog is not within the scope of this chapter, these examples should illuminate the overall tone of the retrospective exhibit.

Instead of providing a space for an open discussion of nuclear weapons or even a glimpse of the catastrophic loss of civilian lives in Japan, the overly nationalistic space of the museum focuses on two seemingly contradictory elements to justify the US nuclear past: American victory culture and American innocence. Sociologist Steven Dubin paraphrases the idea of American victory culture in his work on controversial museum exhibits, from Displays of Power:

'[Victory culture] is a set of beliefs that dominated American thinking since colonial times. A central precept was that savages – be they Indians or the Japanese in their sneak attack on Pearl Harbor – continuously provoked conflicts that Americans felt compelled to respond to, typically with vanquishing force.

(Dubin 1999, p. 188)

Victory culture goes hand in hand with the American culture of innocence, the myth of a benevolent nation stripped of any lust for power. It is a position of denial that ignores the role the USA has played in global politics, and instead presents the nation as a non-aggressive entity, only attacking when attacked (Sturken 2007, p. 7).

The future of atomic nostalgia

Despite the fact that the adjective 'atomic' was excised from its official name, exhibits devoted to the Manhattan Project still dominate the space of the museum. However, from the fifties onward there have been many attempts to diversify the space, albeit within the constraints of certain historical perspectives. The AMSE is a national museum, a Smithsonian affiliate that is operated by the Oak Ridge Labs and the Department of Energy contractors, University of Tennessee-Battelle. From the Manhattan Project to Cold War politics to Homeland Security new exhibits have been steadily added that reflect the political moods of the federal government and the corporate entities that remain closely attached.

Yet the overly positive attitude toward science and technology in the AMSE, while expected considering its backers, is questionable in a museum that owes its life and content to a town that was created for
the sole purpose of the development of the atomic bomb. However, on this point the message of the museum is clear: (1) The use of atomic weapons was absolutely necessary. (2) The use of the atomic bomb accelerated the end of the war, saving thousands of lives, both American and Japanese. (3) The end of World War II subsequently led to an age of nuclear deterrence and to a world safer for democracy. This stance is not unique in American museums. As the sociologist Matt Wray points out in his recent article on the Atomic Test Site Museum: 'Few museums of technology ever stray from the ideological path that equates technological advances with human progress and cultural and moral superiority' (Wray 2006, p. 483). From the first American Museum of Atomic Energy in Oak Ridge to the Smithsonian’s Enola Gay controversy to the Atomic Test Site Museum, America’s relationship with the atomic bomb, as displayed in the museal context, has historically been celebratory rather than critical.

How, then, can the history of the Manhattan Project and of nuclear weapons in general be told in a museum setting in a more complex way? Several curators who have attempted to tell various sides of the story in the USA have come up against incredible opposition. Implicit in the debate over displays of the atomic bombing of Japan is the tension between historical representation and commemoration. The most public of these mnemonic battles was the Smithsonian Enola Gay controversy. The exhibit at the National Air and Space Museum, which eventually became ‘The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II,’ was originally conceived in 1987 as ‘From Guernica to Hiroshima – Bombing in World War II.’ This title drew vitriol from many veterans’ groups who strongly opposed any display that would call into question the absolute necessity and sound judgment involved in the atomic bombings. Steven Dubin, who studied the event, has suggested that the original provocative display could be construed as ‘parallelising fascist atrocities with American actions’ (Dubin 1999, p. 188). World War II was an extremely popular war for Americans; it has been called the ‘Great War,’ the ‘Just War’ and the war fought by the ‘Greatest Generation.’ Challenging a heroic version of a national past through museum spaces has proven to be extremely difficult. As the sociologist Vera Zolberg explains:

[M]useums have become arenas in which the reconstruction of the past is frequently at issue. They are, arguably, institutions in which a nation’s qualities are ‘written’ or ‘displayed.’ Open to the public and explicitly intended to draw attention to their exhibits, they serve as sites of celebration of events in which patriotism or, at the least, a sentiment of national cohesiveness is evoked.

(Zolberg 1998, p. 583)

The Smithsonian is certainly not the only museum that has faced this challenge. Another museum that has battled the problem of commemoration is the Atomic Testing Museum in Las Vegas, Nevada. The new director, William Johnson, has expressed his desire for the museum to ‘become a kind of open public space, where visitors will learn about the history of the science and technology at the site and where experts and laypeople can find common languages to discuss highly charged controversies and debates,’ to create a ‘venue for all things nuclear’ (Johnson quoted in Wray 2006, p. 406). Despite Johnson’s best intentions for a nuclear public sphere, the museum has become, like the AMSE, a puppet for the Department of Energy.

What, then, lies ahead for the atomic spaces, like Oak Ridge? It remains to be seen how museums will deal with the nuclear past in the future. If they will continue to pile more and more distracting themes into their exhibits, trying to encompass history, science and national agendas or if they will be able to develop more effective ways of telling a complicated past that the public will accept. At this point it is unclear whether new sites of nuclear memory will fall victim to the same tropes of scientism and nationalism that have plagued the AMSE, the Smithsonian and the Atomic Testing Museum, to name a few.

As the original creators of Oak Ridge coast into middle age, Oak Ridgers have begun to ask themselves how they want to remember their past. At present, plans are in the works to create a new museum in Oak Ridge. Former employees of the Manhattan Project as well as local preservation groups were hoping to save a portion of the massive K-25 building. While contamination issues prevented this from happening, another site has been proposed, the K-25 History Center. The proposed site, although not on the original grounds, would contain a ‘withdrawal alley fitted with authentic World War II process equipment’ and an ‘interpretive center focused on the methods pursued at Oak Ridge to produce enriched uranium’ (Smith 2009). In addition to its didactic features, the K-25 site would also include examples of what historian and memory scholar Alison Landsberg calls ‘experiential’ space, where the visitor experiences elements of the past physically (Landsberg 1997, p. 74). Or, as D. Ray Smith suggests in a recent article in The Oak Ridger (2009), the museum will ‘allow visitors to delve deeply into the richness of the culture and exhibits of seeing the real thing, the real equipment,'
smelling the place, and knowing one is where it actually happened.’ If
this museum space is realized it will introduce additional layers of phys-
icality – olfactory, optical and tactile, with the intention of creating the
aura of being in the actual atomic laboratory c. 1945, even though it will
be a newly created site. However, if brought to fruition, we can expect
that the new site will be doubly stripped of danger, where the narratives
as well as the equipment will be sanitized for consumption, yet again
missing a chance to re-evaluate the nation’s atomic history and nuclear
future.

Other proposals for the new space describe a schizophrenic distraction
factory. Murals illustrating the history of Oak Ridge have been proposed,
as well as an expansion of the current AMSE, and many commercial
activities, including a brew pub, roller skating rink, squash courts, bicy-
icle rental store and a performing arts center. As the marketability of
historical spaces continues to grow, it could be possible for the grand-
children and great grandchildren of the original Oak Ridgers to receive
an entirely new type of mnemonic socialization; they could roller skate
through the K-25, while their parents enjoy a micro-brew at the local
uranium-themed pub. While all of this activity promises pleasure and
fun, what about the nasty history of the bomb itself? Is it possible that
we will see a new narrative regarding Oak Ridge’s past and the trajectory
of nuclear weapons in general?

The fact that many former Manhattan Project workers are leading the
charge for the new atomic museums is potentially problematic, as they
tend to be among the least critical or questioning of the atomic past.
Also, if the new museum gains funding from the Department of Energy
and the Smithsonian Institute, like the current AMSE, then undoubtedly
the museum will adhere to a positive interpretation of the US nuclear
record.

Atomic nostalgia, like the scientific utopianism that came before,
marks real-life realities of destruction and atrocity. The fog under the
happy mushroom cloud creates an environment where critical thought
is choked. The result is a loss in the potential to engage in debates
regarding many important issues facing the USA and the world at large,
such as the use of nuclear weapons, the clean-up of ‘hot’ spaces and the
power of the federal government to reshape and reorganize the land-
scape. With new opportunities for sites of memory it is possible that
this trend toward scientific and atomic nostalgia could be reversed. But
can a pause be created in the steady stream of celebration to ponder
the destruction and atrocity that has resulted not only from the atomic
bomb, but other large-scale scientific and technological projects as well?

Unfortunately, the current trajectory in museum planning seems to be
moving toward more of the same, new spectacular displays to celebrate
old spectacular displays, more happy memories under the mushroom
cloud: ‘The first time as tragedy, the second as farce’ (Marx 1998, p. 15).

Notes

1. The tiny mushroom of smoke was the result of an electrical impulse generated
   from the Oak Ridge National Laboratory’s uranium chain-reactor that ignited
   the ribbon, which had been treated with potassium chlorate and magnesium
   in order to make a loud pop.
2. Of course this was decades before Google Earth and the nearly successful
   project of mapping the entire globe.
3. The American Museum of Atomic Energy was the original name of the
   museum. It was changed in 1978 to the American Museum of Science
   and Energy. According to a current staff member at the AMSE, the change
   ‘reflected the expanded programs in all energy alternatives and energy
   research,’ Email interview with Jim Comish, 20 November 2006.
4. ‘The Greatest Generation’ is a term coined by the journalist Tom Brokaw in
   his 1998 book of the same name.
5. The data presented in this chapter were gathered through a combina-
   tion of ethnography, participant observation, archival research and crit-
   ical tourism. Fieldwork for this project was conducted independently in
   Oak Ridge, Tennessee in December and March 2007, December 2008 and
   August 2009. Additional archival research was conducted on-site at the
   AMSE. The ethnographic and archival material collected was analyzed using
   qualitative sociology, interpretive methods, and discourse and historical
   analysis.
6. The Oneida Community was founded in 1848 in Oneida, New York, by John
   Humphrey Noyes. The community believed that Jesus had already returned
to earth in the year 70, and therefore it was possible to be free of sin and to
   create a perfect kingdom in this world.
7. Brook Farm was a transcendental utopian community founded by the former
   Unitarian minister George Ripley and his wife Sophia Ripley. Inspired at least
   in part by Charles Fourier, the community was dedicated to communal living
   and the balance of passions through work and leisure.
8. Drop City was an artists’ community located in Colorado from 1965–70.
   Community members were inspired by the designs and ideas of Buckminster
   Fuller, who argued that because of our advanced stage of industrialization
   our options for the future were now limited to only two: utopia or
   oblivion.
9. The National Museum of Nuclear Science and History was originally known
   as the National Atomic Museum, yet another example of the historicizing of
   the once imagined atomic future.
10. There was also a pilot plutonium production plant located in Oak Ridge, the
    X-10 plant. However, the plutonium enrichment process was mainly carried
    out at the Hanford, Washington site.
11. This slogan was taken from a speech that President Eisenhower gave of the same name to the United Nations General Assembly on 8 December 1953.
12. In fact, at one point the suggested name for Oak Ridge was Shangri-La, a utopian paradise first described in the novel, *Lost Horizon* by James Hilton (1947). Shangri-La is located in a mystical valley that is isolated and protected from mankind, and ironically it is also a haven from war.
13. There is more to be said about the role that these photographs play in the overall environment of nostalgia that permeates the museum space today; I will return to this topic later in the chapter when I explore the special photography exhibit held in the summer of 2009.
14. The Y-12 plant was initially created to produce enriched uranium for the Manhattan Project by means of electromagnetic separation. Y-12 is now a US Department of Energy National Nuclear Security Administration facility.
15. Here images of Einstein and Szilard are used as props to bolster the US Homeland Security agenda. Both Szilard and Einstein later felt ambivalent about the use of the bomb, even though they initially encouraged research in that direction. Szilard, especially became an avid critic of the US Cold War policies.
16. It should be noted that Ed Westcott’s photographs are a mainstay of the museum. This exhibit marks an expansion of the Westcott photographs that are permanently on display at the AMSE.
17. The K-25 plant used the process of gaseous diffusion in order to transform uranium-238 to the fissionable uranium-235.
18. A Calutron was a mass spectrometer used for separating uranium isotopes. It was created by Ernest O. Lawrence at the Berkeley labs of the University of California for which it takes part of its name.
19. There are no African-American Calutron girls in the picture because like the rest of the South at that time, Oak Ridge was still practicing segregation.
20. The Tiller Girls were a dance troupe created by John Tiller in Manchester, England in the early 1900s. They were characterized by their uniformity and uncanny ability to dance as a unit.

References

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