

# A People's Atlas of the Nuclear United States

Sarah Kanouse  
Media Arts | Interdisciplinary Arts  
College of Arts, Media and Design  
Northeastern University

Shiloh Krupar  
Geographer | Culture & Politics Program  
Walsh School of Foreign Service  
Georgetown University

## OVERVIEW

“A People's Atlas of the Nuclear United States” is a digital public humanities project that documents and interprets the relational geographies of nuclear materials used by the United States military. The Atlas is structured to articulate scalar relationships – from the planetary to the corporeal - and to simultaneously present cartographic, textual and image-based information in order to foster active interpretation on the part of its users. The pilot phase of the online project focuses on the state of Colorado and its immediate surroundings, which includes sites and processes representing all stages of the nuclear cycle, from extraction, milling, and processing to the assembly and deployment of weapons to the storage and monitoring of waste. A dedicated but often disconnected and underfunded collection of community and labor organizations, nonprofits, and researchers has arisen to address these legacies, and the Atlas is conceived both as a means of amplifying their work to a larger audience and as a platform to facilitate their collaboration. More than another clickable map, the Atlas will serve to articulate and interpret local embodied experiences, regional material-environmental politics, and their global and intergenerational consequences, thereby making visible what remains a hidden legacy not only of environmental devastation but also of community resilience

## DESCRIPTION

The storymap is a popular public humanities genre that often simply overlays qualitative data or archival material on a base map in an illustrative and straightforward fashion: the user clicks on a “dot” to trigger a video, get more information, or read an ethnographic account. Our vision for the People's Atlas is more artistic, interactively rich experience that structurally renders the geographical concept of **scalar relations** into interface design, with four interrelated parts.

- A clickable map of regional nuclear geographies, centered on the state of Colorado. The map includes the cycle of mining and milling uranium and bomb production, testing sites, secured airspaces, research laboratories, and disposal cells. In addition to the standard description that comes up when a map icon is clicked, sites are tagged according to themes and regions that call new content into other portions of the interface. Themes are linked to the nuclear cycle and its “remainders” (e.g. mining and mine tailings disposal cells).
- A content panel allowing users to navigate through atlas texts, including short entries on specific sites and nuclear processes and longer but still accessible scholarly essays representing disciplines including geography, history, environmental humanities, literature, and anthropology. Texts and sites are placed on intersecting “paths” that allow the user to navigate through different phases of the nuclear cycle and their shadow or remainder.
- A gallery of images linking to data sets and critical essays, call up by the keywords associated with sites selected in the map or content panel. This panel focuses on the local

and intimate scales of individual sites, the specific materials, bodily exposures, biotic specimens, and the land itself. Atlas materials and content paths presented here are heterogeneous and uneven, reflecting the uneven knowledge present about given sites, and may include documentary site photographs, extreme close up images of nuclear materials, soil and biota, and critical and/or poetic text.

- **Sidebar Menu:** Toggling sidebar that functions as a table of contents for the Atlas, with complete list of/links to scholarly mini-essays that are also linked via specific sites/themes.

## **RATIONALE**

The stakes in assembling, presenting, and interpreting the legacies of the American uranium complex have never been higher. With the 45<sup>th</sup> president intent on expanding US nuclear capacity, promoting an aggressively nationalistic resource exploitation agenda, rolling back environmental and labor regulations, and defunding the Environmental Protection Agency, now is the time to refocus attention on the legacies of earlier nuclear booms. Throughout the Cold War, hundreds of communities across the United States and the world were involved in (or subjected to) some aspect of nuclear weapons production, from mining and enrichment to weapons production, testing, and deployment to decommissioning and remediation. These activities have deeply marked human lives and nonhuman ecologies in these places, yet there is little public awareness of the longitudinal impacts that may inform citizen and policy action around a revived nuclear weapons program.

At the same time, the Cold War era has experienced a renaissance of popular interest: Alongside television shows and video games, several museums and memorials dedicated to atomic heritage have been established or expanded—most notably the 2015 creation of the Manhattan Project National Historical Park. “A People’s Atlas of the Nuclear United States” is a timely complement to these efforts, drawing together an open-source repository of interactive data sets, photo-documentation of sites and materials, accessible scholarly essays, and narratives of individuals and communities on the front lines of the domestic Cold War. More than a map, the online Atlas provides for more narratively-rich spatial experiences by allowing users to explore the scales of operation and relational-thematic geographies of the nuclear complex, despite the ambiguities characteristic of Cold War geographies and the political divisiveness of security issues.

The multiple functions of the Atlas are inherently interdisciplinary and call for collaboration among geographers, design specialists, historians, digital humanists, environmental and community organizations, and others. Questions traditionally bound to specific disciplines are better answered using a broad set of lenses: How can geographical and historical inquiry into the nuclear weapons complex precipitate new insights into the relationships between location, security, harm, intervention, and public action? How can methods developed by socially-engaged geographical research and the digital humanities stimulate public memory work that is both more engaging and more nuanced? What forms of interactivity, interface, data visualization and graphical representation allow stakeholders and scholars to collaboratively address the past and future of nuclear sites?

## **AUDIENCE**

We envision the Atlas as having audiences within the digital humanities and geohumanities, as well as in a variety of educational contexts beyond academia, such as high schools and museums. Effort will be made for scholarly essays to remain accessible and short, as best works in an online medium.