Living with Our Toxic Legacy: Parafictional Practice and the National Toxic Land/Labor Conservation Service

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Since its inception in the late 1960s, land art has held an uncertain place within the broader context of environmentalism. Environmentalists inside and outside the art world have often felt that the actions of artists such as Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer, were perpetuating the ecological destructions they were critiquing. Recently, art historians have unveiled a different narrative that shows the intentions of these artists being motivated by concerns with the dialectical relationship between landscape and the city. This effort has led to important developments in understanding historical land artists and contemporary conversations concerning the effects of human intervention in the landscape.

On a global scale, environmental and land-based issues; including climate change, land rights, environmental concerns, conservation, greenwashing, and borders, have emerged as central issues in political and cultural discussions. Societies' relationship with the environment, and the consequences that have arisen, contribute to the prescience of these concerns. From deforestation in the Amazon, to increasing water levels from the melting of ice in Antarctica, we are all more aware of our societies' exploitation of nature. Artists have responded and adapted to these growing concerns, offering critical observations that directly address the political conversations around these issues. Land artists such as Robert Smithson, Agnes Denes, and Michael Heizer, have considered many of these concerns, but none more than that of human imposition and adaptation of the landscape. Today, different political and environmental issues have grown out of our interest to preserve and to protect nature such as demilitarization of areas within the United States and greenwashing, i.e., when a business, organization, or government seeks the minimum requirements of environmental awareness for the sake of branding and economic purposes, rather than for purposes related to environmental agency. One group of artists that has responded specifically to environmental concerns and the history of toxicity, demilitarization, and greenwashing is the National Toxic Land/Labor Conservation Service (NTLCS) (Fig. 1). The NTLCS is, according to its creators, a "wishful [government] agency in the Department of the Interior (DOI) ...established by fanciful legislation in 2011 in order to attend to the domestic issues of environmental justice, labor, and human rights related to United States military activities." Since its inception, the NTLCS website has accumulated a range of information concerning military involvement with animal refuge sites, active nuclear plants, and a plethora of toxic sites across the United States.

The NTLCS was founded in 2011 by Sarah Kanouse, an artist and professor at the University of Iowa, and Shiloh Krupar, a cultural geographer at Georgetown University. Krupar, prior to founding the NTLCS with Kanouse, published Hot Spotters Report: Military Fables of Toxic Waste (2013) that laid the theoretical groundwork for the founding of the NTLCS. Hot Spotters Report is innovative for many reasons, but most importantly for the way it is written. Krupar took the lead in a Cold War critique focusing attention on the damage done to communities located within the United States because of the Cold War, specifically those in Colorado. This narrative largely escaped the imagination of the United States throughout the midcentury and afterward into the 1990s, leaving many to believe that the only threat was from nuclear weapons being launched against the United States. The book is written in four chapters: The first three, as Krupar states, "show how green war tactically uses the ontology of nature as separate, external, pure, and/or available for containing waste and promoting consumption - nature as spectacle." Our view of nature as a separate entity from our everyday life reinforces and sustains a practice of exploitation and a continued out-of-sight-out-of-mind approach to waste. During the periods of the Cold War, nature as a space to fill and to be used was exemplified in matters of producing nuclear weapons and their disposal, leaving communities exposed to high degrees of toxicity near military facilities uninhabitable; such as the Rocky Mountain Arsenal eight miles outside of Denver, Colorado, the Savannah Army Depot, seven miles north of Savannah, Illinois, and in many of the Superfund sites in Nevada, including Elko and Lyon counties. For many, the Cold War ended with the collapse of the
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Soviet Union, but for others it persists today through downwinders, radiation exposure, and cancer because of the military involvement in these areas within the United States.

The Cold War took place after World War II and was typified by a nuclear arms race, several wars targeting the global spread of communism, such as the Korean and Vietnam War, and political tension between the USSR and the United States, along with other NATO allies. Many historians have an end date for the Cold War, placing it somewhere between the late 1980s and early 1990s. The strongest critique the NTLCS has of this narrative is that the Cold War never ended and that the real war continues in the maintenance and disposal of nuclear waste. This narrative pushes against the other available Cold War narratives which have been solidified in our unconscious through television programs, movies, news broadcasts, and literature. Films like Sydney Lumet’s *Fail-Safe* (1964), Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), and books like Murray Leinster’s *Fight for Life* (1947), all meditate on the constant threat of an atomic bomb dropping. No better can our interest in the bomb be seen that in the viewer ratings of Nicholas Meyer’s *The Day After* (1983), broadcast on November 20th on ABC, which reeled in 100 million viewers and held the highest viewer ratings for a television-movie for twenty-six years. I mention these pieces to highlight the pervasive narrative that dominated Cold War rhetoric and to highlight the anxiety for those listening. It is a period marked by continuous fear of an otherworldly weapon whose power had been witnessed. Fueled by the U.S. government to develop a strong military hold at the expense of its citizens, this narrative became the narrative that was lost.

Where Krupa brings the ideological framework for the NTLCS, Sarah Kanouse’s artistic practice, with her interests in engaging the public with her work and environmental concerns, enables the NTLCS to teach and to activate communities affected by nuclear toxicity, conduct site visits, and design community events to encourage reactions and responses to the Cold War in creative and novel ways. In 2009, in a similar vein to her later work with the NTLCS, Kanouse created what she calls "geographical imaginations", i.e., conceptual spatial frameworks that connect the corn and coal industries, as in her piece *Region from Below: Power Plants* (2009). In this case, geographical imaginations are maps that show the relationship of daily activities (such as using water, turning on a light, and driving to work), economies, production, and resources to their geographical location. These maps are "imaginary" in the sense that the act of anchoring a resource or specific production to a specific point on a map is a reference to the actual location: The relationships one gathers from the correlations made through these maps are dependent on the maps’ highly subjective content. These maps, which have been exhibited at the University of Buffalo Art Gallery in New York, and the Mess Hall and

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the Smart Museum in Chicago, were accompanied by take-home quizzes that encouraged participants to reflect on their own relationship to the maps with prompts such as: “How have coal and corn futures shaped the landscape? What sort of future does the future [contract] market foretell? Imagine something else.” Other prompts ask participants to make their own maps: “Map the dispersal of people from your city over a typical holiday weekend.” Each participant is asked to, then, develop new geographical imaginations in how they understand the landscape around them in relationship to market currents, resource availability, population, and the use of services. The intended message is to understand that individual experiences do not happen in a bubble but are involved in highly intricate yet visually observable networks that affect everyone.

NTLCS’ ongoing initiative to track, locate, and disseminate information concerning United States government involvement in greenwashing projects is an effort to critique established historical narratives of the Cold War and its aftermath. The NTLCS approaches these topics as a parafictional agency. In other words, the agency is not real, nor is it simply pretend either. In many ways, the NTLCS engages with communities by visiting with Fish and Wildlife officials and by providing demonstrations and lectures to increase awareness of toxicity. The conceptual limits of a parafictional agency are what make the group a fascinating experiment in blending performance with reality. In discussions of parafiction, art historians have found it difficult to find an exact definition that fits neatly within the vast array of artistic practices and practices devoted to social and political reformation. Parafiction is a somewhat contested term, but in this paper, I am using it to describe the intentional performative act of portraying fiction as fact. In doing so, the artist develops a small portal into an alternative reality. As Carrie Lambert-Beatty, an art historian responsible for developing parafiction as an artistic practice outside of theater and literature, has argued, parafiction is rooted in the intersection of an imaginary place developed by an artist, and reality. Behind these aesthetic efforts to develop parafictional work is the assumption of a viewer’s trust in images which the artists use to assist in their viewers experience of fiction as fact. Beyond achieving credibility in its viewers, parafictional practice serves to critique contemporary power dynamics and the difficulty and limitations of entering into positions of power. These practices critique power dynamics by simultaneously simulating an authority’s power, as well as by performing with a limited set of power that the authority has. Parafictional projects actualize the effects of immediate policy changes by putting the intended changes, though perhaps impossible ones, into practice. In other words, parafictional artists live in an imagined outcome of radical change by assuming the identity they are critiquing. In doing so, the NTLCS puts the desired outcome into practice. In the example of the NTLCS, the agency assumes that the structure they are
critiquing has accepted their critique and it simulates this acceptance via its performance.²

Organizations such as the NTLCS open art historical discourse in ways that require novel methodological and theoretical approaches. Situating the “wishful agency” within the discourse of art history further pushes the limits of what we, as writers of art, consider art, given the ongoing problematic distinction between political activism and artistic practice. From the standpoint of art history and social activism, the pressing concerns of the NTLCS include: One, the lack of an identifiable art object; Two, the redirection of conventional forms of political protests, either petitions, protests, or marches, to a new form of civil resistance; and Three, the rewriting of historical narratives as a creative and critical act.³

It is true that performance art has contested each of these concepts. However, performance is only one part of many in the NTLCS.⁴ Approaching the NTLCS as solely an extension of performance art without contextualizing the project through other components, including the NTLCS website documenting site visits, community design charrettes, legislation, programs, etc., does not account for the NTLCS representing an institution after the performance. This is important to distinguish as parafiction seeks to establish institutions that are an accumulation of vibrant texts, including discrete performances, as well as however many texts are needed to conjure a proper representation of the institution they are emulating. By simply blanketing the NTLCS under the category of performance art, the approach will run the risk of obfuscating an inclusive understanding of the wishful government agency, the agency’s critique of power dynamics formed through myths and historical narratives, as well as their efforts to model new forms of representation that effectively consider a new ethics towards toxicity. This is not a criticism of performance art, but a way of breaking down the components that go into constructing the agency’s “fakethenticity”, i.e., the quality of the group to be both legitimate and fake at the same time. Although the NTLCS critiques historical narratives of the Cold War, the use of parafiction as a critical tool is the most effective way of dissecting the NTLCS and the agency’s projects, not only for the reasons already stated, but also for the content with which they are engaged.

As stated above, Krupa, one of the co-founders of the NTLCS, laid out the groundwork for the agency in an earlier project. In her early text, Hot Spots’ Report (2013), Krupa outlines what would become key aspects of the NTLCS, such as the agency’s initiative to critique historical narratives, its novel ethics towards waste, and its use of government documentation. However, this can only serve as a partial model for the larger project of the NTLCS. The chapter “Where Eagles Dare: an ethnofable with personal landfill” introduces Krupa’s fictional agency named the Environmental Artist Garbage Landscape Engineers (EAGLE) and notes its report on the Rocky Mountain Arsenal (RMA) and the site’s conversion to the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge (RMANWR) (Fig. 2). This is a common theme in the history of greenwashing in the United States where a site of irreparable damage is converted into a natural habitat. In a 2013 interview with Stuart Ede for Society and Space, Krupa discusses how the Cold War is represented within the broader culture and why she needed to develop a novel approach to the growing field of literature on toxicity:

The book enacts a demand to work through some of the historical antagonisms and rhetorical investments of different positions inherited from the Cold War. The composite of social science writing, art, and political commentary attempt to show ways of critiquing – by participating in – the tremendous amount of representational remediation of the Cold War, whether the so-called “greening” of the military or the recent 2013 passage of a bill that would establish a Manhattan Project National Historical Park. In short, I can’t imagine tackling the Cold War legacy of toxicity – or environmental crisis and uncertainty more generally – without actively experimenting with form to some extent as part of the inquiry itself.⁶

In describing her approach to engaging with the Cold War legacy, Krupa identifies the experimental necessity of her book, namely the importance of adapting the literary form to reflect the models of representation she is addressing. These include the despended nuclear memoir, exposed journalism, and “the popular presentation style and display conventions of government reports to experiment with the politics of documentary forms and the pedagogical and visual register of environmental governance and forensics.”⁷ Though she doesn’t use the term parafiction specifically, Krupa is suggesting that the experimental use of form in her text is novel, including an element of active participation, in that she adapts the expectations of inadequate governance through the form itself. The form she adopts is a twist on the document, using the authenticity of the document as a vehicle to develop a fictional investigative agency to provide a report on the RMANWR, which will be discussed later in this paper.
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The non-traditional academic approach led Krupar to collaborate with Kanouse and form the NTLCS. What differentiates the NTLCS from other performance-based art practices is that the NTLCS replicates the representational forms of toxic remediation to such a degree that the real cannot be distinguished from the wishful. The goal of the NTLCS is to critique the Cold War’s history, as well as to critique the reification of the nature/waste, nature/human binaries that were enforced during the remediation process of converting arsenals to wildlife refuges. Parafiction presents a query into how we interpret both the visual and literary processes of signification and how both visual and literary documents can be shaped in a collaborative effort. Each parafiction has its own set of parameters, requiring separate analytic approaches particular to the project. There are, however, ways to use the ideas behind parafiction to dissect specific projects. This effort creates a tension between the assumed real departments, real representatives, and the wishful governments, and fake representatives, who can assert themselves into the real. For example, Christopher Willauer, a field agent from the NTLCS, presented his research and findings on the “Atomic Midwest” to the Iowa Center for Research on April 10th, 2015. Agent Willauer’s contribution is part of a wishful government agency, but he has presented his research at a credible research venue. Moreover, by establishing the make-believe as more genuine, plausible, and progressive; the distinction, and the necessity to distinguish between the artificial and the authentic, disintegrates. In the case of the NTLCS, this occurs in the transparency of its efforts that reveal how the government has approached nature as a conceptually malleable space that can indefinitely hold waste.

Throughout my discussion of the NTLCS, I will be using the world “real” often. The use of the word real is not for a discussion of existence, but for that of perceived and widely held beliefs that make a history or an idea sensible. For example, the history presented by films, television, books, and news broadcasts constitute the real of the Cold War in a way that prioritized nuclear fallout and communism. More than just saying narrative, the use of the word real conjures the identity of the Cold War. This is how I perceive the NTLCS critiquing the real of history. Still, there are other discussions of the real within this paper, such as: “What is real nature?” Again, the tension between a perceived nature; one that is pure, pristine, and separate from industry, and a nature that is linked to our existence in every way, is the real of nature. In both cases, the use of the world real acknowledges how perceptions are constructed of histories and ideas, obscuring dialectical relationships and other binaries.

The name of the group, the National Toxic Land/Labor Conservation Service, does not mean to suggest a conservation of land in the pure, pristine, natural setting we are conditioned to expect. Rather, the NTLCS is a conservation service of toxic land. This may appear paradoxical at first; however, it informs the ideological problems within greenwashing, and also the binaries established between humans and nature, humans and waste, waste and nature, and how these approaches are codified and solidified in an ineffective ethics towards toxicity and nature.

By imitating the rhetoric of government agencies, the NTLCS seeks to expose several government agencies’ lack of transparency on issues of greenwashing and the ongoing effects of our toxic legacy. It is the position of the NTLCS that the Cold War never ended and that the damage dealt on domestic soil has had lasting consequences that have yet to be fully addressed. The NTLCS, in stating that the Cold War never ended, proposes an alternative to the current state of irresponsibility of our toxic heritage and places the responsibility on itself and the public.

Establishing a Wishful Government Agency

On the homepage of its website, the NTLCS provides a video that details the issues and concerns the agency is claiming responsibility for, as well as providing an explanation of its mission. The video starts with a large airplane soaring below the camera and an ominous countdown that cuts to a mushroom cloud from an atomic explosion. A woman’s voice, heard through voiceover, states: “There are many ways to tell the story of the Cold War.” Video clips of John F. Kennedy addressing the buildup of missiles on the shores of Cuba, Richard Nixon announcing the withdrawal of troops from Vietnam, and Ronald Reagan requesting Mikhail Gorbachev to destroy the Berlin Wall are shadowed by the mushroom cloud. The voiceover continues: “But we tell it as a story of our present and our future.” The various presidents’ narratives present differing and competing interests and issues within the context of the Cold War. Consistent through each president’s statement is the idea that the Cold War’s aftermath left its deepest scars on foreign sites, rather than in the United States.
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The first few segments of this video present historical events alongside an alternative Cold War narrative. This narrative is aimed to focus away from the political tensions between the United States and the USSR, the nuclear arms race, and the global threat of communism. Instead, the focus is placed on how nature was used by the United States government to normalize the development of nuclear weapons and the disposal of nuclear waste. In this way, the video follows a tradition of critiquing historical documents that Mark Godfrey, an art historian, has argued can “invite viewers to think about the past to make connections between events, characters, and objects; to join together in memory and to reconsider the ways in which the past is represented in the wider culture.” In his analysis, Godfrey proposes that by reading historical events through a contemporary lens, artists are able to ask questions about the ways a culture represented, and continues to represent, a particular time period. Evoking historical information as malleable to interpretation enables the NTLCs to contest historical narratives as misleading or incomplete.

The NTLCs highlights incomplete historical narratives from the Cold War in multiple ways. First, by establishing itself as a fictive government agency, its critique takes hold of authority without having it. Historical text has always held a narrative element that prevents it from being entirely objective. Historical discourse can never truly bring the event forward but is limited to only recalling it as it may have happened. As Roland Barthes posited, “historical discourse does not follow the real, it can do no more than signify the real, constantly repeating that it happened.” For Barthes, what happened in the past always remains there. Documentarians, photographers, and historians alike cannot escape from the fact that any engagement with an event will be through an interpretative lens. On the contrary, it is the mission of those invested in the real to develop its illusion of fact. By presenting itself as an agency of fiction, the NTLCs does not have a stake in confirming existing historical narratives, or establishing the “real” as I have been describing it. Self-identifying as a government agency allows the NTLCs to alter what, as Barthes suggest, signifies the “real” of the Cold War to the public.

Second, the NTLCs’ mission is to establish the link between economy and territory. The video published on the website details the ways in which the United States government has taken and altered physical sites across the country to suit military and economic goals during the Cold War. The voice-over reconstructs the historical narrative of the Cold War as a contemporary issue: “The Cold War was marked by land expropriations, secret human radiation experiments, the inappropriate storage and disposal of toxic materials, lax safety regulations and the misguided promotion of all things atomic as family entertainment.” Altering the narrative to concerns predicated on ecological and labor abuse, and away from military and scientific advancements, reframes the historical Cold War conversation to address the legacy of environmental issues communities live with in the present day. Many of these sites, those used by the United States government during the Cold War to manufacture ammunition and research nuclear weapons, are still monitored by the military state without proper compensation or funding for proper remediation. The lack of remediation and greenwashing were a concerted effort, as stipulated by the NTLCS, constructed by the Department of Energy (DOE) and the Department of the Interior (DOI) to mitigate cost and promote the military-industrial complex at the expense of neglected communities across the United States. Some of these sites will be discussed in the following section.

Third, the NTLCs exists as a government agency in what I have called a post-revolutionary state. By assuming that the DOE and DOI accept responsibility for the toxic military complex, the NTLCs imagines a post-revolutionary state that has been established to “take responsibility for our toxic legacy.” Its programs consist of visiting universities and communities with rich nuclear history to establish the causal links between the Cold War and the present day. This culminates in projects such as the Illinois Design Charrette, where the NTLCs hosted a community meetup to discuss, critique, and visualize ways of conceptualizing a Cold War that never ended. By bringing the narrative to local communities, the NTLCs promotes the understanding and critique of the Cold War as one embedded in several of Henri Lefebvre’s comments on social spaces. Social spaces are the relationships between varied forms of production that establish the idea of the space. By hosting design charrettes and disseminating knowledge of an under-represented component of the social space, i.e., the toxic heritage of a site, a new social space is developed. Julian Myers-Szupinska connects Lefebvre’s text to contemporary concerns when he says we must recognize “the central importance of reclaiming for collective ownership the space that production and speculation hope to enclose.” Speculation speaks to the potential value of a space that is never achieved. For example, owners of an empty lot can retain the space’s lack of production in bureaucratic limbo. By doing so, the lot’s value is never fixed to a particular use and thus remains speculative. This idea pertains to the NTLCs when the agency explains to communities about local sites that are owned, or were previously owned, by the military and how their value has shifted since the Cold War. As a tactic to exist in a post-revolutionary state, the NTLCs approaches land use as a concept to be critiqued and understood, as if the government has assumed responsibility for exploiting land where spaces have been stripped of their productive and speculative value. By understanding how the productive and speculative values of a site have been altered by spaces’ toxic heritage, new social spaces can be formed.

Performing Fiction as Fact

The visit to the Savanna Army Depot, located along the Mississippi River seven miles north of Savanna, Illinois, was conducted by Kanouse and several graduate students in 2013 through a tour given by Alan Anderson, the only Fish and Wildlife Service employee at the site. The entry on the agency’s website details the history of the site...
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as an “ammunition testing, storage, and recycling facility” from 1919 to 2000. In 2000, the Army vacated the depot, leaving the responsibility to decontaminate the site to Fish and Wildlife. The process of re-territorializing the contaminated property left 3,000 acres to Fish and Wildlife while another 6,000 acres awaits reaching satisfactory levels of decontamination before it can be transferred.

Even in its present state, the 3,000 acres currently in possession of Fish and Wildlife are in dire straits. Storage facilities with munition and TNT litter the refuge. The refuge houses forty-seven endangered species; however, the only two species listed in the Environmental Assessment and Interim Comprehensive Conservation Plan are the Higgin's eye pearly mussel and the bald eagle. Additionally, jobs and economic development were suspended by the Army's rapid exit from the site. The immediate switch of leadership from the Army to Fish and Wildlife reasonably created tension between the public and Anderson. Fish and Wildlife, in its attempts to remediate the territory, is seen to only be following the trickle-down commands from the U.S. Army, further exacerbating the strain between the public and government, leaving Anderson and the minimal personnel at the Savanna Army Depot without the necessary resources or jurisdictional power to put change into action.

The site visit reveals how military areas, such as the depot, fall under the bureaucratic maneuvering that allows for the Army to disassociate with toxicity. In summarizing its analysis of the Savanna Army Depot, the NTLCS concludes that:

Because cleanup is mandated only for levels of contamination that threaten human health, the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] and the Army’s favorite way of dealing with it is to remove the people from the land. The conversion of a base to a restricted-access wildlife refuge is an efficient way to accomplish this, since the health of the wildlife is not a major factor in determining how much contaminated land must actually be cleaned up.21

This quote clearly illustrates how the process of greenwashing demilitarized territories, such as the Savanna Army Depot, works. For a smaller cost, the Army can convert a toxic site into a National Wildlife Refuge because it will require less money to accommodate the territory to the standards needed to preserve wildlife. As the NTLCS has revealed, this process has adverse effects for the surrounding community. Local communities continue dealing with the toxic side-effects resulting from living at the site and are placed at a disadvantage given the lack of job opportunities for which the area was initially designed.

Through this example and others found in the report, the activities of the Lost Mound Unit, the organization that is the proprietor of the wildlife refuge assignment at the Savanna Army Depot, exemplify how several organizations motivate the decisions of remediation. The Lost Mound Unit is the title of the Fish and Wildlife Unit in the

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Upper Mississippi National Fish and Wildlife Refuge. The unit’s name comes from the formation of a hill in the area that never appeared on maps of the area, hence it being “lost.” It was only lost in a sense that it was not recognized territorially, yet it existed physically. The institutions that exist above the Lost Mound Unit, namely the U.S. Army, keep the local community and the Fish and Wildlife Service from making serious improvements to a tortured landscape by establishing greater rifts between the community and the Lost Mound Unit and its activities. Yates McKee, an art historian who has written extensively on land art as well as social art, highlights the alteration of the landscape over time as the broader issue of place through deterritorialization. Following Deleuze and Guattari, McKee defines deterritorialization as, “the inscription of the physical terrain of the earth into expanded networks of media technologies, policy regimes, and political economies that constitute all sites as nodal points of historically uneven and politically contested exchanges, flows, and displacements.”

Seen this way, the purpose of these investigative site visits is to highlight the different processes at work and how they intersect beyond the gated-off physical terrain of the site into the local community. This project, if executed over other territories facing similar issues, can and should shed light on how the restrictions of local Fish and Wildlife Service impact local populations.

The last sentence of the NTLCS Savanna Army Depot site visit entry on the agency’s website is exemplary for this exact reason: “If the former depot does not quite look like what you’d expect from a national wildlife refuge, it also does not look like the ‘privileged and effective environment for managing your products and raw materials’ promised on the FTZ [Foreign Trade Zone] website. That is both should prompt us to re-evaluate our expectations and become better able to respond to a world of complex and overlapping fields.” In this excerpt, the NTLCS is discussing the company Riverport Railroad that offers lucrative railcar storage and switching services. FTZ allows owners of railcars, either empty or filled with a product, to store their railcars at the Savanna Army Depot through Riverport Railroad and not pay taxes on the products being stored for a daily rate. If a company has a product that has dropped in value on the market and thus does not want to pay high taxes on it, they can pay Riverport Railroad a daily fee to house the railcar and the product to escape necessary taxes. When the product market value has risen, the owner of the railcar, whether that be an individual or a company, can quickly bring the product back on the market to sell it. It is difficult to maintain separation between economic efforts and efforts directed towards conservation. How can a site simultaneously function as a production facility as well as a wildlife refuge? Do these motives not diverge at precisely their most important interests or objectives? I see this site, the Savanna Army Depot, as exemplifying core components of parafiction through this complex arrangement of production and conservation, and in terms of the distinction between truth and fiction. Much like how parafictional projects blur the boundary between truth and fiction, National Wildlife Refuge programs also have
contradictory components. In the case of Savanna Army Depot, the complexity of the power structure, its function as an FTZ, and the limited resources for restoring the land, all serve as contradictory components to conservation. By exposing the absurdity of how the Savanna Army Depot is run, the NTLCS expands the discourse of how the land is currently used in the process of remediation, in relation to how it was during the Cold War, during periods of production. The NTLCS references the site’s history as an ever-present concern that remains hidden in the mists of rhetoric designed to confuse and shape incorrect information.

Another example of a site report like the NTLCS report on the Savanna Army Depot is Krupar’s EAGLE project. The EAGLE project is an exposé detailing the legal hurdles taken by the Rocky Mountain Arsenal (RMA), located near Denver, Colorado, during its period of transformation from a weapon manufacturing facility with a significant toxic legacy, to a National Wildlife Refuge. This kind of institutional change is an all too common phenomenon in the aftermath of the Cold War. Where many of these projects were undertaken to minimize toxic fallout, the opposite was the effect; at best, they underestimated the potential of how toxic waste can affect communities and, at worst, they undermined the communities that were affected. Krupar’s EAGLE project examined these transformations through artifacts that can be found on site, and through the trail of legal documentation detailing a site’s conversion process.

The report starts with a message from the Field Office of Authorial Remediation, stating that, “the EAGLE collective had been working for decades at the Arsenal [Rocky Mountain], documenting demilitarization and remediation” and claiming the collective’s, “long-standing connection to the U.S. military.” The Field Office of Authorial Remediation is a fictional department, one we can presume is attached to the U.S. government, which is intentionally labeled as, “Authorial Remediation” to create tension between a speculative “real” agency and the author, Krupar, who created it in literary form. In the report that follows, EAGLE details the history of the RMA, as well as provides annotations to the report that correspond to critical readings of the history of the site.

RMA was established in 1942 during World War II by the Roosevelt administration. The area, roughly thirty square miles and approximately ten miles northeast of downtown Denver, was initially commissioned for the design of chemical weapons, including chlorine, mustard gas, lewisite, and, ten years later, the production of Sarin gas in response to the growing concerns of the Cold War. The Army then sought assistance from Julius Hyman and Company, acquired by Shell Chemical Company, to provide support for costs and maintenance, adding pesticide, insecticide, and herbicide production at the site. After the death of 6,000 sheep, due to a nerve gas spill in Dugway Proving Grounds, Utah, and growing local concerns over the dumping hole known as “the sink,” where 243 gallons of waste were disposed of, the demilitarization of the RMA, known as Project Eagle, began in the 1970s.

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Krupar makes clear that distinguishing between waste and nature is the root of the conflict when she states that, “The extraction of waste through on-site burial and off-site dispersal ordained the site’s rhetorical ‘return to nature.’” For Krupar, waste is understood by the government as a material unnatural to nature and a problematic asset to be disguised or physically transplanted away from nature. Krupar states: “Rocky Flats is natural and contaminated; these are not mutually exclusive conditions of existence. However, discourses of the cleanup advocated the binary equating of ‘nature’ with ‘clean’ and ‘waste’ with ‘contaminated’ and therefore ‘not natural.’” The RMA, prior to being relabeled as nature, had to go through a conservation process that would bring it back to nature. These blurry definitions of what nature can and cannot be fortify unrealistic binaries that Krupar and Kanouse would work to extinguish through the NTLCS.

In 1986, twenty bald eagles were found at the RMA. This find, in tandem with the Project Eagle’s mission to remediate the RMA, sparked interest in returning the site to nature. A pristine image of nature was the goal of the conversion that would obscure a toxic legacy. Reclaiming the bucolic image that is such a part of the history of American landscape motivated a practice prioritizing a return to nature that would encourage public interest and prevent repercussions. This image is indebted to a long historical interest in idealizing nature in the United States. Given the canon of American landscape representation, particularly as identified with the Hudson River School and the inception of the National Park Service in 1872, the experience and image of nature began to demand certain expectations that the National Wildlife Refuge conversion process latched onto. Through the study of experiences at National Parks, the U.S. government could produce the experience at toxic sites. Through the joint effort of the Rocky Mountain Arsenal Remediation Venture Office, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Shell, and the U.S. Army, pressure was placed to have President George H.W. Bush sign the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge Act. This piece of legislation would designate most of the territory as a national wildlife refuge once proper standards were established.

The parallels between the agency name EAGLE, Project Eagle, and the eagles found at RMA, serve as a critical framework for EAGLE:

The bald eagle serves as an important cultural boundary ‘object’ for humans that negotiates toxicity, value, the symbolic health of the nation, and the legal-regulatory processes with ecological relations. Under the wing of the bald eagles, a much less extensive and less expensive cleanup took place at the Arsenal. The land had only to be fit for animal habitation, avoiding the more costly remediation required for human residency or usages involving more comprehensive human contact.
Put simply, the bald eagle has become an iconic symbol of the United States and its pro-active interest in protecting and preserving the natural landscape. This project has reaped great wealth for the U.S. government and helped it symbolically assure the public that it is restoring toxic sites across the United States. For example, at the RMANWR, its remediation program was developed around the bald eagle while simultaneously abandoning other animals, to the point of eradication, as well as the local community.

The focus on the bald eagle was particularly attractive during the conversion of the RMA into a National Wildlife Refuge because of the eagle's status as a national symbol and its endangered species status. In fact, the bald eagle was only recently removed from the endangered species list in 2007. On one hand, preserving the bald eagle is synonymous with the solidification of a national identity associated with the American dream, and the establishment and security of democracy. On the other hand, it diminishes the role played by Cold War anxieties over the Red scare, the threat of communism and espionage through the Cold War, and everything other than democracy.

Krupar's analysis of the RMANWR extends beyond the use of the eagle as a national symbol to interrogate our cultural understanding of nature imposed by history and government influence over it:

Waste and industrial residues of the former plant, such as workers who are now the anachronistic 'living remains' of the site's industrial ecology, demand an understanding of nature as porous. However, as the wildlife service rids the area of noxious weeds and re-seeds roads with native grasslands, the spectacular projection of the site as an ordinary natural landscape publicly orients an understanding of the areas as clean/purified by technology rather than as always already 'technonature,' a complex commingling of waste and nature, the social and ecological.30

What nature is and how nature is produced and represented is difficult to sever from the shackles of historical rhetoric. Krupar recognizes this tendency to preserve a familiar concept of nature through the remediation process. Rather than dismissing it, she carries the point further to acknowledge the overlapping fields that have been a part of nature's construction. To distinguish between pure and tampered nature is to miss the point. The vastness of our influence over nature is severely understated through the efforts to hide our waste.

Krupar states that the eagle is a "cultural boundary object."31 Thus far, I have associated this with the difficult boundaries between preserving an endangered species and establishing the symbolic and political value of a product of nature. Border objects are fundamental to NTLCS and EAGLE when they can serve as images that represent or refer to complicated government involvement in National Wildlife Refuge conversion. Both EAGLE and the NTLCS use the image of the eagle to point out the controversial position of the endangered species in relation to toxic remediation. The United States government has made clear use of the bald eagle to encourage interest and pacify dissent when considering the impact, or lack thereof, at National Wildlife Refuges. What I aim to accomplish in this comparison is that parafiction is not only a concept to be applied to the NTLCS or EAGLE but is also a significant component of how the government operates.

Mark Nash has written about the ways artists can engage in social practices through the idea of border crossing. Rather than the physical migration from one country into another, border crossing is defined by artists who "create a scenario that partly relies on existing social realities" and "enter a social realm in order to generate works of art."32 Nash, in the beginning of his essay "Reality in the Age of Aesthetics," quotes Jacques Rancière, a French philosopher who wrote extensively on the connections between politics and aesthetics. Rancière wrote, "The fiction of the aesthetic age defined models for connecting the presentation of facts and forms of intelligibility that blurred the border between the logic of facts and the logic of fiction.... Writing history and writing stories come under the same regime of truth."33 Rancière presents the complexities behind the ever-increasing difficulty in distinguishing reality from fiction. If writing fiction and writing history, read here as fact, both engage with aspects of one another, then this presents a difficulty in the process of deciphering Truth. Nash recognizes this dilemma; however, he reminds the reader that a long history of post-Structuralist theory has argued that distinguishing "between reality and its representation" is a moot point in contemporary art practices engaged in what he calls, border crossing. Border crossing can be understood in similar terms to how I have been defining parafiction. Nash defines border crossing as when an artist "crosses back and forth between the domains of reality and fiction."34 I would argue that this can be taken further; among the lines of Lambert-Beatty, the art historian who first applied parafiction to mediums outside theater and literature, when we situate parafictional practices as existing as both fiction and fact.

Border crossing and parafiction have significant differences when we see that Nash is more concerned with documentary filmmakers and media-based artists that explore the violent and politically tense moments of forgotten histories. In describing Jeremy Deller's piece, Battle of Orgreave (2001), in which the artist reenacted a battle from the Great Miner's Strike of 1984–1985 in the U.K., Nash states that, "The importance of Deller's work is that it encourages these memories to resurface while asking questions about the history and legacy of that struggle today. The artist's agency here, such as it is, involves presenting us with the possibilities of alternative memories and histories."35 Deller's work presents the viewer with the possibility of revisiting history from varying vantage points in the hopes of creating equal awareness of the event, as well as the legacy of the event. Not only is it important to be critical of
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event in question, but also how it is communicated. Much of the work Nash looks at exists within a film or a video that has a clear temporality a viewer can distinguish. In the projects I have mentioned, this is not the case. For the NTLCS and EAGLE, the agencies do not simply present the alternatives, but exist in them as if they were reality. Rather than the work being compartmentalized into an object, these projects exist more through the conceptual and the idea of entering an alternative reality. I propose that beyond “border crossing,” parafictional practices “exist on the border” by living as if the alternative history they propose is real.

For the U.S. government, the use of the eagle as a “border object” can be thought of in similar ways. Rereading Nash’s definition of “border crossing” is useful for considering how the NTLCS reflects government practices. By replacing “artists” with “the government” in Nash’s statement that, “artists create scenarios that rely on existing social realities” (which would read as, the government creates scenarios that rely on existing social realities), the actions of arsenal conversions into National Wildlife Refuges become more politically and economically motivated, rather than motivated by the health and wellbeing of the people. Establishing the bald eagle as a reason to convert the RMA into a wildlife refuge, as opposed to the reality that there is a liability to human safety, the U.S. government’s actions move into the parafictional. This is, quite frequently, the issue with many greenwashing practices. As opposed to assuming accountability, institutions and governments merely present themselves as advocating for a politics centered on ecology. The reality, as the NTLCS and EAGLE have shown, is that the politics follow the most economically sound solution while simultaneously developing an image of resolution that has surfaced because of our toxic legacy.

It is this paradox that makes parafictional practices remarkable, particularly those that attempt to appropriate the institutional rhetoric they are critiquing. The paradox I am speaking of is that the NTLCS emulates institutions by developing programs in response to institutional responsibility. As opposed to taking responsibility for the full conditions of decommissioned arsenals, the U.S. government can easily situate the conversion process as one motivated by the environmental security of a specific species, regardless of the toxicity that endangers human lives in the area. For the NTLCS, this only serves to obfuscate the environmental concerns of the affected communities.

Where Parafiction Meets Reality

Throughout this paper, I have been framing several theoretical currents within the NTLCS. Most prominent is my discussion of parafiction and how this mode of

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production has been utilized by the agency to direct attention to environmental issues across the United States in relation to the aftermath of the Cold War. Fear and anxiety over the threat to capitalism and democracy underscored the tensions of the time, alongside the potential of nuclear fallout. The NTLCS, recognizing these tensions, tunes their ideology to the ramifications of the hidden labor behind the construction of nuclear weapons. In doing so, toxicity becomes the new historical trauma of the Cold War.

The NTLCS demonstrates that there are a multitude of directions one may take in the scope of land and toxic-based issues. One could say they are reversing time, playing out the idealistic point of view of a transparent, self-forgiving government that understands the damages done and is ready to resolve them through a novel approach to transnational ethics, a concept Krupar has developed as a rejection of pure, pristine nature, in favor of a fluid relationship between humans and waste. 36 This position would be a far-reach, and to some implausible, as it would require a degree of honesty from a position of power that is fast growing to be one synonymous with a lie. At its heart, the NTLCS is a cry of civil disappointment, completely and entirely abandoned by a government that has lied so often that everything stated is shrouded in doubt. I cannot help but compare our state to the soured relationship accidentally or purposefully formed by the trespasses of infidelity, broken promises, and deceit that leaves its victims in perpetual doubt and unwillingness to trust. The NTLCS stresses this stake in responsibility, where many have abandoned their roles due to arrogant and dismissive complacency.

At the beginning of this paper, I briefly mentioned historical land artists and what has become a large breadth of work that has shown the dialectic between the city and the desert. What I imagine groups like the NTLCS have achieved and will continue to achieve is that the distinction we make between local environments and the “void” of nature will become increasingly thinner. This is already occurring, by way of production, consumption, and economy policy. It is only our perception that continues to hold onto the “void”. Rather, “the void” must be read as a deeper, more prevalent cultural condition. The two locations discussed in this paper are in Illinois, in a small rural community, and the other roughly eight miles from downtown Denver, far from the “void” of Nevada and the Great Basin. This is not an attempt to minimize the impact of nuclear disposal and maltreatment in the Southwest, which is staggering and unsettling. Rather, it is a wake-up call to other communities that toxicity, nuclear waste, and greenwashing are contemporary, prevalent concerns in every state and corner of the United States. Tackling these issues in our environment has been a prominent area of concern for parafiction. This should be no surprise as landscape, how we imagine it and how we use it, has often been rife with an uncertainty in our imagination and in practice. As Christopher Salter and William Lloyd, two professors focusing on literary uses of landscape, have pointed out:
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Landscape is what lies between our mind’s eye and our horizon as we explore the spaces of our real world and of the artificial worlds we encounter in art. It is an expansive and broadly inclusive concept, generous as to scale and content. Landscape encompasses the abstractness of spatial distributions and the concreteness of intimately known places, emphasizing in each instance the creative actions of mankind in forming and ordering the settling for its activities.37

For Lloyd and Salter, landscape possesses an inherent quality of malleability under the pressures of civilizations’ desires. It is a space of ongoing construction that inherits the creative and imaginary from civilizations’ cultural, economic, social, and political status in physical form. What is at stake, what I am proposing through the work of the NTLCs, is that through parafictional works, artificial worlds can be manifested in the real world as a form of revolution and protest that have lasting efficacy. Recently, Carrie Lambert-Beatty has adapted her discussion of parafiction to environmental issues in a lecture at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City, titled: “Some Things to Know: Parafiction and Climate Change.”38 The program description classifies parafiction as a “historic cultural shift, from a time when skepticism of factual truth claims was intrinsic to progressive politics, to one when widespread cynicism and manufactured doubt threatens both democracy and the planet itself.”39 By introducing the parafictional into the realm of the real, groups and agencies, such as the NTLCs, perform as if the changes we desire in our government and institutions are feasible, actual realities.

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NOTES

1 The dialectic between site and city is the inextricable link in which the barren desert cannot be divorced from the city. All sites are connected through production, an action that connects a site with its economy, and should not be thought of as “voids” to be seen as less important than cultural and economic capitals. My paper is arguing that by understanding the dialectical relationship between site and capital worth, the United States government and artists have approached many sites in the deserts of the West as voids to be taken advantage of. Furthermore, the United States government has exploited our country’s misunderstanding of the dialectical in the hopes to erase their toxic past. See Robert Smithson’s “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape,” in Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, ed. Jack Flam (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), 21-33. Lucy Lippard, Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, And Art in the Changing West (New York and London: The New Press, 2014), 81-93.

2 I believe the most impressive claims of how historical land art can be considered within the frame of contemporary artists engaged in the critique of land use is by Yates McKee. In his chapter “Land Art in Parallax,” McKee investigates historical land art and how land artists were interested “with the imbrications of media technologies and territorial matter, the mnemonics, economic, and political inscriptions of territory, and the crises and conflicts surrounding ecological life-support systems at local and planetary scales.” See Yates McKee, “Land Art in Parallax: Media, Violence, Political Ecology,” in Nobody’s Property: Art, Land, Space, 2000-2010, ed. Kelly Baum (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 45.


5 On the other hand, Kelly Baum, the curator of the exhibition Nobody’s Property, argues for parafiction as a practice of critique of historical narratives and the construction of territory. Both definitions have several overlaps concerning the function and experience of parafiction. Mark Dorrain has also made the connection between theatre and landscape: “But equally intriguing is the power of theatre as a disconcerting representational domain poised between fiction and reality, a power heightened in theatrical installations occupying or creating ambiguously ‘real’ landscape conditions.” See Kelly Baum, “Nobody’s Property,” in Nobody’s Property: Art, Land, Space, 2000-2010, ed. Kelly Baum (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 10. Mark Dorrain, “Landscape and Theatricality,” in Deterritorialisations... Revisioning Landscapes and Politics, eds. Mark Dorrain and Gillian Rose (London and New York: Black Dog Publishing Limited, 2003), 188. Carrie Lambert-Beatty, “Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility,” OCTOBER 129 (Summer 2009) 54-56.
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7 This is not to say that these are the only forms of political protests. Subversion has also been a key method throughout history that NTLCs undoubtedly take advantage of.

8 In other cases of parasitical practice, such as Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco's Couple in the Cage: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West (1992-1993) and several of the hoaxes performed by The Yes Men, performance is central to the piece. For these instances, the components of the piece would benefit from being analyzed through performance.


10 Ibid.

11 Another example of a fake representative asserting the real is when Andy Bichbaum of The Yes Men appeared as Jude Finisterra on BBC World as a Dow Chemical representative. "Field Agent Willauer Presents 'Atomic Midwest'" http://www.nationaltcservice.us/2015/04/field-agent-willauer-presents-atomic-midwest/

12 "Introducing the National Toxic Land/Labor Conservation Service." http://vimeo.com/48278483

13 Mark Godfrey, "Artist as Historian," OCTOBER 120, (Spring 2007) 143.


16 "The eagle is to the eagle, the vulture to the vulture, the serpent to the snake, the corn to the corn. These are the laws of nature. In the same way all nations are like to their neighbors. The eagle belongs to the eagle, the vulture to the vulture, the snake to the snake, and not to the corn, the corn to the corn, and not to the eagle. The eagle is to the eagle, the vulture to the vulture, the snake to the snake, and not to the corn, the corn to the corn, and not to the eagle. The eagle is to the eagle, the vulture to the vulture, the snake to the snake, and not to the corn, the corn to the corn, and not to the eagle."

17 This is similar to how Emily Apter has defined the "aesthetics of critical habitats." Apter defines critical habitat "as a concept that explores the links between territorial habitat and intellectual habitus; between physical place and ideological forcefield, between economy and ecology." See Emily Apter, "The Aesthetics of Critical Habitats," OCTOBER 99 (Winter, 2002), 23.

18 "Introducing the National Toxic Land/Labor Conservation Service." http://vimeo.com/48278483

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22 Ibid.


24 Ibid.


26 Julius Hyman and Company was acquired by Shell Company in 1952. They began producing pesticides at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal in 1946 and continued doing so until 1982: https://www.cerc.usgs.gov/orda_docs/CaseDetails?ID=998

27 Ibid., 33-39.


29 Ibid., 307.

30 Ibid.

31 "The bald eagle serves as an important cultural boundary ‘object’ for humans that negotiates toxicity, value, the symbolic health of the nation, and legal-regulatory processes with ecological relations. Under the wing of the bald eagles, a much less extensive and less expensive cleanup took place at the Arsenal. The land had only to be fit for animal habitation, avoiding the more costly remediation required for human residency or usages involving more comprehensive human contact." Shiloh Krupar. Hot Spotters Report: Military Fables of Toxic Waste. (Minneapolis: Quadrant, 2013), 42.


35 Ibid.


Ibid.