Book Review Symposium


Author’s Response
I am grateful to Jenna Loyd for organizing this forum and its antecedent at the AAG in 2014, and for her poignant portrayal of the military-industrial complex in personal terms in her introduction here. A warm thanks also to the reviewers here—Ryan Griffis, Cindi Katz, and Julie Sze—who have critically and generously engaged with my work across disciplines and genres—and whose creative and political research has deeply enriched mine. My comments reflect on the book through extensive discussion of hot spotting in my recent everyday life.

*How To Be Uncertain, or, My Cold War Kitchen Cabinets*
Perhaps it was the piles of Department of Energy print-outs on Rocky Flats and government reports inventorying the site’s cleanup that had engulfed a significant portion of the tiny bungalow where I live in Washington, DC. Or maybe it was the aggregating stack of rolled-up poster-sized charts of the bureaucratic procedures for nuclear worker compensation that I had obsessively drafted to make sense of it for the book and for worker advocacy—which, in spite of gathering dust and mildew from DC humidity, I could not bear to throw away and, instead, dumped into a black contractor bag destined for the closet. More likely, it was a combination of wanting to organize the messy materiality of my research and a desire to
advance my investigation of the domestic remains of war-making in/on the homefront–my literal home. These domestic uncertainties, ranging from the need for a good housecleaning to critical consideration of the ways the Cold War continues to shape my life, galvanized the sudden decision to demolish my kitchen and rebuild it.¹

The effort hinged around a set of mid-century kitchen cabinets that I had reclaimed from a community salvage yard. House repairs, for me, are an opportunity for re-use and what I would now advocate as banal curiosity about “toxic provenance”. Self-conducted/managed house repair can serve as a pedagogical means for rendering the chemical and radioactive legacies of war more intelligible in everyday life. And while more uncertainty, not less, about the safety of one’s dwelling is inevitably the result (our buildings are made with, comprised of, and covered in potentially harmful substances—expanding the meaning of “sick building syndrome”), this more grounded understanding of risk and uncertainty advances analytic connections between the home as a military space, regional racialized economies, a defense materials complex (an earlier name for the US nuclear weapons complex), US exceptionalism, and war. The “toxic know-how” that comes with house repair can help adjudicate how to dwell in/with the uncertain remains of war—not so much in terms of neoliberal resilience of the homeowner but as a potential catalyst for social-action research into the embodied life and multiply-scaled harms of war on the homefront.

My salvaged Cold War kitchen cabinets were beautiful: boomerang chrome pulls, cleverly designed metal-lined bins and racks, an impressive sliding built-in silverware drawer

¹ A huge part of the impulse was that my kitchen was structurally unsound and hideous. It featured brown-blue formica countertops that were peeling and regularly puncturing clothing and skin, dirty-white ceramic floor tiles that had been sealed before a good cleaning, and a refrigerator cubby-hole sectioned off from the room that, as I later discovered, was about to fall off the back of the house from termite damage to the subfloor and exterior wall.
(I hate those plastic organizers), and seriously sturdy yet elegant overall construction and fixtures. They were Keystone custom-made—the kind featured in Cold War kitchens of the future, which showcased American ideologies of democracy and military superiority wedded to the white heteronormative suburban family. I intersected with the cabinetry’s afterlife at the salvage yard tucked away behind a heap of cupboards from the Watergate hotel that were so shoddy the particleboard seemed to crumble to the touch. While extricating the 1960s-era cabinets from the other displaced kitchen sets, I observed several large stickers on the back that still displayed the cabinets’ original purpose: they had been designed and installed at a residence in the Northwest quadrant of DC. I jotted down the address and then quickly made my purchase and returned home, with the plan of picking up the cabinets on a later day when I could rent a truck. In the time between my initial trip and my return to the salvage yard, I discovered that the kitchen cabinets were not merely atomic kitsch: they originated from one of the wealthiest neighborhoods of Washington, DC—the same land that was also the birthplace and experimental test site of the US chemical weapons program.

The cabinets were from a home located in the upper-right corner of the 660-acre Spring Valley Formerly Used Defense Site (FUDS) near American University. The FUDS program was established by the Department of Defense (DOD) in the 1980s to environmentally restore inactive facilities under DOD jurisdiction; most FUDS are relics of the Cold War, WWII, WWI, and in some cases the Civil War. The Spring Valley FUDS designated an area that had hosted the US’s principle research division and testing station for poisonous gases and chemical munitions developed for America’s entry into WWI. American University had only been open a few years when the US declared war on Germany in 1917, prompting the board of trustees to offer the US Government the use of the campus to support the war effort. The US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) eventually established Camp
Leach on the campus, and the newly-created Gas Service (later the Chemical Warfare Service) and Department of the Interior Bureau of Mines founded the American University Experiment Station. Utilizing over 150 buildings with around 1,900 uniformed and civilian personnel, the Chemical Warfare Service outfitted the campus and surrounding land with underground concrete pits, trenches, and open ranges for field tests of chemical munitions and lethal materials, including mustard gas, lewisite, ricin, cyanogen, chloride, phosgene, chlorine, cyanide, and more. After the war, the Army returned land to the university along with a new sewer and water system; the farmland to the north-west, where munitions had been tested and dumped, was purchased by a real estate company for the development of an upscale neighborhood. What soldiers had nicknamed “Death Valley” became the prestigious DC bedroom community of “Spring Valley”, known for its high-end custom-built homes and twisting street design that departed from DC’s grid system.

My cabinet-inspired forays into the early history of Spring Valley were supported by information released after the discovery of chemical munitions during new home construction in the area in the 1990s. This happenstance unearthing of the chemical legacies of Death Valley inaugurated “Operation Safe Removal”: the USACE conducted a multi-phase project to survey, remove, and destroy potential chemical munitions and materials found across the verdant properties of the university and the entire Spring Valley neighborhood, which by then encompassed 1,200 private residences, a number of commercial properties, and over two-dozen foreign embassies. The project was thought to be closed by the late-90s but, prodded by the DC Department of Health, the USACE returned to Spring Valley to reanalyze the coordinates for a massive burial pit that was depicted in an eerie historical photograph from 1918. The image included a soldier wearing a gas mask on a hillside covered with bare trees next to a trench and numerous five-gallon ceramic or glass
The caption referred to a site known as “The Pit, the most feared and respected place in the grounds. The bottles are full of mustard, to be destroyed here, in Death Valley, the hole called Hades.” The search for a “hole called Hades” led the USACE to the backyard garden of the private residence of the South Korean ambassador and the mansion next door, where over 680 items associated with chemical munitions were eventually found on the grounds. While the South Korean ambassador’s home remains, a large aluminum-plated structure, built to withstand munitions blasts and to contain and filter poisonous vapors, now resides at 4825 Glenbrook Road; the large red-brick mansion that once stood on the property was demolished in 2012. As excavations continue, a large tent in front of the metal building conceals workers in hazmat suits and breathing equipment. Most recently workers found a vial of arsenic trichloride–known as “arsenic butter”–a compound that was used to boost the lethality of the blistering agent mustard gas (reportedly responsible for more than one million casualties in WWI) and to produce lewisite, nicknamed the “dew of death” (it is said to emit the odor of geraniums). More than 1,000 munitions and 44,000 tons of contaminated dirt and debris have been excavated and removed throughout the Spring Valley FUDS, rendering a “fan pattern” of munitions debris emanating from the former American University testing station that cuts through the winding streets of manicured lawns and purple azaleas. The cleanup of this former test kitchen of the Chemical Warfare Service continues today, with cost estimates ranging from 90 to 180 million dollars.

What would you do with Cold War-era cabinets from a well-to-do residential Superfund site of WWI chemical weapons of mass destruction located less than five miles from the White House? How was I to know whether the cabinets warranted concern beyond my fascination with their bizarre toxic provenance? Did these cabinets constitute an environmental risk and health hazard as the centerpiece of my kitchen remodeling schemes?
Did I really want to invite Spring Valley/Death Valley into my home? A panoply of famous figures have allegedly lived within the Spring Valley 20016 zip code: US attorney generals, senators, the principal owners of the Washington Nationals, army generals, media personalities, ambassadors, an AU President, a number of famous DC socialites (ex. Perle Mesta, known for her parties and DC housewarming advice—“hang a lamb chop in the window”), and a handful of former US Vice Presidents and Presidents, such as Lyndon B. Johnson (after becoming the Vice President for JFK) and George W. Bush (whose former home is now the residence of the ambassador of Algeria). The cabinets hailed from a house that was more modest and middle-class in the Spring Valley social periphery and was, therefore, more removed from earlier Death Valley chemical munitions activity. However, the address belonged to an area of land that exhibited elevated levels of concentrated arsenic (43 parts per million according to USACE “arsenic exceedance” maps). The USACE had conducted chemical analysis of an ever-widening zone of Spring Valley and AU soil, in part to track down the extent of arsenic contamination. The threshold of “safe” arsenic levels was unclear, and many residents argued that backyard testing was not enough: household dust could originate from contaminated yard soil brought into the home, especially through the kitchen.

In the end, I chose to bring the cabinets home by following a procedure that loosely mimicked the USACE Spring Valley FUDS cleanup; I also implemented basic Occupational Safety and Health Administration and DC Department of Health suggestions for handling surfaces with potential arsenic contamination from gardening soil or other sources. Chemical weapons and contaminated soil that had been removed from Spring Valley were sent to a nearby staging area on a piece of federal property along the Delacarlia Parkway (a site close

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2 Arsenic is naturally occurring but also a component of lewisite.
to Sibley Hospital, ironically). There, WWI debris was either destroyed or repackaged for disposal elsewhere. Similarly, I spritzed the cabinets with water at the salvage yard, to keep down dust, and transported them in tarps to my side yard (slightly down the hill from my house), which served as my own preparation ground. At this staging area, I donned gloves, rubber boots, and a dust mask, sprayed the cabinets, and wiped them down, before bringing them first into my basement. My reasoning behind this procedure spiraled into crisis at one point: even the water I was using to clean the cabinets was not entirely disconnected from Spring Valley. Chemical analysis of groundwater monitoring wells near the Washington Aqueduct and Delacarlia Reservoir (located adjacent to Spring Valley) in the 2000s indicated elevated levels of perchlorate, a compound that was used in tests with mustard agent and screening smokes. The Delacarlia Reservoir serves as a primary sedimentation and storage basin for water in the Washington Aqueduct system. One of the first major aqueduct projects in the country and commissioned by Congress in 1852, the Washington Aqueduct provides the public water supply to approximately one million people living, working, or visiting the District of Columbia, Arlington County, Virginia, and the City of Falls Church, Virginia. This includes me—whether located at my house or at work on the Georgetown campus. No Spring Valley residents use groundwater for drinking, cooking, or bathing, but perchlorate (and other toxins from Death Valley) may come to harm the vital water infrastructure of all of DC. The USACE, which administers the aqueduct and reservoir, continues to screen for drifting WWI residues. The real or imagined possibility that my tap water might carry perchlorate threatened the effectiveness of the cleanup strategy I had selected to eliminate the unknown arsenic dust from my kitchen set. I ultimately decided to monitor my doubts about DC water indefinitely: it’s not likely that a few parts per billion of perchlorate in the water would have
been any more dangerous than if I had used Windex or other common household cleaners to conduct the kitchen cabinet remediation.

Layers of eco-military governmentality form the basis of the home front. War remains intimate to material everyday life but distributed in myriad ways: munitions debris, pesticides and herbicides, the constant reuse of sites regardless of uncertainties of what lies beneath, the radioactive dot of americium in your smoke detector, the scientific-technical management and domestication of waste, or the after-effects of uneven investments in the suburbs versus inner cities. My Cold War kitchen cabinets are part of the multiply-scaled, domestic and ordinary dissemination of the nation’s chemical warfront, from the original paint of the cabinets—the fruit of the chemical industry—to their commissioning for a home that became complicit in hiding a WWI chemical weapons dump in plain (suburban) sight—to the not-proven presence of arsenic-laced household dust that may have traveled through and accumulated in moving vans, the salvage yard, worker’s gloves, the land around my house, my food and bloodstream. This unfolding of the toxic contexts of my cabinets is a way of practicing “hot spotting”, what I refer to in the book *Hot Spotter’s Report* as a creative diagnostic method—what Cindi Katz, here, calls “important curious acts” and a “refusal to live in a political economy and political ecology of disavowal”.

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Ryan Griffis places the practice of hot spotting in a critical environment of precedents and affinities within documentary arts: the hot spotter is a historically shaped agent that tracks limits to existing material conditions and thought in order to open up alternatives. I developed hot spotting in the book and several prior performances to explore how we might
respond to the techno-military disavowal of war’s ongoing and residual domestic impacts—that is, American initiatives to remediate, resignify, and manage the chemical and radioactive remainders of Cold War military production under the aegis of the “greening” of the military and concessions to the public. My work in this area led me to consider how environmental stewardship, nuclear worker compensation, Department of Energy archiving, and so forth can serve as operations of abandonment; bureaucracy, as Julie Sze observes here, “does damage through linguistic and policy obfuscation”. The fables in the book, therefore, work to unravel the toxic logics—the “immorals” of institutions and governance (Katz)—and de-ontologize nature as separate and pure (because this truth is a governing arrangement that repudiates war’s toxicities). Hot spotting involves inhabiting the residues and historical geographies of war to work them into possibilities that are inevitably fraught but support more interdisciplinary and diverse ecological politics—as opposed to binary modes of thought and practices of sovereignty (national, natural, bodily) that implement spectacular division as a material and rhetorical risk containment strategy. Practicing house repair and salvaging my Cold War kitchen cabinets take hot spotting to a very intimate scale—literal habitation with remains—that regards uncertainty and teases out complexity through a materials-oriented genealogy: hot spotting in this case entails deconstructing the material organization of the home in relation to war and what I’ve called, here, toxic provenance through home reconstruction.

Tracking the toxic contexts of salvaged materials is difficult work. In a simultaneously sincere and somewhat comedic manner, I have attempted to play the responsible consumer who makes an effort to figure out where something is from—which in this case led me from my kitchen all the way to the US’s chemical weapons ground zero (admittedly, only a few miles away). The toxic provenance of my kitchen cabinets shows that
there is nothing exceptional about material linkages to war—even while the story of my cabinet connections to Spring Valley/Death Valley unfolded in the most absurd way! In simply doing house repairs, I have become terribly aware of the hazardous chemical materials that are applied to and embedded in modern construction and homes: vinyl, the latex in paint, construction adhesives, epoxy, asphalt, caulk and other sealants, varnishes, various solvents, PVC plumbing resin, oriented strandboard in general and the pesticides incorporated in “greenboard” pressure-treated lumber, to name a few. These toxic materials are generally contained in construction (they undergo “tolerance” tests and so forth), but they can be seriously dangerous to anyone working with them. House repairs make you aware of their contradictorily indispensable yet hazardous presence to workers in/on the home—and in this case, the salvage yard, where I have subsequently advocated for practical applications of toxic provenance as part of occupational safety in the second-hand economy.

By undertaking home repairs as a form of hot spotting, one’s participation with these materials prompts new understandings of harm (across bodies of land, human bodies, architectural bodies) and opportunities to imagine and practice an alternative “material public” beyond privatized security and threat. My home repairs initiated what I refer to in the book as a creative demilitarizing effort—the creation of a kitchen counter-reality that plays out in the same space as that which is under critique. The cabinets do not formally represent a “mock institution”, a practice that I frequently deploy (see Griffis), but I use them to do similar work: the performance of a parallel reality that rethinks relations with waste and experiments with other ways to practice nature conservation and live with the uncertain remains of war. The figures in the book—the EAGLE collective, a radioactive drag queen, legacy management, etc.—take up queer ethical-environmental practices that refuse ontologies of pure nature, national exceptionalism, or the pure body, and that challenge any narrow
focus on the technical management of waste. My Cold War kitchen cabinets similarly serve as a pedagogical platform for excavating the military-industrial complex in the home and vice versa. As a figure the cabinets queer home security: the promiscuity of household dust or ordinary tap water, from chemical weapons dump to kitchen countertop, exposes commonplace assumptions that the home, the individual, city infrastructure, the university, nation’s capital, and so forth are autonomous, unitary, or singular defensible sites. Instead we see an unevenly manifested toxic commons with uncertain harms ricocheting across and between scales (body, housing development, municipality, region, salvage yard, home, etc.). We also see that my affinity for the cabinets and salvaging them for my home became a way for me to practice kitchen demolition/restoration (rather than criticism or policy) as a means of changing the material conditions in which military pollution remains hegemonic yet largely unintelligible (see Sze) in the area where I live.

As my companion and guide through Spring Valley to Death Valley, my Cold War kitchen cabinets have invited uncertain revelations about the secretions of WWI-era chemical weapons in the nation’s capital, and the governing function of “sacrifice” and “resilience” to toxic crisis. Hot Spotter’s Report considers the death-in-life power relations that operate through the biopolitics of green war in the US West, cautioning against optimism toward post-nuclear nature reclamation or medical reparations applied to workers from the factories of the atomic bomb. For example, the first chapter mourns the conditions under which bald eagles are “made to live” as avatars of indefatigable US militarism on a contaminated former military arsenal, while the third chapter critiques the administration of nuclear worker compensation for implementing procedures and contracts that use the uncertainties of
causation to deny claims. Toxic genealogy of my kitchen cabinets take us to still deeper layers of military ecologies: to the seepages of Spring Valley/Death Valley and America’s early chemical weapons program. In this case, resilience has taken the form of residents attaining property tax breaks due to the potential presence of buried backyard mustard gas and chemical munitions: in other words, resilience simply means the rich continue to work the system. The average price of homes stands at nearly three million dollars regardless of the ongoing USACE clean up, off-and-on evacuations, and uncertain health risks. This predominantly white wealthy community of DC suggests that “green war” builds on and articulates with “necro-ecologies of whiteness”–a term that underscores how preserving the white privilege of this Northwest-quadrant enclave of good schools, high property values,

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3 Since the publication of *Hot Spotter’s Report*, nuclear worker compensation has seemingly become less burdensome/more streamlined: many workers no longer have to undergo the bewildering and slow bureaucratic exercise of dose reconstruction and exposure assessment. Instead, they may qualify for inclusion in a “special exposure cohort” and receive automatic compensation. However, my recent research into the handling of claims associated with the Rocky Flats site shows that the Department of Labor has subcontracted with healthcare industry Professional Case Management to run nuclear worker (and uranium miners and haulers); rather than speed up the process, workers continue to experience bottlenecks and even more obfuscatory medical referral practices, regardless of the more “feel-good” approach offered by Professional Case Management through at-home service and the rhetoric of caring nurse practitioners. It remains unclear what nurses and doctors associated with this program actually know about the working conditions, occupational exposures, and hazardous materials that existed at Rocky Flats.

4 Average listing prices for Spring Valley can be found on [Trulia](https://www.trulia.com) (the figure included here is dated from August 15, 2015). There have been five civil suits; several suits were folded into these five. The most “promising” suit involved the real estate company W.C. and A.N. Miller, the organization that had developed Spring Valley, but it never went to trial. The parties settled in 1998: the Federal Government agreed to pay Miller $2.1 million (see Moeller 2005).
and beautiful landscape entails exposure to unprecedented everyday risks, material hazards, disease, and death. The maintenance of the pastoral scenery is not without its discontents: there have been several civil suits brought against the Federal Government, US Army, USACE, and American University (none successful except for one out-of-court settlement) and local health polling that refutes the “no finding” of adverse health impacts on the part of the USACE. Spring Valley/Death Valley—the articulation of white enclave to the nation’s first chemical weapons experiment station and proving ground—requires further excavation within metropolitan DC’s regionally racialized layout, infrastructure, and epidemiology.

The case also troubles certain conventions of environmental justice and eco-criticism that have come to govern responses to toxicity within environmental politics, such as melodramatic cause or lack of choice (see Sze and Katz). In most popular accounts, Spring Valley is presented as an enigmatic and curious place rather than a community of suffering on par with a toxic inner-city or periphery. Spring Valley subjects are fraught as environmental subjects: they do not adequately demonstrate lack of choice or inequity borne through embodied sacrifice, thus deflecting rather than rousing sympathy. The nuclear workers that I discuss in the book were also often repudiated in the public sphere (for their hand in making the bomb), but they accessed symbolic resources of patriotism, war-effort working-class solidarity, and nostalgia for industrial America. In Spring Valley, even the children of the wealthy do not readily “qualify” as victims: the USACE has refused to acknowledge elevated risks for children and denied requests for the relocation of young people who live in a house on property that is undergoing remediation (one wonders if the underlying assumption is that wealthy families can afford/should pay for the transfer?). The resilience of Spring Valley continues to play out as a tragedy of intergenerational justice.

5 See DC Representative Eleanor Holmes Norton’s letter of appeal to the EPA on this issue in 2013.
Hot spotting—as enacted by the book or my kitchen cabinet and house repair activities—advocates and performs “transnatural irreverence” toward many of the tropes and moralisms that accompany representations of waste or nature, as well as the tendency to fall back on bodily norms, containment, and security in response to toxicity. As a kind of political documentary folklore, hot spotting seeks to tell stories differently and build alliances that support more creative, generative responses to conditions of uncertainty, slow death, and toxic stealth. Its self-reflexive practice owes much to other visual, written, and organizing work that remain committed to cultivating beautiful and equitable futures within the remains of war. I am grateful for the interdisciplinary comments from all three respondents in this forum, who have drawn explicit connections to other projects, and who value my efforts to explore the potentially reparative function of humor and the (bio)political power of fabulation: there’s something more to life than mere survival and something more to politics than catastrophic imaginary. Jenna Loyd’s closing provocation to consider Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle’s eosexual marriages in response to the painful realities of contamination, violence, and loss is compelling grounds for living, loving, and relating differently. Love and promiscuity (across and between different bodies of land, human, animal, law, institution, etc.) seem far less risky than the renewed emphasis on civilizational collapse within some strands of contemporary criticism and revolutionary action. In contrast to (yet another) master narrative of apocalypse and millennial redemption, we might think of the practice of toxic provenance as a kind of everyday eosexual marriage activity that does not sever responsibility from unequal distributions of uncertainty and harm. My house repairs and kitchen reconstruction demonstrate a seriously fun albeit deeply uncertain DIY project of demilitarization—one that experiments with critical aesthetic modes of irony, bricolage, camp,
and ordinary sentimentality grounded in a contingent, relational and homegrown world of possibility.

Reference


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