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**IRRADIATED PLAYGROUND: THE GEORGIA NUCLEAR AIRCRAFT
LABORATORY AND THE LEGACY OF THE UNITED STATES
NUCLEAR PROJECT**

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**IRRADIATED PLAYGROUND: THE GEORGIA NUCLEAR AIRCRAFT
LABORATORY AND THE LEGACY OF THE UNITED STATES NUCLEAR PROJECT**

A Thesis
Presented to
The Academic Faculty

By
Austin Wilson

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in American Studies

Kennesaw State University

May 2021

College of Humanities and Social Sciences
Kennesaw State University
Kennesaw, Georgia
Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the thesis/project of

has been approved by the committee for the capstone requirement of the
Master of Artis in American Studies
In the College of Social Sciences

Capstone Committee

Member

Date

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Introduction

At the age of 12 I became obsessed with *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010), a video game set in a post-nuclear apocalyptic landscape covered in 1950s era Americana. Since that age my fascination with the nuclearization of the United States has only grown, compounded by my grandfather's stories of minutemen missiles in my hometown of Wichita, Kansas during the height of cold war tensions. My own fascination with the relics of this era was so strong that I took a trip to an abandoned missile silo near my college town of Lawrence, Kansas at the age of 19. While doing research for Dr. Okie over the summer of 2020, I was asked to investigate the environmental history of the former Georgia Nuclear Aircraft Laboratory (GNAL), an abandoned nuclear testing site in northern Georgia. While doing this research I came across a message board for urban explorers who took it upon themselves to cut their way through fences and dig under walls to explore the remnants of the site. I became intensely fascinated with the way that this transgressive act of trespass and exploration reconfigured the way the site existed in public memory. Through this act, these explorers were reimagining the possibilities of the site, perhaps in search of treasure or the thrill of discovery in the same manner that compelled my obsession with *Fallout: New Vegas*. This thesis incorporates the various forms of memory that surround the site and my own personal analysis of these memories to create a more complex understanding of the significance of the former nuclear testing ground. Instead of simply focusing exclusively on the conspiracies about three-eyed-deer, I intend to broaden the understanding of the memory of the GNAL by also incorporating an analysis of the explorers and graffitios who transgress the boundaries that have been erected to divide the acceptable use of the site as presented by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (GDNR), and the desired use of the site as a space of reimagining and creativity. Each of these groups has their own story

of the site, the way they wish it to function in memory. For the GDRN the site is a battleground between their approved use of the site as a horse-riding trail and an area open to hunting. For the former boosters of the region, it was a site of financial investment in Georgia. For the urban explorers and graffitios it is a site to explore and either learn from or leave their mark on. For conspiracy theorists it is a site of intrigue and a concrete manifestation of the government spooks of the 1950s and 1960s. Each of these stories is one-dimensional and by looking at the way that these stories interact and form the conflicted and debated form of memory that surrounds the site, this thesis will complicate these stories.

Literature Review

Just as the experience of a place is multimodal, so too should the research into a place be multidimensional. In her 2005 presidential address to the American Studies Association, Karen Halttunen regarded the work being done by her contemporaries to reestablish a sense of place in the face of globalization and the production of homogenized spaces as a necessary act of resistance.¹ The spaces which are particularly interesting to my research aims are industrial ruins, the spaces left behind by a society which rapidly deindustrialized. My work hopes to follow in the steps of these scholars and contribute to contemporary conversations about place through an analysis of a local site of nuclear experimentation and ruin. To interrogate the current social and cultural meaning of the Georgia Nuclear Aircraft Laboratory (GNAL) located in Dawson Forrest in northern Georgia the deployment of various disciplines will be necessary. Firstly, the understanding of a place of ruin has been the subject of many environmental histories and it would be foolish to exclude Kate Brown in framing modern discussions of sites where humanity's hubris with their nuclear capabilities has marked the land. Next the shared fascination with the aesthetics of industrial decay and the creation of the urban-rural fringe will be necessary to interrogate to properly understand the role of popular perceptions of industrial ruin as they relate to the space. Through an interrogation of the various methodologies and meanings made by these scholars this project's methodology will include an analysis of historical factors leading to the modern existence of the site, an analysis of the aesthetics of the site, and an analysis of the people who still interact with the site. The project requires all these various interrogations to fully reckon with the way the history of the place has projected itself forward into the contemporary understanding of the past.

¹ Karen Halttunen, "Groundwork: American Studies in Place: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 4, 2005," *American Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2006): 1–15.

The scholarship on these sites can be broken up into several schools of thought, historians like Kate Brown, David Allen Burke, Ryan Edgington and Sarah Fox are concerned primarily with the public memory of the sites they study, while other scholars focus on the aspects of their sites which relate to the larger story of the Cold War, one example of this being Ryan Edgington. Yet more scholars look at these sites of ruin and are compelled to write on the nature of preservation, which while linked closely to public memory, is itself another conversation entirely, two examples of people engaging with this work are Caitlin DeSilvey and Dydia DeLyser. One would be remiss not to also mention the compelling connections between the discussions on preservation (or lack thereof) and public memory that is central to Tim Edensor's scholarship.

A History: The Stories a Place Holds

When looking at the history of a place, particularly one that has been decimated by industry, commercialization, or other forces of human construction the employment of environmental history has often been used to make sense of the transformations a place underwent. To better understand the GNAL site as a product of human interaction with the landscape, the use of these histories lends themselves well to the project. When consuming these histories one key aspect of analysis for their usefulness to the project was their scholarly focus. Through an analysis of what other scholars centered in their histories of nuclearized spaces a better understanding of contemporary conversations on the subject can be reached and help orient the project in the modern scholarly discourse. The focus of this project on the legacy of a site meant that many of the historians who wrote on similar subjects had their most pertinent commentary toward the end of their books.

As one of the foremost scholars of nuclear sites, the work of Kate Brown on the former Soviet Union is instrumental to understanding the field. Her focus is biographic, being interested in the stories of people who inhabited a space and what that adds to a broader historical understanding of it. In *Dispatches from Dystopia* Brown employs this characteristic biographical approach to several sites including personal interviews which bolster her larger arguments about the historical role of Soviet nationalism to give an example from the first chapter. Brown's central argument is that places that people and governments wish to forget hold truths about the people that once inhabited them and inform modern society. From an analysis of the conditions on the ground at the Chernobyl site to an examination of a region of Ukraine which compares it to her hometown of Elgin, Illinois, Brown uses subjective experiences, personal interviews, and archival documents to demonstrate that these places that people wish to forget hold and transmit stories despite their abandonment or purposeful ruin. She argues that while many sites that have been abandoned have their own specific stories, they also each play a part in describing larger trends like nuclearization or deindustrialization. Through her analyses of these various sites, she both brings up the specific stories held within them, the memories of the places, but she also ties it into larger historical narratives in a way that complicates traditional tellings of the larger stories she discusses Brown's goal of restoring memory of individuals to deliberately 'unremembered' places provides a foundation for reading post-industrial waste sites in the United States and elsewhere. The use of oral history and biography in the telling of place makes her similar to scholars like Lee and Newfont, and Fox.² Citations of her work are somewhat

² Sarah Alisabeth Fox, *Downwind: A People's History of the Nuclear West*, UPCC Book Collections on Project MUSE (Lincoln: Bison Books, 2014), <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=e000xna&AN=842839&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=ken1>; Debbie Lee and Kathryn Newfont, *The Land Speaks: New Voices at the Intersection of Oral and Environmental History*, 1 edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

limited, but the description of her work as different from the typical “dispassionate all-seeing historical narrators,” makes her body of work a complicating factor to other historians like David Burke.³ An argument central to her entire book that I seek to affirm is the role of place in scholarly discourse. By treating a place as a source material like an interview or archival document, she centers the role a place has to prove or disprove arguments, to be interrogated as any other source, and to provide rich meanings to expand the discourse of a subject.

Another historian that writes on nuclear sites is David Allen Burke, whose book on atomic testing in Mississippi illustrated what this scholarship looks like when geographically centered in the United State South. The key argument in this book is that story of the testing that occurred in should be preserved. By opening with quotes from residents of the area surrounding the testing site, Burke demonstrates a clear lack of public memory on the subject. The rest of the book which utilizes internal documents from the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) and discussions with local participants like the Tatum family who sold land to the government for testing as well as Frederick Mellen and Dr. Linus Pualing who both opposed the atomic testing happening in their region. The book’s central driving force is the need to uncover and preserve the history of how the site came to be selected for testing and what occurred there during and after the tests. Burke’s work has similar aims to both Brown’s and Len Ackland’s because they all exist to explain the purposefully muddled history of atomic sites. While Brown’s work encapsulated the modern turn toward an international understanding of these site, Burke covers the specificities of a single geography, that being Mississippi. The central focus of that book being the study of the Salmon testing site in Mississippi lent itself to a study of local politics which included a discussion of local industry and powerful individuals who controlled the land

³ Steven Hoelscher, “Dispatches from Dystopia: Histories of Places Not Yet Forgotten Brown Kate,” *The Public Historian* 39, no. 1 (2017): 103–4.

as well as the interactions between those individuals as representatives of local authority with the Atomic Energy Commission as representatives of the federal government.⁴ This story highlighted issues that were not at the forefront of my mind while originally conceiving of the project. Namely, Burke's emphasis on southernness as an important aspect of place influenced my overall conception of my site. For the purposes of specifically placing my site, Burke's style of centering the factors which made Mississippi a different testing ground than Nevada, will be instrumental in the consideration of the GNAL as a specifically southern location.

Caroline Peyton's work on Maxey Flats furthers this understanding of the southernness of the site and the place it occupies on the fringe of urban and rural space. As a scholar of history and geography, her articles on the Maxey Flats site in Tennessee also serve to further the specificity of my research in the region while complicating the stories of Burke by showcasing a different means of understanding the South, not simply as a region that operates under different cultural and economic conventions, but as geographical resource for the federal government.⁵ Peyton's central argument is that the use of Maxey Flats as a site for nuclear dumping is important to study because it showcases the larger trend of rural areas being designated as dumping grounds during the early atomic period. She argues that while environmental racism was a factor in dumping which occurred near populated areas, rural residents faced many of the same challenges and impacts of dumping coupled with "geographic isolation." She utilizes documents from the state government of Kentucky and later the EPA who designated Maxey Flats a Superfund Site when the cleanup of the site began. This article emphasizes the

⁴ David Allen Burke, *Atomic Testing in Mississippi: Project Dribble and the Quest for Nuclear Weapons Treaty Verification in the Cold War Era* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012).

⁵ Caroline Peyton, "Kentucky's 'Atomic Graveyard': Maxey Flats and Environmental Inequity in Rural America," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 115, no. 2 (March 7, 2017): 223–63, <https://doi.org/10.1353/khs.2017.0050>.

importance of understanding the way these sites impacted rural communities because their smaller population makes visibility harder for their stories. Central to Burke's argument is a clear focus on simply unearthing this history that he says many current residents of the town near the former testing site either knew little of or were ignorant to entirely in his opening chapter "I Had No Idea." By creating scholarship on a site which has not received much scholarly attention he both seeks to inform current residents of the past, but also to show that despite there not being any proven threat to human life at present, the environmental history of this place should be documented to provide another aspect of the archive for future scholars. This mirrors the efforts of similar scholars whose main aim is to preserve stories of the atomic age which have been swept aside like Len Ackland in his book *Making a Real Killing: Rocky Flats and the Nuclear West*⁶. Ackland's research again works to preserve the history of a place. Ackland's writing details multiple accounts of negligence at the Rocky Flats nuclear testing site on the part of the government (the Atomic Energy Commission in particular) and their private partners like Dow Chemicals. Ackland's central argument is that the rushed pace of the project of nuclear buildup led to immense failures of oversight that tainted the land surrounding the site. By using internal documents from the running of the site, Ackland recreates day to day activities at the site and showcases the many ways in which the federal government failed to contain environmental contamination. Ackland's book finishes by discussing the cleanup project at the site using documents from the Department of Energy. Another key point in this writing has been to hold accountable those who failed to adequately contain contaminants that made the site unfit for human habitation. By preserving these stories and the memories of them, the conversations necessary to have about environmental restoration and cleanup are continued rather than allowed

⁶ Len Ackland, *Making a Real Killing: Rocky Flats and the Nuclear West*, Updated edition (Albuquerque, N.M.: University of New Mexico Press, 2002).

to escape common memory. In a similar way, my project seeks to shed light on a site that is poorly documented in the public space and not the focus of scholarly work or contemporary coverage. This focus on traditional environmental history work, with a focus on emphasizing the embodiment of the south as a specific place makes Burke's work like contemporaries, Peyton and Spears.⁷

The importance of preserving stories is a project broadly of the history discipline, however for many scholars of nuclear history in the United States, the task of simply preserving a record of the history that has been systemically scrubbed from public memory itself serves as the basis for much of their scholarship. By using sources which have not received much coverage in scholarly circles, authors like Ryan Edgington, in his book *Range Wars: The Environmental Contest for White Sands Missile Range* continue work in the same vein as Burke and Brown.⁸ A key point in Edgington's book is that the nuclear testing that occurred during and after World War II was instrumental in making the modern west. He seeks to amend the historical record of the period in US Western history by showcasing the importance of the Trinity testing site as a place of contention between residents and ranchers who leased their land and the federal government who utilized it for nuclear testing. By confronting the history of this site, Edgington is arguing that further examinations of nuclear testing should be central to understanding mid-late 20th century western history in the United States. The central argument at the heart of these works can be about the efforts of the federal government to cover up a story, or about the environmental impact left behind in the wake of nuclear testing, but primary to that is an assumption that the preservation of these stories is important for an understanding of the modern

⁷ Ellen Griffith Spears, *Baptized in PCBs: Race, Pollution, and Justice in an All-American Town* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

⁸ Ryan H. Edgington, *Range Wars: The Environmental Contest for White Sands Missile Range*, Illustrated edition (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014).

world. By refusing to let the past become forgotten with regards to these monumental efforts of the US state and industry these scholars cement the stories as an important part of the story of the United States and the development of modern society. My project will continue this work by selecting a site which is local to me and making sure that the history of that site is preserved, that the story of the GNAL is recorded and available for those who want to know it. Unlike the blatant propaganda videos and other relics of the Cold War, these are widely decommissioned, and unavailable to the public. By focusing on these sites as an archive of the past, a past that has been systemically buried and walled off (often times with fences and barbed wire), I will embark on a similar ordeal as these scholars to hold up a local site to the same level of scrutiny that they did with their selected sites.

Another consideration of a place and its history is the preservation or lack thereof for a site. While Burke and Brown helped me with the specificity of location and biographical perspective respectively, Caitlin De Silvey's work proposed another unique approach. By studying the way that a lack of preservation can construct a different form of understanding the history of a place, specifically in the case of an abandoned British nuclear testing site at Orford Ness, this book showcased another possible approach.⁹ DeSilvey's main point in the book is that the decay of sites of heritage or history is not in and of itself a bad thing, that there is a creation of cultural meaning and possible ecological good by allowing a site to decay. She argues that through the decay of man-made buildings and objects visitors to those sights can glean new knowledge that is not easily gotten from a carefully (and expensively) maintained site. She argues for a radical take on preservation that instead of forestalling the natural decay of important places that are no longer inhabited, we should instead allow them to fall prey to the

⁹ Caitlin DeSilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage beyond Saving* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=4745550>.

forces of nature that work to change the spaces. In doing so she argues that there is a new meaning created by the sites, one that emphasizes the temporariness of them and allows for people visiting or looking upon them to engage in different ways.

Another key place of common understanding amongs the scholars of nuclear history is that the creation, active use of, and decommission of these sites creates new relationships between the people in the surrounding area and the state. The shifting of local power balances with the introduction of large amounts of federal funding, influx of contractors, and shifting labor markets in the towns and cities near these sites create new dynamics between both the residents of the area and the government. Burke's focus on the AEC's interaction with southern business interests in his book were an example of this. Likewise, Brown's study of Soviet nationalism as it related to the construction of similar sites reinforce this argument. Also, the amount of federal funding available created new relationships between the state and the sciences as explained in Jacob Hamblin's *Poison in the Well: Radioactive Waste in the Oceans at the Dawn of the Nuclear Age*, a book which uses archival documents to chart the flow of funds from both the US and UK governments into oceanography to better understand the risks of dumping nuclear waste at sea.¹⁰ Hamblin's central argument in his work is that understanding the way that nuclearization led to environmental damage must centralize human motive. One way he does this is by looking at how scientific funding functioned in post-nuclear United States and Great Britain needs to centralize the role that the immense amount of funding which followed nuclear projects. He uses government documents and reports made by competing scientists, biologists and oceanographers, to showcase the hotly contested battleground for funding that was central to the decisions made to dump nuclear waste in the oceans. These scholars' work demonstrate an

¹⁰ Jacob Darwin Hamblin, *Poison in the Well: Radioactive Waste in the Oceans at the Dawn of the Nuclear Age*, None edition (Rutgers University Press, 2009).

interrogation of the meanings created when a large force such as the US federal government enters a region. The development of an area for nuclear testing requires many laborers to make the sites suitable for their intended use. The pouring of concrete, landscaping of an area, and construction of facilities often necessitate the movement of both funds and people into an area. The new conception of the government that this creates in the people who were already living in these spaces is important to many of these scholars. By understanding not only the outright impacts of this movement on people's lives, like the direct impact of the increased economic activity on people's day-to-day lives, as well as the more subtle ideological impact on the residents become important considerations for scholars hoping to better understand what a nuclear site does to the surrounding area that goes beyond direct environmental impact. An understanding of the way that the interactions between and amongs residents of the area surrounding the site changed with the introduction of these changes in material conditions is important to understanding what legacy a site has. Likewise, and perhaps more significantly, the changes in conditions with the withdrawal of funding and personnel after a site is decommissioned has similar effects on the surrounding population.

Much like the studies of the introduction of nuclear sites into an area, the study of what happens in the wake of their removal is also of specific concern to many scholars. From Traci Voyles' study of the environmental devastation of Navajo reservations because of uranium mining in her book *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country* to Valerie Kuletz's book *The Tainted Desert: Environmental Ruin in the American West* which showcases a discarding of native American ideas of land and its use being pushed aside for the exploitation of that land for atomic scientific purposes, scholars that focus on the environmental and social consequences of nuclearization depict the people left behind to pick up the pieces after the

behemoth of the US atomic machine has chewed up and spit out the land the testing, mining, or development was done upon.¹¹ By examining the state both the land and people that live on it are left after the site has been abandoned, these scholars are dealing directly with the legacy of those sites and the actions performed on and to them. This focus can also be seen in Spears's *Baptized in PCBs: Race, Pollution, and Justice in an All-American Town* where she uses the stories of grassroots organizing to showcase an effect that pollution can have on the community, this time being a sense of cohesion that can come from organizing against an outside threat.¹² For my project, I will use primary sources to achieve a similar understanding of the shifting maps of meaning that residents of the surrounding had with relation to my site after its decommissioning.

One aim of my project is to bridge the gap between the existing histories of nuclear sites and examinations of ruins. Through an analysis of visual aesthetics of the site and ways of meaning created through personal interaction, a new layer of meaning which situates the history of the site within a modern context can be created, which is central to understanding the legacy of the site, the central focus of this project.

A Visual Analysis: The Stories a Place Embodies

A quick google search of the GNAL site's name will turn up several articles, including local news coverage of an amateur historians work on the site, an interview with a former employee, and most fascinatingly a travel article aimed at adventurous explorers. The travel article covers a bit of history, but it makes the case that exploring the site is a worthwhile vacation endeavor.¹³ To further understand this specific article and the relationship between

¹¹ Traci Brynne Voyles, *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Valerie L. Kuletz, *The Tainted Desert: Environmental and Social Ruin in the American West*, 1st edition (New York: Routledge, 1998).

¹² Spears, *Baptized in PCBs*.

¹³ Brittany Bowes, "This Abandoned Nuclear Testing Site In Georgia Is Perfect For A Radioactive Summer Adventure," Narcity, July 15, 2019, <https://www.narcity.com/things-to-do/us/ga/this-top-secret-abandoned-hidden-georgia-nuclear-aircraft-lab-is-kind-a-creepy>.

modern explorers and the site, that is the connection between the history that occurred there and the current embodiment of it, this project will employ an analysis of the aesthetics of ruin and their popular appeal.

One of the most important studies of industrial ruins is Tim Edensor's *Industrial Ruins: Spaces, Aesthetics, and Materiality*. In it Edensor argues that industrial ruins are "an uncanny space amidst a familiar realm."¹⁴ While it is written in the UK and about sites there, the book's analyses of these places is compelling and easily transferrable to other sites. His main argument is that the creation of meaning in a place of ruin comes from the subjective interactions between the visitor and the sites. Also central to his book is the idea that instead of wasted space, as they are typically described by people like politicians who seek to re-develop the land many of these ruins stand on, these sites should instead be seen as places of importance to our culture and stand in opposition to the idea that all space must be of utility. He outlines several different ways individuals engage with a site of industrial ruin, whether it be the visiting for illicit purpose like using drugs away from the prying eyes of civilization or the play made in them by children and adolescents. His work on these sites uses some information he gathered from personal visits, and various archival sources such as newspapers. One limitation of this scholarship for use in this project is that none of the spaces discussed here are sites of nuclear activity, but rather sites of previous industrial capacity. However, due to similar associations with the dangerous, and illicit nature of exploring many of the sites discussed in his book and nuclear sites, I believe there are strong parallels which can be made, and this book will serve as a key piece in creating the methodology for the visual exploration of my site.

¹⁴ Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Spaces, Aesthetics, and Materiality* (Oxford [U.K.]; New York: Berg, 2005), <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10375891>.

The relationships that people have with a site are often tied to an idea of authenticity. Dydia DeLyser writes in her article “Authenticity on the Ground: Engaging the Past in a California Ghost Town,” that the specific understanding of a place as abandoned can create a different and seemingly (to visitors) more real experience of the past than one of a curated heritage site.¹⁵ This article describes the specific preservation practices at the ghost town of Bodie California. Her central argument is that the visitors to the site believe they engage more with and get more from the site because of a lack of strictly maintained and routed paths of visit. Rather than the site acting as a museum with guides to shepherd visitors through the ruins of the town, the openness of the experience allows visitors more personal interactions with and insights into the site as it exists. She argues that the construction of the site allows for this feeling of authenticity that impacts the perceptions of visitors. She also argues that this subjective experience is worth the loss of the sorts of specific and factual information that can be delivered through a more traditional preservation of the site. This mirrors the arguments in Edensor’s works because it reflects the sorts of varied constructed meanings people have while interacting with site of ruin. Both scholars argue for a subjective interpretation of these sites because the people who interact with them have such varied reasons and experiences. My project will also aim to continue this process of subjective analysis.

Examining the site requires a material analysis, not just in the Marxist sense, but in the physical sense of comprehending the different types of and arrangements of materials, both natural and manmade within the space. To do this it will be necessary to explore concrete a material which features heavily in the mid-century building techniques. Tue Halgreen has already described how people relate the aesthetics of concrete to their preconceived notions of a

¹⁵ Dydia DeLyser, “Authenticity on the Ground: Engaging the Past in a California Ghost Town,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 89, no. 4 (December 1999): 602–32.

space.¹⁶ His examination of people's varying interpretations of concrete slabs as they relate to the person's preconceived notion of the space those slabs exist in will serve as a solid foundation for my examination of the materials of the site and what meanings those can hold.

These scholars of visual culture focus primarily on the present where the historians focused primarily on the past. As my project seeks to describe a legacy, the transfer of ideas, feelings, and meanings from the past into the present, I will combine the logics of both types of scholarship. Through this combination of understanding specific historical roots and modern perceptions, I will create a different sort of scholarship, one that seeks to reckon the past with the present. In this effort, I will hopefully illuminate areas that both groups of scholars touch on, but as it will be my central focus, it will be more robust. This combination seeks to describe both how people currently interact with and understand the site but will use historical analysis to unearth the roots of those understandings.

Proposal

To understand the legacy of the site, which for this project has been described as the way meanings from the past have been projected into and reinterpreted in the present, I will employ a mixture of historical and visual analysis which seeks to combine the methods of a scholar like Burke whose contributions on the specific southernness of the sites he examined with the insights of Edensor. The historical analysis will rely primarily on the works available from local newspapers in describing the opening in of the site, and other sources such as EPA documents related to the decommissioning of the site. These historical documents will provide a much-needed context for the modern interactions with the site. Through this analysis, I will explain the

¹⁶ Tue Halgreen, "Tourists in the Concrete Desert," in *Tourism Mobilities: Places to Play, Places in Play*, ed. Mimi Sheller and John Urry (London, United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kennesaw/detail.action?docID=199457>.

material reality of what the site is and how the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the site's current owners, mean for the state's residents to interact with it. This will be contrasted with the actual interactions that people have with the site. For an analysis of the material realities of the site as it stands, this project will require a physical visit to the site to gather more data (photographs) for analysis. In doing this there will be ample material for the modern aesthetic analysis. Understanding what types of graffiti exist at the site and where will open new modern interactions between people and the site. Additionally, I will analyze a site used by both urban explorers and geocache enthusiasts, discussing the photography of the site posted by explorers to understand both how people are interacting with the site as well as how they publicly portray that interaction.

By bridging between a history of the site which seeks to understand the impacts it had and continues to have on those around it and analyzing what the site itself says in an aesthetic perspective, my project will put into conversations the ideas of authenticity from DeLyser, analysis of power dynamics as central to understanding the site from both Brown and Burke, and the creations of meaning through exploration seen in Edensor's work. These scholars have vastly different methodologies and conclusions, but central to all this scholarship is a focus on place, memory, and history. By integrating their arguments and attempting to draw on their disparate findings, my project will hopefully synthesize their analyses to provide a more comprehensive understanding of my site.

Thesis

Imagine one evening in the summer or fall of 1976, a group of high schoolers approached an abandoned structure in Dawson Forest. As they found refuge in a large concrete structure,

they gathered enough firewood for a small bonfire and shared several beers cribbed from their parents' refrigerator between them all the while Elton John and Keke Dee's "Don't Go Breaking My Heart," played from their portable radio. The summer rains began to fall outside of the structure, slightly cooling the Georgia heat which has already started to subside a bit with the sunset and filling the building with the smell of fresh rainfall. These teenagers have been relaxing in the "Hot Cell" of the former Georgia Nuclear Aircraft Laboratory (GNAL) potentially exposing themselves to radiation from the paint inside the building that has been flaking off the walls and turning into a fine, inhalable powder for the last five years since the site's decommissioning.¹⁷

The Georgia Nuclear Aircraft Laboratory was a testing site where the Lockheed Corporation, with funding from the United States Federal Government, operated an open-air nuclear reactor to expose various materials and instruments used to construct aircraft to radiation pursuant to the creation of a nuclear-powered airplane for the U.S. Airforce. The site operated from 1958, when Lockheed was awarded an Airforce contract to open the facility to 1971, when the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) decommissioned the reactor.¹⁸ After the federal government abandoned funding the development of a nuclear-powered aircraft, the site continued to operate to manufacture Cobalt-60, an isotope with industrial applications like the manufacture of external radiotherapy tools. However, after the cancellation of the nuclear aircraft project, the site began to be shut down in parts, with the reactor used for creating Cobalt-60

¹⁷ Roland T. Phillips, "Report on Surveillance of Dawson Forest Wildlife Management Area," November 5, 1976, Natural Resources - Commissioner's Office - Commissioner's Subject Files - 1978, RG 086-01-001, Georgia Archives.

This evening party in an abandoned nuclear testing site is not a matter of historical record, but instead an imagination of the sorts of activities that people who at various points occupied the Hot Cell as evidenced by Georgia Environmental Protective Division documents which detail that the abandoned building had been used for shelter, building of fires, and the consumption of beverages and food.

¹⁸ "Summary Report of Radiation Surveillance at Dawson Forest Wildlife Management Area," 1978, Natural Resources - Commissioner's Office - Commissioner's Subject Files - 1978, RG 086-01-001, Georgia Archives.

being one of the last operable components. The site spanned a total of 10,000 acres in Dawson County, Georgia and is traversed by the Etowah River.¹⁹ During the operating years the primary experiments included raising a nuclear reactor from a cooling pool of water and allowing it to run near the materials being tested. Those materials would then be moved along the “Hot Materials Transport System,” an onsite railway, to a diversion known as the “Cooling Off Area.” After a sufficient time had passed, the irradiated materials would then be moved to the “Hot Cell” for inspection and experimentation by the site’s staff.²⁰ A map of the site that shows the movement of the materials can be found in figure 1.

My goal in what follows is to tease out the public memory of this site, by exploring the history of the site’s decommissioning and the relationship that modern visitors have with it. In doing so, I argue that the acts of resistance through imagination, repurposing, and recreation have shifted the legacy of the site. Rather than portraying the site’s history as simply another story of nuclear disaster left by the zealous pursuits of the military industrial complex, I argue for a new and much more complex and deep relationship between individuals, the state, and the history of the land. Conversations of place are important to the scholarship of American Studies, from the historic debates about the meaning of the frontier dating back to Turner’s *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* to more recent discussions of borderlands, queer spaces, and places of recreation.

¹⁹ Leonard Ledbetter, “Letter from Leonard Ledbetter to Bernard Weiss (USNRC),” April 20, 1977, Natural Resources - Commissioner’s Office - Commissioner’s Subject Files - 1978, RG 086-01-001, Georgia Archives.

²⁰ William Hammack, “North Georgia’s Atomic Reactor Lives in a Pool,” *The Atlanta Journal and the Atlanta Constitution* (1950-1968), *Sunday Ed.*; *Atlanta, Ga.*, October 12, 1958.

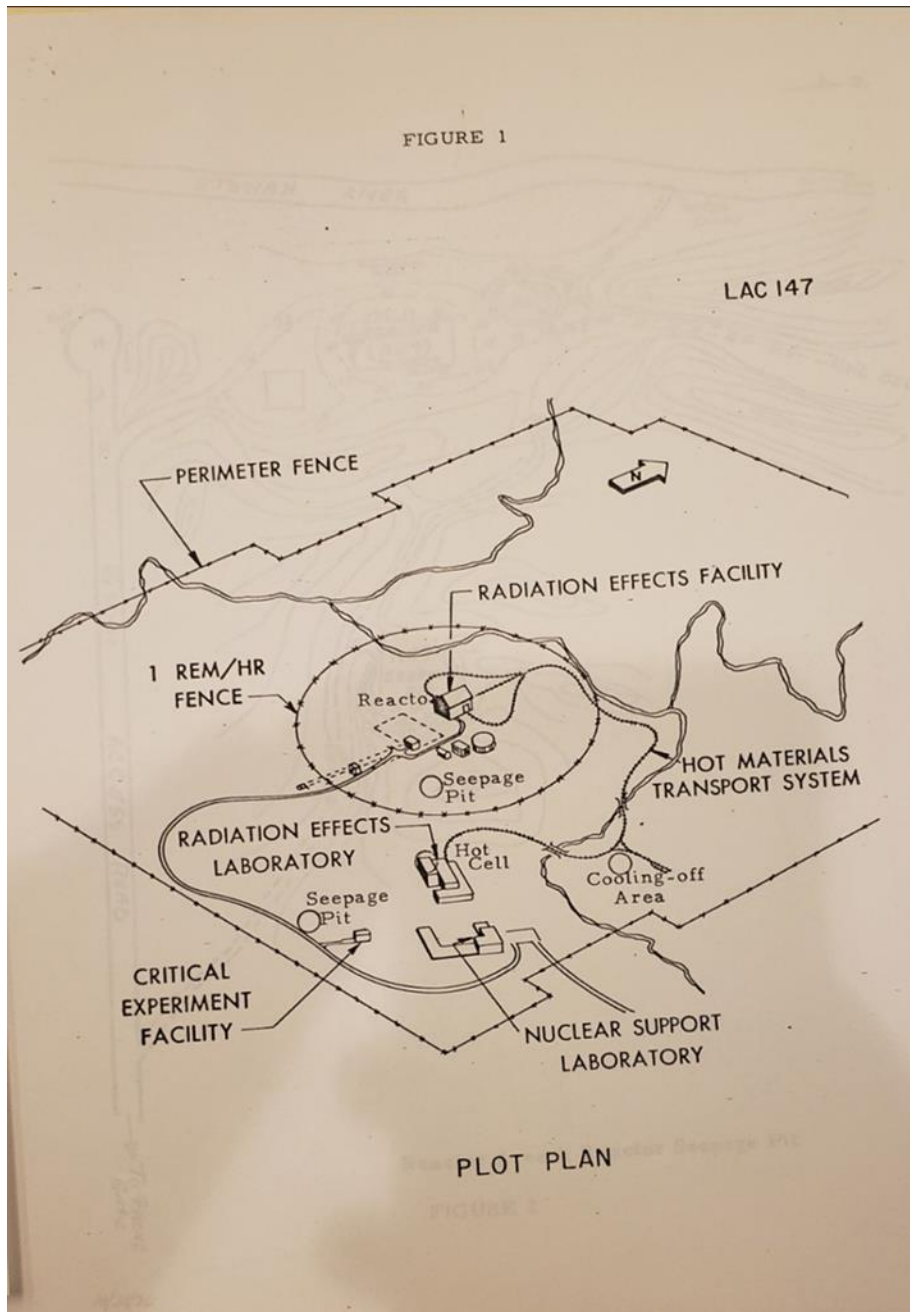


Figure 1. A map of the GNAL site from *Recommended Protection Measures for Dawson Forest Wildlife Management Areas* memo.

Place has been so important to American Studies that it was the central topic in Karen Halttunen's presidential address to the American Studies Association in 2005.²¹ My thesis contextualizes this site within discussions of place, particularly by looking at the intersection of place in memory with the actual embodied experience of place in the GNAL site. I use archival documents to outline the history of the site, which I then compare to modern relationships with the site to see the difference between the historical record of the site and the way it lives on in memory. I made an expedition to the site to take photographs that I will use to compare the site's status and its history. During my trip I also interacted with a custodian of the site and gathered information about his understanding of interactions people have with the site. These pieces of evidence will demonstrate that the creation of a legacy for a place necessitates the understanding of the history of that place alongside an analysis of modern interactions with that site to better construct an idea of the shared memory associated with it. Additionally, I will utilize the theories of Caitlin DeSilvey's *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving*, which argues for a means of remembrance that does not require the active management of a site.²² I will incorporate critiques of cultural geographers alongside the documented history of the GNAL and create more complex understanding that blends the material analyses of place with the cultural knowledge of memory. Ultimately, I hope to complicate the existing narratives that the site is simply a place for engaging in the pornography of nuclear ruins, and instead demonstrate that in addition to that purpose, visitors to the site engage in a variety of activities that broaden the types of engagement with the site and necessitate a deeper look at how we remember the GNAL. It is not simply a place for engaging in rumors of three-eyed-deer, nor simply a representation of Cold War era

²¹ Halttunen, "Groundwork."

²² DeSilvey, *Curated Decay*.

hubris, but instead is both at the same time, furthermore it is also a space of community creation through graffiti, and a site of exploration and imagination.

My analysis of the GNAL site is that it constitutes a “Thirdspace”. Edward W. Soja’s conception of Thirdspace involves looking at spaces that are produced culturally, meaning space given meaning by people collectively participating in the construction of that space.²³ The interaction between the visitors to the site and the physicality of the site itself expose this sort of cultural production of the space and will be elucidated further in a discussion of the graffiti that serves as the most easily accessible physicality of that interaction. Thirdspace is also a more apt organizing methodology than “borderlands” or “contact zones” demonstrated in scholarship from Gloria Anzaldua and Mary Louise Pratt respectively because instead of existing as a space between two concurrently existing cultures, the former GNAL site serves as a site of confrontation between the military and science industrial complexes of the mid twentieth century, physicalized by the ruins left behind by Lockheed, and modern sentiments of disgust when confronted with that culture. This thesis will illustrate that instead of acting as a medium for cross-cultural exchange across geographic lines, the site serves as a cross-temporal space of cultural exchange.

The role of Lockheed in the post-World War II era in Georgia’s economy is indisputable. As the postwar consensus developed, Truman’s containment policy received bipartisan support and became the ideological backbone for U.S. intervention in other countries.²⁴ Those notably left out of the postwar consensus were leftists in the United States who faced discrimination and unemployment in the face of McCarthyism, famously illustrated by the Hollywood Blacklist and

²³ Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, 1st edition (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

²⁴ Thomas Allan Scott, *Cobb County, Georgia and the Origins of the Suburban South: A Twentieth-Century History* (Marietta, Ga: Cobb Landmarks & Historical Society, 2003), 211.

the purges of government employees including gay employees due to their assumed association with anti-American values like communism. This policy was meant to check fears of the growing Soviet Union, to contain the threat of another global power's ambitions for expansion (which was believed to be the failure of pre-war Nazi appeasement and the cause for WWII) and to contain the spread of communist ideology, which would directly interfere with America's foreign policy interests of maintaining free and open markets to US capital throughout the world. As tensions mounted and the Cold War saw its first major proxy conflict in the Korean Peninsula, the drive of the machine that would become known as the military industrial complex whirred into motion with the dramatic expansion of the military budget that can still be seen in modern American spending bills.

A scant three months after the start of war in Korea in 1950, representatives from Lockheed and Fairchild (another aircraft manufacturing company) inspected the closed Air Force Plant No. 6, a former plant of production used for Bell's aircraft in Marietta, Georgia.²⁵ In early 1951, Lockheed reported that the Air Force had asked them to reopen the plant, after a tense battle between the three companies over who would run the plant.²⁶ Later that month a plan to fly 130 aircraft to the plant to be refitted for combat use was announced alongside an estimated 2,000-3,000 positions for skilled mechanics and engineers that would be needed for the task. In 1952, Lockheed's design for a new medium weight cargo aircraft, the C-130 Hercules, now a mainstay of military transport aircraft and imagery associated with American military might, was approved and construction of this aircraft in the Marietta plant ballooned the number of employees to over 20,000.²⁷ This made Lockheed a hugely influential part of Marietta's

²⁵ Ibid, 214.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid, 232.

economy through the decade as the 1960 census shows the population of the city was 25,565, up 25% from the 1950 census which counted the population at 20,687.²⁸ Unlike Bell who had abandoned the Marietta plant almost immediately after World War II, Lockheed continued to employ manufacturers after the end of conflict in Korea.

As the 1950s continued, more federal grant money began pouring into the state of Georgia much to the elation of local officials and boosters. Millions of dollars were allocated throughout the state for the development of nuclear research facilities at universities including Georgia State University and Georgia Tech, heralded with the headline “Tiny Atom Gets Giant Slice of Research Millions.”²⁹ Throughout the decade, Lockheed continued to be a large employer in Marietta, so with the announcement of a new testing plant opening in Dawson Forest in 1956 the excitement for the money it would bring was palpable as evidenced in the headline “Lockheed at Marietta To Design Atom Craft, Build \$4 Million Hub.”³⁰ Another news story that centered the money being infused into the state’s economy simply announced that the contracts to build the roads and other infrastructure necessary for the site totaled over 1.5 million dollars.³¹ The fascination with the site continued past the construction to include more than simply the money being circulated. In 1958, following the completion of the GNAL and the beginning of testing, the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* published an article with the headline “North Georgia’s Atomic Reactor Lives in a Pool,” which described the operations of the site with such adoring language as comparing the water used to cool the reactor as “blue as the eyes

²⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, “1960 Census of Population: Volume 1. Characteristics of the Population,” accessed April 23, 2021, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1960/population-volume-1/vol-01-12-c.pdf>.

²⁹ Katherine Barnwell, “Tiny Atom Gets Giant Slice of Research Millions,” *The Atlanta Journal and the Atlanta Constitution (1950-1968), Sunday Ed.; Atlanta, Ga.*, October 28, 1956.

³⁰ “Lockheed at Marietta To Design Atom Craft, Build \$4 Million Hub: Gets Nuclear Plane Project In Mid-1956,” *The Atlanta Constitution (1946-1984); Atlanta, Ga.*, December 24, 1955.

³¹ “Nuclear Lab Jobs Let by Lockheed,” *The Atlanta Constitution (1946-1984); Atlanta, Ga.*, October 18, 1956.

of a baby doll.”³² The following 13 years saw continued testing of aircraft materials and manufacture of the isotope Cobalt-60.

Parallel to this expansion of employment due to an influx of government cash, the mentality of the Cold War also reached into American life in other ways. In addition to the earlier mentioned Red Scare being used to persecute individuals who did not conform to the post-war consensus, the United States government funded the production of instructional videos such as the oft cited “Duck and Cover” Civil Defense Film, which instructed children in the case of a nuclear detonation to seek cover under their desk if in school or in a ditch or under a car if in the streets. “Duck and Cover” has been so culturally relevant as to be placed on the Library of Congress’s National Film Registry and have clips used in a Weird Al Yankovic parody song “Christmas at Ground Zero.”³³ This film gave advice that would be completely ineffective in the case of a nuclear detonation, which would immediately disintegrate large swaths of nearby buildings and level many others with the massive shockwaves produced by the detonation. Another example of the absurdity of Cold War era thinking was the development of various sorts of “close-range nuclear weaponry” which as a term should concern anyone with even a cursory knowledge of the effects of radiation. These weapons included the M65 Atomic Cannon, a modified Howitzer cannon capable of launching nuclear warheads, and the M28/ 29 better known as the “Davy Crockett” atomic rocket launcher built on the platform of a recoilless rifle. Both weapons are indicative of the same fascination with nuclearizing every sort of tool at the disposal of the US military in the wake of the awesome devastation wrought by the atomic

³² Hammack, “North Georgia’s Atomic Reactor Lives in a Pool.”

³³ Sheryl Cannady, “Librarian of Congress Adds 25 Films to National Film Registry,” December 28, 2004, <https://www.loc.gov/item/prn-04-215/films-added-to-national-film-registry-for-2004/2004-12-28/>.

bombs used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This drive to nuclearize equipment led to the proposal for the nuclear aircraft that was responsible for the GNAL site's construction.³⁴

After the reactor was dismantled and decommissioned by the AEC in 1971 cleanup began. Lockheed representative M. M. Hamm attended a meeting with Georgia Department of Public Health (who oversaw environmental radiation concerns until 1976) representatives to establish a cleanup plan for the site on March 9th, 1972.³⁵ In this agreement Lockheed was charged with blocking off pipes with a "process history," packaging and transporting soil that was above "restrictive concentration" to secure storage facilities, and containing the concrete blocks that formed the reactor building "until a more definitive plan is submitted to the State by Lockheed."³⁶ In June of that year the site was inspected by the Department of Human Resources (formerly the Georgia Department of Public Health), which concluded that "competent health physics specialists, using the best available instrumentation surveyed in minute detail all areas covered," and "it is our belief each of these areas is now free of radiation and radioactive contamination... that in any way may be considered a hazard to health."³⁷ However, only a few short years later, the Georgia Environmental Protection Division would refute this claim and instead label the site a threat to public health. By the Public Health department's working knowledge of the site, it was considered safe, however shifting understandings of what constituted safe and hazardous are a hallmark of early nuclear endeavors and serve as evidence of the ramifications of the zealous pursuit of nuclearization.

³⁴ Christian Ruhl, "Why There Are No Nuclear Airplanes," *The Atlantic*, January 20, 2019, sec. Technology, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/01/elderly-pilots-who-could-have-flown-nuclear-airplanes/580780/>.

³⁵ H. N. Edmondson, "Agreement between Lockheed-Georgia and State of Georgia Radiological Health Service," March 9, 1972, Natural Resources - Commissioner's Office - Commissioner's Subject Files - 1978, RG 086-01-001, Georgia Archives.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Richard Fetz, "Memo From Radiological Health Service to Lockheed Martin," June 22, 1972, Natural Resources - Commissioner's Office - Commissioner's Subject Files - 1978, RG 086-01-001, Georgia Archives.

On Thursday March 6, 1976, the Georgia State Senate held a vote to confirm HB 1907, which amended the earlier Georgia Radiation Control Act and transferred the responsibility of monitoring and regulating environmental regulation to the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD), established three years earlier in 1973.³⁸ After gaining this authority, the EPD reinspected the GNAL site and found that while the earlier inspection by the Department of Human Resources was correct in that the air in the site did not contain a hazardous amount of radiation, there was still a danger posed to people within the site. A factor not considered by the earlier inspectors but caught during the EPD's survey of the site was the possibility of airborne particles, such as dust from chipping paint within the hot cell or soil which did not emit enough radiation to be dangerous to a person when coming into contact with their skin, being inhaled, drunk or eaten.³⁹ In the report, the EPD stated that airborne radiation readings near the walls of the Hot Cell was higher than the readings taken from the center of the room, suggesting that the radiation was likely coming from both chipping paint and rusting metal on the inside of the building flaking off and floating through the air.⁴⁰ The survey also found evidence that the same Hot Cell "has been used for shelter, camp fires, etc, wherein food and drink is consumed" and the floor was coated with "fine clay dust readily moveable with traffic."⁴¹ The Hot Cell was not even the most dangerous area according to the survey. The Cooling Off Area was considered the "most hazardous area where dose levels exist in excess of 5 mrem/hr ("radiation area") as well as existing radiation levels of 100 mrem/hr ("high radiation area")."

³⁸ "Journal of the Senate of the State of Georgia Regular Session, Commenced at Atlanta, Georgia, Monday, January 12, 1976 and Adjourned Friday, March 5, 1976, Volume II" (Georgia General Assembly, 1976), http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/do:dlg_ggpd_y-ga-b1402-b1976-bv-p2.

³⁹ Phillips, "Report on Surveillance of Dawson Forest Wildlife Management Area."

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

With these radiation levels exceeding the allowable amount outlined in Georgia policy at the time, the author of the report emphasized the importance of restricting the access of the public to the area by erecting a fence and monitoring the possible contamination of groundwater from the Seepage Pits. 3 months after the “Report on Surveillance of Dawson Forest Wildlife Management Area” was finished in November of 1976, James L. Setser, Chief of the Program Coordination Branch sent a memo to Joe D. Tanner, Commissioner of the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) who oversaw the site as a wildlife area.⁴² This memo contained instructions for the DNR to construct the fence recommended in the 1976 report. (figure 1). The memo also outlined that since the particulate producing materials are so loosely packed, they are not conducive to removal and thus should be left in place, necessitating the fence to prevent public exposure. In addition to the fence, signs reading “POSTED – NO TRESPASSING” and “HAZARDOUS AREA” were to be placed on each side of the fence.⁴³ The construction took place between this memo in January of 1977 and was finished some time before May 1978, when the yearly inspection of the site recommended in the memo was conducted and a new report was drafted.

The report from May 1978 included copies of the original report from 1976 as well as the 1977 memo. In addition to these duplicate documents the report also included correspondence between James Setser and E. L. Jordan, at the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) in June of 1977 about the use of NRC funds and equipment to conduct an aerial survey of the site’s radiation. In the correspondence E. L. Jordan says that with the current fiscal year (ending in September of 1977), there were not enough funds to conduct the proposed observation, but a

⁴² James L. Setser, “Recommended Protection Measures For Dawson Forest Wildlife Management Areas,” January 19, 1977, Natural Resources - Commissioner’s Office - Commissioner’s Subject Files - 1978, RG 086-01-001, Georgia Archives.

⁴³ Ibid.

representative would be in contact in the new fiscal year about using a helicopter to inspect the site's residual radiation levels.⁴⁴ In addition to this correspondence the 1978 report also contained a page labeled "Courses of Action for Dawsonville Nuclear Site."

The "Courses of Action" page mentions an inspection of the site on May 15th, 1978, which included members of the DNR, EPD, and a representative from the Forestry Commission. The recommendations included repairing a "recent breach in the hot cell wall," replacing destroyed "no trespassing" and hazardous materials" signs, as well as erecting "Radioactive Material" warning signs in the controlled area.⁴⁵ The report also advocated an increase in site security and a reevaluation of the site after an aerial radiological examination, presumably the one requested earlier, was conducted. The disregard of the signs by eager explorers and the "breach" of the Hot Cell wall both boded poorly for official management of the site. There would be many more breaches and disregard of official advice in the future.

According to physicist and amateur historian James Mahaffey, the site lives on in local memory as "North Georgia's Area 51." There are stories of death from the open-air reactor test, three-eyed deer, and the like.⁴⁶ Such rumors actually do a disservice to the true history of the site, which displays government ignorance that put people at risk of dangerous exposure to radiation for five years between the site's declaration as clean by the Department of Public Health and the construction of the fence in late 1977. The significance of the continued will on the part of curious explorers to venture into the site at no insignificant personal risk. Rather than being a site for the spotting of three-eyed deer, it is one that still serves as a conduit for a battle over the

⁴⁴ E. L. Jordan, "Correspondence Regarding Radiological Survey of GNAL Site," June 19, 1977, Natural Resources - Commissioner's Office - Commissioner's Subject Files - 1978, RG 086-01-001, Georgia Archives.

⁴⁵ "Courses of Action For Dawsonville Nuclear Site," May 15, 1978, Natural Resources - Commissioner's Office - Commissioner's Subject Files - 1978, RG 086-01-001, Georgia Archives.

⁴⁶ James Mahaffey, *Atomic Adventures: Secret Islands, Forgotten N-Rays, and Isotopic Murder: A Journey into the Wild World of Nuclear Science*, 1st edition (New York, NY: Pegasus Books, 2017).

history of the United States. It is a battle over the meaning of the Cold War and its accompanying expansion of the federal government to fund absurd projects like a nuclear-powered aircraft. A battle over the meaning of the monuments left behind from this period and what recent generations make of the hubris of mid-century scientific experimentation. This battle is one where the weapons are not atomic powered aircraft and H-bombs, but wire cutters and spray paint cans. The fight for who controls the site continues to modern times and a similar spirit that led people in 1978 to bypass safety measures and explore still guides modern usage of the site.

There are new characteristics to the modern exploration of the site as opposed to the historic exploration. Now, instead of being a sort of regional attraction there exist several articles that sell the site as a sort of Georgian Chernobyl to be explored. One such article from online content publication OnlyInYourState.com, who hosts articles with titles ranging from “These 6 Waterparks In Atlanta Are Going To Make Your Summer AWESOME” to “These 6 Abandoned Places In Atlanta Are Absolutely Haunting,” calls the site “the most dangerous, hidden destination in Georgia,” in the same breath as posting the address of the horse trail parking lot that adjoins the site.⁴⁷ The article by writer Marisa Roman does go on to advise against visiting the site, despite the lack of radiation, due to other sources of danger that are not detailed, but presumably include the same dangers mentioned by Jim – potential structural collapse or becoming lost and trapped in the ruins. This article accompanies others such as a Narcity article titled “Georgia Is Perfect For A Radioactive Summer Adventure,” which opens with the line “Attention all thrill-seekers - why wait until Halloween to take a spooky adventure, when you

⁴⁷ Marisa Roman, “This Hidden Destination In Georgia Is A Secret Only Locals Know About,” OnlyInYourState, September 9, 2016, <https://www.onlyinyourstate.com/georgia/hidden-destination-in-ga/>.

can do it this summer?”⁴⁸ The article goes on to describe the reports of three-eyed-deer commonplace in such articles that often compile rumors from other websites. These two articles both include stills from a youtube video published by the channel grimmlifecollective, a couple who make content and sell merchandise around visiting locations ranging from the GNAL to historic crime scenes and supposedly haunted locations. The video that both articles reference is titled ABANDONED Nuclear Laboratory (Part 1). This video follows the two hosts as they enter the ruin that is directly next to the Hot Cell accompanied by a truncated history of the site and its purpose as a nuclear testing facility.⁴⁹ At the time of writing, the video had over 26,000 views. This introduction of digital recording equipment has at once opened the site up to more viewership and engagement from people around the world, and at the same time removed the necessity of geographic proximity and visiting in person to engage with the site. There is much more to be written on the way that the site has evolved its own life in the online sphere and become commodified by the production of these videos, but that is outside the scope of my thesis. This video, and others like it do illustrate a shift in the spirit of the engagement by decoupling the necessity for an in-person visit, however it could also be argued that through the publication of it and the earlier mentioned articles, the site has received more foot traffic from visitors nearby who simply had not heard of it beforehand. However, video also captures that same drive to uncover potential secrets and explore the site in general, which relates to the historic exploration and recreation at the site. The legacy of the GNAL site can be seen through the various and complex ways that visitors to the site interact with the history of the land they are on. Dawsonville is currently and has historically been a very rural town, with a population in

⁴⁸ Bowes, “This Abandoned Nuclear Testing Site In Georgia Is Perfect For A Radioactive Summer Adventure.”

⁴⁹ grimmlifecollective, *ABANDONED Nuclear Laboratory (Part 1)*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d72vp94VSJc>.

1960 of only 307. The town has been associated with stock car racing from the inception of the sport, originally serving as a home for moonshiners like Raymond Parks who would go on be one of the first “team owners” using his illegal gains to fund real estate investments in Atlanta and ultimately purchasing a stock car.⁵⁰ Dawsonville’s most famous former resident is former NASCAR racer Bill Elliot, also known as “awesome Bill from Dawsonville.” Elliot’s performance in the sport has brought some fame to the small town and it is well known in stock car racing circles for its residents historic involvement in the sport, which lives on today in the annual “Mountain Moonshine Festival.”⁵¹ The site now serves as a trailhead for a horse-riding trail in Dawson Forest (with the foundation of the administrative building making up the parking lot), and visitors who arrive sometimes venture off the marked trail to explore the remnants of the nuclear testing site. Building on top of the ruins and creating a new use for this “tainted” land seems to be the express purpose of the GDNR. By literally using the foundation of the land as a recreation trailhead parking lot the GDNR has clearly demonstrated their aims to move past this period in history by using the ruins to suit their own objectives for the land’s use. When I first arrived to survey the site for this project, I was immediately confronted with the imposing shadow of a cement building looming behind the trees. My guide to the site, a man named Jim who works as a wildlife technician overseeing the area, greeted me by stepping out of his truck. He motioned for me to follow as I began asking questions about the site.

When we arrived at the gate of a barbed wire topped fence with a “Keep Out” sign Jim mentioned that I should look closely at the fence. Upon a closer examination some of the chain-link appeared newer and much less weathered than the rest, which can be seen in figure 2. Jim

⁵⁰ “Raymond Parks Hall of Fame Nominee,” [nascar.com](https://www.nascar.com), October 10, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20121010081214/http://www.nascar.com/news/features/rparks.hof.bio/>.

⁵¹ Dawsonville City Council, “Mountain Moonshine Festival | Dawsonville Georgia,” accessed April 24, 2021, <https://www.dawsonville-ga.gov/community/page/mountain-moonshine-festival>.

explained that the Department of Natural Resources regularly must repair holes cut in the fence by people who want to bypass the security measures and explore the site. After we passed through the gate that was secured with the two large padlocks visible in figure 2, I was immediately struck by the odd confluence of aesthetics within the fence.

Upon passing through the fence a visitor is confronted with the odd mixture of concrete, steel, and biological material that compromises the area around the hot cell. Tall, thin trees encircle the area, but visible between them all is the looming building with a smaller outbuilding. The former Hot Cell is adorned with steel plates welded to the outside of the concrete shell, placed there to seal in the building and prevent entering of the building by people and animals as well as the exit of hazardous materials. Additionally, amidst this confluence of natural splendor and industrial ruin, there are several large graffiti taggings. The most visible one during my visit depicted a poorly drawn portrait of a man's face, a crude depiction of a penis, and several names. This was fascinating to see because without these markings, it would be hard for someone exploring the site to tell that there had been recent human activity in the area.



Figure 2. A photograph of repaired chain-link in the fence surrounding the former Hot Cell at the former Georgia Nuclear Aircraft Laboratory.

Our short walk around the Hot Cell included a brief pause where Jim asked me if I could tell why a tree that had fallen was lying next to the wall of the building. When I told him I had no clue he responded, “well a few weeks back we saw there was this hole under the wall. Looks like someone had dug their way in. So, I had to get down in there and look around, make sure nobody was trapped or anything, then we filled in the hole and put this tree in the way to prevent it from happening again.” Jim also mentioned that the inside of the building was nothing but mud and rotted beams lying in the concrete shell, and that it “wasn’t much to look at and certainly wasn’t worth risking getting injured over.” Jim went on to describe the constant struggle between the people who wanted to explore the restricted areas of the GNAL site and the custodians of the land as a “war.” This war is between the DNR who serve as the facilitators of interaction with the site and those who buck their rules for engaging with the site. The war that Jim alluded to is a

struggle over memory between the state who offer the site for recreation in a way that wholly disassociates the land from its previous use. The horse trail head runs directly next to the fence around the Hot Cell. The struggle is between the memory, or conscious lack thereof on the part of the DNR, and the individuals who transgress these boundaries to create a new imaginary that contextualizes the site in their own worldview.

After showing me around the fenced-in Hot Cell area Jim offered to drive me around the site in his truck to make stops at several of the other facilities that were still standing in the area. During this drive he mentioned that he thought most people that came to explore the ruins of the site were from the surrounding area, mostly teenagers looking for something interesting to do. He also attributed the graffiti located on many of the concrete surfaces around the site to teenagers. “Every year or so we get someone from the police department to come in and take a look at the graffiti to make sure there’s nothing gang related, but they always say it looks like something some kids would get up to.”

However, the graffiti around the site gestures towards a deeper meaning than simply the work of teenagers with little other recreational activity. The act of creating in this site of ruin suggests one of the constructive forms of engagement with ruin discussed in Tim Edensor’s seminal book on industrial sites of ruin.⁵² Edensor’s stated goal in his book is to “free ruins” from the “gloomy constraints of melancholic imaginations,” and he examines ruins as “spaces for leisure, adventure, cultivation, acquisition, shelter and creativity.”⁵³ Additionally, Fiona McDonald’s *Popular History of Graffiti* makes commentary on various types of graffiti and the motivations behind their production. In a section on modern graffiti, she suggests that the practice of graffiti as vandalism, particularly when placed on signs, or near sites of boundary like

⁵² Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 21.

fences, display a contempt for authority.⁵⁴ Much of the graffiti in the GNAL site reinforces this idea that graffiti can be used to show contempt for authority through its use of sacrilege in inverted pentagrams, vulgarity in depictions of penises, and disregard for the rule of law in its own existence as an act of vandalism. Additionally, the context of the site that was once a testing ground and physical manifestation of the military industrial complex is not lost on many of the artists. The taggers who I interpret as specifically invoking imagery of the peace movement like the peace sign or those who use explicitly political critiques of the state or capital clearly demonstrate knowledge of the site's original purpose.

When Jim and I arrived at a now defunct pump station that was once used to pull water from the Etowah River for use both domestically and for testing at the GNAL site, he mentioned that it was the area with the most graffiti, so if I was interested it was the best place to stop. Any visitor approaching the pump station from the path near the road will not understand the size of it. A 25-foot-tall concrete shell which is mostly buried in the soil of the hillside only manages to stick out a mere 3 feet when approaching from the path. The small concrete staircase that draws an explorer toward the riverbank and downward into the shell allows one to see the full height of the pump station and the wall-to-wall graffiti contained therein. The symbols often associated with decrying the status quo and commonly found in graffiti, such as the peace sign and inverted pentagram, are present. The peace sign could indicate opposition to the militarism that was responsible for the construction of the site, and the inverted pentagram is a symbol of religious rebellion common among Satanists and others who wish to show their outward contempt for the Christian church. Additionally, across the site, there are several works which invite a deeper look. These works strike me as someone who has studied U.S. history, politics and culture and

⁵⁴ Fiona McDonald, *The Popular History of Graffiti: From the Ancient World to the Present*, 1st edition (Skyhorse, 2013).

has been invested in researching the site. I bring my American Studies training and the knowledge of the site that I have developed over the last year to these works to create an analysis which elevates them above simple acts of vandalism.

These three works are all overtly political. They suggest a direct commentary from their respective artist(s) on the former nuclear testing site. The first of these works is the phrase “MOURN THE DEAD FIGHT LIKE HELL FOR THE LIVIN,” seen in figure 3. The work is painted on the pump station’s exterior. This quote is a slight variation on the Mother Jones quote, “Pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living!” Jones was a historical labor activist and organizer, socialist, and teacher, who is now a heroic figure within leftist political memory; her name being used as the title for a left of center magazine, known for its investigative journalism, is also not insignificant in the meaning that can be made from this graffiti.



Figure 3. An example of graffiti from the pump station at the former GNAL site.

I interpret this socialist rallying cry being placed in a site that physicalized the Cold War era arms race at home as displaying contempt for the ideological control and military might the United States has historically attempted to wield against collectivist organizing and demonstration both within its borders and across the globe including the invasions of Vietnam and Korea in the mid-20th century.



Figure 4. More graffiti from the pump station at the former GNAL site

Another work that stood out was “be gay, do crime” also spray painted on the pump station. (See figure 4.) Due to the overlapping nature of the works on the walls of the pump station it is difficult if not impossible to tell if the pentagram next to the phrase is meant to be part of the same work. However, regardless of the intention of the artist that created either or both pieces, they will be analyzed together as the collaborative nature of graffiti and the addition of new context to works made by other people is a longstanding part of the tradition of wall

writing, specifically wall writing done in bathrooms.⁵⁵ While the pump station itself is not a bathroom stall, which McDonald uses to discuss the collaborative nature of that graffiti, it does share similarities to one, namely the privacy afforded to one in the concrete shell that was once a pump station, and at the risk of being crass, the possibility of utilizing the pump station as a makeshift bathroom is not lost on visitors.

The phrase “be gay, do crime(s)” has become an online rallying call of queer anarchists and other leftists. While the origin of the phrase is most likely older, a 2016 Instagram post of graffiti in France cited as the origin of the phrase in its current context by the unofficial historical text on internet memes, knowyourmeme.com.⁵⁶ Since then, the phrase has adorned several memes, which include an edit of a Thomas Nast political cartoon of a skeleton bearing a torch of anarchy holding a decree to “be gay do crime!” (figure 5.) This phrase can also be seen on apparel that incorporates the coloring of both gay and trans pride flags, and across the world of leftist twitter in many other various forms. I interpret that the artist is engaging overtly in political speech by placing this phrase, which is another call to action like the previous work, within the context of the former military funded nuclear testing site. The work itself is an act of resistance to the powers that created the site, and to those who currently serve as its stewards. While the artist is not available for comment, it is easy to imagine that they would have a few choice words for Jim, who works to make sure that parts of the site are inaccessible to the public. Additionally, the sacrilegious symbol of the pentagram can be read as a coopting of satanic symbolism for a group (queer people) that have been aligned with Satan in the minds of religious

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ “Be Gay Do Crime,” Know Your Meme, accessed April 24, 2021, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/be-gay-do-crime>.

people, particularly in the region.⁵⁷ This confluence of the calls to action (themselves further acts of resistance) with the satanic imagery exhibits a contempt and outright hostility toward the larger systems that govern modern society, particularly the institutions of the church, the state, and capitalism.

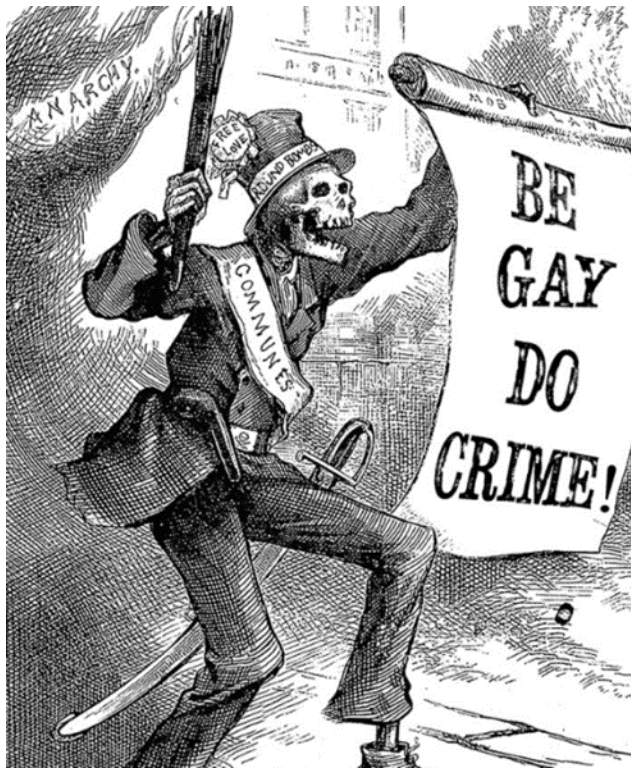


Figure 5. A popular internet meme encouraging viewers to “BE GAY DO CRIME!” made by editing a historical political cartoon.

The last and perhaps most explicit in its resistance to the original purpose of the GNAL site is a depiction of the skull and crossbones with the word “DANGER” directly above it.

(figure 6) This work is not at the pumphouse, but near an access road to the tunnel that was used to enter the reactor area. The wall that the graffiti inhabits is a lone 4-foot-tall wall along the

⁵⁷ An explosive example of this is the recent release of pop artist Lil Nas X’s “MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name),” with lyrics and music video that both draw on biblical symbolism while explicitly about gay sex and relationships. The controversy surrounding the music video, which also shows Lil Nas X giving Satan a lap dance, was an online spectacle driven primarily by evangelical Christians on sites like Twitter.

roadside. Jim told me a colorful story that it was originally meant to serve as a barrier for radiation should someone be caught out on the road when the open-air reactor started running for testing. This could not be confirmed, but his earnest belief in it reinforced the sort of mythologization of certain aspects of the site that is common in groups of people that explore the site for recreation. If the wall was indeed a barrier for seeking refuge from radiation, then the symbol of and word “danger” occupying it currently can be read as a direct contravention to the original purpose of the structure. This story conjures up images of the “duck and cover” cartoon discussed earlier and the absurdity of a desk or even a piece of newspaper as cover from the potential destructive forces of nuclear radiation.



Figure 6. Graffiti on a low wall near an access road at the former GNAL site.

Additionally, regardless of the original function of the wall, the work serves as warning. It urges other visitors to beware potential hazards, presumably radiation, but according to the most recent

report on the site by the Georgia Environmental Protection Division, radiation in all locations at the site is at a level no longer hazardous to humans in the area.⁵⁸ Instead, reading this as a warning against the use of nuclear weapons or militarization and industry provides a much more compelling view. If the purpose of this warning is to promote visibility of the dangers of the processes which lead to the creation of the site, then the act of resistance is compounded. Not only is the artist vandalizing state property, but they are doing so in a pointed critique of the state.

These various acts of vandalism and creation in the space of ruin serve as not simply a critique of the previous use of the site and an indictment of the modern power structures. They also constitute an important reimagining. While they literally appropriate the physical space for activities outside of its previous use, as well as its modern recommended use (as a horse-riding trail) they also conceptually reconstruct the space. Instead of simply serving as a landmark and a testament to the history that occurred there, visitors redefined the site as a space of exploration. The presumed secrets hidden within are now used to motivate those intrepid explorers who bypass security measures such as fences and locks to gain a firsthand knowledge that is much more personal than simply reading about the history of the site. The unique reimagining and repurposing of the ruins create new meanings not simply in the explorers' interactions with the site, but also with the relationship of the actual history of the GNAL with its image in the collective unconscious, its memory. The legacy of the site is not simply as a place where testing was done, fences were erected, and people now ride horses, but instead it has become the focus of conspiracies about government coverups, and an object of exploration. Additionally, these acts of vandalism create meaning in a space that can be seemingly devoid of it. Edensor argues

⁵⁸ "Georgia Environmental Radiation Surveillance Report - Dawson Forest Wildlife Management Area (2000-2002)" (Georgia Environmental Protection Division, 2002).

that “crucially, the ruin as an allegory of memory is fragmentary, imperfect, partial and thoroughly incomplete. There is no clear sign that the meaning of the past is self-evident and easy to decode if you possess the necessary expertise. There is an excess of meaning in the remains: a plentitude of fragmented stories, elisions, fantasies, inexplicable objects and possible events which present a history that can begin and end anywhere and refuses the master narratives of history, for instance, of the stories which encapsulate places within cycles of boom, bust and decay.”⁵⁹ I interpret the graffiti here as an act of memory. These various forms of resistance that evoke the period of its construction and original purpose to those knowledgeable of the facts constitute an attempt to salvage the history that is being eroded by the elements.

These various acts of resistance and community building as evidenced in the graffiti make the interpretation of the site as a Thirdspace clear. Soja’s definition of Thirdspace relates directly to earlier other sorts of geographic analysis. An example given is to look at a marketplace. A Firstspace view would simply describe where it is located, in the center of a town. A Secondspace view would describe the purpose of the market, as a place where goods are bought and sold. A Thirdspace interpretation would look at the significance of the space as one where people interact and analyze the sorts of communities that engage with each other within the marketplace. The imagined communities that form around graffiti artists who clearly have been visiting and tagging the site for several decades demonstrate various conceptions of that community. Some artists appear to riff off of other paintings by adding text to them or changing the configuration with the addition of the new artist’s own drawings. This act of collaborative art showcases a community that may not even occur to the artists who are doing the graffiti, but nonetheless exists. The fact that the same sites such as the pump station and access road wall are

⁵⁹ Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*, 141.

the places where multiple instances of graffiti occur show a sharing of those spaces as communal sites of creation, which are one example of Soja's Thirdspaces. By constructing a new meaning for the site socially between themselves, the artists have imbued that meaning onto the site, creating a new space within their cultural context, a vital component for Thirdspaces.

Soja's Thirdspaces are typically contextualized within urban areas, but the GNAL site serves as an example of Thirdspace in a more rural setting. The site's location in the rural reaches of north Georgia would seem to complicate this understanding of urban Thirdspaces, however the aesthetics of the exposed concrete and ruination of previous symbols of industrial power that compose the most popular parts of the site for these artists demonstrate a liminality of the space. The site exists somewhere between the urban and rural.

Soja's trialectic understanding of spatiality can also be applied to the site. The three components that create spatiality to Soja are the lived, perceived, and conceived. Firstly, the lived component of this space is clearly the exploration of the site and the use of the site as a space for recreation and communal creation. Secondly, the perceived experience of the space is seen through the physicality of it. The looming trees, moss, exposed metal and concrete all add to the sounds of streams, birds, and other animals to create the perceived experience of the space. Lastly, the conceived nature of the space is informed by the other two factors. While one can perceive the exposed metal and concrete, and live the act of creating art or exploring, the conception of these together indicate a conception of the site as a space for those things to occur. All of these factors inform and impact one another to create the spatiality of the site. The perception of the spatiality would be changed if not for the lived experience of those creating graffiti in the space and the conceived nature of the site would also be impacted by that same

absence. So, to fully understand the spatial politics of navigation and creation going on at the site, these three factors must be understood as the sum that their intersection creates.

Additionally, the liminality of the site expands to the temporal understanding of the site. The fact that so many of the artists' works can be interpreted as admonishments of the site's constructors and the forces behind the testing that occurred there show that the site exists in a liminality between the past and the present. The physical manifestation of the past projects itself into the present through the existence of the ruins left behind after Lockheed abandoned the site, and these pointed critiques of the military-industrial complex which are left behind by the artists serve as a way to combat that projection. When looked at through the lens of liminality, that graffiti then serves as more than simply an act of vandalism or even resistance toward the modern state or capitalist structures, but also as an ontological and epistemic challenge to the past. By refusing to allow the site to simply exist on its own terms, these artists have pushed back against both the existence of the past, but also the ideas that that historic existence is meant to impart onto the present. Here, the artists have imposed their own understanding of legacy onto the site and challenged traditional understanding and existing narratives.

In another way, the exploration of the site also echoes American sentiments of the frontier, which lives on in common memory as a place of discovery. If the site is analyzed as a frontier space in a modern context, then it also exists in a temporal liminality between the past and the present. While the site certainly does not constitute the sorts of "virgin lands" evoked in frontier mythology, it instead conjures images of postapocalyptic, the mythical recreation of the frontier through civilizational decline or collapse. This configuration of a space as an area for exploration to gain knowledge or perhaps treasure is alive in modern media, which has seen many representations of the post-reclamation of industrial ruins by nature landscape. A few

examples from contemporary culture include games like *Fallout 4* (2015), and *Metro: Last Light* (2013) both of which sold millions of copies as well as films like *I Am Legend* (2007) and *The Road* (2009). *Fallout 4* is a game centered around a suburban alternate 1950s family who hide in an underground shelter to escape nuclear Armageddon only to be frozen in cryogenic capsules. When the player emerges from their capsule, they have seen their spouse killed and baby kidnapped by some sort of invaders to the shelter and must roam about the wasteland in search of their lost child. The main mechanics of the game consist of exploring the landscape, recovering pre-war equipment like weapons and ammo, and engaging with the inhabitants of the land who are often bloodthirsty raiders who attempt to kill the player for their resources. While the narrative of the game evokes the sort of revenge narrative popular in 1970s films, the mechanics of the game conjure images of mythic frontier stories which portray pioneers in the American West battling Native Americans over land and exploring to “discover” riches. These media representations closely mirror the way that some people now interact with the site. “Some people think if they look around for long enough, they’ll find an old government Jeep,” Jim informed me as we were riding in his truck toward part of the standing ruins of the GNAL site. The explorers who come seeking knowledge or treasure are engaging in a physical reenactment of these media imaginaries that blend with historical fact, conspiracy, and rumor to create a new image of the site. This new image has become part of the legacy of the GNAL site in much the same way that the appropriation of the space as an area for creation has with the graffiti artists.

The legacy of the GNAL site is complex. While the history of the site’s decommissioning and the failures to maintain safety measures in the years immediately after the site went into disuse are a matter of public record, that does not appear to register in the way the site exists in common memory. Instead, the site is pointed to as an eastern Area 51 (the American Airforce

base in rural Nevada that has been at the center of a wide array of conspiracy theories, from the alleged UFO crash in Roswell, New Mexico to “mole people”), with rumors of everything from three eyed deer to nightly glowing coming from the forest. These rumors fuse with the way that modern people interact with the site.⁶⁰ Through their exploration, creation, and reconstruction of the site both literally and metaphorically modern visitors complicate the existing narrative of the site. Their creation of art demonstrates not only the reappropriation of the site for another purpose, but a reinterpretation of what the site is meant for; instead of simply serving as a monument to the past, the ruins become canvases to air grievances against both the past and the present. The explorers who seek hidden treasures and secrets similarly reimagine the landscape as not simply a place of former government activity, but instead inject that activity with meanings of secrecy and even frontier exploration. Additionally, those who simply use the outlined horse trail engage with the state’s new purpose for the land. While the individual visitors have been the central focus of this paper, there is still much to be learned about how the state of Georgia itself reimagined the land, from a potential second airport for Atlanta, to a nature preserve, to a horse-riding trail.

These various forms of interaction serve as evidence of the new meanings that the site now embodies in the minds of the people who live within driving distance of it, and those on the internet who delve into conspiracy theories. These new meanings are central to understanding how the legacy of the failed atomic aircraft and the testing conducted into its feasibility live on in the modern era.

⁶⁰ Ryan Watkins, “Exploring North Georgia’s Area 51,” RootsRated, January 3, 2017, <https://rootsrated.com/stories/exploring-north-georgia-s-area-51>.

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AWARDS

Departmental Honors, University of Kansas

During my undergraduate career I received departmental honors from both departments that oversaw my major coursework including the American Studies department and the History department. Each of these awards required a more rigorous coursework than required for graduation and an individually driven research project.

EXPERIENCE

Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA

Graduate Teaching Assistant

August 2019 – Current

- Develop course curriculum that fit the standards outlined in university guidelines.
- Create assignments with measurable learning objectives and provide feedback on written work.
- Provided guidance and mentoring to tier 1 technical support engineers.
- Utilized online collaboration software including Zoom, Collaborate Ultra, and Desire 2 Learn to provide individual guidance to students.

Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA

Graduate Research Assistant

May 2020 – July 2020

- Performed preliminary primary document research for Dr. Tom Okie's newest project on environmental history.
- Utilized tools from university databases to archival finding guides to locate potential sources of value.
- After completing individual research, utilized collaboration software including Microsoft Teams, Zotero, and One Drive to share findings and created a list of annotated sources for the professor to use for further research.

EDUCATION

Kennesaw State University, Spring 2021 (anticipated)

Master of Arts in American Studies

GPA: 4.0

University of Kansas, Spring 2019

Bachelor of General Studies in American Studies and History
3.64

GPA:

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

KSUnited, Kennesaw, GA
2020

January-February

- Helped organize direct action centered around on campus Martin Luther King Jr. event.