

Exploring the History and Implications of Toxicity through St. Louis: Performance Artist Allana Ross and the “Toxic Mound Tours”

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On a chilly day in early April 2018, a group of sixteen people and one lovable dog met at a coffee house in St. Louis, Missouri, in anticipation of the “Toxic Mound Tour.” Online, the tour was advertised as a performance art piece and an “educational field trip” to “see the realities of the landfill and other contaminated places west of the city.”^[1] When our tour guide, performance artist Allana Ross, arrived, she was easy to spot in her khaki colored park ranger clothing, even without the “Toxic Mound Tours” sign she held. As we gathered around, she quickly introduced herself, then introduced her assistant and their dog, both of whom were outfitted in matching green jackets for the occasion. Before the tour began, the performer passed out tour brochures and white face masks to the group gathered around her. Most of us in the audience looked at each other with slightly worried expressions before she admitted that we did not need to wear masks for our safety, as our stay in each of the five locations would be brief. Even still, they served as a constant reminder of where we were going and the gravity of the area’s toxic legacy. As the contaminated areas we planned to visit were spread out across the greater St. Louis area, we were encouraged to introduce ourselves to one another and carpool. And just like that, we traveled to the first destination on our toxic tour.

In her book, *Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the United States*, Jan Cohen-Cruz states, “A community-based production is usually a response to a collectively significant issue or circumstance. It is a collaboration between an artist or ensemble and a ‘community’.”^[2] The source is not the artist, but the community that surrounds the artist.^[3] For Ross, community is defined in two ways: the people and the environment. In part, the community is defined by the suburban areas south and west of St. Louis and the residents who lived or live in/around the areas affected by contamination. Ross’s community-based work is “less about homogeneous communities and more about different participants exploring a common concern together,”^[4] the common concern being the past, current, and future impacts of the toxic sites on the people who reside nearby. However, Ross’s performance not only elevated the significance of place/environment but also stressed the importance of being in each space—to explore it and experience it—as central to her approach. In her artist statement, she writes:

I am questioning our relationship to nature itself—the culture of nature that we teach to each other through museum diorama, through titillating landscape calendars and all-expense-paid eco-adventures. A public tour of the mounds is a method of activating the viewer outside of the gallery setting as a participant in the re-invention of the culture of nature.^[5]

Ross grounded her performance in place, reaffirming Cohen-Cruz’s definition of community-based performance as “a local act in two senses: a social doing in one’s particular corner of the world and an

artistic framing of that doing for others to appreciate.”[6] Ross privileged the environment itself and the lasting effect(s) that humans have had on the ecosystem(s) of the area. Her piece worked within the realm of environmental activism, which brought attention to the human consumption of nature and its subsequent contamination.[7] Additionally, she questioned notions of the “individual” in communities, as the environment affected people in different ways. Seemingly separate individuals become connected through location and the sense of belonging in a community. To explore toxic places, we are asked to think about the surrounding community and to consider what it must be like living there. In this essay, we explore how Ross’s performance uses place and environment, as well as a historical understanding of the sites, to illuminate the lasting impacts of environmental contamination and the very real effects it has had on local communities through the five sites on her Toxic Mound Tour.

Since the 1960s, performance scholars including Richard Schechner, Una Chaudhuri, Elinor Fuchs, Wendy Arons, Stephen Bottoms, Ric Knowles, and Theresa May, among others, have theorized the practice of performance known as environmental theatre and site-specific performance, as one rooted in the place, and perhaps even the community, in which the performance occurs.[8] Tim Cresswell describes place as:

constituted through reiterative social practice—place is made and remade on a daily basis. Place provides a template for practice—an unstable stage for performance. Thinking of place as performed and practiced can help us think of place in radically open and non-essentialized ways where place is constantly struggled over and remained in practical ways.[9]

Furthermore, as Nick Kaye writes, site-specific art is the “exchange between the work of art and the places in which its meanings are defined.”[10] “Key to this,” as Baz Kershaw states, “becomes understanding how performance is an integral part of global ecology and eco-systems.”[11]

Looking at the scholarship of Nicola Shaughnessy and Laura Levin as lenses through which to examine toxic tours allows us to further contextualize the importance of each tour site as both the set and setting. Shaughnessy looks at the possibility of “place as an event” through which the “[s]ite and place are also integral to visual and live arts practices which have moved beyond the quiet curbs of gallery spaces, to question who art is for, where it can be staged and to explore the experience of spectatorship.”[12] Ross’s attempt to “[activate] the viewer outside of the gallery setting”[13] is thus attempting to “contribute to the process of making space meaningful through practices which explore (and challenge) how we experience the environment we inhabit.”[14]

Ross’s work can be also interpreted through Laura Levin’s concepts of “environmental unconsciousness” and her discussions of camouflage. Levin’s discussion of place-based, environmental performance engages with the idea that environment becomes a part of the performance that cannot be overlooked: “recognizing the independence of the non-human is not simply a philosophical project but also a political one ... This framing of site-specificity provides access to ... ‘environmental unconscious,’ rendering perceptible those aspects of environment that we habitually engage but routinely overlook.”[15] As such, Ross’s tour invited us into these spaces that are overlooked, whether because they have been remediated into consumable spaces or because they were so unassuming that no one realizes their significance.

In recent years, there has been greater public interest in ecoadventure and ecotourism, which seek to counteract or eliminate the wastefulness of traveling by combining experiences with environmentally friendly and/or sustainable practices.^[16] From a performance perspective, Scott Magelssen's scholarship highlights recent trends in the tourism industry that "[implement] attractions that privilege explicitly performative participation by immersing tourists in living, fictive scenarios."^[17] This move towards more "authentic" experiences of tourism includes participants taking on a character and getting into the action, a move away from the passive tourism experiences that ask visitors to see and observe and then to depart without much interaction with the location.^[18]

For a group of strangers to take a toxic tour, we had to be willing to confront and interrogate our own ideas of health and safety, and take on, even for a few hours, the environmental risk that others are asked to undertake every day. Here, the place is central, and rather than being given a part to play, people on toxic tours are not in simulated environments; they are asked to navigate action as it comes. Contaminated places are most often found in low income and minority communities, existing away from and outside of the dominant culture, and as such, they have been referred to as sacrifice zones where both people and waste are pushed to the margins and seen as dirty, undesirable, contaminated, and/or not valuable.^[19] Phaedra Pezzullo argues toxic tours typically "are noncommercial expeditions into areas that are polluted by toxins," and are often led by community members, many of which may be sick, in hopes that doing so will raise awareness and lead to social change.^[20] By willingly entering places that may be harmful, toxic tours not only challenge traditional notions of tours and/or being a tourist, which is most often associated with travel, beauty, pleasure, but they also blur the lines between "nature" and "culture," acknowledging the ways in which each influence one another.^[21]

To take Ross's toxic tour, then, is to use performance to subvert existing ideas of toxic tours as well as place and location. First, Ross did not take on the persona of someone who was sick, but instead took on the role of an authoritative outsider. She took on the dress and authority of a park ranger or nature guide, a figure generally understood as one tasked with expertise, but also one with knowledge of historical significance of place and the importance of the connection between humans and the land that sustains them. Assuming the role of expert was a particularly meaningful move in part because of our culture's reliance on experts to help define what is safe/unsafe. Her character acted as our guide not only in traveling to each location, but also in guiding the audience through the experience: where to walk, where to look, the important features worth noting, and the site's historical background, as it was often difficult to determine the significance of each place without her expert eye. Her character was, in fact, the only "artificial" part of the performance; the audience and the locations we visited were very much real. Second, the tour took us to sites in various stages of remediation; in some cases, the very notion of toxicity and contamination remained contested, as there were widespread disagreements about the safety of the sites, but in other cases a former contaminated site had been transformed into a park for public enjoyment. At each location she interwove local history into her performance, gathered from both official government documents and the stories of residents. Finally, rather than being in marginalized communities and spaces, the tour stops were in predominately white and/or working-class neighborhoods. This is notable because unlike typical cases of environmental uncertainty, these sites have gained greater attention simply because these communities are thought about as safe, clean, and respectable places.

Almost all in attendance were from the greater St. Louis area and most lived in communities relatively close to a specific site and attended the tour because they had not actually physically visited the sites. Everyone learned about the tour through an advertisement in a local Facebook group that discusses issues

of community, toxicity, health, and safety, so attendees brought with them varying degrees of knowledge. The stops on the tour are public and can be visited independently, but Ross provided the background and historical significance of place which is so often hidden. Additionally, her performance as an expert, which was informative as much as it was paternalistic, provided a feeling of protectiveness, as the group explored these largely unknown to them sites.

OUR GUIDE

Unlike the audience members who wore basic, contemporary clothing, bundled in coats and scarves for the chilly, rainy day, Ross donned a wide-brimmed hat and an olive-khaki button-up shirt tucked into khaki pants. A wide brown belt and hiking boots completed her ensemble. While not exact in its replica, it was culturally recognizable as a costume reminiscent of those worn by park rangers in a US context. However, Ross called herself an “urban ranger” because it was not the vast wilderness or sprawling desert she guided us through; it was the suburban space around us. Instead of the park insignia or flags that adorn the uniforms of federal park workers, Ross’s “uniform” had only two embroidered patches: a colorful taco in front of a variation of the nuclear atom symbol and a skull with a ranger’s hat similar to the one worn by Ross herself. Given the hazardous and dangerous history that surrounded the sites on the tour ahead, the patches spoke not only to the macabre reality of touring such locations, even if for the purpose of raising environmental awareness, but also to Ross’s personality. As a ranger is tasked with the protection and preservation of lands for public use, Ross tasked herself with raising local awareness “[b]y inviting the audience to consider the history of these sites in a safe space removed from their threats—to peruse a brochure, to grab a postcard, to plan a visit.”^[22] In doing so, she asked that we “reconsider [our] consumption of nature,” both in terms of the way these sites were contaminated by human interference and now, as nature had reclaimed, albeit artificially, the land for parks and recreation.^[23]

As there was considerable distance between sites, Ross created a Spotify playlist for the drive, entitled “Atomic Musical Collection.” The playlist, which played in the background, served as an intermission of sorts where the audience could reflect on the tour as it progressed.^[24] Like a true guide, Ross provided a map with the “attractions” clearly marked, and we started an approximately five-hour tour organized in a caravan, all following Ross’s white SUV with a large sign on each side emblazoned with “Toxic Mound Tours” and the signature atomic star that adorned all of her materials.

STOPS ALONG THE WAY

Like many industrial cities in the U.S., the greater St. Louis area has a long and contested history of sites contaminated from a wide breadth of industrial activities. Four out of the five sites on the tour corresponded to St. Louis’ involvement with WWII and Cold War weapons production.

Site #1: Times Beach, MO

The first stop on our tour was Route 66 State Park, formerly Times Beach, MO, a small resort town about thirty miles outside of St. Louis. In the early 1970s, the entire town became contaminated when its twenty-three miles of roads were sprayed with dioxin-contaminated waste oil, and it later became one of the nation’s first Superfund sites.^[25] In the early 1980s, Congress passed “The Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act” (CERLA), most commonly referred to as the “Superfund,” which created a tax on the chemical and petroleum industry.^[26] The money generated by

this tax was then used to clean up abandoned hazardous waste sites across the nation. In 1982, Times Beach was evacuated and residents were permanently relocated due to the high-level of contamination. Just a few short years later, the city was deemed uninhabitable and disincorporated by the state. As remediation was underway, all houses and buildings in the town were demolished and buried under a large mound at the park. Now, all that is left of this once thriving community is a large grassy mound, the faint outline of streets and roads hardly visible in parts of the park, and the last remaining building which now serves as the park's visitor's center.[\[27\]](#)

The Superfund program has been met with widespread criticism since its inception from both industries and communities. As a result, in 1995, the tax was not renewed and “significant limits were put on EPA's [Environmental Protection Agency] ability to perform cleanup work itself, and an increasing percentage of cleanups [were] being performed by PRPs [Potentially Responsible Parties]. EPA focused activity during this period and onward on ensuring that PRPs perform most of the cleanups, thus, saving dwindling public funding for government oversight of private actions.”[\[28\]](#)

The former Times Beach town is now Route 66 State Park, and visitors use it as a recreational space for biking, walking, and running, among other activities. Save for a few informative signs at the entrance of the park, the history of this location and community has mostly been erased. Upon arrival, we laughed nervously in the safety of the parking lot, struggling to reconcile the location versus our safety: it did not *look* harmful. From where we stood, we could see a bathroom building near the park entrance and a wooden sign with site information, including guidelines for dogs on leashes and a map of the “Inner Loop Trail.” Ross gathered us around to give an overview of the site before we officially visited the mound.

The mound was to our left as we entered, but Ross had to point it out to the tour. It was an unassuming hill covered in the shoots of early-spring grass, not as we expected. It could be easily ignored by visitors who were unaware that the contents of a town were buried underneath. Our guide instructed the group to walk to the top of the small hill, which turned out to be deceptively long. We gathered there as Ross provided information on how the dioxin-contaminated waste was introduced into the area and the amount of waste that was under our feet. On the far end, Ross pointed out a small fenced-in area with various pipes coming out of the ground, which many of us missed and/or did not know what it was. Ross explained that it was a gas extraction well for the buried waste at the site. Here, Ross's performance speaks to Levin's idea of the “environmental unconscious,” which “[renders] perceptible those aspects of environment that we habitually engage but routinely overlook.”[\[29\]](#) It was easy to overlook our environment and the significance of a location like Times Beach, as it was the oldest site and had been nearly completely erased into its new form: a park. The mound that contains the Dixon-contaminated town is just a hill. Thus, Ross's performance, retelling of the history, and authoritative approach as “urban ranger” reconstructed the town for her audience, so that we engaged with the location as more than its park exterior. She brought our environmental unconsciousness to the fore in order to restore the site, in our imaginations, and challenge our initial perceptions of the space.

The site is open to visitors daily from dawn to dusk, and many visitors take advantage of the trails, many of which are parts of the old roadways, the same ones that were once sprayed with dioxin. Many may not recognize that the uninhabitable nature of this area for day-to-day community life resulted in its transformation into a park which poses little risk for temporary visitors. Instead, we were faced with nature as it has been remade, as Ross said, as all evidence of the contamination was buried, out of sight, in the mound.[\[30\]](#) What was once a place where people lived is now a place for visitors to walk their

dogs, gawk at the history of the town if they happened to stop by one of the parks signs, and then leave, almost without a trace. As such, we had to be taught to see the park for both what it once was and what it is today.

Site #2: Coldwater Creek

The second stop on the tour was a combination of several sites with ties to Cold War era weapons production. Radioactive material made its way to the St. Louis area during the 1940s when Mallinckrodt Chemical Works, a downtown company, was commissioned to be a part of the top-secret Manhattan Project.[\[31\]](#) The project's ultimate aim was to create the world's first atomic weapon, and Mallinckrodt was tasked with purifying uranium. The project was unlike any task undertaken by the State, and to complete the work quickly and away from prying eyes, it had a top-secret security clearance which circumvented typical democratic decision making mechanisms by merely removing the project from public scrutiny.[\[32\]](#) Many of the workers themselves were unaware of the material they were working with and many would later develop cancer and other related diseases.[\[33\]](#) As the project was underway, a great deal of radioactive and/or hazardous materials were used, and much waste was generated. With limited space to store the materials and waste downtown, a property west of the city was used.[\[34\]](#)

The property, referred to today as the St. Louis Airport Site (SLAPS), was a twenty-one acre tract of land near the St. Louis Lambert International Airport.[\[35\]](#) The western edge of the property bordered Coldwater Creek, a fifteen-mile creek that snakes through the backyards of various neighborhoods, before emptying into the Missouri River.[\[36\]](#) The site stored "mountains" of radioactive and hazardous waste in open air conditions for almost two decades.[\[37\]](#) As a result, radioactive waste made its way into the creek before it was later sold to a company from Colorado, which dumped whatever materials were deemed not valuable enough to transport into the local West Lake Landfill.[\[38\]](#)

Our second tour location was near the airport and the creek. However, on the way, Ross brought us to the building housed by government officials of Formerly Utilized Sites Remedial Action Program (FUSRAP). In 1974, the federal government created FUSRAP, which was tasked "to identify, investigate and clean up or control sites throughout the United States that became contaminated as a result of the Nation's early atomic energy program during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s." [\[39\]](#) In addition to the creek, landfill, and Weldon Springs location, there are over 100 identified contaminated sites around the St. Louis Area recognized by the Army Corps of Engineers and the EPA.[\[40\]](#) While the EPA and Army Corps have remediated many of the sites, there are still some that either still need remediation and/or are contested. Regardless, the EPA maintains that these sites are safe,[\[41\]](#) including the landfill, but many residents believe they are experiencing negative health impacts and have created a Facebook group to share information and contest expert claims of health and safety. It was in this Facebook group that our "toxic tour" was advertised.

Once arrived, we parked our caravan of cars along the side of the road, which was lined mostly by warehouse buildings in proximity to the St. Louis Airport. Here, Ross spoke about the significance of FUSRAP in the area and provided details on what became of the creek's cleanup operation. While there, a Hazelwood police officer approached in a car. The arrival of a law enforcement officer made the audience members nervous; this was an unplanned portion of the tour. Keeping with her character, Ross introduced herself as an urban ranger to the officer, who was curious why a group such as ours was in the

area. The officer seemed interested, told us to be safe, and left the scene without causing a disruption to the audience.

Here, the location of the FUSRAP building is reminiscent of Cresswell's concept of place, where we can "think of place in radically open and non-essentialized ways where place is constantly struggled over and remained in practical ways."^[42] The location of the FUSRAP building is indeed a place made and remade by history and perception. With the creek remediation considered complete, the weathered steel building that houses FUSRAP seemed to blend into the warehouse buildings surrounding it. Our perception was altered, remade, by Ross's expert navigation of the site, however the building's history had not been erased as with the previous site, and thus it was easy for our group to see and understand the significance as Ross directed our attention and shared the history of the location. The meaning of the place is, as Cresswell argues, "performed and practiced"^[43] through our interaction with the guide outside of the chain-link fence that surrounds it. As such, without being on the tour with us, the Hazelwood officer had a different concept of the place's significance than those of us who listened intently to Ross's guidance, even though we were just down the road from the mouth of the infamous Coldwater Creek. However, the presence of authority outside of the FUSRAP location felt significant, as it was a reminder that the place we inhabited during the performance is also a part of the larger ecosystem of the area.



Figure 1. FUSRAP site, April 8, 2018, (Photo by author)

Soon after this interruption, the audience members were back in their cars, as we traveled—briefly this time—to our next location: Coldwater Creek. Like the FUSRAP location, this site had not been reimagined and fully transformed into a park or something else. This space was not inviting; there were no sidewalks, no facilities, and nowhere to park, and the mouth of the creek was unassuming and littered with garbage. We would not have known it was a location of significance without our guide to inform us of such, but it was easy to imagine it as a contaminated space. As with the FUSRAP building, the meaning of place is “constantly struggled over and remained.”^[44] Those living along the creek have a clear perception of place while those simply driving may not upload that same definition of place. However, the performance at this location is pushed further when applying Shaughnessy’s lens of location-based performance. Shaughnessy argues that approaches such as Ross’s tour, “engage in the making of place and spatiality ... Thus in site responsive work, where space is made meaningful as place through encounters between performers and spectators/participants, there is a potential to transform our perceptions of the performed environment.”^[45] Ross’s interactions with the audience at this site—encouragement to explore accompanied by careful warnings of caution that pointed out debris and her now established convention of beginning with the historical significance of the site—assisted in solidifying the meaningful nature of the site for the group gathered around. Thus, Coldwater Creek was indeed transformed into a place made meaningful through Ross’s responsive performance.

Large cement barriers, like those used to direct traffic on highways during construction, guarded the creek, prohibiting us from getting too close. There was a sense of nervousness among participants while approaching the creek. We were all aware of the historical contamination of the area, but did not expect to come into contact with the discarded things of today, like broken glass, scraps of paper, and discarded plastic bags. We peered into the murky water, knowing that it had been decontaminated, but the lasting uneasiness was still there for the audience members. Some climbed over the barriers, but not for long, before coming back over to the side that felt “safe.” Once gathered around, our guide talked about how it looked like a place to avoid, though it borders many people’s backyards and was once a place where children played. Before people knew it was contaminated with radioactive waste, the creek, which was prone to flooding, was thought of as a nuisance when rising water entered basements and yards. Now both former and current residents worry, and in some cases believe, that they were exposed to harmful contaminants which have negatively impacted their health.

Under FUSRAP, the creek underwent, and continues to undergo, remediation, but cleanup was not extended beyond the creek into the private properties along the creek’s edge. While seemingly unremarkable, the location exudes a negative atmosphere, so much so that this was the only stop on the tour that audience members whispered to each other and refrained from openly talking at the site. While the town of Times Beach was given renewed purpose after the cleanup project was completed—an opportunity for renewed recreation—the same could not be done for the miles of this creek that remained mistreated and contaminated, at least in this area, hidden from sight unless you know where to look or were/are affected by it.

Site #3: Carrollton

The next stop on our tour was the former Carrollton subdivision in Bridgeton, MO. Once one of the largest subdivisions in the area, the community was bought out in the 1990s to make room for a new runway at the airport.^[46] However, the airport expansion fell through and the community was demolished anyway. Former residents now question if there were other explanations as to why their

homes were destroyed, as it is now known that the subdivision was located between a radioactive creek and a radioactive landfill.

Entering the area that used to be Carrollton was surreal. The tree-lined streets of the community were inhabited not long ago, and the remnants of human consumption of the land were everywhere. The roads that moved through the area were complete with turnoffs, driveways, and sidewalks, as if the homes were lifted from the earth without a trace. The area was also littered with trash, mattresses, furniture, and beer cans, showing that people had been there recently and/or used Carrollton as a dumping ground. After driving deep into the once-vibrant community, we parked just on the other side of a steel gate, complete with a sign that read, "Road Closed. No Trespassing. Property of the City of St. Louis."

Once we stepped out of our cars, the evidence of human intervention was even more present. We were careful not to step too near an open, uncovered sewer. Telephone poles and electric wires still stood along the street. Ross led us on foot to a clearing, which once was a yard, where the group took a break to talk and to decompress after the first half of the tour. Here, we gathered around a blanket for snacks of cookies, clementines, and hot tea that she prepared. We spent the time talking with the other audience members and walking around the general area; we were especially struck by the non-native plants clearly planted as landscaping, including a wall of bamboo, yucca plants that decorated the ends of what used to be driveways, and carefully placed evergreens that had outgrown their hedge-like purpose. By this point in the tour, we had developed a level of comfort with Ross and the rest of the audience members present. We had existed in "dangerous" spaces together and embodied a shared experience with each other and with our host, reflecting Shaughnessy's idea that environmental theatre's exchange between performer and audience allows for "a transfer of bodily sensations ... which affects the participants, creating a felt exchange, an embodied experience."^[47] We had shared the experience up to this point, and that experience lead to trust, not simply assumed authority, in our guide.



Figure 2. Picnic at the Carrollton Subdivision site, April 8, 2018, (Photo by author)

After a bit, Ross stood up and talked to the group about Carrollton, which included a discussion of some of the rumors as to why the subdivision was evacuated. The space transformed for us, as we imagined the homes that once stood on this land, not too long ago. After all, “in site responsive work ... there is a potential to transform our perceptions of the performed environment,”^[48] as this too was a location that needed a bit of reconstruction through Ross’s guidance. While the driveways and sidewalks still existed, the outlines of residences that once were, Ross’s expert perspective helped us to reimagine a space that was once a bustling community not that long ago. Our perspective shifted from viewing the area as a dumping ground to recognizing the lives that once centered on the suburban streets of the Carrollton subdivision. Unlike the historical distance between ourselves and the residents of Times Beach, it was easy to imagine the homes, the gardens, and the cars in the driveways. Thus, the meaning of this location was much easier to grasp than some of the others. Perhaps most ominous was a solitary light pole, long disconnected from its electric source. Ironically, Ross pointed out a current public park, built directly adjacent, that could be seen from our resting place. No fence or structure divided the park from the property where we sat, save some overgrown bushes. There was nothing to keep us in, or out, or to delineate the danger, real or fabricated, of the area of Carrollton from the recreational space next to it.

Site #4: West Lake Landfill

The second to last stop on the tour was by all accounts the most well-known site on the itinerary: the

West Lake Landfill. In 2010, the West Lake Landfill became the focus of national attention when it was discovered that a portion of the site was experiencing what experts called a “subsurface smoldering event,” referred to locally as an “underground fire.”^[49] To make matters worse, the landfill was already known to contain illegally dumped radioactive waste. In 1973, a local company mixed 8,700 tons of radioactive waste, containing seven tons of uranium, with 3.5 times as much soil, and illegally dumped it into a local, unlined landfill.^[50] In the 1990s, the landfill became a Superfund site and was added to the National Priorities List, and anti-nuclear activists had been fighting for the complete remediation of the site since the early 1970s.^[51]

Today, the landfill contains both radioactive waste and an underground fire. While the EPA maintains that the site is safe, residents believe they have been experiencing a variety of different health problems.^[52] While much is known about this site, many residents, even those who live relatively close and those curious, have not *physically* gone to it. For many of the residents in the surrounding communities, the first indication that something was amiss and that they even lived near a landfill, was the presence of a chemical-like odor in the air.^[53] The landfill’s existence likely went unnoticed by residents, in part by design, as landfills and industrial sites are strategically placed away from typical routes and neighborhoods.^[54] But in this case, the waste was illegally dumped in a landfill in a densely populated area, and unlike many cases of toxic dumping,^[55] the landfill is surrounded by predominantly white, working class neighborhoods. With greater access to resources, residents have in many ways garnered more media attention than other sites of toxicity.

We felt great anticipation as we drove our car to a stop along a road that ran parallel to the edge of the landfill. Right away, we were met with a warning: “Posted. No trespassing. Keep out.,” informing us to remain on our side of the chain-link and barbed wire fence that ran the perimeter of the site. There were cameras along the fence offering constant surveillance of the area, which alerted the site’s security that our group of tourists was in the area. As we stood gazing across the expanse of the landfill, a pick-up truck pulled up just on the other side of the fence and while it never stopped, it crept slowly by us; clearly, we were being watched. Unlike Pezzullo’s definition of toxic tours that invite people into these spaces to educate the public, the operators at the landfill wanted us to keep out.^[56]

Here, we did not struggle with Levin’s environmental unconscious of the more unassuming sites, as the location was current and alive: we actually experienced it firsthand. This was the only point in the trip where we felt wearing the cheap, white masks may actually be necessary. While the smell was not apparent at first, it soon wafted our direction. Group members remarked on the smell and asked if it was safe to breathe the air. Our guide led the audience along the fence, providing the history of the mound we were here to explore. Not many people would go there given its status as an active landfill, even without the smoldering event that has attracted public attention. From a performance perspective, Levin argues:

In environmental performance, the perspectivalism of the proscenium stage ostensibly falls away, the action no longer enframed within the confines of a single scenic picture; the staging takes place throughout a found or transformed environment. While the traditional spectator is positioned outside of the stage’s pictorial field, s/he is now placed inside of the theatrical picture.^[57]

Being there, we were inserted into the location and could grasp what it would be like to live at the border of the landfill, gaining an understanding of the community’s plight. Ross positioned the tour attendees in

the frame of the performance by carefully “staging” the place through dictating where to stand and directing the audience’s attention through the added element of past and present knowledge, thus allowing the audience to engage fully in the setting of her performance. We felt safer in this place under her guidance and because of the authority of the character she curated.

We were all fascinated by the visceral experience of standing next to the landfill. The mound seemed to breathe as if it was a living organism, given the pipes and mechanisms that allowed for the release of gasses from beneath its surface. It was hard not to be distracted by the seemingly living mound next to us, and we commented to one another that we were almost waiting for it to move. At this the fourth stop on Ross’s tour the impact of human consumption was palpable. This location is still “alive;” it has not yet faced the remediation efforts of the U.S. government and other forces. It was hard to believe that this site exists in the middle of suburbia, with residences on all sides.



Figure 3. Allana Ross Overlooking the Landfill Site, April 8, 2018, (Photo by author)

Before we left, Ross led the audience back up the road, past our cars, to a higher point in elevation that overlooked the landfill. Here, even though we could not see the landfill in its entirety, Our tour guide pointed out different features at the site to help us more fully grasp the gravity of the situation. Ross talked more specifically about the smoldering event, pointing to an area in the landfill where the “fire” is believed to be. We stood looking over the vast expanse of the mound, the green tarp and grass covered areas, and a seemingly endless system of pipes running in and across the surface. As Ross pointed out, it

may be jarring to think of this site as alive, but that is part of the issue: the earth is alive, we just do not always treat it as such.

Site #5: Weldon Springs

Most of our group left the tour after the landfill, leaving only about a third of the original participants. Pulling into a largely empty parking lot, save for only one other car, we had the final stop mostly to ourselves. While the West Lake Landfill gave the impression that every inch of the place was being closely observed and managed, the Weldon Springs site had the effect of being a world set apart, desolate, and otherworldly. Unlike the other sites of the day, which largely blended into their local environments and felt mundane, this site was intended to be a spectacle. Rising out of the largely flat terrain sat what can only be described as a mountain, covered in white-grey boulders. This mound is also a burial site of sorts, but in this case, it contains hazardous and radioactive waste. After WWII, the U.S. expanded its nuclear weapons programs. In St. Louis, production was moved to a 220-acre facility thirty miles from downtown.[58] The plant was in operation from 1957-1966, and in that time, it too generated an expansive amount of radioactive and hazardous waste, which was often stored in pits and quarries on the 17,000-acre property. The site was later remediated by the Department of Energy, and like Route 66 State Park, it was deemed uninhabitable but safe for recreational visitors.[59]

For our tour group, the mound was immediately visible, rising high out of the earth. Today, the forty-five acre and seventy-five foot high mound is a tourist attraction that contains roughly “1.48 million cubic yards of PCBs, mercury, asbestos, TNT, radioactive uranium and radium, and contaminated sludge and rubble.”[60] The site includes a single story metal building which houses the “Weldon Springs Interpretive Center,” a museum and “exhibition hall preserving the legacy of the site, cleanup activities, and natural environment.”[61] Additionally, the site includes the “Nuclear Waste Adventure Trail,” which consists of a path leading to steps to climb the mound. The mention of nuclear waste is the only major connection to its past. Visitors to the mound are invited to explore, to climb to the peak and oversee their surroundings. Weldon Spring has become a local attraction, and it is now the highest peak in St. Charles County.

Unlike the West Lake Landfill from where we had just come, this location invited visitors. Even though it was getting late in the day and the cold was starting to settle in past our coats, we noticed one other person in the park biking along the nature trail that wound its way around the large mound at the park’s center. In this act of bringing environment into the fore, Levin argues that the concept of camouflage of the environment engages “the spatial process by which we engage with and adapt to our material surroundings.”[62] Performance that engages the environment in which it is taking place uses camouflage to “[highlight] the non-human site as itself a performing entity, reminding us that the communication between self and setting is rarely unidirectional.”[63] Here, at Weldon Springs, the mound became the central character of the performance.

It was quite a hike up a long staircase built into the side of what seemed like an endless mound of boulders. Just when we thought we were at the top, the path kept going to a central area. Ross encouraged us to walk the strange terrain, and we spent some time traversing the boulders, looking out over the edge, before heading to the highest peak. At the top, there was an area with benches and metal plaques describing the location, the history, and the cleanup of the area. There was also a diagram of the mound and details as to how it was constructed, including its dimensions. Again, this park is located within a

highly populated, residential area with a local high school visible in the distance, closer than one would hope. Yet, with expanses of trees on all sides interrupted only briefly by buildings, it felt like the mound was secluded in nature. This unnatural place houses such potential danger, and yet we consumed it, temporarily, by being there.



Figure 4. The surface of the Weldon Springs mound, April 8, 2018, (Photo by author)

Both Shaughnessy and Levin highlight an important distinction in Ross's performance: Ross does not engage her audience with a traditionally staged and scripted performance in these chosen spaces. On the tour, she evoked the sites of contamination, but still framed her performance as a tour of these locations, which could change based on the day, time, and audience present in creating her community. Thus, it is important to revisit Magelssen's discussion of tourism when considering Ross's performance. He observes that immersive tourism experiences "are tapping into the potential energies offered by inviting the audience to step through the fourth wall."^[64] Magelssen's exploration of tourism and second-person interpretation^[65] explores the ways spectators inherently become a part of the performance for the purpose of partaking in an immersive experience outside of their own lived experience. With Ross, however, we did not become a character in her performance through the means of Magelssen's second-person interpretation. Rather, we became a part of the community built through performance and empowered by a renewed commitment to the environment/community, as we were not, in fact, complete outsiders to begin with.

We said goodbye to our guide, and kept the knowledge of our experience at the forefront of our minds during the almost two-hour drive home. For a little more than five hours, a group of strangers gathered for Ross's performance as she challenged our perception of these sites as they were consumed, and then reified, after human impact had contaminated the land. Through her tour, Ross asked us to engage with parts of our community that are outside of our everyday experiences, to know "the history of these sites in a safe space removed from their threats," the unassuming danger that sits silently in the open among the housing developments, quiet streets, schools, and strip malls of suburban St. Louis.^[66] Ross encouraged us to confront these lands:

I think that it is important to repurpose the land because we depend on it and are connected to it. There is a limited amount of land and we can't just trash it and abandon it ... if we abandon these places we don't feel the consequences, we don't see that this is a repetitive pattern of behavior that comes from thinking we are separate from the land...so I think reckoning with the disastrous, contaminated, places that we have created is ultimately more beneficial than abandoning them for short term safety.^[67]

Part of our tour, then, was to confront the historical legacies of place and to see how some of these properties are now being used.

Ross's performance connected her audience to places within our community but that are still distant to many residents. Her performance brought attention to the issue of contaminated sites in the areas west of the city. Ross still hosts tours, advertised on local St. Louis-area Facebook groups, that focus on the landfill, Coldwater Creek, and current cleanup efforts. While she carried a brochure and notes containing historical facts and details on each location, Ross did not have a set script. Thus, the performance can change based on the community members present for the experience, guided by where they are able to go, how long they want to stay, and even the weather. The impact of the tour is lasting, as the sensory experience encourages participants to hold onto the images, smells, and sounds of each of the five sites, allowing Ross to achieve her goal of bringing awareness to the contamination of land in the place she too calls "home."

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