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BALANCING SURVIVAL AND DEMOCRACY: TOXIC CITIZENSHIP AND NUCLEAR WASTE IN A ST. LOUIS LANDFILL

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Little research—none of it anthropological in nature—has been undertaken to understand the current events at the West Lake Landfill, which contains thousands of tons of uranium waste products as well as an underground smoldering fire. This study, both anthropological and historical in nature, seeks to understand in a more qualitative way how the West Lake Landfill is affecting its surrounding communities and how this shapes the resulting activism, political rhetoric among residents (especially in a presidential election year), and sense of contested democracy in St. Louis. During 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork, seven in-depth ethnographic interviews and 20 public event observations were carried out, as well as participant observation and archival review. I found that local residents' lives are severely impacted by the Landfill's problems, with both the fire and the nuclear waste eliciting fear and anxiety about potential health issues. Residents can be characterized by feelings of powerlessness, politically and personally, in the face of a large corporation and a government bureaucracy; these both resist the demands made on them by citizens. The discourses of local residents revolve around illness and political disillusionment as they seek to protect themselves and their children through the traditional political process and through activism and protest from what is perceived to be a looming threat. In addition to amplifying the voices and experiences of disenfranchised residents at the West Lake Landfill, this project adds to a wider body of knowledge about democracy, protest, and environmental health concerns in a post-WWII, post-Ferguson St. Louis. As the West Lake Landfill issue remains unresolved, additional information on the Landfill's politics and discontents are useful in the ongoing contestation of the Landfill's future. Furthermore, the project documents a specific case that sheds light on a broader moment of contested democracy in American life and politics.