

# FUTURES AFTER PROGRESS

Hope and Doubt in Late  
Industrial Baltimore

**Chloe Ahmann**



*Futures after Progress*





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INDUSTRIAL BALTIMORE

Chloe Ahmann

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CHICAGO AND LONDON

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*To Victor and Lucy*



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*Futures after Progress*



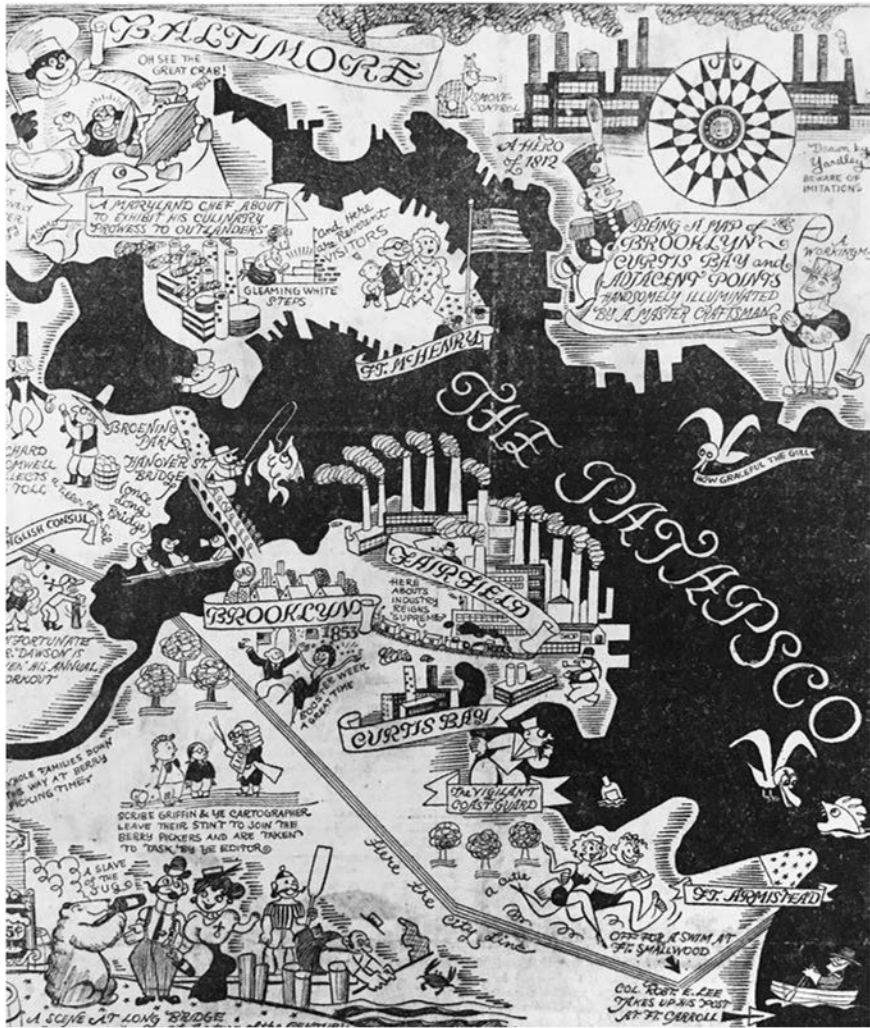


FIGURE 0.1. "Hereabouts, industry reigns supreme." Map of the South Baltimore peninsula by Richard Q. Yardley. Published in Griffin, Gerald. 1933. "Baltimore's Spreading Suburbs VII: Toward the South." *Baltimore Sun*, January 8. Readers seeking a more granular map of the peninsula, its component neighborhoods, and key landmarks should turn to the color insert in the middle of this book.

## The Dust

On January 1, 2016, the *Baltimore Sun* marked the end of the city’s “deadliest year.” In 2015, Baltimore counted 344 homicides—nearly 90 percent of them caused by gun violence.<sup>1</sup> The historically high number of deaths drew condemnation nationwide. Decrying that “too many continue to die on our streets,” the mayor fired the chief of police. Maryland’s governor called the murder rate “disgusting.” And then-presidential candidate Donald Trump blamed Barack Obama, asserting that “Our great African American president hasn’t exactly had a positive impact on the thugs who are so happily and openly destroying Baltimore!”<sup>2</sup>

City, state, and national leaders had less to say when, just two years earlier, researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology published a report quantifying the health effects of prolonged air pollution. The report indicated that, in Baltimore, deaths attributable to long-term air pollution were four times the number caused by homicide.<sup>3</sup>

You would never know this looking at official records. There is not a single death certificate in Maryland that names “air pollution” as the cause of anyone’s mortality. Such papers name the “final” health “event” (heart disease, lung cancer, chronic lower respiratory illness), not its atmospheric causes.<sup>4</sup> Nor do regulators track pollution in a manner that invites an aggregate analysis. Researchers from MIT came to this figure through some arduous arithmetic, combining emissions from point sources tracked in isolation and pollutants regulated one by one.

Even still, there is much that their numbers fail to capture: such as the fact that, within Baltimore, there are twenty-year gaps in life expectancy between neighborhoods sited just miles apart.<sup>5</sup> In the neighborhood that I know best—a heavily industrialized peninsula on the city’s far south side called Curtis Bay—the “average” resident will die before they reach their seventies.<sup>6</sup> Their lives end sooner so as to enable futures elsewhere. But, again, you would never know this looking at official records. You might register the deaths, but not the fundamental reasons for them, nor the steely



logics that make them reasonable. Not the quiet, long-term forces that bind these foreclosed futures to the stable lives and secure worlds of privileged others.

This book turns a sharp eye on those hazy forces, and what it takes for people living with them to build better worlds. It is set in a time still flush with industrial exposures, but firmly *after* the future smokestacks once appeared to promise. And it is set in Curtis Bay: a low-income, multiracial (but tensely integrated) community of about ten thousand people where I have been working since 2010, and which just years before ranked first in the United States for air pollutants released from stationary sources.\* There have been many noxious projects sited here over the past two hundred years—from quarantine stations built to contain the exhalations of contagious people to weapons-making that provisioned two world wars—but today Curtis Bay is chiefly home to fossil fuel transport, waste management, and chemical production.

These developments are not inert. Even children understand this. I first came to Curtis Bay as a teacher of six-year-olds who surprised me by skipping recess, because they found the thick haze made it hard to breathe, which made it hard to run. They lose parents, aunts, uncles, neighbors, grandparents, and friends to respiratory illness at higher rates than almost anywhere in Maryland.<sup>7</sup> But if you ask locals why, you will find that few reply in terms of terminal events. Instead, many shrug before gesturing toward a surface in their vicinity—a car, a windowsill, a clothesline—and postulating that it must have something to do with “the dust.”

“Dust” is a perceptive name for the conditions of life and death in late industrial Baltimore.<sup>8</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s, when union jobs in manufacturing provided stable livelihoods for one-third of Baltimore’s workforce, residents would point to the red debris that coated their belongings and assert it was “the color of money.”<sup>9</sup> Today, when local industry continues to pollute but automation means that it employs less than 3 percent of workers citywide, the dust is a sign that places like Curtis Bay are “neglected” and “forgotten.”<sup>10</sup> Most residents these days scrape by in a postindustrial economy composed of low-wage jobs in food service, logistics, and health

\* When I began this work, greater Curtis Bay was roughly 52 percent White, 38 percent Black, and 10 percent Hispanic or Latino, according to the US Census. I include these figures because race *matters* in Baltimore, given histories of racialized discrimination that meaningfully shape life outcomes. But I consign them to a note because this book treats racialization and demographic change with a finer grain than such snapshots allow, following the movement of people in and out of categories as well as places over two long centuries—through which race itself has been a fickle concept.



FIGURE 0.2. “The color of money.” A Baltimore woman wipes soot from the roof of her car in a photo dated July 8, 1967. *Baltimore Sun* archive.

care, and old-timers will tell you that the haze has thinned with the attrition of industrial lifeways. It has. But still, all manner of things hang in the air. Fumes from tanker trucks that fill up at the region’s oil terminals. Soot from coal piles that tower high above the local park. Emissions from a medical waste incinerator that burns biohazard bags from beyond both state and national borders. And clouds from chemical plants whose managers stave off inquiring minds with platitudes like, “Chloe, everything we make is dust.”

It sounds gentle. And perhaps it feels that way next to the bang of a gunshot. While gun violence happens in a flash, the dust moves cryptically until it settles and amasses, only belatedly announcing the danger in the air—a displacement in time that Rob Nixon shows can make it hard to recognize a harm as violence.<sup>11</sup> Belatedly: sometimes hours after an exposure; sometimes years after a factory shuts down; too murky to pin on any single actor; too distributed to point to as a cause. And too dubious, according to those same plant managers who, when they are not busy spitting platitudes, are throwing up their hands about how hard it is to know and, so, to act on air pollution. Not because they doubt the fact of it but because there is “so much” of it, far too much to “wrap your brain around,” one boss told me



FIGURE 0.3. “Everything we make is dust.” Emissions from a local chemical plant. Photo by the Goldman Environmental Prize, 2015.

on a sweltering spring day, as he explained why regulations should focus on pollutants (molecular entities) not pollution (lived conditions). He said this as he gestured toward the irreducible haze of harmful air as if it were the essence of uncertainty. As if this air were not the clear sign of a problem.

Tucked into this man’s evasion is a presumption about what kind of certainty should count when it comes to making change. This book shows that presumption has a history. And it has challengers, including youth in Curtis Bay who have fought off new polluters on the grounds the dust is evidence enough. They understand the dust is not just what remains in the aftermath of violence. It is the mark of violence present and ongoing, and this much is clear without molecular accounting. They also understand that minimizing it can lead to quite explosive harms. In December 2021, as I worked on revisions to this book, a fireball escaped from a poorly vented tunnel at the area coal pier, sparking a blast that could be felt from miles away. The origin? Soot accrued on surfaces combined with methane gas, and bang: the dust blew up.<sup>12</sup> It was a grave reminder that what is ambient is not always gentle, and what is slow and enigmatic can move fast. Given the normalcy of the conditions that ignited the event, it was also proof that disastrous potential can grow with the everydayness of a problem. Finally, it was an expression of the fact that the residues of past extraction exert their force on futures,



though precisely how is hard to say for now.<sup>13</sup> Locals wonder if the dust that coated cars and speckled skin that day will coalesce into a health “event,” which might only then be legible as “cause.”<sup>14</sup>

The coal pier disaster underscores how hard it is to make the dust political—how hard it is to hold the creeping, cryptic fullness of a problem at the center of one’s vision. We know this. Generations of careful work by critical thinkers from all over the world have shown that “staying with the small cause” (the gunshot, the chemical) is constitutive of modern knowledge.<sup>15</sup> What we know less about—and what recent struggles in Curtis Bay invite us to consider—is how other kinds of knowing might rearrange this common sense. This has never been more urgent. As rivers dry and tempests brew and temperatures rise, as life spans shrink and corporate bosses call it all uncertainty, we need to recognize that claim as a deferral. There are some kinds of certainty we ought not be content to wait for.

There are ways of making change right now, within the muddle.

The campaign that taught me this, and that gradually claims the narrative reins in this analysis, emerged in Curtis Bay around the specter of another smokestack: a development that, if built, would have been the nation’s largest trash incinerator, euphemistically called the Fairfield Renewable Energy Project. The dust was everywhere in talk about this plant, and it became a way of making claims about the future, even as it persisted as a sign of futures past and too far gone.<sup>16</sup> Would residents accept another toxic imposition? Could they reasonably desire something else? Some looked around and shrugged they could have gotten worse. Others hoped they might reprise the “good old days,” when the dark clouds signaled a complex prosperity. But the youth whose organizing won the day have taken on an atmosphere—an air, a mood—to insist that other ways of living here are possible.<sup>17</sup> For a time, the Fairfield Project coalesced a range of diffuse and enigmatic matters long at work in this part of the city. Debates about the plant were therefore never only that. They were debates about how to relate to the future from a present marked by doubt, experiments in hoping after former futures faltered.

The Fairfield Project was exceptional in its capacity to bring things to a head, and it serves as a point of convergence in this book. But I begin with the dust—and specifically with its failure to galvanize the same reaction as gunfire—because it suggests that some forms of violence are so radically distributed across time and space that they are hard to pin down *as problems*. Air pollution is one. Climate change is another. It is an open question how anthropologists, trained to learn in place and in the present tense, should approach these distributed conditions.<sup>18</sup> The question is especially vexing

because these conditions are not shared evenly. It is not everywhere that people breathe the thick exhaust produced from Fordism: that intensely American factory form, with its attendant promises of social progress.

But they do in Curtis Bay. As I show in the coming pages, Curtis Bay has been an infrastructural space for the past two hundred years—a vital cog in many vast machines—and it holds their material remains. It is a six-square-mile site that has been terraformed to provide for the futurity of others. It has quite literally built the American dreamscape, even as so few here get to live that dreamscape out. And so, if we want to grasp the creeping, cryptic fullness of the problems industrial capitalism has left us all to grapple with, it is precisely the kind of place that should be at the center of our vision.<sup>19</sup> You will soon learn that one cannot tell the story of this small peninsula without also telling the story of Baltimore City, American empire, or the multinational corporation. Nor could residents debate the incinerator without implicating all of them.

Every particle here is both vast and eminently local; at once present, prospective, and historical. Together they compose a place that is just as multi-scalar, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot might say: simultaneously a tiny, isolated peninsula and anything but.<sup>20</sup> Read in this light, South Baltimore appears as both object and method for an environmental anthropology equipped to take on the distributed dilemmas of our time. The dust should therefore caution against any reading of this book as a bounded study of South Baltimore. It is a study *from* it.<sup>21</sup>

I also begin with the dust because of its opacity. Readers seeking clarity on the chemical composition of the dust will not find it in these pages. You will find chemicals, but no attempt at parceling the sky in quite this way. One reason is that residents do not have access to this knowledge. There are snapshots, taken from single smokestacks and at single moments, but no catalog that adds up to the totality of the past five generations. The polluters there today are not the same as fifty years ago, and history suggests there will be different ones tomorrow. The records that we have are incomplete, as corporations only track what laws dictate they must restrict, and those laws concern a tiny fraction of the chemicals on market. And all of this assumes that corporations are fastidious, which you will learn is very far from true. There is, in short, no smoking gun that sets up a clean case. If gun violence suggests a palpable relationship between cause and effect, then the dust evokes a more ambiguous world. An ethnography true to this world must sit with uncertainty, not offer refuge from it.

I could try to piece together all the chemicals we know about into a catalog that holds those corporate bosses to account, and indeed I see real value in that work.<sup>22</sup> But it is not my work. I do not want to build a whole





FIGURE 0.4. "There's something in the air." Pamphlet published by the Better Air Coalition, 1976. Smaller text reads, "You can't see it. But it's there. A poison. Floating in the air. And into our eyes, lungs—into our lives." Enoch Pratt Free Library, Maryland Department, VF, Air Pollution.



composed of these component parts. I want to hold a problem-space adjacent to our “chemical regime of living,” which M. Murphy shows loses the atmosphere in its attempts to know the molecule, and doles out solutions that repeat this core misrecognition.<sup>23</sup> If it seems something is missing in an ethnography of the industrial surround that does not apprehend pollution in this way—the way that regulators know it—perhaps we need to ask about that nagging feeling. One core argument of this book is that working toward *that* kind of certainty is what got us in this mess, this air. That progress toward ever more granular modes of reckoning environmental damage is not itself progress toward environmental justice.

Instead, I want to take residents deadly serious in their insistence that “the dust” is where one ought to start a proper postmortem accounting of the industrial age. Not so much a reckoning of industry, which the dust suggests is very much still with us, but of the kind of certainties that industry once promised. Crystalline and comprehensive knowledge of the world, let loose from the stickiness of place. Steady movement toward a “good-and-getting-better life,” as a structuring “expectation of modernity” (if rarely a lived condition).<sup>24</sup> Forever growth, but at nobody’s cost.

If this book tracks the making of an ambiguous environment, then, it also asks how people plant their feet from within the haze kicked up by an aging industrial order: how they cobble together futures after progress loses its solidity.<sup>25</sup> And from here, a quiet space suspended between worlds, it makes clear that the end of *that* hope need not be the end of hope as such.

## Hope and Doubt in Late Industrial Baltimore

I guess what I'm saying is that the future changes.

Angel, thirty-four-year-old White resident of Curtis Bay<sup>1</sup>

Angel brushed dust from her stoop with a few napkins from the diner and invited me to sit, apologizing “for the mess.” We opened our Styrofoam boxes and ate while her kids played. Maresa, Angel’s oldest, hung back while the three boys ran ahead, racing after lights fixed on the coal pier. It was an impossible target, but they seemed to take some pleasure in the chase.

Angel sighed. *Kids are always chasing dreams.*\* She kicked a can and popped a french fry in her mouth. “When we were teenagers, we used to sit here all the time and talk about how Donald Trump was supposed to take over our neighborhood.”

I must have looked incredulous because she nodded as she continued: “It was some kind of rumor. He was supposed to tear down all the factories and build up condos on the water. So for many years—and I still hear it—people have said he’s going to build up Curtis Bay. And we were going to become Curtis on the Bay.”<sup>2</sup>

I think I laughed. It was early 2016, when Trump was in the business of taking over land, not civic institutions, but still the thought of gilded condos on this coast felt out of place. Besides the coal piles that blocked our view of the water and coated every surface with their ominous debris, Angel and I sat amid the quiet fallout of a few American projects: a landfill nearing capacity, several hazardous dumps, a crop of petrochemical plants, some scrapyards, a defunct military depot, a graveyard for old ships, a medical waste incinerator. Even the graveyard lacked the kind of past that might attract a spectacle. It was the silent resting place not for famous boats, but for

\* I use italics when I am paraphrasing an interlocutor. Quotation marks denote direct quotes or very close approximations.

those that “lived a life of anonymous toil” until they sputtered to their end, right here, and stayed.<sup>3</sup> So I snickered at the image of this particular revival, bankrolled by this unlikely hero.

I did not realize, then, that Angel’s story was not about Trump. It was about the mess of want and mourning weighing down the dream of what “we were going to become,” for the “we” who “used to sit here all the time.” It was not about a speculator so much as it was the modest visioning of kids raised at the end of a world and trying hard to conjure futures in its wake.

Because I missed the point, I followed up on the wrong story. A few months after my stoop-side meal with Angel and before Trump’s electoral win, I read about a kindred dream in Gary, Indiana. “It was 1993,” reporters set the scene, “and the New York mogul” was promising to turn a spate of shuttered factories into a shoreside “Shangri-La”—to make the wasteland “great.” What followed was, we now know, fairly patterned: a big pitch, a big deal, a letdown, a lawsuit. Today, Gary has two garish gaming boats and three decades of hard feelings to show for the whole thing. Reporters call it a “cautionary tale.”<sup>4</sup> The caution? Don’t trust a charlatan. But also, check your sense of reasonable desire if you come from a place like Gary, Indiana. The moral? The future is a losing bet in these United States.

I could write a version of that story that lets a reader sit in the space of knowing better, snickering at the prospect of a Baltimore revived. It would conform to a certain picture of postindustrial landscapes as emblems of the past, as spaces out of time.<sup>5</sup> All the makings for that tale exist in Curtis Bay. This is the end of the line for discarded goods, sewage, ships, artillery, stable work, trajectories like progress, and a range of other Fordist fantasies.<sup>6</sup> Toxic exposure has also meant the “erosion of human potential,” in the form of lives cut short and reproductive futures frayed.<sup>7</sup> Things creak to their unspectacular conclusion on this small peninsula; it would seem to be an ending in itself. At least, it would seem to be a cautionary tale about chasing that twentieth-century dream of perpetual motion: the kind of place that critical theorists have in mind when they instruct us to “abandon the illusion of a future,” a modernist fantasy that only ever produced exploitation.<sup>8</sup>

Now, it is true the future can be cruel. In the United States, its brutal pull was particularly marked in factory towns, where generations sacrificed their health to fuel the march ahead—perhaps nowhere more than here, in Curtis Bay.

This peninsula has long been organized by efforts to govern the uncertain future. When immigrants flocked to the nineteenth-century city, this place served as a quarantine zone where public health officials separated



sickly foreign bodies from the downtown population. Later, workers here built ships and stockpiled weapons to arm soldiers bound for war, and defense experts used this place to stage supplies for a potential World War III. Today, South Baltimore is a low-income, multiracial community that hosts chemical production, fuel transport, and much of the city's waste.

One thing these disparate efforts share is a propensity to foment local harms in service of a broader future stability—of progress—be it by protecting public health, promoting national security, or providing for a functioning state. Their cumulative effect has been a history of chemical exposure that cuts life short for residents who suffer heart disease, lung cancer, asthma, chronic bronchitis, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) at elevated rates.<sup>9</sup> Poverty wages and poor health care make these conditions hard to treat. The Baltimore City Health Department reports that 50 percent of the deaths in this community are “avertable.”<sup>10</sup> So if one wanted to prosecute the future, then this would seem to be a winning case.

I could write a book like that—enroll in a project of devaluing futurity so much that one might sell it off for pennies to a grifter who says that things “cannot get any worse.”<sup>11</sup> And Angel must have worried that I might, because, before we left, she held my gaze and said: *Listen*. “I doubt that Donald Trump is going to save the day.”

“But you never know. I wouldn’t mind if someone came and cleaned up Curtis Bay.”

This is not a book about Trump. He is, as ever, a distraction. This is a book about the kind of future-making that coheres on the edges of grand narratives: the kind I missed in Angel’s memory that day. When I say *future*, I mean a sense of what is possible, worth hoping for, worth working toward, more than I mean some time off in the distance. I mean the future as a political object, and that means that abandoning it has enormous stakes.<sup>12</sup> That includes abandoning it to the sort of career speculators tasked with managing the future as a resource—statisticians and statesmen, tycoons and technocrats—who drive so many narratives about the world to come. These characters have done enormous harm in Curtis Bay. What they have not done, though, is exhaust the future as a field of practice. Not even here. This much is clear when one looks past the futurists and thinks, instead, from a set of speculative lifeworlds taking hold in their peripheral vision that are tentative, intimate, and everyday.

That these lifeworlds spring from a site more often figured as a relic does

not mean they are outmoded. It means that they are prescient: little windows into the shape that hope takes on unstable ground, in an environment wrought by the brash confidence of prior expectations.

Prior expectations: let me sketch the “progress” that produced this environment and the “after” this book takes as its context. In these pages, progress names a grammar that organized the rise of industrial capitalism, even as it disorganized so many people’s lives. It is, by many counts, a global tale, but one I tell from the United States.<sup>13</sup> Here, progress specifically named two coupled promises. First, that one could expect ever-sharper knowledge of the future; this is progress in its technocratic guise. Second, that one could expect steady movement toward the good life; this is progress as a Fordist aspiration. Not everyone was wrapped into the “we” of these two paths. They were raced, classed, and spatialized in ways this book explores. But progress was as much a structuring grammar for those it favored as for those it structured into early death. This much we can see from Curtis Bay. Yet it is hard to grasp if one adopts the futurist’s position because, as I will show, future-making in the United States has long hinged on managing doubt through *dissociative* projects that close themselves off from the mess of life as it is lived. The early chapters of this book track how producing sharper knowledge of the world to come has meant producing grave uncertainties about the air in sites like this.

Progress: it has given us the dust and disavowed the same.

Enter the “after,” less of progress as a lived condition than as an orienting premise whose contradictions can no longer be contained. Most of this book unfolds in this precarious present where, to borrow words from Zoë Wool and Julie Livingston, the formerly “durable, knowable, fecund” has given way to shaky ground, and the “instability of meaning” is endemic.<sup>14</sup> It is a present unhinged from prior certainties, but not unhinged from futures.<sup>15</sup> People talk about the future all the time in Curtis Bay. Over the years, I have met people there who cower in the face of cataclysmic hypotheticals, people who pine to revive what felt like better days “again,” people who hope against all odds that they can change South Baltimore. When the Fairfield Project wafted in, it kindled other futures still. I watched some locals court the plant in the hope it would bring back a whitewashed past, even “clean up” Curtis Bay—a hope that Angel, a White woman, had alluded to. And I worked with a multiracial group of youth who organized against the plant and for a future of environmental justice.

None of these were endings. They were prospective efforts percolating in the aftermath of industry, signs of life and hope in spite of damage.<sup>16</sup> All of



them were aspirations after progress. Indeed, if progress implies a steadfast march ahead, fueled by brusque conviction in one's direction, then Angel's words were more equivocal: "You never know." There is a different grammar of futurity emerging in this afterworld, where hope has dropped into a small-s speculative space. This is hope in the key of doubt, or, futurity recast in the subjunctive.<sup>17</sup>

The "subjunctive" is a big word for a modest proposition. That proposition is that conjecture has become a *mode of life* in late industrial Baltimore. I use the big word because it is, for better or for worse, the name for our most speculative grammar. We speak in the subjunctive mood to register uncertainty while voicing suppositions of all kinds—wants, predictions, hypotheticals, and so on. Consider the hedge built into the subjunctive verb form that begins this sentence: "Were I to get a job, I would crawl my way back to the middle class." Often, English speakers tuck this hedge behind an "if," as in: "If you build it (a condo, an incinerator, a just and vibrant vision), they will come." More ambivalent than progress and even than futurity, the subjunctive concedes a speaker's doubts about a given situation. But then it squeezes life into an actionable premise—a world "as if"—to focus on.<sup>18</sup>

The subjunctive is thus speculative in both senses of the term: it enables daily acts of visioning life as it might be, not merely as it is; and it works through praxes of self-conscious guesswork. The latter make the former possible. Put differently, the subjunctive tethers *how we know* to *how we hope*, through quiet premises that steady one's terrain where knowledge has no solid ground.<sup>19</sup> In this book, such premises are not merely the building blocks of language. They are presumptions about the shape of reasonable desire in the moment between worlds.<sup>20</sup>

They are, in short, the building blocks of politics.

I root this claim in a late industrial place where doubt is the condition of, not the exception to, so many people's lives, and where many consequently live this grammar. But it may be true wherever people hope and plan in full view of uncertainty.<sup>21</sup> About the path that lies ahead. About the substance of the dust. About how to plant one's feet after old trajectories have capsized and produced irresolution. About how to live with the gnawing, unshakeable uncertainty that lingers at the end of things—progress among them.

Progress, you might recall, was an orienting premise, too: a common sense that commandeered an era. Whatever will come next is only just emerging, and many premises are inchoate at once.<sup>22</sup> Slowing down and taking stock before one calcifies into a normal is therefore an ethnographic task of paramount political importance. It matters which hopes set the boundaries of the sensible and which get cast off as the stuff of idle dreams.<sup>23</sup> It matters whose hopes appear reasonable—and we might even ask if rea-

sonable is what we want to be, as we set off from this world and work to seed a better one.

This is precisely the contest taking place today in Curtis Bay: a contest over what futures are worth hoping for and working toward. And, so, this book winds through several speculative lifeworlds inhabited by different groups of people—including those whose hopes I frankly do not share—tending to the ways that they bring order to the possible. In this way, the book participates in the mode of life that it investigates. It does not always offer solid ground, but it does work hard to keep the future open. It practices hope, but in a subjunctive mood where hope and doubt are often hard to parse. It does not reach toward an all-knowing stance from which to see the future clearly, so much as it sits with people trying to make sense of unintelligible worlds and asks how their ways of making sense shape other things: their social lives, their politics.<sup>24</sup>

I ask these questions from a site often figured as a paragon of futures past because I think that figuration is itself a sign of hubris. Because I think the view from Angel's stoop is better understood as a glimpse into the murky world to come. Why? If there was ever a steady push toward certainty, it happened in an "as if" world dissociated from the haze in South Baltimore City. But the problems we have been containing here for generations do not seem so containable these days. It is time to sharpen our peripheral vision.

With hope, we will find more than just a cautionary tale. "You never know." We might find reasons not to give the future up.

## Set-Aside Space

Curtis Bay offers an exceptional vantage from which to ponder futures fostered in the face of doubt—and not just because this place is typically "late industrial." To be sure, it captures many dynamics that cluster underneath this diagnostic term, as described by Kim Fortun: it remains hamstrung by industrial paradigms even while it manifests their failures; it escapes environmental regulation; it is toxic, fractured, hazy, hazardous.<sup>25</sup> But Curtis Bay has also been material to the industrial age. Materially, this small peninsula fueled the industrial project for several generations. Materially, the implosion of that project exists in every particle of dust. I am not being metaphorical at all when I say that Curtis Bay produced the able-bodied worker, built Baltimore City, provided for the US state, and enabled the multinational corporation. Curtis Bay matters because it *matters*. When Angel brushed dust from her front stoop so we could sit, all these matters wafted in front of us.



“Sorry, let me just—” She swept up what she could and invited me to take a seat beside her. I had been to Angel’s home before: enough to know the mess was not her fault. Her living room was immaculate (a feat for a single mother with four kids), but the front porch was a losing battle.<sup>26</sup> It wasn’t usually where she hosted me. But the boys were itching to get out, and it was getting late, and Angel wanted to keep watch.

I met Angel’s kids before she and I crossed paths. In 2010, six-year-old Maresa was a student in my class at the school where I worked my first job out of college. I came to the job through an alternate accreditation program designed to plant idealistic recent graduates in the nation’s “high-needs” schools, where they might “change the future for America’s students.” There are many alternate pathways to teaching in Baltimore, where schools are perennially understaffed, but my program was uniquely awful. Setting aside the presumption city students needed *us* to open paths toward the future, the program hitched a highly moralizing mission to an intensely regimented set of goals and assigned both to an ill-equipped workforce that had largely been recruited over pizza. We were tasked with mass-producing a solution to the “opportunity crisis.” Unsurprisingly, our training also included vicious anti-union propaganda. When I signed my Baltimore Teachers Union card in 2010—joining one of the larger unions in a town where union jobs these days are far too rare—I recall it feeling strangely defiant.

Before I signed that card, I did not particularly want to teach in Baltimore. I was raised in Maryland, a forty-minute drive southwest, and the city felt too close to home for me. But I had been placed there by an algorithm, within an organization where algorithms have divine status, and so the post was not up for debate. Our school-based placements, though, were by interview, not formula: while the program got us through the district door, we had to be hired the old-fashioned way as teachers.

My first trip to Curtis Bay was for that interview, and I recall staring out the passenger-side window of a new friend’s car as we drove south of downtown, across two bridges and along emptying streets. The new friend dropped me off on a hill outside an elementary school where I had come to discuss a fifth-grade social studies job. Within ten minutes, I was hired as a first-grade teacher. The small team that vetted me did not blink at my amateur status. They needed someone for the job as soon as possible, and had not been able to get others to come “all the way down here.” It was my first acquaintance with a distance that could not be squared in miles alone. (As long as that drive felt, it took us only seven miles from the city center.) My second acquaintance with that distance would come from White colleagues in the program who hinted through tense smiles that there was something less “heroic” about teaching far beyond the “inner city.”



It was a geographic code for a demographic point: compared with Baltimore City as a whole—about two-thirds Black and less than one-third White according to the US Census—my school served a historically White, working-class community. I did not know then how key this site had been to *constructing* Whiteness in the city's early days. I did know that demographic change was underway during my teaching years.<sup>27</sup> I also knew that many local Whites resented this, and that children sometimes felt the burden of their ire. Angel told me one day after school that other kids had been discouraged from playing with Maresa “because she's mixed, you know, and let's not forget this is the SOUTH side of the city.” Baltimore is often pegged as the most southern city in the north or the most northern city in the south, depending where one situates the border state of Maryland against this Civil War divide. I presume this was the line on Angel's mind—that she meant the southern part hits hard on this periphery.<sup>28</sup>

Maresa is grown now, a “whole adult,” her mother laughs. But when we met she was a tiny girl with deep brown eyes: quiet, clever, and awfully tidy for a first grader. Every afternoon, she would straighten the pencils on each desk and adjust the pint-sized chairs so they aligned with the linoleum tile. Lots of kids wanted to help prepare the room, but she was the only one I trusted. I soon learned that Maresa was the oldest of four children born in quick succession, practiced in keeping order. As I got to know her family, I came to see these same traits in her mother. Maybe not the quiet part, but definitely the penchant for containment. With no hair out of place and no patience for foolishness, Angel worked to keep the mess in check.

But there we were, taking in the dust accrued on her front stoop, reminded that containment is a futile gesture in South Baltimore.

I find it both disturbing and intriguing that, during my time working at the school, I gave very little thought to air pollution. This even though my students would complain about the dust. I drove from home to school each day along a road dotted with gas stations and “pop shops”—always that same road, ever a creature of routine—but had I diverted slightly I might have understood this haze was no coincidence. I might have noticed that the neighborhood housed a couple dozen smokestacks, or been troubled by coal mountains towering above the park. I might have appreciated that the thickness of the air in Curtis Bay made it easier for me to breathe downtown, or that my garbage traveled there on diesel trucks each week. That I didn't speak volumes about my position, my detachment, and the circumstances that enabled both. I could pass through with relative ease, and, according to my job, I carried promise with me. But Maresa embodied late industrialism. And even as a twiggy six-year-old, she could sense the sep-

aration that marked her hometown as an “other space.”<sup>29</sup> Knowing that I lived downtown, she would often ask me about life “in Baltimore.”

This fraught relationship with Curtis Bay precedes my teaching years. Like countless other immigrants, my ancestors passed through quarantine here on their way to opportunities beyond. My great-great-grandfather, a deserter from the Russian Army who fled to the United States around 1905, rolled cigars for work and made a good-enough life on the east side of the city. His children did a little better yet, and participated in a pattern of racialized succession that led them to Baltimore’s near-northern suburbs.<sup>30</sup>

As for me: I grew up about thirty miles in the opposite direction, on the northeast edge of Washington, DC. I know my family passed this part of town on the highway when we drove to Baltimore to visit relatives a couple times a year. We may have used fertilizer produced in Curtis Bay to green our lawn. It seems likely that the hospital waste from my birth, and my sister’s, and my daughter’s, traveled to this area for burning. Maybe yours, too. Hospitals from as far away as Canada truck their refuse to South Baltimore.<sup>31</sup>

That waste—fleshy matter, polyvinyl chloride plastics, and the like—does not simply disappear. When exposed to scorching heat, it produces potent compounds, like dioxin. Dioxin is an endocrine disruptor: known to reduce fertility, obstruct embryo development, and even cause miscarriages. Angel had one agonizing birth; it is hard to say if dioxin is to blame. It is hard to say if my birth, or my sister’s, or my daughter’s, circumscribed another’s.

I do not detail these complicities in search of absolution. They are not personal failings to be balanced out by singular good deeds. Instead, they tell a story of material intimacy that is eminently structural.<sup>32</sup> That intimacy persists through moments of detachment and displacement, and it cannot be erased by noble intentions. Not even through the “hero work” of teaching. Not even by penning a book about these very problems.

For this reason, in this book, I let myself stand in for the broader structural position of someone whose life is yoked to death in Curtis Bay. Because chances are you, too, are implicated in this structure. When we think in terms of toxic ties, millions of people live within this region’s orbit. There is not really an outside from which to ponder Curtis Bay: just different vectors of relation and complicity, paired with varying degrees of disregard.

My relationship with Curtis Bay underscores a broader point with a much deeper history: that it is possible to depend on Curtis Bay without ever knowing it exists. This is hardly accidental. This region has been *made* as a periphery. Historian Nicole King notes the area’s spatial utility derives from



its strange capacity to be both close and far.<sup>33</sup> As a peninsula situated south of the Patapsco River (from the Algonquin *pota-psk-ut*, or “backwater”; a stolen name for stolen land), it has long been proximate to Baltimore’s key shipping ways, but distant from the same city’s protections.<sup>34</sup> Until 1919, the Patapsco marked the city’s southern border, which meant its laws did not apply here. Some exceptions remained in place even after Curtis Bay became a part of Baltimore.

Given their late and partial inclusion in this municipal whole, locals often say the six past and present neighborhoods that comprise this region—Brooklyn, Curtis Bay, Fairfield, Hawkins Point, Masonville, and Wagner’s Point—teeter off of Baltimore like a “loose tooth.”\* But really they have functioned as the city’s vital organ. In this book, I sometimes refer to these as “the Curtis Bay region,” “the southern neighborhoods,” “the industrial peninsula,” or simply “South Baltimore.” When tending to key differences, including distinct demographic trends, I treat the neighborhoods by name. While White folks claimed much of this peninsula through the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, for example, Fairfield and Hawkins Point were solidly Black enclaves before their residents’ displacement at the tail end of this window. That displacement fractured Black working-class histories here in ways that matter deeply to the story I am able to unfold, as I elaborate later. In other respects, though, these six communities share a history of structured disavowal that makes it suitable to speak of them in common.

That history goes back two centuries, through which I show this area has been zoned out, dissociated, held apart. By *zoned out*, I mean to index the urban planning mechanisms (like zoning) that deem it a proper place to concentrate potential hazards.<sup>35</sup> But I also mean to convey the perceptual politics enabled by this separation. In some ways, it is critical that such a place stays out of thought.<sup>36</sup> For Baltimore City, the state of Maryland, the United States, and corporate bodies that exceed all three, Curtis Bay is infrastructure: an “enabling architecture” best kept in one’s peripheral vision.<sup>37</sup> Maintaining a collective fogginess about what happens here, and who gets hurt, has long made other people’s futures possible.

The production and productiveness of this fog—a conceptual confusion about the dust we opened with—is my focus in the early chapters of this book, which grapple with the questions, *How did we wind up in a present*

\* The only two still peopled are Brooklyn and Curtis Bay. I discuss residents’ displacement from the other four in chapters 1 and 2. For a detailed map of all six neighborhoods, turn to the color insert in the middle of this book.

*where the irreducible haze of harmful air appears uncertain? Where what is palpable is not actionable within the halls of power? For whose profit? At whose cost?* On their way toward an answer, these chapters explore the making of this zoned-out space and reveal how efforts to isolate collective harms incited harms themselves, while forging tools that structure ignorance about the latter.<sup>38</sup> I offer this history here in brief to show that disregard is built into the fabric of the city, sedimented over decades of dissociative projects.

As I conceive it, “dissociation” exceeds the psychoanalytic context, where the term is often used to describe a “rift in the ego” that occurs when one meets dangers that imperil their integrity.<sup>39</sup> I am getting at more than a coping mechanism left to those with little power. I mean dissociation as a cutting of relations so methodical it has become a mode of governance. Here, the term names a labor of containment that tries to calm the chaos of a world beyond control by tending intensely to just one part of a problem, one side of a rift, while detaching from the rest—and a labor of unseeing all the ways that those containments fail.<sup>40</sup> It creates landscapes like the one I saw from Angel’s stoop and shunts them out of sight, so that most can move through life naive about their ties to such a place. In search of ever-sharper knowledge and ever-better lives for publics elsewhere, dissociative projects of all kinds have produced the dizzying muddle of late industrial life on this peninsula. That is, they have produced a toxic atmosphere *and* the knowledge practices that make the dust appear as less than certain danger.

Curtis Bay’s history as a zoned-out place precedes the birth of zoning. It even precedes the neighborhoods’ incorporation into Baltimore. Beginning in the late eighteenth century and continuing through the nineteenth, when the harbor was a major port of entry into the United States, officials used this site for quarantining migrant ships. All this followed the unmitigated spread of disease among native Piscataway and Susquehannock peoples here by European colonists. If contagion was a condition of possibility for “settler futurity” in the Americas, then containment helped secure the urban future.<sup>41</sup> But why was this site chosen for the job? It helps to know that doctors in early Baltimore blamed malicious fogs, known as miasmas, for many maladies, and that winds in Curtis Bay were found to rarely gust toward the city. It was a site where bad airs could conceivably be cordoned off.

This would be a boon for public health. But also: many White elites during the antebellum years worried bad airs could transform the body’s character, including its race, making atmospheric management a racializing project.<sup>42</sup>

From its earliest days as an incorporated city, Baltimore relied on Curtis Bay to do this boundary work.<sup>43</sup> Foreigners—presumed to carry vile exhalations from their homelands—were detained here before entry. When epidemics compromised the city center, officials sent the sick to languish



on this rural margin. Separated from the White laboring public alluded to in “public health,” they could be studied in isolation.<sup>44</sup> They could also be excluded from official death counts. Their spatial and statistical sequestration enabled the development of sharper preventative tools downtown, supporting new forms of future-oriented governance. Though the targets and tactics of this work would shift over the next two centuries, they have consistently hinged on managing doubt through dissociative acts. The first dissociation was the spatial rift achieved along the line of quarantine: the severing of Curtis Bay from Baltimore.

This split would soon scaffold new developments, each in service of securing futures elsewhere, while transforming Curtis Bay into a space of concentrated harm. In the early twentieth century, as concern over contaminating bodies gave way to unease about polluting businesses, Curtis Bay again became a space of exception when it was zoned for heavy industry.<sup>45</sup> This, too, was done in the name of public health, and followed from the legal framework that had sanctioned quarantine. Early sanitation rules had already pushed “nuisance” industries beyond Baltimore’s bounds, and many concentrated here. They remained here even after Baltimore absorbed the area, in a move meant to expand the city’s coffers. In the 1930s, Baltimore’s first use-based zoning ordinance formalized industry’s presence and sanctioned that presence well into the future. City leaders hailed the ordinance as a protective measure, and it surely was for some. Urbanites downtown enjoyed cleaner air because factories collected in the southern neighborhoods. As for the White-ethnic migrants and Black southern transplants increasingly living in this set-aside space—“infiltrating” it, according to the day’s redlining maps?<sup>46</sup> They quickly disappeared into a hypothetical: industrial zoning meant governing the area *as if there were no people here at all*.

Nonetheless, in the ensuing years, Curtis Bay’s population grew in step with industry. Both boomed during World War II, when the federal government conscripted the community to build its arsenal. Composed of warships and explosives and a disciplined civilian workforce, this arsenal would be robust enough to withstand the most spectacular potentials. With these shifts from precaution to preparedness, and from the city to the nation, came shifts in future-oriented governance. As Curtis Bay became subsumed into a national production line managed from afar, oversight turned increasingly abstract: spatial rifts enabled epistemic gaps, which cleaved the factory from its environment. Attention to place and body fell away, replaced with a panoply of charts. Treated as if they captured the totality of life and work on the peninsula, these charts tracked inputs, outputs, hours clocked, bullets clipped, and ships delivered to the naval fleet. Technical experts at the War Department could then measure these numbers against

worst-case scenarios to make decisions about future armament. Efforts to govern Curtis Bay in anticipation of the next attack only grew more speculative as the country transitioned into the Cold War—complete with detailed plans for WWII. Along the way, the region grew more hazardous, but in the present tense and in ways progressively less legible to government.

Over the next few decades, industry expanded while government receded from the southern neighborhoods, and the world became more knowable the less about it experts saw. The rise of formal risk assessment to regulate emissions during the Reagan era threw this problem into sharp relief. It was a prognostic tool, invented to manage tensely coupled mandates: securing corporate health; protecting the environment. The hope was that risk analysis would depoliticize this work by translating the complex realities of toxic exposure into technical puzzles.<sup>47</sup> First, regulators would extrapolate health hazards from rat studies, one chemical at a time. Then, they would weigh projected harms against projected private profits. The process was precise, precisely because it was so narrow. And corporate scientists pushed to keep it narrow, fighting every attempt to regulate the lived environment by instead addressing atomized toxics.

Doubt became a tactic in this fight.<sup>48</sup> There was too much indistinction in the air, corporations warned, especially in places like Curtis Bay. Better to ignore the messy aggregate. Better to treat each smokestack in a vacuum than try to grapple with the dust. Better to split the environment-to-come from the environment-as-lived and not get bogged down by the latter. And so, after a centuries-long progression toward sharper forms of expert forecasting, Angel and I found ourselves in an impossibly foggy atmosphere—one where not knowing pays dividends.

An environment suspended in the subjunctive.

A few key lessons about uncertainty emerge from the creation of this fog. First: there is nothing inherently unclear about this atmosphere.<sup>49</sup> Rather, this book shows that particular configurations of capital and knowledge practice have made it so over a long two hundred years, by shifting the bounds of actionable knowledge. In early Baltimore, attunement to the heady air was a kind of medical expertise, and it prompted massive structural interventions. But today, where expertise is many steps dissociated from the same, attunement to the air presents an obstacle.<sup>50</sup>

Second: uncertainty was no mere side effect of industrial pollution. Instead, this book makes clear that American industrialism rested on an orientation toward intervention that took the uncertain future as its proper object. Though there is a wealth of scholarship on anticipatory governance focused, chiefly, on the ruptures produced by the Cold War, Curtis Bay suggests we are not dealing with something new.<sup>51</sup> To borrow an image from



Ruha Benjamin, doubt was built into the machine through a series of structured misrecognitions.<sup>52</sup> More than that, governing bodies at several scales over the *longue durée* drew power from the promise that they could manage that doubt. Doubt served as an authorizing problem.

A third lesson is that the long-ness of this *longue durée* obscured toxic exposure. This was due in part to the lag between cause and effect that marks many diseases of toxicity, but also to the diminution of the present achieved under American industrialism. The projects I have introduced kept all eyes on the abstract future, instead of the “obscurely long-term” violence accruing on the ground, which remained beneath the threshold of cognizable catastrophe.<sup>53</sup> (This except, of course, when things blew up.) The story of South Baltimore is therefore also the story behind a particular “regime of imperceptibility,” M. Murphy’s phrase for specific modes of inattention that consign some problems to the less-than-visible.<sup>54</sup> It is the story of collective zoning out, enabled by the expulsion of burdens to this set-aside space and by temporal displacements that muddled recognition of those burdens’ consequences. The slim peninsula that gets disappeared along the way might otherwise be proof that, in the United States, we have created sites where people’s lives are meant to matter less—that this is by design, not destiny. Perhaps we disavow these sites because they evidence an ugly truth that imperils the integrity of this country’s founding promises.

But not only that. Zoning out also describes a habitus born from the uncertainties of the industrial age: a way of moving through the world and disavowing clues that *something might be wrong*. After all, as Joseph Masco argues, industrialism was a psychosocial project as much as it was a mode of economic organization. Its twentieth-century American incarnation produced subjects with finely honed dissociative habits of their own, as this book demonstrates. Subjects affectively attuned to the prospect of spectacular violence and comparatively numb to the real and present dangers stirring in their midst.<sup>55</sup> Real and present dangers like the dust.

Numbness is not blindness. Residents could see the dust, but it rarely registered as violence. In any case, old-timers will tell you that the dust is nothing like it used to be. Factories had been closing for decades by the time I began work, and air-quality improvements soon followed. I do not want to overstate these improvements. In 2007 and 2008, Curtis Bay ranked first in the entire country for air pollutants released from stationary sources, clocking in at more than twenty million pounds per year.<sup>56</sup> That this counts as an improvement is galling. But I believe it. I heard discomfoting stories from residents who came of age here during WWII; they recall having to pause

during sports and wait for clouds to pass. Weird clouds. Clouds that moved unnaturally. Clouds that came in many colors. People told me there was something in the air that burned holes in freshly laundered clothes hung out to dry, and some could only play outside when the wind was blowing east, toward the water.

But old-timers rarely lingered on these images, and I suspect that few shared them to worry me. More often, they were background to sentimental tales about how much sweeter life here was “before”: before the economic rug was pulled from underneath their feet, before disease set in. Before, in short, the “late” in late industrial.

There was an expectation then that enduring tough times in the present would eventually net the endurer a good life, to borrow Elizabeth Povinelli’s terms.<sup>57</sup> This is a productive myth in extractive zones around the world. Here, it is often glossed as the American dream, but better located in a sacrificial social contract that only promised its pursuit: take on harm today so you might strive toward tomorrow. So people dissociated from the air as best they could and worked toward a range of hoped-for futures (racialized belonging, class mobility). Some policed the boundaries of the home through daily acts of atmospheric management—bound to Whiteness, now as ever—while letting dust consume the porch beyond. Some resolved to live as if the future mattered most, even if that premise cost them everything. Gus, a man I met at the local Seniors’ Club whose family moved to Curtis Bay from war-torn Europe, said his Polish mother forbade all complaints. The children were to be grateful new Americans. She died. And he grasped at a young age that there were certain painful things a person should keep out of speech and thought. Scholars call these learned omissions public secrets, those things that people know to leave unsaid, because they might disrupt the social order, even burst the American dreamscape.<sup>58</sup>

This was a different kind of zoning out than the institutional misrecognitions that I mentioned earlier. It was a setting aside of ambient concerns, a willful disavowal. Or, on Angel’s stoop, a brushing off.

When the whole thing came tumbling down—slow at first and faster come the 1980s—people lost more than factory employment. They lost a particular relationship with the future, and they also lost the steadiness it brought. Angel, whose formative years tracked with this falling from grace, says she grew up in a “lost generation.”<sup>59</sup> Born in the early 1980s, she is old enough to remember scenes from life “before”: busy workers, crowded taverns, the neighborhood’s distinctive smell (“not a good smell to the unfamiliar”), and the good life that the factories promised. But she also watched that promise atrophy. She watched her mother’s generation atrophy with it, through suicide, heroin, and alcohol. She ran away from home and learned



to hustle for her kids, cutting hair and pouring drinks and sweeping floors, piecing together four young lives through a million low-wage jobs. It hurts to organize one's world in anticipation of a future that seems increasingly untenable, and to live amid its uneasy remains—so much one might “abandon the illusion of a future.” Had she? I asked.

She gestured toward her boys, roughhousing in the coal pier's yellow light. “I guess . . . the future changes,” Angel shrugged.

## Futures after Progress

If Angel's shrug made the attrition of old futures seem casual, it was because Angel liked to keep the mess in check. For many, though, the end of factory work was a disorienting loss. It not only meant the becoming-visible of environmental harms previously brushed off as the cost of doing business. It also meant the desecration of old rhythms. As Andrea Muehlebach and Nitzan Shoshan show, Fordism named a mode of production and an “organization of anticipation”: enabled by steady wages, mortgaged homeownership, robust unionism, the welfare state, and the nuclear family form, which were themselves enabled by the pursuit of surplus value. These modes of “predictable, measured incrementalism” made it possible for Fordist subjects to approach the future with a sense of reasonable confidence.<sup>60</sup>

It is true this confidence required a measure of forgetting, as Walter Benjamin makes clear, and as the dust accrued in Curtis Bay suggests.<sup>61</sup> It also turned on racialized exclusions, though these were disavowed through bootstrap myths. Like the myth that Whites' upward mobility depended on hard work alone, not on subjugated Black labor: industrial slavery was common in the pre-emancipation city; for generations after, White elites exploited interracial tensions to blunt solidarity and keep Black workers from the most desirable factory jobs.<sup>62</sup> Or the myth that the mortgage structured opportunity rather than predation: housing discrimination persistently shunted poor Blacks into more precarious straits than their White neighbors, and mortgage debts locked both groups into devastating binds as their houses grew increasingly engulfed.<sup>63</sup> But for Fordism's favored beneficiaries, the happy promise was that one could look ahead with something sturdier than hope. One could expect a good-and-getting-better life, even feel entitled to it. Few took it lightly when those expectations crumbled.

After probing the forces that led us to this present, then, this book lingers in the murky aftermath, asking, *How do people live, strive, and maneuver when so much about their world appears uncertain? How do they relate to the future from this situation of profound precarity?*<sup>64</sup> Staying afloat was

no small act, as the scale of change in Baltimore was staggering. Between 1970 and 2000, Baltimore lost one hundred thousand jobs in manufacturing and nearly half of its population, as the middle classes—Black and White—escaped to greener pastures. These losses did not slow as the city leaned into the new millennium. In 2001, Baltimore reeled from the bankruptcy of Bethlehem Steel, due east from Curtis Bay, where asset strippers slashed pensions and health benefits for ninety-five thousand people.<sup>65</sup> That mill would close for good during my teaching years, leaving Baltimore with an unemployment rate of 8.2 percent: more than three points higher than the country's. The scale of change has been even greater in Curtis Bay, where the unemployment rate during my research reached above 14 percent. Union membership has plummeted apace, but low-wage service jobs have grown across the city. Benefits at most are “a bad joke,” according to one local union boss. These losses have been bleak across the board, but have particularly hurt Black factory workers who, after generations of grunt work, at last ascended to middle-class jobs in the 1970s, just to see them disappear. As the last hired, they were the first laid off.<sup>66</sup>

This final point reminds that Fordist aspirations could be mourned by people shoved to their far edges. Of course, the difference between losing something felt as an entitlement and something barely touched and snatched away is one that matters—but a loss can be a loss across this difference. And because deindustrialization changed the fabric of the city, it touched people who never even dreamed of factory jobs. This was true in Baltimore and in cities far afield. Lauren Berlant describes the erosion of the “good life” as an intensely public trauma felt on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>67</sup> Still others make clear, while rightly shirking universal claims, that this collapse reverberated in parts of the world where Fordism was institutionally weak or nonexistent, but where its promises were nonetheless seductive.<sup>68</sup>

Returning now to the United States, deindustrialization ripped through dozens of cities toward the late twentieth century.<sup>69</sup> Writing from Southeast Chicago after the closure of Wisconsin Steel, Christine Walley relates the feeling of being “unceremoniously ejected from the American dream” and landing in “the limbo of a postindustrial no-man’s-land, heading nowhere.”<sup>70</sup> Again, not only because people lost their jobs. Many lost their foothold on the world. The future was supposed to be a space of growth, not stasis, and certainly not decline. It was supposed to make the present worth it, for however badly you might feel today—however vulnerable or weary or asthmatic or exploited—those bad feelings would eventually pay off.<sup>71</sup>

When they didn’t—when people found themselves in the dust of untenable expectations—that brought about a crisis of meaning.<sup>72</sup> All the more in Curtis Bay, where the interminable march ahead had always promised



sharper knowledge of the future yet to come. All the more for those who saw their health corrode or cared for kids whose sole inheritance would be toxicity. These shifts produced intense uncertainties, and many struggled to come to terms with a world that could “no longer be grasped in terms of the old script.”<sup>73</sup>

Time out of joint meant life without genre.

Some responded bitterly, pushing blame for progress lost onto scapegoats of all kinds. Take Betty, Angel’s sixty-something-year-old aunt. I met Betty during my teaching years, and she took a liking to me the way one takes a liking to a kitten that has lost its precious way. She was sure I needed guidance and protection as a “harmless looking” thing (small, White, feminine) that had landed in a rough-and-tumble part of Baltimore. Proudly claiming both roles for herself, Betty toured me around to meet “old heads” who could educate me about Curtis Bay, while ensuring I avoided “shady” areas. At times, my so-called harmlessness made me an alibi for insolence that called itself defense—like when Betty vowed to “bitch-slap” any “thugs” who bothered me. I told her no and tried to laugh the offer off.

During our frequent drives together, Betty swung between desperate efforts to revive the future that had marked her youth—“when Curtis Bay was nice, you would have liked it”—and making spiteful accusations about its death. Many of the latter came from right-wing news and meme accounts on Facebook: two remainders in a media landscape that has withered since mainstream sources shed their working-class publics. The conservative pundits that swept in to fill the void center “cultural battles as a stand-in for a class critique that is never waged,” proffering frameworks through which Betty read the shifts she lived.<sup>74</sup> Among the culprits that she rattled off to me were “drugs,” “taxes,” “the Blacks,” “the Democrats,” and “those [redacted] at the corner store that sell iPhones for food stamp cards.”\* Sometimes Betty took it upon herself to return the neighborhood to equilibrium, like the time she ran around hassling shopkeepers for donations so the Seniors’ Club could hire an oldies band for Christmas. (“I told one of them, ‘Look. Give me five dollars for my club or we’re gonna have a fucking problem.’”)

Betty had a temper. She had “been through it” in the 1990s, a euphemism for addiction, and came out rearing to defend what little she had left. That included the dignity that came from figuring herself as a victim whose fu-

\* I am borrowing Sharpe’s method of redaction to black out Betty’s slur and counter the re-inscription of racialized violence in writing (2016, 117).

ture had been stolen by bad actors, rather than a patsy who had sacrificed for naught. So the last thing Betty was going to do was call the future an “illusion.” But she also knew it would not be a steady climb from good to great. How could it be? She had lost her health to COPD and her husband to cancer; her kids had moved away; and besides, *there goes the neighborhood*. If there was going to be a future, it was not going to look like progress.

Let me be clear that Betty’s racism did not emerge whole cloth from right-wing radio. Pundits channeled age-old frames to sell a sense of Whiteness under siege that appealed to listeners like Betty at this historic juncture. I am not arguing that the White working class has simply been “manipulated into racism” by elites who stand to benefit, though elites surely have for generations. The stickier story here concerns how this group came to view its class interests *as White*, such that these virulent frames could work in Baltimore.<sup>75</sup>

Countless studies teach that progress and Whiteness gave each other meaning long before the Fordist age. The project of the West turned on their symbolic unity, and on an image of Black flesh as incongruous with progress as such.<sup>76</sup> Empire and enslavement—older than Henry Ford but indispensable to Fordism—both drew their alibis from this assumed temporal difference, whereby White-identifying subjects claimed the future as their natural right, while pressing “tropes of backwardness” onto racialized others.<sup>77</sup> On this peninsula specifically, progress toward Whiteness for “White-ethnic” migrant workers was coterminous with progress toward inclusion in an aspiring middle class.<sup>78</sup> I spend a lot of time with both progressions in this book because their coupling was essential to the armature of violence in South Baltimore. You will see it most severely harmed Black residents; but it also hurt White folks who learned to swallow other forms of exploitation to protect their path toward the good life. So it makes sense that progress lost would be a rousing frame for listeners like Betty. But “racism is flexible.”<sup>79</sup> It owes no allegiance to a timeline. It can persist even in sites where progress doesn’t.<sup>80</sup>

So, Betty traded tales like “Curtis on the Bay” that had revanchist undertones, and some that needed no interpretation. During my longest field-work stint, which began in the wake of the 2015 Baltimore Uprising and wrapped up on the eve of the 2016 presidential election, such tales became increasingly common. The Uprising was a response to the death of Freddie Gray, a young Black man, after a “rough ride” with the Baltimore police. It brought thousands to the streets to affirm that Black Lives Matter. Voting for Trump was Betty’s acrimonious response.<sup>81</sup>

Revanchist politics and revivalist calls to make the country “great again”—these were not linear trajectories. They sought return to that ambiguous



“before” time: when even poor White residents could take some comfort in their racial status, which W. E. B. Du Bois shows amounted to a cherished wage; when they could plausibly deny proximity to “dirt” of many kinds; when the future did not yet seem too far gone.<sup>82</sup> In this sense, they voiced a “felt sense of anachronism,” of being out-of-step with once-affirming expectations.<sup>83</sup> This feeling was exacerbated by a built environment that kept former futures in plain sight, like streetside murals that still flaunted scenes of what “we were going to become.”

The B&O Railroad. The Liberty Fleet. The Coast Guard yard. An expansive, open bay. A school. A church. A party at the beach. A picnic at the park. Betty took me by these murals all the time to reminisce and also to complain that even portraits of this place had “gone to shit”: the paint was chipped and there were gaps in the cinderblock walls where you could glimpse the shuttered factories behind them. “It’s a real shame,” but *rumor has it they’ll be torn down soon to build the next Trump Tower.*

That did not happen. They were razed to build warehouses for Amazon.

Betty’s comments, caustic as they were, suggest that people could lose their taste for progress without abandoning the future. Not everyone engaged the future on Betty’s terms, to be sure. But for those who felt their best days were behind them, progress and the future were at odds. In such a context, Felix Ringel argues from another “shrinking” city, people may invest their hopes in endurance rather than more change—because, when one’s world is careening toward an end, simply staying put can be an act of radical optimism.<sup>84</sup>

Imagine, then, the surging hope that one could actually gain ground



FIGURE 0.5. “What we were going to become.” Photo by the author, April 2016.

back. Imagine the trajectories that one might miss by letting progress stand in for the future as a whole, and imagine trying to understand the political present while insisting on these two terms' correspondence. For one, it would mean misconstruing the direction and the force behind the movements that drew Betty, for whom progress was at best a future past: a cluster of erstwhile aspirations.<sup>85</sup> But there are other consequences still. As Anna Tsing writes, progress narratives sound so loudly even to their critics that it can be hard to notice other rhythms—those polyphonic futures popping “in and out of possibility,” precisely where futurity would seem to be exhausted.<sup>86</sup>

After all, progress set up a problem-space for social theorists, too. Industrialism's biggest boosters and harshest critics both insisted that the future would be better than the past: a time of “universal opulence” or hard-won communal life.<sup>87</sup> Even thinkers who figured progress as the driving phantasm of the modern age and devoted themselves to unmasking it formulated questions within a context marked by its discursive dominance.<sup>88</sup> These works are vital. But to take a cue from David Scott, the “horizon of possible futures” that defined that problem-space is “rapidly receding.”<sup>89</sup> In the United States today, those who once bought into linear plotlines have increasingly turned their eyes to other futures. Setting aside the question of whether those plotlines ever had solidity, we need modes of attention suited to a present *after progress* narratives have ceased to hold much water.

A little stroll reveals that there are many futures stirring in this aftermath. Walk the full length of those streetside murals, past coal mountains and a place called “Final Notice,” and round the bend at Fred and Margie's disco diner. (It's not really a disco diner, but it does have a disco ball.) A few blocks more and you will find yourself outside of a brick school that has been there for generations. Arrive around mid-afternoon, and you will have to wade through squealing teenagers to make it down the hall. Things begin to settle near the library where, most Wednesdays during fieldwork, I would cozy into quiet. For a moment. Soon, though, students would race in, trade snacks, and launch conversations that kept us buzzing well after nightfall.

For all the time that we spent mapping signs of progress lost—chipped paint, pocked streets—Betty never took me here, where other futures were beginning to cohere. But the same years that saw her hopes grow increasingly regressive also saw a multiracial group of high school kids stake out this set-aside space: a little bunker protected from the harshness right outside where they nurtured other notions of the possible.



“What’s the word?” Destiny, a recent graduate, swept her loose Afro aside and let her hand fall on her furrowed brow. “Like, I want to say ‘the system’ but that feels too big.” Charles, a Black senior, offered, “Policies?” She started to nod, then took it back: “Too small. We need . . .” she closed her eyes to think. “Because we’re not just talking about government.” “Right.” Charles thumbed his chin, while Destiny searched beneath her eyelids. The two friends huddled there pursuing words to frame the day’s activity. Meanwhile, the rest of us caught up. Elijah, a charismatic Black fifteen-year-old, told a tale from English class that demanded a whole-body performance. Ben, a blonde athlete, played along.<sup>90</sup> Somebody played a song. Then Destiny called us to attention. “Today we’re going to draw a Problem Tree.”

Destiny turned to sketch an outline on the board: a too-fat trunk with skinny roots and finger-looking branches that brought Elijah laughing to the floor. Ben and Charles tried to shush him, but before long they were laughing, too, and we were getting side-eyes from across the library. “Shh,” Destiny chided, just long enough to introduce the problem. We were going to talk about pollution, starting with the ways it manifests in daily life (the leaves). Then we would work backward to the policies, practices, and habits that prop it up (the branches), and further still to the value systems at their roots. “You don’t see the roots when you look at a tree, but there they are,” Destiny pointed, “reminders that the world is built on values we can change.” “That’s deep,” someone quipped. Charles snorted at the pun, the whole group lost its bearings yet again, and I let myself forget that Betty found the Black kids threatening.

We proceeded in joyful fits and starts until Destiny wrangled us into a working rhythm. At her prompt, we filled leaves with experiential evidence: coal piers, smokestacks, diesel trucks, *we don’t know what’s in the air, people act like they don’t care*, asthma, cancer, coughing, heart disease. Beneath them, branches named forces like industrial zoning, narrow regulations, powerful corporations, insufficient health care, and a lack of local pushback. Beneath them, roots spoke of systems designed for “profit” over “human rights,” of a willingness to “sacrifice” some places for the greater good, of the sense that Curtis Bay was meant to be a “dumping ground,” and of “deep divisions” among locals that strained solidarity.

By the time the school custodian came to shoo us out, we had sketched the contours of a shared analysis. Next time, Destiny would guide us as we moved from that analysis to the more speculative task of figuring the world we one day hoped to see. Articulating different values, imagining practices that could give those values form, and picturing how those changes might be lived from day to day—to do this well required work. *If you want to build*

*a future that breaks from the past, the theory went, then you had better know your history.*

Students did not spontaneously pronounce these layered forces. There were years of collective labor behind the Problem Tree. For three years before I began to join them, providing research support and participating broadly in their organizing efforts, this group had been talking stoop-side with their neighbors and grappling with local legacies of dispossession. Their efforts anchor the latter chapters of this book. For now, know that those years were full of study and debate, of play, and of piecing together a past they were not taught, but whose debris was ambient. They could sense it in the land, in the air, and in their neighbors' mix of animus and apathy. Destiny and Ben, who had deep roots on this peninsula, could also sense it in their parents, who rarely reminisced about the past; it had not been a rosy time. (They were roughly Angel's generation.) And youth could sense it in their own shortage of opportunities. Born and raised in a Curtis Bay that differed vastly from the one of Betty's childhood, most students scraped by in a drearily post-Fordist place and were urged to "grow up and out," for if they stayed they would not "reach their full potential." I know kids as young as six who gleaned this message from their families.

In these and other ways, this group's work could be distressing. But the hope was that digging up this past might help them seed a different vision. Not change the world ("we're just a bunch of high school kids") but, maybe, change this place. At a minimum, they sought to fight depictions of Curtis Bay that would reduce it to pathology. Destiny, for one, was well aware of the fault lines Betty's bigotry arranged, and had watched firsthand as damage frameworks wore away at neighbors who came to see their hometown as a wasteland. That was on the tree in black and white, where *people act like they don't care* found roots in the "dumping ground mentality."

The aims of students' work, as I came to understand them over many afternoons, were to rechannel local resentment about being Baltimore's "dumping ground" so that it might inspire action instead of resignation, to shake old associations and build a future for which there was no script, to stretch into the realm of what could be. The Problem Tree was one of many exercises that helped structure this praxis, a discipline of hope clear-eyed about the harshness of the present. Theirs was a mode of "cramped creation," in Saidiya Hartman's words—a labor of staying open to the world despite constraints, of refusing to be depleted.<sup>91</sup>

It is hard to sustain the subjunctive provocation at the heart of cramped creation. It takes nerve to stay open in the face of so much violence. Would Destiny and her friends have been better off abandoning the future? I hes-



itate to say so, though I concede that hope is often disappointed.<sup>92</sup> As José Esteban Muñoz writes in his retort to those who take the “easy” path of “shouting down” the future, such disappointment must be “risked” when building better worlds than this one is a matter of survival.<sup>93</sup> Even a cursory look at the books that Destiny carried in her bag—books about making life after the end of the world by the likes of Octavia Butler, little signs that speculative thought is alive and well in Curtis Bay—suggest she would agree with this insistence. Chasing neither progress nor its hostile overthrow, and wanting something greater than endurance, Destiny admired stories that paired an unflinching acknowledgment of harm done with a will to build worlds otherwise.<sup>94</sup>

Neither Betty nor Destiny could be accused of relinquishing the future, though they surely had divergent aspirations. What emerges when one reads their aspirations side by side? Two pieces of the fractured present from which I write these words—not easily resolved, not even into a fictive unity. And there are others still. If anything struck me about my time in Curtis Bay, it was the sheer proliferation of futures forming here. Each angling to set the terms of the unsettled world to come. Each insisting this was no end of the line.<sup>95</sup>

## Ethnography between Worlds

These starkly different futures might have stayed apart but for another proposition. When I began what would become twenty-four months of ethnographic research in Curtis Bay, spread between 2012 and 2018, Betty, Destiny, and their neighbors were debating the vices and virtues of the Fairfield Renewable Energy Project. If built, it would have been the largest trash incinerator in the nation, burning four thousand tons of waste each day to generate allegedly “clean” power. Though touted as a climate solution, it also would have released thousands of pounds of lead, mercury, and fine particulates into ambient dust.<sup>96</sup> Proposed in 2009 and slated for construction on a ninety-acre plot—which had once been used for quarantine, before it was used to craft munitions, before it was used to manufacture pesticides—the Fairfield Project came to stand for competing visions of the local future, as large-scale infrastructure often does.<sup>97</sup> Some worried the incinerator would solidify the peninsula’s position as a “dumping ground,” while others hoped it would create jobs that might offset decades of economic loss.

In May 2014, I learned of a campaign to stop the plant led by Destiny and her classmates, premised on the notion that this fight might change the fate of Curtis Bay. At the time, I was a graduate student studying city school

reform, and the group made a splash when they pressured the school board to break a power-purchasing agreement with the Project. Within months, I was helping spread their message among city teachers. Soon, debates over the incinerator became the focus of my research. During my longest uninterrupted period of fieldwork, between April 2015 and September 2016, I wanted to understand whether different positions on the proposal reflected different emplotments of the past and different orientations toward the possible.<sup>98</sup>

In the context of graduate school, it felt like a dramatic pivot from the path I had laid out. As an educator, turning to what students cared about seemed obvious.

This work brought me into many different fields, and into the lives of groups that sometimes saw themselves as foes. Under Betty's wing, I struck up conversations with elderly residents and became a fixture at the local Seniors' Club. Seniors' Club was a casual meeting held weekly at a recreation center ("the rec") by the coal piers, which largely drew White elders with deep ties to Curtis Bay. Black elders attended far less often. This was, in part, because mass displacements in the late twentieth century meant Black elders raised on the peninsula had for the most part moved away, and in part because those who did remain were made to feel unwelcome at these gatherings. We connected elsewhere—over shaved ice at the Fairfield reunion each July, tending produce at the community garden—where I sometimes heard critiques about the Fairfield Project shaded by these past displacements. But White seniors welcomed me into the Club's exclusionary "we," and this is notable: much of this book concerns how the "we" of Whiteness came to mean so much here. Nearly every Wednesday for two years, I ate lunch and played Bingo with eastern European immigrants whose families arrived on the peninsula in the early twentieth century. Most, viewing factory work as a path toward assimilation, decided long ago that this was worth exposure to "a little dust." They told me stories between shushes (you aren't supposed to chitchat during Bingo) about Curtis Bay's industrial past, and about what they perceived as the neighborhood's prolonged, and frankly racialized, decline. On the whole, White seniors saw the incinerator as a last-ditch effort to stave off this decline and return Curtis Bay to a past that they once viewed as prosperous.

Beyond these whispered conversations, I spent time in the library with Destiny, her comrades, and their mentors from a group called United Workers, following their efforts to learn about the plant and the policies that brought it to their doorstep. I also participated in these efforts, attending meetings, running errands, and providing research support to help historicize their claims against the Project. This was a "we" that felt expansive



and sustaining, but I want to be cautious about invoking it here, too. Or, I want to hold space for a kind of research-with that need not collapse into the first-person plural: a kind of solidarity that takes seriously the different structural positions “we” come from. For me, this meant making my time and skills available to the campaign, but also taking a backseat. It meant being present, active, and accountable to movement work while understanding who should lead and who should follow. From this position, I learned from students as they pieced together land-use patterns and mastered the ins and outs of waste incineration. I took part as they studied air-quality rules to understand why Curtis Bay was being asked to bear another toxic burden, and engaged in exercises like the Problem Tree that helped us conjure up a different Baltimore. Together, we shared meals and poked fun. We canvassed blocks and planned protests. We dealt with ugly feelings coming from some neighbors. And as we traveled door-to-door, we each tried, with variable success, to convince folks there could be better futures than the Fairfield Project.

Over time, I got to know the campaign’s growing coalition, which by 2015 encompassed allies beyond state and national lines. I also met their opponents from state environmental agencies, from the company behind the incinerator, and from existing factories. Sometimes, these connections took me beyond Baltimore City, to government hearings and waste industry conferences. All told, I spent hundreds of hours in these sites and conducted more than ninety interviews during fieldwork, along with many months of peripheral involvement while I wrote in Washington, DC. Since leaving the region in 2018, I have returned to Curtis Bay each year for shorter visits. I also realized leaving is not leaving, not when you understand that Curtis Bay is more than a peninsula. I carry these relations with me: ethical, chemical, personal, and structural.

In addition to my ethnographic research, I spent time in archives spread across the mid-Atlantic tracing precisely these connections. To understand ties between disease prevention, military preparedness, petrochemical production, and other uses of this set-aside space, I visited state historical societies, explored the city library’s extensive holdings, perused company files, and combed through records from the US War Department. I was also fortunate to be able to compare formal archival holdings with a series of ad hoc collections owned by residents. The one that taught me most belonged to an elderly woman named Minnie, who stored news clippings in a suitcase underneath her bed, where she also kept photographs of her late husband.

My time with Minnie’s suitcase was a stark reminder that archival work is fieldwork, too: just as weighty and contested. Especially where some histories remain unspeakable, and where ideas about what makes for a good



FIGURE 0.6. Minnie's suitcase archive. Photo by the author, June 2016.

future hinge on competing notions of how precious the past was. In the chapters that follow, I choose to spotlight rather than smooth over the gaps and tensions of the archives I encountered, because they comprise a key part of this story. Whether the past should be buried or mourned or damned or fought, and whose lives should be “endowed with the gravity and authority” of history, were deeply political questions about which people often disagreed.<sup>99</sup> So were first-order questions about what industrialism meant, who it hurt, and who exactly was at fault.

All fieldwork is messy, perhaps especially when it unfolds near home and implicates the researcher. Fieldwork among multiple groups who exist in uneasy relation is also, truthfully, quite fraught. Sometimes in the space of a few hours during my time in Curtis Bay, I would hear White seniors say hateful things about Black youth in the quiet between Bingo games, then head out to canvass with those youth, who expressed frustration with some of their White neighbors. There were days when I ate breakfast with state air-quality regulators, lunch with Fairfield Project representatives, and dinner with members of the coalition that had coalesced to stop it.

It would be naive to pretend that my mobility as a researcher was disconnected from my own identity: as a teacher with local roots that preceded the incinerator fight, as a White woman who reminded White seniors of their kids, and as a twenty-something student to whom older men in industry occasionally showed off. And it would be dishonest to say that navigat-



ing these fields was always, or even often, seamless. For one, it meant being open about my presence in these different sites with everyone involved. This sometimes put me into situations that required holding information I was asked to share, like when officials sought my insight about campaign strategy (they did not get it). And I will admit that I was sometimes coy about the depth of my commitments. While it was no secret that I did not support the incinerator, I was not the loudest voice against it. Researchers make choices, and those choices shape the stories we can author. I chose to do work aligned with the campaign but not quite inside of the campaign, and this afforded me the chance to study its opponents. South Baltimore youth are powerful self-advocates. I have never felt they needed me to amplify their voices. What I have tried to contribute, instead, is a sustained investigation of the violence that their work confronts.

So, though I worked closely with the campaign between 2015 and 2018, I rarely spoke on its behalf. With permission, I attended students' weekly meetings, strategy sessions held among the coalition, political education workshops, public events, and a June 2016 organizing retreat. I provided food, drove people around, and shared archival research. Some of my findings made their way into campaign speeches that condemned the Fairfield Project. But I did not partake in every element of organizing work, and there were moments when I sensed that campaign leaders disagreed among themselves about when I should and should not be included—especially when challenges between them bubbled up.<sup>100</sup> This book does not include those moments, nor does it traffic in my interlocutors' most private joys and pains. In line with a tradition of refusal in ethnographic work that pays attention when people make themselves unavailable for “research,” I want to insist that not everything an ethnographer observes is hers to publish.<sup>101</sup>

To keep myself accountable and maintain trust within a fractious field environment, I often gave transcripts to participants so they could review our conversations. When they struck through comments they had made, I honored those omissions. (Overall, this was rare, but happened more among technocrats in industry and government.) I also shared chapters with campaign leaders and others whom I learned from during fieldwork; some offered feedback that informs this book. But what follows is probably not the story they would tell. Nor is it the story Angel would put into the world, nor Betty, nor Destiny, nor industry insiders from across South Baltimore. Rather, this book emerges from a moment when many stories about this place existed in tension, each with its own orienting premise. When different narratives arose to reckon with the end of one world and jockey over the direction of another.

My goal is to hold these stories in suspension—not out of a stilted sense



of objectivity, nor to triangulate some final truth. In many ways, I hope to underscore the opposite.

I cautioned earlier that this book does not proffer an all-knowing stance, but instead stays with uncertainty: that it sits with people trying to build lives in incoherent worlds. And I proposed that, within this muddled present, conjecture has become a mode of life in late industrial Baltimore. This is one of this book's core ideas, responsive to its second set of questions. (Again, *How do people live, strive, and maneuver when so much about their world appears uncertain? How do they relate to the future from this situation of profound precarity?* Perhaps, too: *What kind of ethnography can meet them there?*) When I say conjecture has become a mode of life, I mean that life here unfolds in the key of doubt, which many manage via "as if" worlds that shape engagements with the possible.

Conjecture is a theory built on limited information. One begins with a speculative claim about the way the world must work and then forecasts from there, to gauge what hopes are sound enough to chase. Like: *Things here are so depleted, the best that we can hope for is a trash incinerator.* Or: *Were we to fight this plant, we could build a different future for South Baltimore.* Career speculators practice conjecture all the time, but it is not their special purview. In a late industrial present marked by the erosion of prior certainties—if ever there were certainties—conjecture is the mode in which most people live, most of the time, and so it is a mode in which this book participates. It is an ordinary way of moving in a world composed of partial knowledge.

It matters, of course, what form conjecture takes—what speculations set the bounds of reasonable hope and political will. Much of this book therefore concerns the how of speculative practice, tending closely to its grammars, which I describe in terms of the subjunctive. I find this grammar good to think with since it works through simplifying premises: resolutions to behave as if something were true that steady the ground for further action. Recall the premise of industrial zoning, or coding land as if it were unpeopled. This smooth rendering of a muddled reality helped planners foist order on Baltimore.

Such premises do not imply commitments to belief, making it tough to dismiss them for their fabrications. And because they are self-consciously conjectural, they are not quite ideological formations, at least not if one insists on a strong theory of that concept.<sup>102</sup> Akin to what philosopher Hans Vaihinger describes as "useful fictions," they are also not intended to deceive (so they are not lies), or to refute (so they are not hypotheses).<sup>103</sup> Instead, these premises are "practically necessary" unrealities that support decision-

making in an irrational world.<sup>104</sup> In circumstances marked by doubt, they help people avoid paralysis by winnowing a realm of exhausting indeterminacy into a smaller set of workable constructions.

Premises can be more or less helpful, more or less violent, more or less liberatory—all without regard for truthfulness. They enter into play when one is living with uncertainty that cannot be overcome. In the face of such uncertainty, they set up circumscribed domains where the world seems reasonably coherent, and where one might therefore imagine herself to be a reasonably coherent subject.

Put yourself on Angel's stoop, and observe the particles wafting in the coal piers' yellow light. Particles that become you with every breath. That become your children. Particles whose composition you will never know, but that you suspect might cause your body harm. How would you behave? What would you need to tell yourself to make it through the day? What might you choose to disengage—not to forget or misconstrue, but to set aside so that you could devote yourself to other problems? Put yourself in Betty's shoes, and take on the bitter realization that the future you once labored for will never come to be. Perhaps you would find some comfort in escaping to the set-aside space of what "we were going to become." Even Destiny's ability to organize over many grueling years turned on the motivating premise that her work would make a difference. She could not know for sure, but she still behaved as if stopping the incinerator would usher in a different future: as if it would stretch her neighbors' sense of reasonable desire by putting a more radical vision within the purview of existing politics.

Recast in this light, the subjunctive is not only a grammar of corporate power that whips up doubt and profits from that doubt. It is also what Ilana Feldman terms a "politics of living" in its wake.<sup>105</sup> It is an operational terrain where people survive and even strive amid uncertainty, where they find ways of not succumbing to exhaustion. One way to characterize this terrain is as a contact zone where multiple, competing futures meet. Behind each is a peculiar distribution of the sensible that conditions what one perceives, how one behaves, what one fears, and what one lets themselves desire. Each chapter here features a different one.

In each, we meet people remarkably clear-eyed about how much they cannot know, but who collapse some of these unknowns to forge a path ahead. Like those who proceed as if the future matters most (and contain the anxious prospect of historical exposures); and those who act as if the fight to stop the incinerator will change the fate of Curtis Bay (because it is immobilizing to admit that it might not). Premises can shrink the world into a set of lousy choices constrained by the burdens of the past, or they can fuel an expansive sense of what could be. Some premises do both. If this seems



like a paradox, it may be useful to adopt a tool from Andrea Ballestero and approach them as “devices” that bring order to the possible.<sup>106</sup>

My claim is nothing so trite as *dream big and change the world*. No one is dreaming themselves out of structural violence here, and some futures are meaningfully foreclosed. Still, within the skin of real material constraint, there are more and less expansive ways to shape a politics. As a grammar with various affordances, the subjunctive can accommodate this range, and this book stays curious about its multiplicity. It takes seriously, in content and in form, that many kinds of hope are immanent in late industrial Baltimore. The middle chapters therefore move through several “as if” worlds, parsing their internal logics before staging their co-presence; I introduce them in the summaries below. Each reflects a different story about the past, a different orientation toward the future, a different politics.

And in this way, ethnography in the subjunctive mood gives lie to easy dismissals of the future as illusive, the stuff of “cautionary tales.” It opens a rendering of late industrial life where the future, and the past, can mean many things at once. Analytics like tense tend to simplify experience into discrete moments that comprise the march of history. But life is full of indistinction. To think with the subjunctive mood is to understand this indistinction as an essential quality of being in the world, or at least in late industrial America, and then ask the next question: How do people sustain hope in spite of it all?

This question needs attention because, to differing degrees, we all live with unshakeable uncertainties. To differing degrees, we all have tools for keeping them at bay. To differing degrees, we are all subject to grammars of power that make it tough to plant our feet. And I suspect we all participate in politics of living that help us strive or, at least, get through the day. As a set-aside space where people have learned to set aside their own unknowns, Curtis Bay is an environment that throws these problems into sharp relief. But it is hardly exceptional, if one considers the profound uncertainties with which most people live—and that will touch even people with great privilege as we confront the disorders of global climate change. Perhaps there are prescient lessons to be learned from this small peninsula about how to approach the end of things without abandoning the future. Perhaps, at the end of things, futures proliferate.

## Orienting Premises

The orienting premises that structure people’s speculative practice are this book’s conceptual focus and its ordering conceit. Following interstitial

scenes that set each chapter's mood and draw out chemical complicities that bind these stories to lives elsewhere, most chapters work within a different "as if" world. That is, each chapter paints a partial picture of this place. In practice, this means giving voice to different groups in turn; no one chapter can suffice to tell the story of South Baltimore. They challenge one another by design. This is especially true of the move from Part I (chapters 1, 2, and 3) to Part II (chapters 4, 5, and epilogue)—which marks a shift from cautionary tales to the spark of something otherwise, from Curtis Bay's old guard to its young activists, and from the ambient racism of residents like Betty to the work it took for Destiny and her comrades to organize in full view of the same. In the movement between premises and the resulting cacophony, one can begin to grasp the multiplicity of futures stirring here: fearsome, bitter, hopeful. And not just here. Recall that Curtis Bay offers lessons that exceed its six square miles, as this is a place where the political life of the nation has been inscribed on the landscape.

Chapter 1 (*Forgotten in Anticipation*) offers a history of that inscription, from the founding of Baltimore City in the late eighteenth century through the passage of landmark chemical regulations in the 1970s. The history of that inscription is also a history of learning to unsee it—of zoning out the region's concentrated dangers. Tracing this labor of unseeing across three dissociative projects, through which those in charge of governing the future closed themselves off from the mess of life as lived, I show how state efforts to manage future harms shaped South Baltimore and made it a space of atmospheric harm along the way. One at a time, I investigate public health anxieties that emerged during a time of mass immigration, proceed through the birth of national security, and end with the rise of risk assessment as a tool for regulating chemical corporations. Each moment produced new ways of mastering the future. And each fomented harm, while making the substance of that harm increasingly opaque. This vagueness points toward a key feature of industrial order: it covers its tracks by rendering certain harms as dubious. Through a parallel narrative curated by a local man named Arthur, I provide a sense of what it feels like to hitch one's future to an industrial order that puts you in unspeakable danger.

Chapter 2 (*Cataclysmic Hypotheticals*) begins a turn from future-oriented governance to everyday modes of conjecture, centering how people live with doubt in this ambiguously toxic place. After briefly reprising the history of human inhabitation on this peninsula, I turn to the late Cold War and to residents who negotiated buyouts of their homes when industrial accidents were on the rise. Explosive ones. Staring down the likelihood of catastrophic loss, these residents turned to a politics of *threat*, or incalculable potential harm. Compared with the murkiness of chemical exposure,



threat offered stark terms for figuring their peril in the next calamity. The buyout, in other words, hinged on a choice to limit charges to the hypothetical. It proceeded as if the gravest obstacles to life lay then, in the devastating future, and not now, ambient and tedious. Examining this premise with the help of one woman's intimate archive, I convey the desperation bound up in residents' choice to bracket historical exposures, as well as the strange solace this provided: displacing danger to the future averted the guilt some felt for raising children here.

Years after the buyout, these erasures continue to affect South Baltimore. And they help explain why another smokestack would soon be permitted: the incinerator. By the end of the twentieth century, residents had left the most dangerous zones, leaving the peninsula with a wealth of vacant land. The region was also struck by economic precarity and racialized anxieties that made many Whites long to revive its early days. In this context, a desire for *renewal* began to take hold among some residents—including Betty. Chapter 3 (*Could've Been Worse*) introduces renewal as a redemptive dream, a yearning to return to a time before progress seemed a foolish aspiration. Specifically, I examine two discourses of renewal that attached to the Fairfield Project after its 2009 proposal. One emerged among technocrats, who argued that incineration should be regulated as a “renewable” energy source. The other surfaced among working-class Whites, who saw the plant as a means to reinvigorate their ailing economy. Both turned on comparisons with the acutely toxic past, favoring the incinerator over conjectural alternatives drawn from that same past. Lingering on the premise that things “could’ve been worse,” I show how renewal sets up a speculative world that limits aspiration to the plausible.

Chapter 4 (*Art of the Possible*) stays with the incinerator but moves toward a different set of futures and a different set of voices who will dominate Part II, tracing the emergence of a youth-led campaign to stop the plant's construction. Beginning in 2012, I chronicle how Destiny and her friends used the incinerator as an opening into two centuries of local history, and the fight against it as an opportunity to practice *prefigurative* politics. This work proceeded from the premise that there ought to be no difference between one's struggle in the present and goal in the future. Instead, time collapsed into a praxis where the ends and means were inextricably linked, and the real and ideal became one. Tracing how this premise stretched youth's sense of reasonable desire in the early days of the campaign, I show that the fight to stop the incinerator was never just about the incinerator. It was also about finding a way to speak radical hope into existence, based on lessons learned from five generations of state-sanctioned exposure to harm.

After chapter 4 explores the conditions of possibility for this organizing

work, chapter 5 (*Tick, Tick, BOOM*) takes up its everyday politics. Here, I show how youth learned to make demands of institutions that had failed them. Demands mark a shift from subjunctive to imperative, a different grammatical mood than permeates most of the book. The “imperative” names something that has not happened yet and says it must. Given the aporias of late industrial life, how did local youth summon such clarity? How, moreover, did they manage to inspire it in others? Reading the events in South Baltimore against the backdrop of the 2015 Baltimore Uprising—and bringing groups from separate chapters into a dynamic analytic space—I argue that one way they did so was by putting time to political work, sidestepping the thorny issue of scientific certainty and orchestrating moments that demanded an ethical response. The chapter orbits around a single protest in December 2015, designed to produce a kind of eventfulness that I call *moral punctuation*. Along the way, I show how organizers took the muddle of living with “the dust” from a condition marked by doubt, disavowal, and inertia, and transformed it into a space of explicit contestation.

Thanks largely to their efforts, the incinerator still does not exist. It is an object suspended in the subjunctive. It therefore invites questions about how to study the “not yet,” and all the past and present work the not yet does.<sup>107</sup> In this spirit, the epilogue (*Ethnography in the Subjunctive*) dips deeper into speculative modes, future-casting three potential paths for Curtis Bay. Thinking from the land reserved for the plant-that-never-was, I experiment with answers to the question: What futures are still possible for this place? Here we have a city struck by population loss, aging infrastructure, an ailing tax base, and the threat that climate change will swallow up its coast. We also have a city where many see these crises as an opportunity to build a just and vibrant world. The book lingers on this multiplicity, resisting narrative closure—an impulse that drives ethnography in the subjunctive mood. Ethnography in the subjunctive cannot claim to know what will come next; it must find ways of speaking through uncertainty. True to form, *Futures after Progress* shows that there is more than one way to write the history of late industrialism, and more than one mode from which to chart its future.

A final note on premises: this book makes the case for theorizing late industrialism from South Baltimore, but I also want to invite you to consider it a history of our planetary present. This is not an outlandish provocation. The years covered in these pages—beginning in the late eighteenth century—track with one periodization of the “Anthropocene,” that age of world-altering hubris wrought by a peculiar sort of man.<sup>108</sup> A man prepared



to terraform the earth in search of progress. A man with cultivated amnesias toward the costs of living life in brash anticipation. In one of those books about making life after the end of the world, *Parable of the Talents*, Octavia Butler depicts the apocalypse as a slow burn caused by stubborn disavowal. She writes, in the voice of character Taylor Franklin Bankole:

I have read that the period of upheaval that journalists have begun to refer to as “the Apocalypse” or more commonly, more bitterly, “the Pox” lasted from 2015 through 2030. . . . This is untrue. The Pox has been a much longer torment. It began well before 2015, perhaps even before the turn of the millennium. It has not ended. I have also read that the Pox was caused by accidentally coinciding climatic, economic, and sociological crises. It would be more honest to say that the Pox was caused by our own refusal to deal with obvious problems in those areas. We caused the problems: then we sat and watched as they grew into crises. . . . Amid all this, somehow, the United States of America suffered a major nonmilitary defeat. It lost no important war, yet it did not survive the Pox. Perhaps it simply lost sight of what it once intended to be, then blundered aimlessly.<sup>109</sup>

She continues: “What is left of it now, what it has become, I do not know.”

*I do not know.* This devastating passage comes in her book’s opening pages. If one were to draw a lesson from that placement, it might be that in spite of great doubt, life persists. It might be that, after progress, the future changes.





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Part One

# A CAUTIONARY TALE

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FIGURE 1.1. **Unforgetting place.** Arthur's annotated photograph, shared on a driving tour of the peninsula. Photo by the author, June 2016.



## Impossible to Say

Nigel spoke fast, and I lost details trying to keep up. He was a chemical plant manager in his fifties, a longtime employee at FMC. Formerly called the Food, Machinery, and Chemical Corporation—but maligned by locals as “Fools Making Chemicals”—FMC set up shop in Curtis Bay in 1954 to produce pesticides, plastics, rocket fuels, “You name it! You know those Sterno cans that heat up food at the buffet? We canned the first of those. And next time you pick up a bug killer like Raid? We made the active ingredients.” Nigel ran through a mess of commonplace consumer products, some of which I had purchased before. “That was just the business model after the war,” he said of the assortment. “Corporations grew by buying lots of different businesses and saved money by finding synergies.”

He laughed. “That probably made it hard to wrap your brain around it from an outsider’s perspective.” Besides, “they weren’t really college-educated people.” The “they” without degrees were residents who worried about “it,” and the “it” that it was “hard to wrap your brain around” was the air on the industrial periphery.

When it was open, FMC was a staggering operation: cranes, colorful smoke, metal tanks, alarm bells, *activity*. Flanking FMC on either side were still more operations: chemical plants, car shops, pipelines, scrapyards, and a terminal that processed fourteen million tons of coal annually. Bits of the coal would aerosolize, mix with other airborne chemicals, and produce a heavy smog that tinted homes and dirtied cars. Locals could not tell you what it was, just that it made it hard to breathe. Research shows that coal dust contains more than fifty different elements, and that this atmosphere is also flush with respiratory irritants and carcinogens from plants like FMC.<sup>1</sup> But most people I met viewed the air as more than the sum of its itinerant components—including the six-year-olds I taught in Curtis Bay who, even after dozens of factory closures, complained the sky above the playground was “sticky.”

Nigel, for his part, said “there was just so much there” that no one could

be blamed. When I asked whether he thought persistent health disparities had anything to do with factory emissions, he dipped into his corporate playbook and drew out the problem of uncertainty.<sup>2</sup>

“I don’t really know how to answer the question because there was just so much there. But I don’t think they ever found anything specific that they could tie to us. . . . Are there things in the environment that will kill you or give you diseases? Absolutely. What are they and where do they come from? Who knows? It’s not my area of science.”

He sped off: “Across the water is the GRACE [Chemical] auto-catalyst plant where they handle heavy metals, okay? Did they do it? Who knows? And frankly, there’s a rendering plant down Pennington Avenue. They have releases — bad ones — that send a fog up north along the cove.” More quickly still: “And look, if your husband smoked like a chimney . . . would you blame the tobacco companies? Probably the tobacco companies would blame us, and they’d write a paper about synergistic effects.”

Nigel gestured toward a sky we both agreed was menacing and left it here: “It’s just impossible to say, you know?”

## Forgotten in Anticipation

Inside the Baltimore City Archives, which share space with the Southern Steel Shelving Company in a nondescript brick building on a dead-end block, lies a series of gray maps. I had not come to see them, but Dr. Papenfuse, a retired archivist, insisted that I have a look. He opened half a dozen volumes before finding 5A, which contains maps of the industrial peninsula. At his bidding, I lifted the heavy, two-foot tome with difficulty and shuffled to the table in the middle of the room. “Look,” Dr. Papenfuse said, flipping through the pages, “that’s history.”

I looked. Besides being large and meticulously hand drawn, the maps were not particularly striking. “Look closer. Touch them,” he said. I did. They were rough, marginally three-dimensional, uneven. My fingers rose at points as they passed across the page, inadvertently announcing changes in the landscape. I could feel them before I could see them.

Beginning in 1867, and 1890 in Baltimore, the Sanborn Company mapped landscapes and coded buildings to help insurance firms calculate the likely damage caused by future fire—in technical terms, to assess fire risk. Fire insurance did not always work this way. In years before, underwriters had to visit individual properties to determine liability, a time-consuming process that grew harder as their businesses grew larger. Increasingly, they sought tools for doing “risk assessment at a distance”: the task for which the Sanborn maps were made.<sup>1</sup>

Crafted for insurers who hoped to grasp important details “at a glance,” these maps were painstakingly precise about structure heights and footprints, construction materials, building uses, and other matters pertinent to the work of risk assessment.<sup>2</sup> Sanborn modified them often, to keep those risk assessments up to date. The genius of the maps lay in the speed with which surveyors made these manifold adjustments. As new buildings went up and old ones came down, they revised the enormous, lithographed sheets by drawing updates on fresh paper, cutting them out, and pasting them atop the older plans to reflect environmental change.



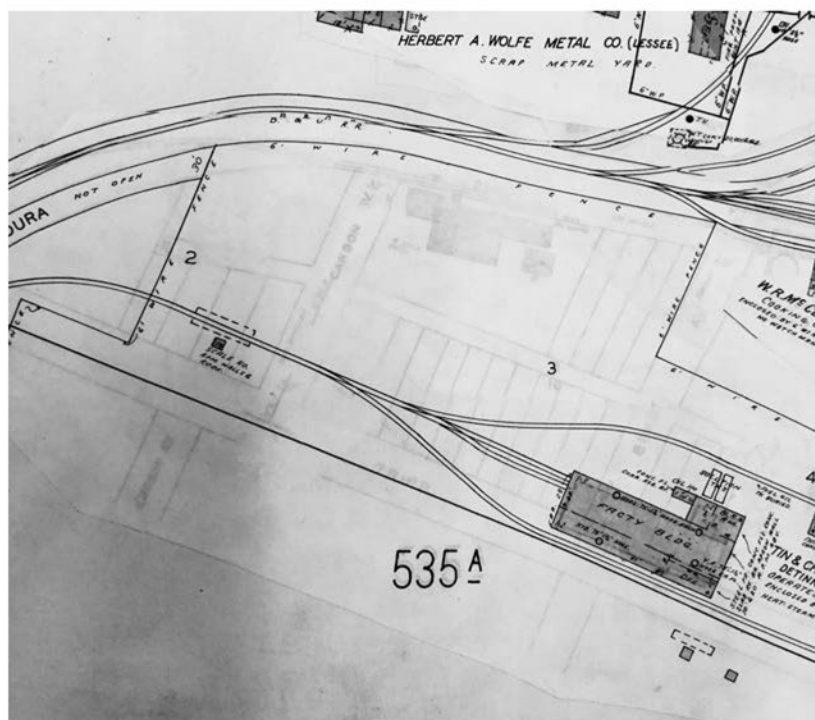


FIGURE 1.2. “That’s history,” captured in the landscape. Sanborn Map Company. 1936–52. *Insurance Maps of Baltimore, Maryland*. Volume 5A, Sheet 535A. Baltimore City Archives. Photo by the author, July 2015.

The effect of their thrift is a landscape shaped by risk, for actuaries hoping to tell the future from afar—actuaries who would glance but never touch. Get closer, though, and you can feel the contours of a far more complicated story beneath the surface of each page.

Curtis Bay, too, is a landscape shaped by efforts to make the future tractable for experts far afield. And like the layered pages of the Sanborn maps, its past appears in countless ghostly traces. Victory Elementary, built in 1943 for the children of wartime workers, has since been repurposed to house a company that builds containers for hazardous waste. If you know where to look inside the recreation center, a disintegrating conduit of community life, you will find the hundred-year-old pipes from the area’s first water pumping station. Street signs also betray a few sites’ former lives: Quarantine Road, today home to the city landfill, once held contagious bodies in isolation. But there are further ways the Sanborn maps offer an opening for understanding Curtis Bay. This land—with its history of quarantine, mili-

tary mobilization, and industrial boom and bust — has not only been shaped by conjectural practices that cleave “risks” from the fulsomeness of lived environments. Successive efforts to tame the future in this manner have also made it hard to access other ways of knowing harm and place.

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“Look,” Arthur nudges as we sit together trying to conjure up an image of the landscape as it was. I find this challenging with eyes wide open, so I settle into a dreamworld while the old man narrates. His memories carry me from the passenger seat of a khaki-colored car pulled over underneath a bridge to the edge of the frozen Patapsco River, where fifty-one houses cling together in a tight embrace. They look like lovers sharing one chair in an empty theater: everywhere between them, full; everywhere around them, space.

The houses lean into one another on two overcrowded streets. One begins at the railroad and disappears into a field. One runs for blocks before becoming pasture before becoming water, which becomes ice around the winter holidays. The younger boys tattle on the older boys who try to skate across the river. Once springtime melts the ice, the older boys will bring the younger boys along while they shoot rodents at the dump across the way. Where it doesn’t smell like trash it smells like vinegar because the plants are making acid that drips into the bay.

“What kind?” I interrupt.

“Oh, who knows? It’s hard to say.”

“Look,” says Arthur, an eighty-six-year-old White man with sagging skin and liver spots.

I close my eyes and look at Arthur, a twenty-something in his Air Force uniform, sidling up to the side of the bar to get a better look at Eleanor, who’s there with three girlfriends on a humid Saturday.

I look at Arthur, a twelve-year-old catching perch by the cove and watching them flop before taking the long way home. I see him galloping over mountains of trash with an exuberance befitting a kid who has just read *Tom Sawyer* with the rest of the sixth grade.

“Look,” says Arthur, an eighty-six-year-old leaning out the window of his car pointing out a weedy patch beneath the highway bridge: “It’s the one on the right as you approach the Harbor Tunnel in the north-bound lane.”

“What is?”

“That’s Masonville.”

“That’s where all the houses were. You can’t really see it, ’cause it’s

been—no, not anymore. But I drive through a lot. Look: here was a scrapyard and there was the shipyard . . . and then Weyerhaeuser Lumber, Gulf Oil, Arundel Sand and Gravel. And this here was called the hump. And I can still hear my grandpa say—”

Arthur talks about the town like it was all a dream. One day, he left home to fight in the Korean War. When he returned, someone had torn the houses down to build a thruway. First, they laid rail to cart coal from Appalachia onto ships, predicting a postwar boom. Swelling suburbs soon brought in a four-lane highway. These days, you can’t stand where Masonville once was without risking an accident. You can’t even tell it was there without a guide who brings a different present to the landscape. For most people, it is a place passed over in the rush toward a good life anywhere but here, a past forgotten in anticipation.

Arthur and I spent a lot of time in his car during my longest field-work stint. Sometimes he would pick me up at the library where I loitered between interviews. More often I would meet him at his home across the county line, where Eleanor would fix us up a plate. He liked to start our meetings at his house so he could show me aerial photographs he had copied from a book and modified with notes. Each worked as a mnemonic for what had been there before, a string around the finger—each drive a lesson in unforgetting place.

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The Sanborn maps, the weedy patch: two openings into a history of Curtis Bay. They both offer glimpses into the matter that underlies the present, but that matter does not matter in each picture. That it appears in the maps at all is a by-product of thrift. That it appears on the weedy patch is thanks to Arthur’s narrative labor. The Sanborn maps give form to a world where clarity depends on distance from the ground and where eclipsing pasts enables sharper futures—two ways of knowing elemental to the modern state.<sup>3</sup> The weedy patch, meanwhile, prompts an intimate account about how things that matter pulse beneath the surface, even as new developments obscure them. It meets the underwriter’s glance with the injunction to “look close,” maybe even touch and feel a place.

The underwriter cannot do his job with Arthur’s swirling recollections. Arthur cannot use the maps to find his neighborhood. The story I want to tell winds its way toward this disjuncture between ways of knowing problems—one conjectural and one contextual—to show how futurists in industry and government gradually dispensed with history and place. It is not a neutral story about two different ways of seeing so much as it is a



seething tale about how institutions came to unsee worlds like Arthur's, and how this unseeing has life-and-death effects.<sup>4</sup> One has been the state-sanctioned concentration of environmental harms on this peninsula, where they fester out of sight and out of mind. Another has been the transformation of these harms into uncertainties: too distributed to know and too ambiguous to change.

The process toward this present has been long, laborious, and wildly profitable for select groups in power—embodied by Nigel, the corporate boss whose evasions serve as prologue to this chapter. Nigel, who gestured toward the noxious air and shrugged that its impacts were “impossible to say.” Here, I track the production of this impasse over two long centuries, during which future-making in the United States has hinged on managing doubt through *dissociative* projects that split the realm of actionable knowledge from the mess of life as lived. By the time I stood with Nigel, these two had split so much that the very tools contrived to make the world to come more knowable had produced the opposite in Curtis Bay.

The term dissociation carries baggage, coming as it does from psychoanalytic practice, where it describes how some people put up mental walls to withdraw from the world, detaching from reality to cope with stress. But I want to turn this diagnosis on the state.<sup>5</sup> At its core, to dissociate means to cut relations that provoke discomfort. One might withdraw into her home and disavow an outside that seems threatening. This would be a classic invocation of the term that centers someone subject to a world beyond control. Yet dissociation can also be a method of control: for risk assessors who escape into insurance maps to pacify disorderly environments; for regulators who govern by conjecture and cease the troubling work of real-time observation.

The past two hundred years have seen a move in this direction, as dissociation has congealed into a mode of governance with grave effects for people living in South Baltimore, and as the subjunctive mood, which privileges the possible over the actual, has slowly come to permeate this place. Three historical moments help to tell this story, each papered over by the next in a tidy process Arthur's world disrupts (to remind us what the futurists don't see, what the logic of the Sanborn maps discounts). The first has roots in quarantine: a *spatial cut* executed to prevent disease in nineteenth-century Baltimore, by severing this peninsula from the downtown population. Mid-twentieth-century war production soon ushered in a spate of *epistemic cuts* that led officials to withdraw into the abstract factory, understood as a closed system. These were shortly followed by the *temporal cut* of toxic risk assessment, which led regulators to retreat into the future, abandoning the lived environment to govern prospective toxics in hypothetical airspace.

Each moment produced new ways of knowing the uncertain future for the good of people elsewhere by excising key relations from the picture. And each fomented harm for people here, while making the substance of that harm increasingly opaque. Despite distinctions between health, war, and corporate futures, then, each project bleeds into the next. They have collectively rendered Curtis Bay into one of the most polluted ZIP codes in the country, while ensuring that its toxic composition remains vague. (Vague, at least by modern standards. Another lesson covered over in the movement toward ever-clearer futures is that what gets to count as certainty has changed.)

If there is a progress story here, it is not a simple one. The chapter therefore moves through three successive cuts to trace two histories at once: one a progression toward ostensibly sharper forms of expert forecasting, the other toward profound irresolution about their impacts on the air in Curtis Bay. Both histories are indispensable for grasping how this place became zoned out of Americans' collective vision, even as so many rely on it. And both reveal why the present here is marked by such great doubt—or, at least, why Arthur's knowledge gets dismissed as dubious. The persistence of the latter in spite of all these shifts is the reason we have other chapters. It is the promise of a story that exceeds the linearity of layers.

### Prevention through Containment

In December 1881, fourteen-year-old Lucy Bronson wrote in her diary that she “almost passed” a yellow flag outside her neighbor's home. She scolded herself for not being more observant, as she was supposed to be on high alert. The disease was barely under control. It was just last week that Lucy had been vaccinated for the second time. A doctor came to school to inspect the students' arms. She had a “good marker,” but they still administered the shot once more. Afterward, in slacker script than usual, she complained her arm was “awful sore.”<sup>6</sup>

The yellow flags and vaccine scars that Lucy mentions in her diary were just two hieroglyphs from the rich sign-system that marked dangerous bodies in nineteenth-century Baltimore. During Lucy's teenage years, they announced precautions to prevent the spread of smallpox, which had recently plagued the city. And there were more: immigrants who failed their health exams received large Xs on their foreheads, surveyors kept exhaustive charts on who had been exposed. Don't go here, don't spit there, steer clear of yellow flags—city records detail a catalog of spatialized restrictions. The archive's pulse is nervous but controlled.<sup>7</sup>



Lucy Bronson was lucky. Had she been born much earlier, she may not have survived the epidemic. Certainly, she would not have gone about her life while it was ravaging the city. But in 1881, she managed both. By the time Lucy received her third vaccine, public health officials had come to see disease *prevention* as a central goal of urban governance. That shift was part of a broader expansion of governing authority to include the future epidemic, and tracked with developments in medical knowledge that promised experts quite precise control. Both worked through a careful ordering of space and demanded detailed knowledge of bodies as they moved through a congested cityscape: public health officials banished hazards to the fringe, they tracked and isolated the exposed. They also imposed a moral order onto the young metropolis, shaping locals into sanitary subjects who could manage their embodied boundaries.

Curtis Bay enabled all these shifts as Baltimore's quarantine zone.

The peninsula was not yet part of Baltimore during the nineteenth century, which marked the city's first one hundred years. (The neighborhoods of Curtis Bay, Brooklyn, Fairfield, Wagner's Point, Hawkins Point, and Masonville belonged to Anne Arundel County through World War I.) But it was geographically close—enough that Baltimore could use the region for affairs prohibited by its own regulations. That included toxic industries and bawdy businesses, where urbanites escaped to drink, gamble, and consort with burlesque dancers. And it included tending to contaminated bodies. So, in 1794, in 1845, and again in 1881, Baltimore bought up plots of land beyond its line of quarantine and established remote medical stations.<sup>8</sup>

Curtis Bay's utility as a zoned-out space begins with quarantine, and specifically with Baltimore's decision to govern the hinterlands as if they were a world apart—at a time when governing the future did not mean losing place so much as compartmentalizing it with great intention. Gradually, this spatial cut would transform the peninsula into a quasi-carceral space key to policing boundaries between foreign and domestic, the body and its environment, purity and danger.<sup>9</sup> These same practices would also become key to the construction of *race*, and specifically of the White body as a body to protect from racialized others, then understood to be contaminating forces. To understand how managing the urban future came to hinge on erecting these enclosures, though, we must first look to the sky: a view that would become hard to muster by the end of these historic transformations.

For early Baltimoreans, health did not inhere in the protection of pure bodies from those bodies riven with disease. Rather, health was a quality of the environment. The gentle, breezy airs kept in motion by the temperate



Chesapeake could produce a gentle, breezy temperament. But they could also turn malicious in a region hugged by marshlands on three sides. When rains overwhelmed the waterways and floods seeped into low-lying settlements, they raised a fetid fog that threatened bodies' equilibrium. That fog emanated from the swamps, slipped into homes through open seams, and disturbed the porous people found inside.

Doctors blamed these fogs, known as miasmas, for the region's status as a "hotbed of malaria" (literally, "bad air") and, later, yellow fever.<sup>10</sup> Though they could not specify their composition, doctors did understand that "airs could imbue people with their qualities" and that, with every breath of miasmatic air, Baltimoreans "respired the very stuff of illness," blending with the atmospheres where they resided.<sup>11</sup>

There was a time, in other words, when attunement to the irreducible haze of harmful air counted as medical knowledge, not uncertainty. The concept of an isolatable "pollutant" did not emerge until the late nineteenth century, Max Liboiron notes, long after miasma theorists began studying how "pollution" shaped both bodies and environments.<sup>12</sup> In fact, it was not until Lucy Bronson's youth that more exacting theories of disease took hold in Baltimore, premised on specific germs that defiled normatively healthy persons. Instead, settlers arriving in the early 1600s, and those present for its founding as a city decades later, labored to maintain themselves in balance with a fickle atmosphere—sometimes wholesome and sometimes sinister but always relevant to making health at the dawn of American empire.<sup>13</sup>

The first European settlers to arrive in Maryland touched shore in 1634, on Piscataway land alongside the Potomac River. Their story is a story of disease—first expelled and then absorbed. Settlers expelled "emanations" they had carried from the "Old World," or sickly air that roiled Native peoples.<sup>14</sup> Though we would explain these epidemics in quite different terms today, their influence was nonetheless decisive. The Piscataway chiefdom claimed eighty-five hundred members at the time of English contact. Settlers armed with guns and maladies cut their numbers down to just three hundred within decades, and they also devastated Susquehannock peoples as they traveled north to what would become Baltimore City.<sup>15</sup> They did not wipe out Native peoples, who live and thrive in Maryland today. But illness was a major boon to settler violence.

Settlers also absorbed disease through discomfiting transitions, however incommensurate with the hurt that they imposed. "Settling" referred not only to the process of encroaching on "new" land, as Conevery Valenčius has shown, but also of adjusting to its climate. Colonists who did not belong to the land "could expect to suffer" as their bodies settled in.<sup>16</sup> So, Europeans on their way to Baltimore would have had to acclimate to

its environment. Many found this process threatening because it promised, first, to make them sick, and then, to transform the fibers of their being. I want to emphasize that this included race, which Europeans of the time understood not as fixed but rather “liable to change” with one’s location, making atmospheric shifts an early source of White anxiety.<sup>17</sup>

Baltimore, in short, was settled by people who saw themselves as permeable beings and health as a state of atmospheric balance. They set down roots between the northwest and middle branches of the Patapsco River—relatively gentle inlets. But marshlands also compromised the young society. Floods vexed its anxious residents, fogs wafted north from shipping docks, and tides of immigrants seemed to carry noxious vapors. Together, these bad airs fomented epidemics that independent doctors could not hope to stabilize.

As Baltimore grew, and transitioned from being part of a dependent colony to a sovereign city in the new United States, so did its need to nurture health by taming the environment. Locals wanted robust institutions. Merchants demanded rational controls. So, in 1793, the Baltimore City Health Department came to be. It had both *present* and *prospective* mandates. Its first was to bring the city back to equilibrium after a devastating yellow fever outbreak, attributed to infectious air: not to specific matter in that air but to the creeping, cryptic whole. Its second was to look toward the future, preventing the next outbreak by imposing order on both land and sky.

Yellow fever posed grave problems in early Baltimore, as in other coastal cities. It struck workers with fatigue, vomiting, muscle pains, and chills, and left merchants destitute by interrupting trade. In the year of the Health Department’s founding, five thousand people perished from the malady in nearby Philadelphia, and Baltimore’s fledgling government was struggling to protect its public from the same.<sup>18</sup> This was no small task, as Baltimore relied on port activity. Its docks received goods from all over the world, indentured laborers from Europe, and enslaved peoples from Africa—some forced into the local iron works and others carted to tobacco plantations. Yellow fever was thought to be connected to the busy ports, but the how was poorly understood. Some physicians believed it had its roots in marsh effluvia emanating from the filthy Fell’s Point docks.<sup>19</sup> Others believed the illness was imported and contagious. Regardless of the source, it was clear that something needed to be done. So, the new department got to work on rules that would address both theories of disease: by targeting the spread of exhalations between people, particularly along the city’s coastal borders, and by tempering the threat of miasmatic winds through exhaustive sanitation.

Rigorous spatial management was key to both lines of intervention, and it was in this context that early Baltimore relied on Curtis Bay. There, in a



sparsely populated hamlet miles from the city and beyond the reach of its new laws (as Curtis Bay was not *of* Baltimore), officials wondered: Could they protect the atmosphere downtown through recourse to this isolated place? Geographic features already made the peninsula a kind of microenvironment, situated across the Patapsco from Baltimore's downtown, whose winds rarely gusted toward the city.<sup>20</sup> Legal boundaries reinforced this separation. Curtis Bay was therefore an ideal site for quarantine—an extra-urban zone where officials could contain the vile airs enabling urban life to an intensely local atmosphere. So it was that this margin became central to the work of making urban futures, and that quarantine rules inscribed what I think of as a spatial cut: the first dissociation.

If jurisdictional lines in early Baltimore gave order to the air, then concerns about disease also gave grist to those borders. Nowhere was this clearer than on Quarantine Road, an outpost in the southern neighborhoods. Authorizing the use of a quarantine hospital on the peninsula was among the city's first official acts. From there, an officer would detain incoming ships for days or even weeks, and then remove the ill for isolation. The same ordinance that outlined these procedures also gave the mayor powers to close the borders amid epidemic, and refuse entrance to persons from "infected" places. Later amendments required ships to discharge their cargos at the grounds for airing out, ventilate the clothing of their passengers, and cleanse both with disinfectants such as lime.<sup>21</sup> All this in the name of prevention: an orientation toward time borne out through the governance of space.

Health surveillance was, importantly, one of the first practices to make borders meaningful as more than "abstract lines on maps."<sup>22</sup> Checking ships before entry into Baltimore *made* Baltimore: it composed a body worthy of defense and set about defending it by warding off contagion. Given that prevention carries an injunction to catch hazards before they spiral into problems, this not only meant sequestering the sick.<sup>23</sup> It also meant interning the potentially diseased—namely, newcomers to the United States.

Immigrants "flooded" the coastal city seeking work through the 1800s, making Baltimore the country's largest port of entry after Ellis Island. Thousands more were shipped to Baltimore in bondage, until Congress banned the transatlantic slave trade in 1808.<sup>24</sup> The first "wave" of Europeans began arriving from Germany and Ireland shortly after, followed by "swells" from Europe's south and east.<sup>25</sup> (In immigration discourse, miasmatic terms remain pervasive.) Through the early century, until racial categories hardened in the lead up to the Civil War, well-heeled Whites feared the "erasure of [their] whiteness" through proximity to migrant enclaves, should they



discharge fumes that crept into more wholesome neighborhoods.<sup>26</sup> Many blamed these groups for spreading diseases deemed endemic where “the natives are dirty and promiscuous in their habits, communistic in their modes of living, and where they do not fear, but ignorantly invite contagion.”<sup>27</sup> Of course, poverty did (and does) exacerbate disease—but it was more common to see illness attributed to migrants’ vice. Scaremongers warned of poor new “elements” disturbing order with their ramshackle tenements, strange customs, and disregard for hygiene, which threatened to return the city to a “village state.”<sup>28</sup>

Many Whites also considered Baltimore’s free Black community to be a public health “menace.”<sup>29</sup> One reason, surely tied to discriminatory policies that kept them kettled in overcrowded districts, was that they suffered infectious disease at higher rates. Those rates later became a pretext for racially restrictive zoning laws that would have lasting effects on Baltimore, as Lawrence Brown makes clear.<sup>30</sup> But even before those laws, associations between filthiness and race marked non-Whites as risky to the body politic, putting pressure on the government to control their presumed danger.

I mention these anxieties to make clear that public health tactics born in the antebellum years were part of a broader response to difference in the burgeoning municipality. Yet it would be a mistake to see this as a one-way causal chain. Reforms were not merely responsive to elite apprehensions about newcomers: they also fostered apprehensions by rehearsing newcomers’ impurity. Health anxieties in nineteenth-century Baltimore were therefore world-shaping phenomena, producing the effects (and the affects) that they named.<sup>31</sup>

To get a sense of the spectacle at quarantine, consider what likely happened to Arthur’s family when they reached the United States. Like most in Masonville, Arthur descended from Germans who arrived in the early nineteenth century. His ancestors would have spotted Baltimore’s skyline after an arduous journey before being detained beyond the line of quarantine—where officers would inspect their ship, examine passengers, and mandate a cleaning process that could take as long as thirty days. This was the first ritual in becoming a Baltimorean: to be processed off the coast, to have your belongings sanitized, to have your ship surveilled for sickness and, if it was found, to wait. Eventually, officers would empty your ship, then drown the deck to wash away disease. If you were verified as ill, your clothes would be burned, your forehead marked, and your body removed in a rickety boat to a building described as “antiquated and dangerous.”<sup>32</sup> The city poured resources into this work throughout the century. Hundreds of vessels passed through quarantine each year, bringing tens of thousands of bodies under doctors’ observation. It is not hard to imagine why fear of foreigners

would surge in such a context and, with it, broad support for government surveillance.

Indeed, quarantine was just the first in a line of reforms designed to discipline the masses as contamination became a fear through which the public sphere was tamed.<sup>33</sup> As early as 1798, health laws compelled street cleaning, garbage disposal, food control, and sanitation—including in individual homes. Armed guards blocked passage through infected neighborhoods. Laws were even passed against “indiscriminate” spitting.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, excesses that could not be rooted out were pushed beyond the line of quarantine. There, in a still-rural region whose few residents ran farms and slaughterhouses deemed “inimical to public health,” offal mixed with the stench of city waste.<sup>35</sup> The outskirts also hosted lewd establishments where urbanites enjoyed pursuits presumed hostile to the body’s balance—corrupting businesses that Baltimore forbade.

These practices shaped the nascent city and they shaped its nascent subjects. This was especially true of Baltimore’s immigrant class, for whom hygiene offered one guard against xenophobia and one path toward assimilation. Having just endured the trauma of the quarantine exam, many migrant women labored in pursuit of a clean home and the belonging that such labor promised in the sanitary city. It is no coincidence that their daily pains to shore up the boundaries of the household mirrored Baltimore’s own efforts.

In a time of anxious mixing, both clung to the seduction of containment.

Clearly, boundaries were essential to securing healthy futures in a miasmatic Baltimore. But their significance would grow as the century wore on, and theories of exposure underwent a major change. Medical knowledge had seen paradigm shifts before, since the days physicians ascribed illness to the gods and prescribed acts of penitential sacrifice. This time, the shift would lead them from the heavens to the lab, and then to microscopic pathogens: “things-in-themselves” that now appeared to cause disease, and that experts could eliminate.<sup>36</sup>

These entities were germs, specific and autonomous. While rudimentary forms of germ theory date to the sixteenth century, it was not until much later that groundbreaking work would inaugurate the theory’s golden age. In the 1860s, Louis Pasteur showed that particular microbes caused once inscrutable bad airs. Beginning in the 1870s, Robert Koch isolated pathogens responsible for cholera, anthrax, and tuberculosis, kicking off a race to track the infinitesimal sources of other plagues. Gradually, health transformed from a state of atmospheric balance into something narrower: the



absence of disease.<sup>37</sup> Conceptions of the body also changed. If before it had seemed a porous thing, made through exchanges with the world around it, then germ theory proffered a more “modern” body—made from “discrete parts and bounded by its skin,” imagined “pure” until exposed, as Linda Nash explains.<sup>38</sup>

These shifts sparked a revolution in public health. Whereas miasma theory countenanced analyses that were “systemic rather than discrete,” and solutions that were “holistic rather than piecemeal,” germ theorists privileged direct concepts of cause (from germ to body to disease).<sup>39</sup> And while earlier officials had labored to contain bad airs, now their efforts at containment would home in on potential vectors of disease: on specific bodies tainted by specific agents.

This revolution did not happen all at once, but germ theory’s impact could already be seen amid the smallpox epidemic that struck during Lucy Bronson’s early days. To contain the disease, officials compartmentalized the city and adapted the logic of quarantine to the entire populace. Starting in 1872, each policeman reported “cases discovered on his beat” to the Health Department.<sup>40</sup> Landlords would soon report the same. Cautioning passersby with yellow flags, officers secured infected homes to keep the germ from spreading, while healthy people worked to keep their bodies pure. Patients past the point of no return were carted south to Curtis Bay to die. Their bodies were then buried in mass graves.

The epidemic devastated Baltimore. But it also clarified the urgency of adapting policy to meet the moment. Baltimore was brisk in this effort thanks, in part, to Johns Hopkins Medical School, founded on the cusp of the bacteriological age. Soon, the city opened labs and hired its own bacteriologists. They also charged quarantine physicians—who, by virtue of their jobs, inhabited controlled environments—to subject their patients to a penetrating gaze.<sup>41</sup>

Prior to the advent of germ theory, Curtis Bay’s value to the city had been chiefly geographic: as a peninsula set off from Baltimore by wind and water, it could keep noxious airs and bodies atmospherically contained. While this distance remained important as the century progressed, officials increasingly valued quarantine as a site for making new medical knowledge. There, within the isolation hospital’s four walls, doctors could examine how specific pathologies caused by specific germs moved through specific stages. Germ theory was amenable to this kind of attention in a way miasmas never were because it privileged linear causal links.<sup>42</sup> These meant that generalizable knowledge could conceivably emerge from observations of secluded patients. Doctors could also begin tracking differential patient outcomes with a precision that would not have made much sense before. For in the



same way that germ theory calcified the body as a bounded entity, it gave a new solidity to categories such as race.<sup>43</sup> Earlier understood as malleable and responsive to environment, race increasingly appeared as if it were an essential part of one's biology and, so, an explanatory force for other sorts of difference—a thesis that quickly naturalized discrimination.

For the sick—who were often poor, immigrant, racialized, or all three—being drawn into Baltimore's public health apparatus therefore meant becoming flesh, a term that Hortense Spillers uses to describe the body-object severed from her personhood.<sup>44</sup> There is a reason I have been describing those quarantined as bodies, not people, or more precisely disembodied data. As flesh, they could be examined under the objectifying microscope of medical knowledge, then contorted into charts that helped protect the unmarked public.<sup>45</sup> Those charts mapped statistical enclosures that for the first time graced officials with the power of conjecture, enabling them to predict disease susceptibility based on evidently inborn traits.<sup>46</sup> This power surely helped the Health Department direct their interventions, sometimes in patently racist ways; consider Jim Crow housing policies designed to “quarantine” Black urbanites.<sup>47</sup> But statistical enclosures also enabled statistical exclusions. This much is clear in Baltimore's gross mortality rates.

As a matter of procedure, Baltimore discounted deaths at quarantine (considered “poor risks”) from the city's total.<sup>48</sup> Though smallpox deaths numbered 1,184 in 1882, for example, this figure took “no account” of the 359 who died in Curtis Bay.<sup>49</sup> This exclusion echoed models popular in the insurance business that used normal curves, not outliers, to forecast the incidence of illness within a group.<sup>50</sup> More importantly, it also gave the impression that, compared with those inside the city, deaths on the periphery *should not count in the same way*. First geographically and then statistically dissociated from the public alluded to in public health, these bodies were zoned out. As Didier Fassin reminds, “There is no politics of life that does not have a politics of death for a horizon. But this horizon remains invisible, occluded,” either practically, through patterns of neglect, or theoretically, hidden by ellipses in health data.<sup>51</sup>

This exclusion occurred at a time when Curtis Bay was becoming a containment zone for more than just sick bodies. By the late nineteenth century, sanitation laws designed to segregate the air had transformed this once-pastoral place.<sup>52</sup> Every improvement downtown saw its underbelly here: urban waste traveled to dumps on the peninsula, human excreta coursed through storm drains into the Patapsco, and “offensive” industries banned from Baltimore cropped up in Curtis Bay. That included manufactories that smelted lead, produced fertilizer, rendered fat, and fabricated soap, bleach, glue, and acid. It included petroleum-processing plants and a coal-export



FIGURE 1.3. “Within walking distance of our property.” Photo used in promotional materials published by Curtis Bay Terrace, Inc. in 1918 to pitch land to potential buyers. Many pages from this pamphlet boast that heavy industry is “within walking distance of our property.”

terminal. And more such firms were on their way. They were drawn here, again, by laws that pushed them far enough from Baltimore that they would not impinge on sanitary efforts but kept them close enough to benefit the city.<sup>53</sup> They were drawn by infrastructure erected in service of those laws. And they were drawn by a mass publicity campaign. In the late nineteenth century, speculators read the writing on the wall and bought up swaths of land on the peninsula that they promptly sold to businesses as the “best money-making proposition in real estate today.”<sup>54</sup>

Speculators also made a point to sell to residents, trumpeting the benefits of living close to factory jobs, even as those jobs polluted local air. One hundred years before, settlers would have viewed their ads as strange—not because the air was dirtier, but because the air was relevant. Because, one hundred years before, *health was atmospheric* and bad airs were known to sap a worker’s strength.

By the early twentieth century, Curtis Bay’s utility as a quarantine zone had largely ceased, as sick bodies could be isolated anywhere—in homes, in hospital rooms—without endangering the city. And Baltimore had made progress in curbing outbreaks. The city had achieved this, first, by meticulously managing space and difference and, then, through demographic tools that established population trends. These enclosures made it possible to anticipate disease before it spread and prevent that spread by externalizing dangers. Externalization could be geographic, as when bad airs were held beyond the line of quarantine. Or it could be statistical, as when demographers cut outliers from official calculations. Theorists of insurance teach that precaution is a “giant machine for the production of knowledge” that “inflates the force of the speculative fact.”<sup>55</sup> If this is true, then it is also true that precaution creates gaps. This is a vital takeaway from early Baltimore,



where precision about public health in general came to turn on structured inattention to the margin, and where a clearer collective future was secured, in part, by losing Curtis Bay.

The quarantine hospital remained in light use through the 1960s (including, in one instance, to detain a ship whose crewmen suffered an odd rash; officials doused them all in DDT).<sup>56</sup> But the twentieth-century peninsula mattered less to the work of achieving public health than it did as an industrial space. This much was evident in the drama surrounding one leper by the name of Mary Sansone, successfully kept out of quarantine by speculators who argued her sick body threatened their land's value.<sup>57</sup> It also tracked with shifts in the immigrant medical exam, which by this time served to prepare them for a life of modern labor. Under the auspices of the US Public Health Service (PHS), a quasi-military body that took over screenings in 1891, officers used the exam to discipline the migrant working class, whom they shuttled into lines, moved about in unison, branded with white chalk, and viewed as interchangeable. This "assembly line of flesh and bone" did work to communicate industrial values and shape industrial citizens.<sup>58</sup> Humiliating by design, its purpose was to transform unruly *bodies* into orderly, dissociable *subjects* who would endure punishing work without expecting much care from the state.

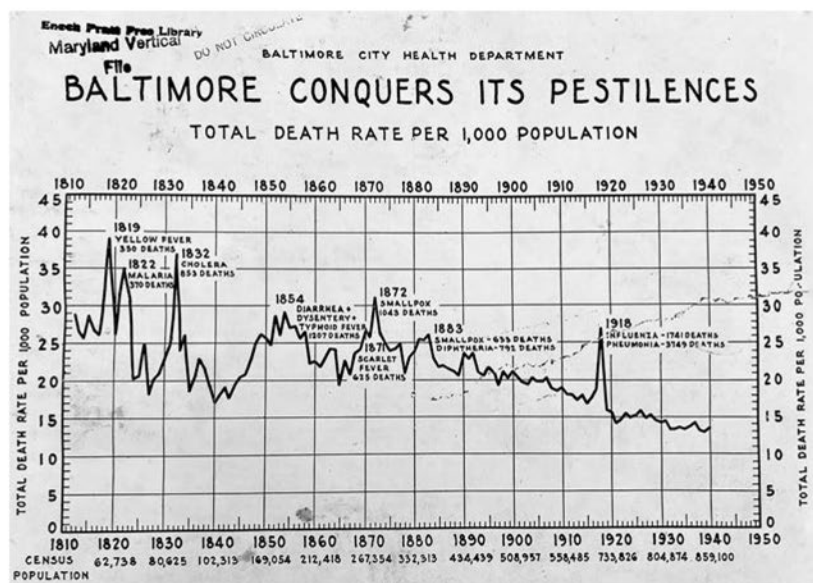


FIGURE 1.4. "Baltimore conquers its pestilences."  
1942. *Baltimore Evening Sun*, May 12.



My own family archive bears this out. In 1905, after fleeing Russia, my great-great-grandfather passed ten months in Germany to treat trachoma: a contagious eye infection that would have kept him out of the United States. The PHS screened for trachoma by lifting migrants' eyelids up with buttonhooks, because it made for bad industrial workers. Knowing this, he got himself in order before traveling to Baltimore, where he passed the medical exam and worked a factory job until machines eventually took his place. His wife and children, who made their way to Baltimore in 1907, engaged in similar praxes of self-governance. They spent hours each day scrubbing floors and washing clothes to prove that a poor family "off the boat" from eastern Europe could keep themselves in tip-top shape.<sup>59</sup>

They did not live in Curtis Bay, but by this time many like them did, tending to self and home while the air outside grew thick with industrial emissions. At the same time as it thickened, the air around them also fell away. It fell away from the vantage point of government as the relentless specificity of life here disappeared into a series of abstractions: a transition sped along by war, which thrust this site into a national production line managed from afar, by people who would never come to know it as a place.

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## The Graveyard

"Here." Arthur pulls over at a parking lot in Fairfield, where cars discharge from foreign freighters. The terminal has just received a shipment of Mercedes-Benzes, which workers drive into long, tidy arrays. Each car waits for paint, then they disperse across the mid-Atlantic. Transient guests, these cars. No one drives a Mercedes-Benz in Curtis Bay.

We sit outside in silence, transfixed as uniformed men drive uniform cars off the ship and into rows. After a while, Arthur rummages through his papers to find a book about Baltimore in WWII. He has dog-eared about a dozen different pages.

Arthur instructs me to turn to the first one while he puts his hands back on the steering wheel. It pictures thousands of people buzzing about the Bethlehem-Fairfield Shipyards, where much of the nation's naval fleet was fabricated. Onlookers in their Sunday best crowd around a flag-flanked ship. The land beneath them used to be a graveyard.

"Look," says Arthur. I close my eyes and look at Arthur with his cousins, peeking from behind a tree. The year is 1941, and workers

digging off the coast to prepare the land for wartime shipping ways strike bone. They have unearthed the old quarantine station. I see one hundred men waist-deep in swamp, sharing space with skeletons. People had been laid to rest in unmarked graves. “Apparently there was a hospital none of us knew about down on the shore,” Arthur narrates, eyes wide, “at least until they dug it up that day.”

“Look,” says Arthur. Eleven-year-old boys are hypnotized by skulls rising from the soil. Closer. Some bones lie strewn about the grass. Others sit arranged in workers’ trucks as decoration. Arthur’s memory is striking for its dream-like quality, but also because it teaches that the march of time is not so neat, that transformations are incomplete, and that things buried reassert themselves in unexpected ways. It would take just weeks for a giant warship-building enterprise to cover up the burial grounds, but the bones kept popping up—each one disrupting the steady march ahead with the gravity of what remains.

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## Preparing the War Machine

If you take the toll roads, you can travel from 1881 to 1941 in two and a half hours. That is how long it takes to drive from Lucy Bronson’s diary in the elegant reading room of the Maryland Historical Society to the Philadelphia branch of the US National Archives, a warehouse that holds files from the Curtis Bay Ordnance Depot. There, in Record Group 156, Barcode HC1-8493192, Folder 12, you will find a photograph: a few uniformed White men watch over a group of Black women who assemble bandoliers. Their eyes are down, their backs are bent, their hands are busy clipping bullets. They are manufacturing security. Working the factory line during WWII provided a sense of stability for thousands in the shape of a mechanized skillset, a regimented working day, a steady paycheck, a path toward assimilation (for some), and plausible middle-class dreams. In that sense, the photo shows a squadron working double-time, to produce the stuff of war and to produce themselves as Fordist subjects. Take a more synoptic view and you can glimpse a whole peninsula at work, transforming the quarantine zone into a cog in the nation’s war machine.

Mass-producing the national future in the form of arms and men was a central goal of the *preparedness* movement, a massive domestic push toward a permanent war posture that emerged during WWI, concretized during WWII, and intensified in anticipation of WWII.<sup>60</sup> Though wars helped





FIGURE 1.5. **Manufacturing security.** Photo from the Curtis Bay Ordnance Depot. US National Archives in Philadelphia. RG 156, Box 1, Folder 12, Records of the Bureau of Ordnance, 1950s.

build momentum, the movement's aims exceeded any single clash. Shirking the assumption that conflict could be avoided, advocates prescribed a constant state of readiness—a vigilance verging on compulsion—and an arsenal robust enough to withstand the most calamitous potentials. They also sold the movement as a means for shaping citizens defined by order, sameness, productivity. Moving beyond the negative rites of containment (don't go here, don't spit there), but continuing a process begun under the quasi-military PHS, the War Department would manufacture standardized and self-sufficient workers who would produce uniform things. To yield both at the scale that war required, the United States would need to rationalize production.

That meant treating the factory as a concept, not a place, enacting what I figure as an epistemic cut that severed the bodies in the photo from the world outside the plant, and both from the perilous brunt of the preparedness regime.

Of course, the factory was a place, embedded in another place, whose place-ness mattered to these efforts. It mattered in part because of the urban form contrived through quarantine. As a waterfront manufacturing



town exempt from Baltimore's nuisance laws, Curtis Bay seemed a natural place to site the national bunker. Many businesses had already arrived before WWI to take advantage of this regulatory beyond: chemical plants, oil terminals, coal piers, shipyards, brick kilns, and asphalt works.<sup>61</sup> They employed about ten thousand men—White, Black, and immigrant—who lived in enclaves squeezed between the factories.

All of this would benefit the war effort, and all of it would grow to meet demand. As facilities scaled up and the ordnance depot joined them, Curtis Bay became subsumed into an operation managed from on high as an abstract collection of inputs and outputs—not lived particularities. If governing the future during Baltimore's first hundred years required an up-close management of space and difference, then by the mid-twentieth century it would rely on panoramic optics poorly calibrated to conditions on the ground.<sup>62</sup> Like the fact that workers viewed themselves as patriots, not cogs. Or that war production *did* affect life here. It infused Curtis Bay with national pride. It expanded worker power. It grew the population by some forty thousand. It made Americans of many immigrants. And it changed the atmosphere.

Through both world wars and well beyond, efforts to secure a national future increased the toxic burdens borne by residents. They also provided Baltimore a rationale for distributing those burdens along hardening Black-White racial lines, exposing some to considerable risk on behalf of the American people. Of course, you cannot see them in this photo: such dangers fell outside the War Department's frame. With time, locals also learned to push these dangers to the edges of their vision, honing habits of dissociation that helped them to imagine futures here.

As an institution, the American military predates the United States, but it was not always oriented toward the national far future. For much of their history, the armed forces grew in times of war and shrank in times of peace. Logics of preparedness—that conceive the military as a “permanently mobilized force” designed to deal with “an intrinsically threatening world”—are relatively modern creations, best understood as part of an effort to discipline the country's migrant masses, and not just into sanitary norms.<sup>63</sup> They first emerged before the country's entry into WWI as an elite response to hostilities in Europe, and a series of domestic threats facing the United States in the early twentieth century.

Those threats included immigrants and labor power, both on display in Baltimore. In the years leading up to WWI, tens of thousands moved through the assembly line of flesh and bone and into factories. Germans,

Czechs, Poles, Hungarians, Swedes, Norwegians, Russians, and Irish departed Europe just to find each other on shop floors, where they organized in ethnic gangs and struck relentlessly.<sup>64</sup> This practice worried hawks like Theodore Roosevelt, who warned that “Old World” bonds would lead to national ruin.<sup>65</sup> It also worried Baltimore’s capitalist class, though few wished to limit immigration and subsequently slow their labor stream. Bosses banked on the boons of a mixed workforce, keeping wages low while stoking interethnic tensions. This was an old corporate strategy in Baltimore, whose earliest entrepreneurs gathered poor Whites, free Blacks, enslaved people, and immigrants for work under the same roofs but in competing units, exploiting difference to blunt solidarity.<sup>66</sup>

When labor did rise up, what capitalists sought was therefore not so much a tamping down of borders as it was a pliant workforce: a departure from the needs of early Baltimore. Henry Ford had famously achieved this in Detroit by hitching pay to learning English, keeping a clean home, staying sober, and deferring to authority.<sup>67</sup> Preparedness advocates sought to inculcate the same through the armed forces, which would demand less from private capital. Business leaders backed the movement because, as Catherine Lutz proposes, military growth would create a “docile labor force at home,” while opening new markets overseas.<sup>68</sup> Roosevelt, meanwhile, argued that universal (male) military service would produce “strong, clean, and self-respecting citizens” from a motley crew of immigrants whose loyalties he questioned.<sup>69</sup> Like many Americans, he had watched radical sentiments splinter Europe. What would become of the United States, he pressed, if the government did not control its people?

I do not mean that preparedness was simply a pretense for neutralizing difference or protecting corporate profits, just as Baltimore’s public health reforms were not only about controlling migrant bodies. What I want to underscore is subtler: that preparedness advocates aimed to produce an anticipatory nationalism that could quell disorder on the home front, and did so by stoking fear about the future of the nation. To again quote Roosevelt, they advertised the “lasting harm” that would come from failing to “front danger” in advance.<sup>70</sup> That was enough to stoke calls for huge expansions in the US weapons store—which would accrue to the benefit of private companies—and for reining in the working class through mandatory military training.

The movement’s national proposals largely flopped, but it did inspire a commitment to peacetime weapons manufacturing, including in Curtis Bay. The region already boasted a strong industrial infrastructure and ready workforce by this time. It was also due east from Bethlehem Steel, whose wares could travel to the peninsula, whose workers could rend them into



weapons that could get to the Atlantic via routes along the bay. So, by 1918, a Coast Guard yard and an army ordnance depot had both been established there to produce the stuff of war past WWI. And the federal government became a local institution: it conducted school programs, ran an annual Operation Santa Claus, and hosted seasonal parades. Arthur told me nearly every man in Masonville was either part of the armed forces or supported them as a civilian worker. Through this work, his German American family—and others like them—were able to cast off their hyphens and claim belonging to a sphere of unmarked Whiteness prized in the United States.<sup>71</sup> Gus, a friend of Arthur's whose family came from Czechoslovakia, agreed: "My father put in sweat to earn this country." It was an achievement that he labored for without complaint.

Archival files, too, reflect the character and uniformity believed to come from military labor. Consider this template letter from the depot's early files: "My dear \_\_\_\_\_, In a few days your soldier will receive his honorable discharge and start for home . . . The Army has done everything it could to make him strong, fine, self-reliant, yet self-controlled. It returns him to you a better man."<sup>72</sup> Or recall the women working in lockstep to make bullets, wearing aprons.

Besides assimilating Curtis Bay's migrant populace, preparedness efforts transformed the peninsula's relationship with Baltimore. Watching workers arrive to fill new jobs, legislators noted the region's industrial potential and the importance of absorbing it, lest Baltimore slip in the national urban ranking. Not wanting to be viewed "as a slow town," the city council voted in 1918 to annex the neighborhoods from Anne Arundel County.<sup>73</sup> Notably, they did so without extending nuisance protections to Curtis Bay. Even after its inclusion in the city and the descent of quarantine, the peninsula continued to be a space of exception—a juridical gap for Baltimore, and soon for the whole United States.

If the early twentieth century sparked a movement for preparedness and laid its material groundwork in South Baltimore, then WWII triggered more dramatic changes. As the conflict brewed abroad, Franklin D. Roosevelt expressed his desire to avoid involving the US military and called, instead, for an economic "quarantine" against the Axis powers. He also acknowledged that "war is a contagion."<sup>74</sup>

Then, in 1941, Japanese planes descended on Pearl Harbor. Interventionists seized on the surprise attack as proof there would be no preventing war's "disease," because "aggressors" like Japan could not be peaceably contained. Warnings from preparedness advocates also echoed in critiques



that the country had *not been ready*, that commanders had *not been thinking ahead*, that Pearl Harbor was a *failure of anticipation*. This led to the historic rise of “national security,” an ideology that “made preparedness a permanent task drawing on all sinews of national strength.”<sup>75</sup> Earlier cautions against unfaithful migrants also reverberated in the wake of the attack, when Roosevelt ordered the internment of Japanese Americans: a preemptive suspension of civil liberties deemed “commensurate with the threatened danger.”<sup>76</sup>

To be sure, there was pushback in the process of readying the home front—from pacifists, from private companies ordered to convert to war production, and from jurisdictions asked to cede control to federal interests. But a few things made the call to prepare more compelling after Pearl Harbor than during WWI. One was the vast industrial infrastructure that Fordist practices had put in place. By 1941, Ford’s innovations had standardized the industrial process such that investments in preparedness could rapidly be translated into outcomes. In his plants, workers could be tasked with manning specialized machines or completing one part of a streamlined process with virtually no training. It was a generalizable model. Fordist principles could be used to manufacture cars—but also munitions and military planes. For the first time during WWII, ships were adapted to this sort of mass production: steelworkers at Bethlehem made component parts that traveled to Curtis Bay for assembly by novices.<sup>77</sup> Before the war, few of them had ever stepped inside a shipyard. But war production would produce them, too, as “welders, burners, riggers, machinists, electricians.” As “goods,” the company quipped, whose value would exceed the war’s duration.<sup>78</sup>

In ways that early preparedness advocates could only ever dream of, WWII generalized the factory form across the social fabric: it folded tens of thousands into regimented processes; it transformed them on the “level of the nervous system”; it stitched together separate neighborhoods.<sup>79</sup> Within weeks, workers here were executing orders to produce an “arsenal of democracy” with “all possible speed”—which Roosevelt advised would take “great sacrifice.”<sup>80</sup> But this would also make them heroes. And it would shape their corner of the city. If you run your fingers across the Sanborn maps, you can feel the landscape change.

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Back on the coast: the lights are on in every single factory, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Men work three shifts to keep production churning, then pile into bars—even the drowsy crew that finishes at daybreak. Besides the depot and the Coast Guard yard,

private industries convert their wares for wartime use. Chemical plants are flush with federal money, making pesticides to limit insect-borne diseases among troops. And Bethlehem is so overwhelmed with work that they absorb the Fairfield coast to accommodate new warship-making. One day, workers are digging bones up on the shore. The next, they are producing 10 percent of the US naval fleet. Fran, Arthur's neighbor, says her family moved from coal country so her father could rivet ships at Fairfield's famous yards. That job made him a factory man for life, and it made his family proud. She calls the plant's productivity "a great tribute to its workers." Between 1941 and 1945 they built a universe at the edge of the Patapsco.

Around them, everywhere, activity.



FIGURE 1.6. **The Bethlehem-Fairfield Shipyards.** Photo by Arthur Siegel for the US Office of War Information, May 1943. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LOT 727 (M).



Forty thousand people flock to the peninsula, drawn by advertisements in the paper. (“ARE YOU AMERICAN ENOUGH?”<sup>81</sup>) The federal government builds barracks to accommodate the masses and packs the coast with trailers. Suddenly, containment seems archaic. White mining families from Appalachia join the area’s old-timers, as do newcomers from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, and Ukraine. Newcomers say the work makes them American. And like Arthur’s family before, many Whites throw off their ethnic status by working for the nation. Meanwhile, Fairfield and Hawkins Point host a growing number of Black workers transplanted from the Jim Crow South to the Jim Crow mid-Atlantic, where housing policies restrict their access to the city. Black people make up one-fifth of Baltimore but may only dwell in one-sixteenth of residential space.<sup>82</sup> During and after war, they will be confined to the most dangerous and poorly serviced areas—sometimes by law and always by force, including by the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>83</sup> At the same time as the city insists upon their difference, though, the United States demands their uniform labor.

So, the factories fill up with White men, Black men, even women; there is too much work to be selective. Formerly segregated units begin to mix up, too. Not smoothly—but some eventually do integrate. Labor unions also find new strength, upsetting early hopes that war might make them docile bodies.<sup>84</sup> They take advantage of federal contracts to double pay and deepen benefits.<sup>85</sup> Interracial coalitions deserve credit for these gains.

The war years in Curtis Bay, in short, are rife with contradiction. People live in separate quarters but work the floor together. Weapons split the world but knit these neighborhoods. Quite literally when it comes to building ships, whose modular parts traverse South Baltimore, war transforms this place into one grand assembly line with every part in synchronicity. Tens of thousands move as one on this peninsula, incorporated.

Inside the factory, industrial hygienists tend to the health of the machine. Building on methods born earlier but advanced now that federal dollars pay the price of plant improvements, they study industrial chemicals with incredible precision.<sup>86</sup> That is, they study how chemicals impact the factory environment, conceivable as abstract space.<sup>87</sup> Bethlehem’s hygienists count dust particles on strips of film to see if they add up to problems for “the human element in industry.”<sup>88</sup> They do this work in sealed, aseptic labs.<sup>89</sup> As for the atmosphere in Curtis Bay?



Here, bodies also register the war, but in a far more cryptic manner. Its impacts slip in and out of knowability. Arthur laughs about his own naiveté:

There was one company that worked copper for ammunition. It traveled down the storm drain into the cove where they'd discharge all their waste. The bottom of the swimming hole looked all shiny and patinaed on the bottom . . . And blonde kids, well their hair would turn chartreuse! You could always tell, at school, who'd been swimming . . . Their hair would stay that way for days.

It's loud and smells like smoke and Arthur tastes something close to metal on his tongue. His hair shines green while he scampers home to help his mother shake the dust of war away. Debris cakes onto windowsills. There's a rumor workers' dirty boots have killed the grass. And it's difficult to breathe: kids playing ball have to lie down and take breaks. But when the smoke clouds pass they'll stand again and sprint toward home plate. "We just sort of understood we were doing our part, building the stuff that made America," Arthur says. He shrugs. Plus, it is "exhilarating" to be around so much movement.

"Imagine!" Eighty-five-year-old Arthur looks out at the great asphalt expanse and says the shipyards feel like yesterday.

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Arthur was young during the war. He mostly remembers the excitement of it all, though his memories disclose some of the dangers. Images like the dust, the clouds, the boot-singed grass, and children's tinted hair hint at harms preparedness produced for locals. Yet Arthur also suggests that people overlooked these harms to help secure a future for the nation. For many, taking on defense work meant identifying with the country on an intimate level.<sup>90</sup> It also meant hitching personal futures to the businesses that mediated that relationship. The bonds linking self, country, and company could, at times, make each one stronger, but they could also cover up inherent tensions. Like when protecting the national body meant sacrificing one's own health through dangerous war work. Or when paychecks from the plants paid for well-appointed homes, insulated from the air those plants had made. The way I read it, Arthur's shrug is part of an embodied archive that recalls what living with these contradictions took: a willingness to look ahead instead of in one's midst, to trust that sacrifice today would make a better world tomorrow, to focus only on the sphere one could control (the home) and brush away the paralyzing haze.

Industrial hygienists also practiced what I think of as dissociative habits, evident in the close attention that they paid to the factory environment but not to life outside its walls. So did federal officials, if the archive in Philadelphia is any indication. Here, place dissolves and workers morph into a labor infrastructure to be managed as carefully as “the mechanical machinery of the plant,” its productivity measured in men hired, hours worked, and weapons made.<sup>91</sup> Inputs, outputs, rules, exhaustive diagrams—managerial precision squeezes life into an order. Officers enumerate every little detail *just in case*. It is 1943 and “there is nothing you can do . . . but prepare for the shock,” one officer announces, by proceeding “on a factual basis.”<sup>92</sup> Another proclaims: “Figures will not win the war, but the lack of them . . . can lose it.”<sup>93</sup> The very statistical skills that technocrats had honed in service of securing public health could now be put to work making strategic armament decisions on behalf of an ever-anxious state.

During WWII, data generated at facilities like the depot made their way onto graphs that traveled to a central office for analysis, kept “separate from the job itself.” This point is key, for it suggests that even planning obeyed a Fordist division of labor. Believing the rationalization of the war machine to be “the *one* thing we can control,” the War Department tasked an entire council with translating production into “systematic information.” Such information would not only help them exercise “good judgment” but also “guide the prediction of future events” by developing a reference point that could serve as a basis for conjecture.<sup>94</sup> For example, if this many workers can produce this many bullets in this many days, then here is what we will need to advance in the Pacific; or, if we suffer this many losses in the European theater, then here is what recouping them will take. Removed from the day-to-day work of production and focused, instead, on a series of efficiency factors, military officers instituted uniform controls, distributed standardized training guides, and made decisions from miles away.

What was new about the massive military mobilization of the mid-twentieth century—compared with the spatial labor of disease prevention—was that it forged an epistemic cut that cleaved the factory from its surround. It made the peninsula legible within a national planning apparatus run by technical experts who would never visit Curtis Bay.<sup>95</sup> Sharper than nineteenth-century public health in some ways but cloudier in others, these efforts traded place-based granularity for maximal utility. They turned on a managerial clarity that did not get bogged down by the extraneous.<sup>96</sup>

This distance provided room for local actors to maneuver during WWII, citing the national emergency to circumvent prewar regulations. Early in the conflict, for example, the Baltimore Housing Authority and the Federal



Works Administration scuffled over plans to build barracks in Curtis Bay. When the country entered the war, it had only been ten years since Baltimore zoned the peninsula for industry. As I elaborate in chapter 2, the designation did not unpeuple the peninsula, but it was supposed to prohibit the construction of new housing there to protect people from industrial emissions and factories from residential nuisance claims. But WWII brought thousands to the area. To manage the ensuing housing crisis, federal officials pushed to construct emergency quarters for wartime workers. By 1942 they had struck a deal with Baltimore: the city would allow construction if they could use the properties, postwar, as low-rental houses to absorb Black “slum dwellers” cleared from more desirable neighborhoods.<sup>97</sup>

In March 1942, the three-hundred-unit Fairfield Homes opened for occupancy—built to ensure a long life at Baltimore’s request. The property would be all White until 1954, when the federal government turned it over to the city. It would be all Black by the end of the decade.<sup>98</sup> It is worth noting, since preparedness was initially portrayed as a vehicle for smoothing difference, that in practice it entrenched inequalities. In Baltimore, the goal of providing for the national future justified unevenly distributing industrial burdens to poor people of color, in flagrant disregard of the city’s own zoning regulations. Even Arthur, as a White child from an upwardly mobile family, was unaware of the extent to which he avoided the worst of the dust; his archive hides things, too. When the railroad bought out Masonville in 1952, his family moved to a White suburban town ten miles away.

The federal government’s distance from life in Curtis Bay would only grow with the end of WWII. Though the military was committed to maintaining its arsenal, particularly as the country transitioned into a Cold War with the Soviets, the region’s place within the preparedness calculus would see considerable postwar change. Shipbuilding that just years before had overwhelmed the coast quietly turned to shipbreaking, as workers stripped steel siding for reuse—including to build tanks for oil storage. Ordnance production at the depot largely ceased. Bureaucratically, control over that facility shifted to an office based in Pennsylvania.

In the 1950s, the depot also underwent a shift in mission toward stockpiling explosives, chemicals, and precious metals in case the Cold War heated up. They purchased some from local companies: FMC made rocket fuel for missiles; GRACE tested the atomic potential of thorium nitrate.<sup>99</sup> Many residents believe that local plants made herbicides like Agent Orange for use in proxy wars. (I do not know if this was true.) Meanwhile, the army redistributed resources from manufacturing to contingency planning in



the hope that simulating worst-case scenarios would clarify what surviving WWII would take.

Preparedness, in short, looked different than it had before the atom bomb. Now, the military was preparing for an event so exceptional that there were no past figures to ground expectations.<sup>100</sup> Instead, Curtis Bay inhabited the quiet gap before the presumed eventuality of a war to end all wars—and the gap is an intensely speculative space.<sup>101</sup> It begs to be filled with “as ifs” and “could bes.” And it was. Locals guessed what might be hidden at the depot (Gus thought “water for the atom bomb”), while officers drafted reactions to the threat of national annihilation. In the archive, reports rehearse how the depot would respond to a nuclear attack with impossible precision, down to the number of pickup trucks (twenty-two) that workers would need to mobilize supplies. Increasingly, federal officials directed nervous energy toward the hypothetical.

In the process, they also let the dicey present fall away.

Return to Record Group 156, Barcode HC1-8493192, Folder 12: again, the women. In the same folder, as if in error: scenes of utter chaos. While written reports depict an efficiently run, accident avoiding, tip-top stock-piling zone prepared for all eventualities, pictures from the 1950s illustrate a different reality—of negligent handling, disrepair, and (to quote the photographer) egregious “disregard for safety regulations.”<sup>102</sup> Quite visible to the naked eye but illegible to the speculative state, millions of weapons casings had been dumped along the railroad tracks that carried volatile materials past the Fairfield Homes and through other parts of Curtis Bay. One wonders, looking at the images, what other place-based harms were left to worsen in the meantime.<sup>103</sup> What might have covered Arthur’s clothes or singed the grass beneath his feet or labored children’s breathing during baseball games?

It seems the more that military leaders absorbed themselves in the conjectural, the more the actual receded, exacerbating a trend begun by nineteenth-century demographers who elected not to see the mess in Curtis Bay. From the rationalization of the war machine to the rise of dire hypotheticals, security experts manufactured a sensorium concerned with national demise, and dulled attention to the everyday.<sup>104</sup> By mid-century, they had produced a vision of the future so climactic that anything short of apocalypse barely registered as violence. The work of manufacturing security thus produced its opposite in the here and now: instead of order, danger.

Along the way, residents became an externality—not a part of the security apparatus, not calculable, not standardized—more zoned out than ever. That problem would only grow as government retreated and multinational



FIGURE 1.7. **Scenes of utter chaos.** Photo from the Curtis Bay Ordnance Depot. US National Archives in Philadelphia. RG 156, Box 1, Folder 12, Records of the Bureau of Ordnance, 1950s.

companies moved in to take its place. For if, until this point, zoning out had been an unfortunate by-product of technocratic governance, then by the late twentieth century it would pay dividends *not* to know about the state of local health. First forged by spatial cuts and then vanished into epistemic ones, this site would shortly be forgotten through temporal rifts that severed life as lived from life inferred through risk: the third dissociation.

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### No Trespassing

Arthur is trying to show me around, but we keep getting stuck between barbed-wire gates and dead-end streets and railway cars and guards-for-hire who shoo us away because this is PRIVATE PROPERTY. Kid Arthur could breeze about on foot but his shortcuts have since been subdivided into Sunoco and Amports and FMC—and old Arthur is on his fourth maneuver trying to free his car from the fenced-in in-between. It's hot out and the view is grim, but with the air conditioner on and the world in my peripheral vision, I imagine we are driving through the alpine hills. Until I breathe. In the uncanny



ecology of petrochemical Curtis Bay, the mountain tops are full of gasoline.

Earlier. The war is over and Arthur is in his teens. He has his first job scrapping metal from old ships, which will become oil-storage tanks. This tank traveled to the South Pacific. That one stormed the shores at Normandy. Later. Scores of identical steel cylinders stripped of their military pasts have been plopped onto a barren landscape. Arthur says, with an eerie nonchalance, that the tanks blow up “occasionally.”

Arthur gets unstuck and we drive on, collecting little pieces of the picture: a big black pile, a guarded warehouse, four EMERGENCY MEETING ZONE signs, a smokestack, a smokestack, a dozen tanker trucks, a smokestack, a stench, a dirty stream. It is hard to see what’s right in front of us but we gain perspective as we drive away. From atop the hill, the big black pile transforms into coal awaiting transport. From a bridge across the bay, separate smokestacks blur into an aggregate, and the ships-turned-tanks collect into a scene. Then there are the things you can’t see even from the best of vantage points. Like Masonville. Like Bethlehem. Like quarantine. Arthur drives around amassing fragments in the hope they will add up to what he lost when he came back from the Korean War to find his town was gone. I try to imagine what it felt like to be greeted with the words: NO TRESPASSING.

I picture hundreds of men coming back from wars to this special sort of rupture. Arthur says they did a lot of drinking. This was one of war’s remainders on this slim peninsula, squeezed together with scrap metal and bad air: abandonment. But also: the raw material for a boom in manufacturing. Endowed with patents for products developed during war that could now be enjoyed during peace, multinational conglomerates ballooned in Curtis Bay. On the Sanborn maps, the 1950s bring about a crisp new sheet. Yet, a different history materializes from Arthur’s car while he is pointing out the tanks—one where the dismantling of government created the infrastructure for postwar petrochemical regimes.

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## Acceptable Risks

Nigel—who we met before this chapter—sidestepped another question. I had asked whether he thought health disparities in Curtis Bay had any-



thing to do with local plants. He told me there was too much pollution in the air to know for sure. Besides FMC, the agrochemical company where he worked and whose releases were the topic of our interview, there was GRACE, “where they handle heavy metals, okay?” And there was an animal rendering plant whose noxious operations sent “a fog up north along the cove.” Between them, a sensing body would encounter oil terminals that discharge their acrid waste into the river, wallboard manufactories whose workers long inhaled asbestos fibers, petrochemical plants emitting great big puffs of multicolored smoke, a medical waste incinerator permitted to burn 150 tons of biohazard bags each day, heaps of trash interred at Quarantine Road Landfill, four hundred trucks spewing exhaust through residential streets, and dust escaped from mountains of black coal. Together, these bad airs compose a cryptic haze whose effects are anything but linear and whose component parts are hard to parse. We’ve encountered air like this before. Once upon a time, attunement to just this sort of nebulous totality counted as environmental data. And now?

Nigel told me with a straight face that *he knew* the air to be so unequivocally corrupt that it was *incomprehensible*.

This, he continued, was precisely why air as such should not enter the regulatory process. Better if state agents set pollutant- and plant-specific standards than bother over ambient toxicity, which companies like his could not control. To do that, they would need to trade this air (mysterious, malevolent, particular) for a conjectural airspace where specific toxics pose consistent risks. Better still to measure risk in dollars, to clarify how proposed rules threaten economic growth. In Nigel’s proposition, air is abstract, harm displaced into the future, and profit relevant to the work of making health. In Nigel’s proposition, we only have a problem if the numbers tell us so. His point was not that this was true, but that any rules imposed on private entities should be based on incontrovertible evidence of harm—and that regulators would not find it in the sky. But they might find it in a model, when a given toxic’s “risk per cubic-meter-of-air-breathed” inched past “acceptable” thresholds.<sup>105</sup>

Protagonists like Nigel loom large in most accounts of how chemical governance came to hinge on risk values—percent chances of harm extrapolated from controlled environments—because this happened at a time when corporate futures came to matter to environmental regulation. Specifically, risk assessment gained ground as corporations worked to set the terms of their own governance once the atmosphere reemerged as a matter of concern postwar, when synthetic chemicals produced for conflict burst onto the marketplace. Companies sold these chemicals to farmers as the key to pest-free fields, to housewives fighting back domestic vermin, and

plenty more besides. By the 1970s, they were everywhere. This posed problems for the regulatory state. While earlier, environmental health experts had urged precaution in the absence of certainty about a given chemical's effects, now that position seemed untenable. The sky was already full of forces whose impacts were unknown, but whose value was exorbitant. And that revelation supported a growing consensus that such harms could not be reasonably eliminated.

In search of a guide for prioritizing limited resources and an objective metric that would placate critics like Nigel, several federal agencies turned toward risk assessment. It offered a pragmatic, if imperfect, process for calculating "unreasonable" exposures, or those with costs to health that outweighed economic gains. Both would be speculative metrics, severed from that unequivocal corruption that Nigel pointed out—enabling a disregard for present harm that I describe as a temporal cut. And both, as speculative metrics, could be tweaked to shape risk assessments consistent with the needs of private corporations.

The great irony was that regulators hoped their turn to risk values would depoliticize this work. That did not happen. Instead, the how behind assessments opened onto tense debate. Corporate counter-scientists seeking to accentuate unknowns in the regulatory process could disassemble each assessment just as Nigel had before my eyes: scientists disagree, we need more research to be sure, this variable is based on bad assumptions, "it's just impossible to say."

The corporate archive plays into this machinery of uncertainty, fractured as it is: a collection of pamphlets, company science, adjudicatory files, winks, whispers, and denials; a stack of papers on a desk somebody meant to put away. So much of it is composed of protected trade secrets that it is no wonder that uncertainty has permeated postwar Curtis Bay.<sup>106</sup> After WWII, the area was inundated with conglomerates whose structure splintered lines of accountability.<sup>107</sup> Even plants long present diffused production across global supply chains. For the next forty years, subsidiary plants on this peninsula produced high-risk, high-reward products whose composition workers did not know. They did know their jobs came with benefits and paid a decent wage. That, and many found these products useful for buttressing the boundaries of the home, including to protect against the atmosphere outside. Trade-offs between health and affluence, it seems, were not just for the state.

These shifts surely intensified the smog in Baltimore, though risk assessors would not register the change. They would take on future harm, conceptualized in abstract air, at a moment when "regulating from nowhere" was the marker of good governance.<sup>108</sup> How strange, what constitutes



not knowing in this present. How young, this sky too dubious to count as information.

How young? It was not until the 1970s that federal regulators apprehended toxic exposures as “risks,” or dangers that might be drawn into the realm of calculative decision-making. Some of the first efforts to address them emerged during the Progressive Era under the auspices of “industrial hygiene,” a collection of sanitary measures designed to keep the migrant worker in good form, and then, maintain the “human element” in war production. Later, rules like the 1963 Clean Air Act brought emissions under the jurisdiction of the PHS, originally founded to streamline quarantine regulations. Under these initiatives, officials treated toxics, like contagions, with a precautionary impulse: as problems to address before they spiraled out of hand. Even more so after 1962, when Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* exposed the harm that pesticides like DDT posed to public safety.<sup>109</sup> Particularly when it came to potential carcinogens, many experts urged no level of exposure should be presumed benign. As long as scientists remained “in the twilight area in which *we do not know*,” one doctor testified to Congress, they should err on the side of restraint.<sup>110</sup> For a time, regulators agreed. But by the mid-1970s, that would change.

A few things caused precaution to wane in the interim, and risk assessment to ascend. For one, multinational chemical conglomerates were learning to flex their influence. After 1945, companies that had devoted resources to war held patents for products that could finally enter the marketplace. Nylon once used for parachutes could now compose consumer clothes; polyethylene that insulated cables could now keep germs from food; pesticides created to protect the troops could now be marshalled in a “total war against man’s insect enemies,” as a chemical defense against domestic nature.<sup>111</sup> Curtis Bay bears traces of this history, as a site of chemical production with explicit ties to war. Consider Nigel’s company, which in addition to DDT manufactured carbofuran: a pesticide akin to several nerve agents.<sup>112</sup> Though both would eventually be banned, these and products like them brought in billions, and a fraction of those billions trickled down to public coffers.<sup>113</sup> Lobbyists made much of this in their attempts to ward off rules that would encumber industry, lest too much precaution leave government bankrupt.

In light of these shifts, many local, state, and federal legislators came to see themselves as economic facilitators whose actions should not unduly burden trade. This, at least, was the economic theory championed by Milton Friedman, whose *Capitalism and Freedom* was published the same year



as *Silent Spring*.<sup>114</sup> Friedman and his acolytes pushed cost-benefit analysis as a tool to maximize economic growth by minimizing regulation. Though cost-benefit analysis had long been in use to appraise the value of government projects—including in the 1940s, when the Parks Service was asked to “put a price on fun”—it was not until the 1970s that agencies began to weigh the costs and benefits of safety.<sup>115</sup> To do this, they would need to put a dollar value on the average human life. Propositions ranged from \$8.37 (from an anatomy professor who gauged the price of the body’s raw materials) to \$10,000 (from a cop who testified that was the cost of a cheap hitman) to much more; debates continue to this day.<sup>116</sup> Beneath them, though, a more fundamental consensus was beginning to take hold: that economists should play a central role in life-and-death decision-making.<sup>117</sup>

If the chemical industry’s monumental rise and this turn to neoliberal governance pointed toward precaution’s economic costs, then technological shifts would corrode the logic further. Advances in environmental testing allowed scientists to detect hazardous substances more quickly, and at lower concentrations, in the 1960s than in previous decades.<sup>118</sup> What they found with this improved technology was a hazardous world. Thousands of potential carcinogens already infused the nation’s water and occupied its air. Scientists also discovered that those chemicals ranged in potency, blurring what had once seemed a clear binary between safe and unsafe. This was a momentous discovery for many reasons, not least because of what it meant for governance: that, if Americans hoped to maintain their way of life, then the zero-tolerance approach experts once held toward carcinogens would have to give way to a gradient.

Meanwhile, government agencies were dealing with quite limited bandwidth. The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was young, founded in late 1970, and faced a monumental task: of some five million known chemicals, more than seventy thousand were in commercial use, and few had ever been tested for safety.<sup>119</sup> Meanwhile, government scientists were fielding charges from both lobbyists *and* environmentalists that they were “permitting political considerations to corrupt the integrity” of their evaluations.<sup>120</sup>

Federal regulators, in short, were in search of a great compromise that could secure the buy-in, or at least tepid assent, of multiple conflicting stakeholders. They needed a tool to guide them in distributing finite resources over infinite problems. And they were eager to identify a rigorous and objective basis for regulatory decisions that could insulate them from political debates. Most of all, they were grasping to “contain and explain” an irreducibly hazy world through a modern apparatus “still intent on drawing boundaries.”<sup>121</sup> It was deeply troubling that the very chemicals that prom-

ised to construct controlled environments by separating crops from weeds, food from pests, and wet from dry, refused to be constrained.<sup>122</sup> Operative models of exposure presumed toxicity could be “walled off” from the world, confined to specific fields or factories—in a word, “quarantined.”<sup>123</sup> Not so, the postwar sky appeared to say. In light of all these challenges, governing the world as it was seemed to be a losing battle.

With the help of risk assessment, though, the environment to come might yet be tamed.

Risk assessment—like preparedness, like prevention—was many things at once. It was a technocratic intervention. It was a mode of governance. It was the symptom of a shared affective state. When federal regulators turned to risk assessment in the 1970s, it was not because they believed that it was flawless. It may be more appropriate to say that they resigned themselves to risk assessment than that they embraced it.<sup>124</sup> After all, the method did not promise a planet free from injury. Its goal was decidedly more modest: risk assessment proffered tools for governing a world understood to be injurious *per se*. To access them, regulators would need to consult a schematized environment that they knew to be simplistic, but that would still help guide decisions—a set-aside world where the parameters of future harm could be calculated on conjectural blank slates.

Key here is that risk assessment’s value lay precisely in its distance from the postwar sky. Dissociation was the point.<sup>125</sup> Risk assessors would think from hypothetical environments about potential injuries as they stacked up against prospective gains. Consider the EPA’s first such assessment, targeting vinyl chloride, a known carcinogen used to produce synthetic plastics. Despite acknowledging it would be “prudent” to assume “no [safe] threshold,” administrators charged a task force with quantifying the risks vinyl chloride posed to the general population.<sup>126</sup> It was a methodological challenge. Scientists could not expose humans to a cancer-causing chemical just to clarify its potency. And since 4.5 million people lived within five miles of the country’s fifty vinyl chloride plants, with annual emissions exceeding 220 million pounds, the resources required for an epidemiological study would be breathtaking.<sup>127</sup> Instead, regulators decided to extrapolate carcinogenicity from animal studies.<sup>128</sup> It was a new achievement in abstraction—a new degree of zoning out—but it brought order to a gargantuan regulatory undertaking. The method did have costs, as Nash explains. “In a climate-controlled laboratory, surrounded by graduated cylinders, precision balances, and carefully bred rats, it was possible to think precisely” about how much of a given chemical would cause consistent



effects. To better gauge the effects of vinyl chloride, then, scientists erased environmental particularity: variables besides the *body* and the *agent* would be “purposefully eliminated.”<sup>129</sup>

Having vastly simplified the setting of exposure to give it “extrapolative potential,” toxicologists tested for the highest possible dose at which they could observe no adverse effects in animals.<sup>130</sup> The search for such a dose, glossed as a “threshold limit value,” assumes degree of harm tracks with level of exposure to a harmful agent. “Under the influence of germ theories of health,” Nancy Langston shows, scientists believed it took a certain mass of toxicant to breach the body’s boundaries. Less than that, and the threshold would remain inviolate.<sup>131</sup> It was not a terrible stretch from this linear presumption to infer a safe dose for humans from the lowest no-effect level in rats.<sup>132</sup> So regulators did. With that value in hand, they modeled how many generic breathers would likely be exposed to an unhealthy concentration.

In 1975, the EPA released a study based on these methods, projecting that 150 cancer cases would result from each year of continuous exposure per million people.<sup>133</sup> Officials then weighed that risk against the predicted costs of mitigation. This was one of risk assessment’s core advantages: it translated environmental hazards into ostensibly disinterested figures that could be measured against others, like the costs of implementing new technologies.<sup>134</sup> In the case of vinyl chloride, the EPA determined that a ban would result in “widespread industry closure” and chose, instead, to limit emissions to a more “proportionate” rate.<sup>135</sup> The next year, the agency signaled its intent to make “rigorous assessments of health risk and economic impact” a standard step in toxics governance.<sup>136</sup> And by 1976, what were once threats so nebulous they had to be avoided could now be voiced as technical decisions to be made.<sup>137</sup>

The vinyl chloride report acknowledged many “conceptual problems” with risk assessment, but that did not prevent the method from becoming standard EPA procedure.<sup>138</sup> If anything, knowledge of the method’s imperfections made it easier for industry to shape toxics legislation in its favor. In 1976, after extended industry lobbying, Congress passed a watershed bill, the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA). It mandated the agency meet a high burden of proof *before* it could regulate specific chemicals. It also grandfathered in all existing chemicals not already shown to be carcinogens—for regulatory purposes, they would be considered safe. To place limits on new chemicals, the EPA would need to perform a formal risk assessment, substantiating that each posed an “unreasonable risk of injury.”<sup>139</sup> If the EPA hoped to keep a chemical off the market altogether, it would have to make that determination in under ninety days. Given the thousands of chemicals introduced each year, most would go unassessed:



as late as 1991, the EPA had only evaluated twelve.<sup>140</sup> Even in cases where chemicals were found to pose “unreasonable risks,” TSCA directed regulators to use the least burdensome method possible to reduce those risks to “reasonable” levels, so as not to idle corporate profit-making.

Risk assessment did not eliminate other ways of knowing environmental harm (there is, for instance, still epidemiology). But by the late 1970s, there was enough law in place to secure its status as a dominant method across multiple federal agencies.<sup>141</sup> What had first emerged as an epistemological compromise—a simplification meant to make the world more knowable—was now “much more than a simple tool.” It was a “general approach to agency decision-making that departed dramatically from earlier conceptions of expert judgment.”<sup>142</sup> And there was much this vantage point could not convey.

In focusing on the conjectural “pure” body, risk assessment could not capture cumulative impacts.<sup>143</sup> It could not acknowledge classed, raced, or emplaced differences. It could not conceive of toxics with nonlinear effects.<sup>144</sup> It simply was not built that way. Risk assessment was built to make the future tractable through incorporeal forms of knowledge, in service of largely corporate interests. It should therefore not surprise us that so much escaped each risk assessment and its rigid schematization of exposure that the picture it produced was incompatible with toxicity as lived in Curtis Bay.<sup>145</sup>

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There we are on the weedy patch where Masonville once stood, looking at the 1980s. Once, fifty-one houses huddled there together, dense and intimate. Now Masonville is transient, anonymous, a non-place.<sup>146</sup> All the families moved out at the railroad’s bidding, their homes demolished and replaced with cargo trains. Those trains weave in hauling coal from Appalachia and out with fertilizers, silicates, polymers, petroleum, and more. Sometimes they move too fast. Arthur says he knew a kid who learned the hard way.

The peninsula is busy, with dozens of plants along the riverbank. They produce the stuff of the good life: pest-free living, insulated homes, fuel to fill the family car, a place to send one’s waste. To stay competitive, they push the limits of their knowledge and their workers, who spend long hours stirring up new products. Of course, tired workers also make mistakes. Their efforts yield more patents as well as spills, slips, fires, and explosions—but at least the union jobs come with vacation, health care, pensions, “and bereavement,” Arthur

mentions as he rattles off the perks that don't accrue to rising numbers of non-union workers. Then he ends the conversation.

Lucky workers use the money to move out, trading row house life for stately homes in nearby counties. All the managers commute to Curtis Bay. "It's a fifty-two-mile round-trip," Nigel tells me in response to a question about plant emissions, "and I did it for thirty-two years. How much exhaust do you think I breathed? Now imagine that I smoked along the way!"

The nonresponse directs me to look somewhere besides the everywhere around us. Everywhere around us: smoke. It is coming from a hundred different places. Meanwhile, regulators are told to *be fair and not look* at the smoke—just each smokestack—while toxics accumulate in bodies that cannot compartmentalize this way. When the market is good, people joke the sky gives off "the color of money." When the market is bad, they don't have much to say. They remind themselves that the factories are following the letter of the law, but they still close their windows and keep their kids inside to play.

The smoke adds to an ambient anxiety for those too poor to quit South Baltimore. Resentment festers, in particular, among poor Whites who have to stay. Those whose Whiteness is a new and tenuous achievement guard it jealously.<sup>147</sup> And, so, they abandon neighborhoods like Fairfield for nearby Curtis Bay when wartime barracks transition into subpar public housing. Black families move in to take their place. Formerly integrated spaces spread out into checkerboards where people mostly keep their distance. Fran whispers that her neighborhood started going downhill "once the Blacks moved in." Gus says a word I won't repeat and tells me that the streets stopped feeling safe. Walt, a Black man raised on Hawkins Point, reports his family was too busy to cause the ruckus White folks feared. Buoyed by anti-discrimination laws that shake up pecking orders nationwide, they ascend to better jobs—for Walt's family, at GRACE. This further roils Curtis Bay's poor Whites, whom Walt avoids by tending peach trees on his square of the checkerboard. Gardens mean a lot to those whose forebears worked the land in bondage, as does caring for the home, a haven from the hardships many face.

But Walt also says the peach trees grew less prosperous, the pond in his backyard took on a funny smell, his dad abstained from fishing in the bay. Gus tells me that his baseball haunt grew "slippery" with chemical waste: "green, like jelly." Everybody knows someone with cancer. Rumors about miscarriages begin to circulate. People aren't rich and some get sick and the tanks occasionally explode, and



yet most people—Black and White—prefer this place to tenements downtown. Particularly after the 1968 “riots,” the “inner city” passes across residents’ lips like a threat. Compared with the ambiguity of toxics, downtown seems a clear and present danger. (Risk assessment does not tell them that this near-future benefit may have far-future costs. That choosing a “safe” neighborhood to raise one’s kids may cut lives short for the next three generations.)

So every day, the water turns, the produce slumps. Soot settles on cars and clotheslines, stoops and slides, kids’ bicycles; it covers porches and sneaks in through entryways. Women wake and wipe dust from their windowsills. They shut their doors to keep the filthy world away.

Inside: they scrub out every particle their trained eyes spot and keep their homes pristine. Dirty clothes come off outside *or else*. They wrap leftover food in sheets of cellophane.

Outside: a handful of residents get environmentally active but there is too much riding on factory jobs for most to put exposure into words. Companies pay for summer camp, church parties, playgrounds, and doctor’s visits, all on top of wages.

Inside: they splash pesticides along their homes’ perimeter. They fight off dust with astringent cleaning products. They pit chemicals against chemicals to purify their homes.

Outside: they do not ask what this bad air contains.

“Imagine that!” says Arthur. Imagine (if you have the privilege not to know) that smoke hovers above your home and your kids have trouble breathing and you still prefer this to the alternative. Imagine the conditions that produce that kind of resignation. There is smoke coming from here, there, and everywhere, and it has been building up for years, all “detectable but nonetheless irrelevant” to rules that claim to tame the corporation.<sup>148</sup> Imagine Nigel asking if you smoke to undercut your strong suspicion that the smokestacks make the air you breathe unsafe. Smoke touches every surface of your good-enough life, while you clean your house with the very chemicals you labor to keep out. Imagine a world where the threshold of the home is supposed to do what threshold limit values can’t. All this desperate boundary work—imagine it comes *after* monumental advances in toxics regulation.

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Once Congress had enshrined a “redefinition of safety as acceptable risk” in federal law and charged regulators with proving harm—rather than pollut-



ers with proving safety—corporations had enormous leeway to challenge their determinations.<sup>149</sup> Acceptability was, after all, a subjective judgment. And even risk, though steeped in the objectifying authority of numbers, could be made to look a lot of different ways. The same prognostic principles that had endeared regulators to the method just years before could now be framed as shortcomings, even regulatory hubris. Who, after all, can claim to know the future? Who, moreover, should set the terms of such extrapolation?

Time and again, corporate scientists drew attention to uncertainties embedded in risk assessment and questioned “the wisdom of balancing concrete evidence of economic damage against evidence of health protection that depend[ed] on a complex series of assumptions.”<sup>150</sup> Policy decisions in the 1970s and 1980s were generally required “to be founded on an explicit trade-off” between these priorities, especially come the rise of corporate sweetheart Ronald Reagan.<sup>151</sup> So, it mattered if one of these values—health or profit—sat on flimsy footing. This created a regulatory environment where scientific uncertainty could be marshalled as a resource to shape risk assessments that served business: an environment open to corporate persuasion.

Baltimore’s corporate archive is full of counter-science that companies mobilized to highlight gaps in regulatory knowledge.<sup>152</sup> Stoking scientific controversy—a PR tactic honed by the tobacco industry—was now a common trick for those behind a range of public dangers.<sup>153</sup> Consider, for example, a tiff between Allied Chemical and the EPA. After being advised in the 1970s that its Baltimore plant would need to meet more stringent chromium disposal guidelines, Allied commissioned consultants who alleged “disagreement” about the chemical’s toxicity. They then pushed for a “relaxed effluent standard,” given Allied’s undisputed value to the state.<sup>154</sup> The challenge did not sit uncontested; environmental advocates fought their counter-science tooth and nail, because they understood how much hung in the balance between variables. But corporations won these contests even when they lost, as each one translated political problems into technical predicaments, directing attention away from industrial pollution and toward the reliability of toxicological data.

Industry experts not only sought to produce uncertainty about the risk of specific chemicals in support of more favorable rules. Some pointed to the fact of already polluted air to do the same. Take Nigel’s company, FMC. In the 1970s, they made rocket fuel for NASA that included known carcinogen dimethylnitrosamine (DMN). The way Nigel tells it, “some PhD invented a gadget that could detect nitrosamines down to a part per trillion,” parked his van outside the company gate, and detected DMN. The

*Baltimore Sun* picked up the story, and the EPA bought the man's machine. In response to charges that they were "killing off the citizens of Baltimore," Nigel grumbled, FMC shot back about the EPA's ineptitude. Arguing that scientists had failed to acknowledge DMN already in the air (released by rotting crab shells along Maryland's coast), they denied responsibility for the release. They also lobbied for regulators to disaggregate plant-specific emissions from ambient air—to limit oversight to parts and not totalities.

This was essentially the argument Nigel rehearsed for me forty years later: even if there *were* consensus about local health disparities (something few were prepared to accept), and even if those disparities *were* shown to derive from emissions (which would be difficult to prove), there could never be certainty about which plants were to blame. Laws should hold themselves to a higher standard. They should not obstruct economic growth when "it's just impossible to say." And they should certainly not hold individual companies like his responsible for the "unfortunate" reality of industrial density. Nigel continued: "Unless a doctor is going to sign off and state, 'This person's sick because of x, y, and z'—and they're never going to do that—people will believe what they want to believe." Arguments like Nigel's proliferated during the second half of the twentieth century, taking advantage of the delocalized nature of chemical knowledge to rebuffer charges against any single corporation. As Murphy writes, so much work "has gone into obscuring, rather than revealing, synthetic molecular relations" that it is "commonplace and legally acceptable for such relations to escape state regulation."<sup>155</sup>

This is a weaponization of doubt: the subjunctive as a grammar of evasion.

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Eleanor saw that I was finished eating and came to clear my plate. "It's just amazing, isn't it? People turned their heads and let it happen." "Did you know people who got sick?" I asked. "Mhmm," she nodded. Then she looked away. "Well, I don't *know*," Eleanor hedged, grabbing a floral rag to wipe the kitchen counters. "Nobody ever proved anything . . .

Somebody was wanting to go around—somebody from the Women's Club, she said cancer was rampant here, very prevalent, and she wanted to go around to houses to find out. And they said no, you shouldn't do that. They said there's just as much cancer—



that somebody did a study. . . . It wasn't as clear as Erin Brockovich. Like, she *knew*. Nobody *knew* in Curtis Bay.

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And so we find ourselves in an impossibly foggy atmosphere, whose air is hard to sketch with much precision and for that reason should apparently be written off—two centuries after “describing the air was integral to describing a place.”<sup>156</sup> To this day, few tools exist for capturing the additive, synergistic, or cumulative effects of multiple point-source emissions, and those that do are fervently contested. Instead, most agencies rely on mechanisms designed to manage pollutants, not pollution. They rely on zoned-out information. Nash suggests this orientation toward toxicity held fast to modernist ideas of bodies and environments whose “instability was now an open secret,” imagining that toxics, like infected bodies, should be addressed in isolation.<sup>157</sup> Along the way, people on the peninsula were doubly marginalized: they suffered at the hands of a regulatory system that had first fostered and then concealed the effects of industrial concentration.

The thing is, a population exposed to carcinogens “*will* suffer an effect, even if research doesn't track it.”<sup>158</sup> And a population breathing in the unequivocally corrupted air that Nigel pointed out will not be any less impacted just because our laws ignore the totalizing haze. It is true that many things about this haze remain unclear: what exactly it's composed of and how exactly its components work; how much of it is natural and how much of it man-made; how different chemicals act on one another, and then, on already burdened bodies; when someone here develops cancer, who precisely is to blame. One may harbor suspicions about one or all of these, but because it is so hard to know for sure, corporate actors can assert their right to keep polluting. They make it easy to forget that *what counts as knowledge about the air has changed*. Uncertainty today means something narrow: lack of linear causal data about how specific particles act on specific bodies.<sup>159</sup> It was not always so. Not long ago, experts could point to irreducibly bad air as cause to build new institutions, from quarantine to sanitation.

That we find ourselves in a present where the opposite is true—where this murk stymies intervention—we call that technocratic progress. At least, it is what one gets after progressively more dissociative governance has severed here from there, then from now, experience from data. After what was palpable and immanent becomes unknowable for just that reason. If Nigel had his way, we would end the story here, with the muddle as a block.

But the muddle is a space of contestation.



## What the Facts Don't Say

I met Arthur in fall 2015 after stumbling upon photos he had left at a building on the edge of the Patapsco riverbank. Between scrap metal and coal piles, there is a small nature reserve. The Army Corps of Engineers built it in the early 2000s in exchange for using the coast as a “containment facility” for toxic sediments dredged from the river basin. Inside, next to the thermostat and set off by a tall, black frame, the smallest note begins: “In 1893 Masonville had 51 homes.” Around it, there are photos of the place: Arthur young, Arthur older, Arthur’s family, Arthur’s house. A plaque congratulates Arthur for his donation. I asked for his number from the woman at the desk and called him up. We were in his khaki-colored car three hours later. What I most remember was that, after a summer steeped in risk assessments, I did not take his scattered memories seriously. Besides, I had just been told by the woman at the desk that Arthur “likes to tell stories,” but “check them against the facts before you write your paper.”

The facts say that Curtis Bay was a quarantine zone. They say it contributed to the war effort. They say it is now a heavy industrial space. They say these things in narratives, photos, maps, and reports separated by walls, sometimes by hundreds of miles, and concerned with ever-narrower enclosures: the peninsula, the factory, the particle. All this information “at a glance.” But they miss their collective impact on this place.

The facts miss how the air weighed heavy in the heat, how it collected on white sheets, how Arthur felt when his town was summarily displaced. They register that the median income here has plunged since the 1980s, as layoffs wiped out hard-won gains for workers, but not what it is like to have seen a universe appear on the Patapsco just to watch the whole thing fall away.

The facts say that Curtis Bay today is home to warehouses, automated plants, and waste infrastructures that offer few jobs and even fewer one can build a future on. They do not hear how residents describe the change. Arthur calls the present a time of “passive industry.” One Black engineer who lost his job at FMC and asked not to be named told me that his parents were the first and last to “live a prosperous life.” Others say that it is tough to find a job before exclaiming, “There used to be so much *activity!*” Then they say that the government “always had it in for us,” that Curtis Bay gets treated like “the armpit of the city,” and that it is hard to pay medical bills when you have been laid off and are barely scraping by without a steady wage.

The facts report an inhalation unit risk of cancer of  $2.2 \times 10^{-6}$  per  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  for benzene and  $1.3 \times 10^{-5}$  per  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  for formaldehyde—two of countless toxics in this air—but not what it is like to nurse a dying loved one.<sup>160</sup> Nor

what it is like to have their death chalked up to the vagaries of ambient exposure, or worse. (“Now imagine that I smoked along the way!”)

The facts miss that people were brought here to provide for the greater good, thinking that they would secure a future in return. The facts don’t capture how it feels to watch that future fray.

The facts do not figure Curtis Bay as a place where the political life of the nation has been imprinted on the land—a place that different regimes of future-oriented governance have made, covered up, and remade. The facts miss that bodies, too, have been classed by these processes, and that the shifts that led us to the germ and the pollutant also underwrote the calcification of race as an essential quality.<sup>161</sup> That modernity has been a “process of racial formation.”<sup>162</sup> That modern institutions, policies, and practices have thrust a disproportionate share of their toxic burdens onto racialized groups, giving *racism* the power to shape health, as Leith Mullings has long shown.<sup>163</sup> That pollution here grew worse as the peninsula became a darker and more segregated place. That these transformations not only shaped land and bodies but also made people into industrial subjects with their own dissociative habits, suited to pursuing futures in a world that no longer corresponds with long-held expectations.

So far, we have tracked the production of this chasm between the facts and life as lived through two centuries of dissociative governance, beginning with the spatial cut of quarantine that would forever mark this as an other-place. That chasm grew with war production and risk assessment. It grew in service of urban, national, and corporate futures. It grew with every effort to speculate about the world to come. Growing with it in South Baltimore: an impenetrable haze.

This story about progress and its discontents comes together in the archives, when one commits to peeling back the layers. To keep the population healthy, banish factories to the periphery. To protect national security, scale up their production. To ensure a robust industrial economy, forget that they are aggregated in one place. It is an important story because it underscores the hubris bound up in the futurists’ position—technocratic, cold, adrift—and because it names the violence Nigel tries to make unspeakable. It might even help us work against long-standing modes of dissociative life by unearthing ties that bind us each to Curtis Bay.

And yet, if we know anything by now of progress stories—whether offered up as triumph or as farce—it is that they draw their force from the muddles that they disavow. They tell us very little about how people live these contradictions: how they hold together worlds and conceive political projects, how they navigate uncertainty, what they do with the mess the future made. These stories demand different “arts of noticing,” to bor-

row words from Anna Tsing for Arthur's ever-present nudges.<sup>164</sup> *Look*. You might see stories, places, people, and objects that brush against the grain. *Closer*. Notice how different orientations toward the future accrue into a consequential mass. Notice how they build, shift, and recombine in a variety of ways.

As Arthur moves from the tanks to the cove to the weedy patch beneath the road, he amasses fragments into a surround that beckons passengers to pay attention: there is nothing past about the history of Curtis Bay. Just as South Baltimore has played host to different futures, each with its own orienting premise, the local past is open to interpretation.







FIGURE 2.1. "An angry god." Wagner's Point man walks into home with Texaco tanks in the background, 1966. Photo from the *Baltimore Sun* archive.

## Little Boxes

Bill and I connected long before we met in person. I got his phone number from a social worker at the school who had met him one evening while canvassing. And though we made plans to get together many times, they usually fell apart: he had a doctor's appointment, he felt too sick to go out, his medicine was acting up, his mother died, his sister died, he had to go get groceries. Things were difficult for Bill, but it was clear he did not want to meet me in a wobbly condition, and even in our calls he labored to contain the chaos of a life coming apart. Just days before I called for the first time, he was diagnosed with cancer. He told me it was "in the family."

Cancer?

"No, just stuff," he said, boxing up the topic of his health. Just stuff. The more we spoke, the more it seemed he meant toxicity.

Bill did not like to talk about his illness, but he had a lot to say about the work that he thought caused it. For eight years before the company hired an "efficiency expert" and laid off most of its workers "overnight," he held a union job down at BP. Formerly known as British Petroleum, BP owned one of several oil terminals in a part of town known as the Point that housed a spate of other high-risk operations. Before the oil job, Bill had made money digging graves on the peninsula. He told me graveyard work was a lot cleaner. But one morning in the 1970s his dad—who had worked the terminal for forty years—shook Bill awake to ask if he wanted "a real job." Bill did. And so he landed at the yard around "that type of stuff. I was always around a chemical or two. Most people are, but not as intimate as me."

"A chemical or two" was one of Bill's distinctive understatements. But if I were to set aside my reservations about fixating on the molecule and follow just one chemical through his tough life, that chemical would have to be benzene. Benzene is a colorless liquid found in crude oil that vaporizes fast and weighs down any air it enters. It also lets off a sweet aroma, but that gentle odor masks a vicious thing. The chemical is both highly flammable, giving it explosive potential, and slowly carcinogenic; even the



American Petroleum Institute admits that there is no safe concentration.<sup>1</sup> In addition to cancer, chronic exposure can cause bleeding and bone marrow problems, suppress the immune system, and impair fertility. Despite these known effects, benzene is pervasive: in the 369 million gallons of gasoline that Americans consume each day, and in the smoke emitted from our tailpipes.<sup>2</sup> When Bill worked on the Point, benzene was also used to produce a whopping two-thirds of chemicals on record.<sup>3</sup> Its toxicity was known then, too, but the boons outweighed the bads, apparently.

It was, in fact, a fight over benzene regulations that led the Supreme Court to strike down “standards designed to create absolutely risk-free workplaces” if the cost of implementing them would be “unreasonably” high—not for workers, but for industry.<sup>4</sup>

So it was that Bill ended up being “intimate” with chemicals: “The yard men, we were right there with it. We climbed the tanks, mixed the diesels by hand.” That was fine, Bill shrugged, “you got used to it.” But other things were frightening. Like “when the [oil] ships came in, you might be working thirty, forty hours straight. And you’d be wore out so you’d make mistakes.” Those mistakes could be disastrous. Some were. Bill still remembers one macabre scene.

Bill survived that accident (a gruesome fire following a tank explosion that lit up the summer sky), but received a grim prognosis decades later. And he was sure “that type of stuff” had killed his dad. “He died a terrible death” years after he retired. “Tick, tick, BOOM. His heart exploded blood all over the pharmacy floor one New Year’s Eve.” Before, Bill had not even realized that his dad was sick. Or maybe he had—he wasn’t sure—he probably was—his dad was always sick in retrospect, but really didn’t talk about these things.

Bill guessed his father’s silence had to do with the value of a job back then, before the massive layoffs that had left Bill destitute. I guessed it was akin to Bill’s containments: the way he steered our talk past heavy stuff to keep composed. Both of us were right, I think. The choice to keep mum about some risks to reap the benefits of steady work—such decisions fill Bill’s spoken words. The desire not to look a problem in the eye—such gestures crowd his mundane memories. Of the way his mother kept a spotless home but stopped her cleaning at the threshold, letting dust consume the porch. Of the long showers Bill took after work to scrub away the sweet impurity. Of cracking crabs caught in the bay just to find their lungs were black instead of white, and taking care to eat around the edges. Of stopping at the little wooden box outside the bar where company men were asked to throw their greasy work clothes before coming in to drink. People were always trying to keep “that type of stuff” contained, controlled, away, at bay,

and still they had to mop the floorboards every day. These quiet disavowals thread through a life lived “intimate” with industry.

I did not want to see it then, as I listened to the disembodied voice of a man whom I had never met, but we were also intimates—bound by the gas that got me to and from this place, by the car exhaust that followed in my wake, by the question of who must stay and who leaves easily. I did not want to see it then: our material relations and our linked dissociations.

But it was there, and it is there: the sticky force of chemical complicity.<sup>5</sup>





## Cataclysmic Hypotheticals

The present is governed, almost at every scale, as if the future . . . matters most.

Vincanne Adams, M. Murphy, and Adele E. Clarke, "Anticipation"

"You can't see toxics, but you can be very agitated about blowing up," Rena told me on an overcast Saturday in April 2016. Rena was an older White woman who had provided legal support to residents who sought to leave the peninsula in the 1990s, and we were sitting in her living room near Washington, DC, discussing what she remembered of the buyout. I had asked her to describe the place to me.

Rena had worked with residents of Fairfield and Wagner's Point (collectively, the Point), both in the Curtis Bay region. For more than a century before their homes were purchased and demolished, the segregated towns had housed two tight-knit groups of people. The all-Black Fairfield Homes were once "the Cadillac of projects." White families in Wagner's Point lived in the same red houses for one hundred years. Today, the only remnant of their presence is a mid-century brick building first constructed as a school, and since converted into a warehouse for containers that hold hazardous materials.

Before I spoke with Rena, I had driven through the Point plenty of times. I had snapped photos of the four hundred trucks that pass through it each day, been hit by its acerbic smell, and grown accustomed to the heavy air-borne dust that clings to nearly everything. But my first visit happened eight years after residents left their homes. "What did it look like," I asked, "when people actually lived there?"

"Look," said Rena, setting down her mug of pantomime. "It looked as though an angry god had taken some Monopoly pieces, the houses, and thrown them in the middle of this big industrial ring." For all the subtle qualities of dust that I had rattled off, she wanted me to know that there were starker dangers there than air pollution—that some forms of harm cut through the muddle. *People didn't leave because it smelled bad. People left because they thought the ring around them could blow up at any time.*

Some of it already had by the time Rena arrived onto the scene.

Minnie, a former resident of Wagner's Point who had since moved one town over, posed a different answer to the question. When I asked her about the local past, she dragged an over-stuffed brown suitcase from beneath her bed, unfastened it, and pulled out bags of family photos and newspaper pieces. In one: a feature in the local paper announced Minnie's wedding to her husband. In another: the handwritten phrase "TIME BOMB WAITING TO HAPPEN" appeared next to a list of local factories. "How unfortunate," read a book kept in another bag, "that the most lovely of the hamlets is today the least attractive."<sup>1</sup> In a fourth, a photograph printed in the 1999 *City Paper* showed a sign at the entrance to Wagner's Point with the graffiti greeting, "WELCOME TO HELL?!?," stuck to a Polaroid of Minnie's grandson swimming.<sup>2</sup>

By the end of the twentieth century, the Point had become a place of jarring contradictions. Intersections of Carbon Avenue and Sun Street, Quarantine Road and Efficiency Way, junked car parts, sunflowers, row homes, and oil tanks marked a part of the city that to outsiders looked like a terrible accident—the act of an "angry god," in Rena's words.<sup>3</sup> Of course people living there would want to flee. Insiders, though, saw a deathtrap that had once felt like a haven. It would take the prospect of grave harm to abandon what had long seemed like safe neighborhoods. And it would take a savvy campaign on residents' part to make that prospect the foundation of their exit strategy.

Before that happened, Fairfield and Wagner's Point were "tiny bunkers" insulated from the violence many locals said was rampant in the city. Take 1968. For nine days after Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination, riots tore through downtown Baltimore. Marked by fires that would transform the fabric of the urban core, the riots were spectacular. So was the response. The police arrested upward of six thousand. Locals watched the drama on TV. Or take the destruction that unfolded downtown as the century wore on: gun violence, homelessness, the drug economy. It was not uncommon, in conversation, for locals to shake their heads at "Baltimore's problems" as though the Point were not itself a part of Baltimore City.

The Point felt apart for many reasons, not least of which was the century-long, state-sanctioned effort to contain problems by zoning them on the periphery. That effort—consistent with spatial dissociations that structured the peninsula's relationship with Baltimore from the city's early days—had led to a level of industrial concentration that posed its own harm to residents. But containment was also one of the Point's attractive features. Bill and Minnie both told me about the walls that people built around their lives.<sup>4</sup> In a world beyond control, they took some comfort in the boundaries. Men replaced their workpants every day, women kept their homes



immaculate, and area schools remained segregated decades after *Brown v. Board*, while life downtown “mixed up” with all deliberate speed. Even residents of all-Black Fairfield who were critical of segregation valorized other kinds of insulation: being neglected meant avoiding more acute forms of state violence. Jennie, an elderly Black woman, said that chemicals did not scare her like police dogs did.<sup>5</sup> And people were close. “Downtown, they had crime,” one Fairfield woman told me, while “we had community.” If, as Rena put it, houses sat in a “big industrial ring,” then it was also true that many enjoyed elements of their enclosure.

Until they didn’t. In the 1980s, locals began to see that certain forms of containment were hypothetical at best, but they were truly trapped by industry.

For many on the Point, that realization came in fits and starts. Slow forms of toxic trespass, vague illnesses, “that type of stuff.” *Explosion! Fire! Catastrophic leak!* On one hand, residents were getting sick from local air that included carcinogens “at levels up to thirty times higher than the EPA considers safe,” precipitating cancer rates “significantly higher than the citywide average, which is higher than the state, which is the highest in the nation,” and which—stark as it was—did not have legal teeth.<sup>6</sup> On the other, people were rattled by explosions emanating from the region’s chemical and petroleum plants. Containment seemed to fail dramatically. It was in



FIGURE 2.2. **Containment, for some.** Workers avoid contamination while preparing toxic waste that will be sent to the South Baltimore peninsula for landfill burial. Photo from “Cleaning Up.” 1991. *Baltimore Evening Sun*, August 15.



this context that residents began to agitate for relocation. But they did so in a very particular way. Rather than decrying the enduring impacts of exposure to secure state recognition, and rather than getting pulled into a losing game of calculating abstract risks, residents emphasized their potential demise in the event of an industrial catastrophe.<sup>7</sup>

The events leading up to the buyout hold valuable lessons: about how thresholds of acceptability get breached, about the chasm between lay and expert forms of sight after decades of dissociative governance, about when people do (and don't) appear as worthy of protection, about disjunctures between quotidian exposure and spectacular injury. They also underscore Ulrich Beck's point that disasters have an "enabling power."<sup>8</sup> But what is perhaps most achingly instructive concerns why residents' hypothetical deaths came to carry more weight than their real ones. The buyout pivoted around a choice to bracket some unknowns to work on others—to limit charges to the future possible. And it happened at a time when government and industry had both retreated to a speculative mode, staving off imagined harms while disavowing dangers that were terribly concrete. As a strategy of last resort, residents seized on this concern by adopting a politics of threat: incalculable potential harm. Threat deals in cataclysmic hypotheticals. It does not politicize long-term exposure, or systemic poverty.

On the contrary, as Joseph Masco argues with the specter of the mushroom cloud in mind, threat management in the postwar United States has been a "highly conceptual enterprise" in which sensational projections overwhelm the everyday.<sup>9</sup> Threat proceeds as if the most existential obstacles to human life lie then, in the devastating future, and not now, ambient and tedious. It is a strictly anticipatory domain where danger is conjectural and the narrative stress, in Austin Zeiderman's words, is on "what has not yet happened."<sup>10</sup> Though decidedly more menacing than progress, threat shares its total commitment to the future. Under this structuring premise, even devastating threats that realized themselves as real explosions on the Point mattered more as omens of a coming harm than they did as lived experience.

There were good reasons to be concerned with cataclysm in this place. My point is not that this was the wrong political object. In the late Cold War, it was arguably the only one that could do what locals needed. Because here, in a place so profoundly shaped by dissociative practices and so resolutely oriented toward the future—here, where attunement to the world at hand did not amount to actionable knowledge—hypotheticals could make things happen. Residents knew this. They had watched a dark subjunctive mood overtake the political sphere.

What, then, are we to make of their choice to adopt a politics of threat and treat the future as if it mattered most? Was it an accession to old grammars

of power? In some ways, certainly. There is something deeply compromised about tapping into a political discourse you know to be implicated in a violent system—about participating in an emplotment that contains the local past in bags and stuffs it underneath the bed, when you feel that past accounts for present suffering.<sup>11</sup> But residents needed to get out more than they needed an internally consistent politics. And perhaps, like many acts of containment, this move produced a prickly comfort. It kept better times out of the mess. It did not desecrate attachments to this place. In telling the story of the buyout, though, I want to be clear that residents like Minnie and lawyers like Rena did not naively reproduce the conditions of the Point's subjection by directing attention toward the future. Their disavowals were a labor of endurance.<sup>12</sup> They recognized the difficulty of politicizing historical exposures in an ambiguously toxic environment where *it's just impossible to say*.

I see the choice that followed from this recognition as a studied response to the power of the next disaster to shape life politics during the late Cold War. Despite knowing full well that their vulnerability had been produced over generations of exposure and neglect, residents appropriated the state's fixation on the future to secure the funds they needed to escape their neighborhoods. Their efforts suggest what it means for the subjunctive to become a lived condition: where the world as if has more force than the world as is. That this condition is fraught speaks to the foundational contradictions of life when that promise of tomorrow turned awfully dark, at the beginning of the end of the industrial age.

## Zoned Out

It is difficult to appreciate the weight of residents' acquiescence to a politics of threat without first acknowledging the history of human inhabitation on the Point. This was, I think, why Minnie responded to my questions with her suitcase full of papers. Little clues spilled out of plastic bags and onto the threadbare pages of my notebook—a photo of a neighbor's garden here, an article on zoning there—while Minnie watched from an armchair in the corner. I remember trying to use the suitcase as a prop, asking questions as I parsed through documents, but it was clear she did not want to narrate.

The whole thing stood in stark contrast with the wry confidence that enabled Rena to compare life on the Point with an ill-fated game of Monopoly. The way that Rena put it, residents were “thrown” into harm's way by a temperamental god sometime in the 1980s. It was a simpler story than the one the suitcase told: people had lived on the peninsula before it was industrial, and stayed despite the dangers. They had lived there amid the





FIGURE 2.3. **Boxing up the past.** Minnie's suitcase archive. Photo by the author, June 2016.

rise of the chemical industry and, earlier, during the construction of the army ordnance depot. They had lived there, too, when the area was used for quarantine, and when it offered access to indecent entertainment. In fact, one thing that became clear as I parsed through Minnie's suitcase under the dusty light of a painted lamp was that the very schemes designed to ensure urban, national, and corporate futures had gradually worn away at people's prospects here. Over time, they became zoned out of municipal attention and thrust into a legal no-man's-land, until their prized peninsula could barely sustain life. It also became clear that residents were invested in this tiny sliver of South Baltimore, even as the place was killing them—and not because they were beguiled. Because their personal and familial futures had intertwined with corporate ones over generations, tethered first by jobs and then by homes. Because those homes were their only assets after work here disappeared.

Still, Minnie knew to keep a record. The record: a promise not to voice the problems in her midst, but also to remember how they happened. This little box in which she tucked away the clues was one of many daily disavowals that helped this woman go on living here.

Minnie did not share her suitcase with me right away. Between 2015 and 2016, we crossed paths each week at Seniors' Club, a casual gathering hosted at the recreation center by the park. There, elders settled scores



through cutthroat Bingo games. I had first arrived as Betty's guest a few years back, after she gleaned that I liked listening to "the old heads tell their stories." Once I returned for fieldwork and became a regular, Minnie had begun attending, too. She would sit at the edge selling sodas for a quarter. I sometimes bought a can to say hello, but Minnie only answered with a nod—eyes down, back straight. She was a shy, elegant woman who stood out in a playful group: she sipped her soda through a straw and ate her sandwich with a fork. Sometimes she would listen as other seniors reminisced about "how nice" this place once was, but she rarely did join in herself. "I don't really know anything," Minnie would say. Then she would walk away.

So I was surprised one afternoon when Minnie tapped my shoulder and handed me her husband's obituary, tied up with a string. "I know it's tacky, but you should know the truth," she declared. Not knowing what to do, I thanked her. The write-up said that he had died after a years-long battle with cancer. It would be another three months before Minnie approached me again and said she wanted me to look at some papers. It turned out the obituary was just the first in a series of exhibits she had set aside two decades back to help secure a buyout for her neighbors.

Something that came through strongly in my time with Minnie and other elders was that things were different on the Point "before"—before life became untenable, before conditions neared catastrophe. Arthur, who grew up nearby and left before the region's most precarious years, pined for the days he used to hunt and swim off the cove. Minnie arrived during the 1940s, but she had heard of a time when the coast was lined with dozens of peach trees. While no one that I met lived when the Point was mostly farmland, the inherited impression was that things moved slowly, folks were left to their own devices, and life had not much been disturbed by industrial pursuits. But all that began to change in the 1870s.

Seeking to capitalize on the second industrial revolution, as well as sanitary laws that banished noxious projects to the peninsula—then beyond the city's bounds—a few powerful families incorporated and began selling off land. They advertised the Point as a "safe investment" for speculators, the "most desirable spot" for working men, and an "ideal site" for heavy industry.<sup>13</sup> Print ads boasting that "MONEY INVESTED IN THIS LAND WILL ALWAYS BE SAFE," even "DOUBLE ITSELF IN VERY SHORT ORDER," were among the first attempts to yoke individual financial futures to the promise of prodigious corporate growth.<sup>14</sup> And for those in need of additional incentive, one company offered purchasers a free plot in the local burial grounds, which came to be known as "Bonus Land Cemetery."

These ads attracted a range of businesses and a diverse array of people. Chief among them were poor immigrant workers from central Europe escaping famine and unrest. Black families also moved to Baltimore from farther South, as agriculture there began to suffer and Jim Crow laws became increasingly repressive. Intergroup dynamics were not egalitarian: Black workers reported to White bosses from industry's first days.<sup>15</sup> But the peninsula was considerably more integrated than Baltimore City.<sup>16</sup> And homes available for purchase by Black and immigrant newcomers to the Point were decent compared with those they could afford downtown, where folks fleeing oppression found precious little in the way of options. They also came with land amenable to rural lifeways that many practiced well into the twentieth century.

Later, journalists would write of “truck farms” and “tank farms” as contrapuntal features of this strange environment.<sup>17</sup> But some of the Point's first industries were quite compatible with farming rhythms—like Martin Wagner's famous cannery. In 1896, Wagner set up shop on the peninsula to be close to his supply of produce. He also built three blocks of row homes there, renting them to Polish workers for \$1.50 a week. A self-styled paternalist, Wagner hosted strawberry festivals, built a parochial school, and financed the construction of a church. And he tended to the houses. Once a year, he sent teams to touch-up the identical red-brick row homes, painting their identical white front steps and their matching whitewashed trees.<sup>18</sup> Seniors who spent time in Wagner's Point in the early twentieth century recall a charming, even whimsical place. Minnie, who came later, shook her head recalling all the dust and marveled “how women kept those bright white steps so clean.”

Nevertheless, Minnie's suitcase offered insight into a time when this was a peaceful, verdant landscape. This was something Rena's perspective made quite difficult to see. It was not at all that an angry god had thrown houses into a ring of fire. If anything, they had permitted volatile developments to encroach upon a calm, pastoral people.

But Rena was right that, eventually, residents were engulfed. Following Wagner's death, his children carved up the cannery grounds and sold them off to heavy industry. Oil companies were among the largest purchasers, leading some to call this area the “Carbon Belt” of Baltimore.<sup>19</sup> In Fairfield, chemical and shipbuilding businesses were growing steadily. Well-to-do White folks had for the most part moved away, and working-class enclaves had begun to form. Wagner's Point was definitively Polish (a group then considered “White ethnic”) and, besides a few who set down roots in Hawkins Point, Black families largely settled in industrial Fairfield. John, a Black man born on the Point in 1924, recalled avoiding Brooklyn and Curtis Bay,



where “we weren’t welcomed.” Fairfield was integrated, but Black residents were shunted into “dirty work . . . it wasn’t easy.”<sup>20</sup> To get by in difficult times, Black families pooled resources and harvested food from front-yard gardens—which meant the world to those who had left behind sharecropping farther South.<sup>21</sup> Jennie, the Fairfield woman who said she feared police dogs more than chemicals, loved the intimacy these planting networks fostered. She arrived in 1917 and stayed through two world wars and more, nourished by close relationships that gave the area a remarkable degree of population stability.

So there were real attachments to this place forged from the experience of scraping by despite tough luck, paired with deep investments in the land. And there was hope that sacrifice would produce a better life for good, hardworking people. But there were also signs of trouble in the air. In 1920, one of the region’s asphalt tanks caught fire when lightning ignited a pocket of gas beneath its lid. The fire raged for twenty-six hours, leaving the Patapsco River flaming. The *Baltimore Sun* reported the next day that hundreds of residents fled “screaming in terror. In their arms, some carried babies, others carried household effects, while still others, wide-eyed and panic-stricken, fled coatless and hatless in a frantic effort to escape.”<sup>22</sup> The fire destroyed ninety thousand barrels of oil, a dozen homes, and the local firehouse—a chilling sign life on the Point might not be safe.

The asphalt fire can be attributed, in part, to nuisance regulations that pushed noxious developments to the periphery. That these developments were dangerous was precisely why they had been set apart: officials preferred they not be built in the center of the city. And yet, migrants flocked to the Point for work. They were brought to this “most desirable spot” in a concerted effort to populate the region. There, still legally outside of Baltimore, they could fuel production without accruing the same protections as their counterparts downtown. Things did not much change when, around the time of the fire, the peninsula was made a part of Baltimore, nor later, when officials instituted land-use laws to ensure a safe divide between residential space and heavy industry. On the contrary, if the industrial character of the Point were not preordained by the city’s 1919 annexation (which, again, drew in the neighborhoods for the express purpose of making Baltimore an industrial powerhouse), then it would soon be cemented by zoning.

Zoning is an urban planning tool that governs land use in a manner consonant with quarantine’s logic. Typically, it entails separating land into different sections (“zones”) pegged to discrete activities. Its official US history dates to 1904, when Los Angeles established three residential zones



where laundries were prohibited—a move understood to have Sinophobic motives—but in many respects the policy has roots in regulations that emerged amid public health scares of the nineteenth century. Some of Baltimore's first laws had banished nuisance projects to the urban margins to contain bad airs thought responsible for epidemics. But a few shifts led US cities to pursue managed inclusion by the early twentieth century. Germ theories of disease, for one, countenanced a narrower approach to achieving public health than their miasmatic predecessors, bent on isolating disease vectors rather than holistic sanitation.<sup>23</sup> And efforts to fill tax coffers increasingly led cities like Baltimore to court, rather than prohibit, manufacturing.

There were countervailing forces, too. By the late nineteenth century, the single-family home had attained an “exceptional social and functional purity” in the United States, as a private sphere walled off from the corruptions of the world outside—be they germs, vice, or impure others.<sup>24</sup> This estrangement of the home was a particularly (White) American obsession, posing land-use challenges distinct from those faced in most European cities. Answering the paradoxical pressures of the moment, planners here proposed a split-the-baby approach: a series of spatial cuts that severed the domestic world from the vicissitudes of urban life. In Baltimore, that meant protecting White homes (and inheritance) from the encroachment of racialized people.

Baltimore's earliest experiment with zoning occurred in 1910, when the city passed the nation's first comprehensive racial zoning law, stipulating that no Black person could “move into a block in which more than half of the residents are white,” and no White person could “move into a block in which more than half of the residents are colored.”<sup>25</sup> (Both prohibitions were included so that the policy might pass muster as “separate but equal.”) It was a technology of containment marshalled to stem the tide of the “Negro Invasion”—a virulent name for the influx of Black migrants from farther South after Reconstruction.<sup>26</sup> In this context, racial zoning sought to neutralize the threats Black neighbors allegedly posed to White communities. First justified as a measure of protection against property depreciation, the policy was soon recast as a tool for keeping risky bodies in their place. As Lawrence Brown recounts, city leaders cited high rates of tuberculosis in Black slums as evidence Black Baltimoreans were by nature more infectious, then prescribed segregation as White residents' preemptive “treatment.”<sup>27</sup> The argument drew on modern concepts of the body and their racialized entailments, but it simply did not hold, as it did not address perilous slum conditions. Observers later noted that the ordinance failed to support the health of the White middle class and was plainly detrimental to Black people.<sup>28</sup>



FIGURE 2.4. **Industrial zone.** City of Baltimore Use District Map, based on an ordinance passed in 1931 and amended in 1958, shows the whole Point zoned for heavy industry. Accessed from Johns Hopkins University Sheridan Library. Image cropped and Point encircled by the author.

In any case, the courts swiftly struck down racial zoning, and use-based zoning soon emerged—also rationalized in terms of public health.<sup>29</sup> Officials held that coding different tracts of land for distinct desired uses would provide denizens with “fresh, clean air” to breathe.<sup>30</sup> The city’s first comprehensive land-use ordinance, passed in 1931, thus sought to minimize potential urban problems by coding every tract in Baltimore as one of four “use districts”: one for exclusive residential use, one for unrestricted industrial use, and two for commercial pursuits. Planners labeled the Point “M-3” for heavy industry.<sup>31</sup>

This marked a critical moment for residents. For one, despite its boons, zoning suffered from a partial vision common among modernist planning schemes. By representing land as “absolute space”—space from which “all ambiguities could in principle be banished”—its rubric made the Point legible to planners as non-residential.<sup>32</sup> It was a frictionless descriptor that smoothed over contradictions.<sup>33</sup> All of a sudden, it was as if there were no houses near the factories. But *zoning law did not unpeuple the peninsula*. Families lived in the same homes they had occupied before the ordinance, and thousands more arrived during WWII when the federal government built housing there under a wartime state of exception. For decades, the law decreed a willful ignorance about those brought to live and work in the “industrial” region.

In other words, the M-3 designation categorically concealed human presence on the Point, stipulating that it was not fit for residential life, and residents disappeared into a hypothetical—bureaucratically zoned *out*



while very much still *in* a place reserved for industrial development.<sup>34</sup> With time, that hypothetical would produce real problems for real people.

Zoning is an important part of the peninsula's history—one of the deliberate policy choices that would eventually make life there so untenable because, by disavowing residential life, it intensified the risks of industry. Zoning was also one of the deliberate policy choices that would fall away when residents chose to spotlight cataclysmic hypotheticals instead of longue durée violences like exposure and neglect. Particularly after WWII, the policy deterred the city from making infrastructural improvements on the Point, leaving the communities to deteriorate.

Known in the early 1900s as a manicured, self-sufficient enclave, White working-class Wagner's Point had no store, public phone, or mailbox by the 1970s. Conditions were rougher still in Fairfield, which quickly lost its status as a "rare integrated community" after barracks transitioned into all-Black public housing.<sup>35</sup> Jane, an elderly Black woman who worked as a crossing guard in Fairfield for nearly a decade, told me that she never once set foot in Wagner's Point, though it was a short walk down the street. The same de facto segregation that kept Black Baltimoreans confined to what Jane called "catch-em-in zones" citywide also marked municipal services: as late as 1976, many Fairfield homes lacked sewage lines.<sup>36</sup> One visiting reporter said it felt "anachronistic."<sup>37</sup> Another published this decrepit scene:

The streets are pitted and broken, without sidewalks . . . and on a recent morning Fairfield Road ended in mud puddles so deep that householders used planks to reach their front steps. . . . Nowhere else in my wanderings have I known city government to be quite so tolerant of assorted junk, shoulder-high weeds, and defunct buildings that should be demolished. Quite plainly, the city regards Fairfield as industrial, the way it is zoned, and not residential, *the way it humanly happens to be*.<sup>38</sup>

Here, again, I want to underscore a stark dissociation between the administrative and the human. People could only make limited claims upon a city that considered itself legally obliged not to foster life in a zone reserved for manufacturing.

By many counts, in fact, zoning disallowed life here. Even though Fairfield and Wagner's Point had the lowest median incomes in the city, the M-3 designation made them ineligible for some War on Poverty programs. It also prohibited residents from operating a community grocery. Jennie, who worked with neighbors to advocate for residential zoning in a campaign the





FIGURE 2.5. Jennie walks home on unpaved roads in “industrial” Fairfield. Photo by Amy Deputy. Published in McGuire, Patrick A. “Miss Jennie’s Crusade.” 1993. *Baltimore Sun Magazine*, March 28.

city basically ignored, said the worst thing about the label was not what it brought but what it prevented: “We can’t build anything on our lots, since the city says this is an industrial zone. . . . I think that is oppressive.”<sup>39</sup> That some must fight to “live in the unlivable,” in Katherine McKittrick’s terms, is a sure sign that racialized exclusions from the category of full-fledged human subject map onto geography.<sup>40</sup>

The one concession to life on the Point was the construction of Victory Elementary School for the children of White servicemen in 1943, though even this was an “ambiguous move . . . since the building was specifically designed for easy conversion to warehouse use.”<sup>41</sup> After the war, the city all but abandoned Victory. In 1972, the principal of the (by then) all-Black school noted her requests for nurses and support staff had largely been ignored.<sup>42</sup> Jane, the area’s lone crossing guard, managed the challenging task alone, shuttling children past oil trucks that sputtered down the road too quickly.

The same formal disregard that led the city to insist that the Point was free of people also fostered an attitude of regulatory laxity there. (This despite the city’s policy of collecting property taxes from residents.) Minnie told me many plants illegally emitted toxics after dark. Local scrapyards took advantage of municipal neglect, violating fire codes with impunity. Petroleum companies also skirted regulations, especially as labor conditions intensified due to market pressures from abroad, and fewer men

manned faster processes. Bill shared harrowing stories about what BP did to improve efficiency: “Sometimes, they’d have us work thirty, forty hours straight, and people would fall asleep at the gauge. Tanks would explode, and that was a terrible thing. Guys would run and, as you were running, you could watch skin peeling off each other’s bodies because the heat was so intense.” The fires also stripped paint from company vehicles.

Bill’s charges square with others I have heard, and the explosion he described was covered in 1979 under the headline, “You Better Get Dressed, the Sky’s On Fire.”<sup>43</sup> It was not a lone emergency. By now, American industry had entered a series of world-breaking transformations that had begun to touch life on the Point, where increasingly risky businesses staffed by more contingent workers had produced a volatile present. In this context, quiet emblems of neglect could turn explosive. The same year the sky turned red, a railroad car carrying nine thousand gallons of sulfuric acid overturned twenty-five feet from the Fairfield Homes, forcing seven hundred residents to evacuate at dawn. Officials blamed the spill on a “soft spot in the road.”<sup>44</sup> Minor oversights (degraded infrastructure, unpaved streets) were becoming major liabilities.

These liabilities aside, many residents found security in the peninsula’s social infrastructure. One Wagner’s Point woman put it this way: “I know the environment may not be safe, but the community is.” Close quarters can foster a sense of comfort that tempers the violence of exposure, as Elizabeth Roberts shows elsewhere.<sup>45</sup> People in the tight-knit towns looked out for one another, and owner-occupancy rates were high for two low-income neighborhoods.<sup>46</sup> Everyone knew where the old, poor, and sick resided, and industry was in the paternalistic habit of paying for holiday gifts and heating bills.

“I don’t see anywhere else in the state of Maryland,” the woman said, “where [people would] get the kind of security that they have here.”<sup>47</sup>

That security took different forms in different neighborhoods. Residents of all-Black Fairfield built a “network of connections” that made life possible despite discrimination.<sup>48</sup> Polish families in Wagner’s Point took comfort in the private enclave they had fostered over many years. Some also found that government neglect had benefits: White children from Wagner’s Point rode buses past Fairfield’s all-Black school for decades after schools downtown were forced to integrate.<sup>49</sup> Being hidden meant freedom from state interference.

These may sound like post hoc rationalizations for staying put, but they were more than that. They were revisions of the social contract in a time of



flux. In Wagner's Point: *if not safety, at least Whiteness; if not a job, at least a wall; if not progress, at least liberty.* In Fairfield: *if not inclusion, at least a little room to grow this garden; at least a place beyond the hostile reach of law enforcement.* They were efforts to find ways of talking about life on the Point that did not reduce the whole thing to a lapse in judgment. They were attempts, under the threat of loss, to protect some spaces of stability.

There were other ways that local people, Black and White, maintained lives marked by containment, exerting a measure of control while industrial matter seeped beyond its boundaries. Containment was a praxis of endurance in a world careening quickly toward an after: after progress, after life became unhinged from the nineteenth-century promise of this place. It was an act of *zoning out* composed of quiet, daily disavowals. Recall Bill's opening recollections. Men kept their dirty clothes in boxes by the door and women swept obsessively. Doubling down on old conceptions of the home-as-haven that had propped up zoning in the first place, but without the structural protections zoning offered other Baltimoreans, locals committed to perimeter protection. Some wiped down surfaces to guard against exposures. Others plastic-wrapped their things to keep away the dust, even as the dust slipped in by other means. People battened down their homes, those "clumps of saved-up labor" for which they had sacrificed so much—a sacrifice that registered in grisly coughs and hushed condolences.<sup>50</sup> Why? Because their homes stood for the promise of the promise of a future. To voice contamination was to put those futures at financial risk and to come face-to-face with the impermanence of lifeways here.<sup>51</sup>

Besides being material investments, pristine homes provided a measure of protection and displayed their owners' self-respect in an environment that strayed far from the Point's pastoral past.<sup>52</sup> So did pristine yards. Jennie tended to raised garden beds with the "darkest, richest soil" while the whole world changed around her.<sup>53</sup> Minnie kept the flag above her front door pressed and clean. Many kept their windows tightly shut. Little comforts, habits, cautions, boundaries.

Then, in 1984, an explosion occurred at Essex Industrial Chemical. It was the second one at Essex just that year. The explosion shook buildings, broke windows, and sent fourteen people to the hospital. Neighbors claimed the event put up a "mushroom cloud, like the bomb at Hiroshima."<sup>54</sup>

And then, a few months later, a spill at Vista Chemical released a heady acid cloud. Minnie remembered it as "proof" containment was illusory.





FIGURE 2.6. **Home as haven.** Photo by Michelle Gienow. Published in Anft, Michael. 1999. "Industrial Waste: The Life and Death of Wagner's Point." *Baltimore City Paper*, January 20.

Look, it was a gorgeous day. Sunny, beautiful, just made you feel like you wanted to do something. And I was downstairs waiting for my son to come home from school. Then all of a sudden I started coughing. . . . It got worse, I lost my breath. And I felt like, "Oh my god. He's coming home, and I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe." So I started running around the house like, "What did I do?" I thought I'd started a fire or something. I went around to let the air out of the windows, out of the doors, and then I saw it—a chemical cloud. It looked as though it had made it halfway up our street and just stopped [she raised her arms] right over our house. And look, I pretty much knew the air was bad, but that was the first time I'd *seen* it. Proof. And right away I knew that I hadn't done anything wrong.

Minnie had experienced breathlessness before, but never anything so sudden. The way she put it, events like this were difficult to "sweep away." You might recall that Rena was a bit more crass: "You can't see toxics, but you can be very agitated about blowing up," she'd said to me.

She was not wrong. Compared with earlier events, accidents beginning in the 1980s loom large in people's minds. They were steeped in the uncertain industrial economy, as job loss eroded locals' patience with the dust. (By the end of the decade, most people who lived on the Point no longer

worked there.<sup>55</sup>) They were weighted by the existential insecurities of the environmental era, as chemical violence became a part of public discourse. And, unlike quotidian experiences of pollution, they were visceral, quick, and clear. Minnie's memory therefore marked an experiential distinction that residents would later translate into strategy: a recognition that certain forms of harm offered clearer "proof" than others that people were unsafe here.

To a limited extent, this proof moved city officials. By the 1980s, Baltimore committed to shuttering the Fairfield Homes after federal investigators expressed concern about "discovering" an all-Black project in manifestly dire straits.<sup>56</sup> But homeowners found themselves with little recourse. Some left Fairfield to live near relatives who had been uprooted from the project, accepting a meager voluntary buyout and losing savings in the process—with some receiving less than \$6,000 for their land—but seventeen households held on, including Jennie's.<sup>57</sup> And all three hundred residents of Wagner's Point stayed put in their red, brick homes with no offers on the table, less sure about the wisdom of remaining with each passing year.

Looking back on all of this from Minnie's living room, it is difficult to reconcile the city's disregard for residents with the city's role in their endangerment. The area's industrial development was bound to its promise as a place of human inhabitation, and people were brought there to live even after it was designated non-residential. Nor did the city offer much redress once problems of co-presence became clear. Instead, the Point's industrial designation limited state attention, rationalizing policies of neglect. In officials' own words, it put a "cloud" over the peninsula.<sup>58</sup> These developments led conditions to deteriorate past the point of prevention, while structuring the mechanisms available for addressing the problem of people here.

This problem warranted structural solutions because it had structural causes. But instead it became the labor of isolated households, left to do the work of balancing capital and welfare that zoning had achieved for people elsewhere. Here, individuals were left to keep the mess of industry contained for the same reason. The cruel irony of this late industrial moment was that most residents became *more* tethered to the Point precisely as it grew more dangerous: job loss tore them from the plants but bound them to this place, as their land was all that they had left. This was true for working-class Whites and even more for working-class Blacks, whose inclusion in the Fordist project had been marginal and recent.

The daily disavowals through which people endured this double bind—they had structural causes, too. What else could people do? By the 1980s, those left on the Point did not have much political clout. Nor could they effectively bring nuisance suits alleging interference with their property rights



in the industrial region. Nor could residents of all-White Wagner's Point draw on discourses of structural racism that had spurred action around the Fairfield Homes, and that made many of them bristle. Cloaked in a policy of partial vision, most had dropped off the map as citizen-subjects.

It was only as accidents grew worse that the state would begin to apprehend them as prospective casualties.

## Time Bomb

If popular imaginings of the Point at the start of the twentieth century were romantic and pastoral, its aura near the end was practically apocalyptic. Accidents were getting worse, with more than fifty plants producing high-risk products at unprecedented speed. The end seemed nigh in other ways as well: job loss shattered financial futures for the working class, and new synthetic chemicals posed existential threats to reproductive ones in ways that undercut old theories of pollution.<sup>59</sup> All this while Reagan insisted risk was to be managed, not avoided; more, that risk-taking was good business strategy.<sup>60</sup>



FIGURE 2.7. “Accidents never take a vacation!” Photo from the Curtis Bay Ordnance Depot, likely taken during WWII. US National Archives in Philadelphia. RG 156, Box 1, Folder 12, Records of the Bureau of Ordnance, 1950s.



Though by now qualitative evidence was “insufficient to support regulation” in service of said management, such evidence abounded.<sup>61</sup> There was the confluence of endocrine-disrupting chemicals with rumors birth defects were on the rise.<sup>62</sup> There was the coincidence of cancer rates and known carcinogens. There were less fertile harvests and less lively waterways. There was the dust that coated every surface in this place. And there was the palpable sense that living on the Point meant living with a “TIME BOMB,” to again quote from Minnie’s suitcase. Sensational events across the globe added to this sinister suspicion.

Love Canal (1978), Three Mile Island (1979), Bhopal (1984), Chernobyl (1986): disasters ricocheted across the news, each suggesting that the Point might well be next. In a single generation, the positive futurities that once structured promises of progress toward the “good life” had resolutely shifted shape.<sup>63</sup> Minnie recalled anxious conversations about how long the communities would last. Others “joked” that the “end times” were imminent. Bill told me that kids started rehearsing dark nursery rhymes. And folks teased that if a single chemical plant were to explode, “it would be like—boom, boom, BOOM—the domino effect,” and the Point would get “blown off” the map of the district.

Insecurities like these were rampant in the late Cold War, and not just on the Point. People nationwide were questioning containment’s viability. Contaminants seemed to know no bounds. Disasters accosted the sensorium. According to Kim Fortun, industrial accidents were not only spectacles of exposure, they also unsettled industrialism’s vision of itself as a set of bounded entities.<sup>64</sup> Grappling with this realization, industry and government retreated to a speculative mode, and specifically to a politics of threat. They fixated on hazards that might be. This was, in part, an effort to control which harms entered public discourse. In making the spectacular uncertain future the principal terrain of governance, hazard planning displaced present-tense symptoms of industrial co-presence and cast residents of the Point as at-risk citizens in a theater of national anxiety.<sup>65</sup> (Whether this production captured conditions on the ground with enough precision to keep local people safe was another thing entirely.)

It was in this context that the accidents plaguing the 1980s Point attracted government attention, as I gathered from a different archive. Dozens of news clippings fill the files of then-Mayor William Donald Schaefer, along with notes indicating he was “angry” because botched evacuations were making the city look incompetent. After the back-to-back Essex explosions in 1984, Schaefer wrote to his Office of Disaster Control to find out why the

accidents had been handled so poorly—especially since a response plan was in place. He received a letter stating that evacuation drills were supposed to have been staged (they weren't), and that “safety monitors” were supposed to have alerted residents (they didn't). The reason the response plan was so “completely fouled up” was simple: no one knew that it existed.<sup>66</sup>

Then, just two months later, a pesticide plant in Bhopal, India, released over forty tons of toxic gas, killing thousands who could not escape. The accident sparked international outrage and, in places like the Point, mass fear. Residents were nervous “it could happen here.”<sup>67</sup> The Essex explosions had already shaken locals, leading some to beg the mayor to evacuate the Point.<sup>68</sup> Before Bhopal, the city's response had been aloof.<sup>69</sup> Now, the need for something more was clear. People knew that accidents were possible; they had happened. Plus, the toxic gas that killed so many at Bhopal was being used at FMC.<sup>70</sup> For many on the Point and in cognate spaces nationwide, Bhopal thus stood out as a grim prophetic moment: geographically far, but in other ways too proximate for comfort.<sup>71</sup> And for the Schaefer administration, the whole thing produced a real PR calamity.

The Schaefer archives give off the impression of a man beleaguered from all sides: residents were understandably concerned, industry was predictably defensive, and the media was eager to exploit these high-stakes dramas. Bhopal, after all, happened when anxieties were high about the risks of modernization.<sup>72</sup> And mistrust of officials had reached a fever pitch within the public sphere. In addition to managing accidents, then, officials were scrambling to manage bad impressions—a task made harder by the heap of disaster films produced during the restless decade. This is manifest in the commotion around one made-for-TV film, *Acceptable Risks*, which landed on the mayor's desk before its nationwide premiere.<sup>73</sup>

Days before *Acceptable Risks* aired in March 1986, Schaefer received a warning from an aide. “My understanding of the synopsis,” she wrote, “is that industry is treated poorly for not erecting and maintaining safety measures, and cities which ignore the potential for hazard of nearby chemical companies are given bad marks for not anticipating dangers.”<sup>74</sup> The film itself is slightly more sensational. Starring mustached plant director Don Sheppard, under pressure to increase productivity without increasing cost, and plucky city manager Janet Framm, the only Black official in the film and the only competent person by a long shot, it unfolds the choices leading to the chemically induced deaths of four hundred citizens. At the center of the plot is the plan to construct a housing development in the shadow of Citichem, a chemical plant in “Oakridge, America.” Promised that the development “will mean further growth for the city,” the city council votes to



approve a zoning exception for developers—despite Framm’s protest that this would be an “unacceptable risk.”

Meanwhile, inside the plant, Sheppard weighs a difficult decision. Should he bypass some precautions to increase production and save the business from a threatened corporate phaseout, or keep things safe but risk his workers’ employment?

The movie does not scapegoat Sheppard—who privileges his workers’ jobs—for what transpires. Instead, it lets him stand in for a series of structural and technical pressures all too familiar to viewers on the Point, which build until they burst into emergency.<sup>75</sup> Within moments, the hyper-toxic substance stored inside the plant seeps out, collapsing children as it passes through the park, the pool, the school, and other sites of everyday Americana. Framm can be heard crying out, “We killed all those people with the zoning law!” And a shot of Sheppard, clutching his young granddaughter’s limp body, closes the film—the devastating image of a chemical apocalypse in the United States.

Understandably, *Acceptable Risks* raised alarm in Baltimore City.

The immediate response from Schaefer’s administration was to take up its own TV spot following the film to boost preparedness efforts.<sup>76</sup> Officials also published letters in the *Baltimore Sun*, and distributed brochures on how citizens should secure their homes amid a chemical release. Through these and other efforts, they sought to patch cracks in public trust that had been pronounced since Bhopal, adopting containment as a PR strategy.<sup>77</sup>

This aggressive information campaign and the planning that it advertised marked a shift in the city’s comportment toward accidents. Previously, officials had emphasized disaster response, a poorly stipulated set of after-the-fact reactions. After the 1984 Essex explosion, for example, one local admitted, “No one said nothing [about what to do], so we just stayed in.” But citizen agitation after Bhopal and lessons learned from the catalog of near-catastrophes that marked the twentieth-century Point underscored the need to prepare for spectacular potentials while the city still had time. Soon, staving off apocalypse would be a central task of urban governance.

Films like *Acceptable Risks* point toward the public pressures pushing Baltimore in this direction, but there were federal factors, too. Following Bhopal, Congress passed the Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-know Act (EPCRA). The “right-to-know” component mandated corporate reporting of emissions above a certain threshold—though there were consequential gaps. More fundamentally, Fortun notes, the right to know



did not correlate with the capacity to rein in industry.<sup>78</sup> In many ways, the promise of more ample knowledge addressed a question Framm gives voice to in the film: “How can you know if the risks are acceptable without knowing what [they] are?” It did not trouble the presumption that risk analysis should form the basis of environmental expertise. Nor did EPCRA trouble the presumption that risks should be taken in the first place. By figuring the problem of the present as an information deficit and, moreover, framing knowledge in industry’s narrow terms, the bill took most proactive options off the table. It was not a preventative piece of legislation, nor one designed to stem the real and present dangers of exposure. Instead EPCRA spoke of the acute *not yet*, the threat, the speculative injury. This was where the “emergency planning” component of the bill had force, drawing on logics Andrew Lakoff contends emerged along with the Cold War. It required governments to steel themselves for worst-case scenarios by engaging in preparedness, framing dystopic ideation as a planning strategy.<sup>79</sup>

In Baltimore, EPCRA spurred the codification of Schaefer’s Chemical Hazard Plan (CHP), which promised to prepare for “the unlikely event of a chemical mishap.”<sup>80</sup> Officials were supposed to test it by staging uncertainty. Minnie, whose archive documents the drills, called them “dress rehearsals.” Maybe twice a year, residents, police, firefighters, the Hazmat squad, and “big dignitaries from downtown” came to watch workers on the Point play out scenarios—any one of which would devastate this place. Plant managers were also eager to talk about the drills. One, named Ralph, recalled them with impressive detail:

So, for example, we might have a tanker truck carrying a flammable solvent, and it would run into a railcar of chlorine or isobutylene or something like that. We’d set it up, make sure we had the hot zones and cold zones laid out, had people suited up and aware of how they should approach the scene. Then we’d have smoke generators and other accessories, plus ten to fifteen fire engines, and trucks from the Maryland Department of [the] Environment. All that made it feel urgent, pretty real. So we’d run it like the real thing, practicing.

The simulations were not, of course, “the real thing,” but Ralph explained that they were critical: “If you didn’t use the [mitigation] equipment, you wouldn’t know *how* to when it mattered.” With practice, companies like his became so adept that they were training state officials.

Another component of the plan was to publicize these efforts. GRACE Chemical’s newsletter frequently recounted simulations, and local papers published reflections such as this:

More than fifteen local, state, and federal agencies coupled with private industry to stage an elaborate, “catastrophic” chemical emergency in the Wagner’s Point section of Baltimore Tuesday. Dozens of spectators, including community and environmental leaders, watched the mock emergency and were asked to help critique the exercise. Public notification of a chemical disaster topped the list of community concerns [since the notification system failed]. . . . Otherwise, the drill was called a success. . . . The chemical industry is “lifting the curtain so we can see through,” said Delores Barnes, “and we like what we see.”<sup>81</sup>

Delores, a Wagner’s Point woman, was not alone. Despite finding them eccentric, many locals agreed the drills were a step in the right direction—so long as they marked the start, not the end, of improving plant safety. For the first time in a long time, simulations gave residents the impression that their plight was being recognized and that more reparative futures lay ahead, because they conceded the need to sustain life in this “industrial” zone after years of disavowal and followed up with concrete resources.

In fact, unlike other Cold War-era simulations, which served to instill a productive sense of “existential danger” in Americans, the purpose of these pre-enactments was to perform competence: to reassure residents that responders could keep the Point under control.<sup>82</sup> Nor were they merely superficial. During the 1980s, local plants poured money into disaster management. They instituted new programs, clarified protective measures, and increased process-safety elements. As Ralph explained, the goal was to reduce risk through “multiple, redundant” layers of protection. This went some way toward appeasing local people.

But these measures also eclipsed key elements of residents’ endangerment. For one, hazard plans located danger squarely in the future, letting the spectacle of prospective accidents drown out the daily violence of toxicity. I want to stress that this was more than a perceptual displacement. It also had material effects, as resources for hazard planning had to come from somewhere. Some came *at the expense of precautionary programs* that, if funded and enforced, would not only improve health, but also mitigate against catastrophe.<sup>83</sup>

Remember that a dozen little missteps had coalesced into the climax of *Acceptable Risks*. That poor road and railcar maintenance had spurred the 1979 sulfuric acid spill. That insufficient oversight had fired up the sky above BP. Nor was it only the case that slow harms could bring about explosive problems. Depending on the chemicals involved, single explosions could impact bodies over generations. Or consider this: In 1984, a chemical leak from another local plant failed to trigger an alarm that would notify offi-



cials at a nearby bridge. The cloud pulled a driver's attention from the road, causing an eight-car pileup and thirteen injuries.<sup>84</sup>

The thing about living with a time bomb is that danger dwells in the beat before the blast: that the quiet and the spectacle are two parts of one machine. Hazard planning missed this defining quality of life on the peninsula. Moreover, because these plans fixated on the hypothetical, they often overlooked the place-based minutiae of life on the Point—and this could have grave consequences in a real emergency.

People often pointed out these oversights through recourse to another film, a public service announcement (PSA) on how residents were to act during an accident. The PSA advocated they shelter in place and await further instructions, a familiar request during the Cold War years. The film, I have been told, opens on a White couple gardening outside their pristine country home. The man is mowing grass, the woman planting flowers. Suddenly, they hear sirens ringing in the distance. “We must shelter in place,” the man declares robotically.

Together, the couple goes into the house, climbs the stairs to their room, and retrieves an emergency kit from underneath their bed. Brenda, a White woman and one of the lawyers who would later work with Rena on the buy-out, recounted the rest of the scene:

So they go into the house, upstairs into their room—which is perfect because it's a master bedroom with an “independent source of water”—and pull out this box that has, you know, batteries and fresh water and perfectly cut pieces of plastic which they put over the windows. Then they wet a towel and put that under the door along with some foam. And they're like, “We're sheltering in place until they let us go.” Meanwhile, the scene cuts to the school, the alarm goes off, and the teacher says, “Alright, children. It's time to shelter in place.” And they pull out their own emergency box, and these children begin unrolling the perfectly cut plastic, which they then tape over all the windows in their classroom, with another team pulling out fresh water, batteries . . . and they just sit quietly and wait.

Brenda laughed. “It was so ludicrous. No one in Fairfield, Wagner's Point, or any of the surrounding neighborhoods had an emergency kit. Neither did any of the schools, and there had never been a drill in the communities to practice. Even if they'd had kits,” Brenda doubted folks could tape up all the windows, as most residents were elderly. No one on the Point had an



attached bathroom in their “master bedroom.” And then there was what Brenda called “the final irony”: efforts to contain the homes were futile, as “the houses in Wagner’s Point all had a common attic crawl space.” So if anyone failed to “shelter in place,” perhaps by not being home, the rest would die no matter how precisely they had followed the procedures.<sup>85</sup>

In light of Brenda’s comments, official injunctions to shelter in place might best be characterized as “fantasy documents,” a term that Lee Clarke uses to describe plans with “so little instrumental utility” that their purpose is essentially rhetorical. As an example, consider how Reagan planned to evacuate Americans into low-risk “host” zones within three days of a nuclear explosion, starting with New York City:

[The evacuation would require] using 50 percent of all 747s in the country, 75 percent of America’s DC-10s and Lockheed L-1011s, all freighters (which will be in Manhattan and unloaded) and automobile transport (all of which will have full tanks of gas and only one-to-two percent breakdown en route). All evacuees would go to Albany.<sup>86</sup>

And, somehow, evacuations would proceed apace in the country’s other population centers. Assuming that every citizen was properly trained, that responders were not eviscerated in the attack, that vital communications centers were not damaged by bombs, and that residents patiently waited their turn to evacuate, the relocation plan might pass muster. But the chance of success was so remote that the promise of preparedness was little more than that: a promise, independent of its “functional relevance to the task.”<sup>87</sup> This is why such documents are fantasies.

Though less expansive, the CHP and its public-facing texts share this fundamental trait. Read on their own terms, they exemplify rationality, offering clear chains of command and describing divisions of labor in painstaking detail. But as living objects, their depictions of human order were many steps dissociated from conditions on the ground—not unlike zoning’s illusions of a perfectly patterned city. These forms of planning sought to contain threats by valuing hypotheticals over knowledge, even as they had life-or-death stakes.<sup>88</sup> And lest one peg these gaps between the speculative and the actual as signs of a broken system, recall dissociation was foundational to governance in Baltimore City.

Making matters worse, the CHP did not stop accidents, as plans did not address root causes: high-risk products, breakneck production, labor burnout, and so on. Instead, problems increased. In 1995, the Point ranked seventh in the country among places at risk of a major chemical accident—a distinction it retained, despite the drills, for several years.<sup>89</sup>

Notice how quickly threats realized as real events were displaced, again, into the future. Imagine living this strange recursivity. When what you feel as an intense disruption of your present is straightaway cast in terms of a prognosis, it is hard to voice harms done.<sup>90</sup> When danger lives in the subjunctive mood, it is hard to claim your injury.

Then, in December 1996, another accident rocked the peninsula, blowing the top off of a tank at FMC. Employees at the pesticide plant had been complaining of poor management and extreme overwork, with many laboring seventy-five-hour weeks with no time off; one worked for 120 consecutive days under threat of being fired.<sup>91</sup> While it may have been “impossible to say” how emissions from the blast affected residents, the explosion was unmistakable: it sparked a two-alarm fire and injured six people. Yet, no alarm sounded. That day, plant officials had been away attending an emergency planning meeting. In their absence, according to the CHP, the string of tasks necessary for ensuring public safety—determining the direction of the wind, identifying a response, alerting residents—would never happen. Residents demanded officials come to the Point to clarify disaster plans, and officials agreed. Two months later, they filled a room, made a brief presentation, and proceeded to show the shelter-in-place PSA on a make-shift screen.

Presented in that context, Brenda told me, the film “radicalized” residents. It had alarming implications for those meant to be sheltering in homes set off from the plants by just a flimsy chain-link fence. Residents pressed on the spot for an evacuation plan, before recognizing such a plan would be impractical: the Point’s single access road was often closed in the event of trouble, since responders were supposed to “isolate” the scene.<sup>92</sup> What once had seemed a minor comfort—containment—was now a major problem. And it was exacerbated by the fact that the combined expertise of industry and government had produced a scheme so removed from conditions on the ground that “we were pretty much left for dead,” as Bill later put it. The consensus among those who remembered the event was that something major shifted that evening.

Brenda and Rena were both present that night. For a few months prior, they had been helping a small group consider avenues for achieving relocation. Their meetings had been thinly attended, but Brenda said “it was a whole new ball game” after the incident at FMC. Linked by the deadly double binds that kept them trapped on this peninsula, residents from Fairfield and Wagner’s Point would come together for the first time in pursuit of a shared purpose: buyout.<sup>93</sup> It soon dawned on them that turning the



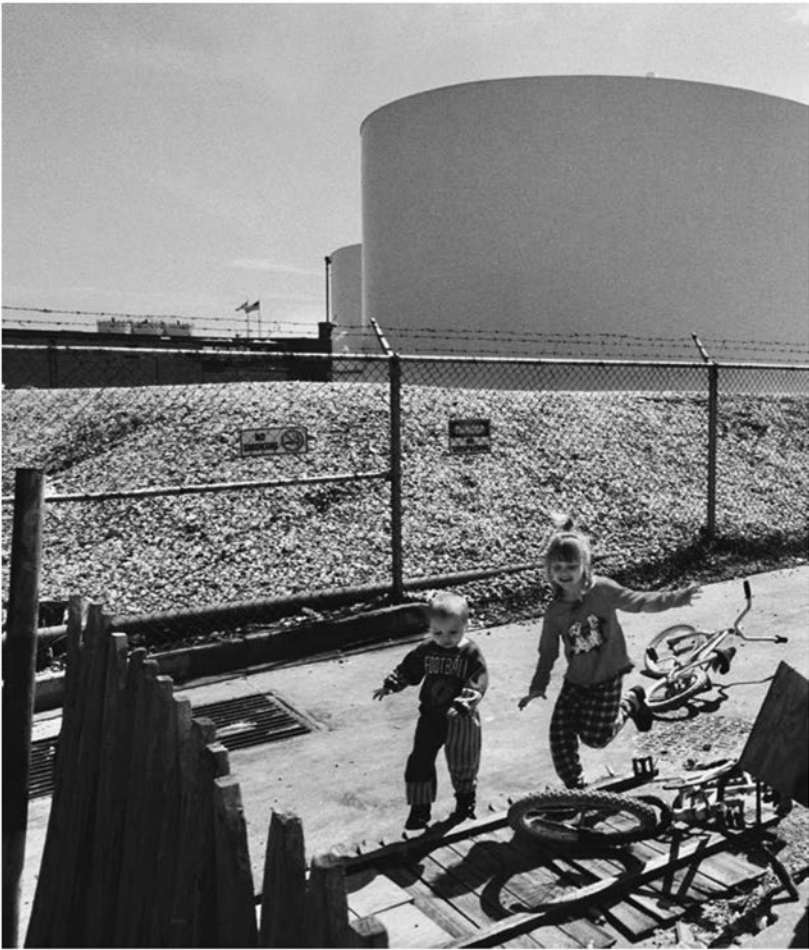


FIGURE 2.8. “Residents want out.” Children play in their yard with Citgo tanks in the background, 1998. Photo by Lloyd Fox. Published in Dewar, Heather, and Joe Mathews. 1998. “Residents Want Out of Industrial Ghetto.” *Baltimore Sun*, April 9.

politics of threat back on officials would be the best route toward this bitter victory.

### Strategic Vulnerabilities

Minnie reminded me that the 1996 explosion was not the first time locals contemplated moving off the Point. Rumbblings had been heard in 1979, after the railcar accident released sulfuric acid. And Baltimore did commit to



closing down the Fairfield Homes soon after that emergency. By the 1990s, the city-owned development was vacant and most Fairfield homeowners had moved as well, leaving seventeen households in a community that once housed thousands. For those who had a choice, leaving home behind had not been easy. Tenants (who did not have a choice) found themselves dispersed among projects downtown that officials had chosen on their behalf. Most homeowners who left ended up in projects, too, after surrendering their prized land for a pittance. And others stayed, like Jennie, balking at the prospect of giving up their plots for the price of a used car—the fair market value for a house in a calamitous location, but nowhere near what it had cost in sweat and sacrifice. Even those who took the money mourned the loss. Despite infrastructural neglect, social ties had made Fairfield livable, even joyous, but eventually the threat of harm became too visceral.

Down the street, Wagner's Point remained, its residents ill and plagued with fear, but with little recourse to leave of their own volition. No one was offering to relocate them, not even to the projects. They could not sell their homes and find comparable ones elsewhere. The stench from the wastewater plant had long since wiped the sweet smell of peach blossoms from the air, and the coastline hid behind the cold, white tanks of industry. Nor could locals sue to raise the requisite funds. It would be difficult to prove “by a preponderance of the evidence” who was responsible for residents' ill health.<sup>94</sup> But hazard planning failures pointed toward an opening.

Of course, this breakthrough did not come without its disadvantages. To make headway in a climate where logics of endangerment shaped the “terrain of political engagement” between citizens and government, residents would need to tap into the Cold War's organizing premise.<sup>95</sup> They would need to dramatize the threat of the next disaster, and invite both industry and government to intervene “proactively.”

Even though this meant bracketing real and present harms to amplify the future possible, and even though locals recognized this as a contradiction, the fact was that they needed to get out. So, they situated themselves at the center of the partial vision guiding government concern and resolved to garner attention “according to calculations of political expediency.”<sup>96</sup>

Though residents' push for relocation was tied, in large part, to the Point's explosive present, their campaign had a bureaucratic start. Brenda, Rena, and the team of law students that would eventually support this cause were initially brought to the Point to represent residents' interests with respect to the Empowerment Zone (EZ) initiative. Enacted under the Clinton admin-

istration, the EZ program identified “blighted” neighborhoods for “reinvention” through public-private partnerships.<sup>97</sup> In 1994, William Schaefer (by then governor) and Mayor Kurt Schmoke applied, pitching the Point as the future site of a “green” manufacturing “ecosystem.”<sup>98</sup> Their bid was successful. But ironically, becoming an EZ meant that the Point would again be a space of exception: regulatory requirements would be relaxed, citizen protections systematically eroded, and financial incentives funneled toward new industries.

Locals were not at the center of this partnership, but rules did accord them a seat at the table and press residents to coordinate their interests as a single bloc. Women from Fairfield and Wagner’s Point soon came together as the “Fairpoint Group,” and Minnie’s neighbor, Jeannette, emerged as their most vocal advocate. She was a middle-aged grandmother from Wagner’s Point who fearlessly aired area frustrations. The EZ funding also came with technical assistance, including independent legal counsel. In July 1996, Brenda was pulled from her job at a nonprofit downtown and assigned to represent the local population.

When we met twenty years later, the first thing Brenda said was that, before the job, she had “never heard of the Point. I didn’t even know that it existed. But they called me in, so I got in my car and drove, drove, drove to meet Jeannette. Then I arrived and gasped, ‘How can this be?’”

I got out of my car in Wagner’s Point—just three blocks of houses in the shadow of the wastewater treatment plant. And in fact, that plant had more environmental . . . problems than any other wastewater plant in the region. The residents would talk about how, in the summer, on a routine basis, there would be raw sewage running through the streets. And of course there were all of the factories that would occasionally blow up. But I’d been called down because residents had been offered office space in the petroleum plant next door, and Jeannette wanted me to take a look at the lease.

While Brenda was there with a narrow purpose, she and Jeannette got to talking about conditions on the Point. Jeannette did not hold back. And when the women said goodbye, Brenda recalled asking Jeannette, “Why are you here?” “We can’t sell our homes. They’re the only assets we’ve got,” Jeannette replied. From there, the women agreed to gauge residents’ interest in a wholesale buyout so that they might safely relocate their families.

Enthusiasm in pursuing buyout was uneven until the accident at FMC. Brenda told me that Fairfield residents were understandably reluctant to



pursue this path. They relished the freedom that inhered in owning land, and had watched their neighbors leave the Point just to land in rough straits elsewhere in the city. On top of this, it seems unlikely that Black women were wont to expect protection from officials in a world where—to invoke Christina Sharpe—their endangerment was “normative,” a nonevent.<sup>99</sup> Jennie, you might recall, had already tried and failed to advocate for residential zoning. But the explosion that December was persuasive. It did not persuade them all (Jennie resolved to stay on the Point till her last days), but it convinced enough that, by 1997, the Fairpoint Group had begun to seek a buyout for the two communities.

It is notable that Fairfield residents did not take the lead in this campaign. I cannot say why with any degree of confidence, and that is also noteworthy. Newspaper articles and lawyers’ recollections from the buyout center Wagner’s Point, and my own contacts from Fairfield left when the Fairfield Homes closed down. I have a sense of Jennie’s voice because it comes through clearly in the archive, though she had passed by the time I began research. As for Fairfield supporters of the buyout who did not step out in front: Perhaps they were structurally marginalized within the Fairpoint Group. Perhaps they had grown too cynical or too exhausted. Compared with Wagner’s Point, they were far fewer in number. And maybe they felt their White neighbors were more likely to attract state sympathies. After all, *Acceptable Risks*, Love Canal, Three Mile Island, and the PSA all featured White protagonists whose premature deaths rose to the level of a crisis. What I do know is that Fairfield’s representatives on the working group cast their support behind pursuing buyout. I also know they shared a field of force and contradiction with their neighbors that would circumscribe their pathways out of here.<sup>100</sup>

The buyout working group began by studying the health effects of living in a toxified environment. Critical awareness of health problems had been building in the area since accidents grew worse, and a small coalition—including Minnie and her husband—had tried to organize around bad air in prior years. In line with these efforts, the working group started with contamination: they went door-to-door tallying sick neighbors and considered taking industry to court. What they found was astonishing—one block in Wagner’s Point alone had housed thirty residents who died of cancer—and legally unusable, as liability would be difficult to prove. As Brenda explained, case law would require them to “demonstrate causation . . . by showing that a particular chemical from a particular plant caused a particular harm. This is hard enough with one plant next door, but with fifty plants, a commingling of pollutants, and a variety of cancers, causation issues become even more daunting.”



But after the shelter-in-place fiasco, a new strategic plan made itself clear. Rena, who had been brought on to support Brenda just before the incident, “sized up” the situation and proposed the team pursue “emergency preparedness as opposed to chronic illness. . . .

Proving that the very small population had contracted cancer [as a result] of exposure from numerous sources would have been nearly impossible. On the other hand, the one access road into and out of the community placed industry in an indefensible position. If people needed to evacuate, they might as well throw themselves in the water. That would have been more effective than waiting for emergency [assistance].<sup>101</sup>

Rena continued, “To litigate [the health conditions] would have been a nightmare. . . . But the idea that emergency access was bad was simpler: you could just look at it and see.”

Unsentimental as it was, Rena’s insight was part of a broader analysis the group was undertaking as they weighed what kind of narrative would *work*. Maybe, as it had with Minnie’s exposure to the chemical cloud, politicizing harm would hinge on visibility.

While a core group of residents rallied neighbors after the FMC explosion, lawyers got to work. Soon, they issued a report entitled “Status of Compliance with EPCRA,” charging seven companies on the Point with violating hazard-planning policy. Moreover, the report alleged that when companies did submit their plans, officials let them lie in unopened envelopes. When lawyers opened up the documents, they found what Clarke calls fantasies.<sup>102</sup> In one plan, industry had tasked the Coast Guard with retrieving residents from the shoreline—likely to be aflame in the event of an explosion. If residents managed to reach the shore, the Coast Guard might just meet them there, but they were not armed with safety equipment, like masks, that would protect victims of a chemical release. Lawyers also identified dangerous labor practices and indefensible infrastructure gaps. Some of the chemical plants had backup generators for their lights, for example, but none to maintain the temperature of tanks should a storm or fire cut off electricity.

“And they were trying to play it off like, ‘Don’t worry,’” Rena mocked. “We have this crack team of emergency responders.” In fact, industry’s first response was to accuse the women of “Hazmat hysteria,” a charge that some had lobbed at activist-housewives in Love Canal in the 1970s. Toxic gaslighting is one of the oldest PR tactics in the business. It involves shift-

ing attention from chemical harm to victims' "emotional" response—but truly officials were scrambling to explain their regulatory lapses.<sup>103</sup> The Fire Department, for example, told reporters that the number of hazardous facilities on the Point had made it "impractical" to develop the detailed plans required by EPCRA, even though that concentration made the plans especially pressing. "When we talk about collecting data for the purpose of [citizens'] right to know, yeah, maybe we're not expending a lot of manpower on that," the department then confessed.<sup>104</sup> The working group broadcast these failures as "accidents waiting to happen."<sup>105</sup> And each one that *did* happen became further fodder for the argument the *next* would be earth-shattering.

But the complicated truth was that explosions from the region's many plants were more than omens of a coming harm. Each one put off bad airs of its own: paraexposures that fomented paracasualties. Attending to the "para," Amy Moran-Thomas writes, means noticing those deaths that slip between too-easy poles—communicable and non-communicable diseases, in her case, fast and slow, real and conjectural, in ours.<sup>106</sup> Paracasualties like Bill's dad, who died fast after forty years of slow exposure. ("Tick, tick, BOOM.") Or Minnie's husband, who passed away in 1996 after being struck by four different cancers. One was an oral cancer, Minnie called it a "smoker's disease. . . . The doctor wouldn't believe he'd never smoked a cigarette in his life," until he learned the couple lived on the Point, where chemical releases were incessant. Then, in February 1998, Jeannette was diagnosed with terminal cancer. She had passed away by April.<sup>107</sup> Brenda recalled people thinking: "If it can happen to her, it can happen to me." And indeed, Jeannette was one of three people stricken by cancer that year on her sparsely populated block. Another told his wife, "Put this in my obituary: I should be the last person to die [here]."<sup>108</sup>

Residents knew that a focus on preparedness could not capture these losses, and many found this painful. It stung to bracket the deaths of their loved ones to dramatize the hypothetical. And for a while, the campaign stalled as residents expressed wanting to "nail" the companies. But officials did not embrace their arguments. Nor did industry executives, who expressed sympathy while vehemently denying responsibility for "health problems that residents' anecdotal evidence suggest[ed we]re unusually severe."<sup>109</sup> As one boss explained to a reporter, "I'm unaware of any scientific evidence that means we should relocate them," adding that a buyout would not "reduce risk," only "allay fears."<sup>110</sup>

It was this very ambiguity that had convinced Rena to pursue an accident-oriented strategy to begin with: it would not be subject to the minutiae of



formal risk assessment, which companies were expert at manipulating. The way she put it, focusing on preparedness

allowed us to deal *in very concrete terms* with how there's only one access road, how the last time there was an explosion it caused a nine-alarm fire, families got split up, and some people were on the wrong side of the line trying to get through. It allows us to show that sheltering in place was crazy because the attics were all connected, the Coast Guard didn't have the right masks, etc. You know, the physical problems were very explainable.

"I get it," she continued. "People were convinced they were sick because of the plants, and I don't disagree. But the way to go with this was not cancer. There [were so few residents], you couldn't prove statistical significance. . . .

And I felt vindicated when the head of the chemical trade association said on public television, "What we need is a health study." She embraced it because she knew you could fiddle around with that kind of thing, change the assumptions, and make a big stink. "Well, is it one in a million or one in fifty thousand? Let's measure all the reported releases." That path would take forever and get us absolutely nothing.

Explosions also clarified the stakes of relocation for residents: living on the Point put them directly in harm's way. So locals refocused after Jeannette's death, agreeing to pursue the strategy most likely to get them out. In Rena's words, "we picked back up and pushed the accident thing," broadcasting imminent danger.

Pushing "the accident thing" did not take much: explosions kept on happening. In May 1998, a tank exploded at FMC. Brenda recalled, "There were no sirens, no calls to the community, and no details shared until the next day." Residents felt panic, but they kept busy documenting this event with the next event in mind, passing evidence that plans had failed to Brenda, Rena, and the media.

In October, a fireball erupted from Condea Vista (formerly Vista Chemical), where equipment was reportedly in bad repair. The explosion could be heard from miles away, shattering windows and knocking locals off



their feet.<sup>111</sup> Some, stuck watching hundred-foot-high flames while awaiting official notice, pulled out camcorders to capture the spectacle. Others contacted reporters, who played harrowing footage on the evening news narrated by locals on live telephone feed.

If the health risks of long-term exposure made for a tenuous case, then botched responses to explosions unambiguously revealed life on the Point to be untenable. They undercut precisely the protective role officials had tried to inhabit after Bhopal, exposing inexcusable flaws in hazard planning. And crucially, as failures of anticipation, they could be broadcast in terms that limited danger to the future possible—terms that kept debate contained. One could call them problems without claiming injury. This was the line that residents learned to toe: how to speak of harm while leaving certain things unsaid. Putting the narrative stress on threat allowed the state to acquiesce to the buyout as an act of care, not an admission of guilt. Local companies were also content to contribute to the fund, so long as they'd be cleared of liability.

The negotiations that would eventually lead to residents' relocation began in July 1998. Nearly one hundred people attended the initial meeting. It was there that the city acknowledged it had identified an "end use" for the properties that would justify a buyout (they would be demolished to expand the wastewater plant), and that residents reiterated their commitment to evacuating all remaining people. Mayor Schmoke later admitted why the buyout was hitched to a public need for land: the city wanted to relocate residents without setting precedent. "I didn't want to talk about environmental dangers. . . . [That] would open us up to conversations about the impact of the [medical waste] incinerator [and] lead poisoning." In Brenda's analysis, the city engaged only when it could "skirt issues of justice."<sup>112</sup> The land-use rationale also kept the problem small—confined only to the Point—and did not undercut the EZ plans to court new industry.

The city's participation marked a positive step forward, but negotiations soon frayed over valuation. Many resented that offers coming in from Mayor Schmoke were limited to homes' fair market value, which was piddling. As Rena remembered, White residents felt Schmoke (a Black man) was insensitive to their plight because of "reverse racism." This left a handful of hangers-on questioning the wisdom of a buyout at all if they would receive pennies and be forced to move to "crime-infested" parts of Baltimore City.

For a contingent of residents, even now, staying was an attractive option: the less-bad choice in a desperate game of prioritizing dangers. Trade-offs structure life in extractive zones around the world, including here, where

many shouldered exposure in exchange for a steady occupation.<sup>113</sup> Arthur told me immigrants to the Point “knew what it was without a job.” Minnie, who arrived after a frightening journey out of occupied Eastern Europe, hated the dust, but recognized herself as being in a relatively well-off situation. And the few left in all-Black Fairfield were hesitant to give up land for tenement life inside the city. Jennie did not want to leave her garden, and in any case she felt too old to move away.<sup>114</sup>

Besides, many doubted life in “the city” would be better. Jennie’s son had survived WWII “only to die of a gunshot wound incurred one night uptown.”<sup>115</sup> For her and others, “I’ll take my chance with the air” was a common refrain. “I’d rather see my kids get cancer when they’re fifty,” one White resident said, than “risk them getting shot [if we move to] the projects.”<sup>116</sup> Getting shot is an event, after all. (One local referred to the experience as “low-altitude, high-velocity lead poisoning.”) As such, it erupts in stark contrast to what Rob Nixon calls “long dyings”: those “inward, somatized . . . cellular dramas” so removed from “cause” and lacking in spectacle that they remain “unobserved, undiagnosed, and untreated.”<sup>117</sup>

Fear of violence “in the city” was also racialized for both groups, though not identically. Jennie, for one, was not eager to brush against police and their “bad dogs.” And White residents from Wagner’s Point—though willing to work alongside Fairfield to fight for relocation—were not exactly comfortable with the notion of living *with* Black people. For many, “the projects” not only promised danger but also threatened to collapse the border zone that held them off from the supposed “chaos and decay” of “other” city folk, erasing markers of their hard-won Whiteness.<sup>118</sup> Plus, Brenda reminded, Baltimore is “very parochial. You know, Hopkins did a study once. Even the rats in different quadrants of the city have different genetic material.” It would take a serious offer to convince residents, who had spent their entire lives on the peninsula, that staying would be riskier than leaving.

But negotiating positions changed abruptly in October 1998, when the federal government committed \$750,000 to negotiations. The effect of this contribution was multiplied by the Condea Vista incident that same week. The sensational event pushed city, state, and residents back into deliberations. It also brought industry to the table—though that had not been easy. Like the mayor, executives were concerned about setting unfavorable precedent. To placate them, Brenda and Rena agreed not to “trumpet” the arrangement as a buyout. Instead, their contributions would be put into a “good neighbor fund” and touted as compassionate relief.

By the end of the year, an arrangement had coalesced that combined city, state, federal, and company funds to support relocation. Brenda called it a historic combination: the first documented buyout in the United States



to draw on both public and private monies. At long last, officials agreed to value homes as if there were no factories nearby. And FMC and Condea Vista, the two companies implicated in the most recent incidents, would offer supplemental funds of up to \$22,500 to families who signed a liability release. Plans were made official in March 1999 and, according to the *Baltimore Sun*, the local working group “toasted the demise of their little piece of southern Baltimore” with a nine-dollar bottle of brut champagne.<sup>119</sup> Then they went off to convince their neighbors the time had come to leave the two communities.

Liability waivers tinged the victory, but most residents acquiesced. They had medical bills, they were living in poverty, they could not endure decades of costly litigation. Once locals signed the papers, demolition happened quickly. After a years-long struggle capped a century of neglect, the city poured resources into destroying signs of their inhabitation. It had taken sixty-odd years to install sewage pipes in residential Fairfield, but it took only two weeks to raze the several hundred homes in the vicinity.<sup>120</sup>

### “We No Longer Have to Be Concerned”

Minnie handed me another article, this one about the demolition of the Point. It quoted a spokesman for the city announcing that officials were “happy the area is clear . . . we no longer have to be concerned with environmental risk [here].”<sup>121</sup> On some counts, he was right. Industrial proximity was no longer the city’s problem, and everybody could breathe easier knowing no one lived in the shadow of the plants. But his relief also underscored the limits of residents’ victory. They “won” by setting aside a range of ambiguous exposures and proceeding as if danger were a threat to be avoided—a potential—rather than a condition of life on this peninsula. It was a fiction, but a fiction with a useful clarity. It is true that, by displacing issues of contamination from the realm of political debate and forwarding a limited definition of protection-as-emergency-preparedness, the buyout failed to address protracted harm: including the embodied burdens people carried with them when they moved, and those emissions that would still impact South Baltimore. In many ways, the buyout released both state and industry from responsibility (“we no longer have to be concerned”) for a range of problems that were very much ongoing.

But it also may have assuaged residents’ own regrets. Imagine having to recast a whole life as a cause of death. Consider, too, the sticky question of culpability. In a rare confession, one Wagner’s Point woman told a reporter: “I feel a little guilty that I kept my husband here that long. Maybe he



wouldn't have gotten cancer."<sup>122</sup> Situating danger in the future might have reassured her, too. Little comforts, habits, cautions, boundaries.

How are we to square these minor acts of disavowal with disavowal as a corporate tactic—a profitable refusal to connect industrial production with its atmospheric fallout?<sup>123</sup> Are the dissociations that inhere in Minnie's suitcase the same as those emanating from the CHP? When Minnie put her "proof" in plastic bags and stuffed it underneath the bed, was she behaving like a docile corporate subject? Did she get to live the big exhale of "no longer" being troubled by industrial emissions? If these equations are seductive, it's because they're too easy.

For one, they forget the power structures that put locals in a bind: all the little ticks before the time bomb reached the point of no return. Land speculation that brought industry and zoning that sanctioned it, while disappearing residential life. Land-use policy designed to insulate the city's White elite. The age-old corporate practice of pitting groups against each other to wear away at working-class alliances, and the segregation laws that enforced these divisions on the home front. Poor corporate regulation and inadequate enforcement of those paltry rules that did exist. Degraded infrastructure. Labor exploitation. Reckless productivity. An economic system that left residents completely dependent on dangerous work and then, when that work left, on homes in perilous conditions. A public housing system so underfunded that it appeared to be a bigger threat than chemical catastrophe. A legal system in which the irreducible haze of harmful air was too dubious to count as evidence. A political and perceptual sphere so resolutely focused on the hypothetical that it did not register the everyday, that worked on future harms by walling off the past, that took up threats and not protracted injuries.

In the face of all of this, I want to insist on a difference between the disavowals that disallowed life here and those that made it briefly possible: those countless micro-practices entailed in making harm go numb in order to survive.<sup>124</sup> Growing things of beauty in a toxified environment. The little box outside the bar that held men's dirty clothes apart. The way that shifting danger to the future might have kept a widow from unraveling. The resonance between these labors of containment and the structures that induced them—it is a half-rhyme, not an echo. And that half-rhyme registers the vital gap between the subjunctive as a grammar of power and a politics of living.

The first is an organizational tactic marked by the weaponization of doubt and the displacement of attention to the possible, rather than the actual. The second is a space of human action where people strive to live good lives in an impossibly hazy world, where they carve out space to plant

their tired feet. Yes, residents of the Point spoke in terms of threat to secure a buyout. No, they cannot be reduced to pawns in someone else's game. Minnie was clearly conflicted about bracketing historical exposures, and others expressed dismay at disaster narratives' inability to capture harms already done. But for all its faults, threat was an argument that worked, and an argument that worked was needed desperately.

This pursuit of life in defiance of proliferating end-times—this is one form the future takes in the aftermath of progress, even a kind of hope. Not hope for “a better tomorrow,” but hope for *a* tomorrow when you know tomorrow is not guaranteed. In a broader historical moment marked by disasters so incessant that they have become endemic, we ought to acknowledge this refusal to expire as an orientation toward the future, even as we hold space for rage at what produced this deep precarity. So much about the late twentieth century opens onto stories of collapse. It was a time when expectations burst asunder. This is why Fortun situates Bhopal as the beginning of the end of the industrial era, and why Beck predicts the twilight of the modern.<sup>125</sup> Or, as Peter Van Wyck puts it in his more intrepid metaphor: “Having now reached the far shore of the twentieth century and portaged into the grainy noir of the twenty-first,” one must put down the boat, look back, and figure out how to “make sense of the breakdown of things.”<sup>126</sup>

Things: the hermetic seal of the factory fence, the feeling of being safe, the tenability of a sacrificial social contract that promised you a future. Breakdown here was palpable. But so were people's efforts to live on through the mess. That is one thing Minnie wanted me to understand, I think.

The other lesson running through the seams of Minnie's suitcase is that every tick before the time bomb opens its own hypothetical, each an incitement to an otherwise peninsula, a foray into the “unrealized” but “once realizable,” to quote Kath Weston's work on counterfactual ethnography.<sup>127</sup> If explosions had not gotten worse, would folks still be living on the Point? What if residents had been graced with two less clever lawyers? If there had been two roads out instead of one? If everyone in charge were just a smidge more competent? If those in power heeded Jennie's calls to rezone the Point back in the 1970s? What if Martin Wagner's children had not turned the cannery into the Carbon Belt of Baltimore? If residents' attunement to the world at hand counted as knowledge, not as doubt? What if Jeannette survived her grim prognosis? Or, if she had to die, what if a different path gained ground in the weeks after her death—one that did not pose displacement as the only viable solution to the problems posed by heavy industry?

And what if Black working-class histories had not been so thoroughly fragmented in the wake of this displacement? Many from Wagner's Point left their homes but stayed nearby, moving to pockets of South Baltimore

where they had loved ones—and where Black residents were then few and far between. But when folks from Fairfield left the Point, most left the region altogether, some for other parts of Baltimore and some to move back South. I cannot help but wonder how their continued presence would have changed the claims that older Whites in Curtis Bay make now about the way things “used to be.”

Years after the buyout, these erasures and unrealized paths continue to affect South Baltimore. And they help explain why another emissions source, the incinerator (blithely named the “Fairfield Renewable Energy Project”), would be permitted there a decade later. Recall that, after the buyout, this region had a mandate for “reinvention” as a home base for “green” enterprise and a wealth of land to bring it to fruition. It was also struck by economic precarity and racialized anxieties that made many Whites long to revive its early days. In this context, a desire for *renewal* began to take hold among some residents.

Renewal: a redemptive dream, a yearning to return to a time before the break.





FIGURE 3.1. "Overflow, the Place for Space." Photo by the author, July 2016.

## Buying Time

Lou, an eighty-nine-year-old guide at the Baltimore Refuse Energy Systems Company (BRESKO), a trash incinerator, stepped aside so that I could see the “view.” Truckloads of food waste, cardboard, plastic, and the occasional appliance culled from households all across the state (including mine) cascaded from the concrete ledge he called “the waterfall” into a massive pit where they splashed up against two thousand tons of refuse. It was too noisy to talk at a normal volume—waterfalls are loud, Lou shrugged—so he cupped his hands and began to shout.

“The human race is gradually destroying this planet. We’re polluting the ocean, we’re polluting the air, we’re just ruining our nest.” I shouted back, “Do you see your work as a contributor to that?” And he yelled,

Absolutely! Everything we do harms our environment. . . . Our livelihood in fact depends on us depleting this planet and its resources. We have to! We use the planet’s resources to sustain life. But then nothing lasts forever. No matter what it is, if it comes into existence, it will eventually go out of existence, just like our wonderful sun. In another maybe five and a half billion years, our sun will burn out and become a white dwarf or a neutron star. And that’ll be the end of that. So nothing lasts forever. I mean, some things last longer than others, just not forever. But there are things we’ve got to try. Sometimes I compare the human race to those unfortunate people on the *Titanic*. Its pumps were taking out twenty thousand gallons of water every minute, but unfortunately forty thousand more were flowing in. They bought themselves a bit of time, but the ship, of course, went down. So that’s what we’re doing [here]—we’re trying to buy ourselves some time.

Lou’s thinking seemed so thoroughly steeped in despair. But then he laughed, “There’s no such thing as perpetual motion, just like there’s no such thing as a free lunch.”

I was unprepared, at the time, to take Lou seriously. I thought it strange that he took comfort in time-bidding while predicting a planetary apocalypse. This particular prophecy was just one of many he had announced on the crisp January morning when we met for a tour of the facility, a few miles north of Curtis Bay. Each proceeded as if the far future were terminal by definition, and I remember thinking he had chosen the prognosis to countenance his job. But it was hardly the glowing endorsement of incineration I had anticipated when I booked the tour. I had expected to meet a corporate type who would parrot company brochures, or at least someone a bit more buttoned up. Instead, I found myself standing on a cliff with a ragged man in the twilight of his life who kept repeating that the world was ending. In the meantime, if we wanted to ride the boat a little longer, burning trash looked like “the best option we’ve got.”<sup>1</sup>

Lou had not come to this conclusion hastily. By the time we met, he had worked at BRESKO for three decades, having started his employment there in its first month. For twenty-four good years before, he was a draftsman at the Maryland Glass Company. He would have stayed, but they closed their doors in 1980. Unemployed, Lou watched BRESKO being built from his nearby home, and then he ambled in and asked for work. He had been leading tours ever since for politicians, engineers, student groups, researchers like me, and even a few environmental “nuts.” Before BRESKO, this land had been a “stinking, rotting” pile of garbage and Lou, being a resident, appreciated that the plant could turn that garbage into useful stuff. Every day, BRESKO transformed two thousand tons of waste into “renewable” energy and provided heat for a few buildings downtown. It wasn’t perfect, but it “sure was better” than standing still on a sinking ship, or than letting all the city’s garbage pile up.

“What about the air?” I shouted over the waterfall in an attempt to burst the fantasy. But Lou surprised me once again when he replied: “Of course it’s toxic. Toxic,” he began, but “well below what the state of Maryland allows.” He rattled off a few headline emissions: mercury and lead, two potent neurotoxins that particularly impact young brains; nitrogen dioxide, a known contributor to respiratory illness; dioxin. Known for its remarkable stability in both bodies and environments, dioxin stores in fatty tissues and builds as it travels up the food chain—including through breastmilk. It has a half-life of a decade, which means it can wreak havoc well after an exposure source is gone.<sup>2</sup> Among other impacts, dioxin exposure can impair developing nervous systems, interrupt hormonal signals, and impede fertility. It impacts reproductive futures: the ability to reproduce one’s life and lifeways over generations. So, of course, I was thinking about Lou’s resigned refrain, “that’ll be the end of that.” And so, I guess, was Lou, who



had moved from the chemical through breastmilk to another offbeat metaphor: "I like to compare the earth to a giant mammary gland that we're all nursing on. Every single one of us . . . depleting it," just to see another day. "We have to! And we do."

He laughed as he emphasized the *we*, the you and me who shed our waste and let it travel here for this dark alchemy. Here, to a set-aside space where one might disavow its lasting harm.

"But then, nothing lasts forever," Lou tossed his hands up in the air. "Come on, this way. I guess I started to ramble off. We have a total employment of—last I heard—about seventy people. You only really need five, though. Computers run it all."



## Could've Been Worse

I grew up around DuPont, the coal yard, the fertilizer plant, and everything else. And we didn't have the safety features they have today. . . . I'm having trouble [understanding] why they'd fight [the incinerator], when they're not going to experience the yellow dust that littered the air before. And look, it could've been another chemical plant like FMC going there—it could've been so much worse.

Dorothy, ninety-year-old White resident of Curtis Bay

Dorothy told me every story at least twice. I could never tell if it was because of her age or because she wanted to be sure she'd made her point. She was ninety years old when we first met, with wispy white hair cut short to frame her face and deep, dark smile lines. She was funny and mischievous and surprisingly healthy for her age. We crossed paths each week at Seniors' Club as I trailed around in Betty's shadow, while Minnie sold sodas and Dorothy played keyboard. Meetings there had a definite pattern. Someone would call the room to order, everyone who could would stand, and we'd chant in unison. We'd move from the Lord's Prayer to the National Anthem to the Pledge of Allegiance as if they were three verses in the same long song, while Dorothy played along. Then announcements, then stretching, then lunch, then Bingo. Every Wednesday for two years, we were bound by this familiar rhythm. And every Wednesday for two years, we would cycle through narratives that were similarly versed: *back then* followed by *these days*, followed by a version of: *We lived through it, so we know it could be worse.*

I have no tolerance for those that blame all their problems now on lead paint, things like that. Because being born in [19]25 and coming up through the Depression times and war times, lead paint was all there was! And then, too, asbestos—we had asbestos plants, fertilizer plants, so we were inhaling all that. . . . They even suggested you wrap a sheet of asbestos around your water heater. So that was all in the house. We lived with that, but we did fine. We washed our walls, and if the paint would chip, we swept it up. And I think that's the problem, because I can't understand how, today, they're saying a lot of children have this lead paint [poison-



ing], and they sue everybody for lead paint. And I'm thinking, if they washed their walls and swept their floors and didn't allow it to lay there, and their kids didn't play in it or eat it, then this wouldn't be a problem.

Then back to *back then* and *these days* and the *moral of the story*, and *back then* and *these days* for two hours. It was a movement I found dizzying until eventually I learned to read the pattern.

The particular Wednesday that I have in mind unfolded in the last light of 2015, when one could still be forgiven for shrugging off these monologues as the wistful stories of an aging woman (rather than a sign of how persuasive calls could be to make the country “great again”). Over Bingo, Dorothy told me her lead paint story for the third time—denigrating a “they” that stood for her Black neighbors, whom she insisted did not keep their mess contained like “we” did. Then she turned to land that FMC had recently abandoned. *Back then* Fools Made Chemicals and tanks blew up, and she knew because her husband was the man who got the call when things went wrong. *Back then* FMC had been just one of many hazards. And *these days* it's closed and someone wants to build a plant for burning trash, and some “kids these days” are fighting it. Note the logic of this chapter's epigraph: *Given what we survived, things could have been worse. So I'm having trouble understanding what's the matter.*

Dorothy was talking about a trash incinerator proposed for construction on the Point, euphemistically called the Fairfield Renewable Energy Project. If built, it would have been the largest such plant in the nation, twice as large as BRESCO, burning four thousand tons of waste each day to generate allegedly “clean” power, while also releasing thousands of pounds of lead, mercury, fine particulate matter, carbon dioxide, and dioxin. Dorothy was a sharp lady who knew my interest in the project came from a space of opposition, though she never asked outright. She did not have to. If my position on the plant were not clear from my position in the world—as a student from a “leftist” university who was always “asking questions about the air,” in Dorothy's eyes—then it was surely evident from how I spent my time that I supported the youth who had organized to stop it.<sup>1</sup> Maybe that was why we cycled through the lessons she had learned with age: about how much a person could endure, and how to calibrate one's wants within a hard-knock world. “Think about it, Chloe,” she prodded as she rattled off the boons of turning “their” waste into something more than blight. On a hypothetical terrain where one must choose between the Fairfield Project and another FMC, the former might just stoke a little optimism.<sup>2</sup>

Though no one had proposed another FMC, Dorothy was right the land in question could have housed a number of worse things. The land: a ninety-

acre plot in Fairfield that was leveled after years of heavy use. If you stand outside the barbed-wire fence that bounds the site, just minutes east of Seniors' Club, you can sense conditions of life in the surrounding community. To the left, a large wastewater plant dominates what was once the town of Wagner's Point, processing sixty-three million gallons of sewage sludge each day. In the distance, trucks move busily about the mountain of trash at Quarantine Road Landfill, and emissions billow from the nation's largest medical waste incinerator, which burns spent needles, blood-borne pathogens, and human tissue. To the right, behind coal piers that shuttle fuel from Appalachia onto foreign freighters, one can glimpse the water tower by the elementary school. A short walk from there—down the hill, under the railroad tracks, and across the street—leads one to the site itself. Governed by restrictive brownfields zoning, it is a plot of contaminated land whose prior lives pose problems for reuse.<sup>3</sup> As sites whose futures are constrained by the intractable remains of industry, brownfields point toward the possibilities space offers time; they are literally zones of limited potential.<sup>4</sup> The same might be said of Curtis Bay as cast through Dorothy's eyes, ever measured in the imprint of *back then*, and other sites where industrial lifeways have collapsed but toxicity remains a trenchant issue.

In many ways, the Fairfield site is a palimpsest—a living incarnation of the Sanborn maps. It encompasses land used for quarantine during the nineteenth century, weapons manufacturing after WWI, and the production of pesticides and herbicides following WWII. Owned by FMC, the multinational chemical conglomerate whose negligence contributed to the buyout of the Point and whose closure exacerbated unemployment, it is currently under “corrective action” as officials work to keep contaminated groundwater from seeping into the community. Until the land is adequately mitigated, the FMC site can only host so many things: stockyards, chemical production, oil refining, and other nuisance developments. Little wonder, then, that Dorothy cast her lot behind a plant that promised to give waste a second life. Perhaps that plant could revive other collapsing orders, too.

Remember how incineration kept a sinking ship afloat for Lou.

Seeing this site through Dorothy's eyes was not the same as seeing it through Minnie's, situated as they were at two historical moments when different speculative worlds were gaining force.<sup>5</sup> My time with Minnie opened onto a place defined by existential threat: tick, tick, ticking toward implosion. But Dorothy trained my eyes on a wasted aftermath, whose multiple depletions had winnowed down the good to leave the best among a set of lousy prospects. It was in this aftermath—specifically in 2009—that plans for the incinerator first emerged onto the scene. Then, on the heels of the global financial crisis and following decades of industrial decline, and in



the context of demographic shifts that brought Black and brown neighbors to formerly White parts of Curtis Bay, many old-timers vested hope for *renewal* in the Fairfield Project.

The logic of renewal worked a lot like Dorothy's stories, moving recursively from old experiences of industrial violence to new ones, and rendering new ones benign by comparison. It approached the future through reference to known quantities. Dorothy was not saying that the Fairfield Project would be good—only that it would have been worse to build another FMC and better than letting land just sit there, idle. Her assessment thus took shape on a conjectural landscape that made past developments the mold for future ones. Think about the word: part cyclical and part linear, renewal loops back (“re”) to ensure forward motion (“new”). This is a twisty temporality. Rather than rendered an abstract set of comparable data (as in logics of risk management), or muted by the potentially catastrophic (as in politics of threat), or overcome in service of some steadfast march ahead (as progress narratives would have it), here, Curtis Bay's history of exposure offered Dorothy a set of hypothetical alternatives that shaped what she later came to see as better options.

So while Minnie sealed away the past to spotlight cataclysmic hypotheticals, Dorothy hemmed in the future to sustain what “could have been”: a past subjunctive.

This zone of limited possibility edged by past developments—this narrow space of reasonable desire—was not Dorothy's alone. During my work, I encountered two groups who shared this ambivalent terrain, leading both to seed hopes in the Fairfield Project. For one, composed of Dorothy and her peers, the plant seemed poised to revive their town from a slow falling from grace that many blamed on “filthy,” “lazy” neighbors: interpretive frames proffered by a right-wing media machine that seized on old resentments. For another, composed of technocrats from industry and government seeking climate solutions within the sinking ship of capital expansion, trash incineration became sensible as a renewable technology.

Both groups based their reasoning on hypothetical comparisons: the project would be “better than another chemical plant,” “better than another dump,” and “better than another twenty years without a job.” Both groups were optimistic about the future it would herald in: technocrats imagined the conversion of waste into energy as alchemical, while many Whites hoped the plant would catalyze development, bringing the “right kind of people” back to multiracial Baltimore. And both groups were eager to return to a time *back then*, before the future felt foreclosed. Back when the path ahead seemed limitless. Renewal, in this sense, was very much a salvage project.<sup>6</sup>



Renewal therefore breaks in key ways from progressive hope, or hope conceived as “futural momentum”—a twentieth-century dreamscape as exhausted as the lifeworld that enabled it.<sup>7</sup> But today this more regressive hope is common. It suffuses a late industrial America marked by depletions of all kinds, where past choices compose the substrate of the present to encroach upon some futures, and where hope can look like clawing back a sense of something gone.<sup>8</sup> Which is not to say that this peculiar hope is absolute; there are other kinds at work in Curtis Bay, and there are other voices. Part II turns to the multiracial group of “kids these days” who organized against the Fairfield Project. But it matters that youth assumed this work in a present teeming with revanchism and racial enmity. It matters that they had to try to move a group of neighbors who, in addition to their animus, held attachments to the past that made the future small.

One way to understand this attenuation, without accepting it as necessary or dismissing it as farce, is to read it as a sign of deep ambivalence about the sorts of futures that seem likely for a place like Curtis Bay, paired with an effort to control those paltry choices: as a form of affective pragmatism that limits aspiration to the plausible. Another (though perhaps this is not so different) is as an attachment to the future promised during the industrial era, even in its toxic aftermath. If Lou was sure that “nothing lasts forever,” and Dorothy knew that things were bad *back then*, neither felt particularly eager to let go. When one’s political imagination is wholly hamstrung by whatever came before, then even hope can circumscribe the possible.

## Turning Back the Clock

Betty plopped the morning paper on our table in the rec—the building where we gathered once a week. It had seen better days. Originally a water pumping station, the structure was retrofitted in the 1950s after locals labored to raise funds. Today, its walls are missing large patches of paint and its plumbing is exposed enough to reveal it has been reinforced with tape over the years. It could use a good refurbishing, but few seniors then expected to get one.

Still, the room is warm from use. It is one of Curtis Bay’s few public spaces, where seniors meet for Bingo and kids play after school and the community association gathers for dinner and a meeting every month. In the summer, little ones line up for face painting and shaved ice (“snowballs”) on the field outside the rec, where they play in the shadow of the coal piers. In the winter, senior citizens—mostly White folks with central European roots who grew up in Curtis Bay, Brooklyn, and Wagner’s Point—pool

cash to hire an oldies band and cook their favorite dishes for a Christmas potluck. This year, in 2015, Betty brought deviled eggs, which she set out before hobbling to our table. Dorothy brought cheesy potatoes, Gus brought Maryland crab soup, Dorothy's sister prepared pickled beets, and I chipped in decorated cupcakes. I had just finished arranging our table and helping Gus and Dorothy settle in when Betty dropped the *Washington Times* onto my notebook. She brought it every week to make sure I was seeing more than just the *Baltimore Sun*, that "Democrat paper." ("Make sure to give this to your husband.")

Gus also had something to share—a set of photographs from high school, when he'd played in the band—but he set them down to flip through the headlines. I knew the *Times* as an archconservative daily founded by devout anticommunists during the Reagan years, and an early instigator of the "culture wars." Gus and Betty knew it as the "only damn paper around here that says anything honest." Since the 1970s, the *Sun* had been shedding working-class readers in their attempts to win the upper-middle class, a move that many US papers then made in their efforts to chase finance capital.<sup>9</sup> This shift in readership involved a shift away from labor coverage and a loss of trust from folks like Gus and Betty. Right-wing media soon swooped in to court White folks from this "abandoned" audience.<sup>10</sup> Common tropes pin their troubles on the supposed scourge of "welfare queens" and "illegal" immigrants—anything, Christopher Martin shows, to avoid a class critique.<sup>11</sup> These interpretive frames filled the pages Betty passed me every week, and that winter they specifically informed coverage of the Republican presidential primary. Trump would win that contest by late spring, but in December it was still a crowded field, and few seniors thought he was a likely prospect.

"I doubt he believes anything he says," Gus told me as he skimmed an editorial about the man, "but I agree with half of it." I followed up: "Like what?"

"Well, they ought to use the old rules [for immigration]," Gus replied, dredging up inherited memories of his family's move from Poland in the early twentieth century. "Quarantine entrants for two weeks, don't give all these free handouts—housing, food, school."

"Didn't you go to school for free?" I shoved.

"And they better speak English," Gus went on in spite of me. Dorothy chimed in about how hard her mother worked to learn the language and how she scrimped with just potato soup to feed the kids. Then the moral: "Back then we worked for everything we got."

Eventually we all get shushed because the time had come for odes to God and country, stretches and announcements, and for the band to play a set before the weekly Bingo contest. I had found a home among this group of



friends because they always talked through Bingo. This bothered the more competitive seniors—who played six, eight, even ten boards and had to listen close to stay atop the game—but I didn't mind. I was bad at Bingo and, besides, they were always bringing stories for my "little book" about South Baltimore. Some were fibs. Gus took great delight in spinning yarns about the past that I dutifully inscribed in my notebook: like the one about how, back in the day, they needed elephants to build the oil tanks because the steel was just too heavy to lift up. But mostly they were bootstrap tales about having grit and working toward a goodish life. About how "things were better back then," even if the times were tough.

Things were better because there was always work and it paid reasonably well (now Dorothy's grandkids have to piece together lives from part-time gigs). Because people knew each other and that made for a safe neighborhood (now Betty won't let her grandkids play outside unless she's there to watch). Because "we were multi-ethnic but one culture," Gus lamented. "Now they say this is a 'multicultural' neighborhood, but it used to be Poles, Lithuanians, Czechs, Ukies—we all believed in the American flag. But it's completely changed," he said. I shifted in my seat. "From what I gather," Gus continued, "it's become, you know, multi-Black." I asked about the history of Black presence on the Point and he mumbled "they" lived there and "we" lived here. "Fairfield had its own school, just as good as ours."

As much as I sparred with Gus in the margins of my notebook, and sometimes aloud over neglected Bingo boards, other things the seniors said were undeniable. In certain concrete ways, things were better for this group "back then"—though they were also much, much worse for others. "In 1960, one-third of all laborers in the United States outside agriculture had jobs in manufacturing," Christine Walley reminds. By 2010, it was just over one-eighth. Among those in manufacturing, union jobs fell from 62 percent to 13.6 percent, an unprecedented drop.<sup>12</sup> These transformations motivated mainstream media's turn away from working-class constituents. They also brought: staggering wage reductions for former factory workers, Black and White; the loss of benefits (including health care) for tens of thousands; a dip in US life expectancy for the first time in more than sixty years; and a rush of less quantifiable but no less important shifts.<sup>13</sup> Frank, who sat at the next table, had been hired and fired from seven different jobs in just the 1990s, pushed out as the plants closed one by one.<sup>14</sup> Frank missed more than just a paycheck. He missed the camaraderie among workers and he missed the work itself. When we sat down together, he reenacted every step of every process—making refractory bricks, mixing specialty chemicals—with a glimmer in his eye. "Man, I cried when that place closed down," he said. Over and over. "And we had three kids," his wife reminded. "That was rough."



Jim, head of the local steelworkers' union, told me that Maryland had seen seventy thousand factory jobs evaporate in the last twenty years alone. "At one time, Bethlehem Steel was the largest employer in Maryland," he said. "Now it's Johns Hopkins Hospital. You look at the support staff there, folks who do the dirty work, and they're making \$10–15 an hour."<sup>15</sup> People killed themselves when Bethlehem shut down, he stressed, because the place went bankrupt and they walked away with nothing. And folks outside big industry hurt, too. "This one guy, he ran a small machine shop that all the plants [in Curtis Bay once] used. Something would break, you couldn't get a part, and he'd work overtime to make it custom. You know? He's out of business. And people will say, 'Well, now we have Amazon.' Yes, we have low-skilled jobs replacing very high-skilled jobs, and there's a commensurate loss in salary. You can't build a future on those salaries," Jim threw up his hands. I knew he wasn't wrong.

Local labor historian Bill Barry reflects that in the wake of all these losses, "a lot of workers feel like they have been betrayed. . . . Some blame the unions, some blame the companies, some blame the government."<sup>16</sup> And some, drawing on conservative media tropes that push cultural battles over all else, blame caricatures of their neighbors. Stock types who "sit at home and collect welfare and have babies. I don't want my money going there," Dorothy declared that chilly Wednesday after Christmas lunch.

Someone across the room called "Bingo." She ambled to the front to choose her prize among a set of random knickknacks donated by other seniors: half-eaten boxes of granola bars, last year's holiday wreaths, cans of green beans, cans of red beans, dog-eared books, embroidered tissue boxes. I scribbled "REUSE!!!" into my notebook, thinking I would write about the greenness of the practice, but in honesty it was a sad display. Winners picked through the discards apathetically until they shrugged and then selected the least crappy thing among them.

Between the prizes and the seniors, the *back then* and the *these days*, it was clear many here were "up against time," as Lori Khatchadourian puts it in her work on post-Soviet salvage—sharing space with aging things on the long end of the life course.<sup>17</sup> They had lived through bad times and good times and bad times again, and now there were too few years to get back on the up-and-up. Their kids and grandkids were looking ahead toward more, not less, precarious lives. The headlines told them who to blame. The woman chose a travel guide to some place she would never go. Minnie sold another soda can. The Christmas band played on.

I had a hard time at Seniors' Club, though I enjoyed the tall tales and the rituals. It was hard watching folks peruse junk at the prize table when I knew that, for some elders, it was the best part of the week. It was hard see-

ing Dorothy catch her sister's eyes during the portion of each meeting when we learned who was in the hospital with what. It was hard hearing folks who showed me so much kindness say hateful things about their neighbors, while I tried to suss out when to intervene and when to quietly take notes. It was hard to sit on the edge of an uneasy "we" set off from a reviled "they" and know the violence that division does. Sometimes the stories that I heard set me emphatically outside, as another "kid these days" who voted for the wrong people, read the wrong paper, went to a school that surely fed her left-wing propaganda, and did not really know what struggle was. But more often they lugged me in, as a White woman who probably swept her floor and washed her walls like "we" did, and who might be set straight with a little effort. "Think about it, Chloe," Dorothy nudged.

The band wrapped up, I shook it off, and someone chose the final prize: a half-empty bottle of hand soap. The young among us started to clean up. "You know it's running out of space," Dorothy told me as I cleared plates from our table. "The [Quarantine Road] landfill." I had a hunch that we were back at the beginning. "So why not—if something could be melted down to nothing—" Yes, we had returned again to the Fairfield Project.

*Back then* things were so much worse, she pressed. Just stop and "think about it, Chloe." The moral of this story was that, at worst, incineration was the least bad prize.

At best, burning trash would be like turning back the clock.

Dorothy first learned about the Fairfield Project in this very room, when a company called Energy Answers came to make a pitch back in 2009. I was not there, but I have seen the posters they hung up. Those posters promised an "alternative" power plant with "restorative" potential—because it would revive degraded brownfield land, produce "renewable energy" from waste, and generate union construction jobs.

"Consider this," a two-page handout read, "should the Fairfield peninsula become an active industrial area again, and a source of jobs and economic stimulus . . . or should the sites that once housed major industries stay idle?" Would you rather "put [your waste] in a landfill," another prompt began, or "use it to produce energy" for all manner of stuff? The argument was that this plant could pave a path back then, toward better days, erasing years of working-class decline by putting this depleted land to better use—and that there would be ancillary perks, like power. Before we wind back to the rec, I want to follow the rise of incineration as a solution to the problem of aging matter in an aging city. I want to consider how this one machine came to stand for a few kinds of renewal, all at once.



Dorothy's tales offer a starting point, peppered as they were with clues that garbage was a specter: a sign of Baltimore's decline and a reminder of her own expulsion from the almost-middle class. This symbolism was especially potent for those whose migrant parents had endured the shameful medical exam and the presumptions of impurity that followed. Despite occasional attempts to reabsorb their discards into systems of exchange, manifest in the junky prizes seniors picked through every week, waste marked an unassimilable remainder. Dorothy would have flinched at the comparison, but Marx once figured waste as ominous matter, too—among the first signs something in the churn toward ever-greater growth has run amok.<sup>18</sup>

Waste, in short, can undermine progressive motion of all kinds. This quality makes waste an anxious object. But waste-to-energy plants vow to disappear the threat by transforming these remainders into profit.

As of 2018, there were seventy-five waste-to-energy facilities operating in twenty-one US states, generating 2,500 megawatt hours of energy each day from ninety-four thousand tons of garbage.<sup>19</sup> They burn trash, direct steam released from burning toward a turbine that generates electricity, and then sell that electricity in the energy marketplace. Along the way, these plants “recover” latent energy from waste and “reveal” resalable metals hidden in our throwaways. Critics also note they “burn the evidence” of an underlying economic problem.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, incinerators are *dissociative infrastructures*, enabling municipalities to disavow the consequences of a “take-make-waste” relationship with resources. They transform matter that would otherwise demand a reckoning into power that keeps the boat afloat a little longer.

When waste-to-energy first arrived in Baltimore, this had been the dream, given perennial problems with waste management. Baltimore had long sent its trash to Curtis Bay, where it accrued in dumps and burned in open pits, releasing wicked miasmatic airs. The city also tried (and failed) to process waste in “piggeries,” where fat hogs feasted on refuse.<sup>21</sup> In the 1970s, officials were shamed for a botched pyrolysis project dreamed up by Monsanto, where workers baked trash in kilns to speed decomposition. It failed spectacularly, leaving the city with a mass of melted garbage.<sup>22</sup> Around the same time, municipalities suffering the effects of the global energy crisis were eager for a remedy, and officials hoped to reinvent waste as a fuel.

So, in 1985, the city unveiled BRESKO, a few miles north of Curtis Bay in Lou's hometown of Westport—Lou, whom we met bidding time atop the “waterfall” of trash. Proponents hailed BRESKO as an “attractive and modern” engineering marvel. Like alchemy, it seemed poised to transform one problem into another's solution.

In reality, the process of converting waste into energy is not quite so



utopian. For one, waste-to-energy plants are capital-intensive; some cities have gone bankrupt trying to maintain them.<sup>23</sup> To remain competitive, according to the Energy Justice Network, incinerators locate in “high-priced markets” and “lock local governments into long-term monopoly contracts” which “discourage composting, recycling, and waste reduction.”<sup>24</sup> Adding to these front-end problems, incinerators contribute more air pollution than coal-fired power plants, releasing roughly twenty-eight times as much dioxin, six times as much mercury and lead, three times as much nitrogen dioxide, and twice as much carbon dioxide to generate the same amount of power.<sup>25</sup> Besides what they release into the air, incinerators also produce toxic “fly ash” that gets layered onto landfills after burning. BRESKO’s ash goes to Quarantine Road, where it gets kicked up by the wind and travels into porous bodies.

Aside from a few innovations, the Fairfield Project would work like BRESKO, the city’s top polluter. And it would join the existing medical waste incinerator, which South Baltimoreans once fought. Minnie had an entire bag in the suitcase underneath her bed devoted to the stop-the-incinerator campaign that local Whites had waged in 1989. Nevertheless, twenty years later, an incinerator became the source of several different optimisms. The Fairfield Project seemed capable of closing a loop in the “circular economy,” ensuring prosperity without pollution, disappearing waste, and returning dignity to a town beset by destitution.<sup>26</sup> These disparate, sometimes mutually exclusive desires coalesced around the same proposal, clashing, weaving, and co-constituting one another, many steps dissociated from the limitations of the technology that produced them.

Infrastructures, Brian Larkin writes, are more than technical objects that keep things chugging in the world as is. They also “operate on the level of fantasy and desire,” proffering visions of the world “as if” it was.<sup>27</sup> Renewal, it appears, is the shape of the dream that has attached to waste-to-energy. Despite environmental impacts, it promises to transform outputs into inputs, risks into benefits, burdens into profits. It promises to transform a system’s discards into fuel for its continued growth. And it promises the possibility of coming back to futures past—to the tenability of old expectations. In a world where nothing lasts forever, waste-to-energy entertains the hope that maybe something does.

“You know it’s running out of space,” Dorothy warned.

*You know we’re running out of time*, she might have added on.

Frank, the man fired from seven different jobs in just the 1990s, said as much in his own way. He had finished rehearsing how he once cast metal



FIGURE 3.2. “Trash *these days* is everywhere.” A residential block in Curtis Bay. Photo by the Goldman Environmental Prize, 2015.

parts for airplane wings when he began rehearsing the repair of his own heart. “Look, they scraped my electrical cords inside to take care of the irregular heartbeat, put two bypasses in. Did that, fixed that. They put a metal band around my leaky valve.” He pantomimed the labor. “So I was out for three and a half hours. On the machine, you know? Like, if they unplugged it I’d be gone. So after three and a half hours, they got me up and I said to the doctor, ‘Look, doctor, my heart was on pause three and a half hours. How much extra time does that buy me?’” Frank laughed. “Well, of course he shook his head and said: ‘It doesn’t buy you nothing, brother.’”

### Development Dreams

Back to the rec, on a frosty evening on the other side of Christmas. I am fresh off Lou’s foreboding tour of BRESKO, where he told me there was “no such thing as perpetual motion” but also “there are things we’ve got to try.” And I am still troubling over Dorothy’s insinuation that burning trash would be like turning back the clock. I can wrap my head around the pitch from the perspective of waste management, though I disagree with it: that incineration extends landfill life by reducing garbage volumes, while helping business leaders turn a dime, and that this is a win-win. But why would



Dorothy want it here? Why, when residents have historically complained of living in a “dumping ground,” would building more waste infrastructure seem to pave a path toward the renewal of South Baltimore?

The answer starts with “blight,” another local shows me as we stand outside the rec. “Look here,” the man, named Michael, says. “This is a prime example. It’d be a nice block if people lived in the houses and there wasn’t trash all over the street.”

I scan the block, following Michael’s outstretched finger. With stone facades and marble steps, it is the kind of place that could have looked fancy. Instead, food wrappers litter the sidewalk. A few doors are boarded up with wood. The marble steps are pocked. And the gates have signs that usher us away: “BEWARE OF DOG,” “OWNER HAS A GUN,” “CONDEMNED,” “NO TRESPASSING.”

Michael and I were unloading food from his truck for a community association meeting in January 2016. Meetings took place in the same old room where seniors met, but the food was usually better. This month, it had been donated by an area strip club called Fantasies. Michael—a middle-aged White man from Curtis Bay, civilian employee at the Coast Guard yard, and head of the association—had agreed to talk with me so long as I would help him set up for the meeting. After arranging chairs in the rec, driving in his truck to Fantasies, and retrieving food from a kitchen booming with the sounds of the lounge but separated by an opaque screen, we had made our way back and began to talk about Michael’s vision for “making changes” in the community.

My conversation with Michael started like my conversations with many longtime residents: with decline, and with the various “turns for the worse” they had observed over the years. I was careful in these conversations not to code change *as* decline, but narratives of decay were nonetheless pervasive here. Some included job loss in their stories, but many fixated on changes in the landscape—there are fewer businesses, too many board-ups, and garbage litters the streets. And some lingered on the composition of people who have gradually arrived. “It’s mostly renters now,” Betty said of her Black and brown neighbors. “It’s gotten worse since they moved here.” In the eyes of many White old-timers, Curtis Bay’s story is as much a tale of toxic decay and industrial loss as it is about the proliferation of “undesirable” people.

It matters that Michael and others used the language of blight to describe these laminated changes. “Blight” is a ubiquitous term where disinvestment has laid waste to space, and an operative frame within the discourse of urban renewal. In American cities, blight has long served as the rhetorical justification for the dispossession of poor people of color, presumed inca-



pable of proper care for land, and for the disposition of property to private developers who might intervene in the descent of lively places into ruin.<sup>28</sup> Though it appears a facially neutral term for landscape degradation, blight became infused with racial prejudice when first applied to urban space during the Progressive Era by reformers with the famed Chicago School.<sup>29</sup> Today, reducing blight is a defining motive of development policy in cities like Baltimore, where it bleeds into older racializing tropes that dictate what places, and what people, count as problems.<sup>30</sup> And it has material entailments: all fifty US states have anti-blight legislation on the books, and many programs name blight as a condition of eligibility for subsidized improvement. Invoking blight in the form of vacant buildings and illegal dumping helped Mayor Schmoke and Governor Schaefer win Empowerment Zone funding for the Fairfield peninsula in the 1990s, to support the “rebirth of Baltimore’s manufacturing base.”<sup>31</sup> “Reduc[ing] blight” is also an explicit mandate of the brownfields redevelopment program, designed to bring polluted land (such as the Fairfield site) back to productive use.

But before it was a racially loaded descriptor for the city and its manifold deficiencies, blight was a miasmatic metaphor, used by sixteenth-century farmers to describe the atmospheric causes of plant death. It hails from a moment when bodies and landscapes were understood as co-constitutive: when a decrepit place could make decrepit people, and where reviving one might just revive the other, too. When Michael drew my attention to the blighted scene outside the rec, then, he was not merely pointing out the condition of inanimate objects. He was gesturing toward a diffuse and active force that threatened to plague all of Curtis Bay — its streetscapes and its people — with the crushing pestilence of downward movement.

Taken together, these synchronous declines populate the terrain where many older Whites imagine renewal, coloring the pasts they mourn and the futures they believe are tenable with racism, disenchantment, and destitution. Local speech is busy with associations between economic downturn, landscape degradation, “their” unfortunate arrival, and the ubiquity of streetside waste — associations that bleed into an irreducible whole, where any one can stand for all the others. Among local Whites who point toward this blight to explain their changing status, aspiration often takes the form of hope against decay, and for a revival of industrial lifeways as the template for a less depleted future.<sup>32</sup>

Consider all that blends together in local accounts of when the latest “blight” rolled in, around the 1990s — and how quickly structural forces disappear into that fog. As factories closed shop and work dried up, people

with the means to leave left, too. Most chose to keep their cut-rate homes, converting them into rentals that their grown kids managed from afar. It was also around this time that changes in Baltimore's public housing system pushed many low-income families of color to integrate the region's once White working-class communities. Taking advantage of Section 8 vouchers, which authorized federal bodies to dispense public money to private landlords, Baltimore demolished many of its inner-city projects by the early 2000s. That's when "they" came to Curtis Bay, Whites often say: a category that has included "renters," "Section 8 people," and "the Blacks," when I have asked. "They" are the precarious masses "seeping in" from downtown, bringing "crime and drugs" while they "live off our hard-earned taxes." And unlike industry, landlords, and the neoliberal interests behind Section 8, "they" figure as a presence, not an absence.

Besides this barely coded language, it was not uncommon to hear explicit talk from many Whites who could not afford to flee to the suburbs once "they" arrived on the periphery. Absent geographic distance, these residents insist upon difference in other ways.<sup>33</sup> One is the persistent description of racialized others in invasive terms: as pests, as waste. I heard many people bind together racial change, soiled grounds, and what they perceived as a deterioration of values in their community. Oftentimes, these narratives assumed a moral distinction between those who made waste, by littering, and those who disappeared it, by cleaning. Fran, a seventy-year-old White woman and lifelong resident, said this about folks who weren't "invested" in the neighborhood:

I've been here for forty-nine years, and it's been bad since they tore down the projects. And you know the problem? They have too many free giveaways and don't care about keeping things up. Like throwing trash, I even see the schoolkids do it.

Here, Fran posits a direct relationship between being committed to the upkeep of a place and having a financial stake in it, while invoking harmful tropes about the avarice of poor people of color. Those who benefit from "giveaways"—which Fran assumes all renters do (they don't)—are inherently more wasteful and strew their waste about the community. Fran also believes that wastefulness says something about the kinds of people who live in Curtis Bay these days: that it betrays a kind of pathology, and that cleanliness, its opposite, conveys virtue.

Take my neighbors. One girl has two kids by an illegal [Fran used this term for Latinx neighbors regardless of their immigration status]. He



doesn't work, he does the drug thing. The other also has a child with an illegal, and then she got involved with a Black guy and had another baby. They're all living together raking in free this, free that. Then they use our money to buy junk food and leave their garbage all over the streets. . . . Me, I try to do my part. I pick up trash whenever I see it. And anytime I see anybody's cleaning the streets, I say, "Thank you. I'm really appreciative." 'Cause, you know, some of them still clean—and that's how you know that they're good people.

As Joshua Reno reminds, "waste" often refers to unwanted things *and* unwanted people; it characterizes "disposable and abject subjects without potential."<sup>34</sup> For residents like Fran, trash thus indexes a certain kind of (racially marked) person as well as the undesirable debris their perceived indolence produces.<sup>35</sup> Put differently, trash provides a language for constructing an internal other whom Fran can blame for area decline, and whose dispossession—or reformation through work—constitutes step one along the path toward regional renewal.

These ties between waste and pathology, cleanliness and virtue, tap into the dark discourse of urban blight that suffuses late industrial cities. But they also have much deeper roots. We have seen them in the panics around impure migrant bodies that marked the nineteenth-century city, and in the fear that White proximity to their bad air might set off processes of racial change. We have seen them in the rites of purification that made the home a haven from disease, and in the chemical warfare enacted at its thresholds to keep all kinds of pests at bay. They manifested in the threat of rat-infested tenements downtown that almost kept folks on the Point from agreeing to a buyout. They have sounded in politicians' dog-whistle talk for generations. Consider one 1933 report from the Maryland Joint Committee on Housing, which warned that diseases might travel from Black slums to genteel neighborhoods through domestic workers, food handlers, and rats—each one coded as "vermin," as Dawn Biehler notes.<sup>36</sup> (Or, from the more recent past, consider Trump's 2019 attack on Congressman Elijah Cummings for not "clean[ing] up" his Baltimore district—a "rodent infested mess," a "dangerous and filthy place."<sup>37</sup>)

All this was on the table when Michael gestured toward the sidewalk strewn with waste. It was there when Betty told me things were different when "everybody's parents watched out for everybody's kids," since "our mothers were always outside polishing the stoops." It peeked into phrases like "White trash"—used to describe women who work in the sex trade, who have racially mixed babies, or who dress suggestively—and in comments old-timers made about how coal workers "looked Black" at the end



of the day, when their faces were dirty. It appeared when locals expressed a desire to “clean out” City Hall. (“I don’t hate Black people, but I don’t want another Black government.”) And it cropped up during community meetings, when residents complained about neighbors who attract rodents by leaving out refuse.

These comments point toward the dense symbolic world that shapes perceptions of pollution.<sup>38</sup> They speak to a persistent sense that there is nothing inert about landscape change. That when places depreciate, so do people—especially people who understand themselves as tenuous “pure” bodies, because their Whiteness was achieved in living memory. This is the trouble with blight, to put it in the starkest terms: it threatens to reverse a set of intertwined progressions, from economic stability to racialized superiority, that, for many Whites, defined the “good old days.” So it makes sense that references to blight open so much local talk about renewal. South Baltimore’s deterioration from a company town into a “dumping ground” has made many old-timers feel discarded themselves; human products of the obsolescence built into consumer capitalism, their lives now seem “erased from public visions of the future.”<sup>39</sup>

Some try to alleviate this powerlessness by exerting superiority over newer, poorer, darker neighbors, who are easier to blame for decline than complicated changes in the global economic system.<sup>40</sup> And others, like Michael, try to overcome disaffection by “fixing things up.” As he pointed out to me, if not for boarded-up homes, a transient population, and “all the trash,” Curtis Bay could be a pretty nice community.

Michael knew that many neighbors were fixated on waste, and he worked hard to disappear the same: he made calls to have bulk trash removed from alleyways; he ran block clean-ups every year. So, when he was approached by a company called Energy Answers about the prospect of building a “waste-to-energy” plant in Curtis Bay, he was enticed by the prospect of a machine that could evaporate waste away, while returning “good jobs” here.

Many shared Michael’s sense that the Fairfield Project would revive something lost in Curtis Bay. For a while, this struck me as counterintuitive. The way I saw it, making Curtis Bay the trash-burning capital of the country would cement its status as a “dumping ground,” rather than return its standing as a middle-class neighborhood. Yet Fran believed the plant would bring back jobs, and jobs would bring back “the right kind of people.” And Dorothy vested hope in the purifying power of fire to “clean up” the community.

“Think about it, Chloe.” She cycled back: “If it’s going to take all this trash off the street and melt it down to nothing, why wouldn’t you want that?”

Before I could reply, she continued: *Back then* “we had DuPont, the coal yard, the fertilizer plant, and everything else. And we didn’t have the safety features they have” *these days*. “They’re not going to experience the yellow dust that littered the air before. And look, it could’ve been another chemical plant like FMC going there.” *We know. We were there. You weren’t even born yet.* “It could’ve been so much worse.”

*It could’ve been worse.* I do not know how much the company instigated this comparative work (“Consider this . . .”), but I do know that previous experiences with exposure and economic hardship shaped many locals’ sense of what was worth desiring. These twin burdens changed how people thought about the past, influenced the present, and affected the futures they thought they would live to see. In the process, they limited the reasonable to a set of crummy prospects drawn from this land’s prior lives (“the coal yard, the fertilizer plant, and everything else”).<sup>41</sup> As Ilana Feldman puts it in a different context, thinking the future from a depleted present delimits what one “sees as vital,” “view[s] as impossible,” and approaches as a “plausible reality.”<sup>42</sup> Perhaps this was why so many in Curtis Bay hoped for a future that looked like the best version of the past that they could muster: employed, White, clean. Somewhere on the path between *back then* and *these days*, residents set up the boundaries of the possible—boundaries central to subjunctive reasoning.

Over time, my surprise about residents’ readiness to accept the incinerator faded as I heard many speak of it as a cleaning technology, instead of one that would lure more waste to the community. The argument that “it could’ve been worse” was also common, since people figured the Fairfield Project would be “better than another dump” and preferred it to a chemical plant, too. Even if they had wanted the chemical industry to rebound, few could imagine that. *These days*, one diagnosed, “trash is pretty much all that we produce.” And many were comforted by the company’s promise to include “high-tech” pollution mitigation features, making things “much cleaner than the air we got used to.”

In short, many old-timers were enticed by the possibility of a plant that promised to make them prosperous again: a vision premised on renewal. A renewal of economic stability, of social standing, of Whiteness and of all that Whiteness signified—hopes that only cohered when set against the specter of the more toxic past and recast as the best among a set of lousy futures. *Better to do what you can to reverse the flow than to idle on a sinking ship*, the logic went, *even if the sinking feels unavoidable to you.* One might characterize this stance as a cruel attachment to the dynamics that had cast Curtis Bay aside, or rigid adherence to a path that had demonstrably failed its devotees.<sup>43</sup> But there is something more ambivalent about the condition-



ality that marks this bleak subjunctive mood. Dreams of community revival were symptoms of a speculative imagination ensnared between the industrial past and the impoverished present, weighted by racial resentment, and steeped in generalized despair. They sought return to when the future as such did not seem bankrupt, and this structured the world of options many here aspired to.

This was also true of technocrats in Baltimore, though their renewal had a different object. Rather than a fading sense of self-worth, they clung to an increasingly untenable pattern of production, consumption, and disposal that waste-to-energy promised to uphold in its guise as a climate solution.

## Energy Alchemy

In February 2016, I sat across a plastic table in a prefabricated trailer at the Fairfield site from Mr. McCarthy, CEO of Energy Answers.<sup>44</sup> He had arrived with a dozen glass vials, filled to the brim with recovered materials samples. One by one, he placed the vials on the table and invited me to “imagine a world” where all our waste could be refigured as a beginning, not an end. “That’s what we do,” he explained, and the “benefit is hugely positive. . . . We turn waste into energy and recover valuable materials. Plus,” he gestured toward the brownfield site, “we take blighted land and put it to productive use.”

This conversion of useless objects into value lay at the heart of McCarthy’s vocation. An engineer by training and executive by title, he was an alchemist at heart: genuinely enchanted by his plant’s transformative potential. Indeed, McCarthy often spoke of his work in terms of transformations—like the transformation of waste into money or trash into fuel. And when he came to Curtis Bay, transformation is precisely what he promised the community.

Poring over pamphlets he had published in 2009, McCarthy told me that the Fairfield Project was supposed to be the crowning glory in a career spent trying to engineer a solution to the waste crisis. It was a particularly good fit for the site given Baltimore’s goals for the Fairfield Empowerment Zone, which sought to reinvent the Point as a “green” manufacturing “ecosystem” after the buyout had cleared room.<sup>45</sup> After years working the problem, McCarthy believed that he had finally realized the right design: that this plant, rather than treating trash as an unfortunate by-product of industrial capitalism, could reconfigure waste as the raw material for “renewal.”

While residents’ “renewal” indexed social and economic regeneration, McCarthy’s had energetic connotations: the Fairfield Project would rely on



“fuel sources that restore themselves over short periods of time and do not diminish.”<sup>46</sup> Despite these differences, I want to underscore that both renewals valorized return while also stressing forward movement. Consider the promise of renewable energy. It is simultaneously critical of the status quo (the means of energy production) and dedicated to maintaining it (the boundlessness of energy consumption). It vows to uphold old commitments to growth through recourse to new fuels.<sup>47</sup> When McCarthy invited me to “imagine a world” that runs on waste, then, the world he had in mind was quite familiar. It jibed with the “defensive” argument of energy transition: that changes in input to the global capitalist order eliminate the need for radical solutions.<sup>48</sup> This attachment conditioned the futures that McCarthy embraced—which became particularly clear whenever he spoke of waste as infinite and, by extension, of waste as a vehicle for the infinite multiplication of value.

Setting aside the question of greenhouse gases, renewable energy is premised on abundance: unlike fossil fuels, finite and expendable resources, one cannot “use up” the force of the wind or the light of the sun. McCarthy figured a similar argument could be made about refuse. “It’s an easy argument to make,” he explained, “because everybody has a trash can. It gets filled up every week and goes to the curb, it comes back empty, and then you fill it up again. It’s like any other renewable—it’s continuously generated.”

McCarthy was not only interested in trash as a renewable energy source, though. He was also captivated by the engineering challenge of recovering resalable stuff. “We’ve made all sorts of things with the [remains],” he explained, showing me a slab forged from incinerator ash and specked with bits of broken glass. And he bemoaned how much value gets “wasted” when materials like coins get buried in landfills with other junk:

Some skeptics will say, “Why don’t you get stuff out before it gets nicked up?” And I’ll say, “There are at least 1,000 quarters in that garbage out there. I’ll give you \$100 if you can find just one.” Of course people go kicking around, but they never will. They’re hidden in coats and bowling bags, they’re crammed in chairs. But you won’t see them until you burn away all that unusable stuff.

Disparaging landfills, where trash is buried and its value subsequently lost, McCarthy stressed renewal’s multiple forms: he could regenerate energy and materials from waste, theretofore presumed to be the end of a process. Marx might say that McCarthy yearned to revive a system nearing crisis—and Lou might say that he hoped to save a sinking ship—by transforming waste from an omen of unsustainability into a means of capital production.

Arguments like these were one reason that incineration—despite its “dirty” reputation—was experiencing a renaissance during my fieldwork. The first new incinerator in twenty-odd years had just opened in Florida, and several more proposals were in progress. Lobbyists told me they were finally enjoying the fruits of an intensive rebranding process. By the early 2000s, they had struck “incineration” from their repertoire in favor of “waste-to-energy” or “energy recovery,” and renamed their trade association in that spirit. They had also begun marketing the technology as “part of an integrated solution to climate change” and an “essential component of the circular economy,” a hoped-for future where all waste might be refigured as an input for production.<sup>49</sup>

And they have been remarkably successful in spreading this vision. While in the 1980s grassroots movements blocked hundreds of incinerators by arguing they were environmentally unsound, today thirty-two states classify waste-to-energy as a source of clean power—and it is even more popular abroad. As of this writing, incineration is considered a “Tier-1” energy source in Maryland, on par with wind and solar, and eligible for special subsidies.<sup>50</sup>

Another reason for this shift is that waste-to-energy managed to placate competing priorities built into the regulatory process. Consider the Maryland Climate Change Commission (MCCC). Tasked with strengthening the state’s climate-action plan while making “the smartest economic decisions possible,” MCCC must weigh environmental needs against their sweeping fiscal consequences. Like those in Curtis Bay who feel environmental concessions are necessary to produce much-needed jobs, then, regulators work within a zone of constrained possibility, saturated by uncertainty, where multiple desires face off. And these dual commitments support some environmental futures while disregarding others. That is, they uphold a limited set of technical solutions as if they were the only options. On this narrow conjectural terrain, proposals to manage the existing waste stream (such as landfills and incinerators) appear reasonable, while those that call for fundamental changes in how we make and use commodities (such as “zero waste” reforms) do not.<sup>51</sup>

It is here, within this slender speculative sphere, that developments like the incinerator have been met with cautious optimism.

When the Fairfield Project was first proposed, supporters praised it as a solution to multiple, embedded problems: it could cut methane emissions from landfills, reduce reliance on coal-fired power, and monetize greenhouse gas reduction. As then-Governor Martin O’Malley explained when



signing a bill conferring Tier-1 status on waste-to-energy, “Marylanders generate tons of solid waste. If there’s no waste-to-energy facility available, it’s dumped into landfills, and no value is derived from that waste.” That value should be derived from waste was implicit in his statement. That value should be derived from as many processes as possible is the driving logic of industrial capitalism. Perhaps what makes incineration so appealing is precisely this: that it provides for a perpetual renewal of the economic status quo by forcing a by-product of consumption back into the commodity system. In this way, incineration promises to satisfy the hope that there be “no limits” to the circulation of capital, not even ecological ones.<sup>52</sup>

(This is one reason some environmentalists scoff at the label: “I can’t even use the word ‘renewable,’” one organizer told me. “It doesn’t have anything to do with greening . . . the words are so abused.” Despite the semiotic merging of “green” and “renewable” in contemporary energy debates, the classification of incineration as renewable energy seems to stem chiefly from its ability to take waste, a sign of economic problems, and use it as an economic fuel.<sup>53</sup>)

As an engineer long absorbed in the business of recovery, McCarthy was particularly attached to the promise of renewal. He had convinced regulators that his plant actually had the power to vanish waste completely, metamorphosing it into capital. In an interview, he rehearsed this conversion process: before anything traveled to Curtis Bay, he told me, it would undergo off-site processing. There, machines would shred trash, compile the shredded material into pellets, and bale the pellets in plastic, creating an “efficient combustible.” That is, waste, an output, would become fuel, an input. This step was critical because it allowed Energy Answers to argue the Fairfield Project was “not an incinerator” but a “power plant”—a label with regulatory consequences.<sup>54</sup> It also permitted McCarthy to reassure residents that his company would “not be importing any garbage, only fuel . . . a valuable and useful product.” Even though waste constituted the sole ingredient for this fuel, and even though it contained the same combination of toxics, Energy Answers successfully argued that “what was a solid waste *will cease to be so* once it has been processed.”<sup>55</sup>

Imagine how enticing this must have been to residents like Michael, eager to clear out blight and return Curtis Bay to its former glory. Imagine their response to McCarthy’s promise that incineration is “beyond sustainable . . . it’s actually a restorative process.”

The idea that waste-to-energy converts public bads into public goods thus reached its apex in the Fairfield Project. Here, discards would not only get put to “good use,” avoiding the wastefulness of landfills and the extraction essential to fossil fuels. They would evaporate, vanish, dematerial-

ize. Their problems would dissipate once “waste” had been transmuted into “value.” Like residents who sought to revive industrial futurity without resurrecting its pollution, McCarthy yearned to recover value from the dregs of an unsustainable economy by engineering environmental problems into environmental solutions. At the core of this yearning was an attachment to continued growth that shaped what he compared incineration to. This attachment structured McCarthy’s speculative practice, bracketing the possibility of reforms that would reduce the energy we need and the waste that we produce. And it was based on this pragmatic fiction—this preemptive winnowing—that burning trash became “renewable.”

### Best of All Plausible

When McCarthy’s promises of restoration touched down in Curtis Bay, residents were already primed to appreciate their power. So were lawmakers. After all, the Fairfield Project appealed to discourses of renewal that preceded it: one local and one global, one racialized and one environmental, one embedded in moral economies of cleaning and one bound to the sustainability of capital. And even though the project would have been a costly waste facility, relying on subsidies to burn trash in an overburdened community, these discourses buoyed an imaginary of the plant as a green investment opportunity.

When I first noticed this dynamic, I dismissed it. In my notes, I wrote that everybody had been “duped.” And had I stopped then, I might have been satisfied reading renewal as a savvy pitch by Energy Answers and a sign of its guileless uptake by Betty, Dorothy, Michael, and Lou. But the more I spoke with supporters of the incinerator, the more I came to understand this stance as one where doubt “puts untrammelled hope at arms’ length,” imposing a strong “ethics of constraint,” in Gisa Weszkalnys’s words.<sup>56</sup> I was hearing aspiration checked by the tyranny of reasonable desires—the future cast in a bleak pragmatic mood. Neither denial nor escapist fantasy, this position emerged from a clear-eyed appraisal of a world that will not “bend to one’s will,” and where one should therefore not expend rare hopes on far-fetched things.<sup>57</sup> This was the shape of speculation from a disappointing present and it made the future, frankly, minuscule:

*The incinerator is the best choice when we proceed as if there were only rotten prospects (another dump, a sunken ship). Or, The Fairfield Project is good because it could have been so much worse.* Such statements voiced hesitance about the futures that could feasibly take hold in a place devastated by decline. They presumed, like Lou, that there were restrictions on how far one



could move forward. These restrictions carved out a zone of limited potential where circumstances not so simple and futures not so bounded managed to appear as if they were. Older residents behaved as if Curtis Bay had to be industrial to thrive, technocrats as if consumption could be boundless, and both “as ifs” propped up the reasonableness of the incinerator.

Like renewal itself, these propositions turned on comparisons with the past and maneuvers between futures near and far.<sup>58</sup> Along the way, they enabled a narrow cluster of previous developments to appear to exhaust all the good and better things that might occur. In some ways, these hypothetical comparisons reflected a manufactured simplicity—proffered by a news media, waste industry, and development apparatus all invested in advancing a peculiar common sense.<sup>59</sup> In other ways, they reflected real impediments. Recall that the Fairfield site was marked by its past and zoned in such a way that its history dictated future development.<sup>60</sup>

“Now, you have to be realistic, Chloe.” I was talking with an urban planner, and he was trying to approximate the mood of debates back in 2010. “This site was owned by FMC, so part of the tradeoff was, ‘Okay, we got rid of FMC, but the land is still zoned for heavy industry, and this [incinerator] seems to be a lot better than a chemical plant, relatively speaking.’ There’s opportunity cost, too. It’s like, ‘If this isn’t built, what happens to this property? Are we necessarily going to get something better?’”

Remember: *Back then* Fools Made Chemicals and tanks blew up and Dorothy knew because her husband was the man who got the call when things went wrong. *Back then* FMC had been just one of many hazards.

“Now you have to be realistic, Chloe.”

Remember: *These days* it’s closed and someone wants to build a plant for burning trash and some *kids these days* are fighting it.

*We were there. You weren’t even born yet.*

Remember: “It could’ve been so much worse.”

Remember: “Nothing lasts forever.”

This is not some naive optimism. To desire the incinerator because things “could’ve been worse” was to condition how one let oneself hope. It was to acknowledge that certain futures had already been foreclosed, while trying to stave off further loss by balancing necessity, probability, want, and discontent. It was to accept certain risks as a condition of living on. It was to keep the boat afloat. Or maybe it was to know that nothing lasts forever and miss a time before you realized that. In any case, yearnings for renewal reflected a deep ambivalence about the sorts of futures that seemed credible, given real-life limitations. After decades of buying into a progress narrative that now felt too far gone, many old-timers found themselves in a space where options seemed forcibly winnowed by the experience of “a weighted and reeling present.”<sup>61</sup>

Once the Fairfield Project entered the set-aside space of plausibility—once it entered a narrow comparative field organized by past trajectories—certain claims about its goodness made more sense.<sup>62</sup> Consider how supporters used “more antiquated” technologies to evaluate the waste-to-energy plant. Like landfills and fossil fuels, incinerators release greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. But they also promise two benefits (waste disposal, energy production) from a single set of risks (emissions). For this reason, proponents typically market them as clean by subtracting any emissions that *would have* come from landfilling from the greenhouse gases associated with incineration, along with any carbon that *would have* been emitted had the power gleaned from trash instead been sourced from fossil fuels. These mathematical machinations have the effect of making waste-to-energy plants—which release more carbon dioxide than any other method used to manage waste (per ton) or produce energy (per kilowatt hour)—appear as though they clean the air instead. Based on these alchemic calculations, Energy Answers boasted “1.9 million tons of [greenhouse gases] a year” would be reduced.

Though opponents argue these are false choices, that incinerators contribute to climate change, and that there are ways to manage waste and produce energy that eschew combustion, state air-quality officials endorse incineration as a “bridge strategy,” to be implemented until wind and solar become “realistic.” They begin, in other words, from the premise that people *must* create waste and generating power *will* release carbon. If, to quote Pangloss, Voltaire’s eternal optimist, “things cannot be otherwise than they



are,” then waste-to-energy technology may very well seem the “best of all possible” options.<sup>63</sup> This was basically Lou’s argument: given the situation in which we have found ourselves, burning trash is the last best hope for avoiding mass destruction.

Similar dynamics structured chatter at the seniors’ Bingo games, where Dorothy and her friends traded tales about the struggles that they had endured. These experiences had nurtured a fatalism, like Lou’s, paired with hope that the future could be better than the worst. Whenever I would bring up the incinerator, Dorothy reminded that it was not nearly as bad as the fertilizer plant where her late father spent his days. The fact that no one had proposed another fertilizer plant for Curtis Bay—the fact that this comparison was hypothetical—did not diminish its capacity to do political work.

“You have to be realistic, Chloe.”

Besides, Dorothy repeated, the air “used to be really bad. It’s not so bad anymore.”

Like Dorothy’s, Michael’s understanding of the incinerator as a public good rested on a series of embedded presumptions: that residents had weathered worse, that jobs would revive the neighborhood, and that, when it came to development, Curtis Bay had limited prospects. And like Dorothy, the community association leader also shrugged off industry’s contemporary impacts, insisting that the air these days is “not an urgent problem. They always blame it on things other than themselves,” Michael said of health disparities that he believed were “self-induced.” “I think they just—” He began to condemn his neighbors’ diets before he stopped himself: “It’s a socioeconomic issue.”

For this reason, Michael indicated in his dealings with Energy Answers that he would be willing to put up with incineration’s risks, provided the company sign a community benefits contract. Eventually, Energy Answers agreed to give locals preferential hiring, establish a scholarship fund, finance community improvements, and pay \$500 to each of three neighborhood associations for emissions exceeding permitted limits. In exchange, the associations would “evidence their support” for the project. And though opponents would later condemn him for “selling out,” Michael described the negotiations as “good politics.” “Sure, there are some health risks,” he admitted, “but they don’t outweigh the benefits the company is promising.”

In many ways, then, past experiences with industry conditioned how residents imagined the incinerator, offering a point of comparison and a political logic. With respect to the latter, Michael used the negotiating process to improve on the old model of corporate social responsibility in Curtis Bay, where residents took whatever benefits businesses felt inclined to offer.<sup>64</sup>

Instead, he sought to shape the terms of engagement with Energy Answers before the company secured a foothold in the neighborhood. As Michael boasted, the agreement preserved the benefits of industry while turning some risks into profits. Another local leader, Peggy, was also proud of the negotiation process:

Look, the company came in, and they said they wanted to do this. The plan to me—having worked in industry—it seemed like it was going to be much cleaner than anything that had operated in the area. . . . And it was *jobs*.<sup>65</sup> And jobs were what we were really wanting. . . . So that was the mindset we were in at the time. “If this is something that’s going to come, we want the community to have a say in it.” And so we got ourselves a seat at the table and negotiated.

Union leaders shared similar sentiments. Jim, head of the local steelworkers’ union, told me that his role was not to direct development but to make sure that members received the best wages and benefits possible:

We’re a labor organization. Our first priority is to protect the livelihood of our members. Now, I have no doubt in my mind that if you went to a coal-powered plant that had three hundred people making \$20 an hour—well, they’d make more than that—and you said, “Look, right across the street we’re going to open a wind farm that needs three hundred people and, guess what? We’re going to pay the exact same thing, give you the same benefits, the same vacation. We’re just going to move you over here.” They’d probably say, “Hey, no problem.” But nobody is making that kind of offer. We’ve got to do good with what we’ve got. . . . McCarthy seemed like a decent guy. When you looked at his supply chain, it was 90 percent USA-made. And a lot of that stuff was going to be made by our members in other districts—grates, steel, bricks. . . . We met with him, vetted the company, did our research, and decided to back the project.

What is at stake in these maneuvers? In part, control: residents were trying to eke out space for hopeful action amid the insecurities of late industrialism. And in part, a redemption of lives lived: few were prepared to entertain the prospect they had sacrificed for naught. What had marked the industrial past that many referenced as their template for a less depleted future was the promise of a good life, soon, so long as one engaged in sacrificial acts.<sup>66</sup> When seniors found themselves on the other side of sacrifice without a better life to show for it, some fixed their hopes on turning back the clock.

We could call this stance a fantasy, even one that coheres in the face of



knowing better.<sup>67</sup> We could call it an effect of ideological capture by those in positions of more power—the news, the company, and so on. We could even try on what James Scott calls a thin theory of hegemony, bemoaning seniors’ inability to conjure different paths from a present marked by so much disappointment.<sup>68</sup> I do not think that any of these arguments is altogether wrong. But they do miss a crucial lived distinction between being able to imagine a future that breaks from the past and letting oneself desire such a thing: between what is, strictly speaking, thinkable, and where one chooses to invest one’s finite energies. They also make too little of the more-than-mental forces that circumscribe the possible. Like the way land’s past contamination meaningfully forecloses some futures. Like how the heavy weight of economic need might lead someone to want a toxic project. While they preferred to downplay industry’s environmental impacts, folks like Michael, Peggy, Dorothy, Fran, Betty, and Jim all knew that the incinerator would release more dust into the air. After weighing these costs against its avowed benefits (regional renewal and a revival of status among them), many decided to support it, mortgaging far futures like health to solve more pressing problems.<sup>69</sup>

Recast in this light, one might say the local past not only shaped visions for the future through its persistence as a comparative object. It also led many locals to be frugal with their hopes, forgoing dreams of the good life in favor of a safer bet—the good enough.<sup>70</sup>

### “Nothing Lasts Forever”

The way that Lou’s obituary read, his life just quietly stopped happening. There was no spectacular burn out, no apocalyptic moment. Maybe the stop started in 1980 when Maryland Glass closed its doors and BRESKO was his limbo. Maybe he was biding time between the memory of a good life and an end that was a total nonevent. His obituary said that he left no immediate survivors, that he was “frank,” and that he escorted thirty thousand people through BRESKO while he worked there.<sup>71</sup> I remember feeling like death oversimplified the man. But then I remembered how he told me there was “no such thing as perpetual motion” and spoke of bursting suns and sinking ships and laughed, and I remembered endings, too, can be ambivalent.

My time with Lou, Michael, Betty, Peggy, Dorothy, Fran, Jim, and McCarthy circled around a few embedded ends: of life, of stuff, of industry and the dreamscape that came with it. These endings weighted hopes with doubts about what could have been. That things could have been worse than the incinerator was hardly in dispute. But some futures are hard to

imagine when *back then* bounds the narrow space of reasonable hope that you are stewing in.

What does a “good” future look like when you expect you’re being rendered obsolete?

Perhaps it looks like one among a range of things you’ve had.

A landfill.

A chemical plant.

An incinerator.

Better than being out of work, and better than an end that feels it’s coming on too fast.

It is hard to pursue futures that break from a past that you have built your life around. It is difficult to stop wanting a future you sacrificed for, even after its credibility seems lost. It is not farcical or even rare to so constrain one’s hopes, or mourn a time when things seemed better. So it was that many here *wanted* the Fairfield Project. For much of Curtis Bay’s White working class, the project seemed poised to facilitate their reintegration into the national economy and revive other aspects of the industrial era for the good of grandkids facing down a trying path—including a sense of (racial) purity and accompanying self-worth. For technocrats, waste-to-energy’s promised boons were more attractive when compared with older waste and energy technologies. These maneuvers could be explained away as signs of delusion or symptoms of misinformation, and surely any vision of the local past as “pure” was a partial one at best. But Dorothy resisted any reading of her life that would end in her dismissal.

“Think about it, Chloe,” she demanded. “I don’t think we’re being obstinate.”

Rather, longings for renewal bespeak the mood of an aging American dreamscape. They voice a desire to return to a time before one felt the full weight of a lifetime of exertion, when the fantasy of the good life did not seem to come at such a cost. That does not mean people like Dorothy missed the cold reality that it *did* cost and that, no, there was no going back. They knew as well as anyone, because their lives ran parallel with that twentieth-century vision of industrial progress. In this sense, they offer an intimate glimpse into lives fashioned under the enthusiasm of the “great acceleration” in energy consumption after WWII, lived in the long lag before its consequences became clear, and now winding down amid the painful realization that the future is not what it used to be.<sup>72</sup> Small surprise that one inhabiting this subject position would spend their final wishes on more time. Not time to save the ship—which Lou suggested was the real false hope—but time to ride the boat a little longer.

This is one way hope can feel amid existential doubt: like chasing the



best of irrevocably bad choices; like limiting what one allows oneself to want. This public feeling is particularly sensible in places like Curtis Bay that face uncertain futures because they have long attracted “undesirables” like waste, and where many residents feel discarded themselves. But it is also true beyond them. Thinking renewal from here can train our eyes on how past conditions occupy the future. It can remind us that both past and future are unstable objects. And it can warn against letting one group’s sense of reasonable desire sediment itself as hope’s hard limit, hamstrung by an ethics of the probable.

Of course, there are ways to imagine past and future without these conditions. There are other premises and other politics. Today, in Curtis Bay, a diverse youth-led movement is attempting just that. To quote one leader, Destiny, “Jobs versus clean air, Black versus White—these oppositions are made up. We believe that other ways of living here are possible.”

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Part Two

# NOT HOW THE STORY ENDS

∴





**FIGURE 4.1.** “When a man comes to town and tells you how to solve your problems . . .” From *The Holey Land*. Painting and photo by Valeska Populoh, 2015.

## Beautiful City

“Close your eyes,” Destiny prompted as we huddled in the corner of the high school library. She pushed her self-repaired brown spectacles up to frame her eyes, which she shut to set a good example. Elijah, a fifteen-year-old sitting on the floor, resisted, and she play-scolded him. “Boy!” She shook her head so vigorously that it ruffled her dress, and he made a show of complying: “Sorry, my Great Leader! Forgive me!” Charles, an older Black student and Destiny’s then-boyfriend, rolled his eyes. Greg, a White social worker, chuckled. “I have to get to practice, come on!” urged Ben, a blonde kid on the baseball team. The six of us sat there together—Elijah, Charles, Greg, Ben, a volunteer named Chris, and me—under Destiny’s watchful gaze. “Now,” she repeated, “close your eyes and imagine a beautiful city.”

“What does it look like?” Destiny continued as we say there trying to muster up an image. “What are people doing? How do they treat each other? Is it sustainable? Take note of what you see.” A moment later, Destiny told us to open our eyes and share. The room was quiet, and Greg offered her a tip: “It would probably help to give people more time when you facilitate this exercise.” Destiny was gradually taking over leadership tasks that formerly fell to Greg, the students’ mentor, and there had been a few bumps in the road. Usually, her nervousness revealed itself as speed. Reminding her to slow down and breathe, Greg nudged: “Should we give it another go?”

“Now,” Destiny instructed us again, this time forcing back a laugh, “close your eyes and imagine a beautiful city.”

The group settled into a rare period of quiet. My mind wandered ten blocks south to the rec where I spent Wednesdays playing Bingo. Outside, there’s a pavilion making shade over an asphalt patch, but there used to be benches underneath. Sometime in the last decade, the city tore them out to make the park less comfortable for drug users—or at least that’s what most local people say. My mind brought the benches back: some kids are breaking between basketball games; a family is eating lunch; and our group is clustered at a table, enjoying a light breeze. My mind also disappeared the



mountains of coal that normally backdrop the park. In their place, I summoned a waterfront view based on borrowed memories.

And then, a snag: the reminder I don't need to borrow connections to this place. My waste travels to South Baltimore to burn. My car runs on gasoline stored here. My family passed through this coast to the United States, after getting clean bills from the medical exam, and I was raised just thirty miles away. What might it have meant to grow up knowing these connections instead of learning them in archives, and what does it mean to know them now? Surely it means something more than being "here to learn," just doing "fieldwork."

When time came to share, most responses were modest. I stumbled through a half-thought about a place where people know and care about the ties that bind them. Charles wanted to forge "authentic connections" with those around him and envisioned public space that made that possible. He also saw a future with more stable housing. Ben imagined what life would be like if his mother were "less prejudiced" toward their neighbors. Chris wanted to see more green space. Greg's beautiful city made time for creative pursuits. Elijah said people helped each other out "with bills and stuff," whereas "now we have a few rich people and a lot in poverty." Destiny jotted these visions in shorthand on the board ("common space," "not racist," "redistribution of wealth," and so on). Elijah added, "No incinerator!" Then he asked Destiny what she'd seen.

She was quiet for a while before responding: "Mine would be thoughtful. Like, people would be more conscious about how their words and actions affect others. And they'd feel empowered to participate in making decisions. I guess it's not a thing . . . more of a feeling."

## Art of the Possible

All that you touch  
You Change.  
All that you Change  
Changes you.

Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

“There was once a magical peninsula.”

Valeska, brushing copper hair aside, began to turn a wooden spool that held an illustrated scroll. As it spun, water gave way to land, and land to the peninsula’s bright, rich, lively creatures: “wolves and elk, beavers and partridges, and fish as long as your arm. They lived in the waters all around.” Winding the spool, she then summoned the “peninsula people.” They “drank from the waters and ate from the waters and swam and played and bathed in the waters. They danced with the sun and ran over the hills, laughing.”

Then, on the far-right of the scroll, a stranger appeared. He wore “a dark suit and a hat that reached all the way to the sky.” “Hello, dancing people of this green peninsula,” Charles boomed. “Your soil is *so* rich. Your animals are *majestic* and *juicy*. I would like to come and live here with you, because your life is *so* sweet.” The scene advanced past hills and valleys, wolves and partridges, until the man again appeared. He was shoveling. “The man came to the peninsula, but he did not live *with* the peninsula people. . . . He toiled all day, digging away at the earth. And he built—well, he built a luxury condominium with a waterfront view.”

“This,” he said, “is an even sweeter way to live.”

“Some of the peninsula people moved into the luxury condominium,” Valeska reported. To pay their way, they “worked for the man,” digging holes and building more luxury condos. “Time passed,” the spool spun, and “they soon forgot about their days dancing in the sun.” But the land became patchy and barren, and the peninsula people worried: “Whatever will we do” about these problems?

“It was then,” Valeska cautioned, “that a new man came to their penin-

sula.” In a deep baritone, Charles began: “I see that your land is holey and your animals are leaving. Peninsula people of the hills, I will fix your holey land. I manufacture premium cast-iron manhole covers.”

“First,” said the man, “I will need to build a factory.”

Smokestacks began to saturate the tapestry, while “the man dug holes to find stones to build his factory, and iron to make the premium cast-iron manhole covers.” “I will need a big fire for my furnace,” Charles exclaimed. “Gray clouds covered the sun.” Destiny sighed, “Now we can no longer do our dance.” “And the people in the luxury condominiums with a waterfront view said,” “Now we can no longer have a waterfront view.” “And through the smog, they heard the man’s voice say —” Charles bellowed: “Come and work for me. Business is booming.”

Dark smoke overwhelmed the scene while Valeska continued: “All of the peninsula people went to the factory to work. All day long, they rolled premium cast-iron manhole covers on the factory line . . . to cover up the holes in the ground made by the factory that built premium cast-iron manhole covers. And soon,” she turned the scroll and stopped, fixing on an image. “Soon, there was only a factory surrounded by water.”

Destiny, Charles, and Valeska paused to let the metaphor sink in. They were performing for a group of residents—mostly kids—at a community event behind the neighborhood high school. Valeska, a Baltimore-based artist, had painted the scroll and written the script with Charles and Destiny’s



FIGURE 4.2. Performing *The Holey Land*. Photo by United Workers, April 2015.



support. Meant as a parable of the Point's environmental history, the story doubled as an admonition to be wary of strangers who come to town with ideas about improving the community.<sup>1</sup> Featuring a people whose lives become tragically bound up with processes that devour their land, displace their creatures, and fatigue their bodies, the performance paid homage to a genre of extraction stories told as devil-pacts with suited men.<sup>2</sup> And it telegraphed an argument, as most parables do. Parables are stories that teach, Octavia Butler writes: they figure moral lessons in symbolic form.<sup>3</sup> A key lesson here was that the incinerator poised to burn waste on the peninsula was another problem disguised as a solution.

Charles chirped, "Looks like my work here is done."

"And he sold his factory," Valeska spun, "and took all of his money, and moved far, far, far, far, far, *far* away. . . . And the peninsula people, well, they left their peninsula behind with heavy hearts to tell you this cautionary tale: when a man comes to town and tells you how to solve your problems, when he causes discord among your people and betrays the holy land beneath your feet, turn to the sun—and run!"

The audience clapped, but Destiny stopped them. "No, no, Valeska. That's not how the story ends." Valeska stepped aside, ceding control of the wooden apparatus to Destiny, who advised: "When a man comes to town and tells you how to solve your problems, gather your people. Organize your community. Turn that factory into a worker-owned co-op. Hook it up to the sun. And tell that man to get lost, because your community can find its own solutions."

I watched this performance half a dozen times during fieldwork, variably staged at galleries, conferences, and schools. Titled *The Holey Land*, it was one of many art pieces to emerge from a campaign to block the Fairfield Project that developed out of the high school in 2012, and eventually ballooned into a regional movement. With a childlike simplicity, the performance depicted the layered set of causes and effects I was beginning to uncover in the archive, showing how one problem laid the groundwork for another, and another, until South Baltimore could barely sustain life. But it did not conclude with the ending of that world. In narrating the making of this dystopian environment, *The Holey Land* also proposed new forms of power and ownership as a solution. And it proffered a reading of history as enduring and unsettled. That was, at least, how I read Destiny's conclusion. Echoing the thrust of Butler's *Parables*—among her favorite books—Destiny proposed it was action in the present that would determine whether, in the future, the past would be read as a warning or a lesson learned.<sup>4</sup> Prefiguring both options, the performance suggests the choice is up to you.

There is something deeply hopeful in both the content and style of this story. Hopeful not for “the undoing of damage that cannot be undone,” nor certainly for the best among bad choices, but for making lives worth living in this present.<sup>5</sup> This is hope as an openness to change in ways that make potentials proximate. That openness lives in the double ending, which offers two potential paths—Curtis Bay as cautionary tale or as the spark of something altogether different. It lives in the choice to pass the apparatus off to youth raised on a “holey land” who would rather stay than flee South Baltimore. On top of the what and the how, the ends and the means, hope lives in the context of this story’s birth and circulation: part of a campaign conceived by those same youth to block the construction of another toxic burden and, thus, to show things *could be* different than they *are*. A campaign that, like the story, dabbles in a subjunctive mood where future becomes present, past palpable, and the ideal real.

A campaign devoted to the art of conjuring the possible.

Beginning in 2012, a youth group called Free Your Voice—led by Destiny, Charles, Elijah, Ben, and more—committed themselves to fighting the incinerator and, through that fight, to fundamentally changing Curtis Bay. Doing so meant sustaining the premise that they could, which meant finding ways to set their sights beyond the plausible. Taking cues as much from the form as the meaning of their performance, I want to show how this group used the proposal to open two centuries of local history and the fight against it as an opportunity to hope together, through the daily labor of co-waging a campaign: less to have hope than to practice it, by engaging in prefigurative politics.

The term appears complex unless you take it at its word. Prefigure: to summon in advance, to compose the future now. Part of a tradition of radical organizing, prefigurative politics proceed from the premise that there is no meaningful difference between one’s struggle in the present and the goal that struggle serves. Instead, Marianne Maeckelbergh writes, time collapses into a praxis where ends and means are “inextricably linked,” and “the struggle and the goal, the real and the ideal, become one.”<sup>6</sup> For youth born after the collapse of Fordist futures and stuck within the mangled aftermath, learning to live this premise meant creating movement in the present that might pry their story open. It also meant cultivating a relationship with the past that served this aim, on display in *The Holey Land*. Here, historical burdens inform but do not ordain the path ahead. Their meaning hangs upon the audience response. By letting past and future hinge on actions taken now, students labored to turn the present into a space of concrete possibility, making the “otherwise” a sensible phenomenon.

This work depended on relationships and, so, this story centers them,





PLATE 1. **Map of the Curtis Bay region.** Painting by Taylor Smith-Hams, 2021.

Key (\* indicates sites that were once peopled, but are not anymore):

1. Enoch Pratt Free Library
2. Benjamin Franklin High School
3. Filbert Street Garden
4. CSX Coal Terminal
5. Homes in Masonville\*
6. Victory Elementary School\*
7. Proposed Incinerator Site
8. Homes on Leo Street\*
9. Patapsco Wastewater Treatment Plant
10. GRACE Chemical
11. Quarantine Road Landfill





PLATE 2. **Futures past and pending.** Mural on Curtis Avenue. Photo by the author, April 2016.

PLATE 3 (*opposite top*). **Job site.** A local man stands outside the site of his last job. He was laid off in the 1990s. Photo by the author, June 2016.

PLATE 4 (*opposite bottom*). **Work and play.** Curtis Bay's coal pier and Curtis Bay's playground. Photo by the author, June 2016.



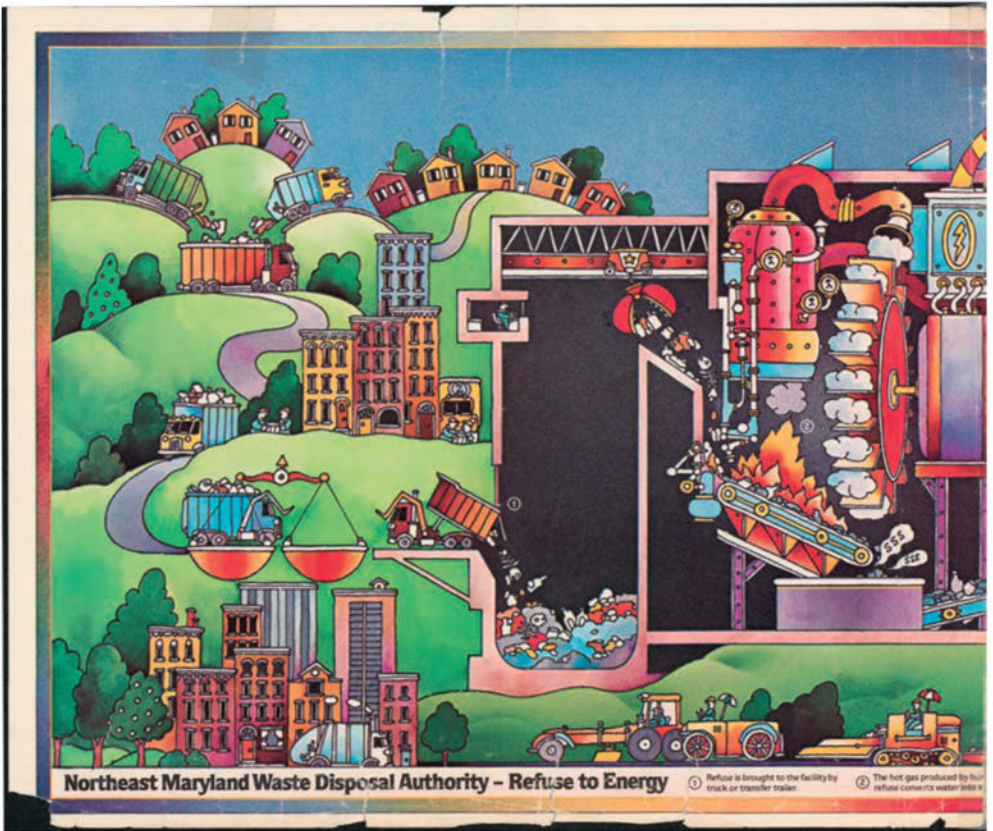


PLATE 5. "Your refuse will soon be converted into energy!" Pamphlet published by the Northeast Maryland Waste Disposal Authority, circa 1985. Enoch Pratt Free Library, Maryland Department, VF, Refuse and Refuse Disposal.



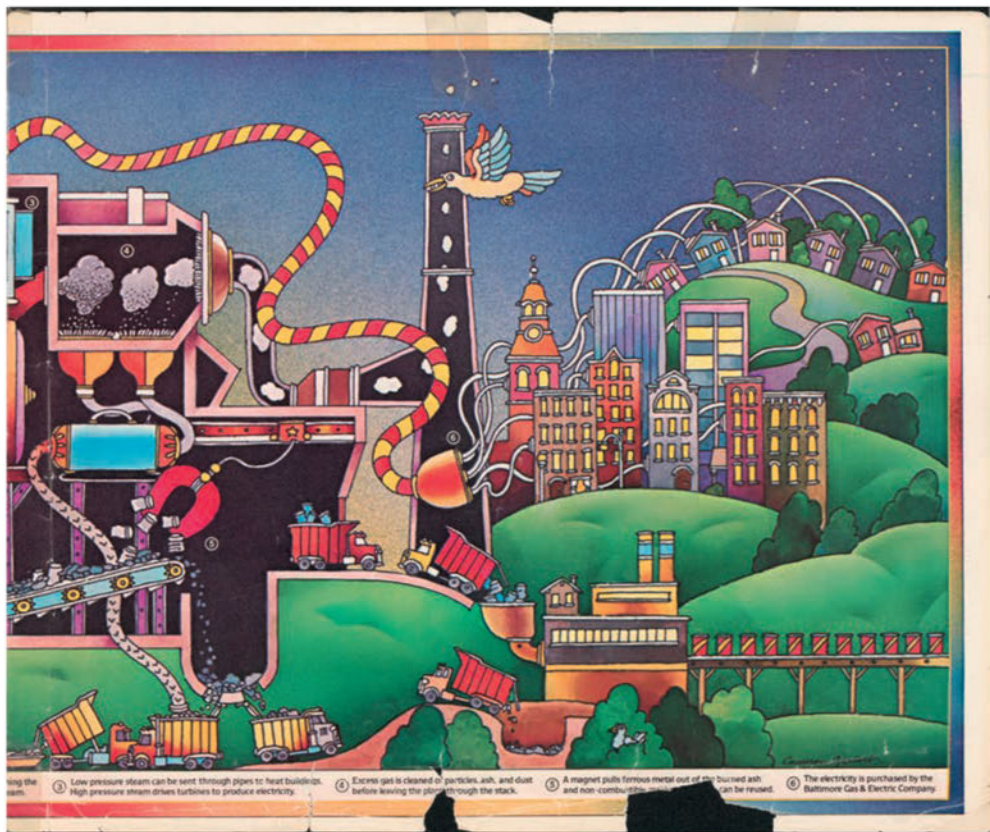




PLATE 6. "A cautionary tale." From *The Holey Land*.  
Painting and photo by Valeska Populoh, 2015.



PLATE 7. "Not how the story ends." From *The Holy Land*.  
Painting and photo by Valeska Populoh, 2015.





PLATE 8. March to stop the incinerator. Photo by United Workers, December 2014.

featuring friendships over singular protagonists.<sup>7</sup> I also share the storytelling apparatus, emulating what it was like to participate in this campaign and, specifically, to theorize *with* this group. In addition to the narrative style, the time horizons that organize these pages differ in fundamental ways from those that we have seen before, as did the campaign's. Their work strayed from renewal, where the idealized past offers a template for the future. They broke from threat, where historical exposures fade in the face of hypothetical danger. And they rejected risk, a calculative method for predicting future harm. All of these are useful fictions that help people get their bearings in a precarious world, in which conjecture has become a mode of life. The campaign turned on a premise of its own, as *The Holey Land* suggests. Without denying accumulated burdens—historical, chemical, affective—students assumed the path ahead was changeable.

And crucially, it was changeable through efforts in the present. For Free Your Voice, enacting this conviction meant behaving as if stopping the Fairfield Project were commensurate with altering the fate of Curtis Bay. The subsequent chapter attends more to the politics that grew from this premise. This chapter is about how youth came to believe they could redirect resentment about being Baltimore's "dumping ground" so that it might inspire transformation.

One condition of possibility for adopting this premise was their enrollment in a pedagogical tradition that saw radical potential in each student's movement toward developing "critical consciousness."<sup>8</sup> Another was the incinerator itself: as a not-yet-constructed entity made palpable through the work of the campaign, the plant had prefigurative capacities. It could condense ongoing pasts and open more than one potential future. In tracing how students seized on this potential in the campaign's early days, I show that the fight to stop the incinerator was never just about the incinerator.<sup>9</sup> It was about finding a way to speak new hope into existence based on lessons learned from five generations of state-sanctioned exposure to harm and figuring how, on the "holey land" that progress made, to inculcate a more experimental mood.<sup>10</sup>

## Campaigns as Classrooms

Someone rolled into the library in tie-dyed joggers and a cheetah-print cap that read "BOSS." The cap hid everything but a pair of dark-brown lips curled into a smile, but the outfit was unmistakably Elijah's. "Hey, Miss Chloe!" It was three o'clock, and we were the first to arrive that afternoon. I had come from the rec, a twenty-minute walk straight south, where I had

loitered after Bingo with seniors. Elijah came from his grandma's house in West Baltimore, but more immediately from English class, and he treated me to an imitation of the substitute. A Black teen from "out of town," he was exactly the kind of kid who made some local seniors bristle, but he was playful, and to know him was to know the most outrageous belly laughs. He took a bow and collapsed onto one of the stiff green armchairs in the library's back corner, underneath a quote painted on the wall in an imposing font: "You can't control where you come from or your family but you can control your future." There were several others placed throughout the room. I was sitting beneath: "Without continual growth and progress, such words as improvement, achievement, and success have no meaning." Presumably inspirational but also vaguely threatening, they were the sort of quotes you would expect to see at a high school.

"Do you have any snacks?" Elijah asked, and I pulled out a bag of barbecue potato chips I had picked up in anticipation of the question. It was September 2015 and my first time attending Free Your Voice's weekly meetings, but not my first time hanging out with this group.

Charles showed up next, frazzled but not wanting to talk about why. He had been having a tough run at home and school, but we knew that prying never helped. He slid into a chair next to mine and signaled for the chips. Elijah obliged. Charles ate quietly, his eyes cast down at his taped-up Nike shoes. Whatever was bothering him eventually passed, and he joined Elijah and me in conversation. Elijah was spinning some tale about his summer and we took turns testing the fib. Soon, we were joined by Ben, a White kid born and raised in Curtis Bay, who stashed his bag and hopped into our banter. Then Destiny, a recent graduate and lifelong resident, arrived, worn out after a day of college classes and a long two-bus commute. Then Greg, a White man in his thirties and the students' longtime mentor, rushed in and jotted something on the board. By 3:30 p.m., there were a dozen different people in the room.

There was no obvious start to the meeting. Instead, conversations about the day coalesced into a discussion that involved everyone, about how to name the unrest that had followed Freddie Gray's death at the hands of Baltimore police. (The previous April, police threw Gray, a twenty-five-year-old Black man, into a van and gave him a "rough ride" that snapped his spinal cord. The weeks after saw a range of responses—organized, spontaneous, peaceful, violent—that led the governor to deploy the National Guard and establish a citywide curfew.) Students wanted to know: Were they riots? Protests? An uprising? Were they destructive or productive? And what did they mean for a multiracial group of teens trying to organize in a place marked by racial enmity and a pronounced hostility toward youth?



The group had not convened to discuss the unrest. They had gathered to plan the next stage of their campaign to stop the Fairfield Project. But the conversation continued for over an hour. It was sprawling and circuitous, sometimes impassioned and sometimes plodding, as students tolerated tangents and held space to think, speak, backpedal, and dispute. Every so often, one would interrupt another and Elijah would shout out, “Point of process!” And sometimes, the discussion would wind its way back to their community. “Maybe,” Destiny speculated, the “riots” and the political lethargy that seemed to envelop South Baltimore were “two expressions of the same frustration,” produced by decades of state-sanctioned violence. Elijah found this equivalence offensive: “Living in a dump is *not* the same” as being killed by the police. That started another debate, which ran a roundabout path, until it was 5:00 p.m. and the group was just beginning to turn to the topic on the board that afternoon.

For a year beginning that September, I attended Free Your Voice meetings nearly every Wednesday after school. For two years before, I had gotten to know members over walks and meals and participated in the group’s local events. But folding into weekly meetings meant becoming implicated—privity to the messy work of movement building and accountable to that work. It meant pivoting from research *on* to research *with* this group. It also meant bringing something “to the table,” as Destiny, Charles, and Greg put it over a lunch a few weeks prior, when we discussed how I could support their work. I would not be a “member” (a role reserved for high school activists and recent graduates), but I would join a broader supporting cast of partners, accomplices, and guides. Specifically, I would help with research, shoring up archival documents that we could use to contextualize the fight against the plant, and sharing insights gleaned from interviews. That was my formal role. Informally, I would do what any supporter with a car and a few dollars should: give rides, run errands, provide logistical support, knock on doors, and bring chips to weekly meetings at the school.

Some of those meetings were direct and purposeful, but most were marked by a meandering quality at odds with what I knew to be this group’s polished public image. Here, the group embraced the autonomy of disorder. They tested ideas, disagreed on strategy, and connected the incinerator with an array of contemporary issues. Observing their long digression into the Baltimore Uprising was my first indication that Free Your Voice was about more than fighting the Fairfield Project. (Catching my eyes during the meeting, Greg said as much: “This is hardly the most efficient way to stop an incinerator.” Then he laughed, “If our opponents only knew!”) They were also working hard to hold an adjacent space where students could be creative, decompress after a bad day, and figure out what they wanted to

say.<sup>11</sup> A space where they could do messy and noninstrumental thinking. A space where they could be confused. A wayward space where, to borrow from Saidiya Hartman, they could experiment in how to live while the world outside the building closed around them.<sup>12</sup> A space where they could dwell on the means, not on the march toward some future “you can control” but *right now* because right now was when they needed to.

It took me a while to realize there was an intimate relationship between the fight to stop the incinerator and the wayward daily praxis of this group—between apparently antagonistic ends and means. Here, by way of the group’s origin story, I show how these two paths converged around a prefigurative political project premised on the notion of campaigns as classrooms.

Before Free Your Voice was “about” the incinerator—before it even had a name—it was simply an exercise in making space. Greg started it after being placed as a social work intern at Curtis Bay’s high school. Greg had not planned to make a life in Baltimore. Raised in Cincinnati, trained in animation in Rhode Island, and fresh off a stint with the Peace Corps, he decided to study social work sometime in his thirties. That brought him to the University of Maryland, which assigned him to his post in Curtis Bay, where he felt astray after years spent on the move. When he arrived, it was 2011, and the school was failing based on most official metrics. “Nobody wanted to come here,” the principal recalled, “and Baltimore had high school choice, so nobody had to.”

Students concurred, naming a general drive to quit the neighborhood. “It’s weird to grow up in a place everyone’s pushing you to leave,” Ben said. “*You have to go, there’s no jobs, no paths.* It’s honestly intimidating.” I knew this dynamic well from my own time teaching in South Baltimore: parents who felt their children had “potential” believed that they would need to leave to find a better future.

As a strategy of last resort, the district hired new school leadership and gave them time to “turn the place around.” It was chaotic, and Greg remembered ambient frustrations. The administration was making cosmetic improvements—like painting the library—but not deeper reforms. Many students felt school was a waste of time and came to Greg to air their complaints. Gradually, their conversations expanded to encompass issues in the neighborhood and city. “We sort of fumbled around for a while,” Ben recollected, debating “little things” like school uniforms and “bigger things” like joblessness in Curtis Bay. But, Greg remembered, “there were a lot of vague



discussions that revolved around statements like, *They don't care about our lives*. And usually my role was just to ask, *What do you mean? Who's they?*"

After a year, the group named themselves Free Your Voice and decided they were ready for more structure.<sup>13</sup> By this time, Greg had started volunteering with an organization called United Workers, where he would later work full time, and was becoming acquainted with their work in political education. With permission, he began to organize student meetings using a United Workers curriculum that addressed topics like poverty and power, and included activities like "Beautiful City." Greg hoped the curriculum would nurture critical thinking and provide a shared vocabulary to ground group conversations.

Founded in 2002 by homeless day laborers in downtown Baltimore, United Workers is a regional organization working to "build a movement to end poverty led by the poor." The organization is staffed by a handful of organizers, paid modestly with funds from grants and grassroots donations. Over the years, they have run a series of discrete issue-based campaigns, from organizing service-sector workers to fight for a living wage, to advocating for an affordable housing trust fund. But those campaigns are just a set of proximate goals. Their far-future vision is nothing short of a radical reorganization of resources around fundamental human needs that private capital has poorly tended to. Those needs range from the very basic, like food, shelter, and health care, to the more abstract, such as time and space to be inventive. It is with those far-future goals in mind that I want to suggest issue campaigns work double-time: in the now, as small realizations of the vision, and toward the desired then, as pedagogical tools. Simultaneously immediate and long term, practical and ideal, these campaigns confound boundaries between the tenses. As Jack, one of United Workers' founders, explained to me, they make the future a reality through everyday pursuits.

Jack was a perpetually disheveled White man raised in Maryland who came to politics through punk rock in the 1980s, and dedicated his life to "growing the movement. . . . A lot of people see our work as this campaign or that campaign," he said of United Workers, "but we're doing very long-term stuff. Our endgame is to eliminate poverty." He paused. "We're not naive. We know that doesn't happen in a single generation or by taking on a single issue. . . . Part of the work is showing people change is even *possible*." That part is hard enough, Jack suggested, when people are dealing with the daily grind of being poor and do not have the luxury of slowly deconstructing the conditions of their oppression and building the whole edifice anew. Every United Workers meeting does its best to model a world where these things are taken care of. There is space, comradery, food, and childcare: things



that make it easier to think expansively in any environment. And there is openness to even the most eccentric ideas about how to address the city's trenchant issues. Next to cultivating what Elizabeth Povinelli might call a will toward the otherwise, another part of the work is building capacity.<sup>14</sup> Facetiously comparing United Workers to a "teaching hospital," Jack said,

That's why we see our campaigns as classrooms. They're spaces where we work on concrete issues, but also leadership development. Every problem we take on is an opportunity to study, build our networks, test strategies, teach skills, and continue sharpening our analysis. . . . The curriculum—it's always changing, but the principle is that you have to be a scholar to build a movement.

Being "a scholar" also helps participants imagine a different kind of world,

Like in our housing campaign: we study the city's history of discriminatory lending and then ask, *What would it be like if we lived in a society where housing didn't exist as a means toward some end—like money—but as a basic right guaranteed to every human?*

Lines like this shed light on the campaign, but they also pressed me to consider my role as a scholar among scholars. They were gentle pedagogical nudges to dispense with any lingering attachments to the notion that theory is what academics do. I do not mean in the sentimental terms now rote within ethnography: that everyone is a "theorist of their world." (Though everyone is.) This group was actively engaged in the work of building movement theory, which they understood to be a scholarly endeavor. Being an observant participant therefore meant participating in the work of *theorizing*—emplaced, collaborative, purposeful—and being worked on in the process.<sup>15</sup> Honoring that role in writing means suspending neat distinctions between "their" analysis and "mine," both seeded in the same classroom. To be sure, I brought questions of my own, about how movement theory worked as it brushed against a range of worldly contradictions, about its time horizons and affective force, which shaped my attention then and inform my writing now. But I brought them to a context where there are *theories about theory* that make theory something different in these pages. Theory is not my addition to young activists' experience, to overstate an old division, though we did at times attend to different things, and though this chapter sets our thinking side by side. That means I am not just a witness, either. Instead, theory here springs from a tradition of movement pedagogy that is deliberately multivocal, consciously recursive, and resolutely intergenerational.

This pedagogical commitment stems from United Workers' turbulent history. "We know from the experience of our predecessors," one organizer told me, "that there need to be many crops of leaders doing the work, many generations working toward systemic change." This organizer had spent years mapping the lineage that binds United Workers to coalitions like the National Union of the Homeless and, even further back, to its "ideological core," articulated by Dr. Martin Luther King in the Poor People's Campaign (PPC).

King envisioned the PPC in the late 1960s after an "agonizing reappraisal of long-held beliefs" sparked the realization that gains in civil rights had not substantively improved material conditions for most people of color.<sup>16</sup> For this reason, he called for the United States to be "born again," for its "whole structure" to be changed.<sup>17</sup> Pairing the language of spiritual rebirth with a critical analysis of Marx (whom King read "with a yes and a no," since Marx failed to "stick with Jesus [and] didn't even stick with Hegel"), King counseled that "true equality" would require more than expanding access to the privileges of citizenship.<sup>18</sup> It would require a "radical redistribution of economic and political power"—a shift from "reform" to "revolution," he proclaimed. For King, this shift marked a break from the incremental progress of inclusion to quite different goals and time horizons: specifically the time of *kairos*, a critical moment when the possible turns palpable, and conditions are right for enacting major change.<sup>19</sup> To solidify class consciousness among the multiracial poor, the campaign was to commence with a dramatic scene in May 1968. But, weeks before participants were to assemble, King was murdered. After his death, the organizer said, the whole campaign "fell into disarray."<sup>20</sup>

The PPC's immediate descendants adapted King's analysis to the precarious 1980s, but of course their tactics changed. Points of solidarity were different, especially with labor power in decline. And movement-wide cohesion suffered as member groups competed for grants and struggled with addiction, especially to crack cocaine. So, when the third generation of organizers emerged from this tradition in the early 2000s to confront the low-wage service economy, United Workers among them, they committed to nurturing a "connected core of leaders" with a shared understanding of movement history, "systematically educated" to ensure that the crusade to end poverty would not die with any one organization.<sup>21</sup>

One animating theory behind this commitment is that waiting for transformation is tantamount to thwarting it. In seeming tension with this theory is a second: that transformative potential is best incubated *across time*, based on lessons learned over many generations.

While acknowledging United Workers' efforts are more "open-ended"



than some descendants of the PPC, Jack agreed that building leadership capacity among the poor is inextricable from the viability of “the movement.” Every emerging leader needs to “do the work,” partaking in a program of critical pedagogy that “cannot be learned in schools.” Founded on Paulo Freire’s conviction that human liberation first depends on developing critical consciousness, which builds on Gramsci’s insistence that it takes study to spark a kind of revolution of the self, critical pedagogy locates radical potential in every student’s worldly education.<sup>22</sup> I mean worldly in the sense that the learning process turns on a thoughtful tacking back and forth between theory and practice—Freire calls this “the dialectic of man’s *objectification* and *action* upon the world.”<sup>23</sup> It is a worldly education that United Workers facilitates through the daily communal labor of campaigns.

In short, every campaign serves the “very long term” in an immediate sense. This is a nondeferral of ideal worlds, seized now in the pedagogical work that Jack described as “trying stuff out and screwing up and reflecting on that and trying again, really participating.”<sup>24</sup> As one movement figure, Willie Baptist, writes, such pedagogy kindles “hope,” which is “the ethical core of teaching. . . . *Because the future is unknown*, optimism is simply dreaming, pessimism merely a dreary turn of mind. Hopefulness, on the other hand, is a political [stance]” that presumes “history is still in the making. . . . Teaching for social justice provides images of possibility,” and each campaign a glimmer of the future in the present that suggests another world is possible.<sup>25</sup> Practicing politics as pedagogy thus means viewing small-scale efforts in the present as though they laid the ground for some desired world. This is what I see as pedagogy’s useful fiction: that learning approximates the world and, so, can change it.

Most organizers recognize this fiction in terms of an incongruence between the “long term” and the “now.” The difference between the two is essential to the method Jack laid out, wherein politics take shape in motion rather than getting passed down fully formed. Recall how each campaign remakes the movement’s long-term goal: through dialogue, study, and reflection, participants are constantly developing new ideas about what forms their world might take. But for all practical purposes, that incongruence between the “long term” and the “now” resolves itself through a premise where means and ends are treated as if they were an indivisible unity—as if each moment were *the* revolutionary moment when actual and possible align and the future becomes present. In particularly grueling campaigns, the premise is that much more important. When work is hard and times are tough, it helps to dwell in a subjunctive mood where each proximate struggle prefigures the group’s far-future aims.

United Workers’ curriculum reflects the importance leaders place on



this recursivity. It includes a few units on power, economy, and movement history but, mostly, participants are not meant to engage these ideas in the abstract. Rather, Jack explained, they are meant to engage them “in real time” and “through reality.” So, about four months into Free Your Voice meetings during the 2012–13 school year, Greg and his students began re-searching issues relevant to their lives that they could use to put their learning into practice.

“There was a lot we considered taking on,” Destiny affirmed. She reached for a handful of popcorn from a bag being passed around the library. Her fingers scraped the bottom, searching for the last few kernels; we had been sitting there for hours. I could tell from the window night had come a while back, but students showed few signs of tiring. It was six months after my first Free Your Voice meeting, and Greg had gathered the group’s original members to recount the early days of the campaign. Some had not seen each other for a while, so the atmosphere was spirited: inside jokes interrupted partial recollections, reinvigorating old debates. Some students remembered wanting to agitate for better school conditions. Others wanted to explore housing insecurity across the United States. The group also discussed labor issues at the city’s new casino. Eventually, someone stumbled on an article about the Energy Answers incinerator.<sup>26</sup>

The incinerator was news to them, and Destiny recalled feeling “angry” something so “big” had not caused more of a ruckus: no one in her intergenerational household had heard a peep about these plans, and her mom, who has breathing problems, was not pleased to learn about them later. When the project was first proposed, they soon discovered, discussion had largely been confined to older White homeowners—like Michael, Fran, and Dorothy—who ran the neighborhood associations. Then, Greg said, the group treated it like “all the other topics on the table,” using the Fairfield Project as a vehicle for “practicing basic research skills.” He nodded toward a few computers across the room. “We collected more articles, started underlining names, and got online to see what we could learn about the issues at stake.” Several students were drawn to the Fairfield Project because they suffered from asthma, and it seemed likely that the plant would make their asthma worse. But the real turning point, as Destiny remembered, came when the group left school to see a play.

Free Your Voice had a few “art and cultural experiences” in these early months, to summon the tangibility that would otherwise come from waging a campaign—but none as uncanny as this Henrik Ibsen drama. Called *An Enemy of the People*, the play told the story of a doctor who discovers

his town's water supply is poisoned, shortly after the opening of a new springwater spa that many hope will grow the town's economy. He wants to publicize his findings, but locals who believe the spa is their "only future" encourage him to suppress the information.<sup>27</sup> Much of the drama pivots around what will happen if the doctor speaks a truth at odds with the townspeople's wishes. It does not go well. He is targeted by experts who kick up doubt about his findings and wage a massive public smear campaign.

"[The play] just shook me," Destiny said, because it cast tacit dynamics in "dramatic" terms. Students read, for example, that supporters of the Fairfield Project dismissed "talk of an industry-caused cancer cluster," by saying "residents' smoking habits" were "probably to blame."<sup>28</sup> The conversation that followed was a lot like the meeting I joined after the Baltimore Uprising: wide-ranging and passionate. Students did not all agree on what the play meant or how they should proceed. One, for instance, suggested it confirmed his concerns about fighting a "big company." But enough were convinced that they "wanted to know more," and that studying the Fairfield Project would be a useful way to get at power relations, economic conditions, and an intangible anxiety about the future that many felt weighing on Curtis Bay.

Students started their own search for "the truth," but quickly hit a wall. Statistics about local health disparities were hard to find, as were emissions data. They invited a few environmental health experts to visit their meetings and offer insight into the Fairfield Project's likely impacts, but none was certain how bad it would be. Given the dissociated data streams that compose environmental regulation, there was no sound information on how its emissions might exacerbate already dirty air. So, the group asked the Baltimore City Health Department to conduct an impact assessment for the incinerator. The department promptly denied their request, as the plant had already been permitted, ostensibly with "community support." Wondering about the process that had led to the appearance of consensus, students began to survey their neighbors: How many were aware of the proposal? (Besides those who were active in the association, few.) Did they support it? (Many were displeased but none surprised.) And what were their concerns about how it might impact their lives? (Most concerns they heard were health related.)

By mid-2013, students and their mentors had developed a working understanding of the project's permitted emissions and an awareness that those emissions would disproportionately impact locals, who already suffered from a range of respiratory ailments. They had also begun drawing connections between these conditions and the peninsula's industrial





FIGURE 4.3. Canvassing the streets of Curtis Bay.  
Photo by Free Your Voice, November 2014.

density, something students had “grown up seeing but not noticing,” Ben explained. Like generations past, youth had learned to practice daily disavowals: those effortful modes of inattention we have encountered many times before. Industrial pollution was something most took as a given, not as an imposition—at least until this point. In Destiny’s words, “It was just there, in the back of my mind.” But they were starting to ask new questions about how Curtis Bay became so inundated.

When students describe the early days of the campaign, then, they describe them as a process of attunement. They were becoming curious about the world beneath the manhole covers, so to speak, and this was shaping them into new subjects.<sup>29</sup> Slowly, once banal features of their lives were opening to scrutiny. It was in this context that the incinerator appeared as both a means and an end: it was a way to open space for the wandering daily praxis I had observed, and a proximate goal through which that wandering might cohere. And it was an exceptional learning opportunity. Here was a plant capable of standing for generations of accumulated burdens, and making those burdens sensible in the present. Here was a plant that did not yet exist—drawn into a pedagogical tradition where uncertainty stands for hope, not fear and certainly not apathy. A plant whose indeterminacy pointed toward the prospect of an open future.

“Not literally,” Greg cautioned. “Like if you’re literally talking about how [stopping] this incinerator would change the world . . . that’s a lot,” he



laughed. “That’s a huge burden to put on any group. But if you stretch it out and think about participation, about who’s entering into discussions they otherwise might not, then yeah, maybe.” Maybe: a willingness to entertain the possibility. And, so, Free Your Voice decided to fight the Fairfield Project thinking, maybe, they could bring about a more expansive change in their community.

## Coming to Terms

If the whole thing sounds romantic, it is because recollections often do. In reality, things were messier. Many Wednesday meetings never happened. Some kids played sports that drew them away, some were easily distracted, and some just didn’t “feel like it all the time.” Sometimes students were annoyed with each other, and sometimes they were dealing with more pressing issues. Charles, for one, had been housing-insecure for years. That could make it tough for him to get to school. By the time we met, he was a “sixth-year senior” struggling to keep up with his classes. Structural barriers bled into emotional ones so completely it was hard to tell the difference. Shame, anxiety, inconsistent buses, hunger, depression, exhaustion, missing documents—there were lots of good excuses.

But he liked coming to meetings and, when he could work up the energy, he did. They were one of the few places where people did not blame his condition on “bad choices.” Others needed this reminder, too. Many students lived with families that scrimped by from week to week and doubted they’d do better without leaving. If they stayed in Curtis Bay, they could look forward to low-wage service jobs, dwindling chances they would own the homes that meant so much to prior generations, and other not-so-Fordist futures.

Indeed, if the Fordist era had been marked by a “temporality of mass utopia,” however aspirational, then youth were wading through its dismal aftermath: a dystopian and fractured present pocked with holes, to borrow Valeska’s imagery; or creased with breaking points and empty promises, to build on Savannah Shange’s portrait of the genre.<sup>30</sup> I mention this to clarify that studying poverty was not a theoretical exercise for local youth. It could provide a huge sense of relief to engage the argument that poverty is structural, something people “have set up” and people “can change.”<sup>31</sup> I also mention it to convey how hard it was for them to “create a space and hold that space against all obstacles,” as Greg once said. Turning to me at one sparsely attended meeting, as if to answer for the absences, Ben made this challenge absolutely plain:

You know, this is your job. You can show up every week. But for a lot of us, it's one of many things. We've had problems with this every year, with every class that's tried to do it. People either play sports or are in after-school groups or are dealing with life, and it's hard to balance. Really hard.

Charles added, "You can have a beautiful vision but it will never come together if you don't have the basic stuff: libraries where people can meet and a way to get to those meetings and—" He grabbed some pretzels from our table, taking a handful.

The message was unambiguous: big dreams are worth little when they fail to engage the limitations of the present. If a key premise of prefigurative politics is that one should build a new world "within the shell of the old" and nurture alternatives *right now*, then it follows one must address old limitations to capacitate the new.<sup>32</sup> Knowing these limitations, Charles and Ben found it both discouraging and unsurprising that there was not stronger opposition to the incinerator in Curtis Bay. People were busy trying to endure the day to day. But given their distance from the Fordist project, some conditions of the present were less accessible to local youth. Like the yearning that pulsed beneath the everyday for those just two generations older, but old enough to have bought into a broken promise. Or the bitterness that yearning could produce. Or why that bitterness might get directed at a rabble of "entitled" kids who think they can demand the world "right now," which was not far from how Dorothy described this group.

Entitled: "I'm having trouble adapting to this new disregard of everything." Back then "you wouldn't hear us complain," but these days "it's like, 'Nobody can tell me what to do.'"

Entitled: believing oneself to be inherently deserving of certain rights or privileges; the nerve to voice dissatisfaction with the present; the audacity to demand a different future.

Noticing a similar dissonance in postindustrial Detroit, Aimee Cox argues that entitlement can reflect a belief that directing the course of one's life is "a basic human right." Or, it can connote "greed and undeserved favor when used in conversations that mention Black or poor members of society," particularly women and youth.<sup>33</sup> Students were no strangers to the contempt contained within the latter. They had canvassed neighbors, attended com-



munity meetings, and made a presentation to the seniors in the campaign's early days—which Destiny suggested was unpleasant and left me to deduce why. And they had worked hard on each other, to give and receive hard truths. Ben was pretty forthcoming about the racism he had brought to the group, and Charles's labor helping him confront it. He glossed his "journey" from a hardhead who grumbled over "welfare queens" to someone concerned about the bane of "corporate welfare," to which Charles replied with exaggerated earnestness, "You've grown, man. You've really grown." In short: they did not need an anthropologist to tell them about the fissures in their neighborhood. They knew. They knew that the terms through which residents like Dorothy approached the present were not at all identical to theirs, and that any effort to close the gap between the actual and the ideal would need to reckon with this discord. That is to say, any effort to realize a "beautiful vision" would need to come to terms with how the local past produced conditions in the present that made so many residents incredulous about the future.

Students encountered these conditions, but in enigmatic ways. Except for racial resentment, which Charles, Destiny, and Elijah encountered clearly every time they moved through the community. Every time they knocked on doors and neighbors stiffened at their presence. Every time they heard "dehumanizing" talk at local meetings. Every time they pushed these jabs to the edges of their minds so they could focus on the "long-term" work—as Destiny repeated, like a mantra—which took a million daily disavowals.<sup>34</sup> As for the enigma: "It seems like a lot of people, mostly older, have it ingrained in their heads that they can't fight [the incinerator]," Ben reflected. "It'd get annoying when we'd canvas and people would say, 'Oh, Curtis Bay is supposed to be a dumping ground.' I've heard many people say that [and] it makes me want to go—" He pretended to shake Charles. "'This is your community!'"

Destiny was also disheartened that many locals' experiences with industry appeared as a block and not a catalyst for action. It was a feeling that emerged the first time she went door-knocking after school:

I remember walking up to one house, clipboard in hand, ready to take down a name. An older man came to the door. And I remember saying, "Hi! My name is Destiny! Do you know about the plan to build the nation's largest trash-burning incinerator in Curtis Bay's backyard? I'm part of a group that's trying to stop it." To which he replied, "The work you kids are doing is pointless. Curtis Bay is and always has been a dumping ground. You're not going to change that."



Destiny remembers being caught off-guard by the man's dismissal. "We couldn't help but feel frustrated [because] we hadn't yet studied our history. We didn't know the truth of what he was saying." It took years for Destiny to appreciate this response as "more . . . than a simple *not interested*." It was a contention borne from years of dispossession that students would need to reckon with if they hoped to sway their neighbors.

For teens born after decades of factory closures, though, these responses were not at all intuitive. Many had grown up here, just as seniors had, and could make well-founded claims to place—but place had changed over the years. Youth had never known a Curtis Bay without industrial debris, nor one with much industrial prosperity. Their families did not work in area plants, and they did not expect to land jobs in those plants after they finished school. Add to this that teens lived on the back end of a transformation in collective memory: they were not exposed to much about the local past at home; they did not learn about it in their classes; nor, given erasures of working-class life from US popular culture, did they hear about it in the news.<sup>35</sup> Before their studies, few students felt either sentimental or resentful about living amid landfills, coal piers, chemical plants, and hollowed factories. That included those, like Destiny and Ben, who had deep local roots.

Recall that Angel, whose story opens this book and who was roughly as old as these students' parents, described her age-set as the "lost generation": they had watched a lifeworld fall apart and were not eager to recount the gritty details. Ben's mom grew up in Curtis Bay, but she had never held an industrial job, and he did not know if her parents had or not. They bonded over other things, like music. Destiny's home was organized around achievement, her and her siblings' ticket "out" of Curtis Bay, and her parents tolerated her activism so long as it did not get in the way. She knew they had long ties to the area but would not discover until later where precisely they led to. And when students did hear about the industrial past—say, from more senior White neighbors—it seemed to block them out.<sup>36</sup> (Destiny: "I've heard people say they miss the *good old days*, which is code for *everything was great before Black folks moved in*.") It was clear the past weighed on the present, but the how and why did not announce themselves. So, the group got online to see what they could learn about the history of their community.<sup>37</sup>

One thing that "stood out" for Greg from the group's early studies was that Baltimore's willingness to "turn a blind eye" to pollution here was as old as the city. Another was that residents had never held control over the region's future. It was manhole covers all the way down: for at least two centuries, power over local development had rested either with an absent government or with outside entities who acquired land, extracted profit,

and moved away. Curtis Bay *had* been a dumping ground for other people's problems, and huge swaths of land were still controlled by outside groups. Complicating matters further, the toxic consequences of this pattern appeared illegible to state agencies, who did not need—and often were not allowed—to consider enduring environmental problems when dispensing new permits to pollute.

It was less surprising, with this context, that the Fairfield Project had been proposed for construction here. It was also less surprising that the most vocal resident response had been to secure meager benefits from Energy Answers while greeting the “privilege of a job” with gratitude. Students' emerging thesis was something like: *If you've never had power, then that might feel like power.* “Give us a little money because there's not much we can do to stop it,” Greg said, in an effort to approximate the mood.

Those were the continuities. But there were discontinuities, too. During this period, a series of chance encounters led students to Fred, a man who said he was from Fairfield. Destiny recalled her first response: “No one lives in Fairfield.” And she recalled how it felt when Fred took her on a driving tour of his community. She described being guided through a place that she had been a dozen times by someone who insisted she had never seen it. I wasn't there, but I know from Arthur's tours how uncanny it can be to poke around with someone who brings a different present into view.

One day Fairfield meant Citgo and Sunoco and FMC and the “FUTURE HOME OF THE FAIRFIELD RENEWABLE ENERGY PROJECT,” and the next it was a place where people lived and children went to school. Destiny's eyes grew wide when she recounted learning where their houses used to be. Wider still when Fred shared that Fairfield once housed farms where you could eat fresh fruit straight off the tree. He talked about when things got bad and people left, and how hard it was to lose a place. From the passenger seat of Fred's truck, the past was near and intimate—and the drive, just six minutes from her home, felt “chilling” to Destiny. “Like I distinctly remember thinking, *Oh my god, could Curtis Bay be next if we don't stop this plant?*” That discomfort only grew as she learned her own roots in the area could be traced back to the Point. “It made me want to fight much harder,” she later said. And it “stung” to realize how completely worlds could be erased, in matter and in memory.

Learning about the buyout marked a major turning point for Free Your Voice because it clarified a lot, from how Curtis Bay became so industrialized to why few neighbors felt that they could intervene. The buyout also offered what they understood to be a “cautionary tale,” a story drawn directly from the local past of what might happen if they failed to thwart this toxic burden. Combine this with the eeriness that came from discovering



such history *now*—after years of organizing against the Fairfield Project and many more living on this peninsula—and the group was eager to learn more. Hence, the research role they gave to me.

Beginning in 2015, I shared primary documents and my own developing analysis, and I also folded students into work with select older residents. Charles joined a ride-along with Arthur and posed his own questions about life in Masonville. Destiny participated in my interview with Jane, who had worked on the Point for many years. Both collaborated on an oral history of Frank, who had held a dozen factory jobs and whose heart repair you might recall from the last chapter. And (with permission from my interlocutors) I brought recordings for the group to listen to during Free Your Voice's weekly meetings.

Over and over, together, we troubled over incongruent mental maps: Arthur's Masonville did not match up with ours; Jane was puzzled to return to Fairfield as we knew it; Frank filled deserted buildings with the sights and sounds of factory work. Again and again, we bonded over shared experience. Like trying to conjure words to describe the smell and weight of local air:

JANE: It was like, WHOA. Sometimes you could hardly catch your breath.

DESTINY: Um-hmm, still is. And also there are levels of just—this really—[She used her hands to simulate a burden.]

CHLOE: Like it's *heavy*.

JANE: Heavy.

DESTINY: So heavy.

Like realizing belatedly that the environment was not inert:

CHARLES: Once this realization about environmental degradation set in—was there ever a sense of, “Oh, we screwed ourselves over?” Because it's been weird for us to learn all this so late.

FRANK: Oh yeah, absolutely . . . I look back now, and I'm horrified.

CHLOE: But you know, belatedly recognizing that you might have been exposed to stuff, does it come with resignation or fear or—

FRANK: Resignation. What are you going to do? As far as I can tell, I hit the genetic lottery, okay? I'm seventy-two years old and I'm still here. I have a lot of friends who ain't.

And ritually, together, we learned to read the landscape differently: Charles and I spouted questions from the backseat of Arthur's car, and he replied



with dog-eared books and marked-up photographs, which sparked memories in Charles, which sparked questions from Arthur, and on and on until the sky grew dark. What emerged was not some hokey harmony. We did not patch the fissures that divide this neighborhood; no driving tour could do that. We did not even bring the same aims to these interactions. But students did learn from seniors' contributions to the campaign-as-classroom, seniors did get worked on in the process, I drew lessons on how the past becomes political from both, and we all observed the past become prophetic.<sup>38</sup> ("Could Curtis Bay be next if we don't stop this plant?") And then, because theory and world are never meant to live on separate planes, students folded what we learned right back into the work of building an analysis that might just seed that beautiful city.

"Shocking," "sad," "weird," "cool," "honestly pretty hard to follow." Studying the local past felt a lot of different ways, depending on the day and depending on the student. The group spent countless hours sitting in the stiff green armchairs in the library's back corner trying to make sense of the whole thing, constructing memories that had not been passed on to them. "Also empowering," Destiny added. "Yeah, empowering," Elijah echoed. "What do you mean?" I asked. Solemnly, Destiny replied: "It allowed us to understand things we'd learned to live with." Then she crumbled the empty popcorn bag and threw it at Charles, who feigned contempt before sending it back into the air. The bag hit Ben in the face.

Nothing stayed heavy for too long in a room of high school students.

There was strong consensus around Destiny's point, that the story itself was bleak but the process of crafting it decidedly less so. Not all of the time: pulling a cogent history from a mess of documents and partial memories was difficult. But enough of the time, as students of Michel Foucault might well deduce. Youth were clarifying conditions that had previously seemed both cryptic and intractable. This is what Foucault calls a "history of the present," a search for descent with the *right now* in mind.<sup>39</sup> Or, a search for descent whose goal is less to understand the past than to puncture the shell of the old so that one might build the world anew. "If people created the way we do things now, then it's not inevitable. It's not gravity," Greg remembered thinking. Things *could have been otherwise* and might *still be* in the future.

I want to underscore that this provocation is both so close to and so far from the notion things *could have been worse*. To say things could have been worse is to look back and voice relief that the less-bad thing was chosen by whoever had the power to choose. To say things could have been otherwise

is to look back and vest power in the act of unmasking. It makes looking back an act of hope, if hope is what it feels like to make an otherwise conceivable.<sup>40</sup> That was, in any case, how the process felt for local students.

With time, this historical study informed a set of concepts drawn from Curtis Bay that Free Your Voice brought into their curriculum. One was the “dumping ground mentality,” a phrase that students coined to describe a disposition born of material conditions, a historically sedimented common sense: the apathy they registered among their neighbors.<sup>41</sup> The dumping ground mentality offers a useful illustration of what Freire means when he says that critical consciousness results from the unity of theory and practice.<sup>42</sup> It is both a description and a tool, a kind of ethnographic shorthand, a way of concretizing vague conditions to open them to change. In the group’s Wednesday meetings, Free Your Voice used this concept to name the quiescence they observed and begin to make it malleable. And as they theorized, I watched that theorizing work on them, tapping into the prefigurative capacities of critical pedagogy and cultivating hope that could capacitate their organizing labor. Notice, in the exercise below, how students came to terms with a range of forces that had made the Fairfield Project possible, even desirable. Notice, too, how this dialogue enabled an affective shift inseparable from their far-future aims.

“What’s going on in this picture?” Destiny pinned the first of three cartoons to the board and prompted the group to look. In the image, a teacher held a belt above a boy, warning him: “Under Section 5.3 of the school rules, I must punish you for cheating.” “That’s why I’m wearing fifteen pairs of underpants,” the mischievous boy explained. Without missing a beat, Elijah joked: “Y’all, that’s me and my mom. You figure out which is which.” Charles, concealing a smile, shoved him in the side. Destiny laughed, then composed herself. Returning to the task, she asked: “Where do you think power lies in this illustration?”

Elijah pointed to the teacher’s angry eyes and said that he looked “powerful.” “The teacher always has the power,” another student claimed. “Why the underpants, though?” Destiny asked, giggling. “Well, it’s sort of like [the kid] knows what’s coming,” Chris offered. “Like he’s read Section 5.3?” Destiny hinted. Charles sat up straight.

“Well actually, could that be where the power is?” Charles tried. “Because the teacher isn’t acting out of anger, right? He’s pointing out this rule—he’s referring to it and it gives him power. Or, it doesn’t give him power, but he’s enforcing it. Does that make sense?”

Greg nodded. “That’s key. So just to break that down: clearly they both



know what the rule is, because the kid's living his life by that rule and wearing all his underwear." Elijah cackled. "And the teacher can name the rule.

So it's like, I don't know, an equivalent would be the speed limit, right? It's a rule that's literally written on the side of the road and you change how you drive based on it. It's a form of power that's out there in the open. In this case, it's like Section 5.3. Building on Charles, I'd say the teacher is exercising power through the rule and over the student, by being the one who punishes him for not following it.

"And if you know the rule then you have power, too? To wear all your underpants?" Elijah inquired. "Metaphorically," grinned Greg.

Destiny wrote the phrase "visible power" on the board. Our group was in the middle of an activity called "Power Cube." Conceptualized by John Gaventa as a practical tool for groups studying power dynamics so as to transform them, the Power Cube divides the complex concept into its forms (visible, hidden, invisible), levels (local, national, global), and spaces (closed, invited, claimed).<sup>43</sup> Forms refer to the ways that power manifests, levels to different scales of authority, and spaces to arenas for participation. Like any pedagogical tool, then, the Power Cube turns on a few helpful premises: that power can be broken into nine clear components; that this exercise approximates the world. Admitting these, Gaventa urges new initiates to take up one dimension at a time.<sup>44</sup> Today, students were engaging power's "forms" to clarify how Energy Answers had garnered support for the incinerator.

Students listed a few more examples of visible power—power that is "out there in the open," "codified," and "explicit"—moving from "Section 5.3" to zoning laws that had devastated the Point to compartmentalized emissions regulations. We then turned to a second cartoon. In three parts, it dramatized the construction of a narrative around the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. In the first frame, a group was pictured around a conference table, facing a map of the Middle East and discussing how to "control all that oil." In the second and third frames, they could be seen endorsing the invasion: "Anyone who questions this is UN-AMERICAN!" "God bless the USA!" Chris identified the first frame as an illustration of "hidden power," since a select group was maneuvering "behind closed doors to figure out a story." Greg agreed, noting power had been "held very tightly" in that space. Destiny jotted "hidden power" on the board, narrating how some actors "make decisions" in "backstage rooms" that "set the terms of a debate." She then drew our attention to the latter frames, where we identified appeals to love of country. One



student described this rhetoric as an instance of “invisible power,” since it indexed “deeply held beliefs” and laid claim on “shared values” that many hold implicitly. As an example, Charles mentioned arguments the group had heard from Energy Answers: “It’s like how they’re always calling [the incinerator] ‘clean’ and acting like it will cure climate change.”

Studying visible, hidden, and invisible power offered students a vocabulary for disaggregating the mammoth and ambiguous force that many once called “they,” as Greg had recollected. (“They don’t care about our lives.”) It allowed them to apprehend and analyze, so they might later redirect, dynamics long at work in Curtis Bay. This is the purpose of dialogue within the tradition of critical pedagogy: to work one’s way around an object of struggle, to participate rigorously in a learning process that builds transformative potential. Dialogue is therefore both a means and an end. It is a humanizing process that prefigures the goal of human freedom, a tactic in motion that produces movement.

But to truly rise to the level of dialogue, Freire says, language cannot simply be given to “the oppressed.”<sup>45</sup> Their experiences must be allowed to inform theory so that theory can evolve—something I noticed when Destiny pinned up a third cartoon.

In the foreground of the image, a sweating man pulled a block three times his size. Next to his head, a speech bubble read, “Thank goodness I’ve got this job. It’s all I’m good for.” After guessing what the man might be dragging (“Stone for the pyramids.” “A giant block of ice.” “Nah, that’s the Power Cube!”), Chris reflected:

What came to mind for me was my own experience working at Starbucks, like slaving away and not getting paid a lot. And then related to power, I guess he feels like he can’t do much. . . . In the first picture there was a bully, a person hanging over the kid’s head clearly exerting power. And in the second there’s this whole crew behind the scenes. But here he’s putting himself down.

Charles agreed: “My mind went first to the idea of internalized oppression. We keep talking about it but I’m not sure I fully understand. I mean, there isn’t an outside entity [telling him he’s worthless],” he began. “He’s kind of taking it on himself.”

As a participant in these discussions myself, I added: “It’s really striking how this guy—he’s pulling a giant block and expressing gratitude. It’s not just, ‘Oh, this is the only job I’ve got,’ but, ‘Wow, thank you. This job is such a blessing.’ So there’s another layer.” Greg spoke next:

So if in the first picture we see power flowing from a written rule through this guy who enforces it and in the second we see power vested in a hidden space, then this one seems to show power flowing through a much more complicated system, one that can function internally within us, which Charles was starting to get at. And it makes me think of the dumping ground mentality that we always talk about. With just a little substitution, we could say, “This isn’t going to work. Our community sucks.”

Charles caught his eye. “Thank goodness we have the opportunity,” he started. Greg finished: “to receive an incinerator proposal. Exactly.”

“I will fix your holey land. I manufacture premium cast-iron manhole covers.”

“Curtis Bay is and always has been a dumping ground. You’re not going to change that.”

Students knew from attending community meetings that some, like Michael and Dorothy, vested hope in the incinerator. They also understood that negotiations between Energy Answers and the community associations had drawn on forms of hidden power that unfolded in invited spaces, where most residents could not participate. Over the years, they had moved from assuming Michael was “gullible” for acceding community support to thinking he might be “corrupt,” to analyzing his attachment to the proposal as a product of invisible power and its ability to affect one’s basic aspirations. They were coming to believe that the “dumping ground mentality” was a form of learned resignation built not on some permanent, inevitable malaise but, in Destiny’s terms, on the long-term experience of exposure to harm paired with rarely “having a seat at the table” when “decisions that affect our lives are made.” And this theory—the product of a praxis not dissimilar from fieldwork—had joined terms like “invisible power” as a tool they used to map a path for their campaign.<sup>46</sup>

Alongside the dumping ground mentality, Free Your Voice identified desires for “clean,” “renewable” energy and a “pro-growth” philosophy as forms of invisible power behind the Fairfield Project. These messages targeted unspoken value systems in their city, and they would need to undercut them by showing that incineration could *not* offer “truly renewable energy” or relieve economic stagnation. It would not be enough, in other words, to



frame the incinerator as bad for the environment. It had been made possible by structures of private ownership and histories of displacement, upheld by profit imperatives, fueled by a longing for progress without limits, and rendered “safe” by a series of regulatory contortions that excused exposure in Curtis Bay. Beyond discussing how to use this knowledge to blunt arguments for the plant, the group also discussed how they could draw on existing narratives to build their own invisible power, to tap their neighbors’ “deeply held beliefs.” What if they could rechannel local resentment about being Baltimore’s “dumping ground” so that it might inspire action instead of resignation?

What we see here is a remarkable articulation of grammars of power in South Baltimore, but not only. Students were also learning to demystify the obstacles they faced. In the process, they were partaking in something like what Hirokazu Miyazaki calls a “method of hope”—a way of engaging the world that wrests the future open.<sup>47</sup> It was clear watching Charles, in particular, how vivifying it could be to move from feeling like a person in power’s throes to one who could command it. And it was clear the group was coming to terms with how to spark that same affective shift at the scale of Curtis Bay.

To recall the question of ends and means, or rather ends-as-means, it was often difficult to tell whether the point of all this work was to stop the Fairfield Project or to help people feel in charge of their own lives. Perhaps the two were substantially the same. (“All that you touch you Change. All that you Change changes you.”<sup>48</sup>) The group was both developing an analysis that could support their fight to stop the plant and using that fight to better know, and so to change, their neighborhood.

“I think she’s pretending not to be home,” Charles shrugged, turning away from a door on Cypress Street. It was not the first time, or the last, that a White woman would peek out the window, spot Charles on her porch, and then retreat, turn out the lights, and sit there quietly. It could be jarring to move from the affirming space of students’ Wednesday meetings into a neighborhood where many regarded Black youth with suspicion. It could be jarring to move between a space that students treated as a “beautiful vision” and one that snapped them back to harsh realities. This is the paradox of cramped creation as Hartman imagines it: practicing the “otherwise” within impossibly tight quarters; toying with “the terms of social existence, when the terms have already been dictated, when there is little room to breathe.”<sup>49</sup> Living this paradox meant enduring a daily shuffle between the “very long term” and the “now,” a reminder that the two were not the same.



But it is hard to keep on going when you don't pretend as if, and so—when it did not feel too hard—students kept their eyes on the long game.

On a good day, students spoke to three people for every ten stoops that they approached. Their interactions ranged. Some residents appeared behind screen doors to say, “No, thank you.” Some invited the group inside and asked questions. Some listened as students warned that Curtis Bay was being treated like a “dumping ground, again,” and replied with their own stories: *We've had enough of that* or *My brother just got diagnosed* or *I clean coal dust off my windows every day*. When they could get an audience, the dumping ground argument often opened conversation up. So did tying the incinerator to a history of development, displacement, and erasure.<sup>50</sup>

The prescient story of the Point, in particular, helped Free Your Voice summon what Timothy Choy calls “anticipatory nostalgia,” positioning listeners “in the future, looking backward [at the present],” watching with alarm at the prospect of another toxic burden.<sup>51</sup> Through their sometimes visionary, sometimes bumbling daily praxis, students gradually came to frame the problem in terms designed to move their neighbors: We can either “be the next Fairfield” or fight a different kind of fight. We can either “leave our peninsula behind” or stick around and change it. It was an argument that made the incinerator emblematic of an enduring past—but a past whose meaning was still open. The consequences of doing nothing were easily foreshadowed by the Point. To prefigure the effects of fighting a different kind of fight, Free Your Voice would have to get creative.

## Seizing the Apparatus

In January 2016, I sat down with Valeska, the artist and United Workers volunteer behind *The Holey Land*. Valeska learned about Free Your Voice in 2014, when students began to spread their message beyond Curtis Bay. After hearing Destiny and Charles speak at an event, she connected with the group and started working through resources they had gathered during research. “It was fascinating,” Valeska remembered. “What a story. Here's this fertile land right on the Chesapeake where people are planting produce for Baltimore. And then a company town starts to emerge and you can see the beginning of this cycle,” where problems appear and solutions arise that themselves produce a range of complications.

“That's why we stop at one point [in the performance] and observe that Curtis Bay is ‘a factory surrounded by water,’” she said. “There's nothing left. It's a visual metaphor for the idea that this place has gradually been

decimated by industr[y].” But it was also a place where a different politics could emerge, as students had artfully demonstrated.

“The whole thing with Destiny saying, ‘That’s not how the story ends’ was our way of acknowledging I’d been the master narrator the whole time, the all-powerful outsider . . . and that Free Your Voice should step in, take over the apparatus, and present *their* vision for Curtis Bay.” As Destiny remembers, the alternate ending (“Gather your people. Organize your community . . .”) was also their response to one child’s query: “What do you do if the man comes back?”<sup>52</sup> The question was at once a realistic threat and an invitation to dwell in the potentiality of its inverse: What would it take for the peninsula people to play a meaningful role in the development of their neighborhood?

It became increasingly clear to students that the answer would be nothing quite as simple as “more data.” Early on, the group sought information on the Fairfield Project’s likely impacts, hoping facts would be adequate to squash the plans. Besides requesting that the Health Department conduct an impact assessment for the plant, they worked with area environmental groups to conduct citizen-science projects, measuring fine particulates with handheld devices and installing an air monitor to replace one long since removed by the state. Beyond United Workers, these groups were students’ earliest allies: experts from the Environmental Integrity Project (EIP), the Chesapeake Climate Action Network, and the Maryland Environmental Health Network came to meetings when students were still learning about the plant. Lawyers at EIP, in particular, did essential work to spell out air-quality issues that already plagued their neighborhood.

Before long, Free Your Voice also connected with the Sierra Club, Physicians for Social Responsibility, the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives, and a slew of other partners. Many provided critical support in documenting harm and sounding the alarm about emissions. Such a focus can, of course, bring valuable attention to sacrifice zones like Curtis Bay. But, as Nicholas Shapiro, Nasser Zakariya, and Jody Roberts argue, pursuing data as a route to remedy also comes with drawbacks. For example, it often “sets the stage for adversarial epistemological encounters that can lead to entrenchment rather than resolution,” particularly when prevailing metrics hide a range of dangers.<sup>53</sup>

This had been one clear—if devastating—lesson from the buyout of the Point, where residents learned that they would need to bracket questions of exposure and forward a politics of imminent demise if they hoped to move the state. Years later, Destiny could confidently say she did not need a double-blind study to know that “incineration is bad for us.” To get bogged



down in molecular minutiae was to vest hope in a “system that doesn’t care about our lives.” It was to get mired in debates about costs and benefits, degrees of certainty, and other fragmented lines of inquiry that presume *the haze is not enough* to evidence a problem: that it is not enough to speak from long-term embodied knowledge of a place.

I do not mean to suggest that Free Your Voice refused the language of toxicity, or that kindred campaigns ought to. Not at all. They often found it helpful and, as a tradition of justice-oriented science shows, there is more than one way to engage exposure data.<sup>54</sup> But for a group with limited capacity and dreams that exceeded stopping this one plant, there was a real desire, in Destiny’s words, to “reach beyond the technical” and toward a discussion of “root causes.” And there was a real discontent with any concept of justice that would adopt the terms of a technocratic apparatus that had demonstrably failed Curtis Bay. As Greg put it,

Energy Answers is constantly reminding us that they’re using the best pollution control technology available. And I think what that statement is designed to say is that there’s not a problem because they’re doing the best they can within our current system. . . . And then it’s like, “Okay!” There’s no question to ask. You can’t ask, for example, “What isn’t measured?” Or, “What’s the effect of following the best guidelines, given the circumstances?” You can’t even ask about the sensibility of putting an incinerator in a community that already has the highest levels of toxic air emissions in the state. . . . And just because one facility is using the best technology available—what good is that when you have twenty facilities right next to each other that are all using the best pollution controls? But no, it’s okay, it’s great.

These comments reflect an awareness that the industrial order keeps certain problems out of speech, and they convey apprehension about using industrialism’s tools to cap the holes those tools created.<sup>55</sup> They suggest that even the most precise accounting of harm within “our current system” could not diagnose the problem of the present.<sup>56</sup> An accurate diagnosis would need to speak of ownership and governance—not merely molecules, point sources, and pathways. So, after years of studying how the existing order had failed to prevent exposure in South Baltimore, Free Your Voice turned to a different set of questions: What values should inform development decisions? What would a “truly democratic” decision-making process look like? What metrics should guide such a process? What would it take to enact alternatives *right now*, through the work of the campaign?

With time, these discussions sparked a series of experiments in local

governance designed to make the campaign an embodiment of the group's far-future aims. Experiments: tentative efforts, trials in approaching the unknown, more capacious than the "double-blind study."<sup>57</sup> While circuitous, to be sure, each was a prefigurative event—a non-skeptical effort to live differently in the present. "It's like we're doing a really crappy version of a sacred objective," Greg summarized from the corner of the library, reaching for words to describe the honorable if impossible work of inhabiting the very world that they labored to create.

Destiny brushed off Greg's self-deprecating comment, saying that it did not matter if their efforts were messy: the "process" would itself be an achievement. "One of the biggest reasons the incinerator came was that there wasn't a strong sense of empowerment here," she continued. "Just building power by fighting the incinerator together is going to [bring about a] change."

The group's earliest experiment in local governance came in the form of a "report card" for the Fairfield Project. Intended for officials, each page identified a "metric" for evaluation—equity, participation, transparency, accountability, universality—then used that metric to appraise the proposal, and offered alternate paths informed by lessons learned from Curtis Bay. Under the "equity" metric, for example, students noted a "pattern of environmental injustice" and recommended a new permitting process to address historical exposures. With respect to "transparency," they called to "reopen the discussion about what we define [as] renewable energy" within the state. Even leaving aside these recommendations, the mere existence of the report card challenged the existing order. It codified a value structure that had nothing to do with growth and authorized a group of teenagers to announce: we reject the terms of your debate.

But it did not end with that rejection. Students used this document to articulate a future that was "not possible to calculate or even imagine" within dominant grammars—one capable of acknowledging history's "soiled grounds" without resorting to the conditions that produced them as a necessary template.<sup>58</sup>

There were grander efforts to create movement within the present, too. A few weeks after my first Free Your Voice meeting, I found myself in another library, the public library where Arthur often picked me up, unwrapping paper plates. Charles was arranging chairs and Elijah was laying out flyers, while Destiny and Greg fiddled with a rickety projector, playing scenes from a short film the group had made.<sup>59</sup> The film spliced together dialogue from a dozen residents—Black and White, young and old—while



someone played a synthesizer in the background. Elijah took the opportunity to treat the music as a soundtrack to his task, raising each flyer with a flourish before placing it on the seat in front of him. As he moved, he mouthed the dialogue: “I live,” “I work,” “I go to school . . .” “. . . in Curtis Bay,” “in Curtis Bay,” “in Curtis Bay.” Charles put on a show of disapproval. Destiny seemed too busy to notice. Greg thanked Elijah for magnifying community voices. Elijah continued: “I have an idea,” “a hope,” “a vision,” “to transform this site from a place for burning trash,” “into a home for solar energy and recycling,” “that creates jobs,” “that helps build a future” “for the next generation.” Another flyer hit another chair. “The next generation!”

Visitors began to file in and, soon, there were two dozen, many of them residents the students met while canvassing. They grabbed food and made small talk until Destiny took the stage. “Hey guys, thanks for coming out.” She introduced Free Your Voice and transitioned to the purpose of the meeting: “We’ve been fighting to stop the nation’s largest trash incinerator. But it’s not enough to stop something that’s causing you harm. Here we have a community that has historically been relegated to a place that—a place where—” She stumbled on her words.

“A dumping ground,” Charles offered.

“Thank you! We’ve been treated as a dumping ground for decades. So, it wouldn’t be enough to stop the incinerator. What we’re working on now is truly green alternatives.” This evening, they would kick-start an exploratory development process led by residents who would vet proposals for the Fairfield site, ask questions, make requests, and conduct their own evaluations. The whole production hinged on the premise that residents controlled the land in question, which Destiny acknowledged they did not.

But they *should*, she urged. The meeting would be an exercise in claiming it.

After debuting the film, Greg directed everyone’s attention to the flyers on their chairs. They were organized around the same five metrics students used on their report card, alongside questions meant to spark debate. He then introduced Neil, an ally who had identified potential tenants for the site. Neil provided background on each one, answered questions, and compiled group demands—a chaotic process that continued until late. It would be a stretch to say that this meeting produced consensus, let alone a concrete plan. Imagine a more unruly version of students’ Wednesday meetings. But the event did begin to shift expectations about what development could look like in Curtis Bay. Here, residents were positioned as stewards of the land in a speculative world where they could exercise control over its use. Many said it was their first time entertaining the question of what this place could be, devoid of limitations.

Another experiment came in the form of an advisory panel that students called the “Dream Team”: the broader supporting cast I plugged into when I joined. Led by Free Your Voice and their mentors at United Workers, the Dream Team brought together representatives from allied groups with residents of Curtis Bay. Students first convened this team in 2014 as part of a divestment effort I discuss in the next chapter, but it gradually became a place for distributing tasks among a committed core of leaders. This group’s importance grew with the campaign. By 2015, the fight to stop the incinerator had ballooned from a scrappy crew of high school kids into a coalition of organizations in and beyond South Baltimore—organizations used to working in silos. Dream Team meetings kept them in communication. More than that, the team was structured to discourage “dark-suited stranger” types. Here, students welcomed the support of outside groups, while insisting they engage in a non-extractive way.<sup>60</sup>

Sam, a Dream Team member and staffer at the Sierra Club, stressed how different this process was from campaigns he had worked on in the past. “Sierra Club is used to being in front,” he said, so to “follow someone else’s lead” was no small change. The Dream Team challenged Sam in other ways, too. “*Mission drift* is a phrase we throw around a lot in Sierra Club” to describe distractions from “explicitly environmental work.” But Free Your Voice took a different tack. “I remember an early meeting that clarified for me that the campaign was about much more than [the Fairfield Project]. It’s about putting a magnifying glass to systemic decision-making processes” that connect “waste” to “poverty” to “housing” to “climate” to “racism.”

This perspective changed Sam’s approach to environmental problems at the Sierra Club, which, again, was not the campaign’s proximate objective. Yet to the extent that the Dream Team became a *classroom*, it served what Jack once glossed as “very long-term” aims. Even United Workers, easily legible as an outsider coming into Curtis Bay to realize its own goals, saw those goals change because of its involvement. Formerly focused on economic justice, United Workers eventually came to articulate its mission in environmental terms, viewing environmental work as a path to realizing human needs from clean air to a living wage.

If experiments in local governance offered students one way to prefigure their desired worlds—to change minds, to test alternatives—then they found another in the arts. It makes sense: the arts had been an early inspiration. Destiny often returned to the group’s trip to see *An Enemy of the People* for ideas when she was trying to write about the plant in ways that reached “beyond the technical.” “The play was a metaphor,” she reflected; it spoke



truth by speaking adjacent to the facts. “And it reminded us that, through art, we could give people another way to see their neighborhood.”

So, when it got too tough to work through their curriculum, or too grating to travel door-to-door, students “fumbled” in the high school library. They talked about their favorite books; they wrote poems, crafted songs, made videos; they toyed around on instruments; they painted. Some of their creations were biting indictments of the status quo. Some conjured visions of a “beautiful city.” Some got at the impossible to say. Take *The Holy Land*, which Valeska described as a “Trojan horse,” a truth snuck in under “the guise of being art.”<sup>61</sup> On her scroll, South Baltimore becomes a magical peninsula, industrial capitalism a series of dark-suited men, progress a proliferation of holes desperately capped in cast iron, and hope a decision to persist after the end of things and forge a different path for Curtis Bay.

But more than any other metaphor, it is the moment when Destiny takes over the storytelling apparatus (the means) to conjure up a just peninsula (the ends) that crystallizes the group’s prefigurative project. The argument implicit in that gesture is that change happens the instant you decide to treat the means and ends as if they are the same.

## What It Takes

“Can we just not and say we did?” Charles slumped into one of the library’s green chairs, this one underneath the quote: “With hard work there are no limits.” He groaned, burrowing his head into his backpack. “Not today.” He had finals coming up and his back hurt from sleeping on Greg’s couch. He did not want to fill out color-coded Post-It notes with his dreams for the community. Destiny tried to coax him in, to no avail. He curled up in the chair and disengaged.

Two hours later, the group had abandoned the activity and was deep into a conversation about whether the campaign had made them feel more “hopeful.” Ben said that it had—that he was “cynical” but the campaign showed him “small groups can rise to the occasion.” Elijah felt encouraged by “a lot of stuff. I see people building power. But I also see the government striking back.” Charles passed when the question came to him. Then students turned to Greg:

What humbles me and makes me really terrified is how much extra energy it takes to hold this space. It requires a lot of different elements: money, time, resources, people. . . . This campaign could so easily have never happened. *It scares me if this is what it takes.*

I looked at Charles, who managed to summon “extra energy” more often than not, despite extraordinary obstacles. Who worked up the courage to knock on doors while knowing people bristled when they saw him. Who devoted nights and weekends to fighting the *idea* of the incinerator. How could he possibly do all this work without believing that it added up to something more? How could he possibly sustain this premise all the time?

“Not today.”

There is no question that Free Your Voice’s Wednesday meetings felt different from Arthur’s driving tours, Minnie’s suitcase archive, and Dorothy’s recollections of “back then.” Students were engaging in a program of critical pedagogy that sought to bring new problems into speech. They were encountering deep pasts and far futures through a proximate challenge. And, through this work, they were trying to lend their “beautiful vision” weight.

This is a capacity of the subjunctive mood: to proceed as if things were different than they are and treat what “could be” as a real alternative; to approach uncertainty as hopeful because it means the future remains open to change. Students seized on this opening by collapsing ends and means and engaging in prefigurative work, finding ways to live out something close to their ideal world. Not all the time, as Charles asserted with his brooding silence, but often enough that they could summon “what it takes.”

As I conceive it, prefiguration is a premise, like risk, threat, and renewal. It is a politics of living on in a deeply imperfect world where one needs to pretend as if to make it through the day. And yet, it is different from these other modes of conjecture. Risk, threat, and renewal all displace potential to some other time: to a foreboding future, to an idealized past. But students named the present as a site of radical possibility, and they did so in more than one way.

This is not the same thing as a claim to omniscience—to “know[ing] in advance what form the future ought to take.”<sup>62</sup> It was, and is, an aspirational premise. Students wanted the present to be open. They wanted to break from structures of political disenfranchisement, regulatory abstraction, economic need, racial resentment, and more that made real change seem foolhardy to many residents of Curtis Bay. More than that, they wanted to make this “holey land” a place they would not have to leave to find a future, but a place where they might stay.

Which raises the question: what does it take to move from wanting this to realizing it, from premise to action? In the final chapter, I consider how Free Your Voice worked to convince others here that such a change could not afford to wait.





FIGURE 5.1. “We can’t breathe.” Protestors march and chant outside of the Maryland Department of the Environment. Photo by United Workers, December 2015.

## Out of Nothing

Greg was walking uphill with his eyes closed. That's how he looks when he gets stressed. It gives the impression of resignation during his most intense periods of work. His leaden feet struck sidewalk holes on one of Curtis Bay's main drags as we moved, slow and labored, toward his car. The sun was setting but the sky refused to show it off. I retreated deep into my scarf. We passed coal mountains come apart in streams of dust and shook it off, as we'd both done a hundred times before.

We trudged. We did not talk. We were too tired. We had been door-knocking for hours, inviting residents to join us at a rally to STOP THE INCINERATOR. We spoke with young Black families who were frustrated, but used to being disregarded by the "powers that be." We spoke with White folks who had spent their whole lives in a toxic place and were flummoxed by the call to respond with urgency. (At least, Greg and I spoke with White folks; fewer warmed to Charles, Elijah, Chris, and Destiny.) We walked, we knocked, we spoke, we circled back:

*It's just impossible to say.*

*Curtis Bay has always been a dumping ground.*

*Now you have to be realistic.*

Little comforts, habits, cautions, boundaries.

By sunset, we had spent so much time leaving flyers in door jambs and speaking to ostensibly indifferent people that, again, Greg was walking with his eyes closed. "It's just—" He sighed. "It's exhausting to create an event out of nothing." Then he turned his eyes to students half a block ahead of us. Two by two, they rapped their knuckles on new doors, trying hard to catch their neighbors up into a something.<sup>1</sup>



December 30, 2021. Cold air, gray skies above those ambient coal mountains. Coal dust accrued on surfaces stirs with methane gas, amassed inside a poorly vented tunnel. Air explodes. A fireball erupts from the shaft, leading plumes of thick, black smoke to hover in the sky. Soon it coats a twelve-block radius.<sup>2</sup> That dust is full of potent toxics.

Dust, fire, dust, eventual disease.

Is this violence fast or slow?

## Tick, Tick, BOOM

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.  
*Or does it explode?*

Langston Hughes, “Harlem”

We can’t breathe.

Elijah, fifteen-year-old Black student from Free Your Voice

On December 15, 2015, nearly two hundred people marched outside the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE), urging officials to “pull the permits” for the Fairfield Project. They had been summoned by Free Your Voice to hold the state accountable for neglecting Curtis Bay. Specifically, the group charged bureaucrats with failing to enforce a provision of the Clean Air Act that should have scrapped the project after an unlawful pause in construction. Instead, MDE had willfully averted its gaze. After months of debate, dozens of meetings, and thousands of petitions met with silence, protestors rallied to chide the agency’s inaction. Locked outside the building, they chanted, “We’re holding our breath.” The expression drew attention to a troublesome delay.

Nearby, Baltimore City police idled on an unexpectedly still evening, with jurors deadlocked in the first of the Freddie Gray trials and citizens awaiting their decision.<sup>1</sup> Commotion at MDE drew law enforcement to the agency. Within hours, they had arrested seven protestors for civil disobedience and summoned four armored vans to the scene. As sixty-odd officers urged back the peaceful crowds, who marveled at the state’s now swift and decisive response, Elijah broke the refrain. Pushing to the front, he locked eyes with an officer in the van where his friends had been restrained. Then, he transformed the exasperated “We’re holding our breath” into a call to action: “We can’t breathe.”<sup>2</sup>

There was nothing tentative about his words. They expressed a dire need to *do something*.

Elijah’s revision of the chant was unrehearsed, spoken out of impatience



after hours in a picket line and in solidarity with those who, elsewhere, awaited a guilty verdict that would never materialize. But the arrests were not spontaneous. They had been carefully planned to punctuate South Baltimore's uneventful encounter with the state. In fact, as I followed the campaign to stop the incinerator between 2012 and 2016, and kindred campaigns in years since, I have noted many efforts by organizers to puncture a routinized experience of pollution and neglect—to concentrate five generations of ambiguous exposure into crisis. They have turned the muddle of living with “the dust” from a condition marked by doubt, disavowal, and inertia into a site of explicit contestation.

This has been no easy feat, given corporate efforts to achieve the opposite. Recall those telling words from Nigel, the wily manager who pointed to the irreducible haze of harmful air and shrugged, “It’s just impossible to say.” It: the precise composition of this air and how its manifold components work; how they work on people who have never lived without these burdens; whether local illness can be pinned on industry and, if so, which one of the dozens zoned in Curtis Bay? Did that illness happen all at once or over time? Can you prove it in a lab? On the infinitesimal chance you can, how does the value of your health stack up against the value of the corporation? Somewhere in the thick of this relentless questioning, the dust itself becomes a question, and that question becomes an excuse for doing nothing—instead of acting on the plain fact that Curtis Bay is overburdened and that every smokestack adds to the equation.

But “we can’t breathe” cuts through this mess with moral clarity. It turns the muddle into a decisive claim. Here, the dust is evidence enough. There is no time to ask nit-picky questions, nor for half-measures, phased reforms, bridge strategies. When one is gasping hard for life, there is no time to putz about for information.

Note the power of Elijah’s words to turn the torpor of time passed into *time’s up*. They force a shift to the imperative: a call to act in spite of the impossible to say. If the subjunctive mood expresses doubts, wishes, premises, and hypotheticals, then the imperative mood is used to voice commands. It does not hedge. It does not ask why or what if. The imperative is a “grammar of futurity realized in the present,” as Tina Campt contends.<sup>3</sup> It names what has not happened yet and says it must. *Enforce the law. Pull the permits. Stop the incinerator.*

It’s true that we have seen such shifts before, usually in service of a deadly status quo. If waste is renewable, *burn trash*. If you do not understand this chemical, then *you must not regulate*. That organizers learned to turn the mood against this tide is therefore all the more remarkable. And it raises questions with conceptual and political stakes. How do people shift from

not knowing to demanding? How do they facilitate that shift for others? What is lost in this leap away from the aporia of late industrial life, and what is gained? Elijah may not have voiced a literal command, but his words surely implied one. And other phrases shouted out that day (“stop the incinerator,” “enforce the law”) were plainly exhortations. Each put on the pressure by bringing problems to a head, and each insisted on an ethical response. Not more granular knowledge. Not more rigorous data.

One thing the protests teach is that people subject to gradual, often imperceptible conditions of distress can make those conditions available for action—that they can work with time and mood to craft a way out of the uncertainties that come, in part, from the strangeness of a harm that can feel as though it barely happens. Describing the “slow violence” of toxic injury, Rob Nixon puts the predicament this way:

[Slow violence is] a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all . . . a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales.<sup>4</sup>

Such violence is “marked above all by displacements”: to a time back then, to a time to come, to a place over there, to the back of one’s mind, to a model, to a map, to a zone, to a weedy patch beneath the road, to a past forgotten in anticipation.<sup>5</sup> At different moments, Curtis Bay has been a place over there and back then and to come, and has contained its own amnesias. It is hard to grasp the depth of violence here. Even harder to draw that slow-unfolding violence into an event, working time to jolt observers into change.

You might remember the efficacy of events in the years before the buy-out of the Point, when residents like Minnie learned to bracket the attritional damage of exposure to make a politics, instead, of *Explosion! Fire! Catastrophic leak!* There, disasters served as signifying moments, wildly gesticulating that everyone should pay attention. Residents took advantage of these moments, but they did not exactly orchestrate them. There was a desperation to their activism. And in the end, their “win” came at the cost of acquiescing to a narrative where those in power “no longer ha[d] to be concerned” about prolonged toxicity.

Meanwhile, pollutants have continued to emanate from local plants and accrue in local bodies, without regard for people’s orienting premises—those “as ifs” I have been tracking all along. Their sloth decouples suffering from its original causes, enabling officials to dismiss health impacts as elusive and residents to acclimate to what Donna Goldstein and Kira Hall call



the “banality of toxicity.”<sup>6</sup> All this while those same residents speak through coughs and care for babies born with signs that something must be wrong. (Angel, who opens this book, had a traumatic pregnancy that she blamed on the dust. “But you never can be sure.”) All this while those same residents sit on porches, tallying neighbors with cancer and respiratory disease.

Curtis Bay is not unique in this regard: slow contamination discourages state intervention in sacrifice zones worldwide. It also strains the attention of the spectacle-driven news. And these problems are compounded by the stultifying effects of scientific uncertainty, which can be used to sow doubt among those who are confused and fatigued.<sup>7</sup> Gaps in time (between exposure and illness) and undone science (on chemicals’ cumulative effects) complicate work for activists struggling to represent the problem.<sup>8</sup> This was what Greg meant when, walking belabored up the hill, he acknowledged it was “exhausting to create an event out of nothing.”

Such expressions may sound like resignation, but resignation is not the only response to the vagaries of *longue durée* exposure. In Curtis Bay, competing parties have also slowed down, sped up, condensed, and reordered time to serve different needs. Through previous chapters I have shown time to be an important context for politics in late industrial Baltimore—from addressing points of protest disallowed by discourses of risk and threat, to triangulating the aspirational space defined by a desire for renewal, to exploring how radical futures get prefigured in the present. But here I turn to several ways that time has also been an object of political action.<sup>9</sup> Time gets put to work to shift the mood of things.

Part of the how comes in complicating neat distinctions between violence fast and slow, for life as lived is messier. The recent coal blast makes these complications awfully clear. But even on the twentieth-century Point, infrastructural neglect led tanker trucks to crash, job cuts left workers sleeping at the gauge, the threat of guns downtown caused residents to tolerate bad air, and bad air worked on bodies weakened by past trauma.<sup>10</sup> Fast violence also seeded sluggish deaths as explosions from the plants released their own exposures. And I learned from Minnie’s suitcase that even dust attacks sporadically: “It sweeps down [the street] like a great fog. . . . The fumes roll in on us so fast it’s hard to get the windows closed.”<sup>11</sup>

Or consider this story from 1956, when a terrible fire erupted at a church fundraiser held in a local dance hall, killing eleven people in the worst such event in the state. (Arthur was there. He was “lucky” to have “only lost a topcoat.”) It started as a small electrical fire that could have been contained, but because it went unnoticed it grew. “Part of the problem,” one firefighter explained, was the smell of smoke was “common” at the dance hall. “It may have been one of the reasons that people didn’t leave right away.”<sup>12</sup>

It seems that what we call slow violence is in fact a motley crew of speeds that can sag, build, bubble, burst, and work together. It seems that the muddle can be quite decisive—and can be made decisive by people tuned into this multiplicity. Organizers are. Their work requires close attention to time and its political entailments. They understand that the rift between disaster and the everyday is not a privilege everyone enjoys.<sup>13</sup> They know that slow violence can coalesce into event, and that eventful forms of protest can bring awareness to protracted suffering.

Recast in this light, slow violence need not incapacitate its victims the way that some observers guess it must.<sup>14</sup> It can also spark creative forms of temporal arrangement, some that take advantage of time passed and others that push past the murk toward a demand: *Enforce the law. We can't breathe.* Academics have a lot to learn from those in the throes of this condition who work time to get a grip on complex problems.<sup>15</sup> Sometimes their success involves displacement, too: displacing some contradictions to work on others; displacing enough unknowns to plant one's feet.

In the pages that follow, I accompany activists as they brush against a range of other groups that so far have dwelt in separate chapters, separate “as if” worlds: resident-supporters of the Fairfield Project, air-quality regulators, executives in industry. All these groups work time to jockey for control over the local future and, though their aspirations differ, they share a collection of temporal strategies. Sometimes these groups gain ground by imitating the *incremental* pace of slow violence, sometimes by ensuring stasis through *deferral*, and sometimes by concentrating time through the strategic manufacture of events that *punctuate*. The first two tactics cultivate ambiguity, playing into the affordances of the subjunctive mood, while the third performs a moral clarity that allows one to make demands. All three are studied responses to the techniques of social tense that structure how people perceive and manage danger.<sup>16</sup> Knowing Free Your Voice's goals, what is especially notable about the third is the imperative that something happen now, giving form to the premise that the present has transformative potential. Punctuation therefore suggests one way long-term problems might become intensely felt, sparking action on matters many here have learned to tuck away.

First, though, let's return to a place emblematic of this obstacle: to my favorite living room in Curtis Bay.

## Not Noticing

“I think . . . I think we're done. I think that's enough for today.” Minnie gathered papers strewn about the table and tucked them into bags, packed the



bags into her suitcase, and pushed the suitcase underneath her bed. She wrapped some cookies in Saran and sent me on my way.

Five minutes earlier, Minnie had let herself get uncharacteristically expressive: “Who’s going to believe me now, after ten, twenty, thirty years? Who’s going to believe me now? I mean, they’re going to say I’m lying . . . or it’s my fault for living [in Curtis Bay].”

Minnie was talking about her health. And her grown-up daughter’s cancer. She was admitting things you really didn’t say. But we had stumbled upon an article that triggered a memory that triggered an emotion.<sup>17</sup> The article recapped a hazard-planning drill on the Cold War-era Point. Imagine Minnie on her toes, watching the simulation. Moon-suited workers hurry here and there trying to get a handle on some danger in the future. Minnie looks on. Minnie coughs. A man from out of town strikes up a conversation. They talk about the chemical clouds and he instructs her, “Please get yourself a lawyer.” She smiles, but she doesn’t. “I should have, I really should have. But who’s going to believe me now?”

“I think we’re done.”

Displacement.

Minnie coughing in the crowd while her eyes were on the future, Minnie’s belated recognition of harm done, Minnie boxing up regrets—these images depict a world structured by lag, which Masco calls “a major psychosocial achievement of the industrial age.” Lag describes the chasm in time between causes and effects, and specifically between environmental events and the realization of their long-term repercussions. “In the name of commerce and security,” he continues, “consequences are loaded into an uncertain future and thus expelled from the realm of formal political discourse.”<sup>18</sup> In the meantime, they “patiently disperse their devastation.”<sup>19</sup>

It matters that he calls lag an “achievement”: it is not some neutral quality of chemical exposure. It is a pace that companies seize to distance profits from the harm that makes them possible, a pace that they exploit to stoke uncertainty about contamination. Nigel and his colleagues know as well as anyone that some industrial emissions take years to accrue into effects. (“Tick, tick, BOOM” was how Bill, the oil-worker whom we met in “Little Boxes,” glossed his dad’s demise.<sup>20</sup>) They know some chemicals don’t reveal their impacts on the body, or the earth, for generations. Consider endocrine-disrupting toxics that accumulate in breastmilk and therefore do their dirty work long after initial contact with a body. Or consider the public’s delayed recognition that industrial emissions are causing climate change. Industry has known for years, and that knowledge makes inaction in the meantime a decision, not an oversight. It means that lag, again, is an achievement of the modern corporation.



Add this to the many other dissociations that have produced Curtis Bay over the years: modes of spatial governance that severed this peninsula from more valued neighborhoods downtown, in the name of public health; war production that treated factories as abstract sets of inputs and outputs, rather than as lived particularities; risk-management regimes that govern air-as-modeled over air-as-lived, a split that accrues to the benefit of businesses. If these were not enough to foster doubt about exposure, then lag adds to the muddle, certainly.

Lag acts on the sensorium in Curtis Bay, where toxics have accumulated over decades but where old-timers see a net reduction in industrial production. Their discrepancy numbs the impulse to tie *this exposure to that disease*. Besides mobilizing against the incinerator, then, part of the campaign's work has been to train residents to recognize past exposures as relevant to the present, and to count small impressions as signs of something more.

Noticing: a necessary prelude to claims about what must be done, but a hard-won achievement among those who have learned to disavow toxicity.

Retraining the senses has been challenging in the absence of an exposure event, like those explosions on the 1980s Point. Events have a distinct capacity to alter social life. They make a difference by bringing multiple spheres of action into fleeting synergy.<sup>21</sup> Remember Minnie's experience of one chemical cloud as "proof" of a relationship between her health and a larger industrial order, and a clear sign something had to change. For a brief but forceful moment, the cloud ruptured her experience of routine. It rushed to the front of Minnie's mind, while her chronic cough lingered somewhere in the back. The rush was part of its effect, hastening her resolve about the need to leave. This is a capacity of events: they can shock observers to attention, catching them up in the fullness of feeling that something big is happening.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, not all events make the same kind of difference. Instead, time unfolds on multiple horizons, sometimes bursting in a spectacle of consequence and sometimes fading into normalcy.<sup>23</sup> Take crises. Despite the political promise often invested in them, crises are not necessarily transformative. They can change one's relationship with the state, as in the events of Chernobyl and Bhopal.<sup>24</sup> But they can also reinscribe existing inequalities.<sup>25</sup> One reason the buyout was so politically ambiguous was that it transformed things at the same time as it reinforced them. It stirred official intervention on behalf of long-neglected locals, but also excused inaction on environmental suffering. The intervention, after all, was into the disaster of industrial co-presence—or rather, the presence of people whose cata-

clysmic deaths would belie the state's self-image as protector—not into the harms shouldered by residents. And the solution was a spatial one that did not attempt to rein in industry.

If the Point had been a “TIME BOMB,” to borrow words from Minnie’s suitcase, then the buyout left the bomb in place while displacing people from the blast zone. It created distance between *the crisis* and *the everyday*, especially as residents’ escape meant granting absolution to the companies. It was a painful decision because those residents knew better. They knew that everyday exposures could escalate into events and that events could have delayed effects. They knew they carried slow deaths with them when they moved. But they also knew they needed to get out. So, they assented to a politics that kept the boundary between fast and slow intact, bracketing ongoing harm to dramatize catastrophe.

Left in the wake of their displacement are the endless forms of precarity not captured under the “crisis” designation about which there is “nothing spectacular to report.”<sup>26</sup> This becoming-background-noise of harm can lead both individuals and institutions to grow indifferent toward human suffering.<sup>27</sup> That includes one’s own, evident from foundational work by Javier Auyero and Débora Swistun on how slow industrial incursion dulls the senses to exposure.<sup>28</sup> So too in Curtis Bay where, to adapt a phrase from Christina Sharpe, industrialism has produced a “total climate.”<sup>29</sup> Its harms are as pervasive as the weather: they happen, but it’s rare that they add up to happenings.

Which helps explain responses like this one from Arthur: “We never really gave it [the air, our health] much mind.” Or this one from Dorothy: “It’s nothing like it used to be *back then*.” Their shrugs divulge a praxis of not noticing. Given the sensory confusion fomented by lag and compounded by countless other grave disassociations, many locals learn to disavow exposure—to push it to the edges of their vision in quiet gestures that we have been tracing all throughout this book. This disavowal takes work.<sup>30</sup> But it is a perfectly reasonable response to feeling powerless in the face of existential doubt, among people who want not to be worried.<sup>31</sup> Bill, whom I spoke with days after he had been diagnosed with cancer, likened the trend to the body’s attunement to smell: “Eventually, your nose gets numb to all that. It’s kind of like cat litter. After a while you don’t smell it, and it’s easy to forget you need to change it out.” Little comforts, habits, cautions, boundaries.

Even members of Free Your Voice who had attuned themselves to signs of ambient exposure in the process of campaigning were able to articulate a time when pollution seemed unproblematic. “Growing up, I knew the industry was here,” Destiny explained. “I could see it, I could smell it, but I’d learned to ignore it.” Ben described a similar insensibility:



You know the park by the coal piers? We call that our “backyard.” A lot of this stuff just seemed normal. And I sort of recall taking car rides with my parents and passing smokestacks, factories, all that . . . but I didn’t really *notice* until later. Like, when we learned about the incinerator that stuff started to stand out more to me.

Ben’s comments make clear that not noticing is hardly a compartment reserved for older folks who dream of industrial revival. It is also a feature of lives lived with no experience free from exposure, no recollection untainted by industrial debris.

When I say that many here have cultivated inattention toward pollution, I do not mean their senses have shut down. Certainly residents detected something in the air, and the occasional signs that things might be amiss: in the way blonde hair turned chartreuse when children swam in the cove, in soot that accumulated on white sheets, in holes that stockings developed when left outside to dry, and in the color snow would sometimes turn (“rainbow,” Bill described, like asphalt tinged with gasoline). But these were ambiguous impressions of pollution, easily explained away. Until “after ten, twenty, thirty years” of them. (“Who’s going to believe me now?”) Until “too late,” one man admitted mournfully:

When we were young, we didn’t pay no attention. But as you get older, things start going wrong with you, and you try to link this to that. You start reading stuff, learning that this area has the highest cancer rate on the whole East Coast, and it’s just like, “Wow. I didn’t know that.” I’m fifty-four years old and I’m learning shit every day that happened here, the stuff that’s buried here, the stuff we played ball on, but I’m learning too late.

These sentiments echo a theme common in the scholarship on environmental risk—that most people only belatedly perceive its grating impacts.<sup>32</sup> They also mirror Bill’s comments on cat litter. Indeed, even those who have moved away and return to visit family say they didn’t notice the smell until they’d had a break.

And lest we satisfy ourselves with classing these conditions as slow violence, remember: we know from the dance hall fire in the 1950s that not noticing a bad smell can turn deadly; we know from the recent coal explosion that ambient dust can burst into a devastating blaze.

So do organizers, who live with and who study these conditions. They were the same conditions—elaborated all throughout this book, of not knowing



and pretending “as if,” of locating hope and violence in some other time, of keeping matters out of speech, of holding chronic problems in abeyance—that led Greg to express exhaustion about creating an event “out of nothing” on that cold November day. Now, I knew Greg well and figured he did not really mean that there was “nothing” people ought to be worked up about. Rather, “nothing” was a measure of how rarely most locals thought about industrial pollution. “Nothing” was a challenge students and their mentors would need to overcome to bring an end to the incinerator. “Nothing” was their diagnosis of a perceptual block, gleaned from the laborious work of going door-to-door to spark concern among their inattentive neighbors.

But diagnosing this block was the beginning, not the end, of their organizing efforts—and it should be the beginning, not the end, of engaged scholarly work. Beyond describing perceptual obstacles that compose a state of crisis ordinariness, then, I want to ask what people living with them do.<sup>33</sup> How do they detect this attritional condition? And how, given the challenges of representing it, do they maneuver and make claims? Though few working on slow violence reject the notion that its victims can respond, initial attempts to describe the condition have been characterized by a sense of obstruction.<sup>34</sup> My goal here is different. I offer tools that, beyond “analyz[ing] the politics of temporality and . . . its pernicious effects on certain bodies,” also specify how those who experience slow violence participate in such politics.<sup>35</sup> To again echo Butler’s parables: people are shaped by time and they also shape it.<sup>36</sup> In contexts where they stretch out lag or concentrate time passed into events—at moments when they stew strategically in the subjunctive mood and those when they force a decisive break—time appears as the object, not merely the context, of human social life. People use it to direct attention and spark change.

### Consequential Meantimes

Jack and I sat across from one another in a worker-owned café uptown. He was outlining the campaign’s initial months of earnest work. “At first, we thought the incinerator was going to get built like that,” he snapped his fingers. “Six months. Everyone was telling us it was a done deal, since the company had [already] acquired its permits.”

Jack shook his head and took another swig of coffee. “So we were like, ‘We don’t have a lot of time, let’s just stir up some trouble.’ For three months, it was *crank-crank-crank*, and we tried to put heat on [the governor].” In the meantime, Free Your Voice was monitoring the Fairfield site and things did

not seem right: where there should have been construction, there was not much more than dirt.

Starting in summer 2013, students resolved to document the stasis. I had an opportunity, later, to scroll through photos taken during this slumber. In one, weeds sprout from underneath a vacant blacktop. In another, branches vine across the site's barbed-wire fence. A series taken that August features six grown geese waddling across the ninety-acre mud expanse. I could picture students venturing out to photograph the site and returning to the library's back corner. I could imagine them giggling and fighting and doodling on poster board, trying to suss out what this nothing meant. Probably Destiny asked a question and Elijah made a joke that frustrated Charles and led Greg to intervene. "For a while," Jack admitted, "the whole thing made us feel kind of stupid." Why try so hard to fight a mound of crushed cement?

By fall 2014, activists were finding it tough to summon urgency around stopping a development that did not seem to exist. Some neighbors assumed the project was "dead," and many were flabbergasted to hear that students were fighting an empty field. As Nixon writes, "delayed effects structure our most consequential forgettings."<sup>37</sup> This went on for some time until, in Jack's words, something "clicked": the incinerator's absence "pointed to a weakness. Maybe they didn't have any money. Maybe there



FIGURE 5.2. **Documenting the stasis.** Greg's photo of the still-empty incinerator site, taken during students' routine monitoring, August 2014.



was a problem. . . . We had no way of knowing, but we did have time to slow down and develop a better strategy.”

Jack’s comments vouch for the usefulness of the meantime, a period between events. The meantime is quintessentially subjunctive: a time of not knowing, of wanting, of waiting.<sup>38</sup> It can brim with possibility or signal trouble, punish inaction or reward procrastination. So far, we have encountered the meantime as that pause that structures late industrial problems. It is the gap that makes incineration sensible as a “bridge” strategy, the time before the proverbial boat sinks, the lag that corporations utilize to sidestep regulation. The capacity of different actors to turn this interim from a “political impediment” into a source of possibility is “key to the politics of time” in contexts of exposure, as Alex Nading writes.<sup>39</sup> Incrementality and deferral are two temporal strategies that can help do this work, substantiating the potential of not-yet-realized things—but they do not belong to any single group. In the months leading up to December 15, 2015, state and corporate actors were busy trying out both strategies, as were students who moved between the empty site and the “classroom” they had built from their campaign.

Incrementality, as I conceive it, is a tactic that mirrors the rhythm of slow violence. It describes a gradual buildup that sometimes coalesces into something (an event, a reform, a disease). Toxicologically, incrementality gestures toward the consequences of prolonged exposure not captured in the regulatory sphere, where rules designed to limit the release of a “single pollutant” from a “single plant” obscure the impact of living for years among heavy industry.<sup>40</sup> While regulators dole out permission to pollute based on the presumption that many toxics are benign beneath a given threshold, they tend to build with the passage of time, accruing in bodies exposed to multiple, continuous releases. Bodies have histories that threshold theories of pollution and the modes of attention premised on them fail to grasp, as many scholars show.<sup>41</sup> So incrementality poses real perceptual problems. But it also opens room for shrewd maneuvering.<sup>42</sup>

Sam, the Sierra Club staffer and Dream Team member who we met in chapter 4, dubbed the tactic “death by a thousand cuts. Often what Sierra Club does is lobby for rules that slowly increase the economic burden on polluting industries.” Air-quality officials also invoked incrementality to describe their work. One portrayed it as commensurate with “chipping away at a hunk of granite”—a laborious process of environmental change-making. Incrementality, then, is a pace that stays beneath thresholds of recognition, but that makes something lasting in the process.<sup>43</sup> As a strategy,



it can mean weakening an opponent through small, successive wins. It can also mean making progress toward a goal while no one's watching.

As we sat together over now-cold cups of coffee, Jack explained that the incinerator's construction had proceeded incrementally. Groundbreaking did not even begin until three years after Energy Answers acquired building permits, since the state granted them more time to secure much-needed financing. In the interim, Free Your Voice worked with allies to research the plant's prospective customers. They learned that twenty-two public entities had signed power-purchasing agreements. They also learned that these contracts specified a deadline by which buyers could opt out if the incinerator was not yet sourcing electricity. The deadline was a form of visible power—codified and explicit—that the group could bend to their advantage. So students and their mentors decided to target institutions one by one. They would turn sluggishness (a perceptual block) into a frame for questioning the project's solvency.

Over several months, different groups within the campaign's coalition targeted different purchasers, knowing that if they could get one to void their contracts, others would likely void theirs, too. This was because the buyers had negotiated their contracts collectively; if any one backed out, its debts would be dispersed among the rest of the group. Keeping after the buyers was tedious, exhausting work: making calls, drafting petitions, sitting in boardrooms. But the group kept chipping away. February 2015 brought their first victory, with the Baltimore City government. Other institutions quickly followed suit. Bit by bit, the campaign collapsed the Fairfield Project's largest source of revenue.

The success of this effort stalled building on-site, as Energy Answers scrambled to secure support for an increasingly risky project—and Free Your Voice made a point of highlighting this stasis. One summer afternoon, I walked next to Charles and Destiny as they led other students on a toxic tour, maneuvering past coal cars and tanker trucks before proceeding to the site where building was purportedly underway. While we walked, Destiny described how the campaign's initial victory opened space to tap another form of visible power: deadlines embedded in emissions regulations.

"Projects like the incinerator hold Certificates of Public Convenience," she told guests, which require them to begin "'substantive and continuous construction' within eighteen months," a timeline set by the federal Clean Air Act and enforced by the states. These certificates are meant to ensure that polluters use the "best available control technology" and satisfy the latest environmental rules. Otherwise, companies could obtain permits to build, sit on them while technology improves, and then use equipment that is cheap and outdated. After granting permits, it is the state's responsibility

to monitor construction and ensure that it proceeds “continuously.” And, Destiny noted, MDE had recorded two years of site visits without any obvious headway.

At this point in the tour, Charles and Destiny led groups around a bend in the road to reveal the empty site. To their supporters, this emptiness communicated they had “not yet” lost the fight. And it dramatized delays documented by MDE. According to public files, the agency’s first site assessment took place in November 2013, when an inspector noted that thirty-two steel pilings had been installed, but that “no work was being performed during the inspection and the site consultant could not provide any information as to when [construction would proceed].” In February 2014, MDE came back, noting that “no additional work” had been performed since the previous visit. In June 2015, inspectors again noted no activity. One observer even called the term (construction) a “mockery. . . . It’s like if one of us went down, put a shovel in the ground, and moved a bucket of dirt.” Taken alongside students’ photographs, these observations made something of the murky interim, giving shape to the project’s shortcomings.

By August 2015, the campaign had begun to make use of these lags, pouring energy into catching the company on a technicality. “Pull the permits!” became a rallying cry as students, environmentalists, faith leaders, and social justice workers mined the minutiae of construction regulation. At public events and residents’ doors, they transitioned from a script about



FIGURE 5.3. Guiding students on a toxic tour through Curtis Bay. Charles speaks to visitors about the Fairfield Project. Photo by United Workers, March 2016.



environmental justice to one about how construction had been “substantially discontinued for a period of eighteen months or more after it had commenced.” They also sought to make this violation “clear as day” to officials, using the state’s own findings against the incinerator.

With time, this argument moved MDE. In November 2015, officials penned a stern letter to Energy Answers, giving them seven days to prove that they had been building “continuously.” And in response, Energy Answers enumerated projects that had unfolded slowly over the years, underground and out of sight, like drainage work and electrical upgrades. In essence, they argued that the project’s incremental growth—that happening that proceeds under the cover of stillness, pacifying resistance through the appearance of absence while accumulating reserves over time—had finally built to a point of consequence.

It seemed reports of the incinerator’s death had been greatly exaggerated.

If incrementality has been one response to slow violence, a second has more plainly been deferral, or delay. Delay does not build. It stews, halts. One can delay recognition, remediation, and effects. In the environmental sphere, what makes chemical contamination “all the more disturbing,” according to one doctor quoted in *Silent Spring*, “is the knowledge that our fate could perhaps be sealed twenty or more years before the development of symptoms.”<sup>44</sup> In the meantime, *it’s just impossible to say*.

Aside from the immediate bodily effects of industrial explosion, such as stinging eyes and itchy skin, most illnesses in Curtis Bay follow a latency period that forestalls intervention. In one worker’s words, “exposure to chemicals doesn’t give you cancer the next day.” Løchlann Jain calls this delay “one of cancer’s biologically defining features.” It produces an existential doubt about the source of things that manifests as a “nowhereness.”<sup>45</sup> Remember Nigel’s callous comment that “there was just so much” pollution, no one could be blamed.

Nigel’s words serve as a reminder that deferral is not some natural quality of biochemical life. It is instead, in Stefanie Graeter’s terms, a “grammatical tense of corporate action” that tables remediation to some other time.<sup>46</sup> Minnie struggled with this displacement. When her husband was diagnosed with “four different cancers” she believed stemmed from his job, he had long since retired; they could not prove responsibility. Deferral, then, can be an engine of slow violence. But, with some modification, it can also be a tactic: a strategic suspension of time, an exploitation of the pause for one’s own gain.

Deferral marked the Fairfield Project since its inception. First, there was

the three-year delay in commencing construction, and then a second period during which the company argued the “clock should have stopped” due to a stop-work order from the state. The passage of time was visible to passersby as untrimmed grass and fading signs. One fence on the property’s perimeter displayed an impressive collection of trash caught there over many windy days. Plenty of people maligned the long and growing interim, but none as much as Energy Answers. Until 2010, the company was embroiled in tense negotiations with regulators over having to obtain a refuse-disposal permit, which would have caused a disastrous delay. Such a pause “could have been deadly for the project. Three hundred million dollars [in stimulus money] is on the line, and we have to get shovels in the ground by the end of the year to qualify,” the company’s attorney then explained.<sup>47</sup>

McCarthy, the CEO, also complained of interruptions caused by the campaign. When we met on the empty site, he lambasted opponents for thwarting progress through “tactical” requests for state review. He also characterized students’ calls for a health analysis as a “devious means of obstruction. Health impact takes years [to determine] for a plant like this.” These are “long and tedious processes,” McCarthy continued. Activists know this. They know procedural delays are their “best shot” at stopping big developments. “The more they can delay, the less people want to invest. The more they can make it controversial, the less people want to deal with us.” It’s something that “groups like this always do.” Then he echoed Lou: for every day the group deterred construction, four thousand tons of trash would go into landfills, which leach methane into the atmosphere, hastening the earth’s demise. “Some people will fight anything that isn’t perfect, but we don’t have time to waste looking for a magical solution.”

Like others who saw the incinerator as the best of all plausible options, McCarthy pointed out that things “could have been worse” than his plans for the Fairfield site. But even Free Your Voice invoked the interim to draw attention to things that could have been built (like a solar farm) had the state not waited so long to intervene. In these cases, appeals to the meantime figured what went on amid deferral as an opportunity cost. But in other cases, delay itself proved advantageous. Within a labyrinthine regulatory process, time was a weapon of the weak.<sup>48</sup>

By now Jack had pushed his cup aside and was scribbling a timeline on his napkin: ellipses, *crank-crank-crank*, ellipses, then an exclamation mark. He was mapping out the group’s hard-going effort—with environmental lawyers from the Dream Team—to put up legal hurdles to the Project. In 2012, for instance, when Energy Answers requested an extension on its first “commence-construction deadline,” the company went through an



abbreviated agency review that invited public comment. Lawyers alerted Free Your Voice and they brought dozens to testify against the plant. *Crank-crank-crank*. As a result, MDE revised the plant's emissions limits down, further delaying progress. That precipitated a second opportunity to intervene in 2014—*crank-crank-crank*—when Energy Answers failed to acquire the requisite emissions offsets.

The politics of incrementality and deferral characterized multiple sides of the incinerator debate, with representatives from the company, the agency, and the campaign all seeking to take advantage of the consequential meantime. Even Michael, head of the neighborhood association, stacked speakers at meetings to keep Free Your Voice off of the agenda until late. But protests on December 15 targeted delay at the hands of the state. Besides dawdling in its attempts to actualize cumulative impacts legislation, MDE had long deferred enforcement of project compliance, taking eight months to determine permit validity and letting deadlines pass without consequence.<sup>49</sup> In public fora, Free Your Voice condemned state agents for this abdication. Among themselves, though, organizers expressed distress over time's asymmetrical politics. At a meeting in the weeks leading up to December 15, a doctor on the Dream Team put her disappointment this way: we are “still waiting,” and the injunction to “wait” has gone on “month after month after month.” In response, Jack slammed his fists down in frustration.

“I feel like our opponents own time. And when we give in to their timelines, we lose.”

Here, we might recall Destiny's intervention in *The Holey Land*: her insistence “that's not how the story ends. When a man comes to town and tells you how to solve your problems, gather your people. Organize your community.”

### Moral Punctuation

Another consequence of the project's deferral, however unintended, was that it left room for opposition to swell. Supporters of the plant called time its “Achilles' heel,” and Greg admitted: “We've had the luxury of spending years building this campaign because we have an opponent that delays and delays.” One of the tactics Free Your Voice cultivated in the interim was to

punctuate time with their own deadlines. Each deadline was an attempt to seize the storytelling apparatus, and each came with a demand: *Pull the permits. Enforce the law. Stop the incinerator.* While deferral forestalls and incrementality builds at a strategically glacial pace, punctuation derives power from its speed. It brings proceedings to a head and directs them toward a designated moment, pulling the meantime to its forceful culmination. Each moment marks a burst in the unfolding of historical time—an explosion of temporal intensity that is more than the sum of its parts.<sup>50</sup> (“Tick, tick, BOOM.”) Sometimes, campaign deadlines concentrated months-long struggles into singular events. At other times, they lent gravity to group demands by letting the plant stand for decades of accumulated danger.

When Free Your Voice pushed energy buyers to nullify their agreements, for instance, they marked April 25 as a “judgment day,” when they would either “celebrate” buyers for “doing the right thing,” or apply tremendous public pressure. All twenty-two buyers listened, and Energy Answers was forced to face that grim reality. December 15 would be a deadline for MDE. After requesting months prior that officials pull the incinerator’s permits, sharing thousands of petitions, and receiving “nothing but silence,” the group delivered “thirty days’ notice.” “We don’t expect [MDE] to respond,” Greg said. “Then the clock starts ticking. They’ll delay like they always have and eventually trigger the demonstration where we can highlight why, instead of continuing to ignore us, they should actually do something.”

Over the years I worked with the campaign, I came to think of this strategy as a form of moral punctuation—a marking of time that demanded an ethical response.<sup>51</sup> Like punctuation in the grammatical sense, one can deploy deadlines to separate time and clarify meaning.<sup>52</sup> They open what Robin Wagner-Pacifici calls a “narrative escape hatch,” revealing a way out of the uncertain interim.<sup>53</sup> For Free Your Voice, activating that escape meant refusing to accommodate delays associated with the legislative process or epidemiologically “proving” injuries. *We can’t breathe*, after all, calls for swift intervention. It figures speed as just, compared with the violence of deferral or the treacherous patience of incrementality.<sup>54</sup>

Frustrated with MDE’s failure to “do its job,” convinced that “our political levers are broken,” and fed up with evasions from the Nigels of the world, organizers abandoned attempts to debate the Fairfield Project on official terms. They resolved the time had come to be decisive. On December 15, Free Your Voice would assert the state’s moral failure with respect to Curtis Bay had gone on long enough and issue demands that redress happen *now*, condensing a “violence of delayed destruction” into a flash of clarity.<sup>55</sup>

In this sense, moral punctuation evokes what Walter Benjamin describes



as redemptive time. In *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin implores historians to “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger,” to put the past to work in contexts of present political need.<sup>56</sup> Benjamin’s depiction of the “flash” as a stop-cord halting the progress of a runaway train or a slap born of bubbled-up frustration fancies redemptive time as an emphatic end to things gone wrong, even if those things were not themselves emphatic.<sup>57</sup> A similar shift can be heard in Langston Hughes’s famous poem “Harlem,” as the dream deferred explodes. There is a double meaning here that echoes Benjamin’s thesis: that things deferred might flare into rebellion, but also that rebellion might expose (and so destroy) the fantasy.<sup>58</sup>

Punctuation is akin to this explosion. It compresses slow-unfolding problems into an event. It hoists the layers beneath the present to show that time has built up to a sudden peak. Arthur older, Arthur younger, Arthur in his Air Force uniform—back then, these days—all of it crescendos to a crisis. Not a crisis set apart from the everyday but one made *of* the everyday: a willful use of spectacle to shine a light on chronic harm. Punctuation therefore registers “a moral demand for a difference between the past and future,” and insists that history derive meaning from this breach.<sup>59</sup>

Moral punctuation was one of those tactics for creating movement in the present that organizers had honed over generations. As he scribbled exclamation marks on napkins, Jack reminded me that *longue durée* problems were the movement’s bread and butter—starting when the Poor People’s Campaign made an event of systemic poverty. The PPC’s first public act was to occupy the National Mall, where thousands lived in tents for weeks on end. The demonstration was designed to represent the plight of the poor in a “dramatic” way—dramatic enough, Dr. King had said, to “confront the power structure massively.”<sup>60</sup> And though the PPC faltered for many reasons, King’s assassination among them, organizers have continued to utilize this tactic, forcing problems to a climax and opening the time of *kairos*: the time for change in self and world; the right time, but in this case made instead of fated.<sup>61</sup> As one example, Jack told me about United Workers’ first campaign, organizing low-wage stadium workers in Baltimore City:

We’d spent years building a narrative around broken promises. We’d generated a lot of attention, we’d built a solid base, we’d met with [the owner]. Nothing. And eventually it was like, “Okay.” So we put it all at the feet of the [state] and said, “We’re done talking.” And—*crank-crank-*

*crank*—we announced a hunger strike. The minute we announced and the media showed, that’s what really did it. We’d built up the problem over so many years that when [the event] finally happened . . . they conceded.

One reason the hunger strike was so effective was that it highlighted the paradoxes of a system that expected employees to sell food for poverty wages. In Jack’s words, this is what effective action does: it “puts people into contact with a power system that’s difficult to engage,” concentrating its diffuse effects into a single confrontation. Direct action is, in short, about more than being disruptive. It “makes contradictions plain.” To quote King, it seeks to “foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. . . . We must come to see,” he wrote from a Birmingham jail, “that justice too long delayed is justice denied,” and to observe deferral with “moral concern” that transcends mere impatience.<sup>62</sup>

Students in Free Your Voice spent years studying these campaigns. They believed that generating crisis could spark substantive change. On Wednesday afternoons, they would collapse into stiff green chairs and do the work, grappling with the apathy they registered among their neighbors. After one disappointing round of door-knocking—which left Greg walking with his eyes closed as we passed the coal that cold November day—we gathered at the school to come to terms with what we’d heard. Destiny was sick and Elijah was tired and Charles was sick and tired, curled up on his chair. So, the task of kicking off the debrief fell to Greg.

“I guess I’ll start by saying people respond to our work in different ways. . . . Sometimes it’s like, ‘Well, have you tried this? Because maybe the system would go back to functioning normally if you did this.’ Wrote a letter to the mayor or something. Whereas other people—who I think have broader experience—say, ‘There’s a real value in [what you’re doing], exposing critical issues that we need to address.’ You’re not exposing a problem so that the problem can be solved as quickly as possible, and then you go along with your happy lives. You expose problems because they’re real problems, and opportunities to deepen your engagement.”

Charles had his head down, but he’d been listening. He started rummaging through his backpack, looking for a ditto. “We read ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail’ in English class today.”

“Tell me about it.”

Charles could not find the paper. But he remembered the gist: “Martin Luther King was describing what the role of direct action is in movement building and community building: it problematizes and makes a crisis.”

“Great. Right. It clearly makes a crisis,” nodded Greg. “The more that



I'm involved in this work, the more I think it's an important function in society to be willing to do that, and—" he shook his head. "Here almost all the conversations are about how *not* to do that. It's like, how to color within the lines, as opposed to how do you actually or constructively or artfully or skillfully create a situation that exposes a real crisis. In our way, I think we're actually having some success doing that . . . I mean, you don't go into something like this saying, 'We're going to clarify societal crises.' Like, that's a pretty arrogant thing to say—"

"Wait," Elijah stopped him. "I don't get it. What was Charles talking about?"

"Charles, do you want to explain?"

Charles lifted himself off the couch. "Okay. So 'Letter from Birmingham Jail' is literally a letter that Martin Luther King wrote to a group of clergymen after an action that King was arrested at, and the basic message from the clergymen [to King] had been, 'Y'all need to chill out before something serious happens,'" Charles said, putting both hands in front of his chest to gesture: *wait*. "And [King replied that] direct action plays a really big role in living as a citizen in society, that it's rooted in the idea that a crisis needs to be made apparent when there is one, and that [pointing out crises] should be a focal point in movement building."

"Right!" Greg moved to the edge of his seat. "And politicians, a lot of their response is like, 'There is no crisis. There's no crisis being highlighted here. These are just some wonderful, inspiring young people.'" Charles rolled his eyes, acknowledging he shared in that frustration.

"Well, it depends what your definition of crisis is," Elijah intervened. "'Cause one version of crisis be like, oh, something bad happening with your life or something that can't be fixed. And another version of crisis be like, information that's too much for certain people to handle."

"When I think of crisis, I think about different levels," replied Greg. "There's a local crisis about health, living with all the burdens in the community. . . . And this also connects to a larger global crisis about climate change and how societies adapt for it or not, which fits into a broader dialogue about defining what we mean by renewable energy. . . . And obviously in Baltimore, we just went through something that was *recognized* as a crisis."

"The Uprising?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"Which is pretty different—well, it *feels* different than what you're talking about."

"Acute versus—" Greg paused to think his response through. "It's like if the incinerator all of a sudden existed and one day it started literally raining

down lead and mercury. Maybe that would count. But not—” Not a violence so vague that it almost feels like “nothing.” Not a harm that people say they’ve slowly grown “numb” to.

December 15, on the contrary, would “count” as a crisis. It would mark a studied response to slow violence: not a perceptual block, not an incapacitation. A far cry from how Lauren Berlant describes agency in the face of attritional harm (as “maintenance, not making . . . sentience without full intentionality”), Free Your Voice spent months mapping the event, down to the finest details.<sup>63</sup> I got a taste of their efforts one blustery December night at a civil disobedience training.

Two weeks after Greg acknowledged it was “exhausting to create an event out of nothing,” and four days before the rally, a group gathered in a stone church basement: Destiny, Charles, Elijah, Chris, and Ben; Greg, Jack, and a few United Workers staffers; and several members of the Dream Team, including one doctor, one priest, one anthropologist (me), and one facilitator. We had all agreed to take part in the event, but seven in particular would put their “bodies on the line” and risk arrest to ensure this confrontation with the state would be theatrical—a task that required preparation. So there we were, gathered around a ramshackle projector, trying to craft clarity from the impossible complexities of late industrial life. Besides the occasional nervous joke, the group was focused; even Elijah stilled himself. There were no hours-long tangents, no wayward wads of paper. Jon, a serious man with a long goatee, explained we had to tell a story.<sup>64</sup> Make it tense, but not tortuous. Don’t lose the message. Leave muddy details well outside the frame.

We began by reviewing photos from historic protests, projected onto the stone church walls. First, there were images from Gandhi’s march on the Dharasana Salt Works, then the WTO “Battle of Seattle,” and finally the Uprising following the death of Freddie Gray. Jon prompted the group to identify key features of each narrative. *What imagery gets put to work? Who are the victims and culprits? What central problem seems to be at stake?*

In response to the first, Charles admired how salt marchers “used their bodies” to point out violent contradictions in the colonial system. To his mind, images of the passive crowd being clubbed by the police captured the moral failure of the British state. Destiny was moved by the sheer mass of people who showed up to protest trade negotiations in Seattle. Their numbers gave economic globalization—a topic that to her seemed quite abstract—forty thousand human faces.

Then we turned to Baltimore, to photos of a moment we could all remem-



ber. Some of us were there. One image featured Elijah holding a box emblazoned with the words, “No Justice, No Peace.” What struck us most about these snapshots were all the things that made Baltimore stand for something bigger than itself: like signs that listed other names alongside Gray’s; like echoes of the awful mantra, “We can’t breathe.”

Imperialism, capitalism, racism: three terribly ordinary forms of violence, three total climates made into events, three structures laid bare in rare bursts of clarity. My point is not that organizers destroyed the systems once and for all through this clarifying work. Of course not. But they did shock worlds to attention. They did make it impossible to sustain the premise there was “nothing” going on. Free Your Voice resolved to do the same on December 15.

Inspired by these aggregating acts, the event at MDE would stage a concentration of accumulated harms. Greg described the plans at our training:

We’ll form a very long line and citizens will proceed into [the building] one by one. They’ll buzz in, enter the office, and say, “I’m here to express my opposition to the incinerator.” The idea is that everyone who’s been involved will get to follow up directly, but also that their mass will create a backlog for the agency.

Each individual’s encounter with the state would be “utterly ordinary,” but the line’s cumulative effects would create a headache for officials. Besides signifying how individually benign parts can accrue into a problematic whole, Greg continued, the crowds would show that “acts of democratic participation come with an expectation.”

“People in Curtis Bay are tired of feeling like their lives are disposable,” Destiny added. “We’ve got to show them there’s a price for ignoring communities.”

Plenty was left uncomplicated in this plan that Free Your Voice would typically be quick to challenge: that the state should be the arbiter of local development, that MDE was a “democratic” institution, that one could achieve justice within existing systems. But bracketing these issues kept the message clean. There was a clear problem (Energy Answers violated the terms of its permit), a clear victim (“citizens” too long treated as “disposable”), a clear solution (enforce rules already on the books), and a paradox in need of resolution (that one should need to violate the law to show the law was not being upheld)—bound together in one moralizing scene.

We kept the clock in mind as we sketched out the event and decided to begin at 4:00 p.m. This way, participants would line up during business hours, but their mass would occupy the office past closing. Meanwhile,

organizers would fill the lobby with protestors. When it began to look like officials would force the masses out, a special few would take a seat. I was tasked with keeping everything on schedule as a “stage manager,” which meant speeding things up if the line moved too slowly and stalling if it advanced too fast (which would complicate the timing of the sit-in). The sit-in would punctuate the night, transforming the long line of polite requests into an ultimatum: *Enforce the law, or we won't leave.*

The plans seemed clear enough, until Jon reminded us, “there’s a huge spectrum of potential responses,” from being ignored to meeting lethal force. The purpose of the training would be to run through those potentials and “hone our skills and intuition.” He split the room so we could practice role playing. The “arrestables” (including Charles, Ben, and Jack) would portray themselves; they needed practice. Jon, Destiny, and Greg stepped in as law enforcement, while Chris and I played bureaucrats from MDE.

Our first scenario took less than a minute: the arrestables arrived, Chris and I called the cops, the cops told the arrestables to go, and the arrestables did, which prompted a discussion about how to productively resist the police. The second scenario took longer, because police had planned a stand-off. Not having expected this, the arrestables were awkward. They debated what to do while the cops just sat there, eating pizza. “So do you all have a cause?” Destiny taunted. “Most folks plan this before they get here, but y’all are good,” poked Jon. Jack looked confused. Charles looked down at his shoes. Time passed until it fizzled into nothing.

The scenarios raised a string of questions that our group had not considered: Would the arrestables hold hands, link arms, or raise their fists? If their arms were linked, could they sit without falling down? Once they sat, would they face the cops or face the media? Would they chant or persist in silence? If they chanted, what would they chant? What would they wear? How would they make decisions? If by vote, would a simple majority suffice, or would they require unanimity? Maybe consensus minus one. What would they do if MDE did not promptly call for backup? How long would they wait for officers to respond? Would they do anything—*anything*—to ensure arrest? How would they comport their bodies to resist but not provoke the police? Would some (like Jack, a White man) take risks to protect others (like Charles)? Would the absence of arrest constitute a failure? What outcome would constitute a victory?

Each question complicated what had once seemed like clean plans, weakening our shared resolve. The room grew quiet as we sat with this uncertainty. If anything became clearer that night, it was that clarity would be hard-won. But the group agreed that there was “too much at stake” to let the moment sag. By the end of the night, the arrestables determined they would



tuck away unknowns and stand firm in their demands. If those demands were not met, they would be dragged from MDE. No matter how long it took, they would force the state to act. In the process, they would orchestrate an event—designed to highlight the absence of eventfulness in Curtis Bay. Refusing to accept “no” or “later” for an answer, the arrestables would kneel and repeat: *Enforce the law*. They would not hedge. They would compel a response to the problem. The problem: months of deferral on the permit question, but also generations of unspeakable danger.

December 15 did not go as planned, but this time the group stayed steady through the mess. In anticipation of the protest, MDE had locked its doors, leaving hundreds to march outside in circles while a few gave interviews on live TV. I remember arriving in a van with the arrestables and being rebuffed at the front gate. It took a while to grasp why the building had been closed to visitors. Once we realized it was closed because of us, the group’s mood shifted quickly. Before, the van had been quiet, as folks were understandably nervous. Then came shock (“Have they locked down?”), then dismay (“What kind of agency shuts out its constituents?”), then confidence (“They must know that we have power.”). And then—*crank, crank, crank*—the realization “this plays right into our story.”

Soon, I was helping to lead chants along the busy road, while Elijah delighted in control of the bullhorn. Greg managed a rabble of reporters, and Destiny kicked off a rousing speech: “For months, MDE has been silent. Now they’re trying to silence *us*, but we won’t stop . . . because today is a day of justice.” She paused to mark the moment, while marchers calmed themselves to listen. “The world is watching Baltimore,” she resumed to loud applause. “And as our friends await the verdict in the Freddie Gray trial, we too have waited too long for answers from MDE.”

After a while, officials agreed to allow Destiny and a “small delegation” (the arrestables) inside. There, Ben shared stories about growing up in Curtis Bay, Destiny discussed her mother’s asthma, Jack reiterated their demands, and the agency director explained that they needed “more time,” instructing protestors to “be patient, please.”

“When that happened, we were very intentionally able to cause conflict, because [the injunction to be patient] followed months of build-up,” one arrestable explained to me:

I mean, the fact that we received nothing but silence for months was insane. Silence is to take the side of the status quo. And I think we made that abundantly clear . . . because we just got so much back-and-forth: “We



FIGURE 5.4. “No incinerator.” Destiny leads a march outside of MDE. Photo by United Workers, December 2015.

hear you” and “We appreciate you” and “We want to meet with you, but we need to consider all of these legal issues,” you know? It was the same old delay, delay, delay. *And then there was this shift.* It happened once we got inside and we were able to say, “No, we’re not here to negotiate. We’re not leaving until you pull the permits and enforce the law.” We were actually able to say, “No, this is about people’s lives. This is about no longer considering these communities disposable.” And to just hear, “Oh, we appreciate you,” and “We hear you loud and clear” — it was like, “No! That’s not good enough, and that’s not why we’re here. *We’re here to demand something,* and if that demand is not met, we’re gonna shout. We’re gonna use our bodies. You know, we’re gonna put ourselves on the line for this.”

Once it became clear that the group would not leave peaceably, officers descended on the scene. Dressed in riot gear, police made their way inside. An hour later, with helicopters overhead, they emerged to chants of “Arrest the polluters!” and “No justice, no peace!” Stories soon spread about seven people (“the #incinerator7”) arrested for simply trying to “deliver a letter,” supporting protestors’ claims that the state had abandoned any semblance of a social contract. All the not knowing, not saying—all the invisible attrition—all the shrugs and doubts—all of it crescendoed to a crisis.

A crisis “we made,” Charles reminded me as we read headlines the next day.<sup>65</sup> A crisis “we made” out of *nothing*.



## Now What?

The incinerator did not die on December 15, or the next day, or the next. The arrests happened, followed by a trying night in jail for the #incinerator7, but the agency's decision was predictably delayed. The arrestables saw trespassing charges raised and dropped before MDE's ruling finally arrived in March, though that ruling did not kill the project either. It just voided old construction permits, leaving the door open for Energy Answers to submit new paperwork.

The boundaries of the event stretched forward into the as-yet-undetermined future. They extended backward over several generations. The day after the arrests, for example, Free Your Voice published a press release naming the buyout of the Point as one reason they had refused to compromise in their demands. It was a reminder that events can be exclamation marks—eruptive and decisive—but they are also restless things whose contours squirm.<sup>66</sup> Some can even do work on slow problems, as Jack insisted when we spoke a few months later.

I wanted to know how Jack reconciled December 15 with the “long term” he had invoked so many times. I wanted to know because December 15 did not attempt anything like system change. The group's efforts to maneuver within the meantime, and their eventual appropriation of a crisis argument, all proceeded squarely within existing systems. (“Enforce the law.”) They doubled down on the political and perceptual mechanisms that have long endangered Curtis Bay. Curtis Bay: where the law is implicated in exposures, where violence does not lie in an event, and where modes of intervention premised on the prospect of some spectacular to-come are partially to blame for chronic problems. Curtis Bay: where quiet harms get forgotten in anticipation. Why pursue a politics of eventfulness here? The means and ends did not cohere. I pressed Jack on the incongruence. He paused, furrowed his brow, and reminded me that this is a “long game.”

Jack grabbed another napkin. As he sketched, he continued: “These crisis moments—they direct attention, they help us make these little gains. But this stuff is hard.” He passed me the napkin, turned into a wall. “[After] we won the living-wage campaign at Camden Yards . . . we conducted this workshop where we built a ‘Wall of Poverty.’ People wrote down causes on each brick, and one of the bricks was labeled ‘Camden Yards.’ [We won that fight, so] we took the brick away.” He crossed it out. “Alright, victory. Now what?” The wall, still very much intact, was a reminder not to get complacent. Campaigns create little crevasses within the now through which to grasp that “beautiful vision,” but no single campaign is a wrecking ball.

Sometimes you have to rub out the incongruence to summon *what it takes*. Shocking people to attention, shaking up praxes of disavowal, capacitating young minds to seize the apparatus—all this is indispensable to the “long term.” So is the occasional turn to the imperative, which crystallizes vague conditions long enough to open them to change.

It is not my intention, in acknowledging these openings, to overstate the incinerator victory: December 15 did not break the capitalisms invested in local industry. It did not jolt old-timers into insurrection. It did not disappear toxics long accrued in Curtis Bay. People would still die slow deaths instigated long before the protests, and the coal piles would sit there six more years and then erupt, in 2021. But the event did appear to make a difference. For weeks after, I watched locals pore over news coverage. Everybody seemed to be engaged. Michael was not pleased but he conceded youth had gained the upper hand. (“I can’t see Energy Answers coming back from this.”) Minnie flashed a huge grin when I told her. Even Arthur, who did not often “fret,” was more attentive to his cough after seeing snapshots from that night, and asked if I had noticed respiratory issues in his neighborhood.

And six years later, when the coal piles did explode, youth activists did not have to start from scratch. They had an audience. They had a narrative. They could point to the event and say it started 140 years before, without equivocation.

We might, then, take a cue from Free Your Voice about how people respond to problems at once so present and so absent, so total and so nothing, that those problems seem impossible. About how, within the muddle of slow violence, working time might open worlds to change. And we might take December 15 as an aperture into other scenes when time gets used to highlight harms that many would prefer to disavow. Like toxicity, like climate change, like attachments to a range of futures past. Like having your neighbors hide when you approach their door. Like all the forces that constrict one’s breathing space.

While I watched the campaign against the incinerator unfold in Baltimore’s southernmost neighborhood, similar debates about problems that have “gone on long enough” were happening all across the city. Just days before the campaign’s April 2015 opt-out deadline, Freddie Gray died. The week before, he had endured an excruciating meantime: three fractured vertebrae, an injured voice box, a spine nearly severed at the neck, a stopped heart, a resuscitation, an extensive surgery. Elijah watched. Charles watched. Destiny watched. They held their breath. We all learned that police had pursued



Gray for making “eye contact” with an officer, and Gray was comatose just thirty minutes later, but what happened in the interim remains a mystery.<sup>67</sup>

Gray’s death could easily have passed through Baltimore like so much weather.<sup>68</sup> But it didn’t. Nor did residents’ initial response demand extensive orchestration. Many called it a “breaking point,” “a boiling over,” a “threshold.” One woman told a reporter that “Freddie Gray’s death made it pop.”<sup>69</sup> Still, the protests that shook Baltimore for weeks afterward *were* acts of moral punctuation. They depended in important ways on the accumulation of names—Rekia Boyd, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Yvette Smith, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, and on and on and on—whose concentrated deaths at the hands of police helped clarify the meaning of Gray’s.

Slow violence is a condition that seems plagued by incoherence. It takes too long, is hard to notice, and casts a chasm between effects and the various forces to which we might attribute cause. But it is, in fact, primed for interpretive debate. In Baltimore, when faced with the challenge of gradual industrial incursion and its inconclusive effects on human health—and other hideously ordinary forms of violence—youth subject to the vagaries of delayed destruction learned to *work* this machinery of perceptual displacement.<sup>70</sup> So while it is true that slow violence can at times condition apathy, it can also inspire manipulations of time and creative rearrangements of history. It can also open room to let an otherwise take place.

As Butler teaches, there is power in knowing change can be “focused, diverted, shaped by anyone at all,” but it also helps to know one’s purpose.<sup>71</sup> Which makes Jack’s question in the aftermath of “victory” so vital. Now what? What futures lie ahead for Curtis Bay?



**FIGURE 6.1. “Future home of the Fairfield Renewable Energy Project.”** Photo by the author, July 2015.



## A Black Hole

Angel kicked another can and watched it clatter along the patchy road. “So for me, what I say is I think life was set up for me to fail, but I’m still striving. I struggle, but I’m here. I think I’m a good parent.” She tugged at her shirt and looked away.

“I had a hell of a lot of kids. I should have stopped at one, but you know how it is. Sometimes we sit out here at night, and it can be really pretty. You see the coal piers all lit up, and it’s nice. For a minute, anyway.”

Angel’s kids were taking turns riding one bike up and down the block. We stopped to watch. The three boys attempted wheelies while Maresa tried to make sure they didn’t hurt themselves. It was peaceful sitting there, observing the kids play. I don’t know what was running through Angel’s mind, but she looked content. I was thinking about when six-year-old Maresa asked me what it was like to live “in Baltimore.” Back then, I had corrected her. (*You tell me, hon—you live in Baltimore, too!*) A decade later, the question did not sound like a mistake.

“Honestly, I don’t know how I should feel,” Angel said after a while. “I always say this place is a black hole. You can’t get out once you’re in. And look, I’m striving to get out, but then again not really. It’s easy to struggle in Curtis Bay.”

A black hole: it sounds like a gap, but it is more like a convergence. A black hole is so dense it pulls in matter, so forceful that it bends both time and space. Looking at a black hole from the outside, time around it seems to slow. From the inside, though, time multiplies. It can move backward, forward, twist around into a loop; it can shoot up, down, diagonal. It can make striving feel like staying put and struggling feel like a break. “You can’t get out” because the gravitational field is too strong, the tug of place too powerful. It’s “black” because not even light escapes. Eight years ago, when we sat together on her stoop, I did not think much of Angel’s metaphor. I had not tried to leave and so I did not know how right she was. And now,

as I write these words from three hundred miles north? I see there is no leaving Curtis Bay.

I drive to Baltimore to visit Angel every year. She has watched my daughter grow. A few months back, I took Maresa out for high school graduation. Trips like this mean everything, but they are not why Angel's right. Consider this: I have seen trucks hauling medical waste to this peninsula every month or two since moving, each a shorthand for the ties that bind me to this site. Or this: when I moved into the hundred-year-old house in Ithaca, New York, where I draft these sentences, I thought it marked the end of my close ties to Curtis Bay, because we moved to Ithaca to stay. But Curtis Bay was here, in the loose-fill asbestos insulation that moon-suited workers carefully extracted from our home. And it is here, in a container of "perimeter-protecting" chemicals designed to ward off bugs that slither in on summer days. "Avoid contact," the container warns, before rattling off potential health effects for those who fail to exercise the proper vigilance. The bugs get in because, when I see the spray, I think of Angel's kids, who play where its ingredients were made.

It took "leaving" to see that Curtis Bay is everywhere, so dense it pulls in matter—years to understand there is no moving on to futures elsewhere because Curtis Bay bends time and folds a million elsewheres into every change.

"I always say this place is a black hole," easily mistaken for a space apart and out of time. Unless you take the view from Angel's stoop and let it shake the worlds that you have learned to take for granted.

"Growing up, the companies—that seemed like a future. But a lot of the companies are gone. So I guess what I'm saying," Angel shrugged. She looked at me. "I guess what I'm saying is that the future changes."



## Ethnography in the Subjunctive

How does one tell impossible stories? [By] exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive.

Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts"

It was not until June 2017 that I noticed signs for the Fairfield Project had come down. I made a point of checking on my periodic drives through Curtis Bay. For eighteen months after MDE revoked the incinerator's permits, the signs stayed up. One read: "FUTURE HOME OF THE FAIRFIELD RENEWABLE ENERGY PROJECT." The other: "Energizing. Revitalizing. Growing Baltimore's Industrial Base." They had not been designed to hang on the building for as long as they did. Wind had rattled them, sun had faded them, and cycles of rain, sleet, and snow had streaked their once pristine green paint. When the signs finally did come down, they carried nine years of dust with them, leaving rectangular impressions behind. From the window of my car, it looked like someone had climbed the warehouse and scrubbed eight-by-ten-foot portions of the wall before giving up and walking away.

One could read the rectangles as remains of an unrealized future, materializing a to-come that was no longer viable.<sup>1</sup> One might call them "ruins of modernity," signs that the march ahead was never quite so straight.<sup>2</sup> Those familiar with the Sanborn maps might recognize the site as a palimpsest. Here was a landscape shaped by efforts to manage the uncertain future, and where dust from those efforts had palpably accrued. Here was a landscape *after progress*.

But it was hardly the end of things. Looking out at the rectangular impressions, I saw two gaps in a teleology — gaps insisting that alternatives had always been in play.

Before this ninety-acre plot had been the Fairfield Project's FUTURE HOME, it housed a multinational chemical corporation. Before that, a munitions producer. Before that, a quarantine station. What it might be next was difficult to say.<sup>3</sup> At the time, it seemed unlikely the incinerator would claim a second life, since any effort to secure new permits would have to survive a strong and growing movement to "change the fate" of Curtis Bay.

After the rally on December 15, 2015, Free Your Voice garnered firm control over public opinion — though Dorothy and Michael remained skeptical. By the following April, Destiny was one of six people in the world named a “grassroots environmental hero” by the Goldman Foundation. The group had so rearranged the boundaries of the sensible on this peninsula that even FMC was in casual talks with Free Your Voice about how to develop the ninety acres they had leased to Energy Answers. Maybe the site would host a solar farm. Maybe an eco-industrial park. Maybe it would become another parking lot for imported vehicles, or a memorial for those evacuated from the Point. Maybe it would stay leveled and vacant. Maybe, Angel joked, Trump would finally build those luxury condominiums with a waterfront view: “He could probably get a good deal.” Maybe it would end up underwater, a casualty of creeping coastal change.

Looking out at the rectangular impressions, I was struck that a place could be so overdetermined and yet so indeterminate. And I left wondering what kind of ethnography would be needed to keep the story open — to write the aftermath of progress as something other than a tragic culmination.

The answer, I think, is ethnography in the subjunctive mood: ethnography that feels the weight of profound uncertainty, that plants its feet by inhabiting a world “as if,” that gets to know that world but is ultimately too restless to remain there.<sup>4</sup> Ethnography that need not abandon the future wholesale to resist the solidity of progress, because it is oriented toward a range of inchoate potentials: the clean, calculative premise of risk; the cataclysmic potentiality of threat; the yearning, aging dreamscape of renewal; the “very long term” lived out through prefiguration. Others, too. This is an ethnography neither so consumed by doubt nor so absorbed in possibility to forget these modes exist in the same grammar. The subjunctive, after all, is used to voice both wish and disbelief, hope and hesitation. An ethnography in the subjunctive would be attentive to how people relate to the unsettled world to come, which means it would be both “deeply empirical and highly speculative.”<sup>5</sup> And it would resist narrative closure. An ethnography in the subjunctive would not covet the last word about a place.

This is the kind of ethnography needed to tell the story of the Fairfield Project, only realized as a hypothetical, and to tell the story of South Baltimore, shaped by speculators over many generations. But South Baltimore has always been more than a setting where such speculation happens. For the past two hundred years, it has been both an object and a method for this work. It has been both an object and a method of governance for technocrats trying to contain the discontents of mastering the future. It has been



both an object and a method of politics for students trying to realize new worlds in the everyday. And it has been both an object and a method of analysis for me throughout this book, as I have labored to gain a foothold on a host of distributed problems by following their lives in Curtis Bay.

I began with the premise that future-making in the United States has long hinged on dissociative projects, each with world-making and world-breaking effects: projects of managing uncertainty through containments large and small, and through conjectural modes of governance that gradually zoned out history and place. And I began with the forging of dissociated subjects made to live within the dust these projects left behind—dust whose impacts became dubious as the shape of knowledge changed. Left to eke out lives in this ambiguous environment, many locals learned to practice daily disavowals, setting aside discomforts in the present so they might pursue the future. These structures produced a spate of unspeakable dangers. South Baltimore was born from these formations and has long been constitutive of them. There would have been no public health downtown without this site of normalized exposure, no armored home front without this vulnerable place. In this sense, Curtis Bay is infrastructural, an enabling architecture for many broader orders: industrialism, militarism, urbanism, capitalism, the American project.<sup>6</sup> And it is hardly alone in being infrastructural. This is one node in a system that runs on sacrificial space.

Studying here means looking at Curtis Bay but also looking from it, at all the processes captured in the dust. It means paying attention to how local, national, even planetary problems pile up on windowsills. It means noticing systemic ignorance and stewing in the moods that it creates. It means holding space for anger at the fact that far too many people die of conditions that they know are linked to chemical exposure, while those in power get to disavow the same. Remember: 50 percent of deaths in this community are “avertable.”<sup>7</sup> *They do not have to happen.* Studying here means turning that bleak truth into pointed questions: How did this injustice come to pass? What are the obstacles to making change? What little moments in the course of things made all the difference—what ticks before the time bomb reached the point of no return? And it means pressing on alternatives, on subjunctive propositions: What if attunement to the air as lived still counted as actionable knowledge? What if it still spurred intervention by the state? What if our regulatory system were not designed to measure safety against profit, but instead to safeguard lives, no matter what this cost the corporation?

From Curtis Bay, it becomes clear that life has been irreversibly altered by each of these contingencies and, still, it remains open.<sup>8</sup> Here, I have explored how these conditions sometimes fizzle into nothing and sometimes bubble into crisis, how they sometimes sound like hope or burn like hate.

I have asked why people living with them variably acquiesce and make demands. And I have thought with Angel, Betty, Arthur, Minnie, Dorothy, Charles, Elijah, Destiny, Ben, and more, not as exceptional subjects, but windows into a radically shared—if radically unequal—condition where doubt is immutable, but people try to build a future anyway.

Bound up in these efforts is a refusal to be exhausted out of politics—a refusal to cede the whole of what is possible to the speculators proper (the tycoons, the technocrats), and an insistence that hope, understood as room to act within the vastness of uncertainty, is still alive and well in Curtis Bay.<sup>9</sup> Here, in the damage wrought by former futures, one finds a range of paradigms for living on and living toward, which I have glossed as small-s speculative lifeworlds. There is the world where one resolves to act as if the future matters most, to preserve the chance of surviving to tomorrow. There is the world where one shores up a fading past as if it were the only worthy template for this place. And there is the world where stopping the Fairfield Project appears as if commensurate with radically transforming this peninsula. Each embeds its own presumptions about the boundaries of reasonable desire.

Which is to say, each affirms desire is an eminently reasonable thing to have in the face of extraordinary loss, including loss of hope in progress as an organizing aspiration.

Of course, the differences between the kinds of hope that populate this landscape matter. The desperate hope for one more day that fueled the buyout of the Point is not the same hope that led some residents to see trash burning as a path toward revival, and neither corresponds with the very long-term vision students tried to seed through their campaign. These hopes rest on different premises and add up to different politics. In this moment, any one could feasibly take hold. What this means, in the most concrete sense, is that it will take work to hope in ways that create life-affirming change.

As for me? I hope that local students' vision takes full form. It is the only vision pictured here that takes on problems from their roots and tries to build up something altogether different. But they are up against a lot, and this will be a labor. Students understand this. It is why they seized on the incinerator as an opening: both an ends and means for liberatory work, or, again, both an object of political concern and a method for stretching the political imagination.

So South Baltimore has been both object and method for all kinds of speculative practice: violent, vibrant, wistful, anxious, and ambivalent. But what



if it were more? What if South Baltimore were object, method, and *metaphor*? Roy Wagner once called metaphor the “ultimate subjunctive,” because it brims with a “richness of potentially elicited analogies, all at once,” that make the fixing of intent a matter of interpretation.<sup>10</sup>

What if the story of South Baltimore were, by way of one analogy, about all the things forgotten in anticipation that have accrued into a consequential mass, forcing an ecological reckoning? What if it were about how people plant their feet at the end of the world? What if it were about the many paths we might take next, given the uncertainties of global climate change? Recall Octavia Butler’s depiction of “the Pox” in *Parable of the Talents*: that long apocalypse caused by a “refusal to deal” with problems of our own invention; that ending that “has not ended.”<sup>11</sup> Recall her insistence, too, that what happens afterward is ours to shape.

Or recall *The Holey Land*, an allegory that snuck in lessons that exceeded its most manifest content. And recall its epilogue, which figured two potential paths—Curtis Bay as threat and Curtis Bay as promise—to put the audience on notice, as neither one is preordained.

If we were to start with the “as if” worlds immanent in Curtis Bay and then forecast from there, what windows might they offer into how this city will deal with increasingly strange weather? Can an ethnography that partakes in these modes of conjecture offer some minor “antidote to resignation”? Many scholars think it might.<sup>12</sup> I think so, too. Not because there is anything innately freeing about speculative practice—we should know enough from Curtis Bay to know better than that—but because it resists the lull that comes when one presumes the path ahead is set in stone. It is with this in mind, and in the spirit of keeping the story open, that I close with an exercise in grounded speculation.

One path for a warming Baltimore, cast in the shape of threat, suggests that we could engineer a world that assumes the worst but holds fast to retention walls—to little boxes—designed to survive (but not avert) environmental stressors. Another path, modeled on renewal, would have us try a range of “technical adjustments” nimble enough to keep the boat afloat for one more day.<sup>13</sup> Or we might pass the apparatus off to youth and approach this problem as an opening to more just worlds, right now. With climate change, “transition is inevitable but justice is not.”<sup>14</sup> The uncomfortable truth is that any of these paths might yet unfold in Curtis Bay.

And let me be clear that by “these paths,” I mean three plausible futures, “fictional, but only just,” as each builds on plans incipient in Baltimore that live in real, dynamic tension.<sup>15</sup> I show my sources in the notes, but my method comes from Butler: take what is present now and escalate.<sup>16</sup> Why? To insist the path ahead is still unsettled, that there is room to act, that this

place need not be a cautionary tale—but that it could. The first two futures are here to remind you how much work achieving the third takes.

Look: the year is 2050, and the weather is strange.<sup>17</sup> Storm surges caused by a volatile climate have raised alarm for urban planners, who have begun the work of fortifying Baltimore. Their task on the peninsula is to keep the groundwater contained. One risk of doing nothing is that rainwater will mingle with contaminated soils on factory land to produce a toxic stew which floods will spread beyond South Baltimore, perhaps to economic engines in the Inner Harbor. Another is that flooding will overwhelm systems that steady explosive chemicals. Officials have built bulkheads along the coast in preparation. At least, they have required landowners to build them—costly work for which the city has no budget.<sup>18</sup> With this fiscal passing of the buck has come the coastline's corporate consolidation. Engineers from GRACE Chemical, now the region's primary landholder, have terraformed South Baltimore into a high-tech moat, which safeguards industrial land while engulfing former homes. (It has been years since people lived here.) This is hailed as a protective measure. The sentiment makes sense in a world where all eyes are fixed on a dark and stormy future, rather than the history that made it.

The concrete walls around South Baltimore convey some of this history. Just beneath the water's surface, discoloration shows us that the sea level has changed. An inch one year, one-half the next, a whopping three as heat skyrocketed in 2040: gradients in the concrete track each shift.<sup>19</sup> Above the surface, corrosion reveals increasingly rough waves.

Then there are those changes blunt enough to knock you down, like the stench emanating from trash mountains. To further mitigate the risk of toxic floods, the city elevated all its waste.<sup>20</sup> Every buried barrel of industrial sludge, every square foot from the Quarantine Road Landfill, now sits atop a metal pedestal. When the work began, dark jokes circulated among residents that Curtis Bay had ceased to be a “dumping ground.” It had been “upgraded” to a “dumping stage.”

Waste management reforms were passed in 2041, as part of an effort to ensure a “climate resilient city.” Planning for “resilience” has meant anticipating bad weather and adapting to withstand it—a political imperative since the prior year's deadly surprise heat wave. Projections have been dire, with double-digit temperature rises expected by century's end and models predicting flooding several times a week in perpetuity.<sup>21</sup> Building codes have changed to meet the challenge. For residential dwellings, required updates range from installing rain barrels to keep gutter runoff out of city sew-



ers to lifting houses onto tall cement supports that children say resemble chicken legs.<sup>22</sup>

After these rules passed, residents did not remain for long. Some fled when the environment became unbearable (imagine trash mountains in hundred-degree heat). Others sold their homes reluctantly to GRACE. GRACE seized on the opening created by resilience codes, which left locals struggling to pay for land improvements. Even Baltimore offloaded infrastructure to clear its billion-dollar maintenance backlog. By 2043, GRACE provisioned water for an ever-shrinking local population.

The last home on the peninsula was razed five years ago, after the final holdout acquiesced. The owner had been living on Cypress Street with his three sons, building bulwarks for a barely living wage. Somehow, he had saved enough to prop his house up on supports, just to be denied a building permit because he could not pay for flood insurance.<sup>23</sup> That the predicament was common did not help. His family had made a reasonably good life outside the fortress walls, avoiding heat in their imposing shade. Laboring for GRACE was tough, but his kids ate well and they enjoyed their independence. It did not last; work dried up after the retention walls were done. The walls' maintenance is fully automated.

It is rare, these days, to see people in South Baltimore. Sometimes school groups come to learn this cautionary tale. Sometimes engineers visit to study GRACE's climate adaptations. Besides hosting these transient guests, the place is not compatible with human life. Any assumptions to the contrary were corrected in 2046, when a storm brought fourteen inches of precipitation. Plans went off without a hitch: bulwarks diverted water to formerly residential blocks, inundating Cypress Street while "critical facilities" stayed dry. A spokesman for the city announced officials were "happy the area is clear . . . we no longer have to be concerned with environmental risk." The final holdout shuddered when he heard the broadcast from his rental out of state. Minnie might have recognized the line, had she been alive to listen. It was exactly what they said about the Point, after the buyout left it vacant.<sup>24</sup>

Look: the year is 2050, and an industrial ecology is blooming on the Point.<sup>25</sup> Sludge from the dump moves through the wastewater plant, which nourishes the pharmaceutical plant, whose steam heats the coal-fired power plant, whose energy fuels the oil refinery, whose outputs help produce sulfuric acid, which goes into fertilizer, which sustains peach trees along the coast. Local children love to eat the fruit—a callback to Fairfield's rural past—so they tolerate the machinery that makes it possible. Signage across

the peninsula reports that this is “Symbiosis at its Best” because it moves “Beyond Sustainability” and feeds “Eternal Growth!”

It took more than fifty years, but officials have finally realized the eco-industrial park proposed in 1996. If Governor Schaefer and Mayor Schموke had pulled off their bid, it would have anchored the Fairfield Empowerment Zone. Their dream did not materialize then, nor when Energy Answers tried to revive it by promoting waste-to-energy. But things changed in 2031 when Baltimore’s waste problem came to a head on Quarantine Road.<sup>26</sup>

When it opened in 1985 on freshly unpeopled Hawkins Point, Quarantine Road Landfill was supposed to last the city thirty years—but planners bought some extra time by burning garbage at BRESKO. With incineration’s help, the landfill survived a few more precious decades. But after years of student agitation, BRESKO closed. It seemed that students’ success had solved one problem but intensified another. As industry groups had long been warning, without incineration, there was nowhere for the city’s waste to go.

Meanwhile, at Seniors’ Club, elders groaned, *I told you so*.

Students protested that ending incineration was only ever half the battle, but their claims went unaddressed. Rethinking production was simply a non-starter. Baltimore could not afford to be green, the prevailing logic went, without supporting economic growth. So the garbage kept coming.<sup>27</sup> And coming. Until the dump accepted its last truck. Backing an incinerator was politically untenable and opening another dump felt distasteful to the city council. Enter plans for the eco-industrial park, gently modified since 1996, to be built on the ninety-acre Fairfield site. The plans passed with a unanimous vote.

The up-cycled plans included a landfill, but one imagined as the first step in a loop. As developers described, the new peninsula would operate “on the model of a healthy ecosystem,” where every “plant” served in at least two modes.<sup>28</sup> Each would take and each would give, moving resources through the interminable cycle. Along the way, they would transform waste into the raw material for exponentially more production. The plan’s key metrics codified this hope. “To be judged a success,” plans read, the park must “demonstrate the creation of above-normal profits.” It must also achieve “environmental improvement” by reducing pollution on the Point or, when that proved burdensome, supporting greening in an off-site zone.<sup>29</sup> The second target would be funded by the first. Hence, the talking point that the peach trees lived on business growth alone.

Ground broke for the park in 2032. In honor of the region’s military past, and as a nod to the old schoolhouse, developers named it the Victory Garden. They also called forth Fairfield’s former lives on oil tanks, where



designers painted “narrative tableaux.”<sup>30</sup> Hopeful newcomers reaching Baltimore’s shoreline decorated one while WWII’s historic shipyards graced another. A third pictured residents sunbathing on the cove. There was even one that featured Destiny earning the Goldman Prize, though the resemblance grew fainter as emissions caused the murals to corrode.

When the plants opened in 2035, they brought a smattering of jobs. People were needed to deposit ash over freshly landfilled waste, maintain pipes at the old wastewater plant, package pills, conduct quality checks at the refinery, and keep the trees alive along the coast. It was dignified work—the kind that paid employees well and provided health insurance. But there are greener things than human labor. Ten years in, job cuts were marketed as good environmental stewardship, as air would be cleaner with fewer commuter cars on local roads.

In Curtis Bay, as cuts left locals struggling to pay their mortgages, the peaches seemed a bitter consolation. Things soured further when greening projects on the Point got scrapped as “inefficient.” But things were looking up for the city as a whole. Industries down south paid for vibrant parks near Baltimore’s Inner Harbor and boosted revenues consistently. Here was a twenty-first-century city tackling climate change with business smarts—turning the existential threat into a windfall—and other municipalities took note.

The 2040s were a banner decade for eco-industrial parks, as cities tried to replicate the “Baltimore model.” By 2050, industrial ecologies were blooming wherever they could fit. Each was lusher than the last, taking in more waste to fuel “Eternal Growth!” It was true, developers acquiesced, that the trend was creating some perverse incentives (more industrial parks meant a rising demand for waste, and of course the parks released their own emissions). But they were hard at work on the next innovation. Besides, one admitted, “Eternal Growth” had only ever been a tagline. At best, the parks were designed to buy the earth “another eighty years or so.”

Look, now: little experiments are sprouting up from vacant lots across this magical peninsula, where locals sow new ways of living on land that is at last community owned.\* Some lots have sketches jerry-rigged to fences, pre-

\* The visions featured here do not rely on my imagination, but on direct quotes from residents and on ongoing efforts to realize a different future in the present—led by Free Your Voice, the South Baltimore Community Land Trust, the Baltimore Compost Collective, the Filbert Street Garden, and other local organizations.

figuring housing being built outside the speculative market. Others invite passersby to imagine rough-and-tumble spaces as composting's "FUTURE HOME."<sup>31</sup> A lot across from the high school has been transformed into a park, conceived by students who asked neighbors, "What do you want to see?" They made the answers real from scavenged things: chessboard tables, mini-golf, a wooden stage, a climbing dome. One organizer called the park a chance to "prove that residents know what's best for their community" — making that modest plot a means toward community control.<sup>32</sup>

That park exists because organizers did not stop after their win in 2016, as blocking the incinerator had never been their only goal. Even before, when imagining what "victory" might look like, students were more likely to mention securing "community control of land" than defeating Energy Answers. As Charles once said, the problem exceeded any one proposal:

Look at the decisions that landed [Energy Answers] here in the first place. They convinced the state they'd earned "community support" by appealing to this narrow definition of who the community is. Then they managed to get classified as a power plant instead of an incinerator. The list goes on and on. And so—when it's clear the whole idea of the democratic process isn't being upheld, it's not enough to stop one private business. You have to address the roots of the problem.

Other students echoed Charles's statements. For Ben, "winning" would need to have "two halves. The first is stopping the incinerator, obviously. . . . But beyond that, we want positive alternatives that are imagined, owned, and operated" by residents of Curtis Bay.

So, students got to work after regulators pulled the Fairfield Project's permits, sketching a plan to build community power premised on an expansive vision of what counts as an "environmental" issue: extractive industry, toxicity, climate change, and waste production; but also land ownership, labor rights, racial equity, and public participation.<sup>33</sup>

To bring these goals to life, the group gathered ten pockets of land into a trust—a nonprofit governed by community members that manages that land on the community's behalf. The hope is for each plot to host a different attempt at seizing the "long term" now. Like that park across from the high school. Or the permanently affordable housing stock being pieced together from the region's vacants. These hopes join others growing here, across this slim peninsula, where people are working every day to make the possible concrete: a community-owned compost facility that, if built, would redirect waste toward something nourishing; a solar farm envisioned for those stubborn ninety acres; a garden where locals harvest food, but also spend



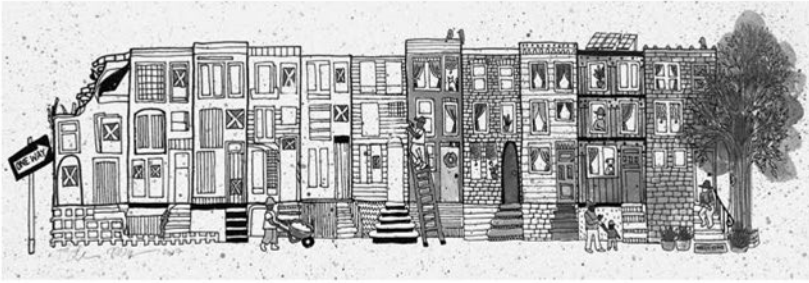


FIGURE 6.2. **A beautiful city.** Painting, titled “Rise, Reclaim, Rebuild,” by Taylor Smith-Hams and Valeska Populoh.

time in community. All of them are classrooms, places where people work on small projects while thinking big about the kinds of worlds they want.

All of them, in micro-scale, reveal a different future in the making.

Imagine a sun-powered peninsula, sourcing energy from that ninety-acre Fairfield site. Amanda, a local woman who designed it, hopes this will be the first infrastructure project planned and owned by residents of Curtis Bay. She shows a mock-up on her screen: rows of solar panels cover the grounds where Fools formerly Made Chemicals. There, they share space with sunflowers, which absorb contaminants through a process called phytoremediation.<sup>34</sup> In Amanda’s sketches, worker-owners tend to the plants and maintain the several hundred panels. Teenage apprentices follow them around, earning high school credit while they learn the solar trade. The panels soak up light and transmute it into currents that keep the power on in homes and schools. Businesses can use this energy, too, after signing a compact that governs their energy use, employment practices, and daily operations. This is community power achieved twice over, once as current and once as sovereignty. Amanda’s screen offers a portal to a world where decisions about the first become a path toward a different Curtis Bay.

You do not have to imagine the youth-led compost collective operating up the hill; it has been turning food scraps into “black gold” for several years. Marvin, who manages the effort, calls black gold South Baltimore’s “vibranium.”<sup>35</sup> In Marvel Comics’ *Black Panther* universe, vibranium is a substance that absorbs and stores kinetic energy. It is crystallized potential. And in that sense the compost metaphor is not terribly far off. Every week, youth gather food scraps and bring them to a garden where they make

fertilizer from what would otherwise be waste. Today, they operate at a small scale, but hope for a facility robust enough to divert scraps from all across the city. Baltimore lacks this capacity at present. (The nearest large facility is forty miles away.) Without this infrastructure, more food scraps reach landfills and incinerators than any other matter in Baltimore's waste stream. When they end up on Quarantine Road, they decompose and release planet-warming gases like methane. When they end up at BRESKO, they fund the city's largest polluter. But when students process these scraps into compost for the garden, they provide essential nutrients to residents of Curtis Bay. That is why Marvin likes to tell people the collective "starves the incinerator" to "feed the community"—literally, with food, and symbolically, with the stuff of self-determination.

An experiment in making homes outside the pressures of the market is underway a few blocks north, where organizers have acquired five lots that hug the school as the first steps toward their long-term goal of governing the land in Curtis Bay. Bit by bit, they are transforming vacant sites—residues of that fraying Fordist promise of homeownership—into permanently affordable housing, by organizing them into community land trusts. Land trusts root capital in place through a ground-lease structure that disaggregates the cost of housing from fluctuations in the cost of land, protecting both from the whims of speculators. The idea is that residents can buy and sell the homes, but the land beneath them stays in trust, and any appreciation in its value thus remains in trust as well. Organizers say they hope to "overcome the practice of using land as a means of [capital] accumulation."<sup>36</sup> Student activists have long felt the burden of the latter in the form of poor apartments, too-high rents, and even homelessness (recall how these affected Charles). Those who have lived in public housing say that low costs come with high surveillance. But when construction at the land trust is complete, ten families will move from these conditions into stable homes. One already has. The student who lives there says that housing has finally ceased to be a source of "worry," that his family members can now devote themselves to other things.<sup>37</sup> Imagine what might be possible on this peninsula if all the energy devoted to survival was similarly liberated.

Of these many classrooms, the one that I am fondest of is called the Filbert Street Garden. The garden is not new, but it is newly sovereign. For years, the city held the deed, along with the right to raze and sell the property. Today, the Garden owns the land, so it can flourish without the prospect of



displacement. I first encountered Filbert Street during my teaching years, when I took Maresa's class for outdoor lessons. When the weather was nice, we would untether from our desks and walk across the parking lot to a patchy, fenced-in plot and play.

Some kids would dig for worms and some would water everything in sight. Some would follow Jason, the garden manager, tending to this and that. All of us were pleased to get outdoors during the brightest part of every day. Besides a few raised beds, the garden at that time was spare. Jason was trying to get it off the ground after a range of failed attempts. In the early 1990s, a chemical company doled out funding to establish it for a PR campaign. But the plants stopped growing after the money stopped coming. A decade after that, the neighborhood association tried, unsuccessfully, to revive it. A decade after that, someone called Jason.

"I had all these ideas about how many plants we could grow and how many people we could feed . . . I thought we'd have a farm with rows of potatoes, carrots, you know." He was focused on production. "But what people really wanted," Jason learned from conversations with a younger Charles, "was a gathering space."

So Jason planted vegetables, but he also painted a welcome sign and put in benches so that visitors would linger, and tried to cultivate a place where kids could feel like part of something more. The idea was to offer "living proof that the things you do to the earth have repercussions over generations." When he passed the garden off to Ms. Rodette, an indefatigable leader at the helm during my fieldwork, she made a true "community hub," adding chickens, ducks, goats, honeybees, a reading circle, picnic tables. Today, murals cover garden sheds while rain barrels conserve and reuse water. Grown-ups drip the honey into bear-shaped bottles. Kids plant seeds and learn small things can make big differences. Teenagers turn food scraps into the stuff that makes life grow, building futures "in the compost of capitalist landscapes."<sup>38</sup> Ms. Rodette oversaw a study that found this acre has the cleanest air around—and the same rich soil that once supported Fairfield's gardens. It sounds like birds, not tanker trucks. "And there are bats!" Jason beamed. "Before, I'd never seen a bat in Curtis Bay.

Bats are a huge part of a functioning ecosystem. And if you don't have bats, you don't have much. Mosquitos, basically. So, when we saw bats, it felt like, 'Oh, this might be okay. This space might survive. This may be a little bunker.' There's a lot like that in [the garden] . . . and in a way the neighborhood has shown me the same thing. For the first time I can remember, kids are thinking about their future *within* the community—imagining it as a place they'd want to stay.

It is here, under the shade of a few trees on the west end of this little plot, that you might find students hanging out after they have closed the library. When it gets too tough to work through their curriculum, or too grating to travel door-to-door, you might see them planting seeds. And you might hear Destiny. And she might say:

“Open your eyes and imagine a beautiful city.”



## Acknowledgments

This is a book about how people hold fragile worlds together, and how they sometimes make them better. It was conceived, researched, drafted, torn up, rehashed, red-penned, and polished over twelve long years—in the little moments between whiplash while so much else beyond it seemed to come apart. It has been a sometimes beloved and sometimes reviled constant through nine moves, five jobs, four cities, one birth, more world-historical events than I frankly wish to score, and countless other happenings that can't be summed but that add up to a life. Someone once cautioned it would be strange to hold this book for the first time; that it would feel too slim to account for all that *happened*. They're probably right. (They usually are.) Even more so of these pages, which name the people who held my seams together through it all.

First, the place. I owe so much to Curtis Bay: an out-of-the-way landscape edged by water on three sides, unceded home to the Piscataway and Susquehannock peoples. Curtis Bay: a quiet, complicated place that deserves much better than it's got. Many locals gripe that Curtis Bay is a “forgotten” neighborhood on Baltimore's far southern rim, but I wrote this book because I think it is the center of the world. At least, it is the center of gravity for world-making projects that have defined the past two centuries. My debts to this place go deep. No book could begin to pay them back. But I hope that loved ones there will see their home within these pages—weighty and complex as home can be. Worthy of a patient, careful, densely detailed story. I am grateful for this place and everything that it has taught.

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# Notes

## PREFACE

1. Rector 2016.
2. Trump drafted this incendiary tweet in response to the 2015 Baltimore Uprising, two months before announcing his presidential candidacy (Durando 2015).
3. See Ericson 2014.
4. See Maryland Department of Health “cause of death” guidelines: [http://www.msdh.state.ms.us/phs/cause\\_of\\_death\\_quick\\_fact\\_sheet.pdf](http://www.msdh.state.ms.us/phs/cause_of_death_quick_fact_sheet.pdf).
5. Linskey 2008.
6. When I began work in the area, local life expectancy was 69.6 years (Ames et al. 2011).
7. EIP 2012, 8.
8. Key guides for thinking about the dust as a material metaphor include Choy 2011; Masco 2015; Zee 2017, 2022; Graeter 2020.
9. Dionne 2015.
10. See 2021 Maryland Department of Labor Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates for “Production Workers”: <https://www.dllr.state.md.us/lmi/wages/baltimorecity/page0037.htm>.
11. Nixon 2011.
12. On how atmospheric harms can bubble into terror, see Sloterdijk 2002.
13. On residues, see Boudia et al. 2021.
14. Residents subsequently filed a lawsuit that sought, among other forms of relief, funding to support “periodic diagnostic examination to ensure early detection” of diseases associated with exposure to coal dust (Shen 2022).
15. Roberts 2022, 547.
16. Koselleck (1985) uses “futures past” to describe how modernity changed people’s relationship with time by introducing “progress” as an irreversible march forward. When one conceives of time as linear, each present was, in the past, a coming future; and some imagined futures never come to be. The “good life” is a kind of future past for many who live in Curtis Bay after the coming apart of industrial lifeways and their attendant aspirations. On how infrastructures often “represent the possibility of being

modern, of having a future, or the foreclosing of that possibility,” see Larkin 2013, 333; Cross 2015.

17. On atmospheres affective and material, see Stewart 2011.

18. For texts that attend to distributed problems without losing the particular, see Agard-Jones 2013, Choy and Zee 2015, Choy 2016, Hecht 2018, Zee 2022.

19. Unsettling dominant accounts of world-historical arcs—like progress—entails excavating “amnesias” about the role of the “periphery” in shaping the modern world (Coronil 1997, 5).

20. Trouillot 1982.

21. This is how Agard-Jones characterizes Trouillot’s call: to not only “do research *in* small places but . . . look [at broader systems] *from* them” (2013, 183).

22. The Environmental Integrity Project has done important work in this direction, as have public health scholars at Johns Hopkins University.

23. Murphy 2008; for a kindred historical accounting of “molecular bureaucracy,” see Hepler-Smith 2019.

24. These quotes come from Fennell 2019 and Ferguson 1999, respectively.

25. On the “haze” constitutive of industrialism, see Fortun 2014, Ahmann and Kenner 2020.

#### INTRODUCTION

1. When I give an interlocutor’s age, it conforms to their age at the time of the scene in question. On names: Some interlocutors asked to be called by their given names in this book. I typically honored this request, except where individuals made sensitive claims or were minors during my research. This book therefore includes a mix of pseudonyms and given names. I do not usually specify where each occurs. On capitalization: I capitalize both Black and White throughout this manuscript. Though many writers capitalize Black to recognize a shared sense of culture and history among African diasporic peoples, it is less common to capitalize White. This choice reinforces a myth that does not hold up in this book, which is that “White people in America do not have a racial identity.” Instead, as Ewing (2020) writes, “Whiteness is not only an absence . . . it is a specific social category that confers identifiable and measurable social benefits.”

2. For more on this mythology, see Ahmann 2016.

3. Englund 1995.

4. Tareen and Biesecker 2016.

5. For critiques of this misperception, see Dudley 1994, Walley 2013, Finkelstein 2019.

6. For foundational accounts of Fordist aspirations and their aftermaths, see Berlant 2011, Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012.

7. This is how Colborn et al. figure “what is at stake” when it comes to endocrine-disrupting chemicals in *Our Stolen Future* (1996, 232).

8. Berardi 2011, 166. Berardi’s injunction is bold but hardly rare in social theory. Consider Edelman’s *No Future*, which refuses the coercive belief in futurity that he locates at the heart of dominant political orders (2004). For sharp but less dismissive appraisals of progress as a modernist pretention to perpetual advancement—and



analogues like the destructiveness of growth or the hubris of rationalization—see Marx 1867, Weber 1905, Vonnegut 1952, Giddens 1991, Beck 1992, Dawdy 2010, Johnson 2013, Livingston 2019, Blanchette 2020. For guides from a growing anthropology of the future that teach that there is more to this terrain than progress, see Munn 1992, Guyer 2007, Collins 2008, Bear 2017, Ringel 2018, Bryant and Knight 2019.

9. Higher, specifically, than both state and national averages (EIP 2012, 8).

10. Ames et al. 2011, 10.

11. Trump repeated this line throughout his 2016 campaign, along with the refrain, “What do you have to lose?” (Tareen and Biesecker 2016).

12. On the “proleptic character of politics,” which “call[s] forth nonexistent worlds by acting as if an unimaginable future were at hand,” see Wilder 2015, 14.

13. For evidence that progress structured expectations even where it never meaningfully arrived, see Ferguson 1999.

14. Wool and Livingston 2017, 10, 4.

15. I do not mean to attribute *these* words to Wool and Livingston, who tend to “the temporality of a difficult present,” while making clear that “hope” is not their object (2017, 2).

16. I take this cue to look beyond damage from Tuck, who teaches that “damage-centered research” can be a “pathologizing approach in which . . . oppression singularly defines a community” (2009, 214), and where the symptoms of oppressive systems receive more attention than those systems; Liboiron describes this as a focus on harm over violence (2021, 85). Similarly, Ralph cautions that a “frame” that captures harm alone risks stifling people’s dreams (2014, 176).

17. Whyte describes the subjunctive as “the mood which is responsive to the if and maybe of experience and looks to an uncertain future with both hope and doubt” (2002, 186). In thinking with this grammar, I mean to get at something softer than the rules of correct speech. I am grasping at the systems of meaning, structure, and relation through which one makes the world intelligible to oneself—here, how people live in worlds where hope and doubt are hard to parse. Grammar is a system with solidity *and* flex; its rigid tools can be put to many kinds of work. I find this possibility of multiplicity within constraint instructive. For other takes on grammar as a conceptual apparatus, some more focused on solidity, others more on flex, see Wittgenstein 2009, Spillers 1987, Wynter 1995, Povinelli 2011.

18. This ambivalence sets the subjunctive apart from what some call the “cynicism” of acting “as if”: a “politics of dissimulation” whereby one behaves as if X is true while quietly believing Y (Wedeen 1998, 503; Allen 2013). Instead, I am getting at how people live on when they cannot hope to know the truth of things—a circumstance that sometimes produces cynicism, but not always.

19. This is different from what Johnson-Hanks theorizes as a “subjunctive habitus,” born from such extreme uncertainty that it leads people to eschew goals and stay radically open to chance (2005, 367). My contention that the subjunctive tethers how we know to how we hope is also different from Miyazaki’s argument that hope is a “method of knowledge” that works by sustaining futural momentum (2004, 2). Though I find Miyazaki’s work helpful, I am describing a grammar that sustains *multiple* kinds of hope through a range of knowledge practices, not all of which conform to progressive emplotments.

20. Bryant and Knight show that speculation flourishes in the gaps between the shattering of prior expectations and the hardening of new ones (2019, 84). Here, between “no longer” and “not yet,” Weszkalnys also observes that “doubtful hope”—not boundless hope—is common (2016, 133).

21. Such uncertainty is a defining feature of late modernity, wherein “unknown and unintended consequences come to be a dominant force” in social life (Beck 1992, 22).

22. Not all of them are liberatory. That the subjunctive can accommodate many contradictory positions is lost in much anthropological writing on the grammar, which tends to celebrate its indeterminacy (e.g., Turner 1977; Wagner 1986; Holbraad et al. 2014). I elaborate on this trend in Ahmann 2019.

23. I am referencing Rancière’s (2000) concept of the political as a “distribution of the sensible.” In thinking about the makeshift premises that structure people’s sense of reasonable desire, I am also thinking about a spongy kind of ideology: softer and less settled than, but cousin to, the kind described by Hall (1986). And of course, my description of progress as “common sense” that commandeered an era owes credit to Gramsci (1971), who teaches that different logics seize the masses at distinct historical moments—though the people who populate this book only sometimes viewed themselves in common.

24. Here I am thinking against theorists like Berardi (2011) and Edelman (2004) who pontificate from a position of presumed omniscience on the false allure of futurity, but also against a classic line of inquiry about why people in contaminated places hold “erroneous perceptions” about toxics (Auyero and Swistun 2009, 357). Such questions not only suggest there is a correct way to comport oneself within a toxic world—one which the questioner has purportedly figured out. They also imply that better information might correct the “failed” perception and, so, help disappear the problem (Auyero and Swistun 2009, 357).

25. Fortun 2012, 2014.

26. I say more about the cultural meaning of clean homes for White working-class people in later chapters.

27. Different parts of this peninsula have different demographic histories, which I describe in subsequent chapters. To provide a sense of the change in Curtis Bay proper, as narrated by the Baltimore City Department of Planning in 2005: “In 1990, 98% of Curtis Bay residents were White; in 2000, 76% were White, 18% African American.” These trends have kept apace in recent years. (From the “Brooklyn and Curtis Bay Strategic Neighborhood Action Plan”: [https://planning.baltimorecity.gov/sites/default/files/BrooklynCurtisBaySNAP\\_0.pdf](https://planning.baltimorecity.gov/sites/default/files/BrooklynCurtisBaySNAP_0.pdf).)

28. On White separatist sentiments here, see Ahmann 2020c.

29. Stewart 1996.

30. For more on the history of racialized succession in Baltimore—by which neighborhoods typically transitioned from White to Jewish to Black—see Pietila 2010.

31. On sources of medical waste burned here, see <http://www.cleanairbmore.org/uploads/MedicalWasteIncineration.pdf>.

32. Rubaii (2022) models this way of telling stories, from the compromised position of the “witness-perpetrator.”



33. King 2014, 431.

34. The origin of the name “Curtis Bay” is more mysterious, as records suggest “no individual named Curtis took title to the land in this area before the name itself was in general usage. . . . Among some of the theories advanced for the source is one that holds that a Curtis could have settled somewhere in this region with no thought of making any legal claim. Another might be that he operated a farm for an absentee landlord.” Brooklyn-Curtis Bay Historical Committee. 1976. *A History of Brooklyn-Curtis Bay*, 29–30.

35. These include expulsive zoning practices that keep hazardous facilities out of wealthy areas (Rubin 1999, Checker 2020).

36. Reno (2016) makes this observation about waste management in general.

37. Masco 2014, 33. I do not mean this metaphorically. “Infrastructures are not, in any positivist sense, simply ‘out there.’ The act of defining infrastructure is a categorizing moment” (Larkin 2013, 330). Compare zones of sacrifice and abandonment described by Kuletz (1998), Biehl (2005), Fassin (2009), and Lerner (2010). And see Johnson on “infrastructural in-betweens,” or “node[s] in others’ networks, both built in and left out” (2019, 75).

38. On structured ignorance, see Proctor and Schiebinger 2008, Hecht 2012.

39. Freud 1938, 519; Ahmann 2022a.

40. I mean unseeing as Miéville (2009) portrays it: as a kind of not noticing that takes enormous work and enables devastating harm. Consider, too, Finkelstein’s distinction between “invisibility” and “unvisibility,” the latter being an “agen[tive] . . . practice of unseeing something until it no longer *can* be seen” (2019, 45).

41. Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández argue that settler futurity “always indivisibly means the continued and complete eradication of the original inhabitants of contested land” (2013, 80).

42. Valenčius 2002.

43. Though European colonists began settling here in the 1600s, I am referring to the formal incorporation of Baltimore City in 1796.

44. As Williams writes of public safety, such logics often “presume the public as white [and] safety as a right that inheres in white bodies,” while risk “inheres timelessly in bodies that are black, brown, and poor” (2017, 38).

45. I find the phrase “space of exception” useful, though what I call the “set-aside” or “zoned-out” space is different from Agamben’s (1998) concept. For one, set-aside spaces do not exist outside of law. As zoning regulations make clear, they are sanctioned by it. Nor need set-aside spaces be marked out in moments of emergency. They serve an infrastructural purpose; their presence is coterminous with the “norm” and essential to its functioning.

46. A 1935 Home Owners’ Loan Corporation Residential Security Map—also known as a “redlining” map, to denote the red lines real estate professionals drew around “hazardous” neighborhoods to deny access to capital, within a rubric where hazard was explicitly racialized—notes an “infiltration of foreigners and negroes” and “industrial plants” on the peninsula. Available through *Mapping Inequality*, University of Richmond Digital Scholarship Lab, accessed June 21, 2022, <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=12/39.238/-76.719&city=baltimore-md&area=C12>.

47. This making technical of political problems is an old dynamic (e.g., Ferguson 1994).
48. Oreskes and Conway 2010.
49. Many show that industrialism created environments of extreme uncertainty (Allen 2003, Murphy 2006, Sze 2006, Auyero and Swistun 2009, Button 2010, Nixon 2011, Little 2014, Fortun 2014, Masco 2015, Shapiro 2015). Some have even gone so far as to call that uncertainty an “inherent” quality of chemical exposure (Edelstein 1988, 112).
50. Liboiron glosses this as a shift from “systemic” and “holistic” ways of knowing environmental damage to more “discrete” and “piecemeal” ones (2013, 136).
51. For more on anticipatory governance, see Anderson 2010, Masco 2014, Choi 2015, Collier and Lakoff 2015, Massumi 2015, Zeiderman 2016. Cons 2018 also offers a tight review of related scholarship.
52. Benjamin 2019. Also consider Bond’s point that “the sundering of material harm from material gain is . . . a conceptual dissolution . . . fully integrated into the design, functioning, and regulation” of polluting industry (2022, 3).
53. Nixon 2011, 5.
54. Murphy 2006, 129.
55. Masco 2014; also Hurley 2020.
56. EIP 2012, i.
57. Povinelli (2011) calls this a tension between the “durative present” and the “future anterior.”
58. Taussig 1999, Petryna 1995. This unspeakability helps explain the hold that the “American dream” maintains for many, in spite of its perpetual deferral (Davis 1986).
59. On the experience of downward mobility as “falling from grace,” see Newman (1988).
60. Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012, 333, building on Gramsci 1971.
61. This is how Buck-Morss (1989, 95) paraphrases Benjamin’s (1999) critique of progress.
62. Rockman 2009, Rudacille 2010.
63. See Taylor (2019) on how “predatory inclusion” undermined Black homeownership in the postwar United States, and Brown (2021) for a detailed history of such practices in Baltimore.
64. “A precarious world,” Tsing (2015, 20) writes with progress lost in mind, “is a world without teleology.”
65. Barrickman 2015.
66. On the devastating impact of deindustrialization on the Black working class, see Wilson 1996.
67. Berlant 2011, 11.
68. For a global discussion of post-Fordist affects, see Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012, 319. Ferguson (2006, 20) makes this point about progress more broadly.
69. I do not mean that the United States is any less embroiled in industrial *processes* than it once was, but that the lifeways industrialism once supported have been wrecked.



“In practice, deindustrialization marks the social abandonment and ostracizing of manual laborers—the devaluation of their existence—amid factory closures” (Blanchette 2020, 5).

70. Walley 2013, 68, 4.

71. This was not just a feature of the Fordist age. Povinelli (2011) shows that this kind of sacrificial discourse is a defining feature of liberal governance.

72. Rojas describes this dynamic in terms of the “crisis progressive” (2021, 913). Rosenberg and Harding also describe the collapse of the progressive chronotope as a “crisis in modern futurity” (2005, 4). Nor was this crisis unique to the United States: progress lost provoked its own crisis of meaning in post-Socialist contexts (Johnson 2013, Schwenkel 2013, Ringel 2018, Fox 2022).

73. This is how Ferguson (1999, 252) describes thwarted “expectations of modernity.”

74. Martin 2019, 131. I say more about this mediascape in chapter 3.

75. Roediger 1991, 12.

76. Shange 2019b, 4.

77. Rohy 2009, x.

78. As Hall writes, “race is the modality in which class is lived” (1980, 216).

79. These are Katherine McKittrick’s words. @demonicground, “Racism is flexible AF,” *Twitter*, January 9, 2021, 7:03 p.m., <https://twitter.com/demonicground/status/1348057827273826305>.

80. Consider Morrison’s (2016) insight that many White Americans are “sacrificing themselves” to “restore whiteness to its former status,” or Metzl’s evidence that some are so attached to White supremacy that they engage in “kamikaze” politics (2019). Hochschild argues that racial resentment comes from the feeling some White people have of being “held back” in a world they thought was theirs (2016), and Brown (2019) suggests this can be so infuriating that it fuels an “apocalyptic” populism.

81. Betty told me that 2016 was her first time voting, and that she has voted Republican since. For more on the complicated relationship between Trump’s election and the “white working class,” see Walley 2017.

82. On the compensatory value of Whiteness, see Du Bois 1935. On the layered meanings of “dirt,” see Douglas 1966, Chen 2011.

83. Yarrow 2017, 577.

84. Ringel 2014, 57.

85. Again, this is Koselleck’s phrase (1985), but I am thinking more immediately with Scott’s expansion of the concept to track transformations “from one rhythm of modern time to another: from a moment, for example, when the future appears guaranteed by the present to one in which it seems undermined by it” (2004, 44).

86. Tsing 2015, viii; also Kirksey et al. 2013.

87. Smith 1776, 12; Marx 1846.

88. Benjamin’s (1999) project, for example, was to overcome the ideology of progress by unearthing counter-images that rubbed against its grain. More recently, scholarship on ruination has advanced this critical project (Edensor 2005, Dawdy 2010, Johnson 2013, Schwenkel 2013, Stoler 2013, Gordillo 2014, High et al. 2017).

89. Scott 2004, 29. Boyarin and Land also argue that the time has come for language that can address the shape the future will take in increasingly degraded environments—“beyond the ironic reversal of rhetorics of progress [and] the mourning-inflected posteriority of the post-catastrophic condition” (2016, 12). This is precisely the sort of language this book offers.

90. Ben is a composite of two young men with similar subject-positions, both members of this group during my fieldwork.

91. Hartman 2019, 128.

92. Hope “can be, and will be, disappointed; indeed, it must be so . . . or *else it would not be hope*” (Bloch 1959, quoted in Chambers-Letson, Nyong’o, and Pellegrini 2019, xiv).

93. Muñoz 2009, 10, 9. Muñoz rejects Edelman’s (2004) polemic against the future as a “straight time” against which queerness is figured, holding instead that few can afford to give up hope in more liberatory worlds. If Edelman is the searing voice of antifuturism in queer theory, then Berardi (2011), whose insistence that we “abandon the illusion of a future” threads throughout the introduction, is his analogue in the postindustrial context.

94. Butler’s *Parables*, for example, follow teenage Lauren Olamina as she “leads a ragtag, multi-racial group of survivors on a sojourn . . . figuring out a way to live after the end of the world.” Along the way, she conceives a religion premised on the belief that “God is Change” and able to be shaped. The books are therefore “instructive in helping marginalized communities imagine a futurity that is not hitched to the continuation of the status quo” (Shange 2019b, 12). The future imagined here is decidedly “not progressive” but multidirectional and relational (Chandrasekaran 2018).

95. Millar also resists the common reading of wastescapes as “end zone[s] in a double sense: the burial grounds for unwanted things, [and] the end of the line for the urban poor”—a reading that has “consequences . . . for both theory and politics” (2018, 4–5).

96. Specifically, the project was permitted to release 240 pounds of mercury, 1,000 pounds of lead, and more than 3,000 pounds of fine particulate matter annually.

97. Including when infrastructures “fail, or fail to materialize at all” (Cross 2015, 435).

98. By *epitombent*, I mean the type of story being told about the past, and what ideological positions that telling supports (White 1973).

99. Hartman 2019, xiii; Trouillot 1995.

100. For readers close to this campaign, I want to be clear that I am not referring to the public feud that erupted among organizers in 2020, following my fieldwork. I am referring to more ordinary disputes between students, mentors, and allies that comprised the daily grind of organizing—not to mention life in high school.

101. Jackson 2013, Simpson 2014, McGranahan 2016, Shange 2019a.

102. Hall 1986 and Scott 1990 are helpful for parsing stronger and looser theories of ideology. Hall’s description of premises within Marxist theory as the historically mediated “limits and horizons of thought to which [different classes are] ‘spontaneously’ attracted” (1986, 41) comes closest to what I am describing here—minus the spontaneity bit, plus a recognition of the heterogeneity of premises *within* classes, and with an emphasis on people’s ability to move between premises even in the absence of mass movements.



103. I borrow these clarifying comparisons from Riles (2016, 128). On Vaihinger: his work on fictions is productive, but carries some baggage that I wish to avoid. First, “fiction” implies the presence of a “fact,” opening debates about truth and falsehood that fall outside this book. Second, I want to dispense with Vaihinger’s instrumentalism. He describes “as ifs” as “means toward a definite end” (1924, 99). Perhaps they can be, but more often I encountered them as starting points.

104. Vaihinger 1924, vii.

105. In her work on Palestinian politics within conditions of long-term humanitarian aid, Feldman (2018) distinguishes between the “politics of life” and the “politics of living,” framing the former as a value structure decreed from on high regarding the sorts of lives some groups might live, and the latter as a space of action that persists within and despite these abject structures. More fundamentally, she teaches how to explore the “grip of encounter” between these two “without either painting a picture of utter abjection or describing a scene of unending resistance,” for neither grasps the messiness of life as it is lived in this (or any) context (2018, 5).

106. Ballestero’s technological “devices” are “structured space[s] for technical improvisation” that pull worlds into fixed arrangements—however fleeting—through which people can imagine futures yet-to-come (2019, 193, 5, 28–9). In this sense, they teach that speculative practice has the capacity for openness, but also to structure, winnow, control, and compartmentalize. Also to lend some potentials greater weight than others (Kyriakides 2018, 700).

107. Bloch 1959.

108. Crutzen and Stoermer 2000, 17. There are many proposals for when to date the Anthropocene and what to call it—all of which are also arguments about responsibility. See, e.g., Haraway et al. 2016; Davis and Todd 2017.

109. Butler 1998, 3–4.

#### IMPOSSIBLE TO SAY

1. On coal dust, see IARC Working Group on the Evaluation of Carcinogenic Risks to Humans, “Silica, Some Silicates, Coal Dust and Para-Aramid Fibrils,” 1997, accessed April 6, 2022. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK410075/>. On other ambient pollutants, see EIP 2012.

2. See Auyero and Swistun 2009, Proctor and Schiebinger 2008, Oreskes and Conway 2010.

#### CHAPTER ONE

1. Mueller 2004, 1.

2. This quote comes from the Sanborn Company’s *Surveyors’ Manual for the Exclusive Use and Guidance of Employees*, published in 1905.

3. On how clarity depends on distance from the ground, Scott writes: “Certain forms of knowledge and control require a narrowing of vision. The great advantage of such tunnel vision is that it brings into sharp focus certain limited aspects of an otherwise far more complex and unwieldy reality” (1998, 11). Giddens (1991) also argues that

modernity divides knowledge-making from lived experience. On how sharper futures come from losing pasts, I am thinking in line with the critical scholarship on risk (e.g., Douglas and Wildavsky 1983, Hacking 1990, Ewald 1991, Luhmann 1993, Lupton 1999, Reith 2004, Zeiderman 2016). Beck (1992, 34) even argues that risk leaves the past powerless to define the present.

4. Miéville 2009.

5. Ahmann 2022a.

6. Diary of Lucy Bronson, 1881–82. Maryland Historical Society, MS 2753.

7. On the “pulse of the archive,” see Stoler 2008. On marking and isolating the contagious in a different setting, see Foucault 1977, 195–96.

8. Three medical posts were built on the peninsula over the course of the century; for the sake of narrative clarity, I do not differentiate between them.

9. Douglas 1966.

10. Howard 1924, 2.

11. Valenčius 2002, 109.

12. Liboiron 2013, 138.

13. See also Nash 2007.

14. Howard (1924, 37) writes that, under miasma theory, disease was understood to spread between people through their “emanations.”

15. Tayac and Schupman 2006, 7.

16. Valenčius 2002, 22.

17. Nash 2007, 13.

18. Iplenski, Maureen, 2019, “The Mysterious Malady: Philadelphia’s Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793,” Blog of the *Historical Society of Pennsylvania*, August 28, accessed March 9, 2022, <https://hsp.org/blogs/fondly-pennsylvania/mysterious-malady-philadelphia-s-yellow-fever-epidemic-1793>.

19. Howard 1924, 84.

20. This information on the direction of the wind comes from Diamond 1998, 62.

21. Howard 1924, 60, 61–62, 92.

22. Bashford 2007, 7.

23. Rose 2005, 14.

24. After 1808, Baltimore became a key node in the domestic slave trade.

25. These descriptors come from Fairchild (2003, 43).

26. Valenčius 2002, 255.

27. This quote comes from a nineteenth-century medical textbook cited in legal proceedings of the Baltimore City Circuit Court. *Fairfield Improvement Co. v. Mayor and City Council of Baltimore*, 1897. MSA T 53-281. Stenographer’s Transcript, 69.

28. Howard 1924, 109.

29. Brown (2021, 77) quotes the 1918 *Baltimore Sun*: “The Mayor . . . has conceived the idea of an ordinance . . . which would segregate negroes in this city because of



having a much higher rate of tuberculosis among them than there is among the whites. They constitute a menace to the health of the white population.”

30. “White city leaders delayed the building of public sewer and water systems and the paving of streets and alleys in areas where Black people lived. Black neighborhoods also received separate and inferior public goods and services, ranging from public school, library, and recreational facilities, sanitation and street cleaning, and public health programs.” All this contributed to “a greater burden of disease” among Black residents (Brown 2021, 43).

31. Butler 1990.

32. Quoted in Howard 1924, 294–95.

33. Compare Corbin (1982) on the role of odor in pre-Pasteurian France.

34. Howard 1924, 59.

35. Howard 1924, 146.

36. Liboiron 2013, 137.

37. Temkin 1977, 436. Also see Latour 1988 on germ theory’s gradual rise to prominence.

38. Nash 2007, 11–12.

39. Liboiron 2013, 136–37. Also see Roberts 2022 on “causal enclosures.”

40. Howard 1924, 286.

41. See Foucault 1973 on the “medical gaze.”

42. Liboiron 2013, 134.

43. Nash 2007, 11–12.

44. Spillers 1987, 67.

45. Work at quarantine thus built on a chilling tradition of “apartheid” medicine (Washington 2006), casting an overwhelmingly racialized group as experimental subjects from whom, but not for whom, public health knowledge could be made.

46. These innovations are also bound to the statistical turn in public health that emerged with the nineteenth-century erosion of deterministic thinking (Hacking 1990) and the rise of biopower (Foucault 2004).

47. Brown 2021, 77.

48. Howard 1924, 18.

49. Howard 1924, 288.

50. Hacking 1990.

51. Fassin 2009, 53.

52. On “enactments of the city as [a collection of] hermetic *airspace[s]*,” see Zee 2022, 174.

53. King 2014, 431.

54. Curtis Bay Terrace. 1918. *Curtis Bay: Baltimore’s Two Hundred and Fifty Million Dollar Industrial Development*, 3.

55. Ewald, Gollier, and de Sadeleer 2001, 47.

56. Tkacik 2020.

57. I write more about the Sansone case in Ahmann 2018a, 57–59; compare Fabricant 2022, 26–27.

58. Fairchild 2003, 7.

59. These details come from an unpublished memoir written by my great-grandmother, who wrote of her mother: “She took great pride in her spotless floors which were of plain unvarnished wood. She scrubbed them once a week. The stove was a black iron coal stove, which she kept shined to a high luster. There were curtains on all the windows which she made herself. She washed her clothes by hand.” Of such behaviors, Tomes writes, “The connection between a clean house and a well-scrubbed floor and dustless furniture was largely an American-born obsession” tied to the “American obsession with whiteness” (1998, 191–2).

60. Logics of preparedness become salient when threats “are not manageable through techniques of probabilistic calculation” (Lakoff 2007, 247).

61. Curtis Bay Terrace 1918, 8.

62. See Giddens on “disembedding,” or lifting problems out of context to make them available for expert knowledge: a central marker of the modern age (1991, 18).

63. Lutz 2002, 48.

64. Ryon 1985.

65. Speech delivered in St. Louis, Missouri, by Theodore Roosevelt, May 31, 1916.

66. Rockman (2009) details the value of these labor combinations to Baltimore’s capitalist class. More broadly, exploiting division was a common corporate tactic in twentieth-century America, where bosses often “hir[ed] the most recent immigrant arrivals en masse as strikebreakers or . . . to lower the wages of existing . . . workers” (Walley 2013, 41; Roediger 1991).

67. Ford’s Sociological Department paid keen attention to workers’ bodies, disparaging “men who herd themselves into overcrowded boarding houses which are menaces to their health,” and advising families to “use plenty of soap and water in the home” (quoted in Fairchild 2003, 77).

68. Lutz 2002, 12.

69. Speech delivered in Chicago, Illinois, by Theodore Roosevelt, October 26, 1916.

70. Speech delivered in Battle Creek, Michigan, by Theodore Roosevelt, September 30, 1916. For a robust analysis of threats like this within the early preparedness movement, see Finnegan 1974.

71. Roosevelt condemned “hyphenated Americanism” because it represented voters’ interest in “the country from which they or their fathers came,” and “will spell ruin to this nation.” Speech delivered in St. Louis, Missouri, by Theodore Roosevelt, May 31, 1916.

72. Template letter for honorable discharges. US National Archives in Philadelphia, RG 156, Records of the Bureau of Ordnance, Records of Ordnance Depots, Curtis Bay General Ordnance Depot, Box 1, Entry 1550, Correspondence of Company A, 1918–19.

73. Non-Partisan Greater Baltimore Extension League quoted in Diamond 1998, 53.

74. Speech delivered in Chicago, Illinois, by Franklin D. Roosevelt, October 5, 1937.

75. Sherry 1995, 32.



76. *Korematsu v. United States*, 323 U.S. 214 (1944).

77. A magazine published by Bethlehem notes: “Whereas the famous ships of former eras achieved their renown through technical advances . . . the Liberty ship won her place among the world’s famous types of vessels by foregoing many of the refinements of her day in the interest of rapid construction.” Maryland Historical Society, MS 2010, Box 32, Folder 4, Bethlehem Steel Corporation, 1941–51.

78. *The Bethlehem Liberty Fleet* magazine. Maryland Historical Society, MS 2010, Box 32, Folder 4, Bethlehem Steel Corporation, 1941–51.

79. This characterization of Fordism comes from Gramsci, who “understood that the factory had no location. It had instead become generalized across the social fabric as the lives of men, women, and children were organized not only just in terms of an articulated public cultural morality or even only in terms of familial form, but on the ‘level of the nervous system’” (quoted in Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012, 321).

80. Radio address delivered by Franklin D. Roosevelt, December 29, 1940.

81. Advertisement from the 1943 *Baltimore Evening Sun*, June 24. Maryland Historical Society, MS 2010, Box 55, Folder 4, Coast Guard News Clippings, 1941–47.

82. Biehler 2013, 118.

83. Diamond 1998, 92.

84. Foucault 1977.

85. Rudacille 2010, 95.

86. Industrial hygiene has roots in progressive-era research begun in Chicago’s Hull House by Alice Hamilton (Sellers 1997).

87. Sellers calls this the “microenvironment of the factory” (1997, 2). Also see Nash on how the rise of professionalized public health after the acceptance of germ theory increasingly “tried to erase the particularity of any given landscape in favor of an assumed homogeneity” (2007, 90).

88. This method is described in the Bethlehem-published magazine, cited above. The reference to “the human element in industry” comes from Maryland’s head of Industrial Health, who described needing to pitch hygiene measures to private companies this way. Interview of Dr. W. F. Reindollar, head of the Division of Industrial Health, July 31, 1946. Division of Industrial Health. *Annual Report*, Maryland Historical Society, MS 2010, Box 80, Folder 3, Health Department (Maryland), Division of Industrial Health, 1942–44.

89. Wylie calls such practices “techniques of disembodiment”: they “export data from [sites] of extraction to centers of calculation,” “reconfigure workers’ bodies as mechanical and replaceable,” and “are developed by engineers who have little contact” with the lived effects of what they study from on high (2018, 187).

90. As Kefalas observes in *White*, working-class Chicago, residents exhibited a “complex cognitive-emotional geography of home that configures the good life on three levels”: household, community, nation (2003, 6).

91. Interview of Dr. W. F. Reindollar, head of the Division of Industrial Health, July 31, 1946.

92. “Proceedings of Conference of Depot Control Staff Officers, July 8 through July 10, 1943.” US National Archives in Philadelphia, RG 156, Chief of Ordnance,

Curtis Bay Ordnance Depot, Administrative Files, Curtis Bay, Maryland, NND883501, 1932–50, Box 2, Folder 6, Conferences, 1942–43.

93. Kieffer, J. Donald. 1943. *Management Reports*, 12. US National Archives in Philadelphia, RG 156, Chief of Ordnance, Curtis Bay Ordnance Depot, Administrative Files, Curtis Bay, Maryland, NND883501, 1932–50, Box 2, Folder 6, Conferences, 1942–43.

94. Emphasis in original. “Proceedings of Conference of Depot Control Staff Officers, July 8 through July 10, 1943.”

95. See Scott 1998 and Mitchell 2012 on expert knowledge, and Appel 2019 on capitalism’s view from afar.

96. That clarity proceeded through the end: before Truman decided to drop the atom bomb on Hiroshima, he was told that an invasion of Japan could cost 500,000–1,000,000 American lives. The projection proceeded from the reference point of previous campaigns. If Leyte, Iwo Jima, Okinawa, then so many deaths could be expected. This was the kind of cold abstraction that could make sense of the bomb as an instrument of peace and not unspeakable violence (Giangreco 2003; also Cohn 1987). It was managerial clarity’s blinding culmination.

97. Staff writer, 1941, “Post-war Role for Defense Homes is Set,” *Baltimore Sun*, August 10.

98. Diamond 1998, 90–91.

99. Schmidt 1964, Williams 1955.

100. After the bomb, Beck (1992) argues, technical experts could no longer manage the risks their work had generated.

101. Bryant and Knight 2019, 82.

102. US National Archives in Philadelphia. RG 156, Box 1, Folder 12, Records of the Bureau of Ordnance, 1950s.

103. This same inattention left several million pounds of radioactive chemicals to leak in the depot’s dilapidated buildings, unmitigated into the 1990s (Abelquist and Bauer 2005).

104. Masco 2014.

105. The EPA designates “risk per  $\mu\text{g}/\text{L}$  drinking water” or “risk per  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  air breathed” as operative units for its risk assessments.

106. See, again, Auyero and Swistun 2009, Proctor and Schiebinger 2008, Oreskes and Conway 2010.

107. Since parent companies rarely accepted responsibility for the actions of subsidiaries, large corporations could disavow most place-based claims (on this dynamic, see Sawyer 2006).

108. Kysar 2010. Haraway describes this vantage—“seeing everything from nowhere”—as the “god trick” (1988, 581). Liboiron further shows that this presumptive “legibility across jurisdictions, scales, materials, and contexts” participates in the universalizing project at the heart of colonial science (2021, 51).

109. Carson 1962.

110. Testimony quoted in Boyd 2012, 936.

111. Biehler 2013, 90.



112. For evidence of DDT contamination at FMC, see <https://mde.maryland.gov/programs/Land/MarylandBrownfieldVCP/Documents/www.mde.state.md.us/assets/document/brownfields/fmc.pdf>. On FMC's production of carbofuran, an organo-phosphate poison, see Bowie 1991.

113. In 1960s Baltimore, chemical companies paid over \$60,000,000 in taxable wages annually (Williams 1954).

114. Friedman 1962.

115. Appelbaum 2019, 196–97.

116. Appelbaum 2019, 207. In 1981, Congress settled on \$1,000,000, though the value of a human life would change with every new administration. For example, in 2003, the Bush-era EPA “proposed to apply a 37 percent discount to the lives of people over seventy.” When that proposition met with criticism, “the lesson learned was to cut the value of all lives” (2019, 211–2).

117. Appelbaum 2019, 206.

118. These advances are bound to the proliferation of gas chromatography-mass spectrometry in the 1960s (Boyd 2012).

119. National Research Council 1983, 11–12.

120. Jasanoff 1990, 3.

121. Nash 2007, 169.

122. Wylie 2018, 52.

123. Nash 2007, 169.

124. Benson and Kirsch (2010, 462) argue that resignation saturated the neoliberal era—including resignation to the impression that corporate power and its harms were “inevitable conditions of modernity rather than . . . relationships between corporations, bodies, and environments that can potentially be . . . changed.”

125. Scholars have marshalled this critique for years, showing that risk assessment works “by dividing complex environments into categories of analysis, enabling ‘the piecemeal enumeration of ecologies as entities’ that can then be monitored, modeled, and governed” (Howey and Neale 2023, 1085).

126. Kuzmack and McGaughy 1975, 1.

127. Boyd 2012, 968.

128. Animal studies were nothing new in the 1970s, but it had been only twenty-odd years since industrial hygienists used them to glean “threshold limit values” for specific chemicals. More recently, the FDA had developed a formula for translating animal data into human standards: by dividing the lowest “no effect” level observed in rats by a crude hundred-fold margin of safety.

129. Nash 2007, 142. In the late 1980s, scientists complicated this picture of the lab-as-background-space when they discovered that plastic lab tubes were leaching endocrine-disrupting chemicals into the samples stored inside (Colborn et al. 1996, 127).

130. Sellers 1997, 188.

131. Langston 2010, 21.

132. Boyd 2012.

133. Kuzmack and McGaughy 1975, ii.

134. In this way, risk replaced judgment with computation (Hacking 1990, 4).

135. Specifically, ten parts per million, based on the lowest level thought achievable through recourse to the best control technology then available. National Emissions Standards for Hazardous Air Pollutants, Proposed Standard for Vinyl Chloride, 40 Fed. Reg. 59 (1975), 534.

136. Train, Russell E. 1976. *Interim Procedures and Guidelines for Health Risk and Economic Impact Assessments of Suspected Carcinogens*, Preamble. Report prepared for the US EPA.

137. This is how Luhmann (1993) differentiates “risk” from “danger.”

138. Kuzmack and McGaughy 1975, i.

139. Toxic Substances Control Act, Pub. L., No. 94-469, 90 Stat. 2003 (1976).

140. “In November 1977, the registry of chemicals maintained by the American Chemical Society listed 4,039,907 distinct chemical compounds—and the registry includes only chemicals reported in the literature since 1965. The list has been growing at a rate of 6,000 per week” (Markell 2010, 350). Nevertheless, “as late as mid-1991, the EPA had received health and environmental assessments on only 22 of the thousands of toxic substances covered by TSCA and had evaluated the results for only 12 of these” (Sellers 1997, 237).

141. Besides TSCA, important legal developments included the Supreme Court’s 1980 *Benzene* decision and the National Research Council’s groundbreaking 1983 *Risk Assessment in the Federal Government*.

142. Boyd 2012, 791.

143. Corburn 2005, 81.

144. On the noncarcinogenic but still devastating impacts of endocrine-disrupting pollutants, see Colborn et al. 1996, Langston 2010. Endocrine disruptors challenge risk paradigms in several ways: the dose does *not* make the poison; they lack a meaningful threshold of safety; and “a single chemical exposure . . . may affect three generations” (Langston 2010, 13).

145. Or anywhere: “When it comes to toxic exposure and humans, there is no such thing as a blank slate” (Jain 2013, 190).

146. Augé 1995.

147. Compare Southeast Chicago, where there was “a constant emphasis upon the need to draw boundaries. . . . Whites in particular jealously guarded their neighborhoods against those ethnic and racial groups perceived to be on a lower social rung, whom they saw as threatening their own recent and hard-won respectability” (Walley 2013, 22).

148. Murphy 2008, 698.

149. Boyd 2012, 896.

150. National Research Council 1983, 13.

151. Jasanoff 1990, 3.

152. The phrase “counter-science” comes from Benson and Kirsch (2010).



153. Oreskes and Conway 2010.

154. Allied Chemical. 1972. “Process Engineering Evaluation Waste Treatment Program,” 19. Baltimore Museum of Industry SC9, Folder 6, “Allied Chemical / Baltimore Works,” 2014.42.02.

155. Murphy 2008, 698.

156. Valenčius 2002, 110.

157. Nash 2007, 169.

158. Jain 2013, 146.

159. To call pollution uncertain is thus a kind of violence: “To residents experiencing the hazards of . . . expanding industry, harm is not ‘inherently uncertain.’ They *know* it through their *senses* and from their *experiences*, and they *learn* it through sharing their *histories*” (Wylie 2018, 280; emphasis in original).

160. Both units come from the EPA’s Integrated Risk Information System database: <https://www.epa.gov/iris>. They are indicative of the cold “mathematical ethics of the technological age” (Beck 1992, 99).

161. On bodies as “classed,” see Walley 2013.

162. Mullings 2005a, 671.

163. Mullings 2005b, Mullings et al. 2021. On how “race becomes biology” through uneven exposures, see Gravlee 2009. For foundational texts on racially disparate exposure to toxicity, see Bullard 1990, Checker 2005.

164. Tsing 2015.

#### LITTLE BOXES

1. American Petroleum Institute. 1948. *API Toxicological Review: Benzene*, report from the API Department of Safety, accessed May 18, 2022, [https://web.archive.org/web/20030310145140/http://hobsonlaw.com/benzene\\_pages/pdf.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20030310145140/http://hobsonlaw.com/benzene_pages/pdf.pdf).

2. US Energy Information Administration. 2022. “Frequently Asked Questions,” accessed May 18, 2022, <https://www.eia.gov/tools/faqs/faq.php?id=23&t=10>.

3. Browne 1988.

4. *Industrial Union Department v. American Petroleum Institute*, 448 U.S. 607, 611 (1980). (This ruling is often glossed as the *Benzene* decision.)

5. Rubaii 2022.

#### CHAPTER TWO

1. Brooklyn-Curtis Bay Historical Committee. 1976. *A History of Brooklyn-Curtis Bay*, 40.

2. Anft 1999.

3. I draw some of this imagery from Schidlovsky 1979.

4. See Pandian on the ubiquity of barriers in American life—from picket fences to plastic bottles—indicating that containment is, for some, an “infrastructural commitment” (n.d., 3).

5. Quoted in McGuire 1993. I never met Jennie, who died before I began research, but she remains a towering figure in the story of the Point. I rely on former residents' recollections and journalists' work to account for her presence here. Regarding Jennie's comments in this sentence: people in contaminated places sometimes accept "porosity to toxins" when they "act as boundaries against worse penetrations," such as law enforcement (Roberts 2017, 598). Consider indigo plantations in the antebellum South: their "putrid" smell kept slave masters out, creating "new geographies of Black freedom" (King 2016, 1037, discussed in Roberts 2017).

6. Dewar and Mathews 1998.

7. This sets the Point apart from what happened in other disastrous landscapes at this historic juncture. For example, victims of Chernobyl staked claims for state recognition on their presently sick bodies, using biological damage as "grounds for social membership" in the new Ukraine (Petryna 2002, 5).

8. Beck 1992, 78. On how disasters divert attention from structural conditions and hold political norms in suspense, see Amoores and de Goede 2008, Button 2010, Klein 2007, Masco 2014.

9. Masco 2015, 20.

10. Zeiderman 2016, 164.

11. As Liboiron writes, "there is no place of purity from which to launch activist politics," because "all agency exercised within asymmetrical power relations is compromised" (2017, 518, 499). Also see Shotwell 2016, Liboiron et al. 2018.

12. Ahmann 2020b. For adjacent analyses of toxic disavowal—in these cases, of refusals to equate toxicity with harm alone—see Stawkowski 2016, Roberts 2017, Langwick 2018, Graeter 2019.

13. Staff writer, 1891, "Fairfield! Beautiful Fairfield!" *Baltimore Sun*, May 13.

14. Curtis Bay Terrace 1918, 4.

15. Blom 2002, 85.

16. King 2014, 433. During this time, Baltimore City maintained segregated schools and transit, and police violence against Black Baltimoreans was rampant. Housing discrimination would not be official city policy until 1910, but it was easily achieved by private means.

17. Staff writer, 1941, "Fairfield Reminisces: Industrial Area Looks Back on Its Almost Pastoral Past," *Baltimore Sun*, June 26.

18. Brown 1982.

19. Diamond (1998, 64–70) writes more about the push-and-pull factors leading the oil industry to Baltimore.

20. This interview comes from King 2014, 434.

21. On the cultural meaning of gardening for Afro-descendant peoples in the United States, see Checker 2005, Reese 2019.

22. Staff writer, 1920, "Oil Fire Still Raging after More Than a Day," *Baltimore Evening Sun*, July 20.

23. Tomes 1998, Nash 2007.

24. Hirt 2014, 15.



25. Quoted in Power 1983, 299.

26. “Between 1880 and 1900, Baltimore’s black population increased 47% from 54,000 to 79,000. Negro newcomers with little money and limited job opportunities sought out the cheapest housing in town. They rented shanties and doubled up in small houses, resulting in Baltimore’s first sizeable slums” (Power 1983, 290).

27. Brown 2021, 78.

28. Power 1983, 307.

29. Other tools for ensuring segregation would soon emerge to take the place of racial zoning laws, like redlining. And use-based zoning was hardly race neutral; many have argued that city planners’ ulterior motive in passing urban land-use legislation has been the preservation of race- and class-based apartheid (Power 1983, Sugrue 1996, Silver 1997, Rubin 1999, Pietila 2010, Trounstein 2018, Checker 2020, Brown 2021).

30. Power 1988, 639.

31. M-3 was the least restrictive among all of Baltimore’s zoning codes. Under M-3, “seemingly any activity was possible” — though residence was allegedly prohibited (Power 1988, 631). This designation did not cover the entire peninsula, though it did encompass the whole Point; some parts of Brooklyn and Curtis Bay were zoned for residential dwellings.

32. On absolute space, see Harvey 2006, Smith 1984. On the “violence intrinsic to abstraction,” and specifically to the production of abstract space, see Lefebvre 1991, 289; Gordillo 2014, 77–84. On legibility within high-modernist state schemes, see Scott 1998 — though Valverde 2011 shows that zoning did not operate as rigidly as Scott’s model might suggest.

33. Easterling writes with special economic zones in mind: the zone is a “frictionless realm of legal and economic exception,” a “spatial instrument for externalizing obstacles to profit” (2012, 5, 7).

34. Checker (2020) also uses the language of zoning “in” and “out.”

35. King 2014, 433.

36. Well into the 1970s, many Fairfield residents still used outhouses, even though the Point housed a wastewater plant and for a time played host to the “Poo Poo Choo Choo,” a sewage train from the center of the city (Samuel 1972). The debacle became a national laughingstock, inspiring this song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsA6hJJpV4&feature=youtu.be>.

37. McKerrow 1977.

38. Staff writer, 1979, “Neighborhood that City Hall Wishes Would Go Away,” *Baltimore Evening Sun*, August 24. Emphasis by the author.

39. Quoted in McGuire 1993. Fairfield’s rezoning campaign, waged in the 1970s, was supported by the pro bono Neighborhood Design Center, and rested on claims about racial discrimination in service provisioning. Though this emphasis on structural racism irritated many Whites in Wagner’s Point, the campaign’s central message resonated across both neighborhoods, where residents ultimately hoped to stay.

40. McKittrick 2013, 7. Jennie’s insistence on growing things of beauty in these same landscapes, through her garden, is also a sign that different stories can be told about spaces of extraction and captivity (McKittrick 2006).

41. Neighborhood Design Center, 1972, “Rezoning Fairfield,” Enoch Pratt Free Library, Maryland Department, VF, Fairfield (Baltimore).
42. Staff writer, 1972, “Fairfield, City’s Junkyard, Fights off Industry,” *Baltimore Sun*, February 13.
43. Gilbert 1979.
44. Bennett 1979.
45. Roberts 2017, 603–4.
46. Just over half in Wagner’s Point, and even more in Fairfield—excluding the Fairfield Homes—owned their houses after generations of investment (Diamond 1998, 122).
47. Quoted in Mathews 1998a.
48. King 2014, 434.
49. Barbash 1972.
50. “As a clump of saved-up labor, a house represented a long-term bet that a form of life would continue” (Winant 2021, 78).
51. This is a classic double bind in “contaminated communities” (Edelstein 1988).
52. Cleanliness had strong, albeit different, symbolic significance for both White and Black working-class communities (Kefalas 2003, Biehler 2013).
53. Schidlovsky 1979.
54. Twigg 1984.
55. Blom 2002, 95.
56. Federal investigators’ surprise at “discovering” the Fairfield Homes is notable, as the federal government built them (Diamond 1998, 116).
57. This buyout was funded by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, as accessory to the closure of the Fairfield Homes. It did not encompass Wagner’s Point. Monetary offers were based on land’s fair market value—low given the peninsula’s condition. Blom (2002, 142) cites purchase prices ranging from \$5,900 to 17,000.
58. Quoted in Diamond 1998, 110 n303.
59. Colborn et al. 1996.
60. Langston 2010, Appelbaum 2019.
61. *Benzene* decision quoted in Langston 2010, 113.
62. Among the endocrine-disrupting toxicants with a known presence on the Point: DDT, DDE, and other chemicals were found in ponds at FMC in 1979; toxic PCBs were stored at the ordnance depot in the 1980s; and the medical waste incinerator would have been a major contributor to dioxin contamination. All three accumulate in bodies over generations and disrupt reproductive functioning.
63. On the positive futurities structuring Fordist fantasies, see Berlant 2007, 2011; Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012.
64. Fortun calls containment one of industrialism’s central ideologies: it “splits Nature from Culture” and imagines “sludge” will “stay in the sludge pond.” But in late industrialism, “the levee has broken.” Breakdown is “everywhere, eminent, and normal” (2014, 309–13).



65. Masco 2014.

66. These back-and-forth letters are dated October 18, 22, and 16, 1984, respectively. Memo, Baltimore City Archives, Mayor Schaefer's Papers, 1962–1992, BRG9-42, Box 322, Folder 10, Fairfield Correspondence, 1983–1984.

67. This concern was hardly unique to the Point. Many Americans worried about Bhopal in precisely these terms (Fortun 2001).

68. As one Fairfield woman wrote: "Please get us away from here before it kills us." Barbara McDuffie to William Donald Schaefer, October 8, 1984, Letter, Baltimore City Archives, Mayor Schaefer's Papers, 1962–1992, BRG9-42, Box 322, Folder 10, Fairfield Correspondence, 1983–1984.

69. One aide to the mayor wrote that residents' conditions did not "appear to warrant such drastic action [as relocation]." Special Assistant to Barbara Mikulski, Letter, Baltimore City Archives, Mayor Schaefer's Papers, 1962–1992, BRG9-42, Box 322, Folder 10, Fairfield Correspondence, 1983–1984.

70. The chemical in question, methyl isocyanate, is used in the production of carbofuran—a product made at FMC during this time. See <https://www.acs.org/content/acs/en/molecule-of-the-week/archive/m/methyl-isocyanate.html>.

71. Caduff writes that prophecy "disrupts our sense of time. Prophecy can address future events in the past tense, as if they had happened, and past events in the future tense, as if they are about to happen" (2015, 7). Prophecy can also disrupt our sense of space, letting Bhopal stand for ghastly futures elsewhere.

72. Beck 1992.

73. Wallace, Rick, director, *Acceptable Risks*, ABC, 1986, 1 hr., 32 min. The preview is not to be missed: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTmBz3MJb2o>.

74. Naomi Benyowitz to William Donald Schaefer, February 27, 1986, Memo re: TV Movie Depicting Chemical Spill, Baltimore City Archives, Mayor Schaefer's Papers, 1962–1992, BRG9-42, Box 857, Folder 12, Hazardous Materials, 1985–1986.

75. The film is a brilliant illustration of Perrow's (1984) point that "tightly coupled" components make accidents extremely likely within complex systems.

76. Naomi Benyowitz to William Donald Schaefer, February 27, 1986, Memo.

77. Hilgartner 2007, Gusterson 2011.

78. Fortun 2001, 60.

79. More than the push for peacetime war readiness advocated in the early twentieth century, Cold War-era preparedness was a speculative enterprise that sought to bring "uncertain future events . . . into a space of present intervention" through strategies like simulation (Lakoff 2007, 247; also Collier and Lakoff 2015, Lakoff 2017, Masco 2014). In the 1980s, preparedness moved beyond the military realm and began to be applied to natural and industrial disasters.

80. Mayor's Emergency Preparedness Planning Committee, 1986, "Chemical Hazard Plan," Baltimore City Archives, Mayor Schaefer's Papers, 1962–92, BRG9-42, Box 857, Folder 36, Chemical Hazard Plan, 1986.

81. Bartlett 1990.

82. Masco 2014, 42.

83. As tens of thousands of public dollars went toward emergency preparedness, Baltimore City was forced to cease: “monitoring drinking water quality”; “pre-demolition assessments for asbestos”; “investigation of complaints concerning air pollution, odors, and visible emissions”; “investigation of spills, dumping, and improper storage of hazardous materials”; and more. Baltimore City Health Department, “Impact of State Budget Cuts on Environmental Health Programs,” Pamphlet, published in the 1990s, Enoch Pratt Free Library, Maryland Department, VF, Environmental Health.

84. Anft 1989.

85. Blom 2002, 135.

86. Clarke 1999, 2, 34.

87. *Ibid.*, 4.

88. Masco 2014, 17.

89. Dewar 1998.

90. Jain 2013.

91. Somerville 1997.

92. Mayor’s Emergency Preparedness Planning Committee, 1986, “Chemical Hazard Plan.”

93. Together, they could be considered an “enunciatory community”: a heterogeneous group brought together in response to a shared paradox (Fortun 2001, 11–3).

94. Though the burden of proof required in civil court (“preponderance of the evidence”) is lighter than in criminal cases (“beyond a reasonable doubt”), toxic torts are notoriously difficult to substantiate. Plaintiffs must: show that there is a specific poisonous substance present and provide evidence of its causal nexus with respect to specific injuries; demonstrate how the substance penetrated human tissue; and prove that the substance belonged to a particular defendant (Strickland 2005).

95. Zeiderman 2016, 180.

96. This is the sort of maneuvering that Chatterjee argues is available to groups which the state prefers to exclude from civil society (2004, 40). It also echoes how Johnson-Hanks describes “effective social action” in the face of insurmountable uncertainty, as based “on a judicious opportunism: the actor seizes promising chances” (2005, 363).

97. Speech delivered in Washington, DC, by William Clinton, January 17, 1994.

98. Quoted in Blom 2002, 96.

99. Sharpe 2016, 7. Anderson et al., drawing on work in Black studies, also argue that the division between disaster and the everyday was “only ever available to certain valued lives,” and that emergency governance therefore exists in service of presumptively White subjects (2020, 622).

100. Fortun 2001, 11.

101. Rena quoted in Blom 2002, 120.

102. Clarke 1999.

103. Grandia 2020. Also see Goldstein and Hall 2015.

104. Quoted in Diamond 1998, 169.



105. Blom 2002, 133.
106. Moran-Thomas 2019, 76.
107. Dewar and Mathews 1998.
108. She did (Mathews 1999b).
109. Quoted in Diamond 1998, 174.
110. Quoted in Dewar and Mathews 1998.
111. Blom 2002, 184.
112. The quotes from Brenda and Schmoke both come from Blom 2002, 241–42.
113. For iterations of such trade-offs as a devil pact, see Taussig 1980, Crandon-Malamud 1991. On toxic exposures as the “price paid for remarkable stability” of other kinds, see Roberts 2017.
114. McGuire 1993.
115. Ibid.
116. Quoted in Mathews 1998b.
117. Nixon 2011, 6.
118. Kefalas 2003, 62.
119. Mathews 1999a.
120. Most of them, anyway. One hanger-on hung on until 2011.
121. Quoted in Klein 2001.
122. Quote drawn from this interview by CBS in 1999: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eN2LY2Wu7qM>.
123. Fortun 2014, 319.
124. “The Marxist diagnosis of false consciousness can seem to imply a kind of moral vacating instead of conflicted micro-practices entailed in making relations go numb, sometimes only later to be revived. . . . Disregard also requires maintenance” (Moran-Thomas 2019, 181).
125. Fortun 2014, Beck 1992.
126. Van Wyck 2005, vii.
127. Weston 2021, 467, 483. Thinking with counterfactuals can be a liberatory exercise, but it can also produce a dizzying sense of cognitive dissonance (Jain 2013, 22–3).

#### BUYING TIME

1. Zee (2017) describes this kind of orientation as a “holding pattern”: an attempt not to prevent an anticipated future, but to forestall it.
2. More precisely, a half-life of 7–11 years.

#### CHAPTER THREE

1. I assure you there was nothing particularly “leftist” about where I went to graduate school. Regrettably, this impression has more to do with the right-wing spin on higher education than it does with higher education’s actual politics.

2. It is worth noting, for readers less steeped in the environmental justice literature, just how uncommon this stance is: incinerators are classic objects of NIMBYism.

3. “A brownfield is a property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant.” EPA, n.d, “Brownfield Overview and Definition,” accessed April 12, 2021, <https://www.epa.gov/brownfields/brownfield-overview-and-definition>.

4. They thus invert Abram and Weszkalnys’s notion of urban planning as a way of thinking through “the possibilities time offers space” (2013, 2).

5. Throughout this book, but particularly here, I am thinking via Gramsci (1971), Hall (1986), and Koselleck (1985) about the different forms that political possibility takes at distinct historical moments. What seemed possible in the late Cold War (chapter 2) was not the same as following industrial decline (chapter 3), which was not the same as what would happen in subsequent years as local youth built a movement against the Fairfield Project (chapters 4–5).

6. Calls for renewal would therefore seem to be examples of “restorative” (Boym 2001) or “ambivalent” nostalgia (Mah 2012, 37).

7. For figurings of hope as futural momentum, see Bloch 1959, Miyazaki 2004.

8. On depletion’s many valences, see Bessire 2021.

9. Martin shows how Baltimore papers that once touted their industrial-labor readership to advertisers had by the 1970s begun pitching their “effectiveness at reaching higher-income households” (2019, 45, 92). This tracked with trends at news outlets across the country.

10. Martin 2019, 7.

11. Ibid. Notably, the *Baltimore Sun* also trafficked in racist propaganda (see Brown 2021, 80–1), for which its Editorial Board (2022) recently apologized.

12. Walley 2013, 3.

13. On life expectancy, see Woolf and Schoemaker 2019.

14. Frank is a composite of two older men with similar subject-positions, both former factory workers raised in greater Curtis Bay.

15. Rudacille 2010 covers Bethlehem’s demise in heartbreaking detail. On the rise of health care in steel’s place, see Winant 2021.

16. Quoted in Rudacille 2010, 11.

17. Khatchadourian 2022, 319.

18. According to Marx (1863), waste is a product of overproduction whose glut imperils profit. Nor is Marx the only thinker to see waste as the “other” of capitalist value (Gidwani and Reddy 2011). Locke (1681) figures “wasted” land as the constitutive outside of civil society whose transformation into property precipitated modern governance. In Weber’s reading of Protestantism, waste is “the first and in principle the deadliest of sins” (1905, 104). And for Bataille, it is that “exuberant” expenditure that cannot be absorbed into a system and therefore must be spent, either “gloriously or catastrophically” (1949, 21).

19. Michaels, Ted, and Karunya Krishnan, 2019, *2018 Directory of Waste-to-Energy Facilities*, 4. Report by the Energy Recovery Council, accessed April 12, 2021, <http://>

energyrecoverycouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/ERC-2018-directory.pdf. This represents roughly 10 percent of the US waste stream.

20. I often heard opponents of incineration use this phrase to describe why the technology is so insidious. As one activist explained at a Baltimore-based event, “If [trash] was piling up in our front yards, we would collectively realize that we have a problem.” But incinerators make our trash “look like it vanished.” Another writes that “every incinerator built delays this fundamental realization by at least twenty-five years,” stalling progress toward “more sustainable” options (Connett 2013, 63).

21. Planners quickly learned there are “limits even to a pig’s digestive capabilities” (Griffin 1931).

22. Though pitched as “an environmental dream, turning common, everyday trash . . . into steam, scrap iron, char, and a glassy substance which could be used to pave streets, all in a short, clean process,” the pyrolysis plant “never worked. . . . When the plant’s private developer, Monsanto Environ-Chem Systems, gave up on the project . . . an embarrassed Mayor William Donald Schaefer angrily called the firm ‘a bunch of common bastards’” (Peterson 1977).

23. For capital-cost estimates, see US Energy Information Administration, 2013, “Updated Capital Cost Estimates for Utility Scale Electricity Generating Plants,” accessed April 20, 2017, [https://www.eia.gov/outlooks/capitalcost/pdf/updated\\_capcost.pdf](https://www.eia.gov/outlooks/capitalcost/pdf/updated_capcost.pdf). On the notorious bankruptcy of Harrisburg, PA, see Tavernise 2011.

24. In April 2019, BRESKO filed suit against Baltimore County for not sending enough waste. See L. Solomon 2019.

25. Ewall, Mike, n.d., “Trash Incineration More Polluting than Coal,” Energy Justice Network, accessed April 19, 2017, <http://www.energyjustice.net/incineration/worsethancoal>.

26. Industry insiders whom I met frequently invoked the “circular economy” as a justification for incineration, citing claims that circular economies are “restorative and regenerative” because they “design waste out” of the economy. For analyses that undermine these claims, see Hawkins et al. 2019, Zhang 2020.

27. Larkin 2013, 333. Also see Jasanoff and Kim 2015.

28. Ahmann 2022b.

29. Mock 2017.

30. This slippage is not unique to Baltimore; see Ralph 2014, Fennell 2015, Cox 2015, M. Solomon 2019.

31. Empowerment Zone proposal cited in Blom 2002, 96.

32. Ringel 2014.

33. Compare waste “intimacies” in urban Pakistan where, given the uncomfortable proximities that waste fosters across difference, other distinctions must be reinforced “precisely because [they] could be cast into doubt” (Butt 2020, 244).

34. Reno 2015, 562; also Bauman 2004.

35. For more on the centuries-old discursive relationship between waste and race, see Lorde 1974, Hartigan 1992, Baker 2010, Chen 2011, Dillon 2013, McKee 2015, Isenberg 2016, Fredericks 2018, Vasudevan 2019, Resnick 2021. For an insistence it is not



merely a symbolic relationship but a material one, see Solomon and Wool 2021. And for a Baltimore-specific example of the racialized work of urban sanitation, see Fredrickson 2019.

36. Biehler 2013, 116.

37. Tweets quoted in Wagtendonk 2019.

38. Douglas 1966.

39. Walley 2013, 120.

40. Ehrenreich writes that Americans have a habit of holding “insecurities at bay” through scapegoating (2010, x). On how waste specifically creates “indeterminacy around responsibility as a second-order burden following the first-odor burdens of waste itself” —including people described *as* waste—see Stamatopoulou-Robbins (2020, 8).

41. On the politics of comparison vis-à-vis environmental harms, see Choy 2011.

42. Feldman 2016b, 413.

43. On “cruel” attachments, see Berlant 2011.

44. While I call other interlocutors by first names (given or pseudonymous), I heard the CEO referenced by his last name almost exclusively. I use a pseudonymous last name to approximate this social distance.

45. Siegel 1995.

46. EPA, n.d., “Renewable Energy at EPA,” accessed April 21, 2017, <https://www.epa.gov/greeningepa/renewable-energy-epa>.

47. Here, renewal denotes what Nadasdy (2017, 275–81) describes as an abstract cyclicity—foundational to capitalist time—at odds with the specificity of residents’ nostalgia.

48. Szeman and Boyer 2017, 3.

49. Both quotes come from the opening plenary of the North American Waste-to-Energy Conference that I attended in Palm Beach, Florida, May 23, 2016.

50. Some attribute this status to graft. According to reporting, “Energy Answers International cut a \$100,000 check to the Martin O’Malley-led Democratic Governors Association on the very same day that Governor O’Malley indicated he would sign state legislation that could be worth millions to the company.” Staff writer, 2011, “O’Malley DGA Fundraising: The Appearance of Conflict,” *Baltimore Sun*, November 28.

51. Regulators are thus inclined toward “technical adjustments” which “efface the simple realization that humans cannot continue to live and consume as they do” (Günel 2019, 10). There are echoes here of the “inevitability syndrome” that Nader (2004, 775) identified as endemic to energy science. Her phrase captures a resistance among experts—underwritten by a fear of change—to imagine futures *not* predicated on increasing energy reliance.

52. Marx 1867, 333. But of course there are environmental limits to the circulation of capital (see Foster 2002, Moore 2015).

53. Thanks to Maryland’s renewable energy market, companies like McCarthy’s stand to profit multiple times for each batch of refuse, as it moves through different regimes of value (see Thompson 1979). First, they get paid to accept “all the trash” and

“melt it down to nothing,” to borrow Dorothy’s words. Next, they get paid to dispense fuel. And now, Maryland awards one Renewable Energy Credit for each “unit” of energy they generate. These credits can be sold in the energy marketplace, but they do not represent the kind of energy that one might use to toast bread or charge a battery; they simply represent the idea of “green” and derive worth from that idea’s value. It is only in this sense that the technology’s “renewability” makes sense, but its object is not exactly waste. It is capital that is renewed through incineration and, again, through the exchange of credits. It is capital that enters the system as one thing and exits multiply revived. It is capital, not trash, that is given a second life.

54. Among other things, this label exempted the Fairfield Project from regulations that prohibit constructing an incinerator within a mile of a school.

55. Energy Answers International, LLC, Rebuttal Testimony of Ronald Nelson, Case 9199 (ML 120636), May 17, 2010, accessed March 14, 2016, [http://webapp.psc.state.md.us/Intranet/casenum/CaseAction\\_new.cfm?CaseNumber=9199](http://webapp.psc.state.md.us/Intranet/casenum/CaseAction_new.cfm?CaseNumber=9199).

56. Weszkalnys 2016, 137.

57. Banerjee 2020, 7. Writing about cancer patients facing truly foreclosed futures, Banerjee suggests that living in the subjunctive is one way to keep hope alive. By living in the subjunctive, he means “maintaining multiple and even somewhat contradictory points of view,” which is not the same as living in “denial” (2020, 42).

58. On near versus far futures, see Guyer 2007.

59. In tagging common sense, I am thinking alongside Hall who, in turn, is thinking alongside Gramsci about the importance of “understand[ing] the limits to political action” that present at particular historical conjunctures as though they were natural and immutable, and showing where they come from (1986, 43). Scott, in a critique, calls this a “thin theory of hegemony,” suggesting there is little evidentiary basis for the presumption that one cannot begin to “*imagine* a counterfactual social order” (1990, 74). My attention, here, is on how residents policed the boundaries of reasonable hope. I stop short of making claims about what they could and could not think—and, so, about true or false consciousness as such.

60. On how industry’s physical remains foreclose future land uses, readying places like Curtis Bay for new lives as nodes in waste infrastructures, see Walley 2013, Hurley 2015.

61. Stewart 2007, 1.

62. “Set-aside space” echoes earlier chapters on geographic division, but here I also have in mind Alexander’s (2017, 81) phrase for the field of selective rationality set up by the subjunctive mood.

63. Voltaire 1759, 4.

64. Welker writes of a similar case in Indonesia, where mining executives made promises to local elites in order to enlist them in corporate defense, crafting a hybrid alliance wherein “divergent moral commitments” fostered complementary politics (2009, 168).

65. Consultants provided a generous estimate of 191 permanent positions between the “power plant” and offsite “fuel production facilities.” But they also speculated that an industrial revival spurred by this plant would produce 1,722 jobs for the state and 1,556 for Baltimore. From Sage Policy Group, 2011, *Why the Fairfield Renewable Energy*

*Project Makes Sense for Baltimore and Maryland*, 22, Report prepared on behalf of Energy Answers.

66. Berlant 2011, Povinelli 2011, Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012.

67. Wedeen (2019, 8) offers tools along these lines that take seriously the pull of fantasy investments while skirting diagnoses of false consciousness.

68. Scott 1990, 71–74.

69. The appeal of the incinerator for residents and technocrats depended on its ability to solve what Guyer (2007) calls “near future” problems.

70. Appadurai (2013) might say the local past limited some residents’ “capacity to aspire.”

71. Kelly 2016.

72. McNeill and Engelke 2014.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

1. See Li (2007) on “the will to improve.” Besides providing terms for the cycles of industrial development that this performance critiques, Li usefully draws attention to what it looks like when the “subjects” of development become theorists of their own condition.

2. This genre is particularly well known in South America (see Taussig 1980).

3. Butler 1998, 10.

4. Butler 1993, 1998.

5. Lempert 2018, 10; also Murphy 2017.

6. Maeckelbergh 2011, 4. Prefiguration has a specific conceptual life in social movement scholarship, where it describes modes of organization found among groups seeking to enact the egalitarian worlds they strive for (e.g., Boggs 1977, Breines 1989, Epstein 1991, Graeber 2002, Juris 2008; and see Polletta 2002, Lightsey 2017 for reviews). But in its broadest sense—the sense in which I use it here—the term describes an orientation toward ideal futures “as if” they were immanent now, or, a capacity of the present subjunctive.

7. It mattered to students that their story center ideas and friendships forged in common: that no one student be the voice of the campaign. Still, some media and advocacy outlets, the most prominent being the Goldman Foundation, forwarded hero narratives that centered Destiny alone.

8. Freire 1970.

9. Compare Brodtkin’s analysis of the fight over the Nueva Azalea power plant in Los Angeles, also waged by high school activists: “the plant was . . . a battlefield on which [competing factions] acted out other political differences” (2009, 2).

10. I rely on Hartman’s concept of “experiment,” which in the early twentieth-century United States described “a range of social projects. . . . There was nothing precious or unusual about seeking, venturing, testing, trying, speculating, discovering, exploring new avenues, breaking with traditions, defying law, and making it, except that hardly anyone imagined that young black women might be involved” (2019, 60). Also consider Hage’s (2015) work on alter-political projects.



11. Adjacent, specifically, to the pace of everyday organizing that Lazar (2014) calls “attritional time.”

12. Hartman 2019, 227.

13. On the name, Destiny said: “We experimented with a few names. For a while we called the group ‘Free Our Voices,’ but it sounded like we were asking for permission, so we changed it. . . . ‘Free Your Voice’ worked better. It’s like you have to take an active action and speak up when decisions are made.”

14. Povinelli 2012.

15. “Observant participation” is “a partial but significant rejection of participant observation” that stresses an ethnographer’s involvement in a community (Seim 2021, 4). It is not about mimicry, co-optation, or ownership, but it often does involve alignment. This means it is not always the right method for an ethnographer, and it is not one that I practiced in all settings.

16. McKnight 1998, 3.

17. Speech delivered in Atlanta, Georgia, August 16, 1967, by Martin Luther King, Jr.

18. King argued that Marx “read Hegel and he took his dialectic. And he read another German philosopher by the name of Feuerbach, and he took his materialism and worked out a system called dialectical materialism. And . . . it led him to an ethical relativism. It led him to the conclusion that the end justifies the means. . . . The great weakness of Karl Marx is right here; that he did not recognize that the means and ends must cohere.” Speech delivered in Frogmore, South Carolina, November 14, 1966.

19. Hardt and Negri 2009, 165. “‘*Kairos*’ is a moment . . . [when] the ‘to-come’ is made evident”—it names a prefigurative event (Lazar 2014, 102).

20. Thousands still poured into Washington, DC, for the event, setting up a shantytown called “Resurrection City.” Their occupation lasted for six weeks, before participants were violently evicted by the Metropolitan Police.

21. McNeill, Emily, 2011, “A National Union of the Homeless: A Brief History,” 13, accessed March 14, 2020, <http://social-ecology.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Breif-history-of-National-Union-of-Homeless.pdf>.

22. Gramsci holds that critical intellectual activity helps one transform from a passive “object” of social conditions into an “active historical subject” (1971, 367)—and that everyone is an “organic intellectual” capable of such work.

23. Freire 1972, 52.

24. The early quotes in this sentence come from Murphy, who, in their writing on “alterlife,” locates radical potential “here in the damage now”: it is “a nondeferral of the decolonial, seized now, despite its impossibility” (2017, 501). In a similar vein, Camp writes of Black feminist futurity as “a politics of prefiguration that involves living the [ideal] future *now*” (2017, 17; emphasis in original).

25. Quoted in Baptist and Rehmann 2011, ix; and see hooks 2003. I also draw this chapter’s title from Baptist’s insistence that “the art of politics” is “the art of the possible” (2011, 74).

26. Specifically, an article in the *Baltimore Brew* by Fern Shen (2012).

27. Miller 1951, 52.

28. Shen 2012.

29. Consider, too, Gordon's (1997) inquiry into "the things behind the things": those echoes of history that clarify what must be changed to ensure a more just world.

30. On Fordism's "temporality of mass utopia," see Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012,

334. On breaking points surfaced in dystopic presents, see Shange 2019b, 12–14.

31. This language comes from a United Workers activity on "theories of poverty."

32. Industrial Workers of the World, 2019 [1905], *Preamble, Constitution, and General Bylaws of the Industrial Workers of the World*, accessed February 4, 2020, <https://www.iww.org/PDF/Constitutions/CurrentIWWConstitution.pdf>.

33. Cox 2015, viii–ix.

34. Shange might intervene here to point out what is lost in the push to "unite across color lines" so fundamental to this movement lineage, which at times seems to demand a minimization of Black suffering in service of an interracial class-based solidarity. Consider what is lost in the appeal to "ourness" (2019b, 4) implied in lines like this from one of the group's public speeches: "In Curtis Bay, we're all breathing the same toxic air, living in the same food desert, trying to survive in the same system that doesn't care about our health or well-being."

35. Walley 2013, Martin 2019.

36. In these moments, students were forced to "grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor" (Hartman 2019, xiii; also Trouillot 1995).

37. Their earliest resources were articles from the *Baltimore Sun* and a rough history (Diamond 1998) written by University of Maryland law students around the time of the buyout of the Point.

38. We thus participated in the production of place as a font of "archival power," an "alternative site and source of political memory" (Bonilla 2011, 332).

39. Foucault 1977.

40. Bryant and Knight 2019, 137.

41. Gramsci 1971.

42. Freire 1970.

43. Power Cube is a visual interpretation of Lukes's (1974) and Gaventa's (1980) three-dimensional power typology. For more, see Gaventa 2011.

44. Gaventa (2011, 9) cautions: the Power Cube represents a "set of relationships" rather than static categories; in reality, all three dimensions of power are "constantly interrelating."

45. Freire 1970, 66.

46. For more on echoes between ethnography and advocacy, see Fortun 2001, 2012; Wylie 2018. Fortun (2012) specifically advocates ethnography that "loops"—feeding research insights back into the design of a project, system, or campaign—which corresponds with students' praxis here.

47. Miyazaki 2004.

48. Butler 1993, 3.

49. Hartman 2019, 227–28.

50. Such as in this quote from one of Destiny’s speeches: “There is no landmark that designates that these communities were ever here. No memory of the communities lost to make way for development. . . . And most recently, like a branch grown from the historical tree of my community, with roots that run deep, there was a plan to build the nation’s largest trash-burning incinerator less than a mile away from my school.”

51. Choy 2011, 49. This is notably different from seniors’ nostalgia: rather than “surturing it closed,” anticipatory nostalgia “pries history open . . . activat[ing] an expansion” of the past’s political potential in the present day (Choy 2011, 28).

52. This quote comes from an interview conducted by Smith-Hams (2016, 40).

53. Shapiro et al. 2017, 575; also Boudia and Jas 2014, Ottinger 2013.

54. Recent work at the interstices of science and technology studies, environmental anthropology, and advocacy demonstrates the power of working “within and against” technoscience (Murphy 2017, 500) in pursuit of environmental justice. That work includes, among other examples, reimagining research protocols to serve anticolonial science (Liboiron 2021), and creating databases that shine a critical light on knowledge gaps and industry obfuscation (Wylie 2018, Fortun 2004).

55. Lorde 1984. To borrow from Fortun (2012, 452), these tools produce “discursive gaps”—conditions for which we have no adequate idioms. Those who recognize these gaps can either stay the course and take “discursive risks,” or try to bring forth new terms of engagement.

56. “Precision does not equal accuracy” (Jain 2013, 178).

57. Again, I draw on Hartman’s (2019) concept of “experiment.”

58. Fortun 2014, 323.

59. The film is available here: <https://vimeo.com/157191419>.

60. For more on the challenges of power-sharing within this broad coalition, see Ahmann 2020a.

61. Valeska credited Lippard (1984) with this description.

62. Here I am quoting—and pushing back against—Razsa and Kurnik’s critique of prefigurative politics, which they say advances a “utopian telos” (2012, 252).

#### OUT OF NOTHING

1. Stewart describes eventfulness as “something that feels like *something*” (2007, 2; emphasis in original).

2. Kazanjian 2022.

#### CHAPTER FIVE

1. In May 2015, criminal charges were filed against six officers for their role in Gray’s death, ranging from official misconduct to second degree depraved-heart murder. None were convicted.

2. Elijah invoked the last words of Eric Garner, who pleaded “I can’t breathe” eleven



times while a New York City cop forced him to the ground and restrained him by the neck. For other engagements with “I can’t breathe” as a “metaphorical and material reality of racism,” see Dillon and Sze 2016, 15; Sharpe 2016; Ahmann and Kenner 2020.

3. Camp 2017, 17.

4. Nixon 2011, 2. Slow violence is not only environmental. In the shift from taking life to letting die, even Foucault (1977, 1978) recognized that not all deaths are “events.” Encompassing chronic health conditions (Cazdyn 2012) alongside general milieus of crudeness (Povinelli 2011), boredom (Ralph 2008, O’Neill 2014), and ruination (Stoler 2013), slow violence names “deterioration as a defining condition of . . . historical existence” (Berlant 2011, 95). It might therefore be understood as a kind of “late-modern necropolitics, where communities are exposed to the power of death-in-life” (Davies 2018, 1540).

5. Nixon 2011, 7.

6. Goldstein and Hall 2015, 650.

7. Brown 2007, Auyero and Swistun 2009, Button 2010.

8. On undone science, see Hess 2016.

9. For a discussion of “time as technique,” see Bear 2016.

10. On the embodiment of historical and racialized trauma, see Mullings 2005b, Brown 2021.

11. Local pastor quoted in Williams 1945.

12. Quoted in Riordan 2006.

13. Anderson et al. 2020, 622.

14. For more on this critique and extension of early work on slow violence, see Ahmann 2018b.

15. I use “work time” to describe deliberate manipulations of time to serve specific ends. In a less pragmatic vein, Ramberg describes how those “out of joint with the straight time of domesticated gender, capital accumulation, and national coherence” in South India “work[] on time” by “cutting, splicing, looping, and knotting” it (2016, 225). Mulla (2014) also invokes the phrase, but to describe the work *of* time in medical, legal, and biographical registers.

16. Povinelli 2011, 13.

17. Raschig theorizes triggers as encounters with violence that bring “lived-through events into sudden relation” (2017, 401).

18. Masco 2015, 153.

19. Nixon 2011, 6.

20. Compare Bill’s “tick, tick, BOOM” with Jain’s point that receiving a prognosis “detonates time, which scatters like so many glass shards” (2013, 28).

21. Sahlins 2000, 301.

22. Stewart 2007, 2.

23. Abbott 1988, Das 2006, Wagner-Pacifici 2017.

24. Petryna 2002, Fortun 2001.

25. This is what Roitman (2013) argues happened after the 2008 financial crisis and what Klein (2007) chronicles under the banner of “disaster capitalism.”

26. Povinelli 2011, 4.

27. See Scheper-Hughes 1992 on “everyday violence,” an experience of scarcity, sickness, and death so common that it normalizes harm, and Farmer 2004 on “structural violence.”

28. Auyero and Swistun 2009, 93.

29. Sharpe is writing, specifically, about “antiblackness as total climate” (2016, 105).

30. Shapiro reminds, “becoming unaffected” takes as much work as “becom[ing] sensitive to environmental change” (2015, 374). Lou further argues that this “deliberate inaction” amounts to an “assertive nondoing” (2022, 583).

31. Eliasoph 1997, 619.

32. Beck 1992.

33. Crisis ordinariness is Berlant’s term for when “life building and the attrition of human life are indistinguishable” (2011, 96).

34. Berlant portrays agency amid slow death as involving “maintenance, not making . . . sentience without full intentionality” (2011, 95). Here, individuals endure instead of invent, and their debilitation seems overdetermined by conditions they can sense but presumably not change. Povinelli is a bit more optimistic about endurance, describing it as the “space of potentiality” from which new projects emerge, but such potential often requires waiting: one must survive these conditions “long enough . . . to accomplish th[e] performative trick” of recognition (2011, 106). And though Nixon argues that writer-activists tackle the challenge of representing slow violence through their craft (by “apprehending threats imaginatively that remain imperceptible to the senses”; 2011, 15), he does less to specify how time itself might be made a medium of politics.

35. Zeiderman 2016, 164.

36. Butler 1993, 1998.

37. Nixon 2011, 8.

38. For other theorizations of the meantime, see Weszkalnys 2015, McKay 2018, Fischer 2018.

39. Nading 2020, 218.

40. These quotes come from an interview that I conducted with a bureaucrat from MDE.

41. Colborn et al. 1996, Nash 2007, Langston 2010, Bond 2022. For a different critique of threshold theories of pollution and the permission-to-pollute regimes they sanction, see Liboiron 2021.

42. For another theorization of incrementality as strategy, see Pierson 2004, 82.

43. Compare Beamish 2002 on “crescive troubles.”

44. Carson 1962, 188.

45. Jain 2013, 184.

46. Graeter 2020, 24.

47. Quoted in Mook 2010.

48. Scott 1985.

49. I spoke with many who argued that MDE’s cumulative impacts working group

was hopelessly stalled. One environmental justice advocate called it a “slow-moving disaster.”

50. Sewell 1996, 843.

51. Moral punctuation might be understood as the organizing equivalent of Shapiro’s “chemical sublime,” an embodied experience “which elevates minor enfeebling encounters into events that stir ethical consideration and potential intervention” (2015, 369).

52. Guyer (2007) writes about the prevalence of deadlines in “punctuated time,” and Feldman (2016a) refers to the conditions that humanitarian actors face between the catastrophic frenzy of emergency situations and the long-term conditions of Palestinian need as a “punctuated humanitarianism.” While both invoke “punctuated” to indicate time that is periodically marked or interrupted, I use the term to describe its intentional parsing out. And though I focus on an explicitly moral type, other kinds are certainly conceivable.

53. Wagner-Pacifiçi 2000, 64.

54. After the December 2015 protest, a campaign ally wrote that, in environmental work, “a long, slow bend toward justice spells catastrophe. . . . We must speak in value-laden terms now. We must claim the moral dimensions of the problem and not wait for science to give us anything more certain than that” (Ruggles 2016, 51).

55. Nixon 2011, 2.

56. Benjamin 1940, 255.

57. I borrow these metaphors from McLaverty-Robinson 2013.

58. Hughes 1951.

59. This is how Roitman (2013, 9) describes the work of crisis. Roitman is one of many critics of crisis talk within the discipline: careful, perceptive scholars who argue that crisis designations create a “blind spot” in critical thinking (2013, 94), even work as “counterrevolutionary idiom[s]” (Masco 2016, S65), and who make clear that “crisis need not catalyze progress,” especially in a world historical moment where critique appears to have “run out of steam” (Muir 2021, 4–5). I am sympathetic to these arguments, especially given what unfolded on the Point. But they share a presumption that crisis talk distracts attention from structural forms of violence, and this presumption hinges on a division between crisis and the everyday that is not available to everyone. Without refusing cautions from these scholars, I want to take seriously how grassroots activists, who were themselves tuned into these perceptual challenges and committed to enacting structural change, reclaimed crisis as *their* political resource.

60. Quoted in Cave and Eveleigh 2017.

61. Compare Badiou’s (1988) conception of the event as a transformative rupture.

62. King 1963.

63. Berlant 2011, 95.

64. This could not have been more explicit: we worked through a worksheet titled “Battle of the Story.” See [https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/SmartMeme\\_Battle\\_of\\_the\\_Story\\_Worksheet.pdf](https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/SmartMeme_Battle_of_the_Story_Worksheet.pdf).

65. There were dozens, ranging from “Incinerator Protesters Arrested at MDE



Headquarters” (in the *Baltimore Brew*) to “Incinerator Merits Protests” (in the *Baltimore Sun*).

66. Sewell 1996, Wagner-Pacifici 2017.

67. Graham 2015.

68. Sharpe 2016.

69. Quoted in Tavernise 2015.

70. Sojoyner cautions that the presumption of “choice” that accompanies arguments for temporal manipulation is often short-sighted, since “the material conditions do not exist for choice to be a [uniformly] viable option.” Nevertheless, relationships with time that work beyond the choice paradigm can be transformative, revealing time to be a multidimensional “terrain of struggle” (2017, 65, 70).

71. Butler 1993, 220.

#### EPILOGUE

1. “These are not absences presented as the material remains of that which has gone, but as the remembered anticipation of a future” (Yarrow 2017, 568). For another investigation of a power plant that never came to be, but presented plenty in its absence, see Powell 2018.

2. Dawdy 2010.

3. This stayed true until late 2022, when an enormous warehouse opened on the lot. At the time of this writing, its owners are actively looking for tenants.

4. Carrithers (2005, 434) argues that anthropology is “tinged from the root by the subjunctive mood” because of its expansive sense of moral possibility. This is not exactly what I mean, as the subjunctive can just as easily close off potentials. Rather, it is in the work of moving between a range of orienting premises—in keeping the story open—that we might nurture this capacity.

5. Pandian 2019, 7.

6. Masco 2014, 33.

7. Ames et al. 2011, 10.

8. Murphy 2017, 501.

9. Solnit 2004, xiv.

10. Wagner 1986, 29. I am also thinking with Livingston’s (2019) “planetary parable.”

11. Butler 1998, 3–4.

12. The “antidote” line comes from Weston, who is in good company. Also see Hartman’s (2008, 2019) “critical fabulation,” Haraway’s (2013) “speculative fabulation,” Benjamin’s (2016) insistence that “social change requires novel fictions that reimagine and rework” what we take for granted, Wolf-Meyer’s (2019) “theory for the world to come,” the range of “speculative nonfiction” projects aiming to represent the looming effects of global climate change (for a review, see Nixon 2020), and the speculative fiction that Destiny herself looked to for inspiration.

13. Günel 2019.

14. This is a common refrain in the climate justice movement, often attributed to Quinton Sankofa.

15. Weston 2021, 481. Weston is clear that counterfactual ethnography needs to come from somewhere factual so that it can “investigate the difference that tweaking one particular element in an assemblage of existing, verifiable conditions might make” (467, 469).

16. Butler’s method in the *Parables* was to entertain the question, “What if this goes on?” and extrapolate “a near-future dystopia from what she read in the news” (Aguirre 2017). This method does not aim to “bring the future into being so much as make plain the possible ways forward—and how they build upon the past” (Wolf-Meyer 2019, 5).

17. This sketch is informed by anthropological work on governing strange weather (Zeiderman 2016, Whittington 2016, Zee 2017, Cons 2018), weather projections for a future Baltimore, Baltimore’s climate adaptation plans, and Butler’s depiction of privatized towns in dystopian California (1993, 118–23).

18. Baltimore’s climate adaptation recommendations propose one mechanism that would make this possible: refusing building permits where no acceptable bulkhead exists, or requiring builders to put such walls in place (City of Baltimore 2013).

19. Experts project that Baltimore could experience a three-foot sea-level rise between 2010 and 2060 (City of Baltimore 2013, 65).

20. City of Baltimore 2013, 200.

21. Temperature projections reflect a two-degree rise, already complete by 2013, coupled with predictions that summer temperatures will rise nine more degrees by 2100 (City of Baltimore 2013, 86). Flooding projections reflect modeling by NOAA, cited in Cassie 2019.

22. City of Baltimore 2013, 187, 205.

23. *Ibid.*, 209.

24. City official quoted in Klein 2001.

25. This sketch is informed by anthropological scholarship on waste management, ongoing debates about the future of BRESCO, and the 1996 master plan for the Fairfield Ecological Industrial Park.

26. The city’s chief of disposal services recently warned that the dump “is already at 90% capacity and would fill up completely by 2024 without incineration” (quoted in O’Dowd 2019). Assuming that BRESCO survives a few additional years, one might reasonably predict the landfill’s death in 2031—the end of BRESCO’s current operating lease, and a critical moment for organizers.

27. Reno 2016, 227.

28. HOH Associates 1996, 6.

29. *Ibid.*, 7.

30. *Ibid.*, 32.

31. See images that accompany this post by @BaltimoreSouth. “Imagine a development that starves the incinerator & landfill while producing soil healing compost, local jobs, funding for permanently affordable housing and is community governed.”

*Twitter*, August 27, 2021, 6:07 p.m. <https://twitter.com/BaltimoreSouth/status/1431377981587476491/>.

32. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HG4ryZpcWxM>.

33. This plan, drafted with partner organizations, was published in 2020 as “Baltimore’s Fair Development Plan for Zero Waste.” See <https://cdn.ilsr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/BaltimoreZeroWastePlan2020.pdf>.

34. Sunflowers—which Free Your Voice adopted as a symbol of their campaign—can be used to extract toxics from contaminated soil, including heavy metals and radioactive elements. For this reason, following the Chernobyl disaster, sunflowers were planted in Ukraine.

35. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfxpDZ2l5ig&feature=youtu.be>.

36. See <https://www.sbclt.org/what-is-a-community-land-trust/>.

37. Student quoted in Fabricant, Sanchez, and Thompson 2021.

38. Livingston 2019, 126; Tsing 2015.





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