

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 Bay¹

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.”²

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.³ 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.”⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ Toxic exposure has also meant the “erosion of human potential,” in the form of lives cut short and reproductive futures frayed.⁷ 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.⁸

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.⁹ 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.”¹⁰ 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.”¹¹ 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.¹² 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ It is a present unhinged from prior certainties, but not unhinged from futures.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸

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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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.²¹ 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, unshakable 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.²² 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.²³ 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.²⁴

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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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.²⁸

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 speaks 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.”²⁹ 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.³⁰

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.³¹

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.³² 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.³³ 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.³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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.³⁶ 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.³⁷ Maintaining a collective foggiess 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.³⁸ 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.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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.⁴²

From its earliest days as an incorporated city, Baltimore relied on Curtis Bay to do this boundary work.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ 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?⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰

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.⁵¹ To borrow an image from

Ruha Benjamin, doubt was built into the machine through a series of structured misrecognitions.⁵² 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.⁵³ (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.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶ That this counts as an improvement is galling. But I believe it. I heard discomfiting 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.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸

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.”⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰

It is true this confidence required a measure of forgetting, as Walter Benjamin makes clear, and as the dust accrued in Curtis Bay suggests.⁶¹ 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.⁶² 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.⁶³ 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?*⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶

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.⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸

Returning now to the United States, deindustrialization ripped through dozens of cities toward the late twentieth century.⁶⁹ 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."⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹

When they didn't—when people found themselves in the dust of untenable expectations—that brought about a crisis of meaning.⁷² 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.”⁷³

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.⁷⁴ 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.⁷⁵

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.⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷ On this peninsula specifically, progress toward Whiteness for “White-ethnic” migrant workers was coterminous with progress toward inclusion in an aspiring middle class.⁷⁸ 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.”⁷⁹ It owes no allegiance to a timeline. It can persist even in sites where progress doesn’t.⁸⁰

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.⁸¹

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.⁸² In this sense, they voiced a “felt sense of anachronism,” of being out-of-step with once-affirming expectations.⁸³ 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.⁸⁴

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.⁸⁵ 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.⁸⁶

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.⁸⁷ 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.⁸⁸ 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.”⁸⁹ 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.⁹⁰ 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.⁹¹

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.⁹² 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.⁹³ 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.⁹⁴

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.⁹⁵

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.⁹⁶ 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.⁹⁷ 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.⁹⁸

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.⁹⁹ 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.¹⁰⁰ 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.¹⁰¹

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.¹⁰² 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).¹⁰³ Instead, these premises are "practically necessary" unrealities that support decision-

making in an irrational world.¹⁰⁴ 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.¹⁰⁵ 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 Ballesterio and approach them as “devices” that bring order to the possible.¹⁰⁶

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, side-stepping 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.¹⁰⁷ 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.¹⁰⁸ 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.¹⁰⁹

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.

