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# Waste to energy:

## Garbage prospects and subjunctive politics in late-industrial Baltimore

### ABSTRACT

If it had been built, the Fairfield Renewable Energy Project would have been the largest trash incinerator in the United States, burning 4,000 tons of waste each day in late-industrial Baltimore. When it was first proposed, two discourses of renewal coalesced around the project. One was propagated by technocrats who argued incineration should be regulated as a renewable technology. Another emerged among working-class whites who hoped the plant would reinvigorate their ailing economy. Both discourses hinged on comparisons with the past and maneuvers between futures near and far, gaining ground through *subjunctive politics*. Recast in this light, both technocratic dreams and local narratives of waste, race, and decline betray a deep ambivalence about the sorts of futures that seem plausible within a geography of “undesirables.” [subjunctive politics, waste, race, renewal, future, uncertainty, environment, Baltimore, United States]

**L**ou, an 89-year-old guide at Baltimore Refuse Energy Systems Company (BRESKO), the city’s trash incinerator, stepped aside so that I could see the “view.”<sup>1</sup> In front of us, truckloads of food waste, cardboard, plastic, and the occasional appliance cascaded down from the concrete ledge he called “the waterfall” into a massive pit, where they splashed up against 2,000 tons of refuse (see Figure 1). It was too noisy to talk at a normal volume—waterfalls are loud, Lou said with a shrug—so he cupped his hands and began to shout. “The human race is gradually destroying this planet. We’re polluting the ocean, we’re polluting the air, we’re just ruining our nest.” I shouted back, “Do you see your work as a contributor to that?” And he yelled,

Oh, absolutely! Everything we do harms our environment. [. . .] But there are things we’ve got to try. Sometimes I compare the human race to those unfortunate people on the *Titanic*. Its pumps were taking out 20,000 gallons of water every minute, but unfortunately 40,000 more were flowing in. They bought themselves a bit of time, but the ship of course went down. So that’s what we’re doing here—we’re trying to buy ourselves some time.

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

I was unprepared, at the time, to take Lou seriously. I thought it strange—if not deeply troubling—that he took comfort in biding time while predicting a planetary apocalypse.<sup>2</sup> This particular prophecy was just one of many he had announced on the crisp January morning when we met in 2016, during fieldwork I was conducting downwind from BRESKO among activists fighting to block the construction of a similar project. I had expected to meet a corporate type who would parrot company brochures, or at least someone a bit more buttoned up. Instead, I found myself standing on a cliff with a ragged man in the twilight of his life who wanted me to



**Figure 1.** A “waterfall” of garbage runs down the concrete pit at BRESCO, an incinerator in Baltimore, 2016. (Chloe Ahmann) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

know that he saw things perfectly clearly, and burning trash was “the best option we’ve got.”

Lou had not come to this conclusion hastily. By the time we met, he had worked at BRESCO for 31 years, having started the month it opened. From his nearby home, he had watched the incinerator get built, then walked in and asked for work. He’d been leading tours ever since for politicians, engineers, student groups, and a few environmental “nuts.” Before BRESCO, this plot of land had been a “stinking, rotting” pile of garbage—and as a resident, Lou keenly appreciated that the plant could turn that garbage into useful stuff. Every day, BRESCO transformed 2,000 tons of waste into “renewable” energy by burning it, directing steam released from the fire toward a turbine that generated electricity, and selling that electricity on the energy marketplace. It wasn’t perfect, but it “sure was better” than letting a mountain of trash emit methane into the atmosphere and hasten the planet’s destruction.

Lou’s apocalyptic vision of a world without incineration was exceptional, but his reasons for supporting “waste-to-energy” were not. I had heard technocrats across the state of Maryland marshal hypothetical comparisons when endorsing waste-to-energy: for a coastal state anxious about rising sea levels but reeling from the Great Recession, expanding incineration seemed like a more “realistic” solution to climate change than a wind-and-solar revolution. I had also heard residents lean on hypothetical comparisons when greeting the prospect of another incinerator with unusual enthusiasm. It turned out Lou’s stance reflected a much more pervasive posture, which I call *subjunctive politics*: arguments about the public good that rely on a speculative winnowing of options. Subjunctive politics impose an economy of choices by foreclosing certain futures. Since meeting Lou, I have come to see this

speculative winnowing—this preemptive foreclosure—as a guiding logic of late industrialism.<sup>3</sup>

As a resident-supporter and company insider, Lou straddled two subject positions that I was practiced in writing off. I was halfway through 24 months of fieldwork in a neighborhood five miles south, still thinking quite dismissively about people who were comforted by the idea that things “could’ve been worse” than a new incinerator, called the Fairfield Renewable Energy Project. If it had been built, the Fairfield Project would have been the largest in the nation, burning 4,000 tons of waste each day to generate “clean” energy, while simultaneously emitting thousands of pounds of lead, mercury, fine particulate matter, and carbon dioxide. Slated for construction in a south Baltimore town called Curtis Bay, Maryland’s most polluted neighborhood, it would have replaced a chemical plant on a site burdened with contaminated groundwater, near a wastewater treatment plant, medical waste incinerator, coal export terminal, landfill, and hazardous-waste dump. I met Lou while studying a grassroots movement against the proposal that was led by high schoolers who argued that, after two centuries of pollution, residents had had “enough” (Ahmann 2018b). Since 2012, those opponents had been the dominant voices in Curtis Bay. I was only beginning to venture into conversations with supporters—visiting with company executives, attending industry conferences, reviewing brochures, and spending time with residents who for years had backed the project. Most of those residents were, like Lou, older, white, and working class. They had lived through Baltimore’s dramatic deindustrialization, which eliminated 100,000 manufacturing jobs. That shift was one reason why the incinerator, when it was proposed in 2009, stoked local optimism. Then, on the heels of the global financial crisis and following three decades of industrial decline—and in the context of demographic shifts that brought black and brown neighbors to the once white working-class community—many vested hope for *renewal* in the Fairfield Project.<sup>4</sup>

There were two discourses of renewal that particularly attracted my attention, in part because they shared subjunctive logics. One was an environmental discourse propagated by technocrats from industry and government who argued that trash incineration, when compared with worse alternatives, should be regulated as a renewable technology. A second discourse emerged among working-class whites who saw the waste industry as a means of reinvigorating their ailing economy. Like regulators, residents based their reasoning on comparing the incinerator to hypothetical alternatives: it would be “better than another chemical plant,” “better than another dump,” and “better than another 20 years without a job.” And like technocrats who saw the conversion of waste into energy as alchemical, many whites hoped the incinerator would catalyze development, bringing “the right kind of people” back to mixed-race

Baltimore. In fact, over the years I have worked in Curtis Bay, I have grown accustomed to hearing white residents speak in coded language about their neighborhood's "degeneration" and mourn a time when "the environment may not have been safe, but the community was."

Responses like these have piqued scholarly interest in recent years, given the national political context. As Arlie Russell Hochschild (2016) puts it, they indicate a "great paradox" in which those most vulnerable to industry's environmental effects nonetheless desire an unfettered industrialism. The paradoxical nature of both discourses was certainly on my mind when I encountered them, given what I knew about south Baltimore. Curtis Bay has a 200-year legacy of toxic exposure. It has long hosted high-risk chemical production. And though few factory jobs remain today, their debris persists to detrimental effect in local bodies. Why, in a landscape so riddled with decay, would residents fix their hopes on burning garbage? What do we make of hope that sounds like despair? Need it be a sign of anomie and resignation, or might such hope point, instead, toward a specific politics?

Lou and others throw these questions into sharp relief. They do not seem affectively or politically "corroded," as Loïc Wacquant (2010) describes those confined to decrepit spaces. Nor do they square with a disciplinary tendency to describe hope as resolutely positive (Kleist and Jansen 2016; but see Miyazaki 2004). Instead, they signal one way that aspirations get directed. They suggest that people invest their hopes in futures that seem plausible. This act of *conditioning how one lets oneself hope* opens a space of inquiry between the finality of choice and the infinity of possibility. This is where people narrow down a vast store of potential futures into a set of actionable prospects. If we wish to understand what hope looks like amid existential doubt, we have to appreciate the affective pragmatism that makes people limit what they want. There is both an elasticity and form at play in the production of this public feeling—an organized irresolution—that affects political sensibilities among groups who feel they have been cast aside. The terms we have to think about the future do not capture this irresolution quite like the subjunctive.

In English, the subjunctive mood is used to express situations that are doubtful, counterfactual, hoped for, or proposed. Grammatically, it allows speakers to articulate futures that "might've been," to compare multiple, composite prospects and to conjure things that are "not yet" (Bloch 1959) as though they were. Many anthropologists view this indeterminacy as cause for celebration (Holbraad, Pedersen, and Viveiros de Castro 2014; Turner 1977; Wagner 1986), but in practice the subjunctive brings order to uncertain futures, giving some possibilities more weight than others (Kyriakides 2018). In Curtis Bay subjunctivity took shape within a discourse of renewal that disciplined the possible by making past developments the template for future

ones. But in general the subjunctive rests on a series of useful fictions—those conjectural alternatives (another dump, a sunken ship) that shape how one evaluates one's options. When these useful fictions mark the starting point for decisions said to serve the public good, then one is dealing in subjunctive politics.

In an effort to sketch this form of political reasoning—a form widespread in contexts of uncertainty—I take up the parallel discourses of renewal that struck me in south Baltimore. Technocratic imaginaries around incineration as a source of renewable energy mapped onto racialized calls for regeneration in Curtis Bay because they shared a structure of conjecture—renewal—that made the future sensible by appealing to known quantities. These discourses turned on comparisons with the past and maneuvers between futures near and far, like Lou's, gaining ground through subjunctive engagements with the yet to be materialized environment. They also took hold through programs of subjunctive regulation that were similarly circumscribed. In this light, the subjunctive appears as an operational horizon marked by neither despair nor unbridled possibility. Instead, both technocratic dreams and local narratives of waste, race, and decline betray a deep ambivalence about the sorts of futures that seem plausible within a geography of "undesirables."

The connections between these narratives became crystal clear to me in the months between Lou's tour and the 2016 US presidential election. There was a marked change in energy among many of Curtis Bay's white industrial workers during this time—an ambiguous enthusiasm that gradually attached to Trump (Ahmann 2016), though many found him inane and unpleasant. Indeed, though Trump's vision of renewal was far less equivocal than theirs, he spoke to their disaffected present.<sup>5</sup> This political context also helps explain the increasingly racialized form that renewal took as my research progressed. Race relations are not homogeneous in Curtis Bay, but in my experience many older whites look down on racialized newcomers. My own appearance no doubt made some feel comfortable expressing this resentment. Though I could regularly be seen socializing with a mixed-race group of students, I'm a small white woman. Plenty of people made racist comments in my presence. Some came to me in whispers; others emerged in boisterous group settings. Many conveyed a boldness I was unaccustomed to before 2016, though they expressed old sentiments. Understanding these sentiments is part of mapping the terrain on which subjunctive politics took hold in Curtis Bay—a terrain marked by racial difference, the experience of decay, and locals' desire for working-class redemption.

An ethnographically rooted reading of the subjunctive as a field of political reasoning serves as a corrective to reductionist arguments about climate denialism on the one hand and caricatural portrayals of the white working class on the other. Such portrayals—common in the progressive

public sphere—distract from the quotidian nature of white supremacy (Rosa and Bonilla 2017). Moreover, scholars lose an opportunity to understand the rationalities behind ostensibly senseless positions when we reduce them to “facile parody” (Darling 2009, 26) or dismiss them as false consciousness. In addition to contributing to ongoing debates about how people politically engage with the future, then, subjunctive politics are very much of this moment in places like late-industrial Baltimore. They represent one mode of encountering the future from a depleted present, when decline seems to confine the possible.

### Waste-to-energy

In Baltimore, subjunctive politics emerged around waste and its imagined infrastructures. Waste evokes decline in many ways. Sometimes it is a symptom, sometimes it is a sign of crises yet to come. Karl Marx (1978) famously theorized waste as ominous excess. Because it cannot be reabsorbed into a system of exchange, it suggests that something in the capitalist scheme has run amok. Waste, in other words, can undermine whole value systems. This quality makes waste an anxious object.

Places like Curtis Bay exist because of this anxiety. One activist suggested that they are where we “hide the evidence” of our unsustainable consumption. Such places fit a paradigm of disposal that serves to maintain form (Reno 2016)—and so to stave off immanent destruction. If maintenance is the promise of disposal, though, *renewal* anchors waste-to-energy technology. Consider the allure of this rebirth, particularly for wasted spaces: it offers to resolve the tension between waste and value by transforming discards into profit.

As of 2016, there were 77 waste-to-energy facilities operating in 22 US states. Every day, they generate 2,500 megawatt hours of energy from 95,000 tons of garbage. This conversion process undergirds what Sheila Jasanoff (2015a, 4) would call the prevailing “sociotechnical imaginary” of waste-to-energy plants, or that “collectively held, institutionally stabilized, publicly performed” vision of the future that the industry upholds, which is that incinerators spin straw into gold.

Waste-to-energy dates to the 19th century, when the first incinerators (then called destructors) improved on age-old open-pit burning by containing the incineration of garbage. Like other urban infrastructures, incinerators were thus signs of “municipal modernity” (McGowan 1995, 159), shifting from domestic cultures of reuse to the biopolitical management of mass disposal. Over time, as engineers learned to harness the power of combustion, these machines became celebrated for doing several things at once: they reduced garbage volumes, salvaged valuable materials, and generated energy for everyday use. Cashing in on modernist desires to engineer away problems without

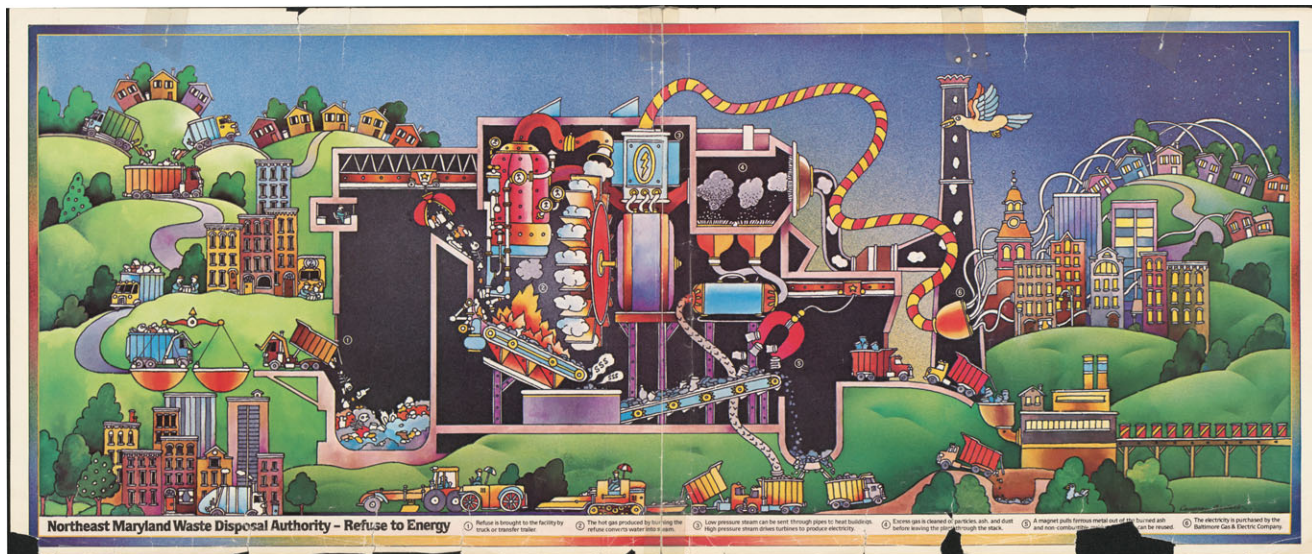
behavioral change, incinerators thus offered grand solutions to some of humankind’s most common nuisances.

When waste-to-energy first came to Baltimore in the 1980s, officials welcomed the innovation, particularly given their poor track record with refuse. Previously, the city had experimented with open dumps, rudimentary destructors, and even “piggeries” where hogs feasted on garbage. (Planners quickly learned that there are “limits even to a pig’s digestive capabilities,” so they went looking for another solution.) In the 1970s, officials had also been shamed for a botched pyrolysis project, in which workers baked trash in giant kilns in an effort to accelerate decomposition. It failed spectacularly, melting garbage into a mass that only jackhammers could break up. Authorities cautioned that, if unabated, unprocessed trash would snowball into half-a-billion cubic feet of landfilled garbage: a monument to capital’s dissolution. Around the same time, municipalities suffering from the energy crisis were eager for a remedy, and officials were optimistic that waste—a sign of decline—might actually fuel urban restitution. So, in 1985, the city unveiled BRESKO. Proponents hailed it as an “attractive and modern” engineering marvel. Like alchemy, it seemed poised to transform one problem seamlessly into another’s solution (see Figure 2).

In reality, the process of converting waste into energy is not quite so utopian. For one, waste-to-energy plants are expensive, costing upwards of \$1 billion to build and \$12,000 per kilowatt hour to operate. To remain competitive, according to an opponent with the Energy Justice Network, incinerators locate in “high-priced markets” and “lock local governments into long-term monopoly contracts,” which “discourage composting, recycling, and waste reduction” (EJN, n.d.).<sup>6</sup> Adding to these front-end problems, incinerators produce more pollution than coal-fired plants, releasing about 28 times as much dioxin, six times as much mercury and lead, three times as much nitrogen dioxide, and twice as much carbon dioxide to generate the same amount of power. They also produce toxic fly ash that gets landfilled postcombustion.

Aside from a few innovations, the Fairfield Project mirrors BRESKO, a concrete citadel that releases an abundance of toxics. And yet, in 2009, it became the source of several different forms of optimism. Specifically, the project seemed capable of closing a loop in the “circular economy,” ensuring prosperity without pollution, disappearing waste, and returning dignity to a town beset by destitution. These disparate, sometimes mutually exclusive desires emerged around the same proposal, clashing, weaving, and coconstituting one another—often despite the concrete limitations of the technology that produced them.

Sociotechnical imaginaries, Jasanoff (2015b, 329) writes, do not dwell extensively on “the world as it is.” Instead, they “project futures as they ought to be . . . crystallizing the dissatisfactions of the present into possibilities



**Figure 2.** Waste-to-energy supporters circulated a creative rendering of Baltimore’s BRESKO incinerator in this 1980s pamphlet, along with the promise, “Your refuse will soon be converted to energy!” Pamphlet published by the Northeast Maryland Waste Disposal Authority, circa 1985. Enoch Pratt Free Library, Maryland Department, VF, Refuse and Refuse Disposal. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

... [that] people would sooner inhabit.” They turn, in other words, on the indeterminacy of the subjunctive, marking *aspirational* engagements with the technological world shaped by specific social, political, and economic features of the present. The fantasies around incineration suggest that, despite its environmental impacts, the conversion of waste into energy indexes renewal. It promises the transformation of outputs into inputs, risks into benefits, and discards into capital—capacities one proponent described as “beautiful.”

To suggest that imagined infrastructures contain the seeds of hope, though, does not mean they do so uniformly. Technological fantasies change shape as they move. They must be performed, repeated, and instrumentalized; they must bind to preexisting narratives; they must appeal to specific visions of the public good. When I say that renewal set the structure of conjecture for subjunctive politics, then, it is not because everyone in Baltimore subscribed to the same vision of the future. Though Jasanoff offers insight into dominant narratives, what matters more to the success of energy transitions is their fit with local worldviews. The everyday lives of these imaginaries are open to contestation (Eaton, Gasteyer, and Busch 2013), even reinterpretation among supportive groups (Smith and Tidwell 2016). This was certainly the case in Curtis Bay, where technocratic visions of incineration as a form of renewable energy intermingled with a racialized discourse of urban renewal. In fact, in late-industrial Baltimore, where residents have long complained of living in a “dumping ground,” waste-to-energy had to win converts among people primed to see trash as the source of their problems, not the solution.

### Development dreams

“Look, here,” Michael said. “It’d be a nice block if there wasn’t trash all over the street.” Michael and I were unloading food from his truck for a community meeting in January 2016. The food had been donated by one of the only thriving local businesses—an adult-entertainment lounge called Fantasies. A white resident in his 50s, Michael served as president of the neighborhood association and had agreed to talk with me so long as I’d help him set up for the meeting. After positioning plastic chairs in the recreation center, driving his truck to Fantasies, and retrieving food from a kitchen booming with the hypnotic sounds of the lounge but blocked off by an opaque screen, we had made our way back and begun to talk about Michael’s vision for “making changes” in the community.

My conversation with Michael started like many of my conversations with longtime residents. It began with decline and the various “turns for the worse” he had observed over the years. I was careful in these conversations not to prompt residents to code change as decline, but narratives of decay usually emerged anyway when I asked them to describe life in the community. Some included job loss in these stories, but most fixated on changes in the landscape—there are fewer businesses, too many board-ups (see Figure 3), and garbage litters the streets. And many spoke of people who have appeared over time. “It’s mostly renters now,” some whites said of their black and brown neighbors. “It’s gotten worse since *they* moved in.” In the eyes of many longtime residents, Curtis Bay’s story is as much about toxic decay and industrial loss as it is about the proliferation of “undesirable” people.



**Figure 3.** Like much of Baltimore city, the Curtis Bay neighborhood is plagued by board-ups, 2014. (United Workers) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

Taken together, these synchronous declines suffuse the terrain where working-class whites imagine renewal; they tinge the pasts people mourn and the futures they believe tenable with racism, disenchantment, and destitution. The associations between economic downturn, environmental contamination, and the arrival of racialized Others further point toward the affective and interpersonal tensions that emerge when people anticipate their own exclusion (Molé 2010). But they also suggest why residents might hope *against* decline, marshaling anachronistic visions of industrial revival when they think about the future. As Felix Ringel (2014) writes of postindustrial Germany, hope need not be transformative to count as such. People who feel that the ground is falling out beneath their feet may cling steadfastly to the good life they once knew. In Ringel's work, this attachment takes the form of maintenance, or attempts to sustain the built environment from crumbling into ruin. By drawing attention to "endurance (as change) rather than . . . change (as change)" (Ringel 2014, 57), he argues for expanding temporal agency to capture how people hold fast when the future seems likely to exclude them.

Renewal works differently from maintenance; it seeks escape from the present. But it is also marked by attachment when transcendence is assumed. In Curtis Bay, many whites old enough to have worked in the factories expressed attachment to industrialism's raced and classed system of values, setting up a point of comparison that they used to assess potential futures. To understand how subjunctive politics worked here, then, one must first appreciate how the experience of decline propped up the whitewashed industrial past as a model. That it could be both bygone and aspirational is precisely the hybridity I mean to capture with "renewal."

The slippage between demographic change and industrial flight that characterizes the local discourse on decline has something to do with timing: both took place around

the 1990s. As factories closed and the once "contained" residents of all-black company towns dispersed across the region, changes in Baltimore's public housing system pushed many low-income renters to integrate into the region's mostly white working-class communities. Taking advantage of Section 8 vouchers, which authorized the Department of Housing and Urban Development to put public money into the hands of private landlords, Baltimore had demolished more than half its inner-city housing projects by the early 2000s. That was when "they" came to Curtis Bay—"they," according to some whites, has included "renters," "Section 8 people," and "the blacks," when I have asked. They are the precarious masses "seeping in" from downtown, bringing "crime and drugs" while they "live off our hard-earned taxes." And, unlike industry, they constitute a presence, not an absence. As two men, Scooter and Lyle, put it,

SCOOTER, *to me*. As you can see, we don't suffer from white guilt around here.

LYLE. I done told her that too. She said everybody's been telling her that's what happened to Curtis Bay. It got a little dark.

SCOOTER. I'll tell you what happened. They tore down Murphy Homes, they tore down Lafayette Apartments, and they had to put 'em *somewhere*. So they all came here.

LYLE. And they spread like roaches.

Lyle's description of poor, black residents as "roaches" and Scooter's unabashedly racist talk were among the most transparent narratives of waste, race, and decline that I encountered during fieldwork (in addition to a noose that hung from a local tree all throughout my research). But many whites drew implicit connections between racial change, soiled grounds, downward mobility, and what they perceived as a deterioration of values in their community. Oftentimes, these narratives assumed a moral distinction between those who made waste by littering and those who disappeared it by cleaning. Fran, a 70-year-old white woman, talked about picking up after residents who weren't "invested" in the neighborhood.

"I've been here 49 years, and it's been bad since they tore down the projects," Fran told me. "And you know the problem? They have too many free giveaways and don't care about keeping things up. Like throwing trash, I even see the schoolkids do it" (see Figure 4). Here, Fran posits a relationship between being committed to the upkeep of a place and having a financial stake in it. Those who benefit from "giveaways"—Fran incorrectly believed all renters do—are inherently more wasteful and tend to strew their waste about the community. Like many, Fran also believes that wastefulness says something about the *kinds* of people who live in Curtis Bay these days—that it betrays a



Figure 4. Garbage litters Hazel Street in Curtis Bay, Baltimore, 2014. (Goldman Foundation) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

kind of pathology—and cleanliness, its opposite, conveys virtue:

Take my neighbors. One girl has two kids by an illegal.<sup>7</sup> He doesn't work, he does the drug thing. The other also has a child with an illegal, and then she got involved with a black guy and had another baby. They're all living together raking in free this, free that. Then they use our money to buy junk food and leave their garbage all over our streets. [...] Me, I try to do my part. I pick up trash whenever I see it. And anytime I see anybody's cleaning the streets, I say, "Thank you. I'm really appreciative." 'Cause, you know, some of them still clean—and that's how you know that they're good people.

As Joshua Reno (2015, 562) writes, "waste" often refers to unwanted people *and* unwanted things; it characterizes "disposable and abject subjects without potential." For residents like Fran, trash thus indexes a certain kind of (racially marked) person as well as the undesirable debris that their perceived indolence produces. Put differently, trash provides a language for constructing an internal Other whom Fran can blame for area decline and whose dispossession—or reformation through work—constitutes step one along the path toward regional renewal. In this sense, waste accomplishes something similar to what "nuisance" does in modern Delhi, according to D. Asher Ghertner (2012): nuisance talk, in referring simultaneously to environmental and social decay, positions slum dwellers as out of place while providing a legal rationale for their removal (see also Appadurai 2000; McKee 2015). Likewise, in Curtis Bay, waste directs residents' response to urban change through multiple registers, wrapping race, class, and decay into a unified scheme of perception. It also clarifies why the experience of decline into a "dirty" present might make incineration appear, subjunctively, *as if* it were

"a form of environmental improvement" (Ghertner 2012, 1161).

Not everyone in Curtis Bay participated in this sort of race talk, but it was remarkably common in my interviews with older whites in the community. Consider how semiotic ties between waste and pathology, cleanliness and virtue mapped onto their nostalgia. They often told me things were different when "everybody's parents looked out for everybody's kids," since "our mothers were always outside polishing the stoops." The waste-pathology semiosis also emerged in phrases like "white trash"—used to describe women with racially mixed babies—and in comments that old-timers made about how coal workers "looked black" at the end of the day, when their faces were dirty. It appeared when some expressed a desire to "clean out" the administration in Baltimore ("I don't hate black people, but I don't want another black government"). And it cropped up during community meetings, when residents complained about neighbors who attract rodents by leaving out refuse. Mary Douglas's (1966) work on purity and danger echoes through such talk, alongside John Hartigan's (1992, 8) reminder that trash can organize "a hierarchy of cultural productions." Indeed, Curtis Bay's deterioration from a company town into a "dumping ground" has made many working-class whites feel discarded and useless; human products of the obsolescence built into consumer capitalism (Packard 1960), their lives are "erased from public visions of the future" (Walley 2013, 120). Some try to alleviate this powerlessness by exerting superiority over newer, poorer, darker neighbors, who are easier to blame for decline than complicated changes in the global economic system. Others, like Michael, try to overcome disaffection by "fixing things up." As he pointed out to me, if it weren't for boarded-up homes, a transient population, and "all the trash," Curtis Bay could be a pretty nice community.

As a community leader, Michael worked hard to disappear waste from the neighborhood. He often worked with the mayor's office to remove bulk trash from alleyways, for instance, and organized several community cleanups each year. So, when he was approached by a company called Energy Answers about the prospect of building a waste-to-energy plant in Curtis Bay, he was less concerned about the potential influx of trash than he was enticed by the prospect of a machine that could evaporate it away while returning "good jobs" to the struggling community.

Many residents shared Michael's vision of redevelopment, a vision that struck me as counterintuitive. Making Curtis Bay the trash-burning capital of the country would seem to cement its status as a "dumping ground" rather than reestablish it as a middle-class neighborhood. Yet Fran believed the project would bring back "the right kind of people." And Dorothy, a 90-year-old white woman who complained that Curtis Bay gets treated like "the armpit

of the city,” invested hope in the purifying power of fire to “clean up” the community. “If it’s going to take all this trash and melt it down to nothing, why wouldn’t you want that? Why would anybody want to fight progress?” She continued,

I grew up around the coal yard, fertilizer plant, and everything else. And we didn’t have the safety features they have today. [...] *They’re* not going to experience the yellow dust that littered the air before. And look, it could’ve been another chemical plant goin’ there—it could’ve been so much worse.

*It could’ve been worse.* This is a distinctly subjunctive formation, but note its direction: it uses past developments to measure future possibilities. In fact, optimisms around the Fairfield Project make little sense outside comparisons to the disaffected present and to older forms of industry. As Susana Narotzky and Niko Besnier argue, aspiration is configured by past experiences, which set up a “horizon of expectations” (Narotzky and Besnier 2014, S5; see also Koselleck 2004)—and this horizon can be limiting. Like a projected habitus, it sets up a “bounded space” where desires calibrate. In Curtis Bay hope was bound by two centuries of exposure to pollution and major shifts in the global economy.<sup>8</sup> These experiences changed how residents thought about the past, influenced the present, and affected the futures people thought they’d live to see. Though they did not close “the opportunity structure” (Wacquant 2010, 216), they certainly structured people’s aspirations. After all, as Ilana Feldman (2016, 413) writes in a different context, thinking the future from a “depleted present . . . delimits what you see as vital, what you view as impossible, and what you think is a plausible reality.” Perhaps that was why many in Curtis Bay hoped for a future resembling the rose-tinted past: employed, white, clean. This comparative work set up the boundaries of the possible, boundaries that are central to subjunctive reasoning.

Over time, my surprise about residents’ readiness to accept the incinerator faded as I heard more of them make comparisons that portrayed it as a cleaning technology instead of as one that would lure more waste to the community. The argument that “it could’ve been worse” was also prevalent, since people figured the project would be “better than another dump” and preferred it to a chemical plant. But their enthusiasm about the Fairfield Project was closely bound to discourses of renewal—a renewal of economic stability, social standing, and a homogeneous laboring community. Such discourses make sense only when set against the specter of the more toxic past and recast as restricted orientations toward the future. And though white working-class optimism might reflect a cruel attachment (Berlant 2011) to the dynamics that had produced their own exclusion, these comparisons suggest instead that



**Figure 5.** The CEO of Energy Answers showed me recovered materials taken, postcombustion, from an incinerator in Rochester, Massachusetts, 2016. (Chloe Ahmann) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

local dreams of community revival were symptomatic of a limited political imagination, ensnared in a tangle between the industrial past and the impoverished present, weighted by racial resentment, and steeped in pervasive disillusionment. It would be too strong to read this knot as *causal*—since the subjunctive can accommodate many different postures—but it does help clarify whites’ tenuous optimism. Renewal structured the world of options they aspired to. This was also true of technocrats in Baltimore, though their renewal had a different object. Rather than a fading sense of self-worth, they clung to an increasingly untenable pattern of production, consumption, and disposal that waste-to-energy promised to uphold in its guise as a climate solution.

### Energy alchemy

In February 2016, I sat across a plastic table from Peter McCarthy, the CEO of Energy Answers. He had arrived at our meeting on the Fairfield site with half-a-dozen glass vials filled to the brim with recovered materials samples (see Figure 5). One by one, he placed the vials on the table and invited me to “imagine a world” where all the waste that we produce could be reconfigured as a beginning, not an end. “That’s what we do,” he explained. “We turn waste into energy and recover valuable materials. Plus, we take blighted land and put it to productive use.”

This transformation of useless objects into value lay at the heart of McCarthy’s vocation. An engineer by training and executive by title, he was enchanted by the generative potential of everyday refuse. He often spoke of his work in terms of transformations—like the transformation of waste into money or trash into fuel. And when he came to Curtis Bay, transformation was precisely what he promised the community. Poring over pamphlets published in 2009, McCarthy told me that the Fairfield Project was supposed to be the crowning glory in a career spent trying to engineer a solution to the waste crisis. After decades, he believed he had finally realized the right design—that rather than treating trash as an unfortunate by-product of industrial capitalism,



this project could reconfigure waste as the raw material for “renewal.”

While residents indexed social and economic regeneration when circulating discourses of renewal, McCarthy’s invocation had environmental connotations: the Fairfield Project would rely on, as the EPA (n.d.) puts it, “fuel sources that restore themselves over short periods of time and do not diminish.” Though different in content, both residents’ and McCarthy’s visions of renewal shared a temporality, fixating on return while stressing forward movement. Consider the promise of renewable energy: it is simultaneously critical of the status quo (the *means of energy production*) and dedicated to maintaining it (the *boundlessness of energy consumption*), vowing to uphold old commitments to growth by turning to new fuels. When McCarthy invited me to “imagine a world” that runs on waste, then, the world he had in mind was quite familiar. It jibed with what Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer call the “defensive” argument of energy transition: that “changes in input” to the global capitalist order vitiate the need for radical solutions (Szeman and Boyer 2017, 3). This attachment conditioned the futures McCarthy embraced—which became particularly clear whenever he spoke of waste as infinite and, by extension, as a vehicle for the infinite multiplication of value.

Setting aside the question of greenhouse gases, renewable energy is premised on abundance: unlike fossil fuels such as coal and petroleum, which are finite and expendable resources, one can’t “use up” the force of the wind or the light of the sun. McCarthy figured that a similar argument could be made about refuse. “It’s an easy argument to make,” he said, “because everybody has a trash can. It gets filled up every week and goes to the curb, comes back empty, and then you fill it up again. It’s like any other renewable—it’s continuously generated.” McCarthy was not only interested in trash as a renewable-energy source, but also captivated by the engineering challenge of recovering as much material from waste as possible. Like other waste-to-energy plants, the Fairfield Project was designed to capture energy and preserve metals for resale, and McCarthy touted the incredible amount of money (“\$1,000 in coins”) hidden in everyday garbage. “We’ve made all sorts of things with the [remains],” he added, showing me a slab forged from incinerator ash and decorated with colorful bits of broken bottles. “We’re the first facility in the country designed for this level of recovery.”

In short, McCarthy’s concept of renewal was conservative. It meant salvaging value from waste without reforming consumption—a capacity he credited to the power of combustion. That was why, McCarthy clarified, opponents who call for “technology at room temperature” miss the point. Fire is essential to incineration’s alchemical promise. As an example, he implored me to consider how much value gets “wasted” when materials like coins get landfilled along with other junk:

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

Disparaging landfills, where trash is buried and its value subsequently lost, McCarthy stressed renewal in its multiple forms: he could regenerate energy and materials from waste, which had theretofore been presumed to be the end of a process. Marx might say McCarthy yearned to revive a system nearing crisis—to transform waste from a signifier of unsustainability into a means of capital production.

There are echoes here of the “inevitability syndrome” that Laura Nader (2004, 775) identified as endemic to energy science. The phrase captures a resistance among experts—underwritten by a fear of change—to imagine futures that are *not* predicated on increasing energy reliance. This resistance, as Nader shows, structured the paths that policy makers presumed were available for “solving the energy problem.” And this limited set of paths resulted, after study and debate, in a narrower set of “good” options. The same could be said of Michael’s pining for the industrial era, which set boundaries on the futures he found probable. It was also why landfilling emerged in McCarthy’s speech as an alternative whose worseness justified incineration. Both residents and technocrats relied on hypothetical comparisons to buttress lesser-of-two-evils arguments.

Arguments like this were one reason that incineration—despite its “dirty” reputation—was experiencing a renaissance during my fieldwork. The first new incinerator in 20-odd years had just opened in Florida, and several more proposals were in progress. Lobbyists were finally enjoying the fruit of an intensive rebranding process. By the early 2000s, they had struck “incineration” from their lexicon (in favor of “waste-to-energy” or “energy recovery”) and begun marketing the technology as part of an “integrated solution to climate change” and an “essential component of the circular economy.” And they have been remarkably successful. While in the 1980s grassroots movements successfully blocked hundreds of incinerators, arguing that they were environmentally unsound, today 32 states classify waste-to-energy as a source of clean power (and they are even more popular in Europe). In Maryland incineration is considered a “Tier 1” renewable-energy source, on par with wind and solar, and it is thus eligible for “green” subsidies. Like McCarthy’s reference to ready alternatives, such as landfills, these policies succeeded by reconciling competing priorities built into the regulatory process.

Consider the Maryland Climate Change Commission (MCCC). Tasked with strengthening the state’s climate-action plan while making “the smartest economic

decisions possible,” MCCC must weigh environmental needs against their sweeping fiscal consequences. The Janus-faced nature of this mandate—a product of Maryland’s divide between liberal cities and conservative counties—was brought into stark relief after the financial crisis, which left commissioners struggling to address climate change while courting industry to boost the state economy. This is not to say that environmental goals have been completely eroded by financial pressures, but it does help contextualize the decisions that officials make in the current regulatory climate, in which every proposed reform includes a projected impact on tax revenue and state employment numbers.

Like those in Curtis Bay who believe environmental concessions are necessary to produce much-needed jobs, then, regulators work within a system of constrained possibilities, one that is saturated by uncertainty, in which multiple, contradictory desires face off. And these dual commitments support some environmental futures while disregarding others. That is, they hold up a limited set of technical solutions *as if* they were the only options. In this climate, proposals designed to manage the existing waste stream (such as landfills and incinerators) appear as “reasonable,” while those that call for reforming consumption (like “zero-waste” schemes) do not. It is within this subjunctive operational horizon that developments like the incinerator have been met with cautious optimism.

When the Fairfield Project was proposed in 2009, it represented a “commonsense” effort to manage waste, produce electricity, and restart the regional economy. Supporters argued it would be a win-win for the state, cutting methane emissions from landfills while reducing carbon consumption. Moreover, it offered Maryland an opportunity to grow its renewable-energy market—to “move” on climate change while also monetizing greenhouse gas reduction. When then governor Martin O’Malley signed a bill conferring Tier 1 status on waste-to-energy, he explained, “Marylanders generate tons of solid waste. If there’s no waste-to-energy facility available, it’s dumped into landfills, and no value is derived from that waste.” That value *should* be derived from waste was implicit in his statement. That value should be derived from as many processes as possible is the *raison d’être* of industrial capitalism, harkening back to the Weberian idea that virtue attaches to the accumulation of wealth. Perhaps what makes incineration so appealing is that it channels this ethos, forcing a by-product of consumption back into the commodity system and promising to fulfill the fantasy that there is no limit to the circulation of capital (Marx 1978, 333), not even an ecological one.

As an engineer long absorbed in the business of recovery, McCarthy was attached to this idea. He had convinced regulators that his plant actually had the power to make waste disappear altogether, *metamorphosing* it into capital. Over three hours, he rehearsed this conversion process:

before anything came to Curtis Bay, it would undergo offsite processing. There, machines would shred trash, compile the shredded material into pellets, and bale the pellets in plastic, creating an “efficient combustible.” In short, waste (an output) would become fuel (an input). This step allowed McCarthy’s company, Energy Answers, to argue that the Fairfield Project was “not an incinerator” but a “power plant”—a label with regulatory consequences. It also permitted McCarthy to reassure everyone that his company would “not be importing any garbage, only fuel [...] a valuable and useful product.” Even though waste constituted the sole ingredient for this fuel, and even though it therefore contained the same combination of toxics, Energy Answers successfully argued that “what *was* a solid waste *will cease to be so* once it has been processed.”

The idea that waste-to-energy converts public bads into public goods thus reached its apex in the Fairfield Project. Here, discards would not only get put to “good use”—avoiding the wastefulness of landfilling and the extraction essential to fossil fuels. They would evaporate, vanish, and dematerialize. Their problems would dissipate once “waste” had been transmuted into “value.” Like residents of Curtis Bay who sought to revive the prosperity of industry without resurrecting its pollution, technocrats like McCarthy yearned to recover value from the dregs of an unsustainable economy by engineering environmental problems into environmental solutions. At the core of this yearning was an attachment to the past that shaped what he compared incineration to. This attachment structured McCarthy’s decisional field, bracketing the possibility of reforms that would reduce the energy we need and the waste that we produce. And it was based on this pragmatic fiction—this subjunctive winnowing—that burning trash became “renewable.”

### Subjunctive politics

When McCarthy’s promises touched down in Curtis Bay, residents were already primed to appreciate their power. So were lawmakers. In fact, the Fairfield Project appealed to discourses of renewal that preceded it—one local and one global, one racialized and one environmental, one embedded in moral economies of cleaning, and one bound to the sustainability of capital. And even though the Fairfield Project would have been a costly waste facility, relying on government subsidies to support toxic trash-burning in an overburdened community, these discourses buoyed an imaginary of the plant as a green investment opportunity. When I first noticed this imaginary, I dismissed it. In my notes, I wrote that everybody had been “duped.” And had I stopped then, I might have been satisfied reading renewal as a savvy pitch by Energy Answers and as a sign of residents’ false consciousness—not to mention Lou’s. But the

more I spoke with supporters of the incinerator, the more I came to understand their perspective as a consequence of subjunctive orientations toward the future.

The subjunctive is used to voice “desire, hypothesis, supposition”; it expresses what “may or might be so” (Turner 1977, 71). Like Ernst Bloch’s (1959) “not yet become,” it exhibits a constitutional irresolution; its form, by definition, is yet to be determined. Many view this indeterminacy as advantageous. Take Victor Turner (1977), who invoked the subjunctive as a metaphor for the elasticity of liminality and its propensity to foster innovation. Or consider how Roy Wagner (1986) used the subjunctive to counter the rigid structuralism of Saussure. Subjunctivity also underlies the “nonskeptical” commitment to “making the otherwise visible” that Martin Holbraad, Morten Axel Pedersen, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro place at the heart of the ontological turn (Holbraad, Pedersen, and Viveiros de Castro 2014). Though by no means exhaustive, these readings stand in for a tradition within the humanistic social sciences of reading the subjunctive as a shape-shifter. But the subjunctive is not only about the open future. It is also a conditional register.

In fact, while I am sympathetic to notions of the subjunctive as a means toward the otherwise, the “not yet” I heard in Baltimore did very different work. They were hesitant about the futures that could feasibly take hold in a place devastated by decline. They presumed, like Lou, that there were limits on how far one could move forward. These limits carved out a “set-aside space” (Alexander 2017, 81) where circumstances not so simple and futures not so bounded managed to appear as if they were. Michael behaved *as if* Curtis Bay had to be industrial to thrive, McCarthy *as if* consumption could be boundless, and both *as ifs* held up the reasonableness of the incinerator. This is the subjunctive I have in mind—one brimming with “reductive elegance” (Alexander 2017, 81). It enables a narrow cluster of options to appear as though they faithfully exhausted all that might occur. Discursively, then, we can call the subjunctive a formula for conjecture that usefully limits a vast field of potential futures to an actionable set of comparable alternatives. And as I have shown, it was the hybrid temporality of renewal that structured the subjunctive in south Baltimore.

What, then, is the subjunctive as a political form?

Subjunctive politics use these fictions to make choices in the public interest. They turn hypothetical comparisons into foundational assumptions from which to deduce what is *good*. “Either this or that,” they propose when faced with many more potentials. “Of this and that, this,” they select when pressed to make a choice. This simplicity may very well be manufactured, but it is particularly useful in contexts in which the precarity of the present makes the future seem insecure. Nor is it an error: as Hans Vaihinger (1924)

writes about the fiction of “as if,” it is a means of simplification that allows one to move forward.

This affective pragmatism makes the subjunctive distinct from what Arjun Appadurai (2013, 1) calls a “politics of possibility,” an engagement with the future that rejects the terms of an unjust present. Recall that Michael, McCarthy, and Lou were all prepared to reinforce those terms, so long as they could bend them to their advantage. Nor does the subjunctive resemble Elizabeth Povinelli’s (2011, 13) “future anterior,” which justifies difficult presents with the promise of eventual redemption. On the contrary, in Curtis Bay, people were frequently willing to abandon far-off futures to obtain more urgent benefits. Neither refusing to engage dominant power structures nor experimenting with other ways of being in the present (Feldman 2016), subjunctive politics try to stave off decline by balancing necessity, probability, hope, and discontent. Far from suggesting blind optimism, then, subjunctive politics reflect a deep ambivalence about the sorts of futures that seem credible, given the real-life limitations of the present.

I have already shown how these conditions shaped comparisons people made with the Fairfield Project. But subjunctive politics are not only about narrowing the comparative field; they are also about how that narrowing enables certain kinds of work. Consider, for example, how supporters used “more antiquated” technologies to evaluate the incinerator. Like landfills and fossil fuels, incinerators release greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. But they also promise two benefits (waste disposal, energy production) from a single set of risks (emissions). For this reason, proponents typically market them as clean by subtracting emissions that *would have* come from landfilling from the greenhouse gases associated with incineration, along with carbon that *would have* been emitted had the power generated from trash instead been sourced from fossil fuels. These mathematical machinations make waste-to-energy plants—which release more carbon dioxide than any method of managing waste (per ton) or producing energy (per kilowatt hour)—look as if they clean the air instead. In fact, based on these *as ifs*, Energy Answers boasted that “1.9 million tons of [greenhouse gases] a year” would be reduced. And though opponents argue that these are “false choices,” that incinerators contribute to climate change, and that there are ways to manage waste and produce energy that eschew combustion, officials endorse incineration as a “bridge strategy,” to be implemented until wind and solar become “realistic.” If, in other words, one begins from the premise that generating energy *will* release carbon or that the waste crisis must be solved by managing refuse rather than reforming consumption—if, to quote Pangloss, “things cannot be otherwise than they are”—then waste-to-energy may very well seem the “best of all possible” options. This was, at its core, Lou’s argument: given the conditions in

which we've found ourselves, burning trash is the last best hope for avoiding environmental destruction.

Things get particularly sticky when subjunctive politics like this get embedded within what are already subjunctive regulatory processes—processes in which “hope” is tempered by an abundance of caution, and efforts to forestall climate change are measured against potential fiscal consequences. In fact, subjunctivity colors multiple facets of emissions regulation, entrenching would-be scenarios within structures of anticipatory knowledge (Gusterson 2008), which are weighed with conditions and entangled in provisional logics. Together with the subjunctive political stance that I have described—according to which incineration, compared with worse alternatives, seems the best of all possible options—subjunctive regulation has shifted much emissions oversight from real-time monitoring to prospective modeling (systematic guesswork about the air to come, a technique that rests on a *matryoshka* of black boxes). Moreover, Maryland exempts projects like the incinerator from modeling their impact on a given environment if they do not anticipate meeting “significant impact levels” (SILs) for certain toxics. In June 2016, I sat down with an environmental consultant, Lynn, who explained the layered conditionality embedded in the regulatory process:

LYNN. If you don't hit the SIL threshold, then modeling that pollutant isn't required.

CHLOE. How do you determine the likelihood of meeting that threshold?

LYNN. First you model emissions, pollutant by pollutant. And if you're under the SIL, you don't have to continue. SIL modeling doesn't include other nearby sources—just Energy Answers. So if you come below the SIL, you're good to go. And if not, you have to account for [ambient air quality].

The artificial isolation achieved through modeling suggests that the subjunctive can be speciously straightforward: consultants like Lynn proceed *as if* pollutants were “delimited in space and time” (Alexander 2017, 83), ignoring toxics outside the modeled world. Lynn told me regulators could, conceivably, consider 20 different emissions permits on the same day for the same place. And if each plant on its own were projected to fall beneath the SIL threshold, none would have to model ambient air quality. “You always [vet] permits plant by plant and pollutant by pollutant,” one bureaucrat explained; assessing cumulative effects is too much work. Notice how, in the name of regulatory expediency, the subjunctive forecloses certain avenues of inquiry in an effort to move forward (see also Riles 2017 on “legal fictions”).

Similar dynamics structured residents' analysis. Take Dorothy, a 90-year-old white woman who supported the incinerator because “it could've been so much worse.” I often sat with her for lunch at the recreation center, where

seniors traded tales about the struggles they'd endured. These experiences had nurtured a fatalism, like Lou's, about environmental futures—but one that managed to coexist quite comfortably with optimism. Whenever I asked about the incinerator, Alice, Dorothy's sister, said it wasn't “nearly as bad” as the chemical plant where their father once worked: in the 1940s, he had come home every day in pants eaten up by acid. Dorothy concurred: the environment “used to be bad,” she said. “It's not so bad anymore.” The fact that this comparison was fictional—no one had proposed another chemical plant for Curtis Bay—did not diminish its capacity to do political work.

Though the subjunctive does not predispose people to make certain choices, it does put forth logical constraints that affect the decision-making process. Even residents who did not “like” the incinerator weighed its impact against hypothetical alternatives. Joe, for example, complained about contamination and didn't support the Fairfield Project. But he conceded he would “rather have [the incinerator] than what was here before.” And he, Alice, and Dorothy all agreed it would be better than nothing. While crime had worsened because of a massive influx of “blacks” and “illegals,” pollution had reduced: “You don't see the chemical clouds anymore.” “And we lived through that,” Dorothy added. Kids these days would get along fine being exposed to a “little bit” of pollution. But they'd have a harder time surviving if their parents didn't work, if they lived around drugs, or if they grew up in a “filthy,” “scary,” “downtrodden” community.

Michael's understanding of the incinerator as a public good also rested on a series of embedded presumptions: that residents had weathered worse, that jobs would revive the neighborhood, and that, when it came to development, Curtis Bay had limited prospects. For these reasons, Michael indicated that in his dealings with Energy Answers, he would be willing to put up with incineration's risks—but not without a community benefits contract. Eventually, Energy Answers arranged to give locals preferential hiring, establish a scholarship fund, and pay \$500 for emissions exceeding permitted limits. In exchange, the community association agreed to support the project. And though opponents would later condemn him for “selling out,” Michael described the negotiations as “good politics.” “Sure, there are health risks,” he admitted, “but they don't outweigh the benefits the company is promising.” Area union bosses were also proud of the negotiations. As one of them put it, “We've got to do good with what we've got. [. . .] We did our research and decided to back the project.”

What is at stake in these maneuvers? In part, control—Curtis Bay's residents were trying to eke out a place for hopeful action amid the insecurity of late industrialism. As Susan Whyte (2002) writes in a different context, people need not be paralyzed by extreme uncertainty. They frequently meet the “chanciness” of the world with an

eagerness to try things out, before reality forecloses their options. The tempered hopefulness that drives this action may reproduce long-standing harms, but that does not make it the product of false consciousness. Though they preferred to downplay the environmental impacts of industry, white residents like Michael, Dorothy, Alice, Fran, and Joe were all aware that the incinerator would emit toxics. After weighing these costs against its avowed benefits—regional renewal and a revival of status among them—most decided to support it, mortgaging distant futures like health for short-term economic progress. Recast in this light, Curtis Bay’s history of exposure to risk not only shaped visions for the future by positing the past as a comparative object, but it also conditioned the “capacity to aspire” (Appadurai 2013, 179) by making hope contingent on conditional logic.

### Conclusion: Futures possible

I drove a lot during fieldwork, because Curtis Bay is accessible only by cars and two public buses. One morning in 2016, on my way to tour the local garbage dump, I caught a radio program on competing visions for the energy economy. During the broadcast, a coal miner, Bill, was debating a representative of the Sierra Club. And when pressed by that representative to justify the environmental burdens, health impacts, and dubious economics of coal mining, Bill replied that reviving the coal industry was “a matter of life and death.” He added, “We talk about the health effects. But the coal miners who are working are a whole lot healthier than the ones who aren’t.”

In many ways, assertions like this resemble a Faustian bargain: they signal unfortunate trade-offs and reinforce false dichotomies. In this sense, they are not unlike desire for the Fairfield Project. As I have shown, this desire gained traction in Baltimore as the result of affectively charged, historically informed, conditional logics. For Curtis Bay’s white working class, the project seemed poised to facilitate its reintegration into the national economy and revive other aspects of the industrial era (see Figure 6)—including a racialized sense of community cleanliness. And for technocrats, waste-to-energy’s promised boons were made all the more attractive when compared with older waste and energy technologies. Like Bill’s defense of coal, these maneuvers could be interpreted as signs of delusion or short-sighted buy-ins to industrialism’s value structure. Or we could, following Arlie Russell Hochschild (2016, 135), explain them through a “deep story,” attributing paradoxical positions to “how things feel” when they seem lacking in logic. But these interpretations fail to account for the complex, even sophisticated analytical field I have called subjunctive politics. They do not clarify why people who are remarkably clear eyed about their circumstances nonetheless make choices to their detriment. Remember: the subjunctive is not a space outside reason. It is a space where options



Figure 6. Reminders of the industrial past line “the Avenue” in Curtis Bay, Baltimore, 2015. (Chloe Ahmann) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

seem reasonably limited by the experience of “a weighted and reeling present” (Stewart 2007, 1).

Subjunctive politics are not reserved for experts, nor are they reserved for one end of the political spectrum or another. On the contrary, they signal a broad operational terrain where hope is hamstrung by an everyday ethics of the probable. Often on this terrain, what figures as a “good” future is limited by recourse to known quantities: I can envision a landfill, I can envision a chemical plant, I can envision an incinerator. Or, I can envision poverty. It is more difficult to envision futures that break from the past. This is one reason so many Americans voted to revive coal country.

What these arguments force us to reckon with is that, sometimes, disaffection expresses itself through fantasy, through development dreams, and through thinly gilded legends of redemptive economics. They demonstrate that oppression, extraction, resentment, and loss can meaningfully texture optimism. This is particularly true in places like Curtis Bay, which face uncertain futures not only because they traffic in undesirables like waste, but also because they are the kinds of places that attract them to begin with—places “ripe for preemption by the designs and desires of other[s]” (Reno 2016, 16). Thinking renewal from these places can train our eyes on the way that past conditions occupy the future, setting limits on the plausible. As anthropologists increasingly take up the future as an object of analysis (Adams, Murphy, and Clarke 2009; Appadurai 2013; Bryant and Knight 2019; Feldman 2016; Guyer 2007; Jasanoff 2015a; Kleist and Jansen 2016; Kyriakides 2018) and as an existential problem (Boyarin and Land 2016; Masco 2016; Oreskes and Conway 2014), we would do well to attune ourselves to the subjunctive’s ambivalence—and, indeed, to the many future orientations that shape our politics. Moreover, attending to this multiplicity is a particularly

urgent task at a time when the future might be said to be *the* object of environmental and political anthropology.

Of course, there are ways to imagine the future without conditions or to change how these conditions come into play. There are ways to escape subjunctive politics. Today, in Curtis Bay, a diverse youth-led movement is attempting just that. To quote one leader, Destiny, “Jobs versus clean air, black versus white—these oppositions are made up. We believe that other ways of living here are possible.”

## Notes

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1. All people in this article have been given pseudonyms except for Lou, who insisted that I identify him by his name, and Destiny, who is well known in the public sphere for her advocacy against incineration. I do not use pseudonyms for places or organizations described herein.

2. Jerry Zee (2017) describes this sort of orientation as a “holding pattern,” an attempt not to prevent an anticipated environmental future, but to forestall it.

3. I borrow the term “late industrialism” from Kim Fortun (2014) to emphasize manufacturing’s enduring impacts in south Baltimore. Though residents have lost manufacturing jobs, they remain affected by industrial ideologies and inundated with industrial toxics.

4. The “white working class” is a mythical category in today’s political milieu, so broadly used that it can be myopic (Walley 2017). Lest my argument be read as a sweeping diagnosis of this group, let me be clear: I use the term to refer to white south Baltimoreans who for generations made their livelihoods in industry but have since sunk into poverty, and I see their attachment to renewal as part of a specific sociohistorical juncture. These residents used “brown” (or more often virulent terms like “illegal,” “dothead,” and “rag-head”) to refer to Latinx, South Asian, and Middle Eastern neighbors who—though there are relatively few—are moving to Curtis Bay in growing numbers.

5. As one reviewer noted, Trump’s campaign motto, Make America Great Again, is a forceful command, signaling a disconnect between the subjunctive forms that I explore and Trump’s “directive politics.” My impression, though, is that the two are quite compatible: Trump’s imperative may offer a seductive simplicity to those stewing in the indeterminacy of the subjunctive.

6. In April 2019, BRESKO filed suit against Baltimore County for not sending enough waste (Solomon 2019).

7. Fran used this term for Latinx neighbors regardless of their immigration status.

8. For more on the area’s long history of exposure, see Ahmann 2018a.

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