

# Introduction

On the South Baltimore Peninsula, where this book is set, breathing is complicated. There, toxic emissions are among the highest in the nation. Take, for example, the case of Curtis Bay, one of six neighborhoods located on the peninsula. From 2005 to 2009, the Curtis Bay zip code (21226) ranked among the top ten zip codes in the country for the quantity of air toxins released, and it ranked first in the country for toxic air pollution from stationary sources with 20.6 to 21.6 million pounds of air pollutants released into the atmosphere each year (Environmental Integrity Project 2012). Even after hospitalization rates for asthma in Curtis Bay fell in 2016 (due largely to legislation that enforced pollution controls for the coal-fired power plants in the area), the neighborhood continued to have one of the highest rates of respiratory illness in the state. In 2012–2013, the Environmental Integrity Project (EIP) research team noted that as a result of the cumulative effects of stationary toxic industries, Curtis Bay–Brooklyn was one of the highest-risk areas in the nation for respiratory problems. As a whole, Baltimore City is in bad shape, too. In 2013, the asthma hospitalization rate in Baltimore was 2.3 times higher than Maryland’s average. Asthma emergency room visits in Baltimore were 2.5 times the state average (Environmental Integrity Project 2012).

*Fighting to Breathe* focuses primarily on high school students who, along with their teachers and allies, chose to fight the individuals and organizations responsible for the levels of toxicity that underlie these statistics. For more than a decade, the students worked to eradicate inequities in land use and waste management, two intersecting systems that have exacerbated uneven development and the race- and class-based health disparities that persist in Baltimore today. The goals of the students were not simply to understand systems of inequality but to envision, design, and create development alternatives that would improve the lives of poor Black and Brown people. Their proposals for and then actions toward new, better, more just urban development were intended to meet human needs rather than industry needs.

Baltimore development policy and implementation to date have produced a devastating palimpsest: more than a century of unjust housing, environmental, and other state laws perpetuate the exploitation of some but not all lands for industrial production. While factories are condensed into specific neighborhoods, their owners are empowered by a layering over of pro-industry policies, adopting practices that maximize their profits while threatening the respiratory systems of the humans—employees as well as neighbors—who share airways with those factories. Most of the time, this adversely impacts poor people of color.

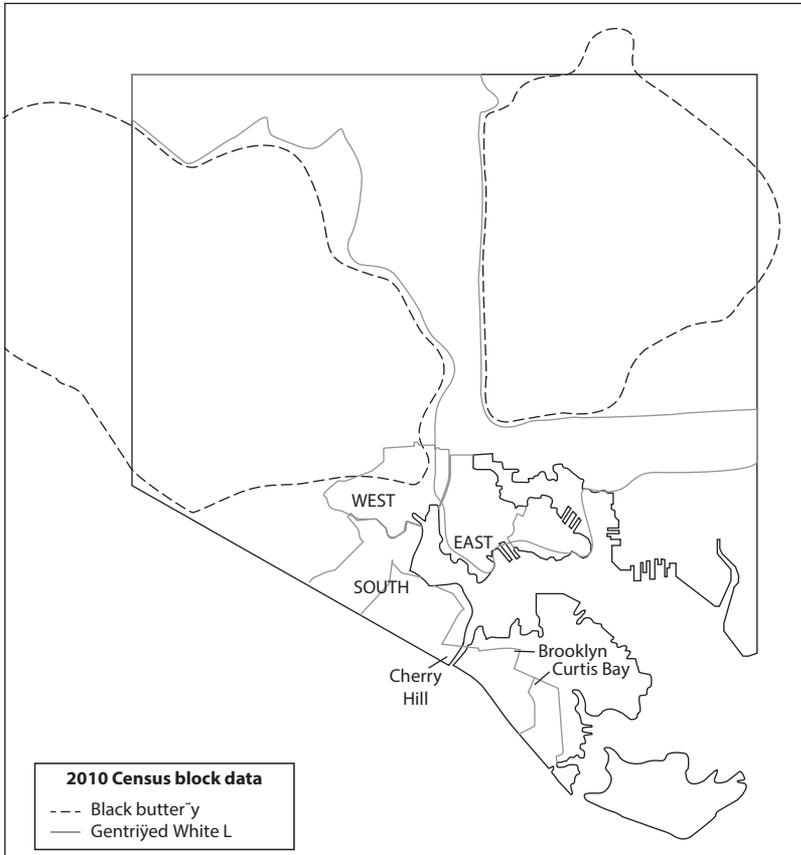
What follows is an ethnographic account of the racialized, environmental violence affecting residents living in neighborhoods of Cherry Hill, Mount Winans, Wesport, Lakeland, Brooklyn, and Curtis Bay.<sup>1</sup> All are located on the South Baltimore Peninsula. All are home to residents who are poor and mostly of color. All are engulfed by industry.<sup>2</sup> As factories and incinerators crowded in during the past century, these six neighborhoods experienced systematic divestments in education, health care, housing, recreational space, and transportation infrastructure.

In this book, I identify environmental toxicity as yet another form of state-sanctioned violence, one that wreaks havoc upon lands as well as bodies and in so doing affects all aspects of human daily life. Undoing

the systems that produce and reproduce harm in poor and Black and Brown communities is daunting. Like the criminal justice system that too often provides police with impunity for brutality and even murder, market-driven logics make it difficult to hold industrial polluters, for example, accountable for their toxic impacts and consequent high rates of illness and death.

The US Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) defines environmental justice as: “The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Fair treatment means that no population, due to policy or economic disempowerment, forced to bear a disproportionate share of negative human health or environmental impacts of pollution or environmental consequences resulting from industrial, municipal, and commercial operations” (Pellow 2018). Environmental toxicity, in contrast to environmental justice, refers to historic patterns of pollution, exposure, contamination, and chemical explosions.<sup>3</sup> This violence is not accidental but rather deeply embedded in historically established systems and structures that perpetuate market-mandated exploitation of natural resources, including human beings.<sup>4</sup> They perpetuate, too, the deregulation of environmental protections by local, state, and federal officials. At the time of my research, disentangling systems of toxicity from the health risks they posed was part of the daily labor of youth organizers on the South Baltimore Peninsula.

Baltimore is a city of contradictions. While slavery flourished in Baltimore, the city was also home to one of the most powerful local civil rights movements in the United States (King, Drabinski, and Davis 2019). And though located south of the Mason-Dixon line, “sometime after World War II the Southern-ness of Baltimore began,” in the words of *Evening Sun* reporter Carl Schoettler in 1977, “thinning out like the quality of rye whiskey” (in Rasmussen 2010). The debate over whether Baltimore is of the South or of the North has been hashed and rehashed



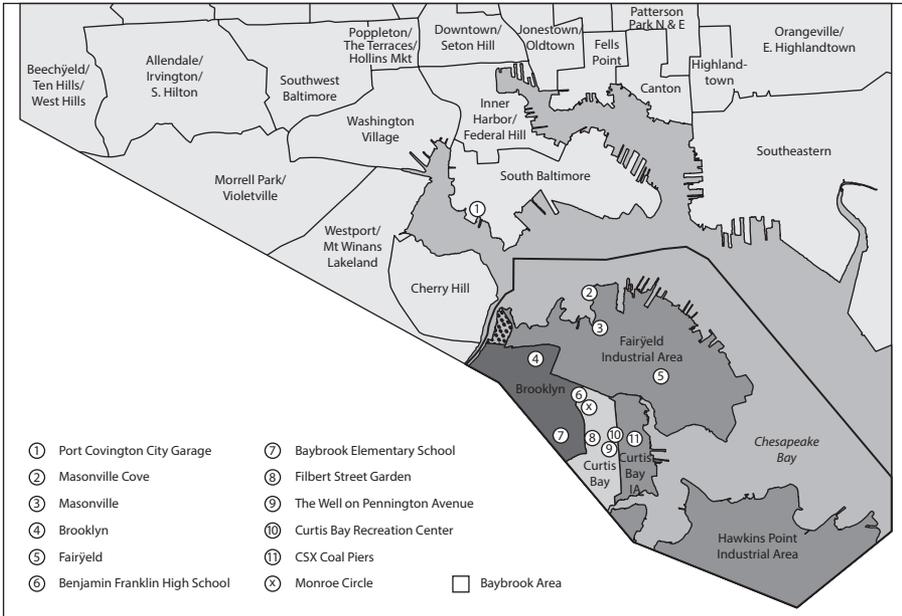
Map 1. This map illustrates what Lawrence Brown calls the Black Butterfly and the White L. *Credit:* Paporn Thebpanya.

since the end of the Civil War, with many Baltimoreans today concluding that the city is a liminal and in-between place. The deep race and class inequalities revealed by Baltimore’s geographic landscape, however, are anything but liminal. Equity scientist and public health scholar Lawrence Brown made famous the notions of a “White L” and a “Black Butterfly” in the city (see Map 1). In his words: “Because of 105 years of racist policies and practices, Baltimore’s hyper-segregated

neighborhoods experience radically different realities. Due to this dynamic, the white neighborhoods on the map that form the shape of an ‘L’ accumulate structured advantages, while Black neighborhoods, shaped in the form of a butterfly, accumulate structured disadvantages. Baltimore’s hyper-segregation is the root cause of racial inequity, crime, health inequities/disparities, and civil unrest” (Brown 2016b). Following Brown’s observations, many scholars and journalists have gone so far as to describe the White L and Black Butterfly as two separate Baltimores: one of hyper-investment and capital accumulation and the other of hyper-*dis*investment and decay (Fernández-Kelly 2015; Spence 2015, 2018; Crenson 2017; King et al. 2019; Fabricant 2019).

Interestingly, South Baltimore, including the South Baltimore Peninsula, does not fit the White L and Black Butterfly typology. Instead, it is situated much farther south than even the tip of the gentrified White L (see Map 2) south of the Under Armour–Sagamore Port Covington Development and south of the Hanover Street Bridge. The South Baltimore Peninsula is deindustrialized and populated by poor and working-class people, some of whom are descendants of Eastern European and Appalachian labor migrants, while others are the descendants of Black labor migrants, many of whom arrived during the Great Migration, including just after World War II.<sup>5</sup>

Laura Pulido wrote in her analysis of Flint, Michigan, that some people like to claim racism is not relevant for thinking about environmental injustices because White people are also hurt by pollution, and White bodies can also become toxic sinks for industrial pollution (2016, 2018). But this line of logic refuses to acknowledge how racism functions to shape valuation processes in development and other urban planning. In 2021, the residential sectors of the South Baltimore Peninsula, like much of Flint, were considered, by politicians and potential investors alike, to be worth very little (for investment, for desirable residences) and thereby disposable. This was by virtue of their being occupied by people who were predominantly poor and of color, though the talk was of values and not of race and class. In the case of the peninsula, like



Map 2. South Baltimore and the geographic areas considered part of the South Baltimore Peninsula. *Credit:* Paporn Thebpanya.

that of Flint, unchecked racism and classism, which shaped how leaders saw lands (as disposable) resulted in urban planning decisions to use the region for dumping waste and industry infrastructure plus other polluting facilities that no one else wanted. What happens when waste and heavy industry are condensed in a singular neighborhood, or side of a city, or say, a peninsula is, perhaps, predictable. But I am using this book to ensure it is made visible.

Most of us are connected to neighborhoods-turned-dumping-grounds and/or industrial zones like the peninsula through our waste cycles. Every time we throw something away, it is either buried or burned, and more often than not, there is someone living next door to wherever the burying or burning takes place. On the peninsula, just as in other marginalized sectors of our cities and towns, the smell of garbage and the sounds of the heavy trucks provide multisensorial reminders to residents

that their neighborhoods do not matter—at least not to the politicians and industry heads who continue to divest from and/or rezone their neighborhoods. And maybe not to us, either. How we consume and what we throw away make it difficult for young children (and their parents and grandparents) to breathe, lead healthy lives, grow, and thrive. Not only should we care about communities that have disproportionately high rates of asthma, communities whose residents of all ages must fight to breathe, therefore, but perhaps we should feel implicated in their toxicity. Not so that we become defensive of our consumption practices, to be clear, but so that we choose to make new, better political decisions fast. A systematic shift to cleaner air and better regulation of heavy industry, to fair housing and to a zero-waste system that is sustainable (and just) requires participation from all of us—on the peninsula, in its sister and brother neighborhoods, and everywhere else, too.

RECLAIMING TOXIC LAND  
FOR ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Public health scholars working in environmental justice communities have gathered an abundance of quantitative data about how air contamination causes respiratory illnesses, cardiovascular complications, birth defects, and more.<sup>6</sup> However, there remains a lack of qualitative data to describe the lived human experiences and quality of life resulting from air contamination—especially for young people (Environmental Integrity Project 2012; Thurston 2017; Wu et al. 2020). Relatedly, there is very little documentation of how the cumulative impacts of layers of environmental injustices motivate youth to engage in political struggle—the project of this book.

In that this book documents hundreds of years of environmental racism, it is a tragic book. But this is also a hopeful book. This is a book that tries to put the public health data into conversation with “the people,” and especially, young people, by examining the ways in which those who are living amid industrial toxicity are surviving, thriving, pushing

back against toxic assault, and creating new and innovative solutions to the contamination around them.

Marxist geographer David Harvey wrote that “the right to the city rises up from the streets, out from the neighborhoods, as a cry for help and sustenance by oppressed people in desperate times” (2008). Harvey argued, “To claim the right to the city in the sense I mean it here is to claim some kind of shaping power over the process of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and re-made and to do so in a fundamentally radical way” (2008). “From their very inception,” Harvey continued: “cities have arisen through the geographical and social concentrations of a surplus product. Urbanization has always been, therefore, a class phenomen[on] of some sort, since surpluses have been extracted from somewhere and from somebody (usually an oppressed peasantry) while the control over the disbursement of the surplus typically lies in a few hands” (2008).

In the aftermath of the 2015 and 2020 anti-police violence uprisings in Baltimore following the killings of Freddie Gray in Baltimore and George Floyd in Minneapolis, respectively, many new and creative movements surfaced to address how oppressed groups can assert their “right to the city.”<sup>7</sup> The foci of these groups ranged from educational justice to food sovereignty to housing equity and beyond. On the Peninsula, residents and grassroots activists built power and solidarity for housing and environmental justice, most visibly.

Even before this, however, in the year 2011, the high school students at the center of this book came together around these same issues. They did so in an after-school program they named “Free Your Voice,” prompted by the slogan “A Voice Is All You Need” from an Amazon Alexa commercial featuring Chance The Rapper. The students you will meet in the book are many. Destiny Watford, a fierce young woman who questioned why her community became a dumping ground, threw herself into activism while still in high school.<sup>8</sup> She later attended Towson University, and eventually, won the Goldman Environmental Prize.<sup>9</sup> Crystal Green—a close friend of Watford’s—started organizing

with Destiny Watford in the halls of Benjamin Franklin High School (BFHS) and evolved into a seasoned leader fighting for housing justice and a champion zero-waste organizer. Crystal grew up in Curtis Bay, moved away to college, and then came home to train another generation of young organizers. Terrel Jones—a shy and awkward high school student—moved from home to home and lacked the confidence to speak at the initial group meetings. His experiences of housing displacement marked his emotional and physical insecurity; he often looked away from his interlocutors while speaking. Yet Free Your Voice gave him both a sense of belonging and newfound confidence as an organizer. Daniel Murphy—a Peace Corps volunteer turned social worker—was the teacher and organizer for The Worker Justice Center who was instrumental in bringing this original group of students together, helping them to find the tools to question the political and economic systems at work in their community. He is described by the youth as both mentor and friend. Terrel Jones, Luis Mendoza, Leanna Jackson, and Rosalyn Drey are the other students who made up the first cohort of Free Your Voice. They were young activists who began their social and political activism by organizing against a proposal to build the nation’s largest trash-to-energy incinerator in their backyards. The students refused to accept one more polluting industry in an already overburdened and toxic geographic space. Their campaign, initiated as an environmental justice movement, grew as they began to ask larger questions about who owns the lands in their community and who makes decisions about what to do on those lands. The students developed political agendas, acquired leadership and media literacy skills, and fought not only to reclaim lands but to redefine development strategies for human needs, which they saw as a redress for the long history of structural and social wrongs in the region.

From 2013 to 2021, a second cohort of Free Your Voice students, this time even more closely aligned with adult activists, continued the fight for environmental justice on the South Baltimore Peninsula. Following up on the success of the “Stop the Incinerator” campaign, they sought

“fair development,” understood to be a more racially equitable form of development, one that prioritizes people and human needs over profits and demands building healthy communities from the bottom up—with poor people and people of color central to decision-making processes.<sup>10</sup> In fair development, public investments maximize all individuals’ access to education, jobs, health care, and long-term and sustainable housing.

The young people featured in this book who comprise the second cohort of Free Your Voice activists, again, are many. Jimmy Brown grew up in public housing in Cherry Hill, a mostly poor, majority-Black South Baltimore neighborhood. He joined the Participatory Action Research class of 2016–2017 at Benjamin Franklin High. Dario Lopez started organizing at fourteen. He grew up as a first-generation US resident from Central America in the Latinx neighborhood of Lakeland. One winter, Dario’s parents were forced to choose between paying the mortgage and paying the electricity bills, a choice that left the family without electricity for four months and required the children, like their parents, to sleep in their clothes each night. This hard reality along with the rest of his family’s financial struggles motivated Dario to join Free Your Voice and to get interested in alternative development in Curtis Bay.

Throughout this book, I show the ways in which the students of Free Your Voice, both in the first and the second cohort, built relationships and trust with their peers and colleagues and later with their neighbors by asking questions collectively, engaging in research, assembling teams of experts, and generating meaningful data. The qualitative and quantitative data they collected became an arm of their environmental justice movements (rather than fodder for peer-reviewed papers that are hidden behind paywalls or shared at exclusive professional conferences). The students transformed their findings into powerful weapons, generating maps to be held high at protests and raps and reports used to educate city officials and/or inform a much broader network of community members about the human consequences of living in a toxic environment.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE NARRATIVE

*Fighting to Breathe* is a story of toxic entanglements and increasing housing and land precarity on the South Baltimore Peninsula. By toxic entanglements I refer to the interconnectedness of political actors, including city officials, and large scale (corporate) business and property owners from the private sector who find it in each other's best interest to work together and make decisions that compromise the health and well-being of the rest of us. Toxic entanglement is an idea that calls to mind public-private partnerships, with tentacles that envelop industries, wrapping themselves around products, services, jobs, infrastructure, and so on such that community residents are left with no choice but to depend upon polluting industries for daily survival. The end result of these toxic entanglements is organized abandonment along with mislocated accountability—as the students' narratives will demonstrate.

In chapter 1, I describe the distinct periods of industrial development on the South Baltimore Peninsula, starting with guano production in the 1800s, moving into the canning industry in the early 1900s, to the expansion of oil and WWII-era shipbuilding. From guano to the canning industry, I explore how white ethnic workers were made expendable through low-wage labor regimes. Their bodies became vessels for absorbing benzene, gasoline, and plumes from oil blasts. While political figures implemented racially restrictive covenants and residential zoning predominantly in East and West Baltimore in the early 1900s, the era of oil and gas in the twentieth century brought total disregard for the Black, Brown, and poor white persons who lived on the peninsula. Explosions and fires frequently threatened homes, humans, and livelihoods. This chapter ends with a look at the relocation plans of the families who lived engulfed by industry—an early example of organizing and resistance in the community that set the stage for contemporary activism on the peninsula.

In chapter 2, I detail the birth of the Free Your Voice program inside the halls of Benjamin Franklin High in the late 2000s.<sup>11</sup> The chapter

describes the transformation of youth from disinterested to engaged citizens who became a vital part of the broader collective fighting for environmental and housing justice in Curtis Bay. Initially by sharing stories of their often traumatic experiences and learning to trust one another, and later through systematic study of the failed and failing institutions and structures that organized their (and all of our) lives, including waste management, housing, and policing and criminal justice, the youth became the experts. They assumed roles as teachers and leaders in their communities, working to educate their families, friends, and neighbors about injustices and, relatedly, about environmental hazards and pollution.

In chapter 3, I look at the Stop the Incinerator Campaign, led by local students in collaboration with other community members, which marked the beginning of the Free Your Voice students' fair development work on the South Baltimore Peninsula. The political and corporate forces advocating for the placement of the incinerator on the peninsula were formidable. The project was proposed in 2011 by then governor of Maryland, Martin O'Malley, who joined former Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake in arguing that the project would keep trash out of landfills and create construction jobs and other permanent employment for Baltimore residents. But the rhetoric surrounding this plan obscured the environmental consequences of the waste-to-energy incinerator: the thousands of pounds of lead, mercury, and fine particulate matter as well as the carbon dioxide that would be released into an already over-polluted region of the city. While the high school students were victorious in their efforts to halt the construction of the incinerator, they learned, as a result of the campaign, that escaping one would-be industrial mega-polluter was not enough. To control future development of the region, community members needed to own the land.

In chapter 4, I tell the story of community land trust work on the South Baltimore Peninsula. Large-scale redevelopment has become a solution to urban decay, so that public subsidies now finance private development for the entrepreneurial class. Rarely do residents of

poor Brown and Black communities—those most likely to be displaced when development spurs gentrification—get a say in these practices. Fair development movements empower poor people and people of color to fight back. On the South Baltimore Peninsula starting in 2015, fair development included the creation of community land trusts or (CLTs) which provided equitable models of alternative housing for the poor and a vision for reclaiming community green spaces.

In chapter 5, I trace the evolution of the Zero Waste campaign from the Free Your Voice classroom at Benjamin Franklin High to the streets of Baltimore, where a broader coalition of experts and allies, along with the students, not only promoted waste reduction measures such as composting but also brought in an outside consultant and produced a practical guide to zero waste for Baltimore City officials. Fair development, they concluded, requires more than equitable land ownership. It requires starving the incinerators by reducing and ideally eliminating the waste streams that flow into them. While the Zero Waste campaign led to much infighting and no clear victory, there are many lessons to be learned, which I recount here.

By way of a conclusion, I reflect on how activist scholars can become better accomplices in movements that are often fraught with contradictions and internal dilemmas.<sup>12</sup> My hope is that some of these insights from inside the movement might help academics—and activists—to better engage with community members with (and for) whom they work. Specifically, I provide insights into multiracial coalition-building, the kind that is designed by poor and Black and Brown organizers—young as well as old—who are often from the communities in which they organize. Questions of how poor people of color can lead grassroots movements and inform state and national policy are of particular importance now as we face multiple and intersecting crises in the United States. Perhaps most important is how youth education and social reproduction can contribute to building more sustainable and just futures in a moment of radical ecological, climactic, and public health crises.<sup>13</sup>

In the postscript, I reflect on broader trends and possibilities in community organizing today. Many activists across Baltimore talk about a “nonprofit industrial complex” in communities like Sandtown-Winchester and “white savior” solutions to Black poverty and inequality. Often, white-led organizations are described as swooping into the Peninsula and/or Curtis Bay with “outsider knowledge and resources” (Cole 2012; Cobb 2015; King 2020), failing to understand culturally relevant and appropriate alternatives. Struggles around power dynamics, whiteness, and access to grants and capital are sources of tension, fracturing The Worker Justice Center. The story of internal struggles and external projects of land trusts and green industries continues to unfold; the next stage of the campaign and alternative forms of economic development and politics are still being written.

The challenges of organizing amid a public health crisis are especially vexing. How to find needed resources for economic development programs without compromising the integrity of one’s work, how to address growing educational inequalities born of the necessity for remote learning, and how to persist despite safety requirements that put fundamental training and movement building on hold are just a few of these. Though other issues have also become urgent at this moment, ensuring access to long-term and affordable housing, good jobs that provide health care, and breathable, *nontoxic* air to residents in communities that have been failed again and again by developers—past as well as present, public as well as private—are vital to our survival.

#### AUTHOR’S NOTE

I have always been an organizer. I went to graduate school to become an academic, but my heart has always been in organizing. My earliest memories of movement organizing were with my father in Elizabeth, New Jersey—a working class Latinx city where I grew up and went to public schools. I remember my father yelling ferociously at

our mayor to house the homeless. I was maybe five at the time, and this experience lit a fire inside of me. Carrying me on his back, feeding me as we marched, and passing me on to my mother as he was arrested. I watched and listened to this passionate orator as a child, and I learned from him as an organizer and a freedom fighter. My parents' social relationships in Elizabeth were deeply rooted in our community, and in organizing work with the homeless. The Coalition to House the Homeless was an institution they built with raw and blistered hands, empty pockets, and unflinching determination to provide shelter for those who arrived from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa without familial support. I grew up in the "spaces" of organizing as a child—I remember late-night meetings and soup kitchens where large ladles banged against huge metal pots and hundreds of plastic bowls were filled in mechanistic fashion. I remember community events where performance and theater were part of our everyday joys, moving us to heartfelt tears and, also, to laughter. I remember living in hospitality houses and being enveloped by this deep and meaningful community of justice. This is what my father (along with my mother) sowed, watered, and harvested throughout the early years of my life.

My summers were spent in upstate New York where my parents worked as supervisors at Vacation Camp for the Blind. This, too, was a space filled by intimate relationships and community, where I watched as a young child. My babysitters, from the South Bronx, from Spanish Harlem, from East New York, raised me during those summers. They shared stories of struggle with me, but also nurtured me with song, dance, and comedy routines. Camp became a safe haven for me, away from the truck traffic and the intense smells of pollution in Elizabeth. I remember learning how to read braille, how to sign to deaf campers, and suddenly how to live outside of myself. I learned how to turn myself over to folks with severe special needs. We helped to feed, bath, and dress special-needs campers. I grew into a junior counselor,

a counselor, and eventually a supervisor. I took with me from camp a political education and a whole lot to think about.

While graduate school was about getting through readings, writings, and eventually long-term research projects on time, I was organizing there too. In my early years as a graduate student, I was part of the graduate student–organized anti-war movement, and in my latter years, I organized with Unite Here Chicago for just and fair treatment of hotel workers. These were my safe spaces, filled with “my people.” They were my solace away from elite university spaces where I felt suffocated by ideas that were difficult to connect to real people’s real lives on the ground. My dissertation work in Bolivia turned into something other than what I had proposed as soon as I got into “the field,” as they say, becoming a quest to organize with the Landless Peasant Movement (MST) in Latin America. At one point my advisor asked, “Are you coming back to finish your dissertation? Or will you simply become a part of the movement?” I did finish the dissertation. But to “become a part of the movement” has always defined my life. Which is to say I always felt a deeper sense of belonging to social movements than to any academic community.

When I moved to Baltimore in the summer of 2010, I was asked to become a part of the Environmental Justice Movement shortly thereafter by Destiny Watford and Daniel Murphy. They found me at Towson University and invited me to join what students and organizers called the Dream Team (a group of public health experts, teachers, educators, and environmental lawyers) for the Free Your Voice Energy Answers Campaign in 2012. I started by folding myself into daily organizing work, chauffeuring students to events and protests, and supporting their work whenever I saw opportunities to amplify their voices. The work evolved over the years, and in 2015, Destiny, Daniel, Terrel, and I launched the first iteration of a collaborative project inside Benjamin Franklin High. Benjamin Franklin was (and is) the local community school, pulling youth from all six of the neighborhoods on the South Baltimore Peninsula. It was also a failing school (with test scores and