A Radical Journal of Geography
ANTIPODE

Lindsey Dillon, *Toxic City: Redevelopment and Environmental Justice in San Francisco*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2024. ISBN: 9780520396210 (cloth); ISBN: 9780520396227 (paper); ISBN: 9780520396234 (ebook)

In 2017, in a groundbreaking article published in *Progress in Human Geography*, Laura Pulido encouraged scholars to rethink environmental justice. She argued that despite 35 years of movement growth and some significant victories, the gap between the environmental conditions experienced by white and nonwhite communities has not diminished but potentially grown. In response, she urged scholars to develop more radical approaches that can "theorize environmental racism as a constituent element of racial capitalism" by attending to the racialized production of differential value and by treating the state as a site of contestation rather than a potential ally (Pulido 2017: 524).

In *Toxic City*, Lindsey Dillon provides a thoroughly researched and beautifully nuanced analysis that attends to and expands both of these imperatives. The book offers a detailed description of the wastelanding (Voyles 2015), redevelopment, and community-based environmental justice activism in San Francisco's Bayview–Hunters Point over the past half-century. The siting of noxious industries in this area of South San Francisco has long enabled the city's financial success. It is best known for a shipyard established in the late 1800s and purchased by the Navy just prior to the US's entry into World War II. The launch site for key components of the atomic bomb in 1945, the shipyard has created and contained widespread radiological contamination as well as other environmental harms. Dillon's understanding of militarization as not only a social but also a spatial process, one that builds up adjacent places, encourages migrations, and poisons landscapes and bodies, is one of the strongest elements of the book.

Black families flocked to the neighborhoods adjacent to the shipyard during the Great Migration, drawn by the jobs it offered. Like many areas with similar stories, Bayview–Hunters Point was initially racially integrated, but as the suburbs were developed through a process subsidized by federal housing funding, Black residents were prevented from entering by racial covenants and other racist deed restrictions. And as Black families from San Francisco's iconic

Filmore District were displaced by urban renewal, they too made lives in a neighborhood whose toxicity was not yet widely known.

It is in this urban environmental history of the racialized production of differential value that Dillon offers one of her most compelling theoretical contributions. She coins the term "toxic rent gap" to describe how the long-term wastelanding of Bayview–Hunters Point, which Dillon traces back as far as Spanish missionization and its dispossessions of Indigenous people, lowered property values in ways that enabled new forms of capital accumulation. The contamination of the shipyard is a classic case of environmental injustice that not only threatened the lives and health of local residents but also further devalued the area economically. Decades later, as Dillon vividly illustrates, the remediation of the shipyards, prompted by their classification as a Superfund site, enabled the use of federal moneys to support the private construction of hundreds of condominiums, offices, and parks on parts of the site deemed clean. Needless to say, these new condominiums are not affordable to long-term Bayview–Hunters Point residents, as the toxic rent gap between pollution and remediation ensures developer profits. By demonstrating the relationship between environmental racism and capitalist accumulation strategies in the context of urban development, *Toxic City* both addresses and expands Pulido's directive. Moreover, Dillon's fine-grained research additionally highlights the deep connections between communities and the places they call home. As she writes lyrically, the "rent gap in Bayview–Hunters Point is doubly toxic because it was predicated not only on devalued and degraded land but also devalued and degraded lives" (p.45). Dillon's analysis constructs a longue durée environmental history to demonstrate the multiple ways that racial capitalism spins environmental racism into capital accumulation through the exploitation of racialized places, labor, and lives.

Toxic City also intervenes in debates summarized by Pulido's (2017: 524) second directive, that scholars treat the state as a "site of contestation, rather than as an ally or neutral force". Scholars in environmental justice studies have taken up the question of state culpability for environmental racism in a variety of ways, with most critical scholars casting racially disproportionate exposure as a form of state-sanctioned violence. This body of work compellingly casts the state as a "fundamental obstacle to social and environmental justice", by

noting that appeals to the state through lawsuits and Title VI complaints fail to a degree that is "truly breathtaking in scope" (Pulido et al. 2016: 15). While these critiques can lend toward a radical, abolitionist, and decolonial positioning, a goal that Dillon and I both see tremendous value in, Dillon's take on this debate is more nuanced and pragmatic. She acknowledges that the struggles and experiences of Bayview–Hunters Point residents "reinforce a concept of the state as creating, sanctioning, and reproducing racialized environmental vulnerabilities and harms" (p.16) but also follows the perspectives of the activists she studied, who have "grappled with the limitations of state institutions even as they pushed the state to do better" (p.18). As her empirical chapters demonstrate vividly, local activists have combined pragmatic efforts with an expansive, oppositional framework and in doing so, have made important gains.

Toxic City chronicles and analyzes more than a half-century of environmental justice organizing in Bayview–Hunters Point. Dillon acknowledges that the neighborhood has been heavily studied, but policy reports and other previous accounts emphasized residents' so-called "culture of poverty", or else painted them as hapless victims. Dillon writes against this grain, developing the concept of "counterplanning" to describe the ways that Black residents have long participated in urban development as a form of worldbuilding, aimed at creating what geographer Katherine McKittrick (2006: 17) calls a "more livable, humane socio-spatial arrangement" (quoted on p.49). Dillon roots contemporary counterplanning efforts in community-led campaigns from the 1960s to oppose substandard housing, evictions, urban renewal, police violence, and discriminatory healthcare. While their goals were often visionary—community control over redevelopment and self-determination—residents made use of state institutions like community development corporations and block councils in order to build community power, and made alliances with state agencies when they were useful. Dillon's patient analysis untangles the ways that the federal funding of these efforts through the War on Poverty both enabled them and made them vulnerable when that funding stream was removed.

The US Navy shuttered its shipyard in 1974 and leased it to private tenants who dumped additional hazardous materials onto the site. Due to evidence uncovered when the City of San Francisco sued the largest tenant, the shipyard was declared a Superfund site in 1989. As a result, federal funds became available for toxic remediation, after which ownership of the site could be

transferred to the city and then developed through a private–public partnership. This created the conditions of possibility for the fulfillment of the "toxic rent gap", in which a private company would redevelop the area in the context of San Francisco's lucrative real estate market. Thus, the racialized production of organized-abandonment-come-capital-accumulation meets the racialized processes of urban development and gentrification. Throughout, community activists continued to show up, offering public testimony to a variety of meetings, and crafting an expansive vision of environmental repair that encompassed both immediate concerns about toxicity and a deeper need for reparations for decades of racialized pollution. These reparations were not primarily about monetary payments, but clean air, housing, and economic security. Dillon draws on the perspectives of Bayview–Hunters Point residents to theorize environmental health and justice as a component of an expansive vision of reparations that can transform socioecological relationships, a vision, she notes, that is very much in line with the writings of Robin D.G. Kelley and Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò and the Movement for Black Lives. This approach positions the state-oriented strategies engaged by generations of residents in Bayview–Hunters Point as "part of a broader, liberatory politics" (p.152).

Dillon spent nearly a decade working alongside and learning from environmental justice activists in Bayview–Hunters Point, first as a community-garden volunteer and later by attending meetings and events, participating in a community mapping project, and interviewing residents and activists. The quality of relationships she has formed with neighborhood residents colors every aspect of this book, from her nuanced and respectful representations of their words and actions to the contextual depth in which she places their work. Dillon highlights the multiple ways that activists' "critiques, demands, organizing strategies, and everyday practices, over many decades, have made the neighborhood a better place to live, work, care, and play" (p.5) in the present, as well as how their frameworks and imaginaries can help us discover new frameworks for building more just and liberated futures.

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Alison Hope Alkon
Community Studies Program & Department of Sociology
University of California, Santa Cruz
aalkon@ucsc.edu

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