

Book Review:

Toxic City: Redevelopment and Environmental Justice in San Francisco

By Lindsey Dillon

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Introduction

Geographer Lindsey Dillon's *Toxic City* tells a story of Black-led activism in a southeast San Francisco neighborhood from the 1960s through the present. The book charts the long life of military-industrial contamination in Hunter's Point, historically one of the city's two

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majority-Black neighborhoods and home to a US Naval base shuttered in 1974 and a shipyard closed in 1994 under the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) program. In many ways, *Toxic City* presents a familiar environmental justice narrative, with Black activists attempting to demonstrate material harm caused by extant heavy metals and radioactive waste at the shipyard, following its CERCLA (better known as Superfund) designation in 1989. But Dillon, like many of her activist interlocutors, refuses to draw facile separations between environmental harm and other forms of Black dispossession. Black activists in the 1960s and '70s, she argues, understood housing and social services like healthcare and job training as fundamentally environmental issues. It's a compelling argument that joins recent works on twentieth-century Black displacement and dispossession (see Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's *Race for Profit* [2019], which Dillon cites frequently) in telling a story of environmental justice work that precedes and exceeds legal-political structures like Superfund. *Toxic City* is a careful and comprehensive work of historical geography and a lucidly argued work of political history.

Review and Assessment

Dillon, who trained as a geographer and now teaches in a department of sociology, deftly summarizes the political and social turns that shape Hunter's Point and its residents. The book's third chapter, "The Politics of Environmental Repair," could stand alone as an introduction to contemporary environmental justice, anchored by a concise survey of the federal Superfund trust and a nuanced discussion of the politics of risk that form the foundation for modern cleanup programs. But *Toxic City* is best approached as a whole: Dillon returns consistently to the question of what it means for activists to appeal to the state for repair when it's largely the state who has done the harm. She lays out the complicated network of state agencies, military offices, and private actors who comprise the polluters and, largely, the cleanup team. Most importantly, Dillon, a white woman whose activist involvement in Hunter's Point preceded her dissertation research there, grounds her study in the lives and demands of the largely Black women activists of her informant base. By and large, her book helps to document the harm Hunter's Point residents have received from the state without positioning them as permanently damaged or pathologizing them as canaries in the coal mine of environmental disaster. The result is a book that can be useful to activists working towards environmental repair and scholars working with communities experiencing environmental harm.

Toxic City approaches redevelopment at Hunter's Point through three main frameworks: wastelanding, counterplanning, and a call for reparative environmental justice. "Wastelanding," introduced in Chapter 1, is borrowed from Traci Brynne Voyles's 2015 monograph on uranium mining on Diné (Navajo) land. Following Voyles, Dillon understands wastelands as sites discursively positioned as valueless or wholly disposable to development and materially appropriated as a sink for industrial waste. Southeastern San Francisco, Dillon suggests, has

been profitable since Spanish colonization, but has distributed those profits largely away from its immediate landscape and everyday residents. In the early twenty-first century, this outward flow becomes expressed through what she calls, drawing inspiration from Neil Smith, a “toxic rent gap” (p. 45), in which formerly industrial lands become desirable for redevelopment because of their very devaluation relative to other parts of the city. The redevelopment of Hunter’s Point— which hinges on the construction of mixed-income, multi-unit residential towers—appears to benefit its current residents neither in the long term of environmental remediation nor the short term of securing consistent social services. “We don’t need any more housing here,” a lifelong Hunter’s Point resident tells Dillon (p. 79). Redevelopment here does not respond to an immediate local need. Instead, it aims to benefit current residents indirectly by raising local property values and, in turn, directing new tax revenue to city programs like schooling. It’s a common model, maybe *the* common model of twenty-first century urban governance, whose specific implications at a site wastelanded through its participation in the twentieth-century US warfare state merit further investigation.

Dillon’s second proposal, introduced in Chapter 2, is that residents of Hunter’s Point and adjacent Bayview neighborhoods have since the 1960s been sites of “counterplanning,” which both intersects with and departs from state-sanctioned urban planning. Dillon argues that Black activists agitating against inconsistent or discriminatory practices by city housing and health agencies articulated a vision of the state as an absentee landlord: both extractive and tactically absent from Hunter’s Point/Bayview (p. 51). She suggests that we understand counterplanning efforts as neither entirely antagonistic to the state nor entirely susceptible to cooptation by it but rather held in a strategic state of mutual (if always asymmetrical) appeal. Indeed, she notes that Great Society-era federal programs funded many of the longest-running community organizations in Hunter’s Point, which in turn had success in making demands upon local city agencies.

Just as importantly, Dillon argues that since the late twentieth century, activists here have understood social struggles as always also environmental struggles. In 1966, Hunter’s Point residents organized a rent strike to protest improper maintenance by the San Francisco Housing Authority (SFHA) of its Hunter’s Point properties. Strikers used withheld rent as an improvement fund, organizing a campaign to repaint buildings and clean up local landscapes overtaken by weedy growth (pp. 54–55). The end goal of this strike, Dillon suggests, was not autonomous control of Hunter’s Point public housing by its residents, but a renewed commitment by SFHA to comprehensive maintenance. These tactical appeals to state programs constitute what the anthropologist Brian Larkin (2024) recently called “metadiscursive moments that point to the workings of the state,” in which informal or grassroots activists lend coherence to the state by requiring it to be accountable to its constituents, “holding the state to its promise” (n.p.).

The second half of *Toxic City*, from Chapter 3 onward, builds on these histories to advocate for a holistic “reparative environmental justice” (p. 145) marked by its “redistribution of economic benefits to the community . . . ; investigating the potential health effects of the military base on residents and workers; and a formal, meaningful role for neighborhood residents in providing oversight of and influence on the remediation process” (p. 79). Dillon distinguishes this social-environmental approach from the technical remediation done by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). In the case of Hunter’s Point, the US Navy is responsible for local cleanup, with the intention of handing remediated land over to the city to sell to a private firm (the real estate developer BUILD) for redevelopment as a mixed-use site (currently under construction) (Nelson, 2023). This is a textbook application of the brownfield program, which was introduced in 1993 to speed up the redevelopment of industrial land flagged for Superfund primarily, Dillon shows, by adopting a risk-based approach (p. 83). The EPA considers a site’s projected land use when determining its acceptable levels of toxicity. Parks and open spaces are held to a lower standard of cleanup than residential uses on the logic that users spend less time in parks than they do in their homes. Throughout the book, Dillon shows Hunter’s Point residents asking why the Navy and the EPA don’t remove all toxicants, which include both heavy metals and radioactive materials, from the site. “How much radioactive waste was taken off side [sic], and how much has stayed on site? . . . Why don’t you dig it all up?” asks one resident at a community engagement meeting convened by the Navy (p. 136). Dillon points, correctly in part, to the EPA’s risk calculations for her answer. The Navy and its allied public agencies are not required to return the site fully to its pre-development state because its future uses have been set strategically as a mixture of residential (lower levels of acceptable exposure to toxicity) and open space (higher levels of acceptable exposure) land uses.

But the brownfield program’s technocratic orientation is not the only impediment to total cleanup. Readers of other recent ethnographies of denuclearizing sites may be frustrated by Dillon’s failure to engage fully with what Shannon Cram labels “the impossibility of cleanup” (2023). Cram, whose work on the Hanford Nuclear Site Dillon cites throughout, begins her work from the assumption that radioactive waste cannot be removed from a site totally, at least not on any human timeframe. It’s a reasonable assumption that poses significant ethical and methodological challenges to activist-scholars of environmental justice. How does a scholar represent calls by her interlocutors for comprehensive cleanup if she is convinced of its impossibility? We’re left to wonder if Dillon has sidestepped a dilemma that is, in fact, central to her project. Given the framework of wastelanding, should we not direct our attention to the paths by which hazardous materials leave Hunter’s Point and the timeframes at which they persist both on and off-site? Even if total removal were possible, would it not demand a wastelanding elsewhere? Indeed, in a 2014 article, Dillon notes that removing irradiated soil

from the shipyard site “would also mean another kind of redistribution . . . to a low-level nuclear waste facility in the desert lands of Tooele Count, Utah, near the Skull Valley Goshute reservation” (Dillon, 2014: 1218). It’s a troubling factual and, more importantly, methodological omission from *Toxic City*. Could those paths of toxic expulsion and exposure also form the paths by which multi-sited solidarity networks emerge? Does the regional circulation of toxic waste create a new multi-sited (if not readily visible) constituency united by shared exposure? Dillon’s work invites these questions primarily by evading them. *Toxic City* does an excellent job connecting the macroscale of federal policy—Superfund in Chapter 3, federal housing policy and Great Society programs in Chapter 2—to the microscale of the neighborhood. For all its contributions, the book largely avoids the mesoscale: the regional and subregional scales at which waste gets distributed away from sites (without shedding its capacity for racialized injury), and the municipal and regional scales at which those programs of redistribution get designed, financed, and resisted.

More convincingly, Dillon devotes the final pages of her conclusion to a discussion of the dialogical tension between reparative environmental justice and the liberal state’s apparatuses for formal reparations. She puts some qualified faith in the California Reparations Task Force that convened between 2021–23: “were the state of California to adopt all of [the task force’s] policy recommendations, we would effectively be living in a different, more just world” (p. 150). The assertion returns us to a central question of this book: What does it mean to repair state harm by way of an appeal to state power? Further, how permanently can state programs undo the state’s own project of “global racial empire” (Taiwo, qtd. in Dillon, 2024: 151), especially given the continued importance of defense contracting to California’s economy? And how earnestly can we approach a nation-state that continually, perhaps foundationally, betrays the promises it makes to its constituents? The answers are not in this book, but Dillon has not sidestepped these questions; indeed, she’s given us methods for taking them on. The futures envisioned by Hunter’s Point activists “will most likely not come solely from petitioning the state . . . That does not mean that people should stop trying to strengthen and improve state practices, only that their efforts should be part of a broader, liberatory politics” (p. 152). In other words, reparations will always exceed state programs, even where the state claims a monopoly on repair.

Dillon’s work resonates with foundational urban environmental justice works like Julie Sze’s *Noxious New York* (Sze oversaw Dillon’s postdoctoral work), and activist-geographer studies like Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s *Golden Gulag* (Gilmore’s [2017] recuperation of “the tarnished practice of planning” is a clear precedent for Dillon’s “counterplanning”). Where I hope Dillon’s work will also make waves is in a growing body of literature on the domestic environmental effects of American militarization. She joins a group of historians and social scientists investigating the afterlives of domestic military-industrial sites, centering largely on

their cleanup (Taylor, 2024; Reno, 2020; Havlick, 2016; Brown, 2014; Krupar, 2013) and, in fewer cases, their expropriation by marginalized groups (Hailey & Wylie, 2018). *Toxic City* is an exciting contribution to this literature in part because Dillon provincializes the US Navy as one in a series of polluters who produced southeastern San Francisco as a wasteland and, consequently, as one of several public and private actors invested in its quick conversion into developable land. The result is a story that approaches the US Navy as an everyday domestic presence—an employer, a political foe, an administrator, and a client—while also recognizing environmentalist work happening beyond the Navy and its structures. Hunter's Point is a site that, through planned wastelanding, remains connected to distant processes of militarization. Crucially for Dillon, it is a site whose stories and structures of planning otherwise may also travel.

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