UNCERTAINTY IN MOTION: Rumors of a Proxy War in Late Industrial Baltimore

CHLOE AHMANN
Cornell University
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8974-190X

I was in the library when my phone rang. Loud. Job seekers fiddling with résumés shot their side eyes toward my table, while the woman in the rocker shook her heavy head at me. I turned off the ringer and tried to pretend the awkwardness away, but then my phone buzzed. Twice. Soon, Nick's device was rattling across the table, and as the job seekers stared and the woman shook her head, we both sank deep into our plastic seats.[1]

It was Martha.

"So I've been wondering about Secretary Johnson [then head of the Maryland Department of Environment], and how he managed to go from the Arizona Department of Environment to MDE."

"I started digging. Here's what I found."

"First, here's his bio."

Nick followed the link while I read on.

"He was born in Kentucky."

"Then he moved north and went to a lot of D.C. law schools."

"Then he served as coun[se]l to the U.S. House of Reps . . . then Deputy Administrator of Water for the U.S. EPA [Environmental Protection Agency]. . . ."

"Then he took a mysterious dive south."

And that's where things get interesting.

Seventeen texts came through each of our phones over the next few minutes. That's thirty-four buzzes and sixty-eight side eyes. Each one substantiated ties: between the MDE and its counterpart in Arizona; between the EPA and a group called the Stewardship Action Council; between the governor of Maryland, a national lobbying firm, and a global player in the waste-to-energy industry. It was the last of these nodes that got Martha "digging" to begin with. She wanted to get to the bottom of the Fairfield Renewable Energy Project ("the Project"), an incinerator proposed near her home in South Baltimore City.

Martha was a mother in her forties who did not have a lot of leisure time to poke around. Her days were full of jobs she pieced into a life: she refurbished guitars, sold hand-knit cell-phone carriers on Craigslist, and was precariously employed managing the office of a solar company. It was there, in 2012, at a desk miles from home, that she first caught wind of the incinerator. (Someone had called about installing solar panels on its roof.) Martha soon gleaned that the plant had been permitted two years prior. "And all I could think was, 'Wait a minute! How long has this been going on behind our backs?'" She recollected later, "It's not the sort of thing you should learn accidentally."

For weeks, Martha spent days answering the company's calls and nights scouring the web for "what these guys were up to." She printed documents and arranged them into piles underneath her bed. Eventually, she connected with a local group—including Nick—curious about the company. Soon, murmurs about the Project surged into a rancorous debate, as residents bickered over the vices and virtues of a plant that, if built, would be the nation's largest trash incinerator: burning 4,000 tons of waste each day to generate allegedly "clean" power, while emitting tons of lead, mercury, and fine particulates into the most polluted air in Baltimore City.

The broad contours of that debate were straightforward enough: some residents coveted jobs at the plant, while others balked at its proposed emissions. But beneath a fight manifestly about local land use, many suspected something else was really going on. Opponents like Martha entertained stories that the company behind the plant was secretly owned by a power player in the waste-to-energy sector, while some supporters swore that Martha's side was getting money from Big Landfill. Rumor had it that a waste-industry proxy war was brewing in South Baltimore.

Rumors are ubiquitous in this late industrial place, marked by manifold extractions and mysterious exposures. Over a decade studying both, preceded by

years as a schoolteacher here, I've heard plenty: secret waste pits, bizarre illnesses, collusion, corruption. Many traverse the faults that divide this tensely integrated town, where neighbor often mistrusts neighbor. Others stretch toward cryptic corporate forces that diminish life outcomes. These are deadly serious forces, and much of my work concerns their role in producing uncertainty about the local atmosphere over a long 200 years and the devastating impact of the same on residents, whose place-based knowledge gets dismissed as dubious. I also study how locals live, strive, and maneuver in this consequential muddle (Ahmann 2018, 2019, forthcoming). One way they do is through a kind of rumor practice that meets the gravity of life in late industrial environments with narrative agility, even play, bent on orchestrating partial knowledge to local advantage—including in debates about who gets to claim the mantle of the "local," and who doesn't.

These maneuvers were on full display during my fieldwork, though it took some time for me to recognize them *as* maneuvers. My eyes were trained on the seriousness of the incinerator fight, and my days spent in conversation with regulators, executives, and residents on both sides of the divide. I also participated in this fight, canvassing with resident-opponents of the plant and providing research support for their campaign against the Project. As a local teacher who had transitioned into a researcher role and moved with relative ease between opposing camps—aligned with but not quite *inside* of the campaign—I was an unusual figure, and sometimes became folded into rumors, too. The most pointed implicated me, notebook ever present, as a spy. Let me assure you I was not. But "spy" seems a sensible way to class a curious outsider. Especially here, where outside influence is profoundly enigmatic, facts spare, and suspicions abundant.

As murky stories with murky origins trade along murky paths, rumors are modes of explanation suited to just this sort of world—and wherever life is overwhelmingly uncertain, as scholars have long shown. Take those whispers of a famine plot that spooked eighteenth-century France into a revolution (Lefebvre 1973). Or vampire stories that coded critiques of dispossession across the African continent (White 2000). Ethnographers in particular make clear that rumors give narrative coherence to mystifying worlds, and they *transform* those worlds: generating doubt (Samuels 2015; Maqsood 2019), hate (Das 1998), and fear (Luna 2018) that alter social ties and upset power structures. Far from signs of ignorance, rumors are rich reserves of vernacular theory among those subject to the vagaries of other people's power—people who, rather than acquiesce to the frailty of not knowing, devote themselves to connecting the dots.

This scholarly consensus opens other questions yet, like: What do rumors theorize? How does their theorizing work? And where rumors are subaltern speech (Spivak 1988) subordinate to the authority of expert discourse—as they are where Martha lives—what might they reveal, and perhaps rearrange, about the workings of authoritative knowledge? I want to suggest that, in the face of a wildly disaggregated regulatory sphere whose partitions have for years served corporate power (Sawyer 2006; Murphy 2008; Fortun 2014; Ahmann and Kenner 2020), rumors here operate through a politics of *connection across scales* that makes skilled use of fragmented information. Moreover, in tension with industrial epistemologies that consign local knowledge to the realm of mere suspicion, they reinvest the local as the ground from which authoritative speech acts spring, implicating evasive outside actors in intensely local dramas. These twin achievements point toward a third whose import stretches far beyond this site, to anywhere where "doubt" supports a lethal status quo (Auyero and Swistun 2008; Oreskes and Conway 2010; Benson and Kirsch 2010). For these rumors show that doubt also has affordances that locals wield with great dexterity. Perhaps not toward liberatory ends, but enough to make small gains and muck things up for corporate bosses.

In Baltimore, tapping into these affordances took a particular kind of narrative work that deserves elaboration, for one, because it exceeds what scholars know about how rumors make sense of the world. Broadly, studies teach that rumors can make sense in terms of style and content. A classic instance of the latter comes from Luise White (2000), who plumbs blood-sucking metaphors to ask how East and Central Africans perceived colonial power. Susan Lepselter (2016) exemplifies the former, tracing how resonance gives poetic sense to conspiracy in the United States through narratives of alien abduction. When random things recur enough, she shows, things click, and *suddenly you know that there is no coincidence.* In this aesthetic, more is more—echoing the chill of the uncanny, which does its psychic trick through repetition (Freud 2003) and the paranoid work of amassing signs that something must be wrong (Hofstadter 1964).

This second mode of sense-making seems palpable in the buzz, buzz, buzz of Martha's texts, as each buzz grew the sense of something sinister. But Martha did more than collect associations. She emphasized the lines between the dots. She labored to compose a set of interscalar ties more often severed in this late industrial place, where power comes from far away but hides its origins and its impact—in part by spurning "paranoid" knowledge. So, while countless works on rumor note the symbolism of the things connected and the felt effects of their association, Martha's prompts mark matters of trajectory pertinent to life in zones of *longue*

durée extraction. Here, rumors' force is more than a matter of how many things cohere, but from where and in precisely what direction. Here, rumors not only connect but connect across scales, organizing data into interscalar plots.

These matters matter because breaking interscalar ties is a core way corporate power works in contexts such as this: where bosses pull signs of harm apart to dodge critique and shirk accountability. In defiance of these moves, rumors build connective tissue between exactly those relations industrial logics work so hard to cut. This is another reason that their interscalar sense-making deserves elaboration: it imparts lessons about how authority in late industrial environments is made, and how it might be made quite differently. As we will see, it was through their busy travels between sites, scales, and actors that rumors of a proxy war took on persuasive strength, upsetting a discursive field in which rumoring is typically the mark of the irrational. It was also through their travels that they became instruments in a contest over local voice that would consume South Baltimore.

Grasping how means following these rumors' interscalar journeys as, in landscapes forged by corporate influence, those journeys unfold rumors' politics. To do this work, I treat rumor as an "interscalar vehicle," Gabrielle Hecht's term for things that dart between scales of analysis. Through their movement, such vehicles reveal how scale is imbricated in "social, cultural, and technopolitical processes" (Hecht 2018, 115). For Hecht and Martha both, scale concerns more than "size and granularity," or how big a problem is (Hecht 2018, 114). It also concerns the relationships our categories stress and the claims they subsequently sanction (Liboiron 2021). Consider the Project. To call this plant a local land-use matter is to fix relational boundaries at the district line, limiting potential ties to distant actors (Ahmann 2020). Conversely, to allege involvement by a multinational waste titan is to cast it as a global problem. Scalar claims consequently attribute victimhood and blame—and this makes them deeply political (Carr and Lempert 2016). Following an interscalar vehicle means catching a lift from scale to scale to see how power shifts in this movement across.

Hecht claims that anything can be an interscalar vehicle, but she rides uranium-bearing rocks to map the forces behind Gabonese exposures. This work depends on the rocks' materiality: miners absorbed uranium, which scientists could then measure in their bodies. The materiality of exposure enables other interscalar stories, too, like Vanessa Agard-Jones's (2013) work on chlordecone in Martinique, which she follows from her mechanic's flesh to imperial France to global pesticide markets. Rocks are tractable, and pesticides (despite the structured ignorance surrounding them) are too. But rumors are slippery, intangible objects. Just as moving

across scales can teach us about rumors, then, rumors seem to test the outer limits of this method—a third reason that their interscalar movement merits close attention. For the scholar tracking rumors cannot map relations on her own. She is completely at the mercy of her interlocutors.

And so I found myself a passenger on Martha's texts. Each one took me on a journey, from the library to the statehouse to a global industry and back. Each one charted furtive paths that made the Project more than meets the eye—and it wasn't only Martha. I heard rumors from many actors engaged in interscalar labor, jumping scales to make political claims. On both sides of the issue, talk of shadowy outside forces worked to vest some voices with more authority than others. Specifically, each group claimed to be the real voice of "local" while dismissing adversaries' views as the result of corporate capture. Meanwhile, each admitted doubts about where power lay, coding opacity as a central problem. Tracking these claims across scales and through allegedly bad relations, I show how rumors became tools for mapping ambiguous forces long at work in this environment. Through this mapping, speakers not only referenced but enacted interscalar power, spatializing agency to serve their own positions on the Project.[2]

Attending to trajectory is thus more than an exercise in being thorough. It sheds light on a tactical capacity of rumors understated in prevailing scholarship. Rumors shape how power feels (Luna 2018), but they also shape how power moves. They put uncertainty in motion—sometimes toward specific ends. And slighting this capacity has consequences for ethnographic knowledge.

After all, rumors are densely symbolic texts that circulate through social worlds, making them paradigmatic objects for this discipline (Jones 2014). Hearing, spreading, and becoming a character in rumors are also common in the practice of ethnography (Gluckman 1963).[3] If rumors do strategic work through their interscalar movement, then it is not hard to imagine how the anthropologist might get drawn into this work and see her own sense of things disturbed along the way: a bumbling departure from genetic narratives of ethnographic mastery that have historically bolstered *disciplinary* authority, for better and for worse. In a place cloaked in uncertainty, where power differentials are always knowledge differentials and one can never really know for sure, she may even find herself to be a conduit.

SOMETHING IN THE AIR

When my phone buzzed in the library on that fateful afternoon, I had already come to know South Baltimore as a suspicious place. Former factory workers

whispered about the sludge they buried in the dead of night. Some confessed to shady dealings on the waterfront. Military secrets, trade secrets, secrets about what was in the air and *who knew* and *why they never told us*: rumors charged the local atmosphere. I spent the early months of fieldwork seeking evidence of these "oblique events and background noises" (Stewart 2011, 445), until I realized evidence was not always the point. Sometimes people wanted me to chase leads and substantiate their claims, and much of my work over the years has been devoted to just that. Sometimes, though, people wanted to fold me into the sensation something bad had happened here, without the orienting clarity of what.

Like the man who gestured toward one plant where "they mixed water for the atom bomb," before returning nonchalantly to his sandwich. Like the oil worker who called me to discuss the laws his bosses made him break, just to navigate us toward another topic. Like the widow who surmised her husband's death had ties to local plants but couldn't prove it, and wanted me to share in that frustration. These moments passed in the style of disclosure without disclosing truly covert information. They dealt in the charge of mystery, the play of indirection, and the torment of a question with no answer—what Alix Johnson (2023) calls "secrecy deployed as form, not wrapped around content."

Taken together with all manner of pollutants, these gestures hint at "something in the air"—invisible, inscrutable, but potent. The sky is thick with chemicals and thicker still with rumors, which read meaning into half-signs that suffuse South Baltimore. There are colorful clouds and cancer clusters, there is a dark film clinging to most surfaces, and there is talk of unscrupulous behavior that occasionally gets verified. In 1989, for instance, one company admitted sneaking mustard gas components to Iran (Meehan 1989).

Mostly, though, it is tough to say what is real and what imagined in this murky episteme (Taussig 1986), where doubt has calcified into a dreadful norm. Suspicion pulses underneath the everyday, sustaining an "affective atmosphere," or the "shared ground from which subjective states" take off (Anderson 2009, 78). As Sarah Luna (2018) shows in her work on affective atmospheres of terror along the Mexico–United States border, rumors play a central role in producing shared intensities; there, rumors of violence fomented fear that ultimately served the cartels' power. But every atmosphere differs, and every rumor mill coheres in its own way. And it is uncertainty, more than fear, that permeates the air in late industrial South Baltimore.

Elsewhere, I tell a longer story about the roots of this sensation (Ahmann forthcoming), but briefly: South Baltimore has been shaped by outside forces for

Figure 1. "There's something in the air." Pamphlet published by Baltimore's Better Air Coalition in 1976. Enoch Pratt Free Library, Maryland Department, VF, Air Pollution.

the past 200 years, many of them shadowy indeed. During the country's great waves of immigration, it served as a quarantine zone to help safeguard the city center; sickly bodies were detained here as a public health precaution. Later, local

workers stockpiled weapons to provision two world wars. The region then supported deterrence with its Cold War chemical arsenal. More recently, it has been a corporatized industrial zone where some of the biggest names in chemicals produce what many residents believe is Agent Orange. "No, just pesticides and herbicides," plant managers insist—but then they wink. One boss toured me around his worksite grinning, "Chloe, everything we make is dust."

Over time, I have come to read these winks as expressions of pleasure in the power of withholding desperately desired answers—about the air, about one's health, and about who is acting in whose interests. But a wink is no one thing, and residents' gestures toward secrecy communicated very different stuff. They lugged me into a late industrial world where I could rarely get my bearings. Where I could sense that something menacing surrounded me, while knowing that my knowledge was too dubious to count as such. South Baltimore is this kind of place in the most literal sense. Here, pollution is plain but its scope, sources, and effects have been obscured: by a disaggregated regulatory regime designed to track pollutants (molecular entities), not pollution (lived conditions) (Ahmann and Kenner 2020); by profitable doubt produced through corporate "counter-science" about toxics (Benson and Kirsch 2010; Oreskes and Conway 2010); by a legal system that discounts victims' lived exposure as evidence of any single litigant's wrongdoing; and by cunning factory managers who evade legitimate concerns with easy smiles and smooth talk. These forces work not to stoke fear, but to *blunt* fear via "labors of confusion" (Auyero and Swistun 2008). Because fear of emissions poses major corporate problems.

Take this evasion from Nigel, a white boss with forty years' experience. "People are highly suggestible when it comes to chemicals," he responded to my question about the health impacts of toxic air.

> Suppose something's been released, but you don't know what it does . . . . There's an example from the first Gulf War of a handsome reporter on a rooftop when a [missile] struck nearby. There were rumors Saddam Hussein had chemical weapons on those things, and you could watch him hyperventilate on camera. There weren't, but it was exciting to watch. Or imagine you went through a group and opened a vial . . . .

Nigel confessed that he "did this once, by putting green vegetable dye in water and using a sinister glass-stoppered tube." He chuckled.

Imagine you open the vial and say, "Interesting stuff. Doesn't have any toxins, just makes your nose itch." Leave it there. I guarantee you'll have everyone scratching their nose within twenty minutes. But it's only because you suggested something to them, and now they feel it. In fact, they'll start attributing other things to it, and all it was was water.

"Now," he arrived at last to the substance of my question, "can I therefore make you think whatever's in that vial is the reason for your cancer? Absolutely."

"That's the thing about the human brain," another boss explained, "it makes all sorts of marvelous connections." *Marvelous*, he emphasized, before his eyes implied *but wrong.*

Several lessons about the shape of industrial power flit between these two evasions, which tarry in the play of insinuation one moment, just to dismiss it in the next. First, when it comes to pinning down "real" dangers in the air, corporations claim a monopoly on authoritative knowledge. Second, many gain the upper hand by dismissing local concerns as the product of so many paranoid connections. Along the way, residents' knowledge becomes rumor—excited, affecting, but dubious—and rumor works as an "[un]authorizing discourse" (Asad 1993) that disqualifies one kind of speaker from the realm of serious debate while bolstering another who need not resort to mere conspiracy. That industry insiders themselves participate in such speech only confirms that they draw the boundaries of the genre.

This impeachment of rumor as paranoid—even "hysterical," per Nigel—is elemental to what Kim Fortun calls industrialism's "functionalist semiotics." Here, everything is as it seems "and nothing more: Chemical plants produce chemical products for use . . . without polluting emissions. Pesticides kill insects, but pose no [other] harm," et cetera, ad nauseum (Fortun 2014, 313). This is a language ideology designed to render connective tissue mute and critics "inarticulate" (Fortun 2014, 315), consigning working-class residents to the realm of subaltern speech, where their fair misgivings might be neatly disregarded. Even more so in this *late* industrial present, where heady air persists without the lifeways that once made it bearable (few residents still work in industry), and old sites for pooling voice, like union halls, have crumbled.

While many ties are cut to bolster this functionalist semiotics—between bodies and environments, experience and evidence, profits and pollution—interscalar ties are among the most important to sustaining corporate power. I mean not only ties between multinational corporations and the local, state, and federal

regimes through which they quietly exert their influence but also ties binding subsidiary operations to their parent companies. The legal construct of limited liability shields shareholders from personal responsibility for a corporation's debts, and multinationals from the actions of subsidiary businesses, including those they own outright. These separations constitute the "corporate veil," a conspiratorial term for "the immunities that accompany the corporate structure" (Sawyer 2006, 28). Piercing this veil is notoriously difficult, as the Supreme Court underscored in a 1988 pollution case. It ruled a parent could only be held responsible for violating the law in question if it was actually "operating" a troubled facility, emphasizing who commands a place, over who owns and benefits from toxic assets, and confining liability to the most local of corporate bodies.[4]

Add this to the reasons why the many *somethings in the air* can be "detectable but nonetheless irrelevant" (Murphy 2008, 698), palpable but categorically uncertain, and no wonder that so much appears to happen under cover of a veil: legally, it does. In addition to being awash in chemicals and the uncertainties composed around their impacts, South Baltimore hosts corporate entities whose structures are interscalar, connections labyrinthine, and control open to change at any sign of legal trouble. It is a widely known fact, which nonetheless sounds paranoid, that companies often change names and owners for this reason. Even Nigel said so, admitting the mustard gas incident was "why [the company implicated in illicit sales] became [another]." In this late industrial place where so much work "has gone into obscuring, rather than revealing" these relations—legal, molecular, and more—efforts to render such ties newly "visible" are fundamentally political ones (Murphy 2008, 698).

Enter rumor once again. Rumors make connections. Incessantly. Obsessively. They bind people to shared feelings through their contagious spread (Ahmed 2010) and their iterability (Derrida 1982): that buzz, buzz, buzz of repetition that makes them seem autonomous. As a rule, rumors make ties, and their power grows with every tie they make. Lepselter, tracking captivity rumors in the American West, shows this happens through a patterned way of reading signs that multiplies potential meanings—until multiplication becomes a sign par excellence. When it does, repetition gives way to resonance, an echoey aura produced by the "overlapping, back and forth" of cues (Lepselter 2016, 3). Resonance is a felt effect, and it produces others. For Luna (2018), the density of violent stories on the border breeds bodily sensations like quickened pulse and labored breath, and shapes how people move through space. Consider, also, Murphy's book on women workers breathing bad air in "sick buildings." In isolation, their aches were dismissed as hysterical.

But organized en masse ("Me too, me three!"), they evidenced an atmospheric problem (Murphy 2006, 1).

South Baltimore, too, is a place resonating with connections. It embeds the paranoia long known to be an organizing force in the United States, palpable in the productive nervousness that colored the Cold War (Masco 2006) and in the recent rise of QAnon. But this site is more than a density of horizontal ties. It has also been made through interscalar power: city public health regimes blurred into a kind of military occupation, which faded into multinational extractions with Kafkaesque arrangements, whose smokestacks have accrued into a planetary problem. Paranoia is a perfectly reasonable response to living here (Marcus 1999), where one must maintain "vigilance against external threat" (Keller 1995, 122)— but this paranoia travels interscalar circuits that keep rumors on the move in ways rhyme, resonance, and density do not. This is what makes paranoia eminently sensible in South Baltimore City. Given the range of outside actors who have had their hands in shaping it, rumors that this place has become a quiet battlefield for two waste-industry behemoths sound quite plausible.

As one deft peer reviewer put it, "rumor is not rumor is not rumor." The genre shifts as it moves through different contexts. Rumors will not work the same way in contexts of terror (where they frighten folks into submission) as in contexts of exposure (where doubt, not fear, pays dividends). When it comes to diagnosing power, these distinctions are instructive.

In late industrial Baltimore, rumors matter themselves into a realm where uncertainty pays if you are in charge, and cuts life short if you are not. (However "dubious" this atmosphere, residents suffer documented health disparities, but preventing more is hard when embodied knowledge is so often undercut.[5]) Rumors matter themselves into a realm where interscalar power hides and the local carries liability—but also, we'll soon see, symbolic value. A realm where rumor, to put elusive corporations in their place, must overcome some major obstacles.

Among them, a speaker must go beyond amassing ties between dissociated things, the mark of that "marvelous," misguided paranoia. Taking a cue from bosses who build authority by exploiting knowledge gaps and deploying winks to undercut opponents, she might be better served arranging them with care, routing atmospheres of apprehension into interscalar plots. Plots are spatial and narrative geometries—as well as surreptitious schemes—while atmospheres are events that "[do] not yet have . . . form" (Stewart 2011, 447). If here the atmospheric surround presses down as a dense assembly of *what ifs*, then rumors lift those *what ifs* into

storylines. They give direction to suspicion, pointing toward whoever's been behind things all along.

PRELUDE TO A PROXY WAR

I will turn to direction soon, but first the plot demands some exposition. Rumors about the Project began in 2009, when a New York–based company, Energy Answers (EA), arrived in Baltimore. To strengthen their permit application with the state, EA sought support from three neighborhood associations. Such associations are the official nodes of local power: they are the first point of contact for developers hoping to reach "the community," and they often claim to be the voice of that community, warranted or not. On the south side of the city, they have historically run interference between residents and industry, and extracted meager benefits from businesses when possible. Though these groups hold little regulatory sway, the permit process stands as one exception. A project with "local support" will have an easier time moving through, especially for an overburdened neighborhood. In a world where their voices are more often rendered mute by corporate subterfuge, locals guard this privilege jealously. And corporations—seeking local influence sans legal entailments—covet it.

When EA first sought this coveted support, the associations were led by middle-aged white homeowners who lorded over the tensely multiracial region. Many felt "hostile" toward EA, as one participant in early talks recalled. The company promised a "clean," "green" operation, but locals doubted these assurances. Tapping into a deep-seated "culture of suspicion" toward outsiders of all kinds (Subramaniam 1999), association leaders lobbed questions at the CEO and unearthed what they could about the company. But many were gradually won over by EA's so-called transparency. Like when the CEO brought a group to tour his Massachusetts plant. Or when EA negotiated a benefits agreement that included money for association projects.

In contrast to opacity and the conspiracy theories it sometimes breeds, the modernist ideal of a transparent social world is one where decisions are "arrived at openly" for the benefit of a discerning public (West and Sanders 2003, 7). Opponents later lambasted negotiations as anything but that. (Recall Martha's shock that all this had "been going on behind our backs.") But association leaders describe them as a democratic process grounded in "solid information." One middle-aged white man, Michael, was impressed by the sheer mass of data that they got. While local companies remain infamously tight-lipped, "[EA] gave us an actual study showing what they were going to emit, how they were going to control it . . . .

And the report was like this," Michael said, separating his thumb and index finger by two inches. "It wasn't some cheapo-report—you know, twenty-five pages. It was a substantial document."

As association leaders gradually warmed to EA, those leaders rerouted reservations toward the plant's opponents. Before Martha and Nick, those opponents included environmental advocacy groups allied against the Project. Such groups are a major target of suspicion among longtime residents, sometimes more than industry, because of what I'm told are spurious intentions. These organizations may say they want to "help," but *actually* they want to build their reputations, spin out onetime projects for foundations, or profit from the neighborhood's hard luck. Like the NGOs Marina Welker (2009, 165) writes about in Indonesia, which villagers charge with "businessing" their community, non-profits here appear corrupt on arrival. That includes groups with extremely benign projects. Consider one group proposing to plant daffodils ("Daffodils? Are you out of your mind? But you can be sure somebody's getting paid.") and another hoping to research butterfly gardens ("I love butterflies—saw a gorgeous butterfly the other day . . . but no one needs a $40,000 study.").

If these charges seem absurd, remember that the histories of extraction, exposure, and evasion that give them grist are deadly serious. Even the most outlandish suspicions bespeak some truth about how power moves in late industrial Baltimore.

Come 2012, "the opposition" took on local form, when a multiracial group of local high school students mounted a robust campaign against the plant, with which I was aligned during my fieldwork. But association leaders remained wary. Many believed students were controlled by "carpetbaggers" such as Nick, their white mentor from a leftist group based a little further north in Baltimore. Beyond this, leaders' mistrust of student activists was also racialized: South Baltimore is a freshly integrated place where many whites code their Black neighbors as "outsiders" by default (Ahmann 2019). This, too, forms part of the atmosphere that envelops this place, where anti-Blackness constitutes a "total climate" (Sharpe 2016, 105), and where few whites believed that the Black youth leading the campaign had reason to care about the neighborhood or the capacity to organize themselves. Meanwhile, those neither Black nor white test the rubrics of belonging held by area old-timers—including Martha, an Asian woman adopted into a white family who moved to the neighborhood twenty years ago to join her Polish husband.

Figure 2. March to stop the incinerator. Photo by United Workers, December 2014.

Nor was it just white homeowners who harbored suspicion toward suspected outside forces—corporate, activist, or racialized. Students, their mentors, and their allies appeared equally distrustful. Nick explained that it was hard not to feel this way. As he shared one winter evening after a campaign meeting at the school, organizing against the plant was like "being in a twilight zone where we have tons of information and, somehow, we know nothing. Like I have virtually no insight into how most decisions have been made. That's the way I personally feel." He paused. He looked at me. "And that's not paranoia. It's just—we're really focused on stopping this [development], and we're looking for certainty where there probably is none."

Then, I heard Nick's comments as a sign of resignation. To lack certainty means to spend one's precious energies chasing leads into dead ends, working hard and getting nowhere. At least, that was what I thought. In retrospect, though, knowing one can never know for sure can prove quite useful. With that knowledge, people can put uncertainty to work, becoming "coeval" participants in its production (Maqsood 2019). Under these conditions, rumors might just grow into subversive speech—a hope that Ranajit Guha (1983), studying peasant rebellion, famously invested in the genre. To do so they would need to subvert the particular murk that serves the corporation, vested in cutting interscalar ties that carry interscalar obligations: precisely by reconstituting them.

Aligned with anthropologists who show how rumors help "constitute power relations they might appear only to describe" (Luna 2018, 65; see also Samuels 2015), then, the remainder of this essay tracks the tactical effects of their inter-scalar movement. En route, note how uncertainty appears as a source of immense consternation—but also as the condition of possibility for power plays on both sides of the Project.

SILENT PARTNERS

Back to the library, side eyes darting toward our table: Martha laid out an interscalar case before she pointed toward the force behind the action. That came with buzz fifteen, when she alleged that the plant was "really" owned by a global player in the waste-to-energy sector that I'll call Energon. I had known Martha for a couple years by then, since we first crossed paths at a campaign meeting in 2014, and much of our collective time had been spent puzzling over how the Project was still kicking after years of setbacks. At last, she believed that she had found the answer. There was *just no other explanation*. Energy Answers had three measly employees, two of whom were a father and his son. It had been five years since EA received permits from the state, and two years since opponents raised a stink that spooked away investors. By the time Martha started "digging," the Project had no known financing. Yet somehow, the company held on. Nick—who was with me in the library that day—also suggested Energon might be a silent partner, and I agreed that something fishy seemed afoot. But no one really knew, and no one had an explanation for the secrecy. Just a feeling something bigger must be going on.

There were many reasons to suspect "something bigger," beginning with the labor of obtaining basic information about the plant. Opponents' first brush with this opacity happened in 2013, when students requested a health-impact assessment for the Project. The city denied their request because, by then, "decision-making processes" had "already occurred." It was impossibly vague language: the first of countless trapdoors into what Nick had called the "twilight zone," where every answer grew the feeling of not knowing. Occurred among whom—state, city, community? What processes?

When I began attending campaign meetings the next year as an observant participant in organizing efforts, tasked with research support that could historicize campaign demands, activists understood one "whom" to have been Michael, from the neighborhood association. But many questions remained. So youth and their allies got to work, studying the company's lease and tracking down its contracts. The latter search unearthed a network that bound EA to twenty-two public

entities who had agreed to purchase power, which inspired a campaign to move the key decision-makers, which required the maddening work of sussing out which actors at what entities held sway. As Nick then said: "There's a lot of secret—I'll just say it's not a simple task securing facts about this project."

By mid-2015, opponents had achieved the unlikeliest of feats: all twenty-two entities pulled out, leaving EA's financing in peril. But EA still had plans to build, which was why the group suspected Energon. While EA had a few employees and limited operations, Energon owned incinerators all over the world, boasting more than a billion dollars in yearly revenue. Originally a holding company, Energon spent decades consuming random ventures before focusing on "waste-to-energy" technology. Waste-to-energy is premised on its own promises of secrecy and revelation: as boosters have it, these plants disappear trash into furnaces that burn away excess matter, until all that remains is latent value, which can be transmuted into power and then realized as corporate profit (Ahmann 2019).[6] No matter that their emissions harm both human and climatic health; supporters claim these impacts are uncertain. Since acquiring its first plant in the 1980s, Energon had become a global industry controlling an economy of scale. They could probably keep themselves afloat during a dry spell, opponents theorized, in ways EA could not.

Figure 3. Proposed site of the Fairfield Renewable Energy Project.
Photo by Chloe Ahmann, July 2015.

Figure 4. Park built in the shadow of coal mountains. Photo by Chloe Ahmann, June 2016.

When Nick first broached this with me, he did it in that mode of performative self-censorship I encountered earlier: suggestion, pause, coda ("I'll just say . . ."). It was a sticky-hot September day, and we were on a toxic tour around South Baltimore. Two young activists were showing students through a few key landmarks, beginning at their school, continuing to the Project site, moving past a park dwarfed by coal mountains, and ending at the community garden. Nick and I were already near the edge of the pack as we moved toward the site, lingering to document potential signs of building, when he dropped his voice. "You know, it's hard to say how they're doing anything without those [energy] deals. Because we believe they have no other deals in place. So——" He stopped, looked away, and then stuffed both hands in his pockets. Nick waited while a large truck clamored by, and then continued, "There's talk they might be backed by a much larger operation——that's how they're still alive with all these snags." Before I could inquire who, he rushed to rejoin students near the front.

The wink in Nick's evasions reminded me of what I had long observed in industry: pleasure in the power of withholding. Nick both teased a theory bosses would dismiss as paranoid *and* adopted bosses' slippery talk. He planted an idea that would be pivotal if true without committing to the claim, preserving a "backdoor out of speaking" (Perice 1997, 4), like the one Nigel took when I inquired about emissions. Indeed, despite hints that privileged information was

forthcoming—shifty eyes, a quiet tone—I walked away with none. Perhaps he read me the way that Nigel read most residents, as highly "suggestible" regarding the unknown, and wanted to point that penchant somewhere useful. Perhaps he was adopting circumventions typically reserved for managers, as a show of his proximity to knowledge. Perhaps he was simply being careful as he gauged my interest in a tricky research task. Whatever his intentions, he left me wanting to know more. While Nigel invoked rumor to cut relations and assuage inquiring minds, Nick used it to intimate the presence of a devious someone.

I did not get to follow up with Nick that day about the "larger operation" thought to be behind the veil, but the next few weeks would bring the answer—Energon—alongside speculation on what "deep pockets" might explain. Such as why the Project got sweetheart treatment from the state. Or why the neighborhood associations supported it. Or where some curious campaign donations emanated from. Martha followed all these leads, and her texts attempted to account for this diffuse potential network, starting with the head of the state environmental agency. She had confirmed that Secretary Johnson had ties to a law school in D.C. that was a member of a national conservation network—along with Arizona, with Maryland, with a lobbying firm linked to EA, and, yes, with Energon. And *wasn't it strange* that Johnson had only been in Arizona for a single year, before resigning, and before that network came into existence? "He may have even left [Arizona] to build the [network]," Martha typed, before later "popping up in Maryland."

And if that's right, she escalated, "that would put him in considerable contact with Energon, and he would've become familiar with their project list." Perhaps more than familiar. If Energon were "responsible" for Johnson's role at the MDE, "he may be indebted" to them. *And if he were*, then he might have planted people on the Community Advisory Task Force (CATF), a shadowy group opponents called "the Catfish." Years ago, the Catfish had broadcast "community support" for the incinerator. But no one knew who from the community served on it.

To be sure, Martha's conclusions rested on some giant leaps of faith, and she knew some neighbors thought she was hysterical. She knew that rumors about rumors and the characters who spread them suffused local talk. They coursed through the neighborhood associations, whom Martha ragged for claiming transparency while dealing underneath the table, and through the legislature, where she felt the campaign was portrayed as "fringe" and students as "brainwashed." But Martha also knew that she had done her homework and there was something right about the ties that she had traced between these far-flung agents. Each link gave form to hidden interests that have long structured power in South Baltimore.

Scene by scene and relation by relation, the incinerator grew from a local land-use issue to a pet project for the state to a test case for the industry's revival—orchestrated by a parent company with a stake in disavowing these connections. And then things started to make sense. Incineration had been sputtering for years domestically, a distant second to the Great American Landfill. But if it could win in Maryland, then Energon sure stood to gain a lot.

It matters that Nick and Martha did more than accumulate these clues. They organized fragmented information into complex schemes, binding problems "usually kept apart" (Hecht 2018, 115). This is one capacity of interscalar stories: they traverse scales to show what each reveals or hides, kicking matters back and forth to do political work. They make something of the lines between the dots. In Hecht's (2018, 129) work on stories proffered by irradiated miners in Gabon, those lines surpassed the local, "a scale that worked to dismiss them as . . . parochial," and the national, as miners knew not to expect redress from the state. Instead, they pointed blame at corporate actors whose interests lay beyond the continent. We can glimpse a similar politics taking form in Nick's and Martha's rumors, which scaled the Project up, up, up, and away, stopping only when they met a shadowy outside. Why? Because in their interscalar movement, these rumors expressed a social truth about living in a site of persistent extraction. No density of horizontal ties could pull that off.

Classic sources teach that rumor and conspiracy, as linked discursive modes, participate in "a texting of everyday life where everything is connected and the connections are uncanny" (Stewart 1999, 16). They process uncertainty by scanning "the realm of the concrete" for signs until there are enough to constitute a plot (Stewart 1999, 17). If enough is a question of mass, then one might find the answer on a single plane, resonating with associations. But if enough is a question of kind, then in this late industrial site, numbers cannot get a rumor up to snuff.

Rather, if rumors of a proxy war are any indication, a good plot takes you on a journey. With Nick and Martha as my guides, I studiously followed. Through the rumors that Nick spread, what at first seemed like a tired feud between jobs and the environment waged by next-door neighbors ballooned into a proving ground for U.S.-based incineration whose success could translate into billion-dollar markets. Through the rumors Martha spread, any claims that South Baltimoreans supported the incinerator could be attributed to someone else's agency. *There was just no other explanation.* The Catfish had been irredeemably co-opted. And with it, that final site of local power—that symbolic right to throw one's weight behind a plan—had been subsumed into the corporation. Unless one could expose these

shrewd ventriloquists. So it was that, through the rumors this group spread, it became clear that only one group was really speaking for the neighborhood. No small wonder *that* group included Nick and Martha.

FOLLOW THE MONEY

"Well, I heard the opposition got a grant." Fran, an older resident and one of the Project's early boosters, shook her head. "I'm telling you, somebody always does." It was a blustery March night in 2016 at a recreation center by the coal piers ("the rec"), where we waited for a neighborhood association meeting. The two of us were always early. We did not like to miss a beat. Fran was nosy by constitution, and I was nosy by profession, so we gravitated toward each other. This despite our differences: though we were both white, I was in my twenties and Fran her seventies; I hailed from the sort of highfalutin institution she liked to rail against; and we had very, very, very different politics. But I was also a ready ear for Fran's stories, and she had a lot to say. Most involved whispers about crime that people liked to make her business. ("The neighbors wave me down . . .") The other half involved rumors about grants flowing into outsiders' pockets without improving the community. Recall this was a common plotline in South Baltimore. A lavender planting initiative, a playground restoration, a skate park, a library—and the butterflies, again—were all run by allegedly bad actors who had turned a dime broadcasting local problems. It all seemed awfully paranoid until I recalled I had a grant. And if it ever transformed into a job, I would be living proof there was a *there* there, as Fran already knew there was.

If Fran had reservations about me, though, she didn't raise them to my face. She made me feel special—even chosen—as I suspect she did with every audience. In any case, there we were, too early not to dip into a story. Fran's eyes darted, making sure we were alone. Satisfied, she disclosed that the campaign against the incinerator, on the docket for that evening's meeting, had nefarious intentions. The whole thing was a ruse designed to generate grant funds. She knew because she had been there years ago when the associations first debated the proposal. They had done their research, spoken to EA, and ultimately voted to support the Project. Though the campaign against the plant was ostensibly led by local youth, none had spoken up back then: just a few environmental groups from out of town, and one big name in landfilling; let's call them Geosystems.

"Strange bedfellows," I replied.

"You're a researcher," Fran poked. "Follow the money."

That Geosystems would side with environmentalists—including those who advocated "zero waste," a movement to end the burning and burying of trash—on anything seemed weird enough to make some people wary. For if Energon dominated waste-to-energy, then Geosystems ruled the waste industry writ large. With 300 transfer stations, as many active landfills, and 21 million customers in North America alone, there was no bigger corporate obstacle to achieving zero waste. But Geosystems did have an interest in keeping competitors' methods, like incineration, small. That led some to suspect a secret partnership aligned against EA, accounting for the dazzling rise of opposition to the plant. In Fran's eyes, student activists appeared from nowhere. She wanted to know "how" and "why," and she presumed there was a "who" providing funds. It was not a terrible stretch to guess the well-heeled who might be a business rival. *And if they were*, it made sense to point to one with experience in the dirty work of covering things up.

Much as for the other side, suspicions of a cover-up stemmed from a sense of implacable uncertainty, and a hunch that clarity lay just beneath the surface. Unlike Nick and Martha, though, supporters did not feel particularly perplexed by the processes behind the Project. On the contrary, Michael explained when he joined us at the rec, claims about collusion were "excited," and he warned me not to get seduced into the same—a move I registered as an attempt to shift my own affinities, for my alignment with the campaign was no secret, and my one-day book would presumably reflect that predilection. The drier "truth," Michael continued, was that EA marked a departure from the status quo, where industries conspired in secret to secure stakeholder profits. "EA didn't need us, OK? They could have railroaded the whole thing through. . . . But they took the step to get involved with the community, and we set up a process." What did strike Michael as opaque were the power structures of "the opposition," and why young activists declined to join them "at the table." Earlier that year, EA had invited students to hash out differences, but they refused to come. Students narrated this as a principled refusal to negotiate with a company that "doesn't care about our lives," but Michael did not buy it: "Why wouldn't they want to show up and make their case?" He paused. "It seems to me they're not a homegrown group."

Michael thought it far more plausible that students were the charismatic faces of a corporate assassination run covertly thorough the grant economy.

While Martha had been fixated on Secretary Johnson's network, then for Michael, Fran, and their allies, Nick was the suspected conduit. He was a paid organizer with a Baltimore-based group that did indeed rely on grant support. Rumor had it he had "slithered" into the school to "take advantage" of impressionable kids,

who he had then "used" to "spread untruths" about the Project. I heard versions of this rumor from several residents, but also from formal power bearers linked to the associations: from the region's city councilman (a suspected member of the Catfish) and from EA's CEO, a silver-bearded man who leaned into my recorder to confirm "the opposition" was an act of "sabotage." "I can point to [Nick] and say he knows he's lying," the CEO insisted. "He has to [lie] . . . . Consider who is funding these opponents." I awaited information on the who with bated breath, but the businessman trailed off.

I met the CEO on site a month before the meeting at the rec. He was in town a lot that year, trying desperately to save the troubled project. Among other things, he hoped to set the opposition straight after they had spread "bad information." He meant that all they had really spread were rumors, and we know how corporations treat this kind of talk. I presume it is because they would not meet with him that the CEO agreed to pitch the plant to me, then a graduate student, over three long hours. It was a duration meant to demonstrate transparency, made forceful by his glut of evidence. With diagrams, data, MOUs (memorandums of understanding), and more, the CEO made one message eminently clear: EA had nothing to hide. The second message was that no one could match this man's sincerity. As he eventually revealed—drawing an interscalar scheme that mirrored Martha's texts—his opponents were supported by dark money. Someone told him Geosystems earmarked 5 million dollars for defeating his proposal, funneled through "a woman PR person" whose spouse worked for the state. "Think about it, Chloe. Who benefits if we aren't built?"

Then he leaned back in his chair and bent his arms across his chest. "There's a whole story. There's stories to the pieces of the story . . . and if you want to hear the half of it," he nodded toward my recorder, "then you'll need to turn that off."

I cannot tell you what happened after that, but we have enough to say that leaps of faith were leaps of scale here, too. Each leap directed intention away from high school activists, diminishing that group into a front: a front for Nick's sly machinations on behalf of a leftist crew downtown, supported by a dubious state grant, working to advance the landfill industry's agenda, embodied in Geosystems, a giant in the waste world poised to lose its corner on the market. *There was just no other explanation.* It could not possibly be that youth worried about the plant's emissions or were otherwise politically engaged. They must be players in somebody else's game. And I should be wary of anything they told me because someone, somewhere, had been "indoctrinating" them.

Figure 5. Nothing to hide. Photo by Chloe Ahmann, February 2016.

Leaps of faith and leaps of scale: all this leaping left me in a muddle. I had found myself an interscalar vehicle, but with tinted windows and inscrutable chauffeurs. The more we moved, the less I sensed that we were inching toward the truth. For all their talk of revelation, these rumors had produced the opposite. As Ammara Maqsood writes, rumors arise in contexts of uncertainty, and they contribute to that uncertainty. They foment "confusion about whom to believe and whom to trust" (Maqsood 2019, 471). *And if that's right*, then anyone who knows that rumors have this strange capacity might choose to take advantage. *And if they did*, imagine the dizzying paths they might construct.

What happens when rumors become the anchors in our "centrifugal" stories (Hecht 2018)? If whispers can be interscalar vehicles, do they teach us the same lessons as irradiated rocks? No. Hecht is right that many things can help lift scholars across scales, but that insight opens other questions: about the specific

affordances of specific guiding objects. Rumors here give form to the dynamic fact (Keller 1995) that corporate power weasels into every cranny and that doubt can prove useful to whoever wields it. They may therefore grant more insight into the power that inheres in cutting and reconstituting ties—in crafting and dissembling veils—than who exactly stands behind the curtain. By the same token, they risk any reasonable hope that the ethnographer who follows them will meet with something solid. Rumors do not pave a path toward final truth; they only promise its arduous pursuit. They build compelling stories in confusing worlds that make skilled use of disjointed information. And that may be among the truest things that one can learn about how power works in late industrial Baltimore.

But someone trained in the hermeneutics of suspicion might miss this slight distinction on her way toward a crowning explanation. She might find a truth that ends without an "aha!" moment rather hard to parse. How peculiar that suspicion could make a listener "so trusting about the effects of exposure," Eve Sedgwick (2003, 139) once teased, pointing toward the paranoid habits of most theorists. Who better a pawn in the knowledge games of whisperers, she might have added, than a meddling ethnographer?

UNCERTAINTY IN MOTION

Four months after Martha's texts and forty minutes after Fran's disclosures, I found myself in a kind of denouement. Parties from both sides squeezed into the rec. On one end, EA leaders sat with Fran and other Project allies. On the other, activists wore homemade T-shirts with slogans like "Incinerators Burn Me Up." In the middle, Michael gripped an air horn that he threatened to use if things got rowdy—which they did, so he did. Also in the room? Through their proxies, apparently: Geosystems and Energon.

It was, in many ways, a scene that anthropologists long for—a moment of "conspiratorial finality" when everything becomes visible and things fall into place, when one gets past the curtain toward the real (Jackson 2005, 108). Except the whole thing looked bizarre with curtains drawn. While the room rang with familiar accusations, they sounded in an unfamiliar register. Instead of whispers, there were shouts. Instead of adventure, acrimony. Instead of intimation, confrontation.

Where had all the pleasure gone?

I thought of Nigel, who took pleasure in withholding information, who cut ties and spurned suspicions to bolster the corporation. I thought of neighbors who had baited me with winks into a search for corporate partners where it now seemed there might be none. Sitting there, it dawned on me, belatedly, that the

seduction of their stories came squarely in the bait and search for hidden truth. Not from truth in its finality but from the frenzied movement toward it. Not from cutting ties but from their lively reconnection—and from how old dynamics got inverted in the process. Against facile corporate claims that local speech is only rumor and that rumor is not properly political, neighbors implicated absent corporations in a tense battle over local voice, marshaling rumors as strategic speech in a struggle playing out among subalterns. That the CEO ultimately tried discrediting opponents by linking them to Geosystems reveals how much they succeeded in this shift. This boss had dropped the classic game of cutting ties and crying paranoia to render critics inarticulate, instead charging activists with *proximity to corporate interests* in a last-ditch attempt to muzzle them.

It matters that rumors turned the tables through their movement, a persuasive force that deflated when they met a final destination. They worked as mobile practices, not static objects. While classic studies teach that rumors can be rich stores of metaphoric insight and, in mass, affective resonance, what I learned trailing rumors of a proxy war was the power of the journey. These whispers worked by plotting signs onto interscalar story lines that pit each whisperer against the world. The only limit to how far someone can chase a story is her own imagination. And until that moment in the rec, it seemed that it was my imagination folks were counting on.

Because here—in this atmosphere of ambient uncertainty, where power differentials are always knowledge differentials and one can never really know for sure—everybody seemed to take some pleasure in the chase. They sent me, a "highly suggestive" ethnographer, chasing rumors up, down, around, and back again, toward everywhere and nowhere, all at once. When I tried to read these rumors for their meaning, their lesson seemed to be that power lay outside this place: that every local actor spoke in someone else's voice, and I went searching for the speaker. (Who's catfishing who?) But when I began to read these rumors for their movement, it seemed that something else entirely was going on.

This is a case of ethnographer as punch line, not as prodigy—as sucker, not as wiseman—kept outside a world *through* access to its "secrets" (contra Geertz 1973). I fell into that role precisely because my clumsy search for meaning had been premised on an "old dichotomy," wherein informants "believe" and researchers "know" better (Samuels 2015, 237). This split invites researchers to track how knowledge works while disavowing the "trickster" work it sometimes does on us (Maqsood 2019, 470). The red herrings left out for the "spy" who seeks to pin down truth, the minor pleasure in subverting my authority to represent: in a zone

of longue durée extraction, these, too, are plays in the battle of who-gets-to-speak-for-us. Beneath the disavowal of these plays lies an anxiety John Jackson describes as endemic to ethnographic research, the fear we might confuse the real for the unreal. Hence the draw of rumors, which would seem to promise anthropologists "some of the fastest routes into the inner structure of the real" (Jackson 2005, 205). And hence rumors' incomparable capacity to enroll listeners into schemes without their knowing—especially the knowledge-seeking ones.

In the end, it seems the rumors locals spread did not pass their power off to outside forces. What happened here was quite the opposite. Fran used Geosystems and its diffuse potential network to build a plot that undercut the other side and served her power. Martha did the same with Energon. It is true these rumors operated as critiques of other people's agency, a capacity that anthropologists have long perceived in rumors. But they also put that agency to work to jockey for control over the Project. The nature of that work—the work of drawing power in—depended on these rumors' interscalar movement. A bunch of dots can make an atmosphere, but if you want to set uncertainty in motion, you'll need the lines. And it helps to have a wide-eyed anthropologist to follow them.

ABSTRACT

Until 2016, South Baltimoreans debated a proposed incinerator. Those debates were manifestly about local land use, but rumors spread that something else was really going on. Opponents supposed the plant was secretly owned by a power player in the waste-to-energy sector; supporters swore opponents must be bankrolled by Big Land-fill. In short: a waste-industry proxy war was brewing in South Baltimore. I follow these rumors and argue that their persuasive power grew as they darted up, down, and back, forging a politics of connection across scales that made skilled use of frag-mented information. On both sides of the issue, talk of outside influence worked to vest some voices with more authority than others. Tracking these claims across scales and through allegedly bad relations—in a place where corporations strive to disavow connections of all kinds and consign local knowledge to the realm of mere suspi-cion—I show how rumors of a proxy war became tools for mapping ambiguous forces long at play in this environment. More, by wielding doubt to do subversive work, rumors managed to draw local power from them. [rumor; uncertainty; interscalar; authority; late industrialism; waste; United States; ethnographic knowledge]

1. I use pseudonyms throughout.
2. Compare Peter Benson (2004, 459), who writes of one rumor shared from the decentralized terrain of "post-war" Guatemala: "[It] does not 'refer' to decentralization. It literally decentralizes—agency, subjectivity, and blame."
3. "The Greek Lexicon defines 'an anthropologist' not as . . . a 'student of man,' but only as 'a scandalmonger'" (Gluckman 1963, 314).
4. *United States v. Bestfoods*, 524 US 51 (1998).
5. According to a 2012 study by the Environmental Integrity Project, residents suffer high rates of heart disease, lung cancer, asthma, COPD, and other illnesses with ties to air pollution.
6. In this sense, incinerators are particularly high-modern instantiations of the dynamics that underwrite waste management in general—which "makes things disappear by moving them elsewhere and . . . is considered most successful to the extent its . . . flows remain invisible" (Reno 2015, 561).

REFERENCES

Agard-Jones, Vanessa
    2013   "Bodies in the System." *Small Axe* 17, no. 3: 182–92. https://doi.org/10.1215/07990537-2378991

Ahmann, Chloe
    2018   "'It's Exhausting to Create an Event Out of Nothing': Slow Violence and the Manipulation of Time." *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 1: 142–71. https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.1.06
    2019   "Waste to Energy: Garbage Prospects and Subjunctive Politics in Late-Industrial Baltimore." *American Ethnologist* 46, no. 3: 328–42. https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12792
    2020   "Atmospheric Coalitions: Shifting the Middle in Late Industrial Baltimore." *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society* 6: 462–85. https://doi.org/10.17351/ests2020.421
    Forthcoming   *Futures after Progress: Hope and Doubt in Late Industrial Baltimore*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ahmann, Chloe, and Alison Kenner
    2020   "Breathing Late Industrialism." *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society* 6: 416–38. https://doi.org/10.17351/ests2020.673

Ahmed, Sara
    2010   *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Anderson, Ben
    2009   "Affective Atmospheres." *Emotion, Space, and Society* 2, no. 2: 77–81. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2009.08.005

Asad, Talal
    1993   *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Auyero, Javier, and Débora Swistun
    2008   "The Social Production of Toxic Uncertainty." *American Sociological Review* 73, no. 3: 357–79. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25472533

Benson, Peter
  2004   "Nothing to See Hear." *Anthropological Quarterly* 77, no. 3: 435–67. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3318229
Benson, Peter, and Stuart Kirsch
  2010   "Capitalism and the Politics of Resignation." *Current Anthropology* 51, no. 4: 459–86. https://doi.org/10.1086/653091
Carr, E. Summerson, and Michael Lempert, eds.
  2016   *Scale: Discourse and Dimensions of Social Life*. Oakland: University of California Press.
Das, Veena
  1998   "Specificities: Official Narratives, Rumor, and the Social Production of Hate." *Social Identities* 4, no. 1: 109–30. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504639851915
Derrida, Jacques
  1982 [1972]   *Margins of Philosophy*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Fortun, Kim
  2014   "From Latour to Late Industrialism." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4, no. 1: 309–29. https://doi.org/10.14318/hau4.1.017
Freud, Sigmund
  2003 [1919]   "The Uncanny." In *The Uncanny*, translated by David McLintock, 123–62. London: Penguin.
Geertz, Clifford
  1973   "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight." In *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, 412–53. New York: Basic Books.
Gluckman, Max
  1963   "Gossip and Scandal." *Current Anthropology* 4, no. 3: 307–16. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2739613
Guha, Ranajit
  1983   *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
Hecht, Gabrielle
  2018   "Interscalar Vehicles for an African Anthropocene: On Waste, Temporality, and Violence." *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 1: 109–41. https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.1.05
Hofstadter, Richard
  1964   "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." *Harper's Magazine*, November.
Jackson, John L., Jr.
  2005   *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Johnson, Alix
  2023   "I have no proof, but . . . ." *American Anthropologist* 125: 629–632. https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13891
Jones, Graham M.
  2014   "Secrecy." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43: 53–69. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102313-030058
Keller, Evelyn Fox
  1995 [1985]   "Dynamic Objectivity: Love, Power, and Knowledge." In *Reflections on Gender and Science*, 115–26. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
Lefebvre, Georges
  1973 [1932]   *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France*. Translated by Joan White. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
Lepselter, Susan
  2016   *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
Liboiron, Max
  2021   *Pollution Is Colonialism*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Luna, Sarah
    2018   "Affective Atmospheres of Terror on the Mexico–U.S. Border: Rumors of Violence in Reynosa's Prostitution Zone." *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 1: 58–84. https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.1.03

Maqsood, Ammara
    2019   "The Social Life of Rumors: Uncertainty in Everyday Encounters between the Military, Taliban, and Tribal Pashtun in Pakistan." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 39, no. 3: 462–74. https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-7885414

Marcus, George E., ed.
    1999   *Paranoia within Reason: A Casebook on Conspiracy as Explanation.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Masco, Joseph
    2006   *The Nuclear Borderlands: The Manhattan Project in Post–Cold War New Mexico.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Meehan, Valerie
    1989   "Two Arrested in Alleged Illegal Chemical Weapons Shipments." *Associated Press,* January 30.

Murphy, M.
    2006   *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty: Environmental Politics, Technoscience, and Women Workers.* Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
    2008   "Chemical Regimes of Living." *Environmental History* 13, no. 4: 695–703. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25473297

Oreskes, Naomi, and Erik Conway
    2010   *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming.* New York: Bloomsbury Press.

Perice, Glen A.
    1997   "Rumors and Politics in Haiti." *Anthropological Quarterly* 70, no. 1: 1–10. https://doi.org/10.2307/3317797

Reno, Joshua
    2015   "Waste and Waste Management." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44: 557–72. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102214-014146

Samuels, Annemarie
    2015   "Narratives of Uncertainty: The Affective Force of Child-Trafficking Rumors in Postdisaster Aceh, Indonesia." *American Anthropologist* 117, no. 2: 229–41. https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.12226

Sanders, Todd, and Harry G. West
    2003   "Power Revealed and Concealed in the New World Order." In *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order*, edited by Harry G. West and Todd Sanders, 1–37. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Sawyer, Suzana
    2006   "Disabling Corporate Sovereignty in a Transnational Lawsuit." *PoLAR* 29, no. 1: 23–43. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24497541

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky
    2003   *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity.* Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Sharpe, Christina
    2016   *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being.* Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Spivak, Gayatri
    1988   "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271–313. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Stewart, Kathleen
    1999   "Conspiracy Theory's Worlds." In *Paranoia within Reason: A Casebook on Conspiracy as Explanation,* edited by George E. Marcus, 13–19. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
    2011   "Atmospheric Attunements." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, no. 3: 445–53. https://doi.org/10.1068/d9109

Subramaniam, Radhika
    1999   "Culture of Suspicion: Riots and Rumor in Bombay, 1992–1993." *Transforming Anthropology* 8, no. 1/2: 97–110. https://doi.org/10.1525/tran.1999.8.1-2.97

Taussig, Michael T.
    1986   *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Welker, Marina A.
    2009   "'Corporate Security Begins in the Community': Mining, the Corporate Social Responsibility Industry, and Environmental Advocacy in Indonesia." *Cultural Anthropology* 24, no. 1: 142–79. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2009.00029.x

West, Harry G., and Todd Sanders, eds.
    2003   *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order.* Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

White, Luise
    2000   *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa.* Berkeley: University of California Press.