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Fighting to breathe: race, toxicity, and the rise of youth activism in Baltimore

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Fighting to breathe: race, toxicity, and the rise of youth activism in Baltimore**, by Nicole Fabricant, Oakland, University of California Press, 2023, xxviii+229pp., \$29.95 (paperback), ISBN 9780520379329

*Fighting to Breathe* by Nicole Fabricant is an important book that everyone should read. The title of the book draws connections between racism, police violence, and air pollution. In recent years, the phrase “I can’t breathe” has been chanted at protests after individuals who were in police custody pleaded that they could not breathe but were killed anyway. Fabricant points out that this phrase has a longer history, as environmental activism by and in solidarity with people of colour has protested the ways that exposure to toxic substances causes asthma and other health effects. Fabricant advocates that readers learn to see the invisible structures and policies that result in pollution, and to understand the resulting harm as historically created and therefore preventable. Indeed, the book’s project is to document environmental activism on the part of high school students in South Baltimore, focusing on “how the cumulative impacts of layers of environmental injustices motivate youth to engage in political struggle” (7).

*Fighting to Breathe* is based on Fabricant’s participation in the 2011–2021 environmental activism carried out by high school students who were part of a South Baltimore Peninsula educational programme called “Free Your Voice.” Fabricant became part of this work when students approached her university, seeking out experts who could support them in their studies, research and activism. She also carried out 71 interviews with students, activists, and allies. In a discussion of her own positionality, Fabricant stresses that she is first-and-foremost an organizer, so the book reflects her experience as a scholar-activist who carried out “observant-participation.” The vivid account of protest strategies and the use of individual stories make for compelling reading.

Fabricant makes two key points in *Fighting to Breathe*. First, she points out “environmental toxicity as yet another form of state-sanctioned violence” (2) for which there is little accountability. For Fabricant, toxicity encompasses both physical poisons and the political corruption that allows such poisons to be distributed. She defines “environmental toxicity” as consisting of “historic patterns of pollution, exposure, contamination, and chemical explosions. This violence is not accidental but rather deeply embedded in historically established systems and structures” (3). The claim that such violence is historically created rather than accidental leads to her second key point, namely, that it can be challenged, including by relatively powerless groups, such as high school students in minoritized neighbourhoods where pollution is widespread. In fact, she stresses, young people’s commitment, energy, and creativity is a source of hope in the face of entrenched

structures of oppression. She insists that “youth education and social reproduction can contribute to building more sustainable and just futures in a moment of radical ecological, climactic, and public health crises” (13).

The book’s structure follows key moments in students’ environmental campaigns. Chapter 1 presents historical background to describe how industrial development and institutional neglect produced intergenerational toxic trauma. But on a more hopeful note, this chapter also details the forms of mutual aid that enabled residents to survive despite contamination, racist hiring practices, and unfair housing policies. Chapter 2 recounts the extraordinary story of how the Free Your Voice programme formed when a Paulo-Freire-style of “problem-posing education” was implemented at the local high school. Participants began exploring their own neighbourhood, ultimately testing soils for heavy metals, creating maps of vacant homes, collecting oral histories from older residents, consulting with experts, and leading toxic tours of their neighbourhoods. Through such practices, “students in Free Your Voice became ethnographers of their own communities” (59). Chapter 3 examines the successful Stop the Incinerator campaign waged by Free Your Voice students. In this campaign, they employed a form of storytelling and artwork known as a crankie, they engaged public officials, and they practiced civil disobedience. It is impressive that high school students creatively combined art and politics in this campaign. But, they did not stop there. Chapter 4 tells the story of their successful efforts to create community land trusts in order to promote affordable housing, establish community gardens, counter gentrification, and exert more control over development in their neighbourhoods. Chapter 5 tackles the last campaign that is the subject of the book, namely, an effort to promote “Zero Waste” in order to starve local incinerators. This chapter also introduces the theme of tensions between allied groups, pointing out that such conflicts hurt this campaign, changing the goal from eliminating waste to minimizing it. The conclusion and a post-script address the value of activist scholarship.


I have a few minor criticisms of and unanswered questions about *Fighting to Breathe*. Even though Fabricant pays attention to tensions between groups, it seemed that the student activists were idealized, though this portrayal is perhaps deserved given that the students took on such ambitious and extraordinary projects. I wondered how other students in the high school viewed the Free Your Voice programme and participants. Such information would further contextualize these students’ work and help to explain the various senses in which it was transformative. Fabricant presents a strong critique of academic work, sometimes allowing jargon, such as the “neoliberal university” to substitute for analysis. I’m not convinced that academic work should be dismissed so easily, given the creative and politically engaged work carried out by many who publish in academic journals. Lastly, I wondered what enabled Free Your Voice to be founded now? What accounts for its success?

Overall, I found *Fighting to Breathe* to be both eye-opening and inspiring. This book is appropriate to assign in courses on environmental racism, engaged research, and student activism, as it shows how students can devise projects and interventions regarding issues that they care about. The book shows how

environmental injustice, structural racism, and lack of affordable housing are integrated, but it is also hopeful in recounting how high school students of colour challenged these forms of oppression.

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