Foreword

Laura A. Ogden

This is a book that offers a way for us to think about cities and their social, political, and ecological complexity, as well as a work that charts a path toward the possibility of more sustainable cities in the future. Social theorists have thought long and hard about the ways cities are utterly distinct even while they are emerging and changing through their connections with other places. For example, Raymond Williams in his 1973 classic, *The Country and the City*, shows how the “country” and the “city” come into being as contingent forms of social life during the transition to capitalism in Europe. At the end of the book, Williams argues that cities are the catalyst for an emerging international economic system, an argument that anticipates contemporary theorists, such as Saskia Sassen, who offer compelling insights into the role of cities in the making of the global.

Yet the authors of *The Baltimore School of Urban Ecology* extend our understanding of cities considerably by treating cities as historically constituted social-ecological forms. At best, cities are sites characterized by shifting intensities—where beings, goods, and ideas saturate and reconfigure the boundaries between the social and the natural. *The Baltimore School* uses Baltimore, one of the most richly compelling cities in the United States, as a kind of productive template for the creation of ideas. These ideas help us understand the ways the city’s social and

ecological life are inseparable modes of existence, dynamically produced in space and time. In the process, J. Morgan Grove, Mary Cadenasso, Steward Pickett, Gary Machlis, and William R. Burch Jr. significantly transform the discipline of ecology. Their approach is necessarily interdisciplinary and experimental because cities challenge boundaries of all kinds.

On maps, city boundaries appear legible and discrete. Although this characteristic can be quite comforting, as we all know, cities resist this kind of containment. Spend time in Baltimore, and the fluidity of these boundaries becomes self-evident. In April, for example, chimney swifts settle in Baltimore after spending their winters in the Amazon. On the ground, bird lovers cluster together, their faces upturned in hopeful anticipation, as the swifts create soaring vortexes in the sky before exhaustedly roosting in Baltimore's abandoned smokestacks. Simultaneously, e-birders around the country monitor the swifts' arrival in Baltimore, an event that looks a lot like storm clouds when captured by satellite imagery. Swifts, often described as flying cigars, are less showy than the Baltimore oriole. Of course, sighting a Baltimore oriole actually *in* Baltimore itself would be an ornithological rarity. Yet the Baltimore oriole, like Poe's raven, permeates the city's iconographic landscape. These birds, too, traverse the globe, troubling the boundaries between city and country, the real and the imaginary, nature and society.

We can map other lines of flight as well. Each day thousands of federal workers commute to Washington, D.C., from Baltimore, reflecting the shifting geography of housing, labor, and governance. Conversely, about a third of the people working in Baltimore, at any given time, actually live in the suburbs. Yet, when you are in the suburbs, there is a good chance that the person working at the strip mall or restaurant has triumphed over the reverse commute. This means that life in the city, for people at least, is lived as routinized mobility. We often think of time spent in transit as lost time, life on the periphery of real living. But as the French anthropologist Marc Augé has shown us, traveling these transit routes is a practice of history and memory. Instead of life lost, the commute is life unfolding at the stop-and-go pace of a crowded bus line. Along the way, monuments to the city's collective history spark personal, individualized memories as well. As we pass, for instance,

Camden Street's Babe Ruth statue, we may recognize one of baseball's greatest players. Or we may wonder, if we do not know *his* history, why there is a statue of Babe Ruth in Baltimore anyway. In those same fleeting moments, as the bus rolls along, perhaps the memory of a childhood trip to a ball field floods our senses. On the commute, the past and the present intermingle in barely recognized flashes of illumination, all in the time it takes to glance up from the morning newspaper.

The city's boundary-defying network of commuting workers reflects the realities of Baltimore's post-industrial productivity as well as the political economy of urban housing markets. Once, the production of goods, particularly steel, tied Baltimore's ports and workers to the rest of the world. During this era, Frederick Douglass, the country's most famous abolitionist, worked as a child at the docks in Baltimore, a time he considered crucial to his political awakening. Douglass's coming-of-age occurred in Fell's Point, now an upscale neighborhood gentrified with restaurants, bars, and tree-lined row houses. A few miles from here stands Frederick Douglass High School, established in 1888 as one of the first integrated public high schools in the United States. In the short commute between these two sites, Douglass's message of racial and social equality has been muted by decades of uneven urban development. Urban development has effaced other forms of liberation as well. Hundreds of miles of streams are now hidden beneath the city's surface, forming a secret aquatic world. Occasionally, these streams erupt through the pavement, leading to collapses in the city's infrastructure. In other places, these streams quietly leave the city, sometimes carrying the city's detritus into Chesapeake Bay.

In this book, what we used to call *nature* is not just the environment, a mode of life separate from society. Instead, the Baltimore School insists on a research practice that seeks to understand urban *social-ecological relations* and *processes of change*, as opposed to an approach to studying ecology "in a city." Central to this approach is an examination of the messy social and ecological patchiness that characterizes the urban landscape. Although patchiness is a spatial and temporal lens, it is important to note that these scholars do not shy away from the political. Instead, patchiness becomes a prism for understanding the processes that create variation, including those leading to social and racial

inequality in Baltimore. While the authors focus on Baltimore, the work is an exemplar of patch dynamics in urban ecology more broadly.

Although this is a book of paradigm-shifting significance for those interested in urban ecology, the authors also insist that *understanding* cities is insufficient. Today, most of the world lives in cities. Urban living has become the norm for what it means to be human and, by extension, it has become the norm for other forms of life as well. For the past fifty years, this normalization of urban life has continued at an exponential pace around the globe, while rates of inequality for urban communities of all kinds (human and nonhuman) keep pace. This context motivates the Baltimore School's urgent commitment to use science to develop new visions for urban stewardship. Of equal importance, the school's science emerges out of long and careful collaborations with communities and activists who call Baltimore home. This is a book about Baltimore's past, present, and future, but its resonance reverberates to all the far-flung places we all call home.