Detroit Incinerator Closes—Eco-Apocalypse Continues

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Editor's Note

I had the pleasure of crossing paths with David Watson—writer, teacher, activist, and early member of Fifth Estate, a long-running anarchist mag out of Detroit, MI—in June 2017, when I attended a panel he organized on Detroit's multiple water crises for the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment. I was so inspired I ended up profiling that panel for Deceleration. On reading our coverage, he sent me back a couple of his own publications, and a correspondence between South Texas and Great Lakes bioregions began—including the essay below, originally published in the August 2019 issue of Fifth Estate. Watson's essay below is worth a slow, thoughtful read, particularly for its reminder that, for all the totalizing power of climate change, other ecological crises (of toxicity, of capitalist production and consumption) persist. But, just as crucially, so too does the creativity and ferocity of struggles for life-affirming forms of economic and social organization. So read a little each night…take your time. Much thanks to photographer Millard Berry for permission to use his beautiful b&w images.

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The news in March 2019 that, due to "financial and community concerns," the Detroit trash incinerator was to be closed was weirdly reminiscent of news back in the spring of 1986 that it was going to be built: It came as a surprise to almost everyone in the city. This time, obviously, it came as good news; people who had been working to shut it for decades naturally celebrated the closing as "a glorious day for the city and its residents," as Sandra Turner-Handy, a long-term environmental justice activist, member of the Michigan Environmental Council, co-supervisor of Zero Waste Detroit, put it. i

The City of Detroit began quietly planning what would become the world's largest municipal waste-to-energy trash incinerator in 1976; a decade later, a small item in the Detroit Free Press announced the last public hearing in Lansing, the state capital, to approve the project. It was to be built in the intersection of two expressways, just east of Wayne State University and the city Cultural Center, and about a mile from a central city neighborhood called the Cass Corridor, where the Fifth Estate office was located, and where most of the FE staff lived. In the spring of 1986, a handful of our neighbors, including an FE contributor, drove ninety miles up to the Michi-

gan Air Pollution Control Commission hearing to find out what was going on and to demand that a public hearing be held in Detroit.

What was going on was not difficult to discern, which was why a General Motors exec who sat on the commission of politicians, corporate bigwigs, and environment bureaucrats stated his opposition to the demand, arguing that it would "stir up the citizens"—which it did.

To the consternation of Detroit Mayor Coleman Young and his administration, the commission agreed to hold a hearing in the chambers of the City-County Building—a sop to the alarmed locals, since the outcome was not in question. Indeed, despite the raucous opposition of hundreds of residents, and an abundance of testimony stretching into the early hours of morning and documenting the ecological, technological, public health, and financial irregularities of the project, the commission voted 9-1 to approve construction.

Thus began for us, our neighbors, and our allies an odyssey of six years or so of intense, almost daily activism against the incinerator. First, we attempted to prevent the completion of what was called, depending on the day, "Coleman's Cathedral," and "the Beast." And then, when that failed, we tried to shut IT down. Ultimately, we failed on both counts, and it ran for over thirty years. ii

To many in our neighborhood, not just us radicals, the construction of a toxic garbage incinerator represented not only a direct threat in an inner-city environment already experiencing a surfeit of environmental threats, it was also acutely symbolic of the worldwide ecological crisis. As Paul Connett, one of a number of scientists who came to support our resistance, put it, the incinerator reflected a society "living as if there were no tomorrow—and making it come true."

Truly, it was hard not to see it as a metastatic moment in a bloated empire—the "Empire of Man," in the infelicitous words of Francis Bacon, one of the founders of modern science—suffocating on its own cravings and waste. This tragedy, this travesty, brought to mind the protests and prophecies of the native peoples who saw it all coming. It was demonstrably only "a single drop in a toxic bucket," as we soon wrote in the Fifth Estate and in Detroit Trash Incinerator—We Say No!, put out by the Evergreen Alliance, which we formed with our neighbors. But we had to fight it. iii

The Evergreen Alliance was never exactly an organization (which, according to FE anti-organizational principles at the time, would have co-opted us, "reabsorbing" our activities to rationalize and improve capitalist domination and the industrial house of toxic cards). But it did function as a loose coalition with regular meetings, press releases, and committees. We kept it minimalist, voluntarist, and anarchistic, which also tended to satisfy many of our already radical and counter-cultural neighbors who preferred a relatively structureless association.

Sometimes we Cass Corridorites were proud to be little more than an undisciplined, angry, but technically and legally informed mob. Our basis for agreement was the "NO"—>no to a proposed tech-fix of smokestack scrubbers and baghouses, no to any incineration, no to compromise. We mostly got along (though there were ongoing arguments) with less intransigent people in the environmental movement who were ready to settle for something less. We liked most of them as people, and found ways to work together, and quite a few came around to appreciate (and participate in) our bad behavior.

Under what was to a great degree the messy direction of a ragtag group of anarchists and their wild-eyed, somewhat anarchy-friendly collaborators, the Evergreen Alliance came to function as a prominent, and certainly the most dramatic, element of the first phase of thirty-some years of what was now an ebbing, now flowing, resistance to "the Beast."

The FE had been reporting and reflecting on "the industrial plague" for at least a decade, but this was our NIMBY moment, if you will—they were dumping their effluents directly on us. iv We didn't countenance it being moved to some other unfortunate neighborhood, of course, but the local threat, the imminent degradation of our already challenged environment, surely played a role in our intense energy level. The worst of the poisons, the terrifying dioxins and furans that apparently were produced by burning recyclable paper with plastics, the fluorides, the heavy metals (including mercury, cadmium, and lead), and other substances—for example, the 588 pounds of hydrogen chloride and 498 pounds of carbon monoxide and other horrific shit-crap they were permitted to, indeed built to, release every hour, 24 hours a day—were not the most noticeable hurts a mile away, where we lived.

The insult added to all this injury was an acrid odor of combustion from time to time, or the stench of standing garbage, waiting to go into the furnace, that sometimes, at the right moment—perhaps a summer weekend, otherwise lovely with birdsong and breeze, when the feckless, overworked inspectors were off fishing or fiddling. At such moments one might suddenly be thrown out of glorious early morning sleep, almost physically out of bed, by the smell, and have to close the windows. v

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When the U.S. Social Forum met in Detroit in 2010 and organized a colorful march to the incinerator with locals, neither the visitors nor most of the locals seemed to have heard of us. vi I managed to talk my way onto the speaker's platform and briefly told the crowd about the paleo-history of the fight, and since then many of us former Evergreen Alliance members have attended anti-incinerator demos organized by Breathe Free Detroit and have occasionally collaborated. We are happy to hear occasionally from younger people, often grad students or journalists investigating and documenting this story. It deserves to be told in detail someday, though this is not the occasion to do so. Here are a few highlights.

The Evergreen Alliance organized picket lines and big demonstrations; canvassed and planted trees all over the neighborhoods near the incinerator. We packed and even stormed hearings; spoke to community groups, classrooms and churches; organized conferences, forums, and "Councils of All Beings." We created giant puppets as demonstration props; and raised money and built community with concerts, poetry readings, and art shows. (The participation and creativity of artists, musicians, and writers, many from the Corridor, was always evident in the resistance.) Some of us, working with neighbors in the North Cass Community Union and other organizations, set up some of the first recycling projects in the city and also went to court to stop the project.

Despite our ambivalence about and critiques of symbolic civil disobedience protests, the community had found out about the incinerator so late in the process that several of us on or close to the FE agreed with our neighbors and decided to try the tactic of peaceful civil disobedience (we did not quite consider it a strategy) in order to alert the community. It turned out to be easy, and ultimately rewarding, personally and politically, to abandon abstract principles in the spirit of "experiments in truth" (Gandhi's phrase), our sometimes awkward attempts to walk some kind of activist walk while continuing to talk our theoretical talk.

We wanted to wed our radical critique of industrial-capitalist civilization's social-ecological apocalypse to a local, pragmatic, more humble citizen-based practice of direct democratic organizing, resistance, and self-defense to a direct injury to our community.

Moreover, something was going on all over the country—the world, really. Here and in other countries anti-toxics and anti-nuclear activists were storming hearings and sitting in; out west (and elsewhere) members of another "non-organization," Earth First!, many of them calling themselves anarchists, were perching in redwoods, blocking logging roads, and chaining themselves to heavy logging machinery. We admired those people and wanted to try our own urban version of the same. vii

In our first action of this kind, in the spring of 1988, the Monday morning after our first mass demonstration and a weekend conference to Save the Great Lakes, nineteen of us blockaded the front gate of the incinerator site and were arrested, charged with Disturbing the Peace (a charge with a potential sentence of ninety days in jail and a five hundred dollar fine), and released. In the fall, with the pro bono help of a local lawyer who said simply that he thought what we were doing was "cool," the Evergreen 19 defended ourselves in Detroit's 36th District Court and, after a week-long trial, were acquitted (and congratulated and hugged) by a very sympathetic jury.

In the spring of 1989, Evergreen Alliance women, fired up with ecofeminism, created WEAVE (Women Empowered Against Violence to the Environment), and in June of that year they spearheaded our largest and most colorful procession, from Detroit's Eastern Market to the incinerator, under a giant figure of the Earth Mother and a massive, fabric peace dove. We were some five to six hundred people, including many families and children, playing music and beating drums, and many carrying images of or dressed up as animals representing a Council of All Beings. (We even had a whole school of some 30 wooden fish.) After we arrived, the WEAVE women wove themselves to the front gate with yarn; when the cops started roughing them up, the crowd went crazy and dozens more people stormed and blocked all of the gates.

More than fifty demonstrators were arrested, far more than we expected. When the women and their supporters were released from detention by a sympathetic woman judge, we organizers came home to eat pizza and debrief, only to learn of the massacre at Tiananmen Square. We knew of course that our struggle entailed nothing of the risks the Chinese protesters and their supporters were taking, or the price they were paying, but we felt that in taking responsibility for our neighborhood, we were doing a small thing for everyone, too.

For the twentieth anniversary of Earth Day in 1990, we organized a death lottery based on the prognostications of deaths-per-million caused by the incinerator, with a New Orleans-style jazz funeral procession bearing cardboard coffins and ending in a die-in. We even managed to help get the Beast shut down for a while. When it started back up, two members of our group occupied the governor's office, chaining themselves to the heavy furniture. These were far from the only protests or activities we tried; there were many picket lines and protests in between. But having few arrows in our quiver, we tended to try anything and everything.

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Around the time we were losing the fight in the early 1990s, many of us turned our energies to opposing the First Gulf War in the fall and winter of 1991. We continued to link our vision of social and environmental justice and new radical perspectives. In our opposition to the incinerator we had connected the dots, for example pointing out that Combustion Engineering, which built the incinerator, had worked on the Fermi I nuke plant in Monroe, Michigan, south of us, which suffered a partial meltdown and "almost lost Detroit" (as the famous book title put it). viii

We also brought up environmental racism, not only in where the incinerator was sited but also the involvement of the companies financing and building the incinerator with the South African apartheid regime, including Combustion Engineering (which meant that the City of De-

troit, ostensibly supporting that decade's BDS movement against South Africa, was prohibited from doing business with such companies). ix

We linked our struggle to anti-toxics movements, struggles against destructive mining and logging in western states and elsewhere, and to indigenous land rights and environmental struggles (including, for example, connecting with the people of the native reserve at Walpole Island, east of the incinerator, who dramatically threatened to declare war on the City of Detroit for sending its incineration plume and ash particulate eastward over them).

We pointed out that this monstrosity would never have been built in a wealthy white suburb (though well-heeled suburbs to the east also did receive the plume). This didn't stop the city administration from vilifying us alternately as wild-eyed "Cass Corridor radicals" (which we were) and as white suburbanites (we weren't).

Truth be told, we were mostly white. It was hard to convince African Americans (or anyone else) in Detroit to actively oppose the powerful and charismatic Mayor Coleman Young, who being the first black mayor was popular, and whom we also defended against the racist suburban narrative that he was the cause of Detroit's problems. Of course, there were always suburbanites (and Canadians for that matter, and others) at our demonstrations and conferences. We worked with just about anyone willing to acknowledge the problem.

The people in those neighborhoods directly around the incinerator, mostly poor, black, or immigrant, had so many problems that this new abuse didn't appear to be the most pressing. And yet they almost always said they supported us and thanked us for our work. We gave them trees and met local elders and community activists and gardeners. (The "Gardening Angels" we met, for example, would gradually come to shape a new Detroit, the urban farm and garden city many people have since come to hear about.)

In fact, people all over the city tended to agree with us when the problem was explained clearly. (Big surprise, that was something the local corporate media never did. They vilified us as effete, unrealistic dreamers or worse; after Greenpeace, working with us, hung anti-incinerator banners on the construction cranes, downtown buildings, and the international bridge to Canada, city administration publicists and the media denounced us as "environmental terrorists.")

Though the patriotic hoopla of the First Gulf War muffled many active "new movements" like ours (as it was designed to do), political consciousness matured over the following decades about the interlocking issues of race, class, the environment, and other questions, and later generations of sophisticated anti-incinerator activists emerged. The new (along with a few old) activists were more smart and diverse, with more color in their palette, which was encouraging. They went along accumulating a more and more useful knowledge base, too.

I was working on other projects—putting out a newspaper makes one a generalist, or perhaps a dilettante—but I was happy to hear about and to tell others about anti-incinerator activism (for example against incinerators in local small municipalities of Madison Heights and Hamtramck, on which old Evergreen Alliance militants collaborated). My old comrades and I were grateful for the Great Lakes Environmental Law Center, Zero Waste Detroit, and Breathe Free Detroit, groups that worked tirelessly for years to document the incinerator's violations and shut it down, and we let people know about them, too.

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When the incinerator closed, Breathe Free Detroit celebrated the move, congratulated the activists who had fought the incinerator for thirty-plus years, and vowed to continue fighting for zero waste and "a just transition" for laid-off plant workers to "new green union jobs," and even

for protections for residents from gentrification in the central city neighborhoods (including our old neighborhood, the Cass Corridor, now rebranded "Midtown" by real estate speculators and the overly enthusiastic tourists and new residents).

Todd Grzech, the CEO of Detroit Renewable Power (an example of false advertising if ever there was one), which bought the facility in 2018 and spent millions of dollars failing to run it profitably, assured the media that there would be a "seamless" transition to send the three thousand tons of waste that was being incinerated daily to facilities elsewhere.

"When we looked at it," Grzech, explained, "there was just not enough money in the world to be a good neighbor, create value for our customers, and go forward as a business entity." In other words, as Nancy Kaffer, a local newspaper writer, put it, the incinerator couldn't turn a profit without breaking the law. x

Truly, the Beast never could function without violating not only inadequate environmental laws but the fundamental, unwritten laws of human decency.

Every empire requires colonies and sacrifice zones, and wherever garbage is "disposed of"—more false advertising, since nothing is ever disposed of, and "everything must go somewhere," as Barry Commoner famously pointed out—there you often find society's poorest people, disposed of with the same imperial indifference.

The neighborhoods surrounding the incinerator were a sacrifice zone in a city that had been and that continues to be plundered and sacrificed. There, capitalism's waste was burned at a bargain—a bargain to those who shipped it there "seamlessly," to borrow Mr. Grzech's memorable phrase—and subsidized with a vengeance by the long-suffering residents of neighborhoods representing some of the poorest zip codes in the country. It was also subsidized by the taxpayers of the poor, majority-black city, as well as Sumpter Township, a working class municipality in southwest Wayne County, where the toxic ash residue was dumped, along with vast quantities of municipal waste, in inadequate landfills. xi

No doubt the dogged efforts of community and environmental groups to document the incinerator's violations of the law played an enormous role in shutting it down. Their persistent complaints and their expanding data base, their pressure on the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), and a petition campaign that delivered fifteen thousand signatures to Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan all contributed. That was something a loose "coalition of individuals," as we called ourselves—with a shared concern but a decentralized structure and somewhat less consensus on action—was not able to sustain. xii Growing public awareness, also thanks to the activists, and a new Democratic administration in Lansing came into play as well, as did an influx of young middle class whites and gentrification of the city core (including the construction of luxury lofts not far from the incinerator that are now being offered for half a million and even up to a million dollars a shot).

Moreover, as incinerator opponents had warned from the beginning, the facility turned out to be a massive public boondoggle that shackled the City of Detroit with debt for the construction and disproportionately high payments to burn its own trash compared to what outside municipalities paid to send theirs to it. In 1990, Evergreen Alliance activists, with the help of several nationally prominent scientists, played a role in getting the incinerator shut down briefly after it failed its required air emissions test for mercury, hydrochloric acid, and dioxins/furans. In a backroom deal, the City got the MAPCC to allow the incinerator to start back up with a promise of retrofitting baghouse/scrubber technology (which had been a demand of mainstream environmentalist groups, and which we said would only shift the pollution around).

The City then sold the incinerator to Philip Morris Capital (yes, the biggest purveyor of tobacco in the world), while maintaining the bond debt for construction and the addition of the new equipment. It took the beleaguered city taxpayers twenty years to pay off what ended up being a billion-plus dollars in debt. Throughout its tenure, private operators continued to shake the City down for tax breaks.

Another reason for the incinerator's demise, seemed to be overlooked in recent commentary: As we argued in the 1980s, the incinerator was a techno-fix engineered to respond to a waste crisis created by the throwaway society.

As an end-of-line engineering solution to front-end social problems—e.g., insatiable consumer craving, a packaging mania based on a feckless obsession with convenience, and planned obsolescence engineered by profit-driven corporations—the incinerator was itself a product that would inevitably wear out, in about thirty years.

Once depleted, deteriorated, the boilers, burners, controls, baghouse filters, scrubbers, whatever it was they fitted or retro-fitted, would have to be replaced—and salvaged, dumped in a landfill, or incinerated by some other Beast. That was why it finally could not function, even with transparently inadequate safety regulations and laws, except through ongoing toxic releases, stench, increasing noise, and wanton disregard for the community and the planet. (According to MDEQ records, the Free Press reported in 2018, the incinerator had exceeded pollution emission standards—such as they were—more than 750 times in the previous five years.)

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The mayors of municipalities surrounding Detroit (and points beyond) were now scrambling to find other places to accept their municipal waste. Jim Fouts, the mayor of Warren, which borders Detroit to the north and sent its trash to the incinerator, called the news of the shut-down "somewhat surprising"—which suggested that politicians may have known more than acknowledged—but guaranteed there would be no disruption of trash pick-up in the sprawling suburb. He added that he thought it now time to rethink the throwaway society, commenting to the Detroit Free Press, "What is the priority—the environment or our comfort?"

This convenient utterance was one more example of talking about the weather (and now the climate) but doing nothing about it. It reveals how we have been left more or less where we began, with the mantra of "reduce, reuse, recycle," etc., but with an added burden of thirty years of waste, incineration residues, and myriad other ecological travesties to contend with—a pestilential, industrial Hydra beyond the imagination of the mayor of Michigan's third largest city to address. Beyond his imagination, I should make clear, because the first term in the recycling mantra, "reduce," and the implications of reduction, are concepts suggesting a renunciation that would in fact be a more authentic abundance, the way renouncing a baleful addiction could be the portal to a happier and more meaningful life.

This is an idea well beyond the dominant social imaginary, at least in social-ecological terms—seeing consumer capitalism as a life-destroying addiction, and reducing, reusing, and renouncing as means to a deeper life of "simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust," indeed of wisdom itself, as recovery. xiii

Even people who have been thinking about such things are at a loss.

"Its closing is a blessing," said Margaret Weber, another Zero Waste activist who has spent decades not just talking but trying to do something. "But what happens to our waste? This event tells us that the time is now for intensive planning."

"I danced today," Turner-Handy said. "But we need to get to work tomorrow, because now what do we do with the trash? We do not have a solid waste management policy in place."

That planning and policy should have been developed decades ago. That doesn't mean we can avoid rethinking and planning now, though it seems late in the game. Meanwhile, the incinerator will start burning natural gas to heat and cool downtown—more business as usual.

Thirty years down the line, recycling has also had its boom and bust because it became an end-of-line answer, an example of the engineering fallacy (Edelstein's phrase), driven by entrepreneurial and corporate avarice, to a problem of social practice—to reduction, deceleration, degrowth, and a broad reorientation of values. Recycling of municipal waste—which represents about two percent of industrial capitalism total—eventually came to be designed with a mindless consumer in mind, as source separation was abandoned and residents were told to throw everything into the same bin.

Meanwhile, the plastic tsunami continued unabated. Consumers who barely paid attention either didn't bother to recycle at all, or threw trash into the bins that their local municipal circulars told them could not be recycled. Others, out of recycling zeal, tried to throw everything in that looked possible to recycle, which also contaminated the recycling stream. Eventually, China—which did manage to make money on the bargain by buying recyclable materials from the West and processing them in its own sacrifice zones—turned the waste back because it was no longer feasible, as with the incinerator in Detroit, to "create value."

Recycling in the U.S. has gone into a death spiral, with municipal recycling going to landfills and to obsolescent, toxin-spewing incinerators. For example, Philadelphia now sends half of its collected recyclables to a waste incinerator in Chester, Pennsylvania—about two hundred tons a day—worsening "an already alarming health situation" in the town, seventy percent black, where four in ten people suffer from asthma, and where the Coventa Incinerator was already burning thirty-five hundred tons of trash a day. xiv

According to Mother Jones writer Jackie Flynn Mogensen, "One Very Bad Habit Is Fueling the Global Recycling Meltdown": an excessive, misguided zeal—"wishcycling"—that is, trying to get everything into the recycling box, including objects that foul the recycling stream. Of course, this excessive zeal to recycle, which is a real phenomenon, is not the "one bad habit" causing the problem, even on the West Coast; two, three, many bad habits lie below that surface. It is wishful thinking, to be sure, a kind of denial and willful ignorance, since people could research what can be recycled and how—to their dismay. Unfortunately, most people are barely paying attention, either because they are too beaten down or too busy buying. For too many people, Mother Earth, the global life web, remains (as a Trump administration flack put it at the recent G7 meeting) "a niche issue." xv

As we argued in the beginning, any serious thinking about trash incineration had to lead to the conclusion that it was just one of a panoply of assaults on the ecological life web and human health—a small piece of business-as-usual, however harmful its specific and various effects. And it was harmful: trash incineration was already thought to be the major source of dioxins in the environment, and a leading cause of acid rain, which, we argued in We Say No!, was "in turn rapidly shredding the delicate natural web of weather, water, and soil—the branch of nature's sacred tree on which humanity also sits."

Here we were thinking not just of acid rain, but more broadly of global warming, which we were only starting to learn about. And though we called it a "slow-acting apocalypse," it wasn't as slow as we thought. Our own small fragment of both dominant and oppositional social imagi-

naries was not clear or deep enough to address fully what we were talking about, either, though we were already alarmed.

"Besides being a way for a few people to make a bundle of money (there is money in everything)," I wrote in our publication, the incinerator…

allows society to temporarily ignore the real sources of the crisis while at the same time turning the industrial ratchet another notch by rearranging the toxic soup … into an even deadlier mix … We need to look at the whole production/consumption system, with all of its interlocking factors … And if we start today to reverse contamination, can we even turn the process around?

In this article and others, we presented the litany: problematic nuclear plants, dioxin in mothers' milk, some two million chemicals produced by industry, not occurring naturally in nature. The rainforests threatened, species disappearing vertiginously, drinking water disappearing or contaminated, rising statistics on birth defects and cancer, fifty thousand toxic waste dumps in the U.S., and some ninety percent of the ninety million pounds of toxic waste produced annually by U.S. industry (seventy percent of it from the chemical companies) disposed of "improperly," according to the Environmental Protection Agency. (It was natural to wonder what would be considered "proper.")xvi

It was a climate crisis already, an ecological crisis calling for crisis measures, and we always pointed to the Big Picture. But we were never able to marshal more than about five or perhaps six hundred people at our festive marches. We used to joke darkly about the numbers of people, including from our neighborhood, under the fetid shroud of the incinerator plume, heading off instead on a Saturday to Pottery Barn or Home Depot to buy what they needed to spruce up what were likely (or at least symbolically) to be their tombs.

Three decades have now flown by, and the apocalypse has continued to roll on. In 1986 an early edition of We Say No! reported on a Dow Chemical Company chemical spill at Sarnia, Ontario, on the St. Clair River, where Great Lakes waters flow into Lake St. Clair and from there into the Detroit River. An estimated four thousand pounds of polyethylene powder, intended to produce plastic milk jugs, was "accidentally" released by the company into the river—which was, according to a Detroit Free Press report, at least the fifth such spill for the year. "We didn't recover anything," a company spokesman said, which he called "an indicator of how little actually got into the river." The Free Press assured its readers that Dow was creating new training programs to prevent spills. No one was talking about microplastics then—or the Anthropocene, for which the ubiquitousness of plastic is a key marker. But we know now that not recovering anything was hardly an indicator of little getting into the water—and then into us. xvii

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The news is calamitous on every front. For the last year or two in particular, it seems every week or two some new report comes out to tell us that the changes industrial civilization is bringing about are far more far-reaching, and working far more rapidly, than previously thought; and that the proposed measures to confront the problem, which no country is even achieving, are dramatically inadequate to the threat.

In October 2018, when the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) announced that humanity had about a decade to turn things around to avoid unprecedented catastrophe, warning that there was "'no documented historic precedent' for the sweeping change to energy, transportation, and other systems required to reach 1.5 degrees Celsius." A team of scientists wrote in 2016 that the changes occurring due to human-caused global warming will "extend longer than the entire history of human civilization thus far." xviii Erik

Solheim, the executive director of the United Nations Environment Program, commented that the signs are "like a deafening, piercing smoke alarm going off in the kitchen." But few are paying much attention, most are just going about their business-as-usual, and a significant number are actively resisting taking measures. xix

We are seeing a new and desperate normal, with destructive storms along the coasts and in the continental interiors; and high heat, cyclones and tornados, flooding and gigantic wildfires. But we are not facing the climate crisis only: the mass extinction spasm of biodiversity, huge swathes of deforestation, a toxic contamination crisis, the crisis in agriculture, the disappearance of the foundations of the food web and of pollinators (the disappearance of krill and the so-called "insectageddon") water wars and water contamination—it's the Hydra. xx

We are, as one commentator on the Anthropocene notoriously put it, "fucked." xxi

And since there is also little documented historical precedent for such changes at all, and science is weak on thresholds, it is also possible that we have even less time than scientists are now saying.

Since scientists, rather than being alarmists, have been notoriously cautious in their prognoses, and since everything has moved faster than they have warned, there is reason to believe that this latest prediction is too conservative. xxii For now one can only hope that it is possible humanity can survive this crisis if we begin to act with "solidarity and coordination on a global scale," on this "shrinking planet," as Bill McKibben puts it. But even that commendable, indefatigable activist adds that, right now, "The chances of that look slim." He muses, "In the face of our environmental deterioration, it's now reasonable to ask whether the human game has begun to falter—perhaps even to play itself out." xxiii

Let's face it; the crisis for which the incinerator functioned as a metaphor or object lesson is a crisis in civilization, a crisis in culture, conscience, and character. However much the corporate and state power complex has created these problems and continues to resist social change, the stench of garbage, of our own shit, reminds us of our denial, our complicity, our distracted business-as-usual, not just "theirs." But since pessimism has a tendency to drift into inaction, and there is not much point in ruminating on the incoherence of mass society (I haven't given up thinking and writing about that), I am ready to consider just about any idea—a degrowth/deconstruction approach, a "Half-Earth" solution and mass tree planting to protect biodiversity, a Green New Deal of some kind, a combination of them all. We need to keep fighting to protect people, places, and nature—and our own humanity in the process. xxiv

The reality of a hard, hard-luck city—the infamous Detroit that people were told about before someone discovered this hip, "innovative" city, in perpetual renaissance, that they think they know now, both imperfect representations—got in the way of our movement, as it did to others (to name two examples in my memory, the fight to save the Poletown neighborhood, and the fight to save Tiger Stadium from demolition, which started as a preservation movement and ended up becoming a radical fight against a massive corporate land-grab). And yet people have endured. "They persisted." And of course, Mother Nature persists, with us or without us—there's solace in that, too.

Detroit, City of Picturesque Ruins, has a reputation, however problematic it may be, of both collapse and renewal. For now, Breathe Free, Zero Waste, and other activists persist. The city persists, the people persist, some wild hope persists. You parents, you children, you Children of the Earth, this practice persists.

What else will you do with your time on a shrinking planet?

ENDNOTES

i. Kat Stafford and Christina Hall, "Controversial Detroit incinerator shut down after years," Detroit Free Press, March 27, 2019. Several other responses to and other information about the closing mentioned in this article come from this news story. See also Sarah Cwiek, "Detroit incinerator announces it will permanently shut down," Michigan Public Radio, March 28, 2019; and Louis Aguilar, Christine MacDonald and Sarah Rahal, "Detroit's controversial incinerator permanently shut down, Detroit News, March 27, 2019.

ii. We did hear that our work inspired people in other places to fight and defeat planned incinerator construction, and to take up or renew fights against functioning incinerators—including one in Madison Heights, a working class suburb of Detroit, where we also protested—that were later closed.

iii. See "George Bradford" (David Watson), "Beyond the 'Beast': The Whole Picture," in Detroit Incinerator: We Say No! See also "Incinerator Logic: The Hidden Cost of Progress," in We Say No!, and "Resistance to the Plan is Heavy," Fifth Estate, Summer 1986, issue 323), both by Charles Willis (Scott Craig). The tabloid-newspaper-format publication looked a lot like the FE, and was done in our office on Second Avenue. On Paul Connett, see "Incineration: The Biggest Obstacle to Zero Waste," Earth Island Journal, Ocober 2013, at http://www.earthisland.org/journal/index.php/articles/entry/incineration_the_biggest_obstacle_to_zero_waste/

iv. See for example "Sonny Tufts" (David Watson), "PBB: Case Study of an Industrial Plague," Fifth Estate, May 1976 (issue 272).

v. That was one of several complex reasons why my companion and I chose early in this century to move from the Corridor, where I'd spent a large part of my adolescence and adult life, to a leafier, greener neighborhood near a different intersection of two expressways but far enough from the Beast to stop suffering those mornings. We knew our class privilege made it possible to abandon the old neighborhood. We had a child then, and we worried about his health. By then, the incinerator had been pumping it out for over a decade. We'd lost our fight; it now seemed to be time for flight.

vi. I realized later that a few of our old comrades from the Evergreen Alliance were involved, but most of the new generation activists were unfamiliar with our story. This was typical of generational waves of anti-toxics activists, according to Michael Edelstein's enormously useful study, Contaminated Communities: The Social and Psychological Impacts of Residential Toxic Exposure (Westview Press, 1988).

vii. The experience made it clear to me and perhaps to some others that we had at times been too hard on the people we had criticized; we might at least have found something to affirm in their symbolic action before taking them down. In our defense, some groups we interacted with in the anti-nuclear movement were so hierarchical that they were from the beginning coordinating with police and willing to turn people over who did not agree with their rigidly choreographed actions and engaged in even innocuous, but more non-conformist, actions. See "Jr. Cops and Anti-Nukers," unsigned, Fifth Estate, June 19, 1979 (vol. 14, numb. 3).

viii. John G. Fuller, We Almost Lost Detroit (Reader's Digest Press, 1975). In 1990, Gil Scott-Heron did a song about the meltdown with the same title: "…No one stopped to think about the people / Or how they would survive…." You can see it here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b54rB64fXY4.

ix. When in 1986 the local weekly, The Metro Times, broke the story that in doing business with Combustion Engineering, the City of Detroit was in violation of its statue to not do busi-

ness with companies involved with the apartheid regime in South Africa, the City Council voted to go ahead with the project anyway. The story, by investigative reporter Rosanne Less, was published in April 1986. See "Twenty Big Hits," https://www.metrotimes.com/detroit/twenty-big-hits/Content?oid=2169567. Unfortunately, I was not able to find the story online. The Metro Times covered the incinerator story admirably in my memory, right through to the closing. For an example, see https://www.metrotimes.com/news-hits/archives/2019/03/27/detroits-garbage-incinerator-is-about-to-belch-its-final-cloud-of-toxic-gas.

x. Nancy Kaffer, "The Detroit incinerator has been awful for 30 years. Why is it closing now?" Detroit Free Press (online), March 25, 2019.

xi. (Around the turn of this century, the neighborhoods around the incinerator logged the highest rates of asthma hospitalization in the city, which itself has a rate three times the state average. The trash, along with other pollutants, was "disposed of" in the airways of the people living there. For Commoner's Four Laws of Ecology, see his book, The Closing Circle (1971). The Four Laws of Ecology are: 1) "Everything Is Connected to Everything Else"; 2) "Everything Must Go Somewhere"; 3) "Nature Knows Best"; and 4) "There Is No Such Thing as a Free Lunch."

xii. This inability to create a lasting, institutional opposition was fairly typical of the early stages of all such struggles, not only where anti-organizational radicals played such a large role, which Edelstein describes in detail in his Contaminated Communities. In any event, I doubt that in our day, even a wave of organized, daily and weekly complaints (we did that to some degree) or even ten times the number of signatures on a petition to the mayor (I think there were petitions) would have mattered. The law didn't much protect us then. When in 1988 workers at the incinerator walked off the job after being sickened by initial test runs, a State agency, the Toxic Substance Control commission (TSCC, created after the mass contamination from PBB affected pretty much everyone in the state in the mid-1970s), agreed with us that the incinerator ash was so toxic it would by law have to go to much more expensive hazardous waste landfills. In a matter of days, the City, the Democratic governor, and the legislature conspired to pass a bill labeling municipal incinerator waste "special waste" that could simply be tossed into a municipal landfill in a different "cell," alongside the cells containing banana peels, Styrofoam clamshells, and other trash. Neither the law they had sworn to uphold nor the laws of physics and chemistry mattered. But often the law, far too flaccid to protect the public, with the burden of proof on the contaminated rather than on the contaminators, was against us, too. Some of us still remember what our friend Harold Stokes, a community college science teacher and indefatigable activist since the 1930s, declared to the Michigan Air Pollution Control Commission in 1990. Something was terribly wrong with the way everything was being done, he said. "Because no one is breaking the law, and people are still dying." (Later, Republican Governor John Engler simply abolished the MAPCC and the TSCC and with them their public hearings.)

xiii. These are Thoreau's words, in the first chapter of Walden—a school of philosophy, he says, that works to "solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically."

xiv. Oliver Millman, "'Moment of reckoning': US cities burn recyclables after China bans imports," The Guardian, February 21, 2019. See also "California's largest recycling center business, RePlanet, shuts down," Associated Press, August 5, 2019; and Katherine Ross, "Sorting it out: Some communities rethink recycling programs due to cost, confusion," Detroit Free Press/Associated Press, June 16, 2019.

xv. Mother Jones, August 30, 2019 (online). For a commentary on the recycling problem generally, see the column of FE writer (and another founding member of the Evergreen Alliance)

Peter Werbe, in a local suburban paper here in Metro Detroit at https://www.ferndalefriends.net/peter-werbe-august-2017/.

xvi. I was premature in what I wrote about the Brazilian rainforest, which I reported would be gone by 2000 at current rates of deforestation. I imagine my sources were credible at the time. Of course it is not as if rainforests, the oldest living ecosystems on the planet, containing more than half the Earth's species, and producing some forty percent of the planet's air, are doing fine. According to data released by the World Resources institute at the Oslo Tropical Forest Forum, where some five hundred forest experts and policymakers met in 2018, despite efforts to reduce tropical deforestation, tree cover loss had nearly doubled over the previous fifteen years. In 2017 alone, 39 million acres, an area close to the size of the state of Washington, disappeared. As National Geographic reported, "The latest total was second only to 2016, the worst-ever year of tropical forest loss with 41.7 million acres (16.9 million hectares)." Brazil alone lost 11.1 million acres. Stephen Leahy, "Tropical Forest Loss Slowed in 2017—To the Second Worst Total Ever," at https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2018/06/tropical-deforestation-forest-loss-2017/. The election of corrupt, right-wing madman Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil has turned this already dismaying situation in a far worse direction, with his immediate moves to destroy indigenous reserves and open up total exploitation of the rainforest. (As I was finishing this essay in late August 2019, the arson of Bolsonaro's minions was destroying huge swathes of the forest.) The election of Caligulas like Bolsonaro, Trump, and other authoritarian-oligarchic neofascists, is a development so deliriously threatening to the ecological order that they would figure in the geological history of the planet—if anyone were to remain to record it.

xvii. The unsigned article was reprinted in the Summer 1986 Fifth Estate, issue 323.

xviii. Various authors, "Consequences of twenty-first-century policy for multi-millennial climate and sea-level change," Nature Climate Change, Vol. 6, February 2016. Bill McKibben cites this report in his article, "Life on a Shrinking Planet," The New Yorker, November 26, 2018.

xix. Chris Mooney and Brady Dennis, ""The world has just over a decade to get climate change under control, U.N. scientists say," Washington Post, October 7, 2018; see also Elizabeth Kolbert, "Comment: Global Warming," The New Yorker, October 22, 2018. We have also learned that the petrochemical companies knew all along what had become a scientific consensus about the catastrophic effects of fossil fuels, and used what they knew to mislead politicians and the pubic, and to justify more exploration for and exploitation of gas and oil; we also know that "nearly every conversation we have in 2019 about climate change was being held in 1979," as Nathaniel Rich, who has written the story of this cover-up, put it. See his Losing Earth: A Climate History (Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2019).

xx. The Hydra has been on my mind for a while. If it is on yours, see my essay, "Stopping the Industrial Hydra," in Against the Megamachine: Essays on Empire & Its Enemies (Autonomedia, 1997), originally published in the Winter 1990 issue of the Fifth Estate. The book is currently out of print. The essay can be found at https://archive.org/details/DavidWatsonAgainstTheMegamachineEssaysOnEmpireItsEnemies/page/n61. On the dramatic decline of insects, see Brooke Jarvis, "The Insect Apocalypse Is Here," New York Times Magazine, November 27, 2018. Though it might add to the reader's despair, for wildfires and the mass destruction of northern temperate and boreal forests, see McKenzie Funk, "Smoked Out," London Review of Books, February 7, 2019; "Vast wildfires in Siberia a potential 'disaster' for arctic, and the world's climate," CBS News, July 30, 2019; and Mark Sumner, "Fire at the top of the world: Earth's largest forest is burning, and it won't be coming back soon," Daily Kos, July 31, 2019.

xxi. Roy Scranton, Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of Civilization (City Lights, 2015)

xxii. In 2018 James Anderson, the Harvard scientist known for linking CFCs to the disappearance of the ozone layer, put the time remaining at five years. See Jeff McMahon, "We Have Five Years To Save Ourselves From Climate Change, Harvard Scientist Says," Forbes, January 15, 2018. It isn't even clear what these predictions mean—five years, twelve years, for what? To "turn things around"? Given the breadth of destruction, what does that mean, beyond being fucked? Events are already unfolding. It's difficult to imagine the manifold challenges human societies will face in five or twelve years.

xxiii. McKibben, "Life on a Shrinking Planet."

xxiv. It's hard to tell what can be done, but a lot could be done. See David Wallace-Wells, The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming (Tim Duggan Books, 2019). As I have written elsewhere, the "degrowth" idea that human beings are converting too much of nature into human artifacts and that a world with our present population living at a Global North production/consumption/destruction level is unsustainable is convincing to me. See the epilogue to my book, En el camino a ninguna parte: civilización, tecnologíay barbarie (Madrid: Ediciones Salmón, 2018); an English version is forthcoming. For degrowth, see Marisol Cortez, "Degrowth: Coming Soon to a Continent Near You," January 20, 2018, at https://deceleration.news/2018/01/20/degrowth-conference-mexico-city/. A debate on degrowth and a Green New Deal over several issues in New Left Review is useful. In "Between the Devil and the Green New Deal" (Commune, Summer 2019, issue 3), Jasper Bernes criticizes the GND concept in some ways parallel to my own—including, however, his reluctant willingness to "blame anyone for committing themselves to the hope at hand rather than ambient despair." On E.O. Wilson's Half-Earth idea, see his Half-Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life (Liveright, 2017), and his website, https://www.half-earthproject.org/. For a glimpse into the current arguments between despair and voluntarist optimism—even perhaps a "tragic optimism," as Viktor Frankl put it in his Man's Search for Meaning—see Rachel Riederer, "The Other Kind of Climate Denialism," The New Yorker, March 6, 2019.

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David Watson has worked on the Fifth Estate off and on between 1969 and 2019. He was a founding member of the Evergreen Alliance and one of the Evergreen 19. He thanks Tom Stephens, Sylvie Kashdan, Robby Barnes, Peter Werbe, and Lorraine Perlman for comments and suggestions on this essay.

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https://deceleration.news/2019/09/28/detroit-incinerator-closes-eco-apocalypse-continues/
A slightly different version of this article is available at
https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/404-summer-2019/detroit-trash-incinerator-closing/

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