

## Conclusion

It is January 2020, and we've just arrived in Mongla. Disembarking from a crowded ferry as dusk falls on a rainy winter day, Riton and I trudge up the steep concrete slopes of Mongla's main *ghat*. We're looking for a place to eat, to warm up, to get out of the wet, and to begin recouping from the long trip from Dhaka to the delta region. As we trudge away from the ferry and toward the city center, we stop in our tracks. When I last visited, the pathway we are walking along was flanked by a rather unremarkable ditch. Now, there is something new and strikingly odd. It's an incongruously placed fountain, illuminated in the misty rain by a ring of colored LED lights.

The fountain sits just beyond the ferry ghat in a pond. The pond itself was excavated during Mayor Md. Zulfikar Ali's recent project of raising Mongla's embankments to protect it from anticipated winds and rising seas. The fountain seems out of place. It stands alone, unmarked, in a location neither peripheral nor central to the city at large. It is not built of materials such as concrete but rather of rings of metal that resemble nothing so much as the rebar seen protruding from the concrete slabs of unfinished construction sites across the country. There is no marker to indicate who made the fountain, why it was built, or what it stands for. It has an air of presence but also tentativeness. It feels neither permanent nor impermanent, finished nor unfinished.

In the misty dark it glows, seeming to beckon a set of possible, if paradoxical, futures for Mongla. On the one hand, it marks the city as a continued staging ground for ecotourism, where visitors from Dhaka and foreigners from abroad will come to see the region's unique fauna—such as the dolphin leaping through the fountain's base.<sup>1</sup> On the other, it tentatively nods toward Mongla's emergence



FIGURE 29. Fountain, Mongla.

as a hub city in the delta—a city deserving of monuments, a space worthy of visiting in its own right. The fountain thus manifests at least some of the incommensurate futures of the delta landscape. It stands for both nature and capital—verdant mangroves and Sonar Bangla. But its construction site—in the middle of an excavated dredge pond, dug out to reinforce the city’s climate ramparts—is also suggestive. It gestures toward the unstable terrain upon which future-making unfolds in the delta. The various futures in Mongla rise from the midst and mist of the present. The fountain, like the mela discussed in the previous chapter, seems to offer a modestly sublime vision of a future emerging out of incommensurability—summoning a time when all the abundant contradictions of the present are resolved, when the Sundarbans survives not in spite of the projects of bringing about Sonar Bangla but through and within them.<sup>2</sup> But whether such incommensurabilities

can be made commensurable in more than melas and monuments and policy documents such as the Delta Plan 2100 remains to be seen.

### THE EVACUATION OF THE PRESENT

While Riton and I asked around about the fountain, we never discovered anything more about it. When we mentioned it to people, mostly they just shrugged or chuckled. But the various futures it seemed to beckon are emblematic of the challenges of forging the future—and preserving the present—in the delta today. The delta has been and remains a nexus of future possibility. It is a place simultaneously imagined as doomed, vital, threatening, threatened, and ripe with productive possibility. All of these imaginations invoke a set of futures, some of which are in the process of becoming, none of which has come to pass. If these futures are incommensurate—that is to say, they cannot all happen in the same space or time—they also are instrumental in overwriting the complexities of the delta's present. To paraphrase Jane Guyer's well-known formulation, these future visions evacuate the delta's present and near future even as they occupy it with a panoply of projects seeking to bring these various futures about.<sup>3</sup> The delta's present is selectively subsumed within and reconfigured by projects of bringing these futures into being. Through this process, the delta present is made to reflect what planners and practitioners wish or fear to see. As conservationists frame the Sundarbans as a critical site for the management of climate change and the future of humankind, as discussed in chapter 4, the mangroves emerge as a space where regulation and policing can order unruly extraction regimes. As the delta becomes increasingly central to the vision of a Golden Bengal, as discussed in chapter 5, a port a hundred kilometers upstream of the Bay of Bengal is imagined as a future coastal shipping hub with the potential to integrate the delta into regional and global economies.

My point is not that these future visions cannot come to pass. The possibility that the delta's imperiled siltcape might emerge as a conservation zone, an engine for industrial growth, or a space of agrarian resilience is thinkable, even if the chances that they can all be realized at once seem vanishingly slim. Rather, the evacuation of the delta's present is a displacement of projects, possibilities, and aspirations for things that might be realized in the present or near future for delta residents in service of more remote temporalities and audiences. That planners and practitioners construct spaces—or imaginaries of them—within which their programs are likely to succeed has long been an axiomatic proposition in the anthropology of development.<sup>4</sup> So too in the delta. Here, visions of a particular kind of atomized peasant family at imminent risk of becoming climate refugees yield the kinds of development interventions that attempt to produce the resilient peasants discussed in chapter 1. The social and technical configurations of what resilience means, however, often have little bearing on the lived realities

of delta life in the midst of environmental change. These visions of resilience evacuate the present of the possibility of finding temporalities and meanings of life that articulate with the lived experience of peasant life in the midst of environmental change. Similarly, the framing of the Sundarbans as the threatened habitat of climate change's sentinel beast—the tiger in the climate coal mine, discussed in chapter 3—knits encounters with tigers into the global narrative of climate change and development. At the same time, it leads to the fetishization of certain victims of misfortune in the mangroves at the expense of others who suffer more quotidian fates. In doing so, the everyday politics of risk that accompany life and work in the mangroves are erased from conversations about the preservation of tigers and their mangrove habitats.

These processes are interesting in and of themselves. But what is more significant are the density and growth of such visions, all operating at different scales and temporalities and to different ends in the delta's present. These work together to remake delta space—to reconfigure the terrain upon which the delta's residents make their life. They shape risk, possibility, and ecology in often dramatic ways. And they attempt to harness (or tame) the delta's present materialities as resources for the future. Such is true in many other spaces where climate change has come to occupy a central—though not exclusive—place in planning, development, and governance paradigms around the globe. The delta is not the only place where climate plays a central role in shaping imaginations of future possibility. Yet because of its valence within global debates over planetary peril, the delta is instructive of the ways that diverse imaginations of climate serve as an organizing principle that guides risk and opportunity, possibility and impossibility, and threat and prospect.

#### FORGING THE CLIMATE FRONTIER

There is a tendency in much contemporary discussion of climate change to understand the climate-affected future from a unitary standpoint. While the kinds of crises and environmental catastrophes that global warming heralds are various, our vision inclines toward an understanding of a singular future of climate chaos. This allows us to then weigh heterogeneous interventions designed to forestall climate against this looming (if unpredictable and possibly unknowable) future—how likely is such an intervention to prepare people for climate chaos, how much can a certain policy contribute to climate mitigation, what kinds of pathways do various strategies of planning leave open for response, et cetera.<sup>5</sup> Yet in places like the delta, there is a vast and competing array of different climate temporalities and outcomes at play. It is certainly possible, and indeed important, to assess the probable impacts and outcomes of these different future-oriented projects. But doing so on a case-by-case basis—assessing, for example, how effective conservation regimes in the Sundarbans will be in preserving the mangroves for the future of humankind—risks missing important conjunctures and disjunctures. It becomes

easy to miss the ways that these programs assemble *different*, not just unpredictable, futures, and also the ways that both the projects and the futures they summon work against each other in the present. Moreover, imagining a space of crisis on the horizon makes it easy to miss the ways that projects addressing looming catastrophe imagine a space in the present without recent pasts—to see the Sundarbans as a blank space where unruly fishermen must be disciplined into orderly and sustainable fishing practices as opposed to a siltscape sedimented also with multiple histories and long-existing political economies and forms of territorial regulation and control.

To understand the interplay of pasts and futures in the delta, we need a framework that is at once synoptic and ethnographic. That is to say, to understand the crucial politics of future-making in places like the Bengal Delta—a politics that holds the lives of millions in the balance—we need an approach to exploring these terrains that at once can think transversally across projects while remaining focused on the ways that individuals navigate and make sense of these fractious futures today. What this book adds to contemporary conversations about climate change in Bangladesh and beyond, then, is the theorization of the delta as a climate frontier—an analytic for seeing the ways that the future yields projects of opportunity and expropriation in a present that is also fundamentally conditioned by its pasts.

Michael Eilenberg and I have argued elsewhere that frontiers must be understood as imaginative zones where the “material realities of place are inextricably bound to various visions of and cultural vocabularies for what the frontier might be.”<sup>6</sup> Such cultural vocabularies in the delta are increasingly and inexorably linked to climate—even if the various meanings and implications of climate change are radically diverse. These vocabularies and the future-making projects they enable organize risk and opportunity in the delta today. As such, the various projects unfolding in the delta that seek to bring about and/or forestall different futures are best understood not individually but as a collective set of processes of making and unmaking delta space.

Not all projects at play in the delta are about climate change. Nor do all projects that mobilize the imagination of rising seas and salted lands operate with the same valence and to the same ends. I have used the concept of “frontier” in this book less as a descriptive term and more as a diagnostic tool to begin tracing the linkages between divergent projects. As I note in this book’s introduction, there are many dynamics of frontiers. These have been subject in recent years to a vast amount of scholarly analysis. But in this book, I have traced three dynamics that are centrally important to the formation of the delta as climate frontier. I have focused on its visions, its materiality, and its forms of capture to paint a picture of the delta as a space uncomfortably wedged between past and future.<sup>7</sup>

*Visions.* A fundamental dynamic of frontier-making in the delta is the imaginative rendering of delta space as open to urgent intervention—a place in need of

conservation policing, a place open for new experiments in resilient development, a place of economic and geopolitical integration. Imagination, as a place-making dynamic, is multiple. No single imagination of place is singularly implicated in the production of delta futures. However, imaginations of the delta's present and future—for example, the delta as a zone of impending climate chaos—circumscribe what is and what is not possible on this climate frontier. They are, further, central to determining what kinds of life and livelihood matter in the delta, and what constitutes risks and threats.

Imagination, as a dynamic, cuts multiple ways. If imaginations of place are productive of those places, the reverse is also true. Here, for example, the vision of the delta as a zone of climate dystopia captures the imagination of audiences in places such as the US and Europe. This, in turn, fuels the funding and implementation of projects that render the delta as precisely that—an imperiled zone in which the key fact of life is impending climate catastrophe. These imaginations yield, for example, interventions like climate-smart houses designed to turn their residents into resilient peasants standing against a future of rising tides and footloose migration, as I explored in chapter 1. Such projects are wholly inadequate in addressing the complexities of either life or environmental change in the delta zone. But they do reinforce global imaginations of the delta as a front line in the war against climate change and its displacing effects. Imaginative framings, across scales, of the delta as a remote, endangered, but possibly productive zone produce it as frontier space—they enable and transform the kinds of projects, social relations, dynamics of governance, and anxieties about security that unfold within them. Imagination thus produces the delta as a sensitive terrain where possibility is organized by or in relation to anxieties about the delta's future—that is to say, a climate frontier.<sup>8</sup>

*Materiality.* Throughout this book, I have also argued that if we wish to understand how these imaginations play out—to trace what happens when imaginations of the future are superimposed onto the delta present, and why—we must also attend to the materiality and biological complexity of delta space. That is, we must attend to the ways that future-making unfolds not on but within and through the delta's terrain. A central dynamic of this conversation is the way that delta water and land stubbornly refuse to remain fixed in singular dimensional forms. Despite projects of keeping the wet wet and the dry dry (seawalls, embankments, sluice gates, etc.), dimensional change in the delta—the shifting from solid to liquid and back—remains an inexorable part of daily life. The delta is a space of transition and transformation, constantly in dimensional flux—from wet, to dry, to the damp in-between.

To that end, I have argued that the delta is best understood not as a landscape but rather as a siltscape. As siltscape, the delta fouls the attempts of engineers, dredgers, planners, politicians, and others to maintain a distinction between the wet and the dry. The delta siltscape may seem to remain fixed in place for a time, but it is always in the process of moving back toward the muddy, transient, and

often insidious damp. This siltscapes, as I have argued, is a terrain of recalcitrance: a continual refusal to adhere to binaries that sort matter into its proper place. But as importantly, it provides a material basis for the making and unmaking of frontier projects. The postcolonial history of the shrimp frontier, its transition to a crab frontier, and the re-imagination of both within the framework of climate, which I explored in chapter 2, demand that we see the muddy terrain of the delta as intimately entangled with frontier-making. Similarly, the biological complexities of the delta—its abilities to facilitate certain kinds of life, its shifting habitats, its increasing salinity balances—are not incidental to the making of the climate frontier but are rather its basis.

*Capture.* To understand this climate frontier, I have attended to the complex interworkings of capture as an elementary form of frontier power. On this climate frontier, fishermen capture marine life, dakat groups prey on fishermen, shrimp and crab farmers grab lands, the government attempts to control both the past and the future, NGOs capture the imaginations of audiences elsewhere, and more. In these pages, I have framed capture as a loose way to trace predatory spatial and temporal strategies that deploy force to take humans, animals, resources, and territories into captivity for various ends. “Capture” encompasses literal practices of capture (fishermen capturing marine resources, bandits removing fishermen from boats, etc.), but it also encompasses the capture of rents and resources through the exercise of power, the more-than-human networks of hunting and capture that constitute life and livelihoods within the mangroves, the enrollment of global populations anxious about the future, and competing projects of seizing and controlling land and territory. Capture brings seemingly distinct processes of controlling the delta—conservation, policing, development, syndicates, banditry, and more—into relation with each other in ways that allow us to see their connections anew. It allows us to trace, as I do in chapter 4, the ways that new interventions in conserving the mangrove forests for the future fundamentally reconfigure—but do not erase—the territorial politics of fishing and dakati, radically increasing precarity for fishermen who make their living in the Sundarbans’s waterways.

My proposition has been that if we are to understand frontiers as processes—as forms of territorialization that happen to, in, and through certain spaces, as opposed to being innate qualities of those spaces themselves—then attending to capture helps us to map the often surprising contours of what happens within them. The making of a frontier at large is a process of legitimizing and facilitating capture, often of land and resources. It is not surprising, therefore, that the assembling of spaces like the delta as a frontier involves the knitting together of a myriad set of techniques of appropriation and seizure. To approach frontiers through capture is simply to ask how the capture of rents articulates with the seizure of land, the act of resource extraction, the mobilization of global anxieties to implement new kinds of projects, the production of new “natural” resources, and more. It is to suggest that these interrelationships are more than correlative; that

they are, indeed, constitutive of an ecology of power. And it is to posit that these linkages provide a key to understanding the making of a region at a particular moment of time.

#### PERSISTENT PRESENTS

The last time I saw Jolil was in Munshiganj. Jolil, who I had never seen off Gabura before, excitedly waved us down from across the street as we were riding past on Riton's motorcycle. "The government has given me a pension," Jolil told us. He pulled out a bank card, which he proudly displayed and then, just as quickly, tucked away. Jolil had an appointment at the bank, where he was going to learn how to use the card to extract money promised to him as an incentive to retire from fishing. We pressed Jolil for more details, but he was characteristically vague and in a rush.<sup>9</sup> He had time to say hello, but no time to talk. As Jolil waved to us and made to leave, I asked him if this meant he would retire from working the Sundarbans. He laughed and replied, "Of course not. How else will I make a living?"

This is a question that looms large for people like Jolil, whose livelihoods continue to rely on their ability to either work their increasingly saline land or to extract resources from the increasingly regulated mangroves. The delta's imagined futures do not seem to hold a space for people like Jolil, whether it is figured as a space of imminent catastrophe peopled with a few resilient peasants clinging to their development-enhanced homes, as a conservation zone where the future of the mangrove forest has been secured by the progressive reduction of small-scale resource extraction within it, or as a zone of urban and industrial development, where climate migration fuels sustainable (and sustained) growth. While, as I explored in chapter 5, new visions of climate urbanism in Mongla imagine the city as a receiving zone for the delta's future displaced, it is hard to imagine people like Jolil as fitting into such a future. They lack the education and training necessary to find work in many of the businesses opening in Mongla's export processing zone. They know that migration to urban areas (whether proximate ones such as Mongla or more remote ones such as Dhaka or Kolkata) would likely force them to take hard and insecure jobs at low pay—that such a move would likely increase, rather than reduce, their precarity. Indeed, they know this very well, as many friends and relatives from the delta's agrarian landscape have already been forced to make such a transition. As importantly, for all of the difficulties of life in the delta—storms, dakats, tigers, government policing units, and more—bawalis like Jolil do not wish to abandon life in the Sundarbans or in the delta's agrarian space. Even as others frame their homes as uninhabitable—as resting on real or metaphorical crumbling embankments—they insist on continuing to inhabit them.

This persistence stands in stark contrast to the forms of resilient development explored in chapter 1. Rather than a politics of anticipating future shocks and girding homes, habitats, and jobs against them, it is a politics and an ethics for the time

being<sup>10</sup>—a set of strategies that are predicated on maintaining life and livelihoods against ever-increasing uncertainty and risk, of staying in places where peasant and fisher lives are constantly imagined as absent, problematic, or doomed. It is far from utopian. As these pages have shown, evading being captured by others' imagination of the delta's future exposes people like Jolil to a multiplicity of new, changing, and often difficult-to-chart forms of capture and expropriation in their everyday life—dakats prowling the mangroves, tigers inside and out of the Sundarbans, forest officials seeking to police and sometimes extort payments, and new forms of organizing land development initiatives and export-oriented production. There is no evading the cycles of capture and release in the delta siltscape. Yet persistence, if nothing else, affords those who do remain in the delta a chance to confront these cycles on their own terms, to choose the ways that they navigate the confluence of futures and pasts that occupy the delta's present.

If the project of critique is to offer alternative explanations that might frame possible different outcomes, the ideas and experiences of people like Jolil are instructive. People who fish the delta's rivers and work its siltscape often have enlightening ideas that offer an alternative—an otherwise and othertime—to grand projects framing delta futures. Some of these emerge through alternative policy and programming suggestions. Some of these are incisive critiques of the ways that current interventions do more to increase risk for those who work the delta than to stem it. Some of these are stories that offer vernacular explanations and theories of the ways that power works across scale on the climate frontier. These narratives do not offer simple solutions or clear alternatives. They do not unmake the climate frontier. But they do important work nonetheless. They reframe the delta, and the lives and experiences of its residents, not as a space where the near future has been evacuated but as an imperiled present where grappling with future-making projects might help us to rethink the risks of planning for multiple incommensurate futures at the same time. Such a subaltern perspective on climate futures recasts the diminishment and erasure of delta lives not as an inevitability but as only one (or some) of the many possible delta futures emerging from its damp and muddy terrain.

Jolil, and hundreds of thousands like him, thus persist in delta space. While pension schemes and job retraining programs may speed the transition for some from agrarian peasant or forest worker to urban laborer, it remains hard for many of them to see a better future outside of the delta. It also remains difficult for me to envision a delta future without them in it. Future-making in the delta constitutes an evacuation of the present and near future, but that does not mean an erasure. Unquestionably, the present and its occupants persist. And if it seems unlikely that the various projects of future-making afoot in the delta will bring about the specific ends to which they are set, that does not mean that they are not productive, that they do not produce an inhabited space in the present—a space in which delta residents continue to forge livelihoods and lives.