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# Coastlines, Oceans and Rivers of North America

## Encounters and Ecocrises

Since 2013, artist Sarah Cameron Sunde has brought her *36.5* site-specific performance to different coastal areas of the world. She stands, motionless, for an entire tidal cycle, usually 12 or 13 hours, in between land and sea. As the project's website<sup>1</sup> explains, *36.5* is a

durational performance with the sea [...] that engage[s] people on personal, local, and global scales in conversations around deep time and sea-level rise. It began with a poetic gesture—standing in water for 12 hours and 48 minutes while the tide rose and fell on her body—and has grown into a complex, collaborative, evolving series of works spanning seven years and six continents. (Sunde, n.d.)

By traveling to different locations threatened by the rise of sea level, Sunde participates in the locally specific relation of human, territory, and water, while stressing the commonality of certain histories and phenomena. She describes her experience of standing in the rising water as a deep communing with the elements: “*water engulfs my body and then recedes again. The tide tracks time on my body viscerally, and functions as a metaphor for the changing environment. The water is my collaborator and the risks are real. I stay present in the sensations, attempt to embody the ocean and find a way to endure the struggle*” (Sunde, n.d., italics in the original). Situated in the tradition of artistic reckoning with the oceans,<sup>2</sup> Sunde's performance

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Cameron Sunde, *36.5/A Durational Performance with the Sea* (2013 – present) <https://www.36pt5.org/>. Last visited 20/06/2022.

<sup>2</sup> In the last few decades a number of artists have created sculptures or performance art that position the human body or its representations at the intersection of landscape and seascape, often as an open critique of the human species' negligence to address climate change, but also as a memorial to the history of exploitation, extraction, and violence perpetrated along the coastlines. See, among others: Antony Gormley's *Another Place* (1997, Germany); Pedro Marzorati's *When the Tides Ebb and Flow* (2008, Netherlands); Isaac Cordal's *Waiting for Climate Change* (2013, France); Jason deCaires Taylor's *The Raft of Lampedusa* (2016, Spain).

has been discussed in a forum on the journal *Resilience*, where Stacy Alaimo, in her piece titled “Standing,” emphasized Sunde’s immobility as a way to imagine new “modes of relationality”:

Sunde's striking and prolonged stillness—she does not float, swim, or tread water—removes this encounter from practices of resource extraction as well as from familiar cultural frames for aquatic experience, such as the athletic, adventurous, sublime, or touristic. Nothing is taken from the water; nor is the water put to use; nor is it—as far as viewers can discern—experienced as a sensual, exhilarating, or aesthetic pleasure. This is, instead, a steadfast, even stoic, *witnessing* of waves, flows, and tides, an invitation to imagine the vast potential for new modes of relationality to be realized through purposefully allowing oneself to be acted on. (Alaimo 2020, 228)



**Fig. 1:** 36.5 Bass Harbor, Maine, 2013

Through artistic performances and other forms of intellectual inquiry, in the last few years questions of environmental concerns have been reoriented as to include the coastal areas and the interstitial spaces between land and sea as a significant and paramount object of study, and as a critical vehicle for reflecting on a network of relations among natural elements and human

agents. As demonstrated by a number of scholars, and by the essays included in this special issue, the ‘coastal’ critical angle articulates long-standing and ever-present questions that deal with environmental racism, appropriation, capital accumulation, and crises embodied in different kinds of cultural artifacts and literary forms.

In this special issue of *Iperstoria*, we intend to contribute to this field of study by investigating how the land/water boundaries of North America are home to complex cultural dynamics, and can therefore be seen as laboratories of cultural and social experimentation. The coastal and waterway cultures of the American continent are sites where encounter, exploration, exploitation, and experiment in integration have constantly been shaped by impending crises and threats of environmental disaster. The shorelines and waterways of those areas, inhabited by more than a half of that continent's population and for many centuries a focal point in the continent's historical, social and economic transformations, now find themselves at the forefront of the unfolding climate crises, that are both re-shaping geographies and re-inventing cultural practices.

American and Canadian coastal regions have been molded by their colonial and imperial past so that they can be defined as “contact zones”<sup>3</sup>—borrowing the term from Mary Louise Pratt—in a complex transnational and transcontinental cultural dynamic. The coastlines and waterways of the so-called New World, since the early colonial era, have always functioned as laboratories of cultural and social interaction and mutual scrutiny between groups of peoples, witnessing oftentimes acts of brutality and deprivation. Their very geographical position, and geomorphological formation, have exposed them to constant human exploitation and ecological damage, also endangering encounters and social experiments.

By considering the environmental dangers and catastrophic outcomes of these specific locations, and investigating the long haul of settler colonialism and enslavement on the American coastlines, this special issue draws from recent studies, such as Tiffany Lethabo King's *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (2019), to concentrate on “a space of liminality, indeterminacy, and location of suture between two hermeneutical frames that have conventionally been understood as sealed off from each other.” By shifting to a liminal space between land and water, we seek to bring attention to “new conceptual tools to navigate its terrain” (King 2019, 4), and to open up new avenues of awareness and debate.

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<sup>3</sup> This critical term, particularly germane for our study, has been famously introduced by Pratt in her seminal *Imperial Eyes: Travel Eyes and Transculturation*, where she defines “contact zones” those “social spaces where disparate meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relation of domination and subordination—such as colonialism and slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today” (Pratt 2008, 7).

In *The Great Derangement* (2016), Amitav Ghosh has identified the parallel fates that have presided over the emergence of key urban centers in the old and the new worlds: their proximity to water—a fundamental asset for their commercial expansion—at some point became the main threat to their survival, as rising water levels began to render uncertain the viability of coastal cities.

It is surely no accident that colonial cities like Mumbai, New York, Boston and Kolkata were all brought into being through early globalization. They were linked to each other not only through the circumstances of their founding but also through patterns of trade that expanded and accelerated Western economies. These cities were thus the drivers of the very processes that now threaten them with destruction. In that sense, their predicament is but an especially heightened instance of a plight that is now universal. (2016, 54)

Gosh sees the current plight of coastal cities around the world as emblematic of the “utter recklessness” that has always characterized the human relationship with the environment, shaping in every culture the “precariousness of human existence” (2016, 55) that, according to the writer, has always been at the core of literary imagination.

Those colonial and post-colonial outcomes of human “recklessness” are places now facing the most immediate threats of extinction—threats that have been accelerated by changing climate conditions. The majority of the world’s largest cities lie in coastal zones and their precariousness is increased by their dependence on services that can be hampered by extreme weather. Coastal infrastructures at risk include electricity, clean water, wastewater treatment, nuclear power plants, and general industry. In his *Extreme Cities* (2017), a ground-breaking analysis of the vulnerability of North American cities in this age of climate chaos, Ashley Dawson discusses how cities concurrently drive climate change while being on the frontlines of the coming climate crisis. The fact that “the majority of the world’s megacities are in coastal zones threatened by sea level rise” is what Dawson has called the “deadly contradiction that is one of the most overlooked facts of the twenty-first century.” As more than 75 percent of the world’s population is projected to live within 120 miles of the sea by 2025, “anthropogenic climate disruption—claims Dawson—is going to dramatically alter the world’s cities, and it is here that the effects of climate change will be of most consequence” (2017, 125).

In October 2019, two scientists from Climate Central (a US non-profit organization), Scott A. Kulp and Benjamin H. Strauss, published a study in the journal *Nature* showing that climate change will put three times more people at risk of coastal flooding by 2050 than previously thought. The study found that 300 million people are now living on land that is likely to flood at least once a year on average by mid-century without adequate sea defenses, even if

governments manage to make sharp cuts in emissions. Earlier estimates had put that figure at about 80 million. China, Bangladesh, India and Vietnam account for the bulk of the at-risk population. Given the constant increase of extreme climate events around the world, we would not be surprised if that very recent forecast were proven to be an underestimation.

In November 2019, on the 40th anniversary of the first world climate conference, 11,000 scientists issued a warning in the journal *BioScience*: the world's people face "untold suffering due to the climate crisis" unless there are major transformations to global society. In order to secure a sustainable future, they write, "we must change how we live [which] entails major transformations in the ways our global society functions and interacts with natural ecosystems" (Ripple, et al. 2020, 11).

Even more recently, in November 2021, the United Nations's 26th global conference on climate (COP26), while on the one hand making progress in recommending initiatives aimed at containing the rise of global temperatures, failed to find a convergence among nations to keep that rise within the fated 1.5 degrees Celsius, the threshold beyond which, according to scientists, catastrophic outcomes for the planet are to be expected, especially for those ecosystems and populations living in areas particularly prone to risk.

The current conflict in Ukraine and others around the world are putting the already meager measures that were agreed upon at COP26 under threat: the new geopolitical crisis emerging from a war that is closely tied to global energy policies, may slow down even further our much needed emancipation from fossil fuels (coal, first of all) and our transition to renewable sources, whose strict time constraints now seem to have become incompatible with the worsening global political scenario.

It is within this ever growing political, climate, and environmental crisis that we feel that the resources of scholarly research need to be mobilized to better understand the scope of this crisis. It is only if we understand, and manage to properly communicate that understanding, that public consciousness can be raised to pressure decision-makers into not losing sight of the global climate crisis. The papers in this special section are meant as contributions to the ongoing reflection on how these dire conditions came to be and how culture can contribute to offer a viable way forward.

The present essays included in *Iperstoria* address the ways in which, now and in the past, the cultures developing along the coastlines, oceans and rivers of North America have been put in danger by reckless human behavior and decisions. The cultural texts that our contributors engage in are rich and diverse, and comprising different disciplines and methodological approaches. While some articles (by Parrish, Di Loreto and Wildermuth) examine the past, with

its painful legacy of racism, colonialism and extraction, others (by Carosso, Dawson, Concilio, Luebken, Scarpino, and Zehelein) are critiques of contemporary environmental catastrophes and human damage.

In her essay, Susan Scott Parrish puts two distinct periods in conversation, namely the modernizing era (1500-1850) and the recent present, to offer a very brief history of an Atlantic coastal imaginary over the long *durée*. She looks at how the European iconography of Atlantic coastal encounters developed in the early modern period, redefining the geography and the epistemology of divine-human relations and participating in the invention of racial difference. Parrish examines how a contemporary Black historical novelist, Esi Edugyan, working in the genres of the neoslave narrative and the scientific adventure tale in her 2018 novel *Washington Black*, written during a time of rising coastal peril, uses circumatlantic coastal locations to imagine the making of a Black naturalist—a naturalist who, importantly, shifts the definitions of knowledge, race, and the sacred he has inherited from imperial British science. Setting the tone and inscribing the analysis in a long temporal trajectory, the essay thus offers two glances at coastal transformations: the first at European promises of Atlantic expansion granting divine redemption, and the second at a contemporary story that suggests how historical Black risk-informed knowledge might help us reimagine our relation to the nonhuman world now. Continuing with an analysis of colonial relations, Di Loreto's article concentrates on shipwreck narratives, offering some reflections on the different types of shipwreck stories, in order to then focus on the novel *The Female American*, anonymously published in 1767. As a truly transatlantic text, this work is in conversation with both *The Tempest* (1611) and *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and as a shipwreck narrative it provides a remarkable model of settler colonialism and extractivist accumulation based equally on aesthetic pleasure, and on the symbolic and exchange value of colonial artifacts. The article deems this text to be a re-writing and revision of an imperial fantasy, situated at the intersection of a series of economic systems, where gifts are not in opposition to the plundering and extractivist process of acquiring already manufactured artifacts, and where the liminal position of coastal traffic allows the protagonist to enter and to participate in the global market of colonial commodities.

Moving from the oceanic regions to the domestic water boundaries of the American continent, Andrew Wildermuth engages in revisionist close readings of the first chapters of *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843*, where Margaret Fuller documents the beginning of a journey through the Great Lakes region during the era of "Indian removal" and the U.S. invasion and settling of lands further westward. The article argues that while Fuller builds an understanding of the world that is directable and fluid, the ability to reform the world is in her writing, through a

theory of fixed racial hierarchies, reserved only for the white settler. In close readings, the author demonstrates how on the banks of the mighty flows of Niagara Falls, the Great Lakes, and the Rock River, the text documents and attempts to direct the fluid power flows of a continent—and, parallel to this, how it focuses on theorizing the divergent “settler” and “Indian” at the crossroads of what Fuller calls “inevitable, fatal” white progress. *Summer on the Lakes’* aesthetics and politics become exemplary of what Wildermuth calls “Transcendental settlerism,” suggesting a more thoroughly understanding of the legacy of Transcendentalism and the history of race, colony, and liberal imaginaries of progress in the United States.

In conversation with the historical and cultural past of the American continent, the subsequent essays employ their critical lenses to investigate the present. One crucial point of departure for this analysis is hurricane Katrina, discussed by Andrea Carosso. His essay, in fact, examines how film and media representations have become a crucial tool of political response to the Katrina emergency, by framing it as emblematic of the compounded crises that so-called ‘extreme natural events’ highlight, involving the exacerbation of social injustice and second-class citizenship, the questioning of the relationship between natural phenomena and man-made disaster, and the special vulnerability of coastal cities to the effects of climate change. By analyzing four visual texts emerging from the Katrina crisis—Spike Lee’s *When the Levee Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006), Carl Deal and Tia Lessin’s *Trouble the Water* (2008), HBO’s *Treme* (2009-2013), Benh Zeitlin’s *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012)—this paper frames ecocatastrophe as a new conceptual paradigm of modernity.

In his essay, Ashley Dawson asks crucial questions in the conflictual process that is urban adaptation to the climate crisis: how the climate crisis gets represented, who gets to speak, and how their speech is rendered. This essay offers an analysis of the conflict over the East Side Coastal Resiliency project. The ESCR, and the broader Rebuild By Design process out of which it grew, are particularly significant examples of efforts to adapt a major global city like New York to the climate emergency. Will efforts to adapt or abandon coastal cities to the climate crisis entrench or ameliorate the soaring social stratification that characterizes most of the planet’s megacities? This essay turns to the controversial redevelopment process surrounding the East Side Coastal Resiliency project to explore these and related questions.

Focusing on a different area of the North American continent, Concilio’s essay demonstrates how soundscapes might be harbingers of environmental crises and, consequently, how literature translates those same soundscapes and the stories they have to tell. While exploring soundscapes as theorized by Raymond Murray Schafer (1933-2021), one of the most renowned Canadian composers and communication scholars, this contribution also aims at detecting his

influence on Canadian writers and artists in their literary and creative renditions of Canada's most characterizing waterscapes. The significance of water in the intellectual production of such a renowned public intellectual as Joan Didion, is the focus of Scarpino's essay. Water, in fact, and California water to be precise, is a recurring presence in Joan Didion's work, both her fiction and nonfiction; it is, indeed, an "obsession." In this article, the author analyzes two essays of the 1970's ("At the Dam," "Holy Water") and Didion 2003 memoir *Where I Was From*, arguing that water control—as epitomized by the Hoover Dam and California water history—has its counterpart in control over writing, the total command of Didion's obsessively honed prose.

The two final essays concentrate again on specific locations, thus once more shifting the visual and critical perspective. Luebken's article focuses on the short history of Vanport, Oregon, located in a floodplain, between the city limits of Portland, Oregon, and the Columbia River on reclaimed bottom lands. Vanport was created in 1942 as a huge public housing project to accommodate thousands of workers who had flocked to the region to work for the wartime industries, most importantly the Kaiser Shipbuilding Corporation, and it was entirely inundated by a flood in 1948 and never rebuilt. At that time, some 18,000 people, down from the wartime peak of 40,000, still lived in Vanport, many of them African Americans. This paper looks at the history of Vanport and the site where the city once stood from a socio-cultural and environmental perspective. Thus, by tracing the fate of those flood victims that had to settle in Portland's Black neighborhood Albina, it highlights cultural encounters with the legacy of displacement, and it elaborates on the recent surge in memory activism.

In her essay, Zehelein tackles Karen Russell's short story "The Gondoliers," arguing that, far from being speculative fiction *à la* Atwood or just another cli-fi piece, this is a genre b(l)ending text, a "Southern Gothic 2.0." Rife with intertextual references, it entwines cli-fi with the "freakishly imaginative" (Roy 2019) which is Russell's signature hallmark—the mythological, supernatural and magical realist, maybe even the surreal. The story employs the post-apocalyptic scenery of climate change induced "New Florida" to hint at current social iniquities and draws on timeless ruminations about individualism and identity also to comment on contemporary discourses about epistemological uncertainty.

Through a wide range of case studies, objects of analysis and critical preoccupations, with this collection of essays, like Sarah Cameron Sunde, we intend to "take a critical look at where we stand, reigniting the conversation around extreme weather events, climate change, and sea level rise," (Sunde 2020, 202) and we would like our readers to participate in this collective reflection, going at the root of ecocrises in order to raise awareness about an "elsewhere catastrophe" that is already and has always been here (Brickhouse 2022).



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