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WET DATA:
THE OCEAN AND ITS NEGATIVE ARCHIVE

by

KENDRA SULLIVAN

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2016

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Wet Data:

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Kendra Sullivan

Advisor: Sophia Perdikaris

This paper and the poetry cycle (*Wet Data*, see appendix 1) it describes are in dialogue with a wide array of social and cultural histories of the sea; the production of the sea as a social, economic, and militarized space; maritime ethnographies; as well as artistic and literary projects stemming out of what are now being termed offshore art and forensic literature. The ocean is traditionally conceived of in one of several ways: a transport surface upon which the movement of goods from port to port is orchestrated; a resource provider which supports fishing communities, and later, the fishing industry, the oil industry, the pharmaceutical industry, and the rare Earth mineral industry. It is additionally a contested territory that plays a profound and often unseen role in defining geopolitics and nationalism under globalism. In eco-critical and creative art contexts, the sea is often represented as a metaphor for loss, the outside, a void, and the unknown; the sea-voyage is often deployed a metaphor for the journey of life and the boat as a site of transgression. Through poetic, archival, and forensic practices, artists and writers turn their gaze toward the sea, giving order to its “negative archives.” Which practitioners are breaking into and finding means to represent, communicate, and learn from this “unknown” in the face of increasing global inequity and the climate crisis, and how efficacious are the methodologies they employ? Can such practitioners transcend the position of spectator through their creative engagement with and exposure of tragedy at sea?

Foreword: This hybrid work investigates the many ways in which practitioners of different fields come to know and express the sea. It can only be a start as the sea is deep and this text is short. I am grateful to Sophia Perdikaris for her support as well as her own work in Barbuda. It inspires. I am grateful to Matthew Gold, Katherine Koutsis, and all of the faculty and students at the Graduate Center who helped make pursuing a Masters in Liberal Studies such a moving intellectual experience.

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1. Introduction to *Wet Data*

“Many years since you looked at this map, Pilot?”

“Years... 11 years!”

- *From Gulf to Gulf to Gulf* (2013), CAMP

In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Jacques Derrida writes that the archive is sheltered from the memory that it shelters. It forgets itself.¹ The aim of this paper is to provide some methodological and conceptual framework for the accompanying creative, text-based component of an ongoing art and research project. The creative text, tentatively called *Wet Data*, weds a long-standing interest in the apparently disparate fields of archival and oceanographic studies. Influenced by the work of photographer and theorist Allan Sekula, poet Caroline Bergvall, international art collective CAMP, and research and judiciary group Forensic Architecture, the work examines what types of submerged archival forms are sheltered by the sea and its environs, which remain in spite of their proximity and ubiquity to the land and its inhabitants, fundamentally opaque. This paper will also briefly describe the ways in which artists, scholars, and writers access these effluvial archives through artistic, anthropological, and literary practices, while expanding on the juncture between the archive and the eco-critical creative project in the context of the ongoing climate crisis.

Allan Sekula and his collaborator Noel Burch called the sea “the forgotten space of our modernity” in their film about the 24-trillion dollar containerized shipping economy, *The Forgotten Space* (2010). Sekula writes that we have “lost contact with the sea’s archive of primitive organic structures.”² But in the age of climate change the sea is reestablishing contact. In this paper I refer

¹ Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,” *Diacritics* Vol 25, No. 2 (1995): 9-63.

² Allan Sekula, *Fish Story* (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 2014), 11.

to the historical and biological “memories” sheltered by the sea as speculative or “negative archives.”³ Artist and activist Mariam Ghani coined the term “warm data” to describe the endangered archives of nations at war, of suppressed archives kept up at great cost to their citizen archivists.⁴ For the purposes of this project, I postulate that “wet data” is an archive in motion, an archive in constant state of fragmentation, dispersed by deep basin currents, the “global conveyor belt,”⁵ and submerged.

This paper and creative project can only make inroads into an expansive field of study that would necessarily incorporate multiple modes of knowing and describing the world – such as anthropology, oceanography, hydrography, and history, to name only a few. In order to glimpse this negative archive, we must look at cartography, boat design, port towns, the organization of labor, lost continents, marine painting, maritime literature, ethnographic writing, war and territoriality, fish tales, trash gyres, and even adventure narratives. Simultaneously, an archaeological examination of ocean plastics, biological catastrophes, and tragedies at sea can activate other readings of the archive.

How do we as a society perceive and represent the ocean? In *Fish Story*, a three part, five-year, interdisciplinary art, archival, and writing project depicting a transection of pelagic labor politics after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Allan Sekula writes: “What one sees in a harbor is the concrete movement of goods. This movement can be explained in its totality only through recourse to abstraction.”⁶ Consider for a moment the various methods of capturing and communicating the ocean: undersea maps, sonar, migration tracking, maritime art and literature, seismographic data, ship logs, insurance claims, sales records, and wind, current, and depth charts.

³ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Dismal Science* (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 2014), 85.

⁴ Mariam Ghani, “Divining the Question: An Unscientific Methodology for the Collection of Warm Data,” *Viralnet* (2006).

⁵ “National Ocean Service: The Global Conveyor Belt,” NOAA, last accessed August 22, 2016, <http://oceanservice.noaa.gov/education/kits/currents/06conveyor2.html>.

⁶ Sekula, *Fish Story*, 11.

Poet M. NourbeSe Philip's *ZONG!* is a poetry cycle that represents the negative archive of memory, history, law, and loss at sea. Philip excavates public court records from *Gregson v. Gilbert*, the trial of a slave ship captain who murdered by drowning 150 Africans for insurance monies in 1781.⁷ The legal documentation becomes an incantatory index of the deceased.

CAMP's website – <http://studio.camp> – states “CAMP was started in November 2007 as an artist's space in Mumbai, India. CAMP is not an artist's collective but a workspace gathering ideas, sensibilities, and energies.” CAMP's *Wharfage* is book project that offers a comprehensive tabulation of departures, arrivals, and goods (and their quantities) on the hand-built, wooden boats that circulate between the port city Salaya and a creek in Sharjah from January 2, 2008 - March 4, 2009.⁸ Because these transshipments are inscribed within “the arrow of trade” in and around Somalia's free trade zone, their exporters are able to operate as if they were not a part of any country and their exports are duty-free or, at least, duty-flexible. The circulation of goods has its own story to tell about how societies are entangled in transborders defined by water.

There are many instances when negative archives have been determined by the contents of the hold. Sekula tells the following story: “Sailors and dockers are in a position to see the global patterns of intrigue hidden in the mundane details of commerce. Sometimes the evidence is in fact bizarrely close at hand: *Weapons for the Iraqis in the forward hold. Weapons for the Iranians in the aft hold.* Spanish dockers in Barcelona laugh at the irony of loading cargo with antagonistic destinations.”⁹

Feminist environmental historian Max Liboiron accesses the negative archive through “baby legs,” a tool to measure ocean microplastics and fibers that she patented in 2014. Liboiron and her team track the toxic bondage between the manufacturing, the global market, local fishing economies,

⁷ M. NourbeSe Philip, *ZONG!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 12-25.

⁸ CAMP, *Wharfage* (Mumbai: Spenta Press, 2009), 53.

⁹ Sekula, *Fish Story*, 32.

and the sea around Newfoundland by charting the presence of submerged socio-cultural detritus, namely, trash. On her web journal, *Discard Studies*, Liboiron writes that “waste is not produced by individuals and is not automatically disgusting, harmful, or morally offensive, but that both the materials of discards and their meanings are part of wider sociocultural-economic systems. Our task is to interrogate these systems for how waste comes to be, and our work is often to offer critical alternatives to popular and normative notions of waste.”¹⁰ In essence, Liboiron promotes an investigation of waste: what is left out, left behind, devalued, vanished, drowned, and otherwise trashed. This methodology is essential when coaxing both material and immaterial histories from the sea.

Through such abstractions (legal records, commodity logs, and plastic accumulations), the vast ocean and its hidden violences are measured and rendered a little more legible (and to a lesser extent predictable) by and for the purposes of different social groups. Submerged histories can also be gleaned from registers of colonial expansion, piracy, military campaigns, and even the distribution of life forms on land.¹¹ What I hope to retrieve from these fluid archival forms in this paper and creative project is an indication of what the sea has meant to specific societies at specific times, and how these cumulative meanings have contributed to our understanding of the sea and society in modernity. In short, how do these illusive archives shape terrestrial life-worlds today?

2. Shifting Perspectives and Representations of the Sea

In *The Social Construction of the Ocean*, Philip E. Steinberg writes: “each era of capitalism, besides having a particular spatiality of land, has had a complementary – if often contrapuntal –

¹⁰ “About,” *Discard Studies*, last accessed August 22, 2016, <https://discardstudies.com/about/>.

¹¹ John Mack, *The Sea: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), 63.

spatiality at sea, with specific interest groups during each period promoting specific constructions of ocean space.”¹² Each culture develops a conception of the ocean that enables the fulfillment of needs, aims, and uses unique to its time, place, and inherent biases. The constructed relationship between humans, land, and the sea is forged by each era in accordance with its territorial and political economy as well as its conceptions of its own fixity, mobility, and spatiality as a governing body. Steinberg’s project merges meaningfully with *The Sea: A Cultural History* a similarly large-in-scope research project by art historian John Mack. He asks: what does the sea mean to subjects on land, how is the maritime world constituted, and in what ways do the “maritime and terrestrial worlds interact”?¹³

Oceanic New York is a more recent compendium of urban writers and artists discussing New York City’s waterfront, and by extension, what it means to be an urban center surrounded by water. In his contribution to the book, sculptor Granville Ganter describes the work of two recent eco-critics, William Ruckert and Angus Fletcher, who have written about art and poetry in terms of their environmental ontologies. Ganter writes: “For these critics, art about nature often comes to imitate the forces it describes. Poems become environments in themselves, bundles of stored energy in flux. For these critics, writing about the environment is not just a description of the processes in the environment – the words become a living allegory of the environment to the extent that they actually become parallel worlds.”¹⁴ Prolific eco-critical philosopher Timothy Morton describes this braiding together of multiple features into single systems as *enmeshment*.¹⁵ Enmeshment is a process

¹² Philip E. Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 4.

¹³ Mack, 11.

¹⁴ Granville Ganter, “Miss Newtown Creek,” *Oceanic New York*, ed. Steve Mentz (New York: Punctum Books, 2015), 23.

¹⁵ Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2009).

that connects human and non-human forces through vast systems such as weather or the power grid (an example explored at length in political philosopher Jane Bennet's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*).¹⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson's iconic description of the mutual dilation of the sun and his "immortal pupil" in *Nature* is a prime example of enmeshment in American literature.¹⁷ Another example of the collapse of nature into poetic space is Denise Levertov's poem "To The Reader," wherein she describes the sea "turning/ its dark pages" while the reader reads.¹⁸

Each culture has its own techniques of oceanic representation and creative technicians who tell its story. Who is telling the story of the sea in contemporary times of climate change, mass migration, and global capital? Similarly, there are as many types of ocean travel as types of travelers. Below is a cursory timeline of how different cultures rely on and develop different perceptive tools and physical technologies in navigating. This timeline is as an aid in demonstrating the ever-shifting relationship of land inhabitants to the sea and its archives.

The first known human navigators traveled between "points of intervisibility,"¹⁹ that is, between proximal shores visible to the unaided human eye. Roughly around the turn of the Common Era, Polynesians traveled the open ocean between far-flung islands splayed across a surface of the Earth larger than North America in human-powered, outrigger canoes. They found their way by use of a song-based mapping system.²⁰

Meanwhile, Greek and Roman galley ships employed a sailing technique known as "coasting" to travel along the Mediterranean shoreline, navigating by visually registering cliffs, caves,

¹⁶ Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

¹⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," *Nature and Selected Essays* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003).

¹⁸ Denise Levertov, "To The Reader," *The Jacob's Ladder* (New York: New Directions, 1961).

¹⁹ Andrea Grover, *Radical Seafaring* (London: Prestel, 2016), 21.

²⁰ Mack, 63.

and rocky outcroppings. They hugged the land because they required its resources to fuel their many rowers in the galleys.²¹

Until 1500 AD, the Indian Ocean was perceived as a space of distance between ports, only navigable during brief, calm breaks in long bouts of weather inhospitable to travel. Navigation, in that time and place and for those peoples, was largely a matter of understanding seasonal winds and directional currents. British archaeologist Neville Chittick once wrote that the Indian Ocean was “arguably the largest cultural continuum in the world during the first millennium and a half CE,” and the image of the trading wheel is often evoked to describe the spatiality of the sea.²²

In his work on the shipwreck and the sea voyage as metaphors for the way people understand their life-world, theorist Hans Blumenberg argues that in antiquity the sea voyage implied transgression of natural boundaries, and that this transgression wrought shipwreck and disaster.²³ He further claims that this perspective was gradually replaced by the impulse toward mastery of nature during the Renaissance.²⁴

In the 15-17th centuries the world was globalized by European sailors ushering in new, networked conceptions of language, culture, and domination. Steinberg and others have argued that these expansionist tendencies shifted the relationship between the land, the sea, and its archives for good, thereby ushering in the era of modernity.²⁵ Fernand Braudel, a historian of the Mediterranean, writes: “The great technological revolutions between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries were artillery, printing and ocean navigation.” He goes on to say that only ocean navigation “led to an

²¹ Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Enemy of All: Piracy and the Law of Nations* (New York: Zone Books, 2009), 25.

²² Quoted in Mack, 62.

²³ Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* (Boston: MIT Press, 1996).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Steinberg, 65.

imbalance, or asymmetry, between different parts of the globe.”²⁶ These systems of asymmetry are still played out as migrants in open boats cross the dangerous Mediterranean in search of political asylum, a phenomenon that this paper will address through the lens of surveillance, territoriality, and representation – with attention to the famous case of the “left-to-die” boat as it figures in two integrated art, writing, and research projects by Caroline Bergvall and Forensic Architecture.

In *The Enemy of All, Piracy and the Law of Nations*, Daniel Heller-Roazan notes that while England banned the trade of black Africans in 1807, it was only in 1815 that the Congress of Vienna followed suit. In 1820, the United States Congress “declared any citizen to have participated in the slave trade guilty of piracy and so punishable by death.” The world's open waters were increasingly legislated by international tribunals who sought to “cleanse the sea” of outlaws, and indeed, Captain Nathaniel Gordon, who was caught transporting enslaved peoples off the coast of West Africa on his ship *Eerie*, “was the last American to go the gallows for piracy” in 1862.²⁷

Theorist Sumathi Ramaswamy writes that during the Victorian era in Europe the sea was experienced as a metaphor for loss. In *The Lost Land Of Lemuria: Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories* Ramaswamy writes eloquently about imaginary, vanished worlds in the Victorian age, exploring the science, poetics, and politics of fictive landscapes such as Lemuria, Atlantis, and Mu, all said to have been swallowed by the sea by a “contraction” during “deep time.”²⁸ She postulates “high modernity has not been merely preoccupied with progress and advance, but also with loss and disappearance.”²⁹ The sea offers ample opportunity for both.

²⁶ Fernand Braudel, as quoted in Steinberg, 8.

²⁷ Roazan, 32.

²⁸ Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Lost Land Of Lemuria: Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories* (Oakland: UC Press, 2004), 51.

²⁹ Ramaswamy, 1.

“Lost continent” theories proliferated in the 17-19th centuries. Vanguard natural scientists, paleontologists, and fossil hunters were actively exhuming the bones of vanished beasts and “missing links” on land. Their destabilizing discoveries shattered long-held notions about the age and nature of planet Earth, shifting conceptions of the sea’s role in the creation and maintenance of life. In James Hutton’s *Theory of the Earth* written in 1788, he speculates that through a complex process of erosion and rebirth continents sink to the ocean floor before rising again as fresh continents in a “succession of worlds” with no beginning or end.³⁰

In 1798, French paleontologist George Cuvier wrote a paper championing the notion of extinction based on his discovery of similar mammoth jawbones in France, India, Africa, and even Siberia. The fact of extinction exploded the tidy envelope of human time and history. From there, he launched a theory of planetary restructuring called *catastrophism* (as opposed to the pervasive theory of *gradualism*). He writes: “Life in those times was often disturbed as a consequence of periodic oceanic floods.”³¹

Ramaswamy states, “The bottom had dropped out of a hitherto finite Earth history, opening up a deep (and to some, a dark) abyss, waiting to be filled by the human imagination.”³² To paraphrase Ramaswamy’s argument, it was an era preoccupied with recovering and restoring to human knowledge lands and animals that had been submerged. The ocean was the place where losses were preserved, recorded, and eventually, rebirthed.

Landscape architect Pierre Bélanger argues convincingly that when Barack Obama became President of the U.S. in 2008 there was shift in focus away from outer space expansion and toward expansion of oceanic territoriality. In 2011, Obama shut down the manned space shuttle program.

³⁰ James Hutton, *Theory of the Earth*, 187.

³¹ Gabriel Gohau, *A History of Geology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 58-60.

³² Ramaswamy, 19.

Three years later, Obama invoked the 1906 Antiquities Act “to create the largest marine protection zone in the Pacific Ocean.”³³ Ostensibly this was to protect endangered marine habitat, but has also been interpreted as a strategic military move. Bélanger names this shift “the oceanic turn.”³⁴

For a salient example of this turn today, we need only trace some popular conceptions of the sea imaginary in the contemporary press. In 2015, the BBC reported that water is an alien substance, arriving “in frozen lumps from space during one of the most violent episodes in our planet’s early history.”³⁵ This alien reimagining resonates with scholarship on the shadow biosphere, the theory that a hypothetical microbial biosphere cohabiting Earth hosts chemical and molecular processes unrecognizable as “life” as we know it. Scientists Carol Cleland and Shelley Copley first championed this theory in 2005.³⁶ Their claim is that humans share a planet with life forms that cannot be recognized as such and might be better classified as “alien.” Relatedly, the *New York Times* reports that in waters “where fish have faced serious declines [because of ocean-acidification], cephalopods are thriving,”³⁷ and a recent study in the journal *Nature* reports that octopuses possess genomes composed of 33,000 protein-coding genes that yield an *other-worldly* level of complexity.³⁸ In popular press, these studies are framed as suggesting that octopuses have alien DNA. What does it mean to say that during our present era the ocean and its inhabitants are represented as emissaries from outer space? Might it be related to the fact that the ways in which the ocean is legislated are not unlike the

³³ Pierre Bélanger, “The Other 71 Percent,” *Wet Matter*, No. 39 (Winter 2014), 3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Alok Jha/BBC, “Alien Origins of Earth’s Oceans,” accessed on August 22, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20150526-alien-origin-of-earths-oceans>

³⁶ Robin McKie/The Guardian, “Life on Earth... but not as we know it,” accessed on August 22, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2013/apr/14/shadow-biosphere-alien-life-on-earth>

³⁷ Nicholas St. Fleur/NYTimes, “Squids Are Thriving While Fish Decline,” accessed on August 22, 2016 <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/25/science/squid-are-thriving-while-fish-decline.html>

³⁸ Caroline B. Albertin, Oleg Simakov, et. al, “The octopus genome and the evolution of cephalopod neural and morphological novelties,” *Nature* 524, 220–224 (August 2015) doi:10.1038/nature14668, accessed August 22, 2016, <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v524/n7564/full/nature14668.html>

ways inner and outer airspace and cyberspace are legislated? Indeed, both domains face governance problems similar to those encountered as sea.³⁹

Systems of harvesting and trading fish, especially cod stocks, figured heavily into the definition of European modernity. The onset of containerization and implementation of bulkers for international transport in the advanced capitalist system ensured the transformation - beyond recognition - of docks as place-worlds and pivot points of culture. In addition, container ships shifted the imaginary and material geographies of the sea. To provide some figures that put these changes in perspective, at this moment close to seventy thousand container ships and over one million sailors are crossing the ocean.⁴⁰

Today, over twenty percent of the world's petroleum is extracted offshore.⁴¹ Developed countries are vying for control of the seabed to mine minerals, to lay cables that provide physical infrastructure for moving information through digital space, and to explore the pharmacological potentials of marine biota.⁴² The ocean is now viewed as an essential material component of the extractive industries, the technology sector, and the realm of health and genetics.⁴³

Only after WWII were humans able to develop the technologies necessary to map the ocean floor through a process of sounding, controlled explosions, seismographic charting, and physiographic mapping perfected by the geologist and cartographer Marie Tharp. Tharp's careful reading of data (collected by men on boats she was barred by superstition from boarding) proved that the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, and therefore the Continental Drift, were actual facts of nature. French

³⁹ Steinberg, 7.

⁴⁰ Dylan Gauthier, *Just Add Water, Mare Liberum Broadsheet for Radical Seafaring* (Water Mill: Parrish Art Museum, 2016).

⁴¹ Steinberg, 7.

⁴² Norse, 1993.

⁴³ Steinberg, 9.

scientist and filmmaker Jacques Cousteau proved the material reality of Tharp's maps when he dragged his underwater cameras across the ocean floor, capturing the peaks and valleys of the ridge.

And finally, to close this provisional timeline, while boat-building has always been a craft mastered by artisans and engineers, since the 1960s contemporary artists – the ill-fated Bas Jan Ader whose disappearance at sea during his artwork “In Search of the Miraculous” makes him most fabled among them – have integrated boats and sea travel into conceptual art practices.⁴⁴

3. Place-Making at Sea

In *Toilers of the Sea*, Victor Hugo writes: “The solitudes of the ocean are melancholy: tumult and silence combined. What happens there no longer concerns the human race.” Hugo is wrong, but he is not alone in being so: historically, the ways in which societies perceive, manage, and construct their relationship to the sea are opaque. To quote environmentalist Rachel Carson in *The Sea Around Us*, she describes the sea as “a realm so vast and so difficult of access that with all our efforts we have explored only a small fraction of its area.” During certain epochs, the sea has been variously understood as: a barrier, a blind field, a void, a transport surface, a resource provider, a military field, an object of scientific study, and a highway.⁴⁵ It is perhaps a peculiar fact of the age of catastrophic climate change and high frequency capitalism that the sea is at once more imperiled, more dangerous, and more difficult to see and understand than previously registered in historical record.

What Hugo could not have foreseen during the early days of commercial trans-Atlantic travel in 1866 is that what happens to the sea could not concern the human race more. Indeed, what happens to the sea and the way we interact with it – in terms of the global trade and the Trans

⁴⁴ Jan Verwoert, *Bas Jan Ader: In Search of the Miraculous* (London: Afterall Books, 2006).

⁴⁵ Steinberg, introduction.

Pacific Partnership (TPP), maritime law and militarism, technology and transoceanic internet networks, territoriality and globalism, pharmacology and energy resource extraction, seasteading and mass migration, and shrinking biodiversity and sea-level rise – will rewrite what it means to be human in the next century.

As discussed above, Sumathi Ramaswamy traces the conceit of the “lost continent” as a possible explanation of the origins of life on Earth during the Victorian era. Ramaswamy describes the way the speculations in the field of natural history and paleontology altered the public conception of time and history. Our own age is also facing a temporal crisis. If the Victorians discovered that the past was much bigger, more violent, and less human than they had imagined, then the contemporary era are a facing a radically shrunken future, where the promise of posterity has been withdrawn. Ramaswamy asks: “Under what circumstances does the past return to haunt the present as loss – as the disappeared, the vanished, the submerged, and the hidden?”⁴⁶ We might well ask ourselves: under what circumstances does the future haunt the present as loss? Because her book is about the eccentric, the off-modern, the aborted lineage of an abandoned idea, she implies that certain theories of life on Earth are like lost continents, they sink and rise over time. This is the kind of place-making that the ocean produces in the face of uncertainty.

In Keith Basso’s *Wisdom Sits in Places* the anthropologist describes the Apache process of summoning the landscape into being through simultaneously naming, remembering, and imagining place-worlds. The place-worlds, in turn, establish lineage, connection with ancestry, and identity. Basso writes: “What happened here? The answers they supply, though perhaps distinctly foreign, should not be taken lightly, for what people make of their places is closely connected to what they make of themselves as members of society and inhabitants of the Earth, and while the two activities

⁴⁶ Ramaswamy, 3.

may be separable in principle, they are deeply joined in practice.” And succinctly, “We are, in a sense, the place-worlds we imagine.”⁴⁷

Now, Basso’s journey takes him through a more-or-less habitable landscape, with landmarks, paths, springs, roads, and mountains acting as signposts along the way. How does place-making work at sea? Who has the knowledge to call up those histories? Ramaswamy goes on to write that, “Place-making in the modern world, cannot ignore the colonization of imagination itself, and the numerous contradictions and conflicted intimacies of power, contestation, and resistance in an age dominated by capitalism.”⁴⁸

Place-making at sea requires the imagination, and its constant companion, metaphor. Any narrative of place-worlds necessarily includes room for the enigma, the lost, the sunken. The plunders of colonial exploitation drive Captain Nemo and his crew searching for sunken treasure in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. But Nemo, son of a Hindu and a Muslim, master of too many languages to list, scours the ocean floor in *Nautilus*, his submarine, summoning through his rejection of land-based civil society a counter-world without English imperialism.

While the full implications of these topics lie far beyond the scope of this paper and related creative project, the driving thesis behind both is the idea that while its impact on land-based societies are enormous, the way the sea is managed and conceived of is under-examined by most general populations. As Ellen Semple wrote in 1911: “We are in a certain sense amphibious, not exclusively connected with the land, but with the sea as well.”⁴⁹

4. Defining the Negative Archive

⁴⁷ Basso, 12-14.

⁴⁸ Ramaswamy, 5.

⁴⁹ Semple, Ellen, 59.

The word archive is a descendent of the Greek *arkheion*: the house from which the guardians of the archive command. They protect, interpret, and institutionalize the archive. By doing so, they recall and impose the law. Derrida famously states: “There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory.”⁵⁰ Fundamental to his idea of the archive is its localization, its house (Greek: *oikos*). He writes “There is no archive without a place of consignment, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside.”⁵¹

How can the idea of the archive be applied offshore, where localization is difficult to pinpoint and laws are constantly rewritten to reflect the ideologies of land based society? The first answer is the most obvious: the sea is often represented as the absolute “outside.” (As mentioned above, it is even now being contextualized as somehow alien.) As an example of the origins of this attitude, Steinberg describes that the Indian Ocean was considered a great void, a distance to be crossed, and immune from state power by its coastal dwellers circa 500 BC to AD 1500.

The second answer is a further stretch. In opposition to civil laws upheld on land, the first Roman laws governed the sea according to *jus gentium*, or common law, the law of all peoples.⁵² On the one hand, the Romans understood that there could be no political power without control of the waterways. Their attitude toward the sea was that of an extension of the land, to be owned, protected, and controlled. This Mediterranean perspective was established by the Roman’s idea of *mare nostrum*, “our sea,” prevalent between 300 B.C. and A.D. 500, but continues to inform contemporary European relationships to the sea.

⁵⁰ Derrida, “Archive Fever.”

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Steinberg, 65.

Michel Foucault describes the archive as a system of language that defines the sayable while overhanging the border of the unsayable. Derrida's archive is jussive while Foucault's is linguistic in nature. Foucault's "begins with the outside of our own language; its locus is the gap between our own discursive practices."⁵³ In the metaphor I am activating for this creative work, coastal regions and port cities are representations of this overhang.

Again, conceptualizations of the "outside" apply. Steinberg writes: "Because the social constructions of these spaces are inherently unstable, these seemingly marginal spaces are identified as potential arenas for generating social change." The outside is often conceived of as an engine or incubator for forms of radical otherness that promote and produce social change – for good or ill. This potentiality is something many artists, filmmakers, and writers – from CAMP's *Wharfage*, to Sergei Eisenstein's depiction of mutiny on the *Battleship Potemkin*, and Sekula's description (in *Fish Story*) of Melville's concept of revolution as an "irrational combustion as by live cinders blown across the channel from France in flames" in *Billy Budd* – have exploited in narrative form. I explore the methodologies of some of these practices below.⁵⁴

6. The Poetry Cycle

⁵³ Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Trans: A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), 131.

⁵⁴ Herman Melville, *Billy Budd*.

My capstone project itself is a poetry cycle that conceptualizes the aforementioned research through the tradition of lyric poetry. It is part of a larger scale, long-term visual and text-based project. In *Wet Data*, I hope to fruitfully reexamine what Bélanger called, “the ocean’s historic and superficial remoteness,”⁵⁵ by asking readers and participants to consider how they are shaping the ocean and how it is shaping their social, political, and psychological subjectivity.

The engine driving the text is how people “respond to and reproduce social processes, spatial patterns, and physical nature” through their interactions with urban waterways as well as coastal zones and ocean spaces.⁵⁶ Humans, especially those inhabiting urban spaces, tend to orient themselves toward land-based growth and development. Unless economically or socially reliant on its resources, they turn away from the sea and the vulnerability it represents. Though water makes up 71% of our planet (and 65% of the human body),⁵⁷ it remains what sociologist and urban theorist Henri Lefebvre would have called “an urban blind field.”⁵⁸ From an ethnographic perspective, in *International seafarers and transnationalism in the twenty-first century*, Helen Sampson writes “Those who work aboard ships are largely invisible to those ashore and this is particularly the case in Europe now that crewing practices have changed. Today many companies are based in European and other OECD countries but the crews recruited to serve on their ships are hired from developing nations in the Far East, China, India and so forth.”⁵⁹ Despite the fact that New York City is part of an archipelago, a port city colonized because its geographical features were ideal for defense against attack by sea, its waterways are pushed so far out of visibility that most New Yorkers remain

⁵⁵ Bélanger, *Wet Matter*, introduction.

⁵⁶ Steinberg, 11.

⁵⁷ Bélanger, *Wet Matter*, introduction.

⁵⁸ Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, Trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 31.

⁵⁹ Helen Sampson, *International seafarers and transnationalism in the twenty-first century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013),

unaware that the combined sewage overflow systems pumps metric tons of raw sewage into the East River every time it rains.⁶⁰

In order to conduct the research submerged within in this poetic text, I have studied the social uses of coastal zones at an oyster farm in Long Island, a volcanic island in the Azores, the Newtown Creek delimiting Brooklyn and Queens, and at an art residency on Governors Island, New York City, through which I make daily contact with the water while communing via ferry to and from Greenpoint to the island – a decommissioned military base now functioning as a city park.

Poetry is above all rhythm, and in this text in process I attempt to harness the rhythmic ontology of the sea. The poetic text is an experiment. It suggests that there are other ways of knowing history and that the negative archives of the sea might be accessed and transmitted through poetry and language.

Its takes its form in part from a rich tradition of research-based poets such as Jill Magi, in her recent book about Seneca Village buried under Central Park in Manhattan; Bhanu Kapil, whose work on children raised in the wild skirts the borders of poetry and sociology; and perhaps above all because of shared subject matter, Caroline Bergvall, who works across mediums, producing books, audio works, live performances, and installations.

7. Oceanic Forensics

⁶⁰ “NYC Environmental Protection: Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs),” accessed August 22, 2016, http://www.nyc.gov/html/dep/html/stormwater/combined_sewer_overflow.shtml.

Bergvall's *DRIFT* is a forensic report in the form of poetry. She says, "The forensic principal: that every action or contact leaves a trace. I decided to use the narrative of the journey and its harrowing drift, the story told by the survivors and corroborated by the forensic finding. My role will be to shorten the narrative and relay the report's complex piece of memorialization, interpretation and investigation through live recitation." And she concludes, "One loads on vessel for dream-travel and one follows it into hell."

The boat of refugees she pursues in her poetry is also the subject of a research and visual art and data project by the research collective Forensic Architecture, led by Eyal Weizman and Susan Schuppli. Forensic Architecture is a research agency comprised of architects, scholars, designers, lawyers, artists, human rights investigators, and scientists based at Goldsmiths, University of London. They research and present spatial analysis of underexamined sites of contestation and violence on the international scale, focusing their analysis on labor camps, drone attacks, and cities under aerial bombardment. Their mission is to "provide evidence for international prosecution teams, political organizations, NGOs, and the United Nations in various processes worldwide. Additionally, the agency undertakes historical and theoretical examinations of the history and present status of forensic practices in articulating notions of public truth."⁶¹

Forensic Architecture's *Forensic Oceanography* project backed a coalition of NGOs seeking accountability for international negligence that led to the deaths of many migrants on a particular boat in the central Mediterranean Sea, then tightly monitored by the NATO-led coalition intervening in Libya. Forensic Architecture publishes reports on an interactive website. In one such report, the project's lead researchers, Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani write, "the efforts were focused on what is now known as the 'left-to-die boat' case, in which sixty-three migrants lost their

⁶¹ "Forensic Architecture," accessed August 22, 2016, <http://www.forensic-architecture.org/>.

lives while drifting for fourteen days within the NATO maritime surveillance area.”⁶² Heller and Pezzani claim that because there was an arms embargo off the coast of Italy during the time of the crossing, “the central Mediterranean Sea was being monitored with unprecedented scrutiny, enabling NATO and participating states to become aware of any distress of migrants.”

Indeed, their research, which takes the form of an assemblage of GPS data, estimated drift trajectory given atmospheric patterns in the area, reports, interviews, video surveillance, crowd-sourced photographs of naval assets in the area, maps reproducing the trajectory of unknown ships captured by radar, aims to prove that NATO and its allies are guilty of the crime of *nonassistance*. In their own words, “By going ‘against the grain’ in our use of surveillance technologies, we were able to reconstruct with precision how events unfolded and demonstrate how different actors operating in the Central Mediterranean Sea used the complex and overlapping jurisdictions at sea to evade their responsibility for rescuing people in distress. The report we produced formed the basis for a number of ongoing legal petitions filed against NATO member states.”⁶³

In *DRIFT*, Caroline Bergvall uses alternate means to track the very same rubber ship issued by the Libyan army, “a zodiac type plastic vessel, 10 meters long and with a capacity to carry max 25 people”⁶⁴ that carried 75 people from Nigeria, Ghana, Sudan, and Eritrea, and Ethiopia. The book-length project is broken down into five components that gather sources from the negative archive.

The first section is a translation of a medieval seafarer poem about being lost at sea. She says the anonymous author calls the phenomena of being lost “hafville, sea wilderness, sea wildering.” That cycle starts: “Let me speak my true journeys own true songs/I can make my sorry tale right soggy truth/ sothgied sodsgate some serious wreacan my ship/ sailing rekkies tell Hu ic how ache

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ “The Left to Die Boat,” accessed August 22, 2016, <http://www.forensic-architecture.org/case/left-die-boat/>.

⁶⁴ Bergvall, 71.

wracked from/ travel”⁶⁵ and ends, “blow wind/blow, anon am I.”⁶⁶ She employs the poetry of the past as a template for the poetry of the present.

The second section contains unidentified aircraft surveillance footage of the boat that she and collaborator Tom Martin macro magnified. “It encounters the dead as they are still living and sailing. The macro processing of the image is a process of collapsed timespace, of enhanced slowing down, of active registering. It lifts the inscription of their dialing pixel by pixel from the flow of incessant newsrush and quick apparitions and swift forgetting. It insists on being seen and rescued. The macro work investigations the traces of other ghosts.”⁶⁷ Of course, poetry cannot recuperate loss, rescue the dead, or fundamentally changes politics. So what is the place of poetry in these discussions?

The third section is a narrative report of the migrants’ time at sea, during which they made contact with international ships, helicopters, and even a priest in Italy via radio. The boat drifted, many died, most lost consciousness, and at last winds and currents brought the ten survivors to rest back on the Libyan coast. There are two more fatalities while the migrants were held in a prison in Zliten. Bergvall incorporates the voices of the survivors into the report.

The fourth section depicts constellations Bergvall believes would have been visible from the boat. Bergvall is showing how the boat looks from above, with the use of aerial surveillance, and how the sky looks from the below. In the final section she presents her own ship log of the research journey. She writes, “What is north. Is it a direction or a process? A method or a place. Is it space accelerated into time, like a glacial flood. Is it time spread into space, like permafrost. Is it always further on, further north until it makes a vertical drop, like a voice that traverses, illuminates

⁶⁵ Bergvall, 25.

⁶⁶ Bergvall, 57.

⁶⁷ Bergvall, 62.

everything but will not itself be held. Is it trajectory of an endpoint, or both.”⁶⁸ She then initiates a conversation about Nordic open sea navigating, using its principals to trace her own path backwards in time to her ancestors, themselves island pastors and seamen.

Both projects fail and succeed on different registers. The report on the “left-to-die boat” by Forensic Architecture was presented as evidence in a series of legal cases led by a coalition of NGOs, but they have not succeeded in forcing responsibility of any single governing body. Nonetheless, the body of evidence the produced demonstrates that while the migrants were lost at sea their location was always known to coastal agencies responsible for different search and rescue areas as designated by the 1979 International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR). What does it mean to be lost – to be left-to-die – during a sea journey in which your every move is being monitored?

Bergvall’s poetry also stems from a rich maritime literary tradition. For Bergvall, its negative archives are accessible through language. But in this set-up, she remains a spectator. In the introduction to Hans Blumenberg’s *Shipwreck with Spectator*, translator Steven Rendall writes, “One of the ever-present models is that of life as a sea-voyage. It encompasses the voyage out and the voyage home, the harbor and the foreign shore, anchorage and sailing the seas, storm and calm, distress at sea and shipwreck, barely surviving and merely looking on.”⁶⁹ He notes the one of the main tropes of the metaphor of life as a sea voyage in literature is the figure of the spectator, overserving distress from the safety of dry land. Rendall continues, “For Blumenberg, this spectator embodies theory (the Greek word *theoria* derives from *theoros*, “spectator”) and thus raises the question of what a theoretical perspective of the world entails.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Bergvall, 127.

⁶⁹ Blumenberg, translator’s introduction, 1.

⁷⁰ Blumenberg, translator’s introduction, 2.

The spectator succeeds in so far as she records, witnesses, and interprets reality. In Bergvall's case, she does so through the poetic lens. But the spectator must always fail in its second role, which is to intercede on behalf of the world one observes in order to defer catastrophe. Rendall goes on to reference Pascal, who stated that there is no safe shore, "nor any question of whether to embark on a perilous journey." Rendall writes, "We are embarked - Pascal wrote - always already at sea."⁷¹ Perhaps this is why it is so urgent to understand the sea, the ocean, and its tributaries in the contemporary moment.

8. Post-Studio Art Practices on the Water

As a member of the environmental art and publishing collective *Mare Liberum* (thefreeseas.org), I build seaworthy boats out of salvaged materials and conducted public voyages as participatory performances on urban, industrial, and impacted rural waterways. These waterways include the Susquehanna River, running through the Marcellus Shale in New York and Pennsylvania; the Saint Lawrence River with its headwaters in the Thousand Islands on the US-Canadian border; the waterways of New York City including the Hudson River, the Harlem River, The East River, The Newtown Creek, the Buttermilk Channel, and the Gowanus Canal; and two urban rivers in the Boston metropolitan area, the Mystic and the Charles, among others. The boats are fashioned after historically prevalent regional crafts, updated to meet the economic needs and material resources of contemporary users. They are designed to enter into the urban blind field in order to extend Lefebvre's "right to the city" into its waters.⁷²

⁷¹ Rendall in Blumenberg (into)

⁷² Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on cities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

The boats are built in the art tradition of the social sculpture, as coined by German artist Joseph Beuys in his treatise on producing three-dimensional work that is meaningfully entangled with the movement and organization of larger scale social processes. These boats, once on the water, encourage a deep reading of “the shift from the groundedness of landscape to the fluidity of seascape,”⁷³ paying particular attention to the way catastrophic climate change and the effects of environmental toxicity destabilize the difference between the two through the seepage of cause and effect across porous borders. One driving question behind these public voyages is: how can we learn (the implicit question here is: how can we teach) the histories of these waterways through embodied research and lived experience?

One underlying drive is to recast bodies of water as structures that connect instead of divide. The *Geographical Review*'s 1999 issue called *Oceans Connect* was dedicated to the idea that oceans define world regions rather than keep peoples apart. Water has the potential to blur national boundaries as well as on the smaller scale civic and urban spaces in productive ways. Post-colonialist Richard Hartshorne writes, “As long as we limit our attention to land areas and associate these together in terms of large land units, referring to the seas only as an afterthought, we inevitably etch deeper the impression given by our maps, that the seas are negative in human relations and hence form the great barriers between people.”⁷⁴

On her website, Elizabeth Sibilía, a Graduate Center alumna from the Earth and Environmental Science PhD program, builds on Hartshorne's work to discuss “Proclamation 2667, titled Policy of the United States with Respect to the Natural Resources of the Subsoil and Seabed of the Continental Shelf, later known as the Truman Proclamation.” Sibilía writes, “The Geographer, Richard Hartshorne, suggests [...] that our world's oceans are spaces of connection,” and goes on to

⁷³ Allan Sekula, *Notes for an Exhibition Project*, 1992, unpublished manuscript (Xerox).

⁷⁴ Steinberg, 10.

discuss how ocean-space might have been “a platform for social, political and historical processes in the period of decolonization.”⁷⁵ Filmmaker Jacques Cousteau once wrote that he believed “national sovereignties will shrink in the fact of universal interdependence” based on his filmic investigations of the deep sea.

Through direct, empirical experience of being out on the water, *Mare Liberum* accesses the commercial, industrial, and societal archive of the immediate area while promoting public stewardship of this overlooked commons. We postulate that the water is in fact one of the last commons; the boat a platform for social change; and poetry a way to access a more fluid ontology. One of the fundamental questions that arises through our practice is: who owns the water?

Governmental bodies assert “near-shore” ownership extending twelve nautical miles from the coast. In 1982 the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea secured exclusive economic zones for coastal nations.⁷⁶ Steinberg, and others, might construe this divided sea as a tragedy of the commons, and even go so far as to suggest a civil society based conglomerate of stakeholders, including users, processors, consumers, retailers, and non-governmental organizations should work together to implement and sustain the water as a commons.

Mare Liberum names itself after the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius’s 1609 treatise first legally arguing toward the “unimpeachable axiom of the law of nations” that allowed every nation to travel and trade with every other nation, without restriction, whether by land or by sea. 1609 is the same year that Henry Hudson’s navigational error led him to enter into what would eventually be known as the Hudson River. (He was marooned and – lost – by a mutinous crew two years later in Hudson

⁷⁵ Elizabeth Sibilila, "The reconstruction of maritime space during Decolonization," accessed August 24, 2016,

http://elizabethsibilia.com/artwork/1484208_Title_The_reconstruction_of_maritime.html.

⁷⁶ “Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone,” United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), accessed August 22, 2016,

http://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/part2.htm.

Bay). Grotius argued for the Dutch East India Company against the Portuguese *mare clausum*, or “enclosed sea” policy. He claims that because the sea is non-susceptible to occupation it is destined for common use of all people.

The curator of *Radical Seafaring*, 2016, an exhibition that presents a historical cross-section of artists working on the water, Andrea Grover writes, “Artist-made vessels, waterborne performances and actions, documentation of expeditions, and speculative designs for alternative communities at sea all indicate an ancient exploratory impulse and a widespread desire to connect with the natural environment.”⁷⁷ Waterborne art in New York City is produced by a thriving network of artists and activists. It is ecological, communitarian, and liberatory in nature.

Historically known as “offshore art,” this method of working is employed by conceptual art world elite and art world outliers inspired by life off the grid and in the margins. Some examples include artists Richard Serra, Chris Burden, Tacita Dean, and Simon Starling. Serra once floated a forest on a barge down the Hudson River. Chris Burden famously staged *Ghost Ship* (2005), a crewless vessel that traveled 330 miles of the coast of Great Britain in response to questions about security and drone warfare. Tacita Dean’s *Disappearance at Sea* (1996) is a looped film shot at St Abb’s Head lighthouse in Berwick-upon-Tweed in northern England.

Simon Starling’s *Autoxylopyrocycloboros* (2006) is a video of two men on a boat crossing a loch. The two men (the artist and his assistant) sit in a steam powered wooden boat systematically hacking it apart. They feed the pieces to the furnace, fueling their voyage with the physical body of their boat. They sink. Further, Loch Long in Scotland, their palette, is the notorious storage site of the Royal Navy’s nuclear arsenal. On the banks, a permanent peace camp has established itself. Its tragic-comic environmental commentary on overconsumption is clear. Others offshore artists

⁷⁷ Grover, 32.

include Papa Neutrino, Swoon, Duke Riley, Mary Mattingly, Marie Lorenz, Marina Zurkow, Nancy Nowacek, the heroic Women on Waves, and of course, *Mare Liberum*.

To paraphrase Grover's catalog essay for *Radical Seafaring*, all of these works stem from a trend in conceptual art to move art practices and objects out of the gallery and the artist herself out of her cloistered cell and into the public realm. Grover writes, "the liberation of artwork from standard production and display has expanded to ever more fluid dimension, with artists' projects that have varied from expeditions to ecological research, and from floating performances to contestational actions related to ownership and access to waterways."⁷⁸ While waterborne exploration is as old as civilization itself, these contemporary practices still make new information about how humans live in the world legible and accessible.

Inspired by the legacy of Bas Jan Ader (*In Search of the Miraculous*, 1975) and Chris Burden (*B.C. Mexico*, 1973), who introduced the idea of the voyage as performance art, the body as material, and the environment as the subject of a work, *Mare Liberum* traveled 200 miles down the Hudson River and circumnavigated Manhattan as part of a 16 boat flotilla organized in collaboration with climate justice group 350.org. Through this kind of "direct engagement strategies, [we] reignite a sensual, heuristic, and watchful understanding of the water."⁷⁹ The Mahicans called the Hudson *Muhbeakantuck*, "the river that flows both ways," because of its tidal north-south currents that flow to and from the Arctic and the Atlantic.⁸⁰ The boats we made out of paper, and we spent as much time on the water as we did repairing our fragile vessels on land. The fragility of these boats and the care with which we administrated our crafts grew into a thematic of radical care and resilience along the journey.

⁷⁸ Grover, 14.

⁷⁹ Grover, 23.

⁸⁰ Ganter, 25.

9. The Boat

Because human experiences on the water are oftentimes mediated by the technology of the boat, *Wet Data* contingent in a very concrete way on a vessel that facilitates discovery. As such, this paper concludes with a brief discussion of boats, focusing on their role in a particular work of art called *Gulf to Gulf to Gulf* by CAMP.⁸¹ Because conversation of boats necessarily implies a conversation of ports, I will also readdress the work of Allan Sekula.

In *Other Spaces*, Foucault famously defines the boat as a heterotopia, a space of otherness outside of society that escapes, replicates, and compensates for society.⁸² A metaphor lodged between utopic (progressive, leftist) and dystopic (neo-liberal, free market-driven) utility, the boat is an emblem of the human imaginary and the ensign of economic development. It is the engine of colonialism, slavery, travel, and the global economy. It is also a platform for radical otherness, lawlessness – as best embodied by the figure of the pirate, according to Cicero, “the common enemy of all,” and an instrument of escape.⁸³

A boat is not a place. A boat passes through places. On the boat, people drift away from domicile, family, and lineage – all paramount features in Derrida’s archive. Boats institute fluid economies that braid nations into networks that riddle demarcated landscapes. They conserve fluidity. They are transitions between states, between places, between legal and judiciary order. On boats, commodities cross thresholds people cannot. Boats transform their passengers as they transport themselves across the surface of the ocean. In “The Cultural Biography of Things:

⁸¹ CAMP, studio website, accessed August 23, 2016, <http://studio.camp>.

⁸² Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias,” *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984): 46-49.

⁸³ Daniel Heller-Roazen.

Commoditization as Process,” anthropologist Igor Kopytoff describes the moral economy behind the objective economy of trade that transforms persons into things and things into other things, accruing and shedding value all the while.⁸⁴

In Greek, *eco* means habitat and *nomos* means natural law. What is the law of the home of the ocean, where there are no homes, only boats? At the end of *DRIFT*, Bergvall writes, “I come home and find that I have lost my sense of home. I come home to find that I have left my home.”⁸⁵ In *The Death Ship*, by German author B. Traven, the protagonist is a paperless sailor from New Orleans shuttled back and forth between bureaucracies that arrest and deport him until he finally lands a job on a coffin ship, a ship that is worth more to investors as a wreck.⁸⁶

Homer says: “Who are you, strangers? From where have you set sail/Along liquid paths? Do you roam for trade/Or for adventure, crossing the seas, like pirates,/Risking their lives and bringing harm to others.”⁸⁷ Daniel Heller-Roazen quotes Cicero when he says the pirate is “the enemy of all,” because he is an unjust antagonist eschewing the law of the land at sea. Because the boat confuses rather than upholds law and order, it is not an archive, it skirts archives. It is caught up in a performance of adventure and commerce. Derrida says: “But where does the outside commence? This question is the question of the archive.”⁸⁸ The outside commences at the water’s edge.

In *From Gulf to Gulf to Gulf*, CAMP collaborates with a group of sailors as they record (on cell phones) their travels from Pakistan and Iran to the Persian and Aden Gulfs on hand-crafted barges carrying cargo like: elastic straws packed in boxes packed again in bashed up mini-vans, dirt packed

⁸⁴ Ian Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64-91.

⁸⁵ Bergvall, 136.

⁸⁶ B. Traven, *The Death Ship*.

⁸⁷ Homer, *the Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Viking, 1996), 9:250.

⁸⁸ Derrida, “Archive Fever.”

in halved oil drums, boxes of something called “Real,” camels, and other items too varied to list.

The sailors film each other as they build boats, sunbathe, hook fish on a line, and leap from burning, sinking, and storm-tossed boats.

In the first scene, two young fishermen (and they are all men) tussle, sing, lip-sync, and lovingly threaten to slit one another’s throats a drawn blade. The scene is soft, sensual, and happy. CAMP quotes David Harvey as he famously dismisses Foucault’s idea of the boat as a heterotopia, charging that there is no emancipatory potential in escapism.⁸⁹ But home cell phone videos are in a sense emancipatory because they place their subjects, who are also their authors, into a different kind of circulation that is only commodifiable in the abstract, as a part of cultural economy that they themselves have created. In *Wharfage*, CAMP goes on to write: “So how do we understand these ships, moving in a direction opposite to ‘escape’, willingly and repeatedly entering zones of conflict?”⁹⁰

The repetitive passage of a ship ensures transmission of knowledge through performance and “the continuity of ancient networks,” as outlined by Diana Taylor in her work on performative repertoires as purveyors of knowledge across time.⁹¹ The very structure of a crew on board a ship allows the sailors to practice autonomy and collaboration in ways that engender social formations that lay the groundwork for effective political and economic alterity. Taylor refers to these relations as a kind of vertical past, one that offers “a different form of storage of what’s already there.”⁹² The performance of the voyage defends the past against erasure – the past embodied by knowledge of the sea, of trade and exchange between sites of social and political difference, and of wooden boat-

⁸⁹ CAMP, *Wharfage*.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Diana Taylor, “Performance and/as History,” 67-86.

⁹² *Ibid.*

building – but also creates the space for a kind of hybrid-state that connects warring factions while maintaining relationships that are both ancient and common in spite of conflict.

This footage was gathered over the course of four years. With the construction of their own video archive, the sailors enact Pad.ma's (a project of CAMP, Berlin-based collective 0x2620 and the Alternative Law Forum in Bangalore) first thesis on the archive: "the archive can be deployed: as a set of shared curiosities, a local politics, or epistemological adventure. Where the archive could be recast, for example as the possibility of creating alliances."⁹³ Through this film they choose not to wait for the archive or to be archived, but rather, "enter the river of time sideways."⁹⁴ They circulate not only used and second market bulk trade, but also command what artist and writer Hito Steyerl would call poor images of their experience. Steyerl writes: "Poor images are the contemporary Wretched of the Screen, the debris of audiovisual production, the trash that washed up on the digital economies shores."⁹⁵ But the boats tracked by the sailors in *From Gulf to Gulf to Gulf* defy the very idea of trash as they make a living from secondary trade, and film themselves taking control of hand-me-down popular culture to express their own deep and singular identity and experience. This idea of trash as inherently valuable in circulation argues for a waste-positive perspective best understood through the lens of discard studies championed by Max Libroiron.

In *After Art*, by David Joselit, the art historian posits "images produce power – a current or currency – that is activated by contact with spectators. The more points of contact an image is able to establish, the greater its power will be."⁹⁶ In *From Gulf to Gulf to Gulf*, the negative archive of the sailors' videos has power: their lives and experiences have power. In *Reading An Archive: Photography*

⁹³ "10 Theses on the Archive," Pad.ma, accessed August 23, 2016, https://pad.ma/texts/padma:10_Theses_on_the_Archive.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image." *E-Flux Journal* 10(11): 1-9. Accessed August 23, 2016. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

⁹⁶ David Joselit, *After Art* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2013), 36.

between labour and capital, Allan Sekula states “photography constructs an imaginary world and passes it off as reality.”⁹⁷ Sekula’s project is to determine how photography might serve to legitimate existing power, while CAMP’s project treats the open ocean as an unscripted zone of exchange that has the potential replace existing power structures with a kind of homespun efficacy built on personal repertoires. Although Sekula’s definition is tied into ideas of territory, boundaries, and the outside, his archive conception of the archive differs in meaningful ways from Derrida, who conceives of the archive as the place of the institution and conservation of law, and Foucault, who maintains that the archive demarcates the sayable. In the end, the boat embodies the tension between the law and the outside; the sayable (land) and the unsayable (sea). The footage the Indian sailors take of themselves creates an image-based negative archive from which the meaning of their lives at sea can be constructed anew.

In closing, sea exploration has traditionally been the result of migration, commerce, a search for new markets and scarce resources, transport, and empire. The first maps of the ocean were representations of coastlines with lines drawn from port to port, thus indicating that the sea exists only as an obstacle to be crossed between two destinations. But, its inter-tidal regions including beaches and estuaries connect land and sea as well national bounders. Is there a way to frame the sea that it fundamentally encourages connectivity? As an example, the Mediterranean, known for its bounded nature, mixes with the Atlantic at the Strait of Gibraltar is fed by three fresh-water river systems that bridge national, and indeed, continental boundaries: The Nile, the Po, and the Rhone. The ocean is often conceived of a space outside of land and law, but in fact it is built in direct relation to its terrestrial counterparts be they societal or environmental, and thus subject to loss.

⁹⁷ Allan Sekula, “Reading An Archive: Photography between labour and capital,” *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (London: Routledge, 2003), 443-452.

Wet Data asks is built around the premise that in the age of sea-level rise it becomes increasingly important to understand the ocean and its hidden archives as a connective rather than divisive space so that the spectator - indeed, the artist, poet, anthropologist, geographer, oceanographer, etc. – can acknowledge that there is no question of assuming or securing safe haven for some, because: “We are embarked - Pascal wrote - always already at sea.”⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Rendall in Blumenberg (into)

Wet Data

Falling is subject to the law but law is unevenly
meted and some fall
harder,
fall unjustly hard. The ground
is the substrate of love.
It breaks the fall
of law.
I love
but am robbed
of the empirical precondition of being
loved. I am a mother, human history
depends upon my labor.
Am I a monster?
My children
are pinned to the earth
by the heel of love. The knee of law
falls heavy on their fragile necks.
I want to touch the quantum
body, but am smaller than
the mesh.
There is only one binary: surface
and depth.
My love is the promise of water
in water.
Gentle waves are genital
chaos. The cargo ship slips
into a never-total, voluminous
wall of birth –
from which commerce
emerges and bodies
are lost.

Love
is lost,
but loss
lasts,
and law
is land, no

law is gravity.

There is no gravity
in the sea of grief.

The sea of grief sinks
the sea of greed in its sad
commodious swells.

Lawless tears
streak loveless faces.

You do love or you go down.

Faces in the waves smear the tide
with scrambled looks of final loss
mistaken for financial loss.

Skin is a source of light
without light, a guide.

The soul is a venal laborer.

Those who think the body knows no
bounds have never been blown up
during a routine trip to the market.

Those who think that borders
break continuous space
swim out to meet

the overburdened boats.

The eternal sea is broken
into minutes by container ships.

Shapes unfurl and chains raise anchor.
You do love *and* you go down.

Down is the direction of love. Cruel

widow-generating mother without a womb,
capital sea of cumulative bodies, I am

love. I break law. With my body -

the ground. I bind you to the broken rib
of rebirth without memory of previous life.

Water organizes wide swaths of pre
history in indistinguishable
tides. Its enclosure is continuous script

walling us in. Falling is the object
of law, its subject is lost
in the fall.

You are bigger than me, eternally,
money, my child to whom
I am no parent.

I am a ruler, human measurement
depends on me, am I a monster?

Water topples matter.

After a disaster, risk is briefly
redistributed, but inequality
is in contract with disaster.

Water undoes contracts.

For the length
of a wave matter splits
the body from the spirit.

After a wave's length
contracts snap back into place,
but a human life is less elastic

*begin again in a sea of difference
as though it is not missing
and it might return*

Producers at low risk
in high towers produce

high risk subjects
at the far reaches

of capital.

The object of production
is the subject at risk.

Those producing risk
are not at risk, though

they perceive their way of life
to be.

From the arable interior
subjects at low risk call
for higher profit margins.

Subjects on land
locked in panic rooms built
in response to nuclear proliferation

call for an abundance
of risk. A risk harvest.

Subjects at risk are assured

there are too many
bodies in the boat

to fit any more
people on the beach.

The boat sheds bodies
on the shoal but the people left on
board already know

the shore is full.

The rich who lavish risk
on subjects lost at sea
comb and lap, lap and bomb
each other on the beach.

The meaning of alive is being redefined.

Those who take risk turn
their backs on the sea.

Full of sinking hearts

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