THE ISLAND AND THE COAST:

Between the archipelagic and aquapelagic

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May Joseph

Pratt Institute, Brooklyn USA <mjoseph@pratt.edu>

ABSTRACT: Islands are often defined in relation to mainlands. In the case of archipelagos, a dominant island often emerges as the "coast" to minor islands around it. This essay applies the structuring ideas of islands and coasts to the logic of archipelagic thought. New York, Zanzibar, the Malabar Coast and the Laccadive Sea region, places that I am deeply connected to, and which have inspired me, are intertwined to present a global historical connectivity between archipelagos in different global regions. Maritime colonialism of the Portuguese, Dutch and British periods wove deep linkages between island societies across oceanic networks from the 15th century onwards. This article traces how the colonial past informs my personal research methodologies and articulates how the archipelagic and aquapelagic intermesh across national histories.

KEYWORDS: Coasts; New York; archipelago; aquapelago; Zanzibar; Kerala; Maldives; Laccadive Sea

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This finale issue of *Shima* Series I is a fitting place to acknowledge my debt to Philip Hayward and Adam Grydehoj for inviting me into the field of Island Studies two decades ago. Island Studies opened up a perceptual space of writing between the archipelagic and the aquapelagic: the space of island becoming. Deploying Eric Sanderson's (2013) technique of forensic ecology, New York's archipelago became a place of peripatetic island ontologies. To walk in New York City is to be in a perpetual state of archipelagic becoming. Yet one traverses New York's islands primarily through landbound logics.

The landmark journals *Shima* and *Island Studies Journal*, both of which I have been engaged with since 2005, opened up a method, an international community, and a series of scholarly engagements including a book series out of Routledge, The Ocean and Island Studies Book Series that Hayward, Grydehoj and I coedit along with Lisa Bloom, Sudipta Sen and David Erdman. My excursion into Island Studies as method and praxis has produced a sustained engagement with the archipelagic histories of New York City. This material reality is pedagogical, grounded in the study of islands and oceans, through my teaching architecture students at Pratt Institute, New York. One seminar I teach is a ferry class that explores the different and numerous water bodies shaping the New York Bight, including the Hudson River, the Buttermilk Channel, the New York Harbor, the East River, the Harlem River, the Verranzano Narrows, Gowanus Canal, the New Town Creek, Jamaica Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. The second course is a walking class where we visit a different island every week, studying the marshes, wetlands and eroding shorelines of the sinking city.

My students and I dwell between the archipelagic and the aquapelagic, as we walk the buried coastlines, and probe the forgotten waterlines of Lenape, Dutch, British and climate change New York. Our walks along the shorelines of the city decentre centuries of land based urban

planning. We reimagine a Lenape walking ontology through mnemonic place making. We graft the archipelagic past to the architectural history of climate futures. This is a rapidly morphing world of pedestrian bridges, berms, dunes, oyster middens, marshes, elevated parkland and afforestation: all anthropogenic, all recent climate redesign efforts around the New York archipelago.



Figure 1 - View of Manhattan Island from Brooklyn Island (author's photo).



Figure 2 - View of Manhattan Island from Governors Island's The Hill, a new storm surge barrier for New York (author's photo).

Island Studies offers a decentring approach to rethinking the world through an island focused lens. A landmark essay by Nadarajah and Grydehoj (2016) argued the little understood perspectival shift of a decoloniality threaded through an island ontology. Grydehoj's invitation to join Island Dynamics in early 2004 and through that community, reading the work of Philip Hayward, and Godfrey Baldacchino, charted a new approach to the study of New York City, one that would foreground the islandness of the archipelago. Such an Island Studies approach deepened my reach into the historical antecedents of island thinking, bolstered by indigenous and precolonial histories of where the waterline was before the coming of colonial occupation. Key to my pedagogy is the question: what were the geologies of these islands of New York before the impact of the Anthropocene, the era of escalating human impact on the planet?

This essay is an exploration of what Hayward and Evans (2026) identify as "emotional ecologies" – a catalysing term for grafting autoethnography with analysis and theory. Writing about islands has been an applied exploration of emotional ecologies. As an immigrant in the U.S whose cultural genealogies are anchored in island structures across far flung oceanic spaces of the Indian Ocean, the permission to delve into the intersections of locationality, water-bound histories and ecology is freeing. Key theoretical modalities that come into view through the lens of Island Studies is my comparative understanding of colonial history and our climate futures. This comprehension is both theoretical and applied, through my performance practice as a choreographer who creates site-specific performances created at 17th century Dutch and Portuguese island locations.



Figure 3 - Harmattan Theater, *Cabo de Tormentoso*. Cape of Good Hope (Director May Joseph. 2011). Performers: Najma Gool, Saligha Gool, Shenaaz Kimmie. (Photo: Lari Meyer.)

As Adam Grydehoj has theorised, an island methodology can be a powerful decolonial approach. The influential 16th century map of the Dutch cartographer Jan Huygen Van Linschoten *Delineatio Orarum Maritimarum* dramatically captures the island imaginations of the Indian Ocean world. The East Coast of Africa is linked through an elaborate system of islands to Zanzibar, Madagascar, the Seychelles and the Maldives all the way to the Malabar Coast. Suddenly, my childhood in Dar-es-salaam connected across the Indian Ocean to the Malabar Coast and unexpectedly to the New York archipelago through the concept of the "the island and the coast". Suddenly, the humble geologies of my family's background from

the brackish near islands of the Malabar coast became legible in the broader navigational logics of 16th century maritime flows. Suddenly, New York's historic linkages to the Dutch East India Company entrepot of Cochin came to the fore. They were both established by the same colonial power, the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC) the same decade of 1624. Indeed, as Grydehoj argues, the view from an island is a disrupting, decentring, and a sharpening exercise that threads through a history of global maritime flows.



Figure 4 - Jan Huygen Van Linschoten (1563-1611) Delineatio Orarum Maritimarum Terrae vulgo Indigetatae Terra do Natal, item Sofalae, Mozambicae, & Melindae ...

(Translation: "Illustration of the coasts of the land called Terra do Natal, and likewise of all the coasts of Safala, Mozambique, Melinde, and the island of S. Lorenzo [Madagascar] ... likewise of the islands from Maldiva to the Island of Ceylon shown to the promontory of Cormorin, situated on the coast of India ... all very accurate, revised, and improved in accordance with the very best Indian maps.")

I. Zanj-Bar, 2023: The Island and the Coast

As the departing ferry leaves behind the receding coastline of Dar es Salaam, the haven of peace, all the intensity and beauty of the East African coast wraps its golden light into the lively deck of travelling school children, honeymooners from the mainland and the vast array of local tourists chatting excitedly and heading to the fabled "island of Black people," Zanzibar. This being my own dream journey to the island of my childhood after fifty years of being away from Tanzania, I absorb the physicality of the distance, of how long it would have taken all the people shipped from Bagamoyo to Zanzibar for centuries to service the slave economy of the island. This history is never far away from the festive, touristic ambience of the travellers to this island of Zanj-bar ('Black Coast' in Arabic). The sea journey is deliriously beautiful, the colours of the Indian Ocean refracting off the glistening waves. The ocean air has its distinctive fragrance of salt and acidity laced with the hot odour of sweat and breeze.

It is a heady and seductive sensation that absorbs one as the breathtaking coastline of Zanjbar begins to rise in the distance.

It is 2023 December and this journey to the island of the Black Coast, is the trip I have dreamt of since I was a child growing up in the coastal city of Dar es salaam. In the 1960s and 1970s, Zanzibar was not accessible to tourism. It was the revolutionary island that boasted an identity different from the mainland and for that reason had always been at once present as an exotic ghosting off the Haven of Peace,[1] and yet, absent in the mainland's imaginary. At school I was taught that Zanzibar was different from the mainland because it had Arabs, Asians and Africans living closely for millennia leading to a violent conflict between Tanzanian nationalists and the islands local Arab populations. My childhood in Dar es salaam was parallel to the shadowy history of Zanzibar's struggles for political sovereignty set against the impinging coastal hegemony of mainland Tanzania. Zanzibar was out of bounds for tourists. It was in a state of emergency and military surveillance during the 1960s. Now, in 2023, imbibing the island air as we approach the extraordinary archipelago, passing Changu (also known as Prison Island) towards Unguja Island, I realise what Zanzibar really had was a distinctive archipelagic identity that was a crucible of the world in a way that was far different than the shoreline based coastal city of Dar es salaam. Zanzibar was a microcosm of the world, as it absorbed every traveller, every coloniser, every trader alongside the heinous history of slave trade that brought entire populations from the hinterlands of East and Central Africa to eventually reside on Zanzibar after the abolishment of slavery. Zanzibar both absorbed the history of the world and spat out its syncretic Arab-African-Asian manifestations into the world, flung far and wide from Brazil to Oman, India to Europe.

Arriving in the pell-mell of Stone Town's docks throws one head on into the maelstrom of the centripetal forces that make this archipelago so defining to the world but also to Tanzania. I found myself relating to the mainland in a way I had never imagined. From Zanzibar, Dar es salaam is "the coast". Locals who have lived in Zanzibar since the 1960s speak of the coast with carefully veiled caution. The new prosperity has come at the violent expense of their own history. In the marketplace, on the waterfront, I hear complaints from vendors that if they were not forced to belong to the coast, they would be much better off. All their hard-earned profits go to "the coast". Speaking in Swahili to all and sundry I run into descendants of ex-slaves whose families came from Mombasa and Lamu. They speak of the living stories from their ancestors who were forcibly brought to the island. Chatting with the smart young hospitality industry workers I realise almost all the young people I speak to come from the mainland hinterlands of Tabora, Mwanza, Arusha, Shinyanga and Iringa. Zanzibar offered plums job on a leisure island. Talking to local Zanzibaris along the streets I find resentment that the cornucopia of global wealth flooding the Zanzibar tourist industry has not benefitted the lives of locals whose infrastructure and public health systems are strained and direly underfunded. The sheer sprawl of hybridities, of Arab, African and Asian histories over millennia on the island, succeeded by the new global syncretisms of African and foreign tourists, opens up the liminal archipelago as a simulacrum of multiple time frames. The colonial histories of conquest and occupation on Zanzibar merge with the post-Independence histories of mainland Tanzanian migration to the Island for work alongside the new global economy of eco-tourism. Somewhere along this intensely vibrant, multilayered deeply entwined mélange of networked histories lay the thread of my own reason for coming to Zanzibar. I was here to reflect on my family's Tanzanian past. To remember and reimagine the lost history of the 1964 Zanzibar revolution – and what really

[1] The Arabic phrase *Dār as-Salām* means 'Abode of Peace.'

happened. I wanted to see how the unique history of the island's past migrations had produced the distinctive palimpsestic futures it is now spiralling outward into the world.

On Zanzibar, I felt at home. Between Arab and African cultures, the Asian continuities linked the mainland's trading aesthetics with the island's maritime heritage. Ensconced in Zanzibar, I could begin to revisit the political reasons that led my family to leave "the coast" – Dar es salaam – our haven of peace. It was a history linked to the era of nationalisations, of Africanisation and of anti-Asian sentiments that lay buried in the now forgotten past of the early 1970s. Afloat between Daressalaam and Stone Town, the tangible anxiety that undergirded my own life as a child in Tanzania rose to the frothy, turbulent surface. The unshakeable realisation that while trading relations between Indian and East Africa extended well before the arrival of colonialism, the burden of clientelism has always haunted the Asian presence in East Africa following British colonialism. Asians were the economic middlemen of the British colonial machine whose individual journeys would bear the burden of colonialism's hierarchies still informing East African societies. Asians were the signifiers of colonial exploitation as business owners and economic drivers of East African mercantile growth. There was an infectious commonsensical post-independence local antagonism toward this prosperous minority community as having been complicitous in the larger colonial project. Never mind that recent arrivals such as my father shared the very same anti-colonial struggles and solidarities with the lumpen proletariat, indigenous Tanzanian worker. Never mind the fact that not all Asians in Tanzania were exploitative or usurious or approving of the segregationist British social structures. Such distinctions were not possible in the 1970s which was the first decade of decolonisation. Asians were being held accountable through subtle and more public ways for their role in the history of colonisation. I came to understand that my family's story was a tiny part of that accounting (see Joseph, 1999).

Sitting cheek by jowl with buoyant Tanzanian hipsters, tourists, students, lovers and travellers, the new globalisation of the 2020s makes that distant socialist past seem archaic and irrelevant somehow. But for the children of the *Ujamaa* revolution, an unravelling, a connecting, a rememoring is still to be made. Zanzibar is the crucible from which one can look back at the languorous expansive Tanzanian coast to ask the difficult questions of loss, change and history alongside the new globalisation.

Unguja (or the main island of Zanzibar) bears the physical brunt of the new nation of Tanzania. It harbors the deep injuries of nation formation as it was robbed of its auxiliary languages, Arabic, Urdu, Gujarati and Kutchi towards the creation of its Swahili imagining in 1964. The island has been the distant echo for all the mainland's ambitions. Standing on Unguja and looking back at Dar-es-salaam, one gets the sense that the price Unguja paid being annexed to Tanganyika continues to reverberate. Two tangible consequences of Zanzibar's annexation to the mainland are the exile of its Arab descent populations, now spread in Oman and more widely around the world, and the unreconciled tensions between the Arab, Asian, African syncretisms whose histories continue to rub up against the ongoing influx of mainland ethnicities who work on the island but have no interest or understanding of its past or their impact on Zanzibar's present. The colliding centrifugal power of Zanzibar's pasts alongside its centripetal effects on the tremors of world history it continues to intersect with, makes the island now more powerful than the coast. Zanzibar's rising global prominence can only lead to a new volatility between the island and the coast, as language becomes surreptitious, cautious and clandestine in the face of rising island resentment for the coast.

II. From the Laccadive Sea to the Bay of Bengal: Navigational island logics

Zanzibar sharpened the peculiar relationship of islands and coasts. The worldview from Zanzibar in 2023 shocked a realisation that the coast is an abstraction for islanders. It is a flattened space of domination and land-time. Unmoored from the mainland, islanders regard the coastal mainland as the abstraction of land-time outside which island realities exist. Nowhere in the world is this experiential island ontology more tangible than from the Laccadive Sea region of South Asia.

Standing on the balcony of my parents' apartment in Cochin, India and looking out to sea, one can only imaginatively comprehend a vastly understudied region stretching from the Malabar coast across to the Puttalam Coast of Sri Lanka across to the 1100 island complex of the Maldive islands wrapping across to the Laccadive archipelago. A 17th century map of the region illustrates this expansive archipelagic region of South Asia. In the Dutch cartographer Pierre Mortier's navigational map, the extensive archipelagos of the Indian ocean and the Bay of Bengal present "a sea of islands" (Hau'ofa, 1994). The focus of Mortier's *Carte Particuliere d'une Partie d'Asie ou sont les Isles d'Andemaon, Ceylan, les Maldives* is a communicative visual rendering of what Hayward and Evans (2026) refer to as "emplaced inspiration."

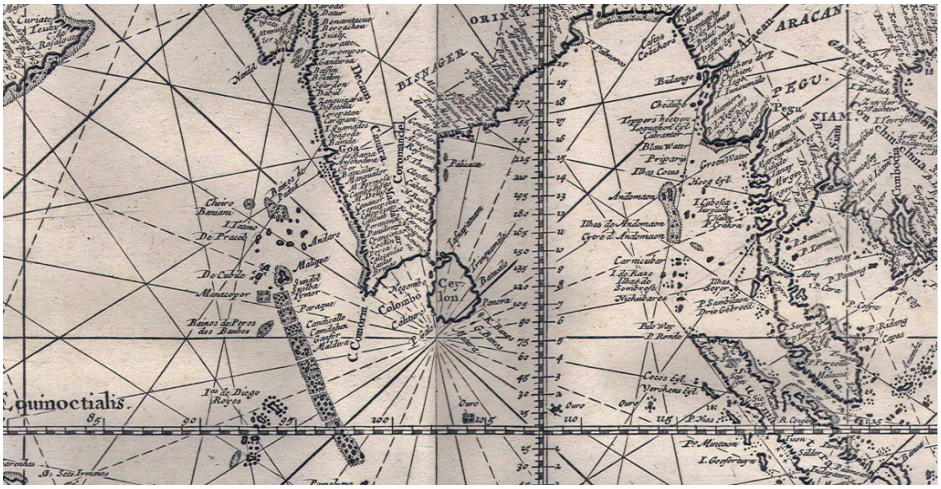

Figure 5 - Pierre Mortier, *Carte Particuliere d'une Partie d'Asie ou sont les Isles d'Andemaon, Ceylan, Les Maldives.* (1700, Amsterdam)

Writing from the Malabar Coast, a region within the Laccadive Sea, the threads of place, affect and personhood as articulated by Hayward and Evans (2026) weave primal coordinates of island becoming. The very structure of the region is shaped by religion, trade, geology and seafaring histories. It necessitates a kinetic methodology that is fundamentally navigational. Here all is island, as Mortier's map depicts. Near-shore barrier islands envelop the air one breathes, heavy with moisture, mold and damp. The coast is a constantly receding shoreline between islands. The "why" as to one would write about this dank, stormy and sinking environment is rooted in the animality of the region. Amphibious lives of subsidence and storm surge caused by escalating monsoons cling to a world gone climatologically awry.

The Malabar coast is a space where the intricate archipelago of near shore islands have historically shaped a distinctively cosmopolitan, syncretic, migrant and heterogenous culture of islandness. Curiously, Gemini Pro, the Google search engine, does not recognise the barrier islands of the Malabar as islands, but rather a riverine ecology with shifting island like geographies. However, from the perspective of my family, islanders for generations hailing from Bolghatty Island, Vypin Island, Fort Cochin and the serrated brackish islands along the Malabar coast that were land filled by the British to create the smooth connectedness around Ashtamudi Lake, the water bound precolonial knowledge continues to shape the understanding of the past. It is a knowledge entirely folkloric in existence, evoked through the memories of my 93-year old mother who describes the place she dwells in now as a series of ponds that got landfilled during her childhood. Mother describes floating on a log for fun as a kid in one of the several ponds in her father's coir (coconut) estate. Today it is all settled land on which our lake front home now stands, albeit muddy, low-lying and in the coastal flood plain.

What makes this region of the Laccadive Sea so infinitely challenging to study are its widely divergent geographical and historical matrixes: India, which is pre-dominantly Hindu, Sri-Lanka which is Buddhist and the Maldives in which Islam is its national ideology.



Figure 6 - View of Male from Villingili Island, Maldives. Identities of Maldivian performers withheld by request of the actresses. Harmattan Theater, *Male Requiem*, Villingili, Maldives, 2015. (Director: May Joseph (author's photo).

The three states together comprise the largest sweep of islands from the Laccadive Islands, the Maldive islands, the Puttalam islands, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands all the way up to the Sunderban island ecologies further up the Bay of Bengal. When I first embarked on the study of South Asia's archipelagos in 2005, there was no systematic structure through which to embark on a social science and humanities informed research area. The development of Island Studies as modalities of knowledge production and world shaping agencies has shifted nation bound narratives of coastal engagement which deployed land bound understandings of archipelago issues towards an island-based thinking. A quick glance at world governance bodies today underscores the dynamic growing awareness between the island regions of South Asia through robust island information sharing histories and policies. This is particularly the case in the areas of fishing, security, weather, climate preparedness, container shipping, migrancy and ocean security. While the region has never been fully historicised as a zone of inter-relationally dependent islands- a new regional archipelagic consciousness and cooperativeness is underway at multiple levels of engagement. This opens up new kinds of theoretical possibilities for consideration.

III. New York barrier ecologies: Between the archipelagic and the aquapelagic

What links my research on South Asian and East African island ecologies to the New York archipelago is a shared history of the 17th century Dutch East India Company (the VOC) and its colonial legacies. The renowned VOC cartographer Johannes Vingboons illustrated over 600 colonial entrepot maps for the Dutch, including Zanzibar, Cochin, the Maldives, Kaap Stadt (Cape Town), and New Amsterdam, now New York.

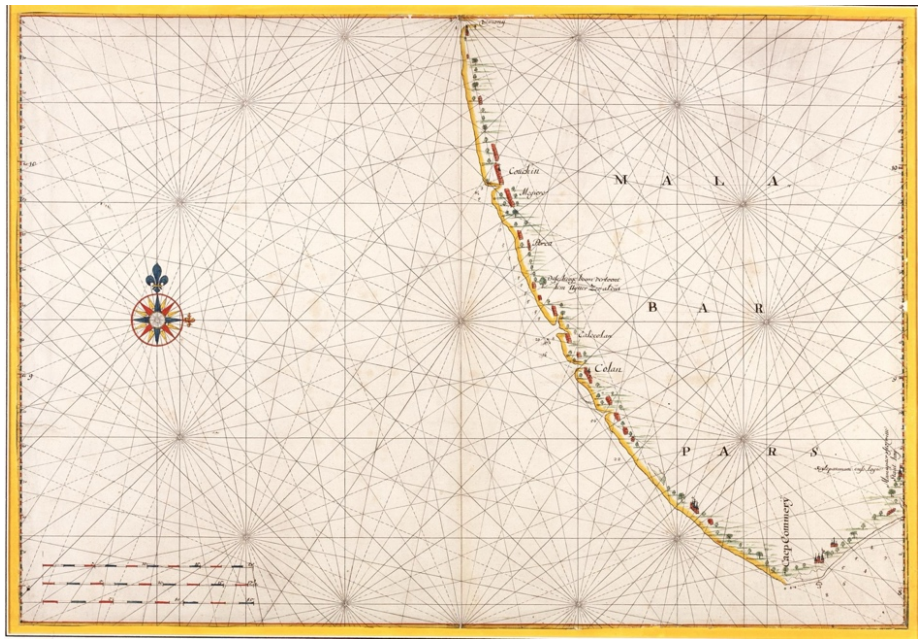

Figure 7 - Vingboons, J. (ca. 1665). *Kaart van de kust van Malabaar van omtrent Cochim tot kaap Comorijn* [Map of the Malabar coast from around Cochin to Cape Comorin]. Leupe Catalogue (Finding Aid 4.VEL), Inventory Item 523. Nationaal Archief, The Hague, Netherlands.

Living on Manhattan Island brought to the fore the startling similarities between Dutch Cochin of the 17th century and its mirror entrepot Dutch New Amsterdam of the 17th century. Remarkably, the Dutch reproduced in New Amsterdam the very similar patterns of colonisation that was rehearsed in Dutch Cochin. In Cochin, the island of Bolghatty (*Mulavukad*) became the Dutch Governor General's official residence. In New Amsterdam, the Dutch first established residence on Governors Island before moving on to the island of Mannahatta and renaming it Neue Amsterdam in 1625. Both New Amsterdam and Dutch Cochin have the archipelagic geology of barrier islands enclosing a large harbour. This was a deliberate strategy on the part of the Portuguese 15th century colonisers who sought estuarial and deltaic geologies to set up forts in the global south. The Dutch followed on the heels of the Portuguese and expanded the military strategy of securing the barrier islands to create colonial ports across Asian and African archipelagic sites. Hence, the relationship between islands and the coast is a profoundly interlocking one between all the former Dutch and Portuguese ports around the world. Zanzibar, Cochin and New York included.



Figure 8 - Harmattan Theater, *Aquatopia.* Performer Maddie Leonard. (Director. May Joseph. Governors Island, New York. 2017. (Photo: Joshua Kristal.)

New York is an archipelago of over 40 Islands. However, its archipelagic mobilities largely disappeared with the advent of the car. The 1890s began an aggressive effort to shut down ferry systems of the New York region. By the 1920s, the New York transportation authority had more or less closed down its entire ferry system. It was the beginning of the Robert Moses era. The era of the car. For the next hundred years, New York would effectively forget its shoreline and disconnect from its island relationalities. The porous shores hardened as landfill and aggressive reclamation expanded the city's largest islands while accelerating the neglect of multiple smaller inhabited islands. Manhattan emerged as the coast. Brooklyn took on the identity of a mainland despite being one of New York's larger islands. The Rockaways and Coney Island articulated their shorelines in relation to the imagined mainlands of Brooklyn and Queens. What was erased in the process of motorisation of the islands was the aquapelagic logic that Philip Hayward identifies as the structuring connectivity unfolding along the edges of islands.

The catastrophic impact of category 3 storm Hurricane Sandy in 2012 accelerated a coastal and island-based approach to the future thinking of New York City (Hayward and Joseph, 2025). The coastal devastation forced open an urban planning emergency to embrace the island ecologies of a landbound mid-20th century metropolis initiated by the mega-planner, Robert Moses. The outcomes have been complex but forward thinking. New York today is an emerging landscape of berms, oyster middens, rain gardens, retractable flood gates, movable flood walls, marshland, dunes, elevated parks, floodable gardens, bioswales. The archipelago is embracing its sinking contours by reclaiming its wetlands and marsh. The following are some images of the Manhattan coast embracing its islandness.



Figure 9 - Lighthouse Park (Elevated Park) Roosevelt Island, NYC. (author's photo).



Figure 10 - East Side Resiliency Project. One of eighteen movable gates. Manhattan, New York (author's photo).



Figure 11 - 90 Flip-up retractable flood gates - East Side Resiliency Project, Manhattan. (Photo: Marla Diamond. February 24, 2025. 1010WINS. New York.)



Figure 12 - Beach replenishment and raising the shoreline. Far Rockaway, New York City (author's photo).

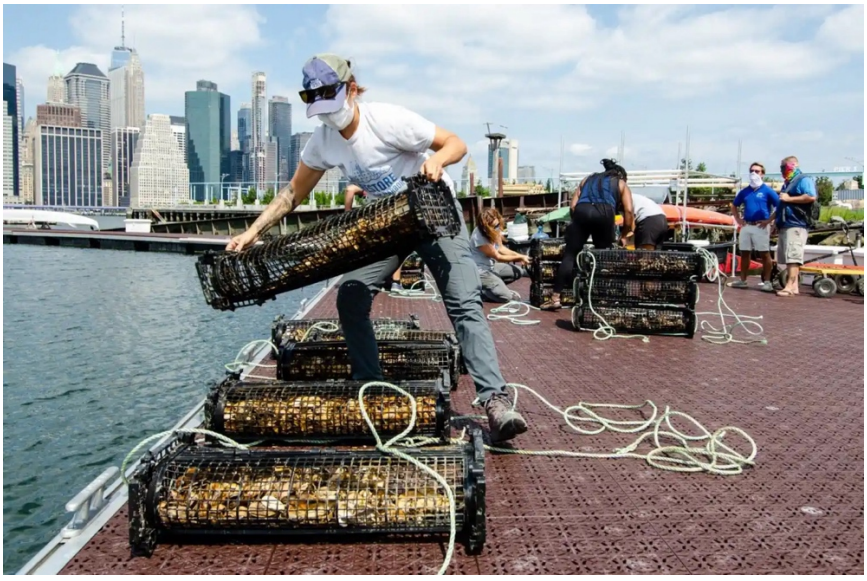

Figure 13 - Billion Oyster Project. New York Harbor. (Photo: @2020 Steven DeWitt/Witness Tree Media. From Ben Verde, 'Billion Oyster Project installs shellfish in the waterway at Brooklyn Bridge Park.' AMNY Aug. 31, 2020.)



Figure 14 - Gansevoort Beach. New elevated climate redesign. West Village, Manhattan, New York (author's photo).



Figure 15 - Riprap bolstered shoreline. North Roosevelt Island, New York (author's photo).



Figure 16 - East Side Resiliency Project floodplain gauge Manhattan (author's photo).

In closing, New York is the island, in relation to the coast of the United States. Its archipelago floats as a series of barrier islands geologically separated from the mainland. This physical disconnect is true culturally, politically and most tangibly, climatologically. New York is sinking swiftly. We also practice evidence-based adaptation for climate change, which distinguishes the precarious city from the mood of climate denial in the heartland of the country. The barrier island ecology creates a series of coast and island relationalities fanning outward towards the farthest of the barrier islands of which Far Rockaway and Coney Island are some of the better-known landmarks. The pathbreaking climate adaptation redesign unfolding in New York City is unique and urgent. It is paving the way for an island bound thinking with the rising seas that is a blueprint for what the United States needs to grapple with, in the near future. At some point uncomfortably soon, the coast will catastrophically morph into islands along the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. It will be too late at that point to draw on archipelagic wisdom and aquapelagic planning. Hey, we are voting for it!

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