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### LANDSCAPE AGENCY: WHAT IS A RESPONSIBLE UNDERSTANDING OF THE COAST TODAY?

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# LANDSCAPE AGENCY: WHAT IS A RESPONSIBLE UNDERSTANDING OF THE COAST TODAY?

**Maria Goula<sup>1</sup>**

## Abstract

Can we reimagine society's relationship with the coast? Most importantly, can we collectively make a shift of how we engage with it, setting the conditions in ways that the seashore can become a landscape? This broad, yet radical question provides a working frame to briefly examine the desire to live by the sea in a regime of permanence, in particular the reasons and consequences of occupying this precious frontier among ecosystems while at the same time ignoring the dynamics that actually shape it. The article aims to unfold the landscape's agency as a device of understanding the world to critically de-construct dominant, broadly accepted values about the coast and leverage emerging ones; novel values that engage deeply with a systemic understanding of the performative aspects of this edge in an inclusive way for humans and non-humans.

Key words: landscape, coast, USA coastal landscapes

Η δράση/δύναμη του Τοπίου. Ποια είναι η υπεύθυνη κατανόηση των ακτών σήμερα;

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## Περίληψη

Μπορούμε να ξαναφανταστούμε τη σχέση της κοινωνίας με τις ακτές; Κυρίως να πραγματοποιήσουμε μια συλλογική υπέρβαση ως προς το πώς ασχολούμαστε με τις ακτές και πώς απλές παραλίες μετατρέπονται σε τοπία; Αυτή η γενική και συγχρόνως ριζοσπαστική ερώτηση παρέχει ένα πλαίσιο για να εξετάσουμε σύντομα την επιθυμία να ζούμε μόνιμα δίπλα στη θάλασσα. Ιδιαίτερα να κατανοήσουμε τους λόγους και τις επιπτώσεις από την κατάληψη αυτού του πολύτιμου συνόρου μεταξύ οικοσυστημάτων, ενώ συγχρόνως αγνοούμε τις δυναμικές που το δημιουργήσαν. Το άρθρο επιδιώκει να ξεδιπλώσει τη δράση/δύναμη του τοπίου ως βοήθημα για την κατανόηση και κριτική αποδόμηση των γενικά αποδεκτών αξιών για τις ακτές και, συγχρόνως, για την αξιοποίηση των αναδυόμενων νέων γι' αυτές.

## Introduction

The coast has been a personal fascination over the years, embedded with memories of a globalized *dolce far niente*, the taste of salt on sweet peaches and watermelons. While this interest originated in my childhood as a result of the summers I spent with family and friends by the sea, it expanded with my research on coastal landscapes and leisure over the last twenty years. With this text I will be sharing my thoughts on society's contested relationship with the coast, whilst also contributing an international perspective to this special issue on Greek landscapes.

This is not a strictly disciplinary article but rather a reflective one; somewhat like the ones renowned American cultural geographer, J. B Jackson, was demanding for the review *Landscape*, which he diligently directed from 1951 to 1968. I owe a lot to this review, as well as Jackson's articles published in books such as *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time*, or *Landscape in Sight*. His understanding of critical observation in field work has been of utmost importance to me, especially in shaping my readings of ordinary landscapes, identifying values in them often entangled

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with the territorial inequalities of the European south. Him and others provided solid connections to cultural [and political] geography and how these fields intersect with mine, the landscape studies. His radical gaze toward the vernacular landscapes of America, as well as his deep understanding of history, have been great examples of how to study the patterns of occupation at our coasts, venerated by many through aesthetizations of their material conditions: the latter, defined by values rooted in Romanticism, paradoxically obscure the actual way of inhabiting them, by basically denying their inherent dynamic conditions, the very ones that shape them.



1. Wet condition multiplicity along littoral landscapes: Cayuga Lake, Ithaca, New York.

### *Landscapes of privilege*

In a relatively recent discovery of a citation by geographers Mitchell and Mels (2015: 204-205), I eventually found another reason why the concept of landscape, in its rich terminological indeterminacy between the natural and the cultural, tangible and intangible, energy and material-driven, becomes a great tool to approach justice: “[...] justice and injustice are embedded in, maintained and contested through the landscape”. Why talk about landscape in the language of justice? The landscapes of Gotland and Youngstown indicate that a link between landscape and justice, while complex, is also indissoluble. Justice is an ideal. However, landscape is always more than an ideal. It is the very real material effect –the “spoor” as Pierce Lewis [1975]

called it– of social practice. It is the built form of the world “as it really is” [Harvey, 2001] despite the notion that through representation, the meanings of that world are highly varied and deeply powerful [Mitchell, 1994, Duncan & Duncan, 1988]. Landscape is heavy, solid, powerful, concrete, symbolic of justice, and by contrast seen as immaterial as it is aspirational. [...] It required remaking the landscape and thus the very nature of the space within which “justice” (of whatever sort) may or may not be achieved. In remaking the landscape, a new notion of “the good” was instantiated [...].<sup>2</sup>



2. Brooklyn Bridge park, NYC, landscape architects Michael Van Valkenburgh. Marsh restoration integrated in the design of a public waterfront that aspires to reveal the coast’s performative conditions.

This statement offers a novel framing for how we understand the coast, especially now under the effects of a new climate regime. Perhaps we need to approach the coast as a landscape, and apply the agency of the concept to critically de-construct dominant, broadly accepted values about the coast and leverage emerging ones,<sup>3</sup> that engage deeply with a systemic understanding of this dynamic entity, a habitat for humans and non-humans.

When mentioning the dominant values I refer to the extensive and increased privatization of the coast around the world, with few exceptions as for example the building of public waterfronts, which is not only resulting in further coastal deterioration through expanded urbanization responsible for erosion, loss of habitat and of biodiversity (especially of marine life), but also re-

veals the coast as a space where environmental and social inequity are exemplified. This derives from the hospitality industry's continuous hunt for novel and profitable business, and perhaps most importantly, from a decreasing capacity in responsible management of the shorelines due to ongoing demands for it, due to climate induced disasters or simply, because of excessive use.

Yet, it is mostly because of our cultivated desire to live by the coast, in combination with the existence of permissive or inefficient laws to guarantee (proper) accessibility to it, that is impacting the coasts worldwide. The paintings of Edward Hopper provide us with an acute understanding of humanity and this precious, albeit fragile edge. In looking at his famous painting *Cape Cod*, or other similar coastal depictions,<sup>4</sup> the relationship humans have established with the coast becomes evident- the female figure inside her dwelling in solitude, conveying a clear condition of domain over a particular coast. The context of secure inhabitation in front of the ocean, from what we believe, not only confirms the kind of visual relationship that people have built with the coast, but it also exemplifies privilege. Land ownership on the coast runs parallel to conferring social status, the type of potential for investment with short-term recovery that is apparently unaffected, for the moment, by rising seas and extreme natural disasters. In a magnificent way, Hopper not only depicts the tension that stems from displaced interest of his subject in the painting, but he further illustrates coastal landscape values as we learn to perceive them: exclusivity of coastal appropriation; a form of comfort and safety on the front line that remains protected by the adjacency of a dense forest wrought by an enhanced naturalization of the scene. Beyond late capitalism's socio-economic impediments to the acknowledgment of the coast as an edge defined by maritime dynamics and important hydrological and sedimentation processes, there is a deeper, culturally-constructed rationale upon which we, as a society, continue to contribute to the silencing of performative coastal phenomena.

### *Representation as legitimization*

In recent times, the coasts of the world have been intensely scrutinized in terms of their built capacity and



3. Dune erosion and typical leisure patterns at the background on an Atlantic sand barrier, Ocean City, New Jersey.

resiliency, as well as in regards to waterfronts and post-industrial harbor sites. It is incredibly compelling to follow what type of actions cities take in response to sea level rise, restructuring design protocols alongside a critical expansion of engineered control toward the field of ecological restoration.

An increasing worldwide scientific clamor about climate change, and the broadly accepted threat wrought by storm surge and sea level rise, demands immediate collective responses on a global scale. Although there is scientific agreement on the causes of climate change and corresponding mitigation strategies, the application of adaptation scenarios that primarily focus on costly defense occur in only a few places, if at all. Moreover, understanding what adaptation unfolds is truly complex – especially within the current framework of multiple uncertainties.

Yet, even in the most innovative approaches the representation of the coast is oversimplified; represented as a thin line delineated by criteria of ownership or infrastructural arrangements rather than as a dynamic in-



terface between water and land. This perhaps explains “the epistemological and instrumental difficulty of addressing the coast as a waterscape”.<sup>5</sup>

In her article titled “Under water: Can engineers save Louisiana’s disappearing coast?” Elizabeth Kolbert writes: “Plaquemines is where the river meets the sea. On maps, it appears as a thick, muscular arm stretching into the Gulf of Mexico, with the Mississippi running, like a rosy blue vein, down the center. [...] Seen from the air, the parish has a very different look. If it’s an arm, it’s a horribly emaciated one. For most of its length—more than sixty miles—it’s practically all vein. What little solid there is clings to the river in two skinny strips.”<sup>6</sup>

Kolbert claims that we are perpetuating a way to map watery, uncertain landscapes such as estuaries, deltas, riverbeds, and so forth, with lines that communicate their potential virtue of becoming solid, permanently inhabitable land.

This heritage stems from the coast’s relatively recent invention as a productive landscape, either infrastructural or commodified through leisure trends. While writing this, I stumbled across a very interesting example of coastal disappearance and commodification. An article profiling Hog island, a one mile piece of sand in front of lower Queens, New York was maintained and rebuilt by its owner who commercialized services on the beach after having been washed out by a hurricane in 1893. The articles of the time focus on the island’s disappearance, yet it is the denial of its actual identity of being a sand barrier that is not addressed at all. Ownership of an element in flux reflects commodification of a positioning, but not necessarily an understanding, of what this land actually is.

The representation of time and movement on the coast, stifling ever-changing flats and their fragmentary variation that makes it a particular landscape in defiance of inhabitation and human perspectives, is altered from the revealing of a multiplicity of islands to the definition of thick lines- the result of infill and projected grid expansion that ultimately indicate [aggressive] modes of urbanization.



4. Typical resort development in cohabitation with obsolete sewage overflow tubes that helped flash to the ocean the excess of water after a storm event. Atlantic sand barrier, Ocean City, New Jersey.

#### *Nature-culture: A new ontology for the coast*

“Among aesthetic procedures that contribute to the contemporary dream of the shore- the denaturing of the shore itself; its methodical falsification as a natural site [...]” are notions that have become key constitutive elements of the cultural narrative we collectively constructed for the coast, according to Jean Didier-Urbain in his book *At the beach*, a particular domain of the coast with unique affordances as well as a source of pleasures.

The coast is inevitably a thick palimpsest formed by a myriad of actions, stories, and processes of varying speeds that continuously frame, write and rewrite it. The need to facilitate comfortable access to oceans and seas, as well as bays and rocky shores, has triggered imaginations that could have only developed by treat-

ing this precious edge as mere *tabula rasa*, since there was no prior recognition of any productive value for this territory.

This early, sustained success of formal responses to control set a path for the coasts' rapid, universal commodification, miraculously converted into narrow, yet uniquely profitable, sites for investment. The spatial patterns that the new inhabitations proposed had the power to translate the sensorial effects of the shore in a "visual-centric" spectacle implemented through the usage of available technology while ultimately reduced to a domesticated, thus controlled, disintegration of its constitutive elements: controlled water in pools and fountains of hotels' gardens; drainage of remaining wetlands after farming reforms [having already decimated them along all coasts]; the total disappearance of any sign of wetness caused by rainfall, directing exceptional or periodic overflows into underground infrastructure destined for the sea that contaminate it in an invisible way; banal aggregate orders of *ex novo* built environments; "gardenlike" managed dunes that can only exist if stabilized; collectively, these realities embody the spatial patterns that continue to contribute to the spectacle.

"Beaches provide a kind of sand dial, a clock for climate change in our new era. They record the timing, direction and extent of erosion and deposition in their form and materiality. Beaches respond to disturbances at all scales – local, regional, and global. By learning to read the lapidary prose of the beach, we can learn lessons about adaptation and beauty that reinforce what it means to be human in the Anthropocene. [...] Discovering the beauty of ephemerality may be the most important aesthetic experience that design with disturbances can provide to us, as humans living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century."<sup>7</sup>

Yet, at a level of the aesthetic experience, these very qualities co-exist with a hyperbolic, subconscious fear of the sublime effects that the utter openness and depth of the sea, and of the often catastrophic associated phenomena, are formulated in ways [both culturally, formally and materially] that deny the ethical aspect of an insoluble bond between aesthetic and moral values.<sup>8</sup> By necessitating safety protocols to respond to this powerful, hard to control variability, a variety of performances inherent to this complex edge are denied, both in

terms of processes that take place, as well as in the diversity of species competing in its inhabitation. Moreover, there are no planning tools to negotiate property lines and deal effectively with entities on the move.

*"Sous les pavés, la plage!"*

Ricard Pié, a professor and planner with several national awards for creatively sustaining collective environmental concerns for municipalities around Girona, Catalonia through policy and bold plans to de-urbanize the coast [also a fierce activist in his youth against the dictatorship of Franco in Spain], often uses the well known slogan of May '68, "*Sous les pavés, la plage!*" to underline the failed empathy of our culturally-oriented protocols in regards to what coastal sites are made of, sustained by, and eventually aestheticized about. This is also a manner in which to suggest that we must speculate and explore the de-urbanizing mode of our coasts that can only be imagined through novel representations of the coast as an emerging landscape. They are necessary to bring back the latent [memories of] performances that are underlying, or perhaps reinforced, by the effects of climate change.

The broad semantics involved in the use of the term landscape imply imaginations that prioritize the land itself yet with acknowledging the multiple, often conflicting, perceptions of it. "One common theme throughout contemporary writing, however, is that landscape provides a useful way(s) of knowing the world [Seddon, 1997]. It gives us a framework for understanding how to describe and analyze what we see and feel about the environment in which we live" [Swafield, 2020: 6].<sup>9</sup> Can we thus imagine a different approach toward the coast, approaching it as multiple material, and affective assemblages? Can the heavily-established environmental claim for biodiversity and that of an enriched, inclusive collectivity based on rights for humans and non-humans provide the framework for the coast to become?

## Notes

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4. Edward Hopper, *Cape Cod Morning*, 1950 (detail), Oil on canvas, 86.7 x 102.3 cm, Smithsonian American Art Museum.
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