

HOLDING
BACK
THE
TIDE

PRESS NOTES

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PUBLICITY

Title: Holding Back the Tide

Director: Emily Packer

Total Runtime: 77 minutes

Genre: Hybrid/Experimental Documentary

Copyright Holder: Marginal Gap Films

Language: English

Available Subtitles: English, Spanish

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LOGLINE

LOGLINE

Tagline

Reconsider the oyster.

Short logline

A docu-poetic meditation on New York's oysters and their transformations in the face of an uncertain future.

Full logline

Holding Back The Tide is an impressionistic hybrid documentary that traces the oyster through its many life cycles in New York, once the world's oyster capital. Now their specter haunts the city through queer characters embodying ancient myth, discovering the overlooked history and biology of the bivalve that built the city. As environmentalists restore them to the harbor, we look to the oyster as a queer icon, entangled with nature, with much to teach about our continued survival.

Subway

SYNOPSIS

CAUTION DO NOT ENTER

SYNOPSIS

A woman swallows a pearl. A subway car falls to the ocean floor. A deluge bursts through the cracks of New York City. In every borough, oyster shells are pried open and carefully returned to sea. A chorus of farmers, diners, sous chefs, fishmongers, activists, and landscape architects colloquializes the oyster's many lifecycles. These educational snapshots about the bivalve's ecological role, mating habits, communal living, and historical presence take on new meaning and flirt with the mythic. Underwater dances and poetic addresses blend the human and nonhuman worlds. The oyster as a water filter, carbon capturer, storm barrier, and habitat maker transcends its environmental promise and becomes a queer icon of New York City's unlikely survival story.

Retracing cyclical ecologies for the largest metropolitan area in the United States calls upon an existential reimaging of a sustainable future. Out with the narratives of bootstraps and capitalist urban individualism; in with the water-bound, the intergenerational, the queer collectivity. Once New York City was built by the oysters. Now, it is built anew.



BACKGROUND

BACKGROUND

City of Water

New York City has over 500 miles of coastline and New York Harbor was once home to half of the world's oysters. Oysters are bivalves that filter water as they breathe and routinely change their sex to reproduce. While they might primarily be thought of as an hors d'oeuvre, removed from their natural context, they provide vital services to their ecosystem. They form reefs that provide habitat for other aquatic life, protect against storm surge events, and prevent and reverse coastal erosion. Before we overharvested them, oysters filled the harbor, maintaining the water quality and feeding the indigenous Lenape people and New Amsterdam settlers alike as a popular staple.

Today, New York's waterways are at an historic turning point that could

make or break the city's habitability. Rising tides threaten the coast and climate change brings ever more intense superstorms. Every time it rains in New York City, the Combined Sewer Overflows spill unprocessed waste into the harbor. In the face of worsening environmental crises, non-profit, for-profit, and political agencies are coming together to support sustainable solutions to keep the city livable in the long term. Despite the bleak outlook, people are do what they can to stave off the worst effects of climate change. Recent reports by the NYC Department of Environmental Protection show that the harbor's water is cleaner than it has been in over 100 years, largely due the efforts of environmental organizations and activists working for the future.

BACKGROUND

Sites of Intervention

The Billion Oyster Project (BOP) is one organization who has turned to the oyster to shape the future. BOP partners with restaurants across NYC to collect discarded oyster shells otherwise destined for landfills. These collected shells provide a surface for new oysters to grow on and form reefs once they are seeded with baby oysters (spat) and restored back to the harbor.

Another organization harnessing the benefits of the oyster is the landscape design firm SCAPE. SCAPE's Living Breakwaters project is working to build structures off the coast of Staten Island to protect the neighborhood of Tottenville, which itself has a rich history of oystering.

In the culinary industry, farmers

and food workers find community in the oyster. With his oyster cart, Moody “The Mothershucker” Harney is reclaiming oysters for the common diner, after long being a symbol of bourgeois food culture. Moody's cart takes inspiration from Thomas Downing, the Black Oyster King of New York from the 1800s. Former WNBA star Sue Wicks farms oysters and finds solace working on the water. Away from city life and unbound by gendered expectations, she feels a kinship with oysters, especially as they inspire new understandings of sex and gender.

Holding Back The Tide celebrates the intricacies and interconnectedness of oysters, visiting scenes of intervention across all five boroughs and beyond, as it celebrates and considers the ticking environmental time-bomb that is New York City.

A large pile of oyster shells overflowing from a rusty metal container. The shells are piled high, reaching the top of the container and spilling out onto the ground. The container is made of dark, weathered metal. In the background, there are green trees and a clear sky. The overall scene suggests a significant volume of oyster shells, possibly from a processing facility or a large-scale oyster harvest.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

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Holding Back the Tide was made with intersectional queer values, queer practices, and LGBTQIA+ collaborators. As a non binary queer filmmaker working with a subject that regularly changes its sex as part of its reproductive process, it was important for me to create a vision of the oysters' cultural economy that celebrated the environmental heroism of the oyster through a queer perspective. Not only are most of the characters and actors queer people, but they also come to see that their gender evolution and self-actualization are reflected in nature. The film sees this reflection as necessary for cultural transformation and building a

sustainable future. In engaging with these themes, the film avoids rigid definitions or hierarchy of knowledge sources. Concepts are allowed to collide and blend. The boundaries blur between documentary and fiction, ecology and economy, individual and community, food and living creature, oysters and humans, past, present, and future. The film is shaped cyclically, as recursive crashing waves that revisit brief encounters with subjects, each revisit revealing new possibilities. Our creative choices are deeply rooted in our research and incorporate our subjects' Black, Indigenous, immigrant, and working class histories.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

We subvert the oyster's "classic" connotations of wealth and heterosexual aphrodisia, reframing old tropes through an intersectional and anti-capitalist lens.

The film was produced with the intention of building and creating community around the filmmaking process. I assembled the team out of my talented friends from the industry who shared my desire for an alternative to traditional hierarchical and extractive filmmaking practices. My frustration in feeling creatively limited in what we could make or contribute to on other projects. I was motivated by a reaction to traditional extractive practices in the modern film industry which

affect the wellbeing of crew as well as documentary trends towards character documentary. We took inspiration from the oyster, which thrives when connected and fails when isolated. All team members were extensively involved in early discussions and pre-production, imbuing a sense of collective ownership of the film. The team's roles and responsibilities were consciously flexible and able to evolve as our skills and interests developed. This collectivity was mirrored in our decision to decenter a singular human character and allowed us to find the poetic voice for the film as a prismatic city symphony, a mosaic portrait that employs different filmmaking styles threaded cohesively via emotive association.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The aesthetic values of the film intersected with our filmmaking approach and extended to our collaboration with our film's human subjects. We supported them with in-kind media exchanges and used their input to find the film's scope and messaging. We used the film as an inciting cause to connect oyster farmers to activists, nonprofits to entrepreneurs, enthusiasts with historians, and so on, for a web of reciprocal relationships that will expand beyond the film itself.

When I started this film, I was curious to discover what lengths the largest city in the U.S. would go to for the sake of its own

posterity. I was interested in the small, measurable contributions of the individual towards monumental and collective goals. When I learned about the large-scale oyster restoration in New York Harbor, it brought up questions about necessary optimism in the face of a seemingly inevitable threat and what it means to work towards change in a sinking city. *Holding Back the Tide* involved many individuals coming together and volunteering their time in service of a collective vision, guided by shared values; making this movie has shown me that in the face of the impossible, collective action opens up real and impressive possibility.

An underwater scene featuring a large sea turtle in the foreground, its head and front flippers visible. The turtle is swimming towards the right. In the background, a diver is visible, partially obscured by a large, billowing cloud of white bubbles or a large animal's head. The water is a clear, light blue-green color. The overall scene is dimly lit, with light filtering down from above.

SOUNDS OF THE FILM

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Soundtrack

The music of the film combines original score and soundtrack from a largely queer and trans group of musicians. Our soundtrack features selections from Grammy-winning artist **Arooj Aftab**, highlighting songs from the 2018 release *Siren Islands*. Other artists appearing on the soundtrack include the pioneering multidisciplinary artist **Iury Lech**, vocalist and producer **Holland Andrews**, **Time Wharp**, and **sqip**. The film also features the music of **Wael Elhalaby** and other New York City artists who performed on location during filming. **Ben Wittkugel** (Ploeg Arts), an artist manager and co-founder of independent record label Winspear, served as music supervisor.

Original score

Our original score has contributions from music producer Melissa Guion of **MJ Guider** and violinist and composer **Abby Swidler**. The score's dreamy backdrop mingles with the sound design and introduces musical themes that subtly cohere the disparate elements of the film.

Sound design

Holding Back The Tide also boasts an immersive soundscape conjured by film editor and sound designer **Kaija Siirala**. It seamlessly blends site-specific hydrophonic recordings, evocative motifs, and diegetic sounds.

A close-up, low-angle profile of a woman's face, looking upwards. Her skin is glistening with shimmering particles, and her eyes are closed. A bright sun flare is visible on her lips. The background is a clear, bright blue sky.

CAST AND CREW

CAST AND CREW



EMILY PACKER
DIRECTOR / PRODUCER /
WRITER

Emily (she/they) is an experimental filmmaker and editor with an interest in geography and hybrid formats. Their directorial work has been screened at film festivals and theaters across the country, including at Anthology Film Archives, BlackStar, DOCNYC, and others. Emily's short film *By Way of Canarsie*, which she co-directed with Lesley Steele, is streaming on the Criterion Channel and was a part of POV Shorts Season 6. Her archival film *Too Long Here*, which *Criterioncast* called "a fascinating, important work" about the inauguration of an international park, has been used as an advocacy tool for its preservation. As an editor, Emily's work has been featured in the *New Yorker*, PBS, and on Vimeo Staffpicks. Her feature film editorial experience spans indie narrative, experimental nonfiction, historical arthouse fiction, and personal essay film. In addition to her editing and directing work, Emily serves on programming committees for film festivals in New York City. They were a fellow in the 2018 Collaborative Studio at UnionDocs in Brooklyn, and are a proud alumna of the anomalous Hampshire College. Emily collects voicemails for future use; consider yourself notified.



TREY TETREULT
PRODUCER / NARRATIVE
SUPERVISOR

Trey Tetreault (he/him) is a director, producer, and creative specialist based in New York City. He is an award-winning director of theatre and film, having attained recognition in the international independent short film circuit. He likes to stay busy on a myriad of creative projects, always looking to collaborate and expand his creative circle. Various credits include work with *Saturday Night Live*, HBO, projects with 4-time Tony Award-winning Producer, Harriet Leve, and Anthony Bourdain's *Parts Unknown*.



JOSH MARGOLIS
PRODUCER / ARCHIVAL
PRODUCER / WRITER

Josh Margolis (he/him) is a Brooklyn based documentary producer with a keen interest in art, visual culture, and archival research. He is best known for his work on Netflix's *This Is A Robbery*, *Abstract: The Art of Design*, and a number of PBS *American Experience* films including *Voice of Freedom*, *The Riot Report*, *The First*, and *The Man Who Tried To Feed The World*. As an undergraduate at Ithaca College Josh co-produced a documentary short following a community of Syrian refugees as they resettled in Detroit. The film was selected as an Editor's Pick by *The Atlantic* magazine, and won Best in Show at Docs Without Borders Film Festival. Outside of work Josh can most often be found searching for meaning at an art museum, rock show, or in the cheap seats at a baseball game.

CAST AND CREW



JOHN MARTY
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

John Marty (he/him) is a non-fiction filmmaker based in New York City. His visual practice explores anthropological stories based in the (un)natural world. He is an alumnus of Hampshire College where he made the film "Tartufai" utilizing ethnographic methods to explore the clandestine world of multi-generational truffle hunting in Italy. His work with the band CyberAttack won Best Music Video at the Bowery Film Festival for the song "Fantasy Killer." John was a fellow in the 2021-2022 Collaborative Studio at UnionDocs in Brooklyn where he researched public space in New York City. He co-directed "Altitudes", a short documentary about the multi-dimensional efforts from scientists, activists, and students to prepare for the climate crisis. The film was selected to be part of Labocine's October 2023 issue (art)ificial 2.0.



LINDSEY PHILLIPS
EDITOR

Lindsey Phillips (she/her) is a documentary filmmaker and editor based in Brooklyn, New York. Her work celebrates unique traditions and idiosyncrasies of place, culture, and communities, finding humor and humanity in complex places. She is currently working on a comedic hybrid project called "Serious Play" about the juggling community and its annual festival. She is known for directing and editing several short films including: "The Exceptionally Extraordinary Emporium," about the significance of costuming in New Orleans, "My Name Is Marc, And You Can Count On It," about Cleveland's late-night commercial cult icon Marc Brown, and "Rhythm's Gonna Get Ya", a city symphony of the many challenges NYC subway commuters face. Her award-winning films have screened at numerous festivals across the country, have appeared on PBS's Reel South, and her work has been featured on The New Yorker, Time Studios, Vox, and CNN's Great Big Story.



BEN STILL
*EDITOR / PRODUCER / FIRST
CAMERA UNIT*

Ben Still (he/him) is a filmmaker whose documentary work has won awards at film festivals and has been featured as a Vimeo Staff Pick. He also makes music videos, which have been featured in *Rolling Stone* and NPR's *All Songs Considered*. He is a founding editor of the collage journal *ctrl + v*, whose website he designs and maintains, and he was a 2018 - 2019 UnionDocs fellow. His writing has appeared in *The LA Review of Books*, *The Offing*, *Landfill*, and elsewhere. He holds a PhD in Social Psychology from New York University.

CAST AND CREW



LIZ BEESON
PRODUCER

Liz Beeson (she/her) is a Brooklyn-based producer who has worked with a diverse array of clients including Netflix, Instacart, Amazon, Samsung, Under Armour, GE, and more. Her most recent film, "Serious Play," premiered at the Brooklyn Film Festival 2023 winning the Audience Award for best narrative short film, and is screening at Cucalorus Film Festival, SCAD Savannah Film Festival, and the New Orleans Film Festival. In addition, Liz also produced, edited, and co-hosted an award-winning podcast called On the Virge, which is all about your first time and the topic of virginity/sexuality. During her time in New Orleans, Liz produced and served as the producer and production manager for an original series called Sunken City, hailed by the press as 'the New Portlandia' and featured on Indiewire's list of web series that could be 'the Next Broad City.' Liz is also a freelance producer for Inspired Storytellers, a creative agency dedicated to working with non-profit organizations, and all those making change in their communities. Liz is also in early development on a feature-length hybrid documentary about the International Jugglers' Association. Liz received a Bachelor's in Journalism from Middle Tennessee State University, was part of the 2018 National Arts Strategy cohort earning a certification in Arts and Culture Strategy at the University of Pennsylvania, and received a certification in Diversity and Inclusion at Cornell University.



LESLEY STEELE
SECOND CAMERA UNIT

Lesley Steele (she/her) is a director, editor and producer of video art and documentary film. Originally a NYC native she obtained a BFA in Design Technology from Parsons The New School for Design and Masters in Directing from SVA. In 2020 she was chosen to participate in Sundance's Art of Editing Fellowship & subsequently appeared on DOC NYC's "40 under 40" filmmakers list. Steele's spark in experimental 16mm cinematography and analog editing is a driving force in her work, both nonfiction and fiction. Much of Steele's filmmaking reflects the essence of nonlinear experimental storytelling and unorthodox approaches to visioning stories of the black experience and culture within the African Diaspora across the Caribbean and United States. During the civil uprising following George Floyd's murder in 2020, she documented the late Floyd's horse-carriage funeral on 16mm film in Austin. Her latest short "By Way of Canarsie", which she co-directed with Emily Packer, is available to watch on Criterion Channel and on PBS. Lesley is currently producing her first investigative feature doc about the state of mental health in Nebraska and its intersection with race and the carceral system in the United States. She is a member of Meerkat Media, a democratically run co-operative production company in Sunset Park, Brooklyn that produces artful and impactful films with an emphasis on ethical narrative storytelling, non-fiction and visual craft. You can find Lesley via Brown Girls Doc Mafia, The Alliance of Doc Editors, and Array Crew.

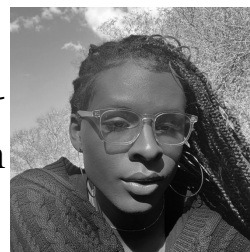
CAST AND CREW

Scripted Cast

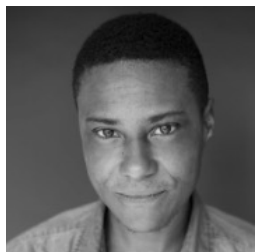
Dragonfly//Robin
LaVerne Wilson



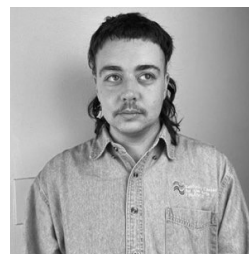
Aasia Taylor-
Patterson



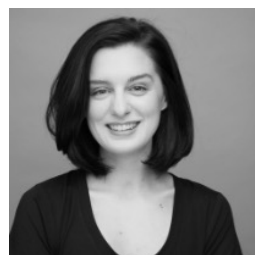
TL Thompson



Hannah Rego



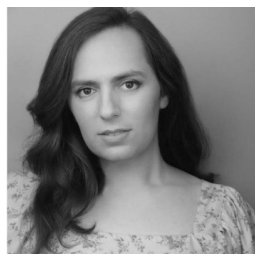
Meghan Dolbey



Katharine
Nedder



Avery
Nusbaum



Hannah
Lennon



Thomas
Annunziata



CAST AND CREW

Documentary Cast

Moody Harney

The Real
Mothershuckers



Sue Wicks

Violet Cove
Oyster Co.



Pippa Brashear

SCAPE Landscape
Architecture



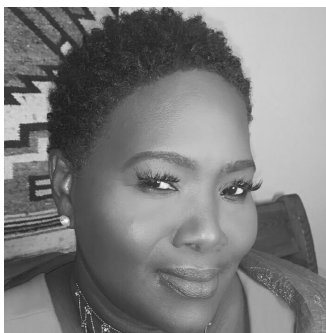
Owen Foote

Gowanus Dredgers



Lucina Clarke

MyTime, Inc.



Kim Tetrault

Cornell Cooperative
Extension





FILM STILLS

FILM STILLS



Standing gracefully on the sandy banks of the shore, a Black woman in a Grecian white robe embodies the mythic Aphrodite, posing as portrayed in Botticelli's "Birth of Venus".

Credit: John Marty

Pictured: Dragonfly // Robin LaVerne Wilson



A subway station floods with water, an example of the devastating impact of severe weather on New York's insufficient urban infrastructure.

Credit: John Marty

FILM STILLS



An extreme close up of an oyster dripping succulent juices into an open mouth.

Credit: Ben Still

Pictured: Avery Osajima



Nestled in the mossy embrace of the riverbank, ancient oyster shells protrude from a shellmound that pre-dates Western settlement.

Credit: John Marty

FILM STILLS



A commercial-sized truck empties its cargo of oyster shells, creating a modern day oyster midden on Governor's Island in the New York Harbor. The shells will be recycled and restored to the harbor by the nonprofit Billion Oyster Project.

Credit: Ben Still



A closeup of volunteers' hands building a wire cage that will later be used to house oyster shells for restoration into New York Harbor.

Credit: John Marty

FILM STILLS



A young black trans woman basks in the glistening sunlight in a moment of gender euphoria.

Credit: Lesley Steele

Pictured: Aasia Taylor-Patterson

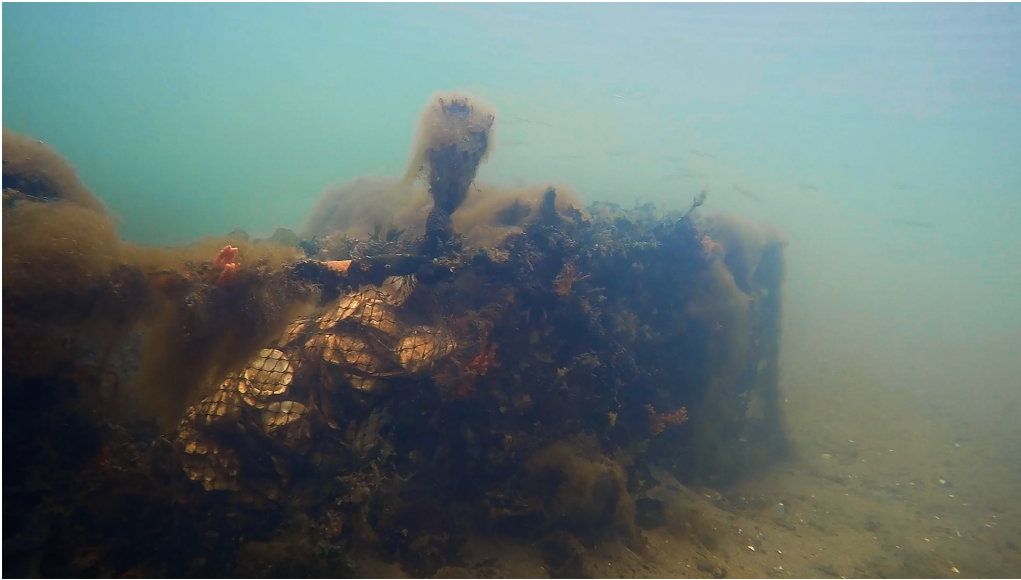


A young Black trans woman emerges from a shell in a queer recreation of the early film “Birth of a Pearl” (1901, Armitage). Shot on 16mm.

Credit: Lucas C. Ospina

Pictured (left to right): Meagan Dolbey, Aasia Taylor-Patterson, Emily Packer

FILM STILLS



An underwater oyster cage covered in seaweed is nestled on the ocean floor, revealing marine life hidden beneath the waves.

Credit: Courtesy of Billion Oyster Project



A young Black nonbinary person sits in a green wheelbarrow in the Rudolph Oyster House, constructed in 1908, which now belongs to the Long Island Maritime Museum. Their determined gaze towards the camera embodies the resilience and contributions of Black and immigrant communities in cultivating and shaping the oyster industry.

Credit: John Marty

Pictured: TL Thompson