

## Beaches and Ports

THIS SPECIAL ISSUE gathers reflections on beaches and ports—landscapes of leisure and of industry, coastal sites with incommensurate histories and complex social and ecological dynamics. Our aim is to elucidate points of connection between these seemingly disparate spaces, and in doing so, shed light on possible new avenues for comparative literature and the environmental humanities. Beaches and ports are cultural and geological contact zones, spaces of both pleasure and precarity. The former often signify the hedonistic suspension of work, while the latter suggest sites of proletarian labor, but the essays collected here complicate this opposition. On beaches and in harbors, dividing lines of all sorts are eroded and displaced.

We take inspiration from oceanic and maritime studies, but our investigation is anchored within the littoral zone, an undertheorized space in literary studies.<sup>1</sup> Contributors to this issue explore the critical resonance of various coastal geographies. These include tidal pools and shorelines as sites of interspecies meeting and “missed encounter” (Ada Smailbegović); the industrial port on strike, where the gendered dimension of labor comes newly into view (Sarah Ann Wells); the post-industrial redeveloped harbor as a “surreal” transfiguration of the industrial seaport (Harris Feinsod); the fossil-rich chalk geology of the cliffs of Dover, the mutability of which belies the formation’s mythology (Maxwell Uphaus); the Strait of Hormuz, a hyper-surveilled “petro-landscape” (Thangam Ravindranathan); and a range of coastal ruins, including seawalls, military blockades, vernacular beach architecture, and ghostly harbor cities that draw attention to the littoral as a “disappearing landscape” (Morgane Cadieu). These diverse maritime sites comprise a weave of materialities, including literature and visual media. As such, they invite transdisciplinary engagement with the question of setting—understood as an “enabling force” rather than a stable ground or backdrop (Freed-Thall and Zhang, n.p.). Like a “plantation zone,” a “flood year,” or a smoggy sky, the tidelands can only be approached as a representational and geophysical

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<sup>1</sup> Numerous journals have devoted issues to oceanic studies, including *English Language Notes* (“Hydro-Criticism,” 2019); *Comparative Literature* (“Oceanic Routes,” 2017); and *PMLA* (“Oceanic Studies,” 2010). See also, notably, Cohen; Blum; and Raban. The littoral has not received this level of attention from literary scholars, though it has been the subject of several edited volumes, most notably Allen, Groom, and Smith.

overlap, a terraformed amalgamation of industrial, biological, and textual rhythms.<sup>2</sup> This issue thus experiments with object and scale, considering poetry, novels, painting, photography, and film, and moving among divergent methodological vantage points, from critical geography to zoopoetics. What can we see when we linger at the water's edge? Our wager is that the shoreline might be understood not just as a launching pad or limit point, but as a confluence of bodies, sand, and cargo boxes, and as a matrix of literary and cinematic form.

Emerging as a privileged site of leisure in the era of carbon-based capitalism, the beach is a space of contradiction. It presents both an extension of the dominant order and a fissure in its logic. In an age when, as Jason Moore puts it, nature is generally "put to work," the beach is often imagined as a paradisiacal zone of exception—a space of sensory intensity and democratic possibility.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the twentieth century the beach has flashed up as a figure for the promise of suspended labor and radical egalitarianism: one of the rallying cries during the student and worker strikes of May 1968 in France was "sous les pavés, la plage!" (beneath the paving stones, the beach!). But the beach is not only modernity's dreamscape. It is also our nightmare: at once a cemetery and an ecological disaster zone, with its heaps of debris, oil stains, and rising seas.<sup>4</sup>

If the beach is both an unruly edge and a stage for the performance of leisure, the port is a platform for the "concrete moving of goods" (Sekula 12). A doorway between sea and land, a port is a transfer point or channel of exchange, a place for loading and unloading bodies and things. Defined by the mobility it facilitates, a port is essentially "a bundle of routes and berths, of roads and rails leading away" (Khalili 4). Vital nodes in a vast, "orderly disorderly" traffic in goods, ports are feats of engineering as well as elaborate social organizations (Birtchnell, Savitsky, and Urry 1). Contemplating ports as settings thus requires us to consider the relation of literature and art to such seemingly unaesthetic concepts as infrastructure, logistics (originally military terms), and cargo.<sup>5</sup> Ports are also borders, sites of customs enforcement and surveillance, settings for detainment and deportation. Yet, figuratively at least, a port is a haven or shelter: "a place to which one aims, a destination; a place of safety or rest, a refuge."<sup>6</sup> In traditional maritime terms, a port is where one might wait out a storm, or pause in anticipation of a more favorable wind. And this is to consider ports only in terms of shipping and commercial trade. Centers of diasporic community, the industrial working ports of the last century also sustained a

<sup>2</sup> See Allewaert; Parrish; and Taylor. For a study of the "material entanglements" of hydropower, state building, and poetry comprising China's Three Gorges Dam, a "techno-poetic landscape," see also Byrnes (5, 19).

<sup>3</sup> On capitalism as a political economy marked by the rise of "cheap nature" whereby nature is devalued and put to work at very low cost, see Moore.

<sup>4</sup> On the beach as both dreamscape and nightmare, see Gillis 158.

<sup>5</sup> On the military provenance of "logistics" and "infrastructure," see Cowen, who shows that in an age when commodities are produced not in any singular place but across the virtual pipeline of "logistics space," "supply-chain security" is increasingly displacing the "inside/outside" logic of the national border (2–4).

<sup>6</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, online ed., s.v. "port," 1.3.b., <http://www.oed.com> (accessed January 4, 2021).

diverse, often queer social world and a “vagabond internationalism” that spilled beyond the docks (Edwards 210).

Beaches and ports, then, are complex enough spaces in their own rights. What happens when we attempt to think about them together? When Morgane Cadieu and I began to explore this topic, I expected the port to act as a reality effect. I imagined that a focus on maritime industry would puncture the dream bubble of the beach, which too often figures as just another “convenient but promiscuous metaphor”: an ahistorical fantasy of sheer liminality and emergence (Price 51). And yet, as capitalism’s connective tissue or nerve site, the port, too, is difficult to grasp—and all the more so in recent decades, when working ports have effectively vanished from the heart of the coastal metropolis.

The cultural history of the leisure beach encompasses medicine and hygiene, steam engines, urban planning, and labor movements. It’s a story that can be condensed into a few centuries, spanning a period of intensified carbon combustion and anthropogenic climate change, from the late eighteenth century to the present. But who could hope to construct, in a single narrative arch, the history of the port? It would involve a wild mesh of narrative strands, including wind, steam, and global positioning systems; colonial exploitation, labor, and migration; military logistics and postindustrial automation. To invoke the title of anthropologist Laleh Khalili’s recent book, ports are the very “sinews” of trade and of war. Sarah Ann Wells lucidly encapsulates the contradictions of this space in her essay for this issue, noting that in the Global South in particular, “the port instantiates colonial extraction and harbors the sticky origins of global supply chains. It is enclave and shelter perennially mutating, expanding and contracting with capital’s flows, sluice gate and waystation for the spatial fix.”

Although trading ports have long existed, the modern protective pier emerges, like the leisure beach, with industrial capitalism, as the product of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century engineering (Jackson 14).<sup>7</sup> The violence of the global plantation system is also bound up with the rise of the modern port, as we see clearly in the case of Liverpool. Historians of port engineering enthuse over Liverpool, which opened the world’s first commercial wet dock in 1715 and expanded on it over the course of the century. This proved to be key infrastructure for the transatlantic slave trade, which Liverpool dominated in the second half of the eighteenth century (Jackson 47; Richardson 67).<sup>8</sup> Long before the container revolution that would transform ports into nearly invisible, automated factories, trading ports facilitated the mass scale, brutal commodification of human beings.<sup>9</sup> The specter of

<sup>7</sup> A protective pier, or enclosed wet dock, maintains water at a constant level, thus enabling a faster turnaround time for ships, which previously would have been dependent on tidal conditions in order to load or unload cargo.

<sup>8</sup> Historian David Richardson notes that after 1780, Liverpool was the “undisputed slaving capital of England and by far the largest slave port in the Atlantic world” (67). On Liverpool’s outsized role in the transatlantic slave trade, see also Anstey and Hair; Richardson, Schwarz, and Tibbles; and Wallace.

<sup>9</sup> In his stunning *Specters of the Atlantic*, Ian Baucom examines the late eighteenth-century record book of maritime expenditures kept by Liverpool’s Lord Commissioners, who directed the movement of ships from one international port to another while also managing the “trivial daily business of global rule” (5–6). This record book is “haunted,” Baucom argues, by “the specter of slavery” that these financial protocols made possible: the specter of the “wounded, suffering human body incessantly attended by an equal sign and a monetary equivalent” (7).

enslavement haunts the commercial port, which has also served as a fundamental vector in the history of organized labor, as a fomenting ground for strikes. Ports, after all, are places where goods can be moved or obstructed, and where labor can be offered but also withheld.

Beaches and ports are among the twentieth century's most significant and polyvalent cultural geographies. The fates of these spaces sharply diverge, however, as the rise and consolidation of the leisure beach coincides with the cultural forgetting of ports. Speaking in the broadest of terms, port history from 1850 to the present can be summed up in three words: "coal, oil, and boxes" (Williams 13). The shift from the centrality of coal to that of the comparatively sanitized, hollowed-out form of the shipping container registers a broader reorganization of capitalism itself. Today, ports are as crucial as ever—90 percent of our stuff passes through them, as various scholars have pointed out—but they have been transformed into securitized sites, while the massive ships that dock at them have become floating warehouses (Yaeger 523; Sekula and Burch, n.p.). The advent of the containerized "RORO" ("roll-on roll-off") maritime cargo system means that seafarers spend less and less time on land (and often are not permitted to leave the docks at all) while huge ship-to-shore cranes are operated by remote control from a half mile away (Levison 374). In her essay for this issue, Thangam Ravindranathan underscores the spectral quality of the postindustrial port, noting, in reference to the "unpeopled" and "inert" infrastructure of the Strait of Hormuz, that there is no place more "located" and "geostrategic," yet no place more "speculative," more "vanishing," more "repressed by world consciousness." If the modern metropolis rose up around its harbor—no Manhattan without "streets [that] take you waterward," without "commerce [that] surrounds it with her surf"—the contemporary working port is often imperceptible to the city dweller, displaced as it is behind "layers of barbed wire and security" (Melville 2; Khalili 1). By contrast, the leisure beach exposes the nonworking body for all to see. You may recall the 2017 aerial "Beachgate" photos of then New Jersey governor Chris Christie relaxing on a holiday weekend with his family on Island Beach State Park, which was closed to the public because of a state government shutdown. The wide circulation of these photos exemplifies the hypervisibility of the beach body and showcases the exclusivity that haunts a supposedly egalitarian site. If, as Khalili puts it, "maritime trade, logistics, and hydrocarbon transport are the clearest distillation of how global capitalism operates today" (3), the picture is only complete when we consider not only the port but the beach, too: desolate edge transformed into utopian fantasy of leisure, "nature" as idealized otherworld, suspension of the real.

### Beach Effects

Despite their divergent functions, then, the leisure beach is less the port's other than its uncanny double. It, too, is a carefully engineered space. If ports necessitate reflection on mobility, the leisure beach draws our eye, rather, to the image of the immobilized body, scantily clad and splayed out in the sun. Ports represent distribution, labor, marine routes, and networks; beaches index consumption, nature as commodity, leisure as spectacle. Over the course of the twentieth century, beaches became increasingly manufactured, their inherent transience denied, their patterns of erosion obsessively filled in with sediments dredged up and transported

from afar.<sup>10</sup> Sand is now among the most traded global commodities by volume (Khalili 83).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in her afterword for this issue, Cadieu suggests that the image of a sand barge floating down Southeast Asian rivers, powered by shovel-bearing low-wage workers, could be the “new postcard of the twenty-first century beach.”

In his 1884 decadent novel, *Against Nature*, J. K. Huysmans invites readers to imagine reproducing the beach experience by means of a few well-chosen props, including salt water, the smell of twine, a casino photograph, and a touristic guidebook (36). Today, Huysmans’s recipe has spread across the globe: beaches—or simulacra of beaches—are everywhere. Take Paris Plages, the temporary artificial beach that appears along the Seine in Paris each July. Created in 2002 by a team of sociologists and theatrical set designers, Paris Plages is replete with sand, palms, cabanas, umbrellas, deck chairs, hammocks, bocce courts, and refreshment stands—everything but the sea. As scholars have noted, to participate in Paris Plages is not to go to the beach, but to *pretend* to go to the beach, collectively, in the center of Paris (de la Pradelle and Lallement 105–6). The beach is thus an apt emblem of Anthropocene-era “nature”: colonized, commoditized, artificially engineered, bombed, trashed—and all the while, intensely fetishized. Like the cruise ship and the redeveloped urban harbor, the leisure beach would seem to be entirely cut off from coastal ecology—just another “festival space” to consume (Gillis 171).

Yet, as Smailbegović’s and Uphaus’s essays for this issue demonstrate, beaches exist before and beyond their codification as places of leisure. A port is a landscape built for human use, but a beach, in the most basic, geological sense, is nothing more than sediments accumulated on a coast—available to be moved and sorted by the uprush and backwash of the waves. “Malleable and impermanent across time,” as Uphaus puts it, the littoral is intrinsically unstable because it is a marine/terrestrial interface, or ecotone—a space of transition between biomes, replete with tough and delicate life forms.<sup>12</sup> To cite environmentalist and marine zoologist Rachel Carson, the seashore is not only an ecological site of extreme dynamism and mutability, but the most “fleeting and transitory feature of the earth” (*Sea around Us* 99).

Even the leisure beach can be a space of alterity and resistance. A comparison of the seashore writings of Carson and Roland Barthes helps us to see this. In her 1955 study of Atlantic coast ecologies, *The Edge of the Sea*, Carson reflects on the subtle interplay of visibility and invisibility that marks life in the intertidal zone. Attentive to the traces and remainders left by a variety of “transient inhabitants” of the shore, she highlights the irregular rhythms patterning a space that “belongs alternately to sea and land” (157, 28).<sup>13</sup> Carson’s sensitivity to the zoological microforms and

<sup>10</sup> For an account of how labor-intensive “beach nourishment” projects can be, see Caro. In engineering Jones Beach in the 1920s, Robert Moses’s team had to dig up 40 million cubic feet of fine silver sand, then plant beach grass by hand to hold the dunes in place (Caro 232).

<sup>11</sup> Khalili notes that “of the nearly 59 tonnes of material mined every year, 68 to 85 per cent is sand and gravel” (83).

<sup>12</sup> Allen, Groom, and Smith note that an ecotone “often has a biological density far greater than that of the areas on either side of it: both the intensity of its life and death cycle and the diversity of its species are greater” (5).

<sup>13</sup> For an expanded engagement with Carson’s “close reading” of the coast, see Freed-Thall, “Thinking Small.”

nuances of the seashore stands as a subtle critique of the extractivist practices and expansionist mindset characterizing the postwar era. Similarly, in a little-known 1977 essay, Barthes reads the late capitalist seashore as a site of alternative, less productive and accountable temporalities and corporeal modes. Barthes's "beach effect" is a phenomenon of cognitive drift and sensory remapping: "Qui de nous n'est resté des heures étendu sur le sable? Je me souviens: des bruits, des bouts de phrases se croisent autour de moi. Si je ferme mes paupières, des couleurs persistent: bleu, rouge, jaune; si je les entrouvre parasseusement, je vois passer à travers mes cils des corps dont je ne sais rien. Tout cela forme un *effet de plage*." (509; Who among us has not spent hours splayed out on the sand? I remember: sounds and bits of phrases crisscross around me. If I close my eyelids, colors persist: blue, red, yellow; if I half open them lazily, I see unknown bodies passing through my lashes. All of this forms a *beach effect*.)<sup>14</sup> Barthes invites us here to rethink the concept of leisure. Like Carson, he depicts the littoral as a space of unexpected pleasures and contingencies: his repeated "if" (*si*) parallels the often speculative tone of her prose, with its refrain of "perhaps" and "sometimes." Carson presents the seashore as a multisensory realm in which the haptic, visual, acoustic, and olfactory cross and mingle; similarly, Barthes's beach effect involves a slowed-down scattering and reconfiguration of sound and sight—sensation queerly incarnated. As the link between sensory cause and effect is loosened, other connections become imaginable.

In their focus on the seashore as a space of intimacy with strangers (human or otherwise), Carson and Barthes implicitly underscore another peculiarity of this site: its status as a commons. According to the laws of many nations, the water's edge cannot be privatized. This is notably true in France and in the United States, as well as in Mexico, Thailand, and in other coastal nations of the Global South. Even when the beach itself is privately owned—as is increasingly the case in the United States—the intertidal zone, or at least part of it, is set aside as a public trust.<sup>15</sup> The idea of the commons has been theorized by economists and ecologists as a site of tragically overused and exploited resources. "Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all," Garrett Hardin declared in 1968 (29). Yet we might also consider commons as spaces of unexpected encounter, fleeting pleasure, and utopian possibility. The classic nineteenth-century example of the commons is an overgrazed pasture, but in an extended sense, the commons encompasses a range of social margins or fringes in which mixing, recalibration, and queer interclass contact might take place—including beaches and ports.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Unless otherwise attributed, all translations are my own.

<sup>15</sup> Gillis notes that in the United States (as of 2012), 83 percent of eastern shores and 60 percent of western shores are privately owned (174). On public trust law in the international community, see Blumm and Guthrie. On beaches as legally protected public spaces in France, see Bordereaux. For a comparative overview of public beach access in each US state, see Surfrider Foundation. On inequities in coastal access, and on the US beach in particular as a space that has shaped and been shaped by white supremacy, see Devienne; Keul; Wiltse; Wolcott; and Caro, especially 318–19.

<sup>16</sup> In my capacious rethinking of the "commons," I follow the lead of Saidiya Hartman, who describes the early twentieth-century slum as an "urban commons where the poor assemble, improvise the forms of life, experiment with freedom, and refuse the menial existence scripted for them" (4). Thus Hartman imagines both the ghetto alleyway and the tenement hallway (or "parlor") as rich zones of sociability,

Consider, in this light, the complex history of the French word “grève” (beach).<sup>17</sup> Like “beach,” “grève” literally refers to this site’s geological sediment, or sandy shingle, but the word acquired a range of other meanings over time. Today, “grève” retains its original sense but also signifies a labor strike: to be “en grève” is to strategically withhold one’s labor. This semantic morphology can be traced to the Parisian Place de Grève (renamed the Place de l’Hôtel de Ville in the nineteenth century). Named for its location on the banks of the Seine, the Place de Grève served until the nineteenth century as the primary port of entry for Paris’s waterborne food supply (Tilly 42). But this port was much more than just a place for unloading cargo: it was a site of pleasure and of violence, an “epicenter of rebellion” and a place of “misery and possibility” (Harison 421, Clover 63). The Place de Grève was infamous as the site of public executions—Balzac and Hugo reference the place in this context simply and ominously as “la Grève”—but it was also the stage for public festivals (it held the annual midsummer bonfire for the fête of Saint-Jean) and for hiring fairs, especially those of migrant stonemasons.<sup>18</sup> Workers regularly assembled at the Place de Grève for hiring, banding together near the river when work could not be had or when the offered price was too low. As Charles Tilly notes, “to stand apart from work was therefore to *faire la grève*; strikers became *grévistes*” (42).<sup>19</sup> This port was therefore the origin of the modern labor strike, and it served more broadly as a popular gathering place during moments of political crisis or insurrection, from the 1789 Revolution to the 1871 Commune (Harison 403).<sup>20</sup> The *grève* thus invites us to hold seemingly opposed terms in our minds: festival and death, work and strike, beaches and ports.

As the multiple resonances of “grève” make clear, the beach indicates not merely a commodified landscape but a precarious commons and a site of collective resistance. Yet on the modern leisure beach, the complexity of this space is subdued—or so it seems—into a “expensive backdrop” (Tausig 258). How did the seashore become such a ubiquitous emblem of paradise that by the mid-nineteenth century,

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unrecognized as such by critics bent on reform. Similarly, Samuel Delany valorizes the wide range of queer interclass “contact” that the now-demolished porn theaters of midtown Manhattan enabled (23–29).

<sup>17</sup> “Grève” is one of two primary French words for beach; the most commonly used word is *plage*, the etymology of which I discuss below.

<sup>18</sup> The dictionary of nineteenth- and twentieth-century French, the *Trésor de la langue française informatisé*, cites Balzac’s 1831 *La peau de chagrin* (*The Wild Ass’s Skin*) and Hugo’s 1831 *Notre-Dame de Paris* as works that reference “la Grève” as an infamous execution site. See *TLFi*, s.v. “grève,” 1, <https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/greve>.

<sup>19</sup> Allan Potofsky fleshes out this point, noting that “the summer of 1785 witnessed the first appearance of the term, *faire grève*, which appeared in police reports to refer to a strike. A commissioner noted that *faire grève* meant to ‘not work in order to have the daily wage increased.’ This is ‘what they call (it) among themselves.’” As Potofsky points out, “a refusal to work at this central locale, otherwise used for public executions, was no doubt an impressive act of defiance” (57).

<sup>20</sup> As Casey Harison explains, this setting “was especially noteworthy for its history of contentiousness in the nineteenth century, for it was here that crowds tended to gather, rumors of insurrection circulated and rebellions reached their climax” (403). Potofsky describes the Place de Grève as the site “of great moments in which sovereignty passed temporarily from the national government to the people of Paris and their representatives. . . . The Place de Grève was for centuries the locale par excellence of popular politics” (53–54). For an expanded history of this site, see Le Moël and Derens.



Figure 1. Eugène Boudin, *On the Beach at Trouville*, 1863. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Flaubert's landlocked heroine, Emma Bovary, could declare her love of sunsets on the beach, having almost certainly never seen one?<sup>21</sup>

Historian Alain Corbin notes that in Europe, until a few centuries ago, the ocean was represented as a place of rot and decay, and the beach, as the scene of shipwreck and disaster, suitable for sailors, fishermen, and castaways, not for idle pleasure-seekers. By the eighteenth century, however, medical authorities had begun extolling the therapeutic benefits of sea bathing, as a cure for melancholy and urban degeneration. In the second half of the century, "cure-takers" set off for the seashore in search of an escape from the perceived ills of city life (57). The result of this trend, Corbin notes, was not only a new regime of the care of the self, but "[a] major event in the history of sensibility" (164). The feeling of exposure and vitality incited by the conjunction of sea winds, sun, salt breezes, sand, and distant horizon can be linked to the modern concept of "coenesthesia"—a sort of undifferentiated sensation, a generalized feeling of aliveness irreducible to any particular region of the body (Heller-Roazen 249).<sup>22</sup>

In nineteenth-century Europe, as expanding train lines created an ever more mobile populace, the beach became a miniature civilization, a makeshift, constructed, and reconstructed encampment, increasingly commodified as an object of touristic desire. This "aesthetic conquest" of the shore meant the displacement of workers and native populations (Urbain 44). The inherent transience of the

<sup>21</sup> "Je ne trouve rien d'admirable comme les soleils couchants, reprit-elle, mais au bord de la mer, sur-tout. — Oh! j'adore la mer, dit M. Léon." (Flaubert 146; "I can't think of anything as wonderful as a sunset," she said, "but above all, at the seaside." "Oh, I love the sea!" said Monsieur Léon.)

<sup>22</sup> Heller-Roazen notes that examples of coenesthesia in nineteenth-century medical literature include the sensation of "well-being produced by clean air" as well as compound mental states such as tickling, tingling, and shivering (249).





Figure 2. Eugène Boudin, *Beach at Trouville*, 1875. Courtauld Institute of Art, London.

seashore makes true conquest difficult, however. French marine painter Eugène Louis Boudin captures the temporariness and fragility of bourgeois beach encampments in his 1863 painting, *On the Beach at Trouville*: an overturned chair, crumpled garment, and abandoned shoes in the foreground convey a day at the beach as a windy struggle against the elements (fig. 1). In Boudin's 1875 painting of the same beach, the entire pictorial space, including its mass of fashionably dressed subjects, seems to be disintegrating into the seaside (fig. 2).

With all of its décor, the late nineteenth-century beach soon became a fashion show of sorts: a variety of veils, hats, umbrellas, parasols, striped suits, and long ruffled gowns feature in impressionist beach paintings. Yet the beach is also a flattening, depersonalizing space, where the intensities of air, sand, and sea always threaten to reduce complex social hierarchies to a conglomeration of windswept, sensate bodies.<sup>23</sup> On the beach, one is at once exposed and absented. As anthropologist Marc Augé puts it, the beach is both a “spectacle” and an “immense waiting room” (38, 42). A waiting room might be a space of boredom or of impending doom. But it is also a site of potentiality, a minimally scripted social space that enables nonhegemonic modes of desire, perception, and sociability to flourish. Landrin's 1873 touristic guide to French beaches, *Les plages de France*, opens with the admission that the beach makes mental concentration impossible: “one spends hours looking at the sea without thinking about anything; its sight alone intoxicates” (3). In his 1874 fashion magazine, *La dernière mode*, Stéphane Mallarmé imagines his ideal “reader” as a beachgoer, a dreamer who leafs through pages, not reading at all but simply resting her eyes “dans l'oubli causé par un horizon vaste et nu” (61; in the oblivion caused by a vast, naked horizon). As Mallarmé reminds us, even when the beach offers the spectacle of nature tamed and furnished, it resists the planned and the orderly; it is difficult to keep time at the seashore.

<sup>23</sup> On the beach—and especially the seemingly unfettered, deregimented female bather—as an object of fascination for impressionists, see Nochlin. On modernism's attraction to the blank, impersonal quality of the beach, see Tickner.



Figure 3. Eugène Boudin, *On the Beach at Trouville*, 1863, detail. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

As a space in which industrial time is suspended and productivity set aside, the beach appealed especially to novelist Marcel Proust. *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–1927) presents the seashore resort of Balbec as an improvisatory site of social mixing and queer sociability, and thus as the alternative *par excellence* to both the aristocratic salons of Paris and the closed family nucleus of the village, Combray. Yet in Proust's earlier, unfinished novel, *Jean Santeuil* (1895–1900), the beach is not yet a stage for seeing and being seen; rather, it is an enormous bed, a site of intoxicating “animal life” in which one might lie for an “indefinite” interval, book in hand but not yet reading. As Jean tosses and turns among the dunes, his mind is at last “empty.” He becomes all body, simply “digesting” and gazing at sea and sky in delirious proximity to this “reservoir of all forces” (368–70). In *Jean Santeuil*, Proust mediates between Carson's subtle zoology of drifting tentacles and hidden sea caves and Barthes's eyelash-patterned beachscape. His seaside is a space of elemental intensity where, to cite Smailbegović's essay for this issue, “human scale is pressed against the scale of the sea.”

In late nineteenth-century paintings of Trouville, we see bourgeois subjects engaged in an act of aesthetic surveillance: they contemplate the sea as if the liquid expanses before them were a frameable work of art. The genius of these paintings is to expose the impossibility of such containment. For painters like Boudin, as for authors like Mallarmé and Proust, the seaside is less a frame or conventionally conceived “setting” than an enveloping atmosphere. In Boudin's Trouville, elegant beholders melt into the very object of their observation, merging along with their various props into the elements of the scene. On the beach, after all, it is difficult to hold anything in place. Indeed, such paintings could be described as mixed media, as their oil paint sometimes contains traces of windblown sand.<sup>24</sup> In Boudin's 1863 painting of Trouville, some cast-off garments (a red shawl, some shoes) lie in the foreground; the viewer's eye is drawn to these abandoned objects, which appear to belong to no one in the scene (fig. 3).

Today, such abandoned objects have once again taken center stage. Many contemporary artists work in the medium of marine trash, building miniature anti-monuments to late capitalism's endless consumption. For example, in her 2012 photographic series, *SOUP*, Mandy Barker presents sea-drift gathered from the world's

<sup>24</sup> We see this in particular in Monet's 1870 *La plage de Trouville*, the lower quadrant of which is encrusted with patches of sand. For a discussion of this sandy patch, see Kessler.



Figure 4. Stuart Haygarth, *Strand* (2012)—rubber shoes. Courtesy of the artist.

beaches, including a constellation of marine plastic that ocean creatures tried and failed to ingest.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Stuart Haygarth highlights flotsam's allure in *Strand* (2012), a sculptural work composed of things that the artist culled during a 450-mile walk along the English coast, from Gravesend to Land's End.<sup>26</sup> *Strand* is made entirely of oceanic debris, including tools, lids, goggles, lighters, buckets, shovels, frisbees, balls, combs, cords, sunglasses, gloves, and many varieties of shoes (fig. 4).

In *Strand*, it is as though the abandoned shoes in the foreground of Boudin's 1863 beachscape had slipped off the canvas only to resurface, across the channel, a century and a half later. As these artists demonstrate, the beach is a singularly ambiguous space. It is framed on one end by the pleasurable disintegration of personhood into swirling particles and abandoned objects, and on the other end, by the hapless return of those fragments as they wash up as tidewrack on the shore. In tender arrangements of such debris, we glimpse the cracks in a containerized world.

### Port Effects

If the modernist "beach effect" suggests both the pleasures of waste and a languid, hallucinatory crossing of the senses, could we identify a parallel "port effect"? Multilingualism would be a chief element: the Place de Grève, historians have

<sup>25</sup> Barker, Mandy, *SOUP*, 2012, photograph series, [www.mandy-barker.com/soup-2](http://www.mandy-barker.com/soup-2).

<sup>26</sup> Stuart Haygarth, *Strand*, 2012, found man-made beach objects, micro cable, and plywood, 600×340 cm. University College Hospitals Macmillan Cancer Centre, London, [www.stuarthaygarth.com/strand2012](http://www.stuarthaygarth.com/strand2012).

noted, was a “cauldron of regional dialects and patois” (Jordan 108), and twentieth-century texts set on a working waterfront tend toward polyglot argot and *skaz*. Thus Steinbeck famously depicts Monterey’s Cannery Row as “a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream” (1). The eponymous hero of Jean Genet’s queer maritime novel, *Querelle of Brest* (1947), speaks in “bits” of argot that “seem to enter through the mouth, to pile up inside him, to settle and to form a thick mud deposit, out of which, at times, a transparent bubble rises, exploding delicately on his lips” (12). And Claude McKay’s *Banjo: A Story without a Plot* (1929) takes place in the queer, Black “dream port” of Marseille, where flocks of seamen, soldiers, pimps, and vagabonds speak a “confused lingo of English, French, and native African” (15, 24). McKay loves Marseille precisely because it is not an ornamental entryway but Europe’s “best back door” (69). In *Banjo*, he explores what he terms the “picturesque” quality of the industrial port city, thereby untethering this aesthetic concept from its historical relation to gardening and landscape design. For McKay, the picturesque names a way of seeing proper to a mobile, collective eye—the eye not of the tourist or the architect, but of one who is cruising or simply passing through.<sup>27</sup>

As these examples demonstrate, just as beaches cannot be entirely reduced to their leisure function, ports are about more than the commerce they facilitate. Industrial ports are also zones of encounter, spaces for cruising, loitering, and carousing. The industrial port sometimes realizes the beach’s egalitarian promise, offering a commons or ephemeral gathering place, a site of anonymous pleasure and aesthetic play. This overlap of port and beach intensified in the immediate wake of containerization, when working docks and piers were largely abandoned (and before these spaces were seized upon by urban developers). As Feinsod notes in his essay for this issue, “many varieties of aesthetic experience” rise out of the ruin of the break-bulk piers. We have seen that tidewrack-based art emerged from the debris of the container revolution: hauled through the world’s oceans at ever-greater speeds, masses of densely packed plastic objects inevitably jump ship and end up washing up with the tides. The flourishing of both art and queer sociability on Manhattan’s dilapidated west side piers in the 1970s and 1980s, was, at least in part, another consequence of containerization.<sup>28</sup> Like an “extended back room after closing time,” the Hudson River piers “presented extraordinary opportunities for experimentation and mischief” (Anderson 24; Crimp 269).<sup>29</sup>

Alvin Baltrop, a photographer who gained fame in the art world only posthumously, was fascinated by these piers. When not working as a taxi driver or self-employed mover, Baltrop took thousands of pictures documenting queer life in this derelict industrial site. In his photograph of sunbathers basking on a cracked

<sup>27</sup> For an account of the picturesque as an eighteenth-century aesthetic concept that translates the world into a work of art, see Marshall. On cruising—the “search for non-binding, uncommodified sex and movement across social space”—as a queer Black ethos in McKay, see Newman 177.

<sup>28</sup> Containerization left the piers empty, but they became harbors for queer sex because of a homophobic crackdown in the city—an attempt to erase the signs of homosexual life in time for the 1964–65 World’s Fair (Anderson 13).

<sup>29</sup> For an account of artist David Wojnarowicz’s relation to this space, see Anderson. For an overview of other artistic experiments staged on the piers in the 1970s and 1980s, see Crimp. Edmund White discusses the importance of this site as a dehierarchized queer space of “sexual abundance” in his memoir, *City Boy*.

cement platform, a heterogeneous assemblage of bodies, alone or together, lounge in various states of dress or undress, as if on a beach (fig. 5). A homoerotic mural by the artist Tava appears at the photograph's bottom left, its representation of interspecies encounter echoed by the human-canine grouping on the far right. In its explicit fragmentation of space, Baltrop's photograph of the piers subverts the tradition of the totalizing panoramic tableau, which, according to Sekula, has long been allied with maritime space. Unlike a panorama, which always signals "desire for a greater extension" beyond what we can see, Baltrop's picture is neither topographically complete nor "greedy" for more (43). But what is most surprising here is the angle from which the photograph is taken. The platform appears strangely tipped, as if the sunbathers were on the verge of sliding off an invisible edge—a spatial reminder that these figures, to invoke Elizabeth Freeman's account of queer temporality, are "out of sync with state-sponsored narratives of belonging and becoming" (xv). This dizzying tilt might also remind us of the common etymology for "beach" in Romance languages (the Italian *spiaggia*, French *plage*, Spanish *playa*, and Portuguese *praia*). These words derive from the Latin *plaia*, which can in turn be traced to the Greek *τὰ πλάγια*, meaning "the sides of a mountain."<sup>30</sup> Like a beach, Baltrop's pier is oblique, aslant—except that instead of slanting *down* to the water's edge, its cement surface inclines vertiginously *up* to the Hudson, as if it were a ship pitching in the waves. Baltrop's photograph thus merges the scenography of leisure with maritime visual cues, indicating an outcast queer world suspended between the effects of port and beach.<sup>31</sup>

Baltrop shot his photographs from a range of angles—through doorways, from neighboring piers, and sometimes from above, as he hung suspended in a makeshift harness from the ceiling of pier warehouses, "watching and waiting for hours," in his words, to "preserve the frightening, mad, unbelievable, violent, and beautiful things that were going on at that time" (quoted in Crimp 269). In the scenes he captured, we get a sense of the piers as a zone of attachment, a space of both tenderness and roughness. In this regard, Baltrop's aesthetic sensibility is not unlike that of Carson, who emphasizes the improbable tenacity of even the smallest and most vulnerable intertidal life forms, which she describes, variously, as "lacy" and "shrubby," "delicate" and "tough" (*Edge of the Sea* 39, 174, 95, 57). A February 11, 1987 *New York Times* article describes Manhattan as an "unhemmed dress" and the westside piers as the garment's irregular, unfinished border (quoted in Anderson 2). Baltrop invites us to linger on the textures of that frayed edge. Whether he is documenting a gathering of humans on a pier or a lone kitten sunbathing precariously on the harbor rocks (fig. 6), his eye is sensitive to fleeting occasions of intimacy and transformation within a scene of ruin.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *TLFi*, s.v. "plage," 2, <https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/plage>.

<sup>31</sup> For nearly as long as they have been sites of leisure, beaches have been queer refuges. Drag was part of queer beach culture in the New York area since at least the 1920s, according to historian George Chauncey (184). In her history of the queer enclave of Cherry Grove, Fire Island, Esther Newton notes that beachside resorts were long "the only public places where gays could socialize and assemble without constant fear of hostile straight society" (2).

<sup>32</sup> As Crimp puts it: "the complexity of Baltrop's legacy resides not only in the record his photographs provide of utopian and dystopian occurrences, but also in their evidence that the moment in Manhattan's



Figure 5. Alvin Baltrop, *The Piers* (sunbathing platform with *Tava mural*), courtesy of the Alvin Baltrop Trust, ©2010, the Alvin Baltrop Trust and Third Stream. All Rights Reserved.

This issue follows Baltrop's lead in positing beaches and ports as intricate, interconnected geographies. Each of the contributors identifies a particular coastal formation as an occasion to explore what falls outside the dominant beat. What is at stake here is an attempt to see what emerges when we consider ecological and social formations in close proximity, as a series of overlapping forces—rhythms of existence at the edge.

Ada Smailbegović's essay launches the issue, drawing us into an intertidal zone unmoored and disjointed by climate change. Exploring uncanny terrestrial and liquid encounters in the work of photographer Jeff Wall and poet Marianne Moore, Smailbegović notes that these artists are preoccupied by the figure of the sea displaced into a grave. She reads this incongruous, visionary reversal in ecological terms, in relation to a series of other environmental disarticulations and gaps. Moore's seascapes, in particular, foreground nonmonumental forms of marine life, elucidating "the myriad of forces that shape the fluctuating line between the land and the sea" and enabling us to see the intertidal zone as a site of what transgender and animal studies scholar Eva Hayward terms "provisional togetherness" (Smailbegović). In this ephemeral contact zone, species, thrown off their rhythms by climate change, fall out of sync with their environment and with one another. Smailbegović shows that Moore and Wall make art of this "edge of unmeeting," enabling us to recognize the seaside as a text—a sensitive register of creaturely amalgamation and missed encounter.

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history when we could so thoroughly reinvent ourselves was as precarious as the places where we did it" (269). Many thanks to Frédéric Viguier for introducing me to Baltrop's work.



Figure 6. Alvin Baltrop, *Untitled*, n.d., courtesy of the Alvin Baltrop Trust, ©2010, the Alvin Baltrop Trust and Third Stream. All Rights Reserved.

Offbeat rhythms and breathing spaces are also vital to Sarah Ann Wells's reading of the "unusual" strike film, Aloysio Raulino's 1978 *Santos Port*. This film, Wells argues, compels us to rethink labor itself. It does so by spotlighting unwaged, overlooked forms of work, especially the gendered labor of sex work. Raulino permits us a glimpse of bodies that normally recede from cinematic view—especially the cis- and transgendered sex workers ("girls from the wharf") whose work, and resistance to work, rarely register on film. Wells's essay thus highlights the way subjects appear "in excess of [their] labor" in *Santos Port*, a phenomenon emblemized by Raulino's striking close-up of a slowly respiring torso, tattooed with the names of the world's ports. Could there be a more beautiful and defamiliarizing depiction of the body on strike? In contrast to the precise choreography of the city symphony, Raulino's port film produces a "sense of the port as the place where pulsations of contradictory work-times and life-times jut up against one another," and makes us wonder "what bodies and experiences lie beyond the frame."

While Wells explores the syncopated rhythms of the working port on strike, Harris Feinsod hones his gaze on a site as yet unexamined in literary studies: the redeveloped, postindustrial urban harbor, patterned on Baltimore's shopping mall-esque "Harborplace." Focusing especially on Joris Ivens's 1966 documentary film, *Rotterdam Europoort*, Feinsod navigates among the harbors of Rotterdam, Baltimore, Barcelona, Long Beach, and Genoa, underscoring how the "aesthetic forms of industrialization" remain legible beneath the veneer of each emergent leiscapescape. Examining the process by which modernism's urban seaports have been replaced by "gleaming esplanades and *paseos marítimos*," he highlights the "confounding historicity" animating a range of contemporary waterfront-set comic

tableaus, from a Baltimore mural of a mayor beside a mermaid to the zany antics of the Bluth family on the Fox sitcom, *Arrested Development*. Guided by Ivens's Baudelairean "Flying Dutchman"—simultaneously a "prospector" and a "ruinologist"—Feinsod gathers fragmentary dialectical images that expose the ironies of the gentrified "festival marketplace."

Just as Feinsod excavates the ruins of break-bulk piers beneath the touristic harbor, Maxwell Uphaus explores the layers of chalk that make up the mythologized Cliffs of Dover. Uphaus's essay elucidates the geopoetics of these cliffs, contrasting their appropriation as a spectacle of unadulterated Britishness to their actual "geohistorical contingency" as represented in poems by Matthew Arnold, W. H. Auden, and Daljit Nagra. Uphaus thus deconstructs the xenophobic mythologization of the cliffs and shows that they are in fact a permeable, impure "epitome of coastal space." As he puts it, "from both a historical and a geohistorical perspective, Britain is *all* accretions: layer after layer of originally foreign deposits, none of which can be isolated as inherently native bedrock." The cliffs of Dover represent not an "insular community of lovers," but, to cite Auden, a "commingling of strangers."

With Thangam Ravindranathan, we move from the seaside cliff to the maritime strait, and from geopoetics to petrocriticism. Ravindranathan investigates Jean Rolin's *Ormuz*, a 2013 novel about a shadowy character named Wax who attempts, for reasons unknown, to swim across the Strait of Hormuz. As Ravindranathan points out, this strait—one of the world's most trafficked oil channels and a strategic military choke point—is an improbable novelistic setting. What sort of plot, and what sort of character, could exist in this "tense and riddled landscape," with its extended security apparatus, massive oil tankers, and "unhomely" port infrastructure? In lieu of a realistic character in which one might invest belief, Wax is a mere "subject effect" with a Cartesian name, "a cyber-ghost figure," a "dreamy swimmer" at the epicenter of the world's maritime petroleum trade. Yet according to Ravindranathan's ecological reading of the novel, it is precisely in his implausible existence and tender unaccountability that Wax stands as the "opposing principle" to the "petro-chemical-industrial-military order." Ravindranathan's essay thus explores a problem at the heart of this issue: how forms of life (and art) might survive within the twenty-first century's oil-saturated scene, conjuring other possible pathways through the present.

Ghostliness and perambulation are also central concepts for Morgane Cadieu, who takes Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* as a model for her own exploration of "ecosystems and infrastructures threatened by erasure." Cadieu understands the contemporary shore as both a vanishing terrain and a mausoleum, and her essay centers on a series of coastal "entanglements" haunted by war and ecological violence. Echoing Smailbegović's account of the "grammar" of land-sea inversion, Wells's attention to forms of waterfront life and work that go unregistered by cinema, Feinsod's search for dialectical images within the gentrified harbor, Uphaus's dive into the chalky materiality of the Cliffs of Dover, and Ravindranathan's focus on the "weird phenomenology" of the Strait of Hormuz, Cadieu makes the shoreline strange. She does this by emphasizing the fragility and reversibility of beach and port, and by highlighting a range of disorienting scales and perspectives. These include the "spinning coastal compass" and "amphibious aesthetics" of Asako Narahashi's and Tadashi Ono's shoreline photographs, novelist Jean Rolin's



blending of military and vegetal lexicons, and filmmaker Céline Sciamma's cinematic transformation of the coast into a surface on which to record oft-unseen forms of labor and desire.

As Cadieu points out, in our era of accelerated climate disruption, "beaches are washing away" while ports "move seaward." To contemplate the seashore is thus to acknowledge the impossibility of holding fast to anything. Real estate speculators, urban developers, and home owners defend property values by building ever higher barriers against erosion and rising tides. Yet artists tend to underscore the impossibility of possessing or stabilizing this transient ecotone, mobilizing an aesthetics of the passing and ephemeral rather than the durable and death-defying. For the modernist and contemporary artists who find themselves drawn to the tidelands, the coastal edge offers both a "waiting room" and a space of collective resilience. It's a site of refuge and exposure, of work and strike—grounds for an elusive encounter, catwalk at the end of the world.

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