Rachel Carson Center Perspectives

How to cite:

Pastore, Christopher L. "Line in the Sand: The Promises and Perils of Ordering the Ocean's Edge." In: "Unruly Environments," edited by Siddhartha Krishnan, Christopher L. Pastore, and Samuel Temple, *RCC Perspectives*, 2015, no. 3, 61–65.

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Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN 2190-8087

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Federal Ministry
of Education
and Research

Deutsches Museum

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Line in the Sand: The Promises and Perils of Ordering the Ocean's Edge

As thresholds between order and chaos, between "places" endowed with meaning and undifferentiated "spaces," the ocean's edges have long lured humans to inhabit them while invariably denying their efforts to fully control them. Mixing security and liberty, durability and variability, coasts evoke the need for permanence alongside a desire—whether real or imagined—for continual change. If, as this volume posits, "unruliness" is an essential aspect of the natural world, a closer examination of coasts reveals the extent to which unruliness occurs when the human need for stability negotiates with nature's dynamism. Unruliness, in other words, is the human perception of, and response to, disorder. In the face of unruliness, boundaries and notions of jurisdiction become blurred. Routines and rules of decorum erode. For many, these irregularities hold special allure: so enticing are unruly spaces that some have sought to enhance and even reproduce them. Others have endeavored to contain or, in some cases, remove them. Yet, as this essay suggests, these changes can come at a cost.

Environmental history has largely focused on terrestrial topics, but a recent transdisciplinary burst of scholarship some have called the "new thalassology" has drawn the seas back toward the center of inquiry. Although initial examinations of the ocean emphasized the physical and conceptual boundaries between land and sea, a new littoral history, one that explores the soggy interstices of ocean and inland, is emerging. While historians such as Alain Corbin have examined how coasts were constructed culturally, others have examined them in imperial and postcolonial terms. Scholars such as Michael Pearson, Greg Dening, and John Gillis have explored coasts in global perspective, while a number of recent environmental histories have begun to explore specific coastal regions alongside the rivers and estuaries that punctuated them.

If scholars have only just begun giving historical coherence to coasts, humans have been creating order along the edge of the sea for much longer. As Fernand Braudel has shown, Europeans and North Africans began modifying the Mediterranean's shores (and surrounding wetlands) in significant ways as early as the fifteenth century. The Mitidja near Algiers, the Pontine Marshes near Rome, the lower Rhone and

Nile Valleys had all been sparsely populated swamps.[1] But through damming and diking humans added order to these otherwise indeterminate spaces over time. Most famously the people of the Netherlands drained their intertidal sloughs to create one of Europe's most prosperous early modern cities. What had once been a nearly uninhabitable maze of marshes was dammed and diked into dry land, setting the stage for a new era of capitalist development.

Coasts served as the principal points of connection around the early modern Atlantic world. Alongshore, the practices of the Old World met with the realities of the New. At once open to exchange and sheltered from attack, littorals and estuaries in particular became important sites of settlement, and people invariably shaped them to meet their needs. Mirroring the trend toward enclosure in Europe, English settlers in North America modified their coastal environments in ways that removed the commons component from intertidal space. In Boston, for instance, a 1641 law intended to encourage wharf construction allowed for private ownership as far as the low-tide mark. That merchants could own the land below high water would encourage them to shoulder the expense of constructing wharves, while still allowing the traditional rights of fishing, fowling, and navigation—a hybrid public-private arrangement. But as wharves sprouted among the shallows, owners began to fill between them, thereby creating dry land from which the commons qualities of the sea were permanently removed. When faced with the sea's ability to undermine exclusive ownership, and so being confronted with an unruly presence on their property, the people of coastal Massachusetts replaced intertidal uncertainty with the security of seawalls.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, efforts to tame and contain the unruliness of the sea even engendered new tools for economic development. As Jonathan Levy has shown, risk was first commoditized in the form of marine insurance. But by the early nineteenth century risk began to move onshore. Just as common lands and intertidal mudflats were partitioned and enclosed by fences, walls, and wharves, "future peril" was enclosed within insurance policies that encouraged economic, and in some cases environmental, risk-taking.[2] Insurance hedged the promise of profit against the threat of financial ruin. With unruliness safely contained by indemnities,

1 Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Sian Reynolds (1949; New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1976), 60–62.

2 Jonathan Levy, *Freaks of Fortune: The Emerging World of Capitalism and Risk in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 10.

the same spirit of endeavor that drove maritime expansion bolstered economic development across the North American continent.

The desire to experience the invigorating effects of nature without the danger and mess fundamentally shaped human interaction with the shore during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With the rising popularity of seaside resorts many holidaymakers, preferring pristine seashores, encouraged seascape painters to remove piers, weirs, and fish pounds from their paintings to advance a cleaner, more romantic rendition of the sea.[3] As Jean-Didier Urbain has shown, twentieth-century beachgoers began to fetishize an organized shore. Phobias of seaweed caused many to consider it a form of "pollution," an unruly vestige of wild nature. So particular were some beachgoers that many municipalities began to rake their beaches and even bring clean sand from other places to achieve seaside perfection. Individual beachgoers, accordingly, felt compelled to enclose individual beach plots. With blankets, folding chairs, and umbrellas they staked their claims, thereby partitioning the shore.[4]

Seeking the tension between predictability and possibility, between order and unruliness, many seaside resorts began to engineer their shores to provide the best of both worlds. The rectangular swimming pools of the 1950s and 1960s have, in recent decades, given way to swimming pools with undulating edges, many of which were built along or just behind beaches to emulate tidal lagoons. If older swimming pools provided a wholly artificial waterfront experience, the new concrete lagoons were shaped to emulate an estuary, a maze of hidden pools and channels as a means by which waterfront loungers could lose themselves in all the complexities of the littoral. Wading among these man-made tidal pools, bathers could experience a sense of childlike wonder without the fear of being pinched by lurking critters. In some of these lagoons, the ultimate freedom could be achieved atop submerged bar stools (like underwater boulders) while the bartender moved safely between the bottles a few feet away.

Even more dramatic feats of engineering have endeavored to replicate the interface between order and unruliness. The growing popularity of the "infinity pool"—that is, a pool designed to create the optical illusion that it lacks an edge—suggests that

3 Matthew McKenzie, *Clearing the Coastline: The Nineteenth-Century Ecological & Cultural Transformation of Cape Cod* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2010), 173–77.

4 Jean-Didier Urbain, *At the Beach*, trans. Catherine Porter (1994; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 134–39.

many will labor to recreate coastal tensions at any cost. Chest-deep in water, one looks across the swimming pool clear over the ocean to the horizon. The pool could be perched halfway up the side of a mountain, yet the effect is the same: an unobstructed view of an enduring ocean that visually flows directly into a protected bay. In other places, infinity pools emulate the thin sheen of water in the intertidal, a glassy reflection of the sky that again extends clear to the horizon. The widespread belief that infinity pools are the exemplar of refinement suggests that, as we continue to cordon off our coasts, and as we continue to build edges along our shores, taste dictates that at least an imagined communication with the sea must be maintained.

Ever evocative of unruliness, the ocean's edge has required endless tinkering to make it habitable. Both materially and imaginatively, humans have labored to enclose it. But the ocean's enduring presence has often thwarted that impulse toward improvement. Scoured by strong winds and currents, the line in the sand becomes easily blurred. In consequence, humans have looked for ways to emulate the ocean's powerful forces while removing the threat of violence, or just the plain old mud and muck of nature. The philosopher Gaston Bachelard has claimed that a deep or "material" imagination forms when the mind contemplates matter consisting of "profound and lasting ambivalences." "To engage the whole soul," he explained, "there must be a *dual participation* of desire and fear . . . good and evil . . . black and white," and even, he later added, "*la pâte*," a mixture of water and earth. In other words, deep expression and true creativity must be imbued with all the tensions inherent in the natural world. Permanence must be met with possibility and security with vulnerability. Socially, politically, and environmentally—we need them all. Nowhere are these tensions more evident than alongshore. The objects that are "immobile and inert solids," Bachelard concluded, are "foreign to our nature," and as a result of one's constant interaction with them the "soul . . . suffers."[5]

We have taken great pains to improve our shores. The walls that line the littoral have allowed for dramatic economic growth, and the pools constructed at the edge of the sea (or were made to look as if they were) are veritable works of art. So drawn are we to our beaches and bays that we feel compelled to recreate them, suggesting that there is a deep psychological need to engage with the ocean's edge and the feelings

5 Gaston Bachelard, *Of Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. Joanne H. Stroud (1942; Dallas: Pegasus Foundation, 1982), 11–13.

of unruliness it evokes. As sea levels continue to rise and our coasts bear the brunt of ever-more-powerful storms, we will be forced to renegotiate our relationship with the sea. Doubtless, we will continue to build walls along its shores, but we must not cut ourselves off completely. A sense of collective vitality—and poetry, no less—depends on maintaining that connection. When the uncertainties of nature converse with the human desire for permanence, unruliness emerges. Although intuition tells us to resist it, perhaps a little unruliness can be a good thing.

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