

A photograph of Rihanna standing on a beach. She is wearing a light blue dress and a brown shawl. Her hair is styled in a large, curly afro. She is looking off to the side with a thoughtful expression. The background shows waves crashing on the shore under a blue sky with scattered clouds.

HOLDING  
BACK  
THE  
TIDE

PRESS NOTES

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# LOGLINE

## **Short**

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

## **Full**

*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.

A photograph of a large, weathered, light-colored rock or shell fragment lying on a dark, rocky ground with some dry twigs and moss. The rock has a layered, concentric appearance, suggesting it might be a fossil or a piece of ancient pottery. The background is filled with dark, jagged rocks and some dry, brown twigs and moss. The overall lighting is somewhat dim, giving the scene a natural, outdoor feel.

# TOPIC SUMMARY

# TOPIC SUMMARY

## 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.

# TOPIC SUMMARY

## Scenes 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 as we visit scenes of intervention across all five boroughs and beyond, as we celebrate and consider the ticking environmental time-bomb that is New York City.

A close-up, profile view of a woman's face, looking upwards. Her eyes are closed, and her skin is glistening with sunlight. The background is a clear, bright blue sky. The text "CAST AND CREW" is overlaid in the center of the image.

CAST AND CREW

# CAST AND CREW



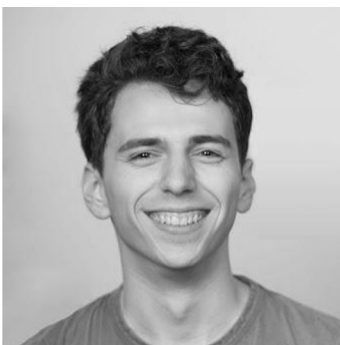
**EMILY PACKER**  
*DIRECTOR*

Emily Packer (she/they) is an experimental filmmaker and editor with an interest in geography and hybrid formats. They were a fellow in the 2018 Collaborative Studio at UnionDocs in Brooklyn, and is a proud alumna of the anomalous Hampshire College where she now teaches digital editing. Her directorial work has been screened across the country, including at Anthology Film Archives, BlackStar Film Festival, 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. As an editor, Emily recently cut two feature films including Noah Schamus's "Summer Solstice," an interpersonal trans drama set in upstate New York, and the forthcoming "Sound Spring", an experimental anthology film about residents' historical entanglements with Yellow Springs, Ohio. In addition to her editing and directing work, Emily serves on programming committees for film festivals in New York City and guest-curated the "Coastal Knowledge" series for the Rockaway Film Festival in 2021. 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**  
*ARCHIVAL PRODUCER*

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 is a digital producer whose work focuses on story and discovery. Liz has produced 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.’ In addition to this work, Liz also produces/edits/and co-hosts “On the Virge,” an award-winning podcast about your first time. Liz is also the producer of “Serious Play,” a comedic short film which is premiering at the Brooklyn Film Festival 2023. She is a freelance producer for the production company Inspired Storytellers and Project Director for Mustache, a full-service agency under Edeleman.



**LESLEY STEELE**  
*SECOND CAMERA UNIT*

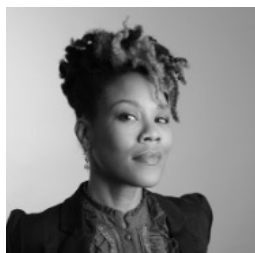
Lesley Steele is a director, editor and producer of video art and documentary film. Originally a NYC native she obtained a BFA in Design Technology from Parsons The New School for Design and Masters in Directing from SVA. In 2020 she was chosen to participate in Sundance’s Art of Editing Fellowship & 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 non-fiction 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.

# CAST AND CREW

## Scripted Cast

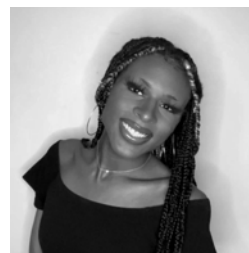
Dragonfly//Robin  
LaVerne Wilson

Aphrodite



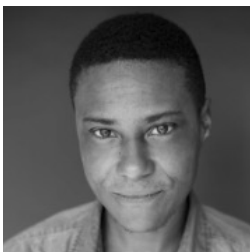
Aaysia Taylor

Hermaphroditus



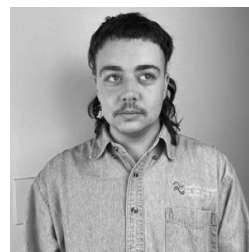
TL Thompson

Sous Chef

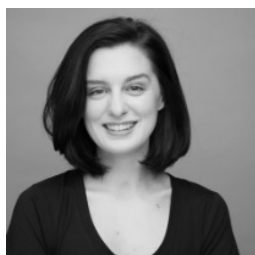


Hannah Rego

Cronos



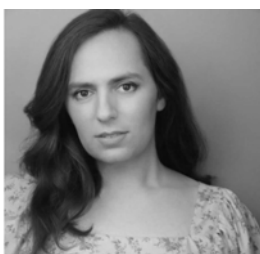
Meghan Dolbey



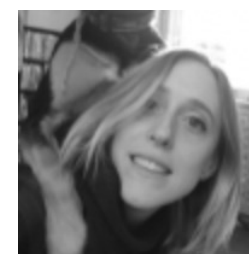
Katharine  
Nedder



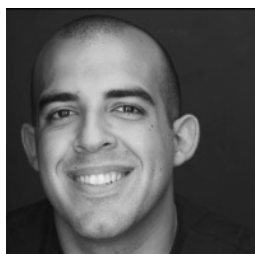
Avery  
Nusbaum



Hannah  
Lennon



Thomas  
Annunziata



# CAST AND CREW

## Documentary Cast

Moody Harney

The Real  
Mothershuckers



Lucina Clarke

D.I.V.A.S. Discovery  
Journal



Sue Wicks

Violet Cove  
Oyster Co.



Pippa Brashear

SCAPE Landscape  
Architecture



Owen Foote

Gowanus Dredgers



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