

HOLDING BACK THE TIDE



a Marginal Gap Films Production

Director: Emily Packer

Producers: Emily Packer, Josh Margolis
Trey Tetreault Ben Still, Liz Beeson

United States | 2023 | 77 minutes
World Premiere - DOC NYC 2023

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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.

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 apart 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

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 when 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 from their association with 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.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

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.

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 filmmaking practices, and 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.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

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.

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.

SOUNDS OF THE FILM

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.

DIRECTOR BIO

Emily Packer (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* (*The Victorias* by Ethan Furst), on PBS (*When I'm Her* by Emily Schuman), and on Vimeo Staff Picks. Her feature film editorial experience spans indie narrative (Newfest darling *Summer Solstice* by Noah Schamus), experimental nonfiction (Catalina Jordan Alvarez's forthcoming *Sound Spring*), historical arthouse fiction (Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich's *The Ballad of Suzanne Césaire*), and personal essay film (a hybrid feature by Lynne Sachs currently in development).

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. 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.

NARRATIVE CAST

Dragonfly//Robin
LaVerne Wilson



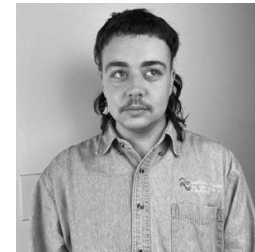
Aasia Taylor-
Patterson



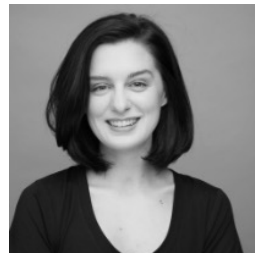
TL Thompson



Hannah Rego



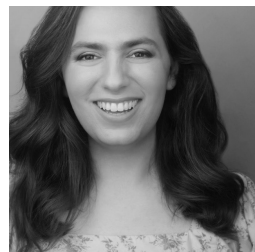
Meghan Dolbey



Katharine
Nedder



Avery
Nusbaum



Hannah
Lennon



Thomas
Annunziata



FEATURED DOCUMENTARY SUBJECTS

Moody Harney

The Real
Mothershuckers



Sue Wicks

Violet Cove
Oyster Co.



Pippa Brashear

SCAPE Landscape
Architecture



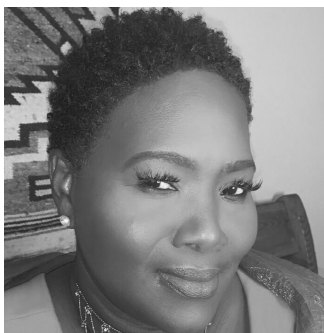
Owen Foote

Gowanus Dredgers



Lucina Clarke

MyTime, Inc.



Kim Tetrault

Cornell Cooperative
Extension



CREDITS

Directed By

Emily Packer

Produced By

Emily Packer

Josh Margolis

Trey Tetreault

Ben Still

Liz Beeson

Associate Producer

Julia Lewis

Written By

Emily Packer

Josh Margolis

Director of Photography

John Marty

Edited By

Lindsey Phillips

Ben Still

Archival Producer

Josh Margolis

Narrative Supervisor

Trey Tetreault

CREDITS

First Camera Unit

John Marty

Ben Still

Second Camera Unit

Lesley Steele

Original Music

Abby Swidler

Melissa Guion

Featuring Music By

Arooj Aftab

Music Supervisor

Ben Wittkugel (Ploeg Arts)

Sound Design

Kaija Siirala

Sound Mix

STEMS Group

Color

Cédric von Niederhäusern

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