Bodies of Water Rising
A performative reading
Carlos Motta, November 6, 2021
Louis Valentino, Jr. Park and Pier, Red Hook, Brooklyn
Amant Foundation

1— Louis Valentino, Jr. Park and Pier

Surrounded by industrial, residential, and historic buildings, Valentino Pier was once the site of an active shipping industry. In the 1600s, the Red Hook district was settled by the Dutch. As the land became more developed and the population grew, the shipping industry began to take form. With the growth of the New York Harbor and accompanying changes on the waterfront, in the 19th century Red Hook became one of the nation's premier shipping centers. This pier is a reminder of the shipping industry that once occupied the waters of the Buttermilk Channel and the Upper New York Harbor.

This park was named in honor of firefighter and Parks lifeguard Louis J. Valentino, Jr. (1958 – 1996). Over the years, Valentino lived and studied in a number of Brooklyn neighborhoods, including Red Hook, Bay Ridge, and Brooklyn Heights. He became a firefighter, joining the New York City Fire Department in 1984.

On February 5, 1996, Valentino lost his life while searching for wounded firefighters in a three-alarm blaze in an illegal Flatlands garage. Louis Valentino, Jr. Park and Pier preserves the memory of a man who demonstrated devotion to fighting fires and saving lives.

Louis Valentino, Jr. Park and Pier was originally built in 1996 by the City's Economic Development Corporation before becoming a city park in 1999. From the pier can be seen the Statue of Liberty, Governor's Island, Manhattan's skyline, Staten Island, and the New York Harbor. — NYC Parks, Historical Signs Project

2— Please take 5 minutes to walk around and explore the park on your own. Meet me again at the beginning of the pier. As you walk and observe, please reflect on your connection to this place: Perhaps to the neighborhood of Red Hook, or to the borough of Brooklyn, or to New York City at large: What life choices have you made that led you to stand here today? How have those choices informed your perspectives on this land and its histories?

3— Life is defined in its relation to death, yet death isn't necessarily finite. Every life lived produces echoes that reverberate in time and space. Those echoes are the effects of the choices we make in life. The collection of those choices, which are both personal and collective, public and private, can be a way to approach and understand the notion of "history." History defies death. It cyclically haunts us. It turns itself into storytelling ghosts; each one lingering with its own trajectory and mission. Death is arguably the loss of the physical body, but it is also the birth of the ghosts of history.

4—The story of Brooklyn began long before the Conquest of the "New World." Brooklyn, situated at the southern tip of Long Island, was originally inhabited by a group of Native Americans who called themselves the Lenape, which means "the People." They included the Nayack and the Canarsee, who planted corn and tobacco and fished in the rivers.

The Dutch, who settled in Manhattan in the early 1600s, called the inhabitants of these lands "river Indians" or "wild people." They began to buy land across the river in 1636, and their fortunes often contrasted those of the Native Americans. As a result of diseases, such as smallpox, that were new to America; war; land deals that were not honorable; and violent displacements, by the 1680s Native Americans had lost all claims to the rolling, heavily forested landscape.

The Dutch founded five villages: Bushwick, Brooklyn, Flatbush, Flatlands, and New Utrecht. Gravesend, a sixth village, was founded in 1643 by Lady Deborah Moody, an

Englishwoman who was fleeing religious persecution in England and the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The British captured the Dutch territory in 1674, and gathered the six villages into Kings County, part of the crown colony of New York.

A census taken in 1698 counted 2,017 people in Kings County. About half of these early colonial settlers were Dutch. The others came from Germany, England, France, and Scandinavia, and included a large number of enslaved black people brought from Africa.

Enslavement flourished in these rich farmlands during the 18th century. By 1771, just before the Revolutionary War, enslaved peoples represented nearly one third of the population of Kings County. Enslavement wouldn't become illegal in New York State until 1827.

During the Revolution, British troops nearly destroyed George Washington's inexperienced Army at the battle of Brooklyn in 1776. The fighting ranged from Gravesend to Gowanus, and the Colonial Army narrowly escaped annihilation by slipping across the East River to Manhattan during a foggy night. The British then occupied Manhattan and Brooklyn for the duration of the war. -Brooklyn History, Thirteen Media

5— Please walk in silence and meet me at the end of the Pier. As you walk, please think of the original inhabitants and forced laborers that populated and worked in these lands, which included Native American and enslaved men, women, children, people who expressed their sexuality and gender identities differently, differently-abled bodies, and others. Please acknowledge the colonial processes of settlement and displacement that constitute the foundation of this site.

6— We are standing along the 131 miles of coastline that make up the borough of Brooklyn. This specific waterfront is the “hook” of the borough, lying at the southwest tip of Brooklyn. Red Hook is located on a peninsula projecting into the Upper New York Bay and is bounded by the Gowanus Expressway and the Carroll Gardens neighborhood on the northeast, Gowanus Canal on the east, and the Upper New York Bay on the west and south. The Upper Bay is fed by the waters of the Hudson River, historically called the North River as it passes Manhattan, as well as the Gowanus Canal. It is connected to Lower New York Bay by the Narrows, to Newark Bay by the Kill Van Kull, and to Long Island Sound by the East River.

This park is situated in an area subjected to 400 years of colonial deforestation at the service of industrialization. These changes have produced tangible forms of human and environmental injustices. We are gathered today in a forcibly transformed landscape, haunted by human decisions that have begun to present themselves in what has concretely been termed the “climate crisis”: Annual floods, storm surges, hurricanes, and other forms of natural forces threaten the livelihood of this pier, this park, and its many neighboring communities. Some of you might have already experienced first-hand floods in your homes, basements, or offices, or at least become aware of the rising water levels that threaten the livelihood of the Brooklyn and Manhattan waterfronts.

Please close your eyes for a minute and listen to the sounds of this urban environment. What can you hear and what can you not hear?

Please stand in a closed circle around me.

7— “Ghosts are characteristically attached to the events, things, and places that produced them in the first place; by nature they are haunting reminders of lingering trouble. Ghosts hate new things precisely because once the conditions that call them up and keep them alive have been removed, their reason for being and their power to haunt are severely restricted,” writes Avery Gordon in “Ghostly Matters.”

As I prepared this presentation, I closed my eyes at this site, performing a kind of involuntary séance. I was looking for a way to connect the emotional and intellectual knowledge I have about this place with a path towards the future. A future composed of new knowledge with informed links to the past. I heard the presence of lingering ghosts in the sounds that define and make the present and the memory of this urban landscape.

Ghosts are not only the made-manifest spirits or souls of dead persons or animals. Ghosts also are the expression of the cyclical nature of history. Ghosts reflect the man-made errors that have led to interrupted lives. In haunting us, ghosts demand us to stop and reconsider their stories and our part in them. Ghostly presences are everywhere: Haunting reminders of the events that have transformed our societies and have left us in a continuous state of mourning.

8— Thus, begins the a story of a man, a sailor, a queer, and a visionary whose ghost confided in me some facts and reflections about his experiences crossing the sea and arriving to this pier, facing the hardships and joys of being a transient migrant seeking financial stability for his family back in Norway, and the events that led to his demise.

This is the incomplete story of Ole, as I recollect it, a working class man in his mid-twenties who landed in Red Hook, Brooklyn sometime in the second half 19th century.

9— Upon arrival Ole noticed the sounds of an active port city: The creaking of pulleys, the shouting of the dockworkers, the wet and heavy sounds of port work. He had crossed the ocean on a Norwegian merchant ship that would transport lumber back to Europe and was offered a bed in a “sailor hotel” at 355 van Brunt Street. The buildings, docks, and streets in Red Hook formed a developing industrial and transactional maritime landscape. The feeling was that of a temporary place where no one puts down roots.

Ole’s decision to cross the sea was partly influenced by economic reasons, he couldn’t make ends meet, but also out of a personal dissatisfaction around his emotional and sexual lifes. For years he had been dealing with inner feelings of difference. He felt a strong attraction to men, a desire that was troubling to him. The expectation to marry and to form a family didn’t correspond with the ways in which he wanted to imagine and live his life. He was aware of the transgressive and confusing character of those feelings and felt like an outcast, even if he didn’t have the language to express it.

Yet he was keenly aware that those feelings were condemned morally but also legally. He had heard of the “crimes against nature” statutes that abound across Europe, which meant that any sexual act considered defiant of reproductive sex was also a condemned in the eyes of the law. He could face a trial and potential imprisonment for being a “sodomite.”

As such, he saw an opportunity to "buy himself time" by working on a ship and crossing the ocean. The homosocial world of the ship seemed to him like an escape and a relief. He wanted to be part of what he envisioned as a world with less social order, even if that meant enduring hard labor and strenuous living conditions.

Ole spoke to me about his first ocean crossing as a sort of metaphor for his troubled self. The unstable waters weighing on his head and shoulders like a burden, the ocean storms dampening his sense of self. The ship was like a purgatory, a liminal space of disorientation and reflective transition towards an unknown idea of place and self. But the crossing was also tangibly factual, it was harsh, and it was real. Working 20 hours per day on the ship his body surrendered to the elements, to the culture of survival and discipline, and to physical exhaustion.

10— Ole knew other sailors, but no one well enough to call a friend. Once in Brooklyn, he spent the days moving goods between storehouses and ships and the nights drinking on the streets, catching sight of the different kinds of activities that the darker hours enabled, mostly "blowing off steam" from work, he said. This new world, albeit raw and unknown to him, represented an opening and a possibility. He found a job in a recently established ship building company, a growing industry that attracted migrant men with construction skills. His personal and work lives had merged.

At night he began to frequent the bars at Sands Street by the Navy Yard and elsewhere along the waterfront, coming in contact with other solitary beings: Single men, sailors, and workers looking to drink, to kill time, to have sex. He befriended sex workers and entertainers who made a living from the industrial and maritime economy of the area, which in its rapid growth had set up demands to give its workers some release from work.

The Brooklyn waterfront at night had become a destination—or perhaps the destiny—of those looking for a life that wasn't policed by the strict moral and societal norms of the time. Brooklyn was ruled by the norms of the Victorian era, thus on a daily basis, men and women led largely separate lives, with women confined to the home, to family life, or to work gender-segregated jobs. The confluence of these circumstances made the edges of the city along the water be fertile grounds for same sex encounters, personal connections, and to find others who felt and lived differently.

Over the next years, Ole established friendships, sexual and otherwise, that gave him a renewed sense of emotional possibility and connection. He began to recognize these areas, however inhospitable in their dampness and darkness, as comforting and filling of what he had until then experienced as a lack. Thinking of himself no longer as an exception or a rarity, but as sharing experiences and desires with others, made him stronger and more confident, even if it was shrouded by secrecy and risk.

The link between risk and desire was described by Ole as inherent to his encounters. Seeking sex meant putting himself and his body in public and learning secret codes and ciphers—what we understand today as the practice of cruising. Ole would walk, attentive to the environment, recognizing the presence of men in areas not frequented by many others at night. Lust charged him with erotic power. He would lock eyes with other men while walking. Enthralled by mystery, he would turn back upon passing, craving for a reciprocal turn, a look, a sign, a call. Eventually, the men would approach one another in a careful choreography of seduction. Subtle gestures, inviting body language, lustful gazes. Sometimes casual conversations ensued, other times daring moves that led to physical proximity, to touch. Depending on the night the pier became the site of a passionate sexual encounter surrounded by dampness, humidity, and sultry smells.

Often the men would leave together and find the privilege of solitude at the sailor hotel. Within the comfort of erotic intimacy, Ole developed relationships and forged links to others. One time hook-ups, sometimes regular visits, or sporadic recurring affairs were his way of finding solace and establishing kinship. The specter of fear thinly veiled it all yet never stopped him from developing, what he expressed as a sense of "sex-based community."

Despite my inquisitive questions, Ole was reluctant to share specifics about "special" relationships, as if he didn't believe in a hierarchy of emotions. To him the accumulation of experiences derived from the different encounters sketched a full sense of emotional and sexual satisfaction and care.

11— A consummated introspect who was also deeply curious, Ole spent his free time reflecting on the past histories of this place. Able to recognize the changes that were visibly underway, he wondered about what Brooklyn looked like in the past. What lives were lived here? He would lay on an empty street or pier at night looking at the sky, searching for stories.

He told me about an encounter he had one night—he was unclear whether it was a dream or a vision—with an older Dutch sailor named Bernt who described himself to Ole as an Ouroboros, the emblematic serpent with its tail in its mouth, continually devouring itself and being reborn from itself. The enigmatic Dutch sailor used a symbol of eternity and the soul of the world to imply that his legacy had grown so large that it could encircle the world and grasp its tail in its teeth. A poignant image of unrelenting power.

Bernt spoke about lush forests, natural landscapes, native inhabitants, and an overall sense of geographic and social transformation tainted by dispossession and violence. Ole had a chat with an earlier sailor who came here with a different task. Perhaps to claim ownership of this land? Perhaps Bernt told him about the process of urbanization of territories in the name of “civilization”? Perhaps he found out about the countless histories of extraction of resources, both natural and human, that defined the approach to the “new world”? Perhaps he learned about the interrupted and displaced lives that succumbed to colonization and war? Perhaps he considered the ways in which the accounts of that distant past are perceived as progress and as the basis of history? Ole was undoubtedly haunted by a lingering ghost.

I have come to think of Ole’s narration of the encounter with the old sailor as similar and a predecessor to our own, an intergenerational spiritual reckoning between three men: Bernt, Ole and myself, three individuals trying to make sense of our place in time and space. How are we three responsible for the perils, promises, and accounts of our respective times? What is our responsibility as individual agents of history?

12— I arrived in New York City at the end of the 20th century, a modern city and the world’s financial center for trade, commerce, and cultural influence. Not unlike Ole, I was looking for a renewed sense of self and possibility in relationship to the expression of my own identity and sexuality. New York City and its promises of social freedom had the allure of a contemporary mecca for gay life. It was a city defined by sexual emancipation, a vibrant cultural underground, and ripe with potential for sexual and gender expression. New York attracts aspiring artists and others seeking to belong and form a community. I came from Colombia, a South American country entrenched in Catholic ethics, traditional values, and ideas of social respectability.

A country ravaged by war, drug trade, and social inequality. A society defined by extraction, US intervention, and environmental injustice. Like Ole, I felt like an outcast who needed to find an escape in search of meaning, both personal and political.

Undoubtedly, our circumstances were different, we lived in different times. While he endured the hardships of hard labor, my life was full of privilege and access to education. Yet our paths aligned on this very pier. Today, this place is a contemplative park overlooking the Statue of Liberty, that potent symbol of colonization and political hegemony. And before, it was an active site for the envisioning of the projects of colonization and industrialization.

13— Within the twenty five years I have lived in New York the Brooklyn waterfront has undergone a transformative process of gentrification. The gentrification of Williamsburg, Bushwick, Dumbo, Red Hook, Sunset Park have contributed to the displacement or replacement of thousands of long-term residents from minority communities from their homes. This persistence of racial and ethnic segregation in a time of gentrification raises many questions about the two processes and the effects that they have on the lives and well beings of minority communities. Far from the industrial character associated with these areas throughout the 20th century, white gentrifiers have relocated to these neighborhoods, changing the value of real estate and consequently who has access to affordable housing. In Red Hook, streets were paved, the refinery were demolished, the shipyard destroyed, and over the past decade, the community has been transformed from a scrappy and isolated post-industrial backwater into a crowded shopping and dining destination. The pace of change will intensify in the coming years, when several of the last historic industrial warehouses on the waterfront are emptied out, making way for an ongoing megaproject that promises to further change the neighborhood.

13— Pressured by a finishing deadline the workers of the ship building company were ordered to test a ship at sea despite the inclement late October weather conditions. Ole and his colleagues set off to the water to work on the ship day and night. What started as cold heavy rain became rapidly a storm; tempest-like winds; water levels rising, splashing, battering against the carcass; thunder hitting the ship's roped mast. Without warning, a cosmic tremor resounded throughout the boat, the mast slowly tilting, creaking, moving, falling, crashing onto the hull.

Ole died instantly from a massive hit on his head, his body rolling into the ocean, face down, naked from the waist up. Yet, Ole witnessed the sight of his own body floating on the water, he had become disembodied and weightless. Floating over the scene, Ole, was now a ghost who could move across storms, space, and time.

14— Bodies of water rising. Bodies of water rising is a sentence that recurrently comes to my mind like a mantra, a cautionary song, an inevitable threat. And although it sounds like a poetic image, there is no poetry to the rising of waters, today.

On October 29, 2012, hurricane Sandy hit New York. I was at home in Chelsea with my then partner David when over the course of 48 hours, wind, rain, and water destroyed homes, left hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers without power—including us—damaged infrastructure, and left many New Yorkers vulnerable with limited access to food, drinking water, healthcare, and other critical services. The storm surge pushed the East River over bulkheads, along the shore and into streets, parks and basements, flooding homes and businesses in Red Hook with more than 10 feet of water.

The storm resulted in the deaths of 44 people throughout the city and inflicted an estimated $19 billion in damages and lost economic activity. Over 69,000 residential units were damaged, and thousands of New Yorkers were temporarily displaced.

While scientists can't exactly determine the relationship between global warming and hurricane Sandy—that is, whether or not Sandy was intensified by climate change—it's ravaging effects demonstrated a precarious state of urban infrastructure and how vulnerable New York City is in relation to storms in combination with sea-level rise. Sea levels in Brooklyn have risen about 9 inches since 1950, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Estimates range for how much additional sea-level rise is likely to occur, but on average, the expectation is that by midcentury, water levels could rise by more than a foot in New York City, compared with the year 2000.

Scientists predict that with future warming Red Hook's piers will be submerged under a normal high tide by the late 2020s, Van Brunt Street, home to Ole's "sailor hotel" will flood almost daily by 2080, and by 2100, many parts of the neighborhood will be subjected to twice-daily deluges. In worst-case scenarios, in which humanity does not significantly cut its climate-warming greenhouse gas emissions and the world's ice sheets rapidly melt, sea levels could rise by more than 6 feet by the end of the century, putting hundreds of millions of people at risk worldwide. Higher water levels mean more areas are susceptible to flooding, storm surges and other problems associated with hurricanes, as well as more chronic flooding from high tides.

15— How would Bernt have experienced a storm 400 years ago? Bernt's assertions of the perils of deforestation are testimony of a ghost who has witnessed the industrialization of the world for four centuries and of nature's subsequent reaction to it. Human's prioritizing of the development of our societies and economic growth have led to a man-versus-nature dichotomy of superiority and a dynamic of extraction of resources that began as early as societies transitioned from nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyles to permanent settlements and farming.

I was first inclined to visualize Bernt's cautionary story about climate change as a growing wave of incremental transformations that is peaking in the present. Within that vision, the extraction and the transformation of natural resources have led to the crisis we face today: Greenhouse emissions from human activities from burning fossil fuels for electricity, heat, and transportation act like the glass in a greenhouse, trapping the sun's heat and stopping it from leaking back into space, causing global warming.

But Bernt also told Ole about the erratic climate behaviors of the 17th century. In that important century for the global expansion of European civilization through the colonization of territories and its peoples and a practice of extraction, a great deal of human suffering was also the product of climate change. The 1600s were the low point of the "Little Ice Age," a centuries-long decline in global temperatures. The causes of the "Little Ice Age," are disputed, but it seems that solar radiation patterns, changes in the earth's orbit, and volcanic activity caused the earth to become colder. This, combined with a steep decline in human population as Old World diseases killed up to 90% of the population of the Americas, leading to reforestation, caused temperatures in some parts of the world to be as much as two degrees Celsius below normal. Climate change and its effects were spread unevenly around the planet, as is the case today.

I believe Bernt's impulse to tell Ole about an earlier occurrence of pre-industrial climate change is motivated by a need for hope: Trends and fluctuations have defined historical moments, including weather patterns. Ups and downs, ebbs and flows, regulated by nature and its cycles. We could indeed be in foothills of an upcoming mass extinction in geological time. But Bernt, what we are living today trumps hope. Climate scientists and activists warn the world's leaders that lack of action is leading to irreparable damage, at least for the kind of societies we've set up to live in. In 2021 alone the US has dealt with the devastating human, natural, and economic consequences of Hurricane Henri, The Tennessee flash flooding, the water shortage in the west, the Bootleg, Dixie and Caldor fires, the Pacific Northwest heatwave, Hurricane Ida, and the West's drought.

15— Ole reminded me that the conditions set forth by the industrialization of the Brooklyn waterfront made same sex encounters possible. It was in that marginal and industrial urban landscape at the edge of the water in the city of Brooklyn of the mid-to-late 19th century that homosocial relations were able to develop, setting the grounds for, what decades later, could be understood as a homosexual community-in-formation.

Ole died in these stormy waters, but after piecing together the fragments of his personal story, it appeared to me that his life in Brooklyn, albeit raw and defined by strenuous work, gave him a space to think of himself as a sexual man with agency and possibility. A man's identity is undoubtedly formed by the intersecting aspects of our that compose our lives. The meeting point of our personal choices and the external conditions that surround us, make us who we become. So, why are you lingering, Ole, you intrepid ghost? I asked him this question just before he left.

15— Ole's mission is different from what I had imagined. His position was only possible for an old troubled soul who has witnessed the machinations of power in the world for over a century. The consolidation of power is tangible in Brooklyn, he said. Look around you, you can sense it everywhere. Since my arrival, I have seen the ways in which power, be it racial, economic, sexual, political, ethnic, or otherwise devises strategies of control over this land and its inhabitants. But today, I am concerned with climate capitalism, he said. That vital force of accumulation that drives the system and reproduces inequalities and injustices. The ravaging effects of climate change are measured not only in ecological terms but in terms of human loss, death and wellbeing, he added.

Mine is a ghost story for the present, Ole exclaimed: Have you reflected on the ways in which climate destruction relates to communities disempowered on the basis of sex or gender, for example? The knowledge of difference, dilemmas of inequality, and strategies and resistances of the marginalized are inherently gendered, segregated and dominated by discourses of power. The nature-culture split, the conception of the anthropocene, post-apocalyptic narratives and images, pre and post-disaster strategies, environmental justice, dominant climate science discourses, and the climate science and policy interface need be examined through the lens of feminist and queer theories and methodologies. Embodiment, difference, imagination and environment must reflect discussions on climate change because it affects gender, sexual, and all forms of unequal social relations. Climate destruction affects underserved communities also infrastructurally. Resiliency projects need to only protect areas at risk but protect vulnerable communities through a fair and equitable community-based plan for resilience, recovery, and vitality.

16— Ole, unlike you, I am not yet a ghost. I am an artist who creates artworks that respond to the world around me, to tell stories that center voices that are often sidelined within the dynamics of social power. I create with the future in mind, thinking about how the future can present opportunities, possibilities, chances for improvement, change.

The pandemic has shrouded futurity for me. It is more difficult to envision the future when the present unfolds so intensely and violently, putting to test ideas of sociability, community, and survival.

You appeared to me as an agent of history. Your story is a lesson on the ways in which the knowledge of land defines the future of its people. Geographies, places, sites defined by social conditions that reflect human will and choices.

Bodies that move across space. Bodies that make non-linear time. Bodies that resist injustice. Bodies that envision justice. Bodies as culture. Bodies as memory and documents. Bodies that die. Bodies as ghosts. Bodies as history.

17 — Please close your eyes

Ole, this intent audience releases your lingering spirit to death. We've heard your story and your warning signs. We take on the task to pass on the knowledge of the land of Red Hook, Brooklyn and its waterfront, bestowed upon us by you, to others in our lives. Thank you ghost for haunting us so we confront the dire challenges of the present.

18— Distribute drawing