



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Artist Statement: "The Poetics of Suspense"

Megan Fernandes

Configurations, Volume 27, Number 4, Fall 2019, pp. 545-560 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/con.2019.0035>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/735226>

---

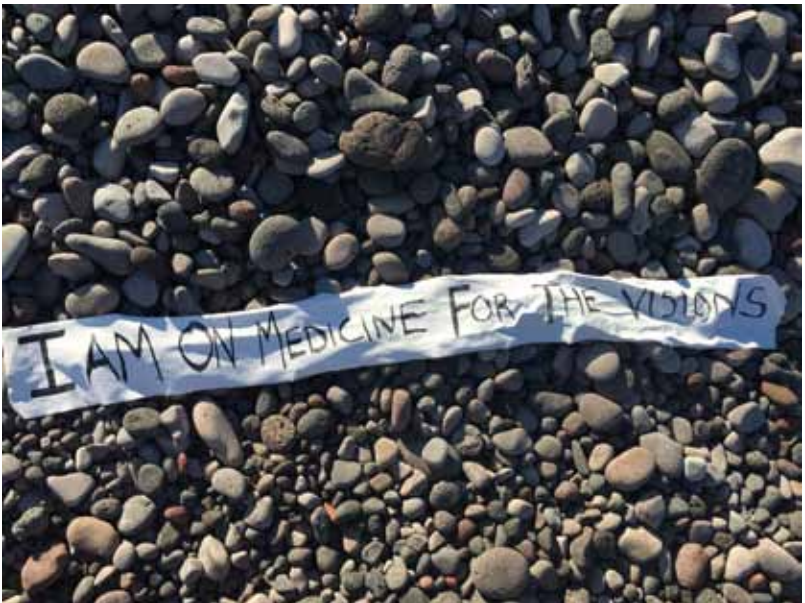
## Artist Statement: “The Poetics of Suspense”

**Megan Fernandes**  
**Lafayette College**

**ABSTRACT:** My critical-poetic project, entitled “The Poetics of Suspense,” is an ongoing series of environmental cinépoems about suspense in different aquatic sites off the coast of mainland Sicily and the Aeolian Islands. Using the influential methods of sensory ethnography filmmaking, my project particularly explores how suspense is temporally anchored in a liminal space better represented through the aesthetics of being underwater. Edouard Glissant argued in *Poetics of Relation* that the Mediterranean is an “an inner sea surrounded by lands, a sea that concentrates,” as opposed to the Caribbean Sea, which “diffracts.” This focus on the nature of the Mediterranean’s purgatorial and claustrophobic interiority makes it a useful eco-critical framework in which to aestheticize the paralysis of contemporary climate despair—highlighting a form of suspense that does not necessarily anticipate catastrophe, but rather lingers in that surreal realm where catastrophe is imagined to be endlessly deferred and time is eternally suspended.

### **Overview**

My critical-poetic project, entitled “The Poetics of Suspense,” is an ongoing series of environmental cinépoems about suspense in different aquatic sites off the coast of mainland Sicily and the Aeolian Islands. The project uses canvas strips painted with fragments of contemporary poems temporarily tucked into the shallow stony Mediterranean seafloor. A simple GoPro camera glides and bobs against the slight pull of the waves to capture poetic confessions



Images 1 and 2: The Poetics of Suspense. Still (top): "Moon Swells." Still (bottom): "I am on medicine for the visions" from Catherine Pond's "March 9th, Dusk." Island of Alicudi, Sicily.

of hallucination, the foreshadowing of slaughter, elegies like nursery rhymes—all fragments from contemporary poems describing a resignation toward an anticipated existential violence awaiting the earth. Each blue environment is home to specific ecological and geological histories, from the saltwater flatlands of Marsala, Sicily, to the primitive lava rock bed off the coast of the island of Alicudi (population: 120), and part of the Aeolian volcanic arc. The Aeolian Islands, formed by fountains of lava erupting from seven volcanoes, some now extinct, have rich, fertile soil where figs, caper berries, and citrus grow wild. In the ancient world, Sicily and the Aeolian Islands were the homelands of gods, kings, and fantastical creatures. From Persephone's kidnapping to Odysseus's narrow escape from Scylla to the terrorizing one-eyed Polyphemus, Sicily and the surrounding Mediterranean have been the volcanic backdrop and the watery graveyard of some of our most well-known archetypal narratives of violence and loss.

This region of the world has also been of interest to ancient geographers, philosophers, and natural historians, including Strabo, Pliny the Elder, Callias, Aristotle, Thucydides, and Diodorus. Many of their lengthy accounts of Sicily bring together observations of major geological events, anecdotal evidence from local townspeople, references to mythological literature, cartographic data, and interpretations of the political alliances and divisions that shaped the present civilization. For example, in book 2, chapter 14 of Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* (written in AD 77–79), the author moves from remarks about Sicily's triangular appearance, referencing its supposed 618-mile circumference according to Agrippa, to commenting on the Strait of Messina's perilous "Scylla and Charybdis" region.<sup>1</sup> He then situates the triangular coasts of Sicily to Greece, Africa, and Sardinia, measuring out the distances and going on to list important rivers, fountains, interior towns with "Latin privileges," colonies, and so on. Of the Aeolian Islands, Pliny remarks on Lipara (now Lipari) and informs his reader of King Liparus, who succeeded Aeolus. He also mentions the Aeolian island of Stromboli, which he states has flames of a brilliance superior to that of Lipara, and that "[f]rom the smoke of this volcano it is said that some of the inhabitants are able to predict three days beforehand what winds are about to blow; hence arose the notion that the winds are governed by Æolus."<sup>2</sup> This

1. Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, The Perseus Project, Tufts University, accessed January 7, 2019, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a1999.02.0137>.

2. *Ibid.*

intersectional methodology bringing together geology, geography, myth, ethnography, and politics has challenged me to think more imaginatively about how the history of environmental “data” is produced. Moreover, these methods have long been entangled with the temporal dynamics of prophecy and prediction, forming new experimental epistemological grounds in which to evaluate how the elements (here, wind) can actualize potential environmental futures.

The Aeolian Islands, named after the keeper of winds, are particularly apt subjects to think about the elements because of their proximity to each other. From the small village of Ginostra on the island of Stromboli, on a clear day with no mist, one can see Lipari, Panarea, Filicudi, Alicudi, and even Vulcano. They appear as shapes that split the sea’s horizon. You can observe a rainstorm hovering over Panarea, knowing that it is on its way to you. You can detect lightning, sharp and bright, over the mainland of Sicily. And when the wind picks up as it does in dramatic gusts, creeping through the outdoor kitchens like a thief, it operates as almost a form of supernatural communication between the islands. Depending on the wind temperature, people will inform you from which direction it was carried. Scholars of atmospheric studies in the era of the Anthropocene Timothy Choy and Jerry Zee argue in their essay “Condition— Suspension” that “wind makes terrestrial things into atmospheric ones,”<sup>3</sup> noting that within the ubiquitous air, multiple materialities are composed and suspended together, telling us stories of toxicity, pollution, geological change, and the socio-politics of the atmosphere. Suspension is their central concept of both methodology *and* medium; as they put it, “The condition of suspension is one condition of an Aeolian, atmospheric anthropology.”<sup>4</sup> By this, they argue that suspension conceptualizes itself as a shared medium; what it holds together cannot belong to one sovereign or body. Being “suspended” requires multiples subjects and often means that they are indiscernible from each other. This form of distributed subjectivity allows us to imagine a critique of the elemental, suggesting that matter that is less governable than their terrestrial counterparts (air and water, for example) can thwart our notions of statehood, property, and occupation.

Investigating the relationship between the earth and air is a natural point of inquiry for the Aeolian Islands, but the history of the geophysical instability affecting the surrounding seafloor interests

3. Timothy Choy and Jerry Zee, “Condition—Suspension,” *Cultural Anthropology* 30:2 (2015): 210–223, at p. 214, doi:10.14506/ca30.2.04.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 217.

me more. The Tyrrhenian Sea, the name of the Mediterranean off of Italy's western coast, experiences frequent seismic activity, resulting in volcanic eruptions, underwater venting, landslides, and tsunamis. In late December of 2002, a submarine landslide occurring on Stromboli's northwestern flank, known as Sciara del Fuoco, resulted in tsunami waves that reached the other islands and even mainland Sicily.<sup>5</sup> Such unstable events are not uncommon in the Aeolian arc, which was formed by a subduction zone of converging tectonic plates. In an interview, volcanologist Tamara Carley stated that "magmas formed at subduction zones are higher in silica" and that this makes the "volcanoes much more viscous, and thus leads to more explosive eruptions (because gas can't escape) and much steeper, dramatic, volcanic landforms."<sup>6</sup> These violent geological episodes quite literally change the form of land (leaving scars on the volcanoes, creating new craters) and sea (creating underwater canyons, changing tidal formations).

As Anthropocene "readers" of these occurrences, how do we interpret such events of geological rupture? Benjamin Morgan states in his essay "Scale as Form,"

Geology, as a science of structural observation and of change over time, historically opens itself to the literary domain in two long-standing ways: through a disciplinary investment in tropes of legibility and inscription; and through a disposition toward temporal narrative forms, such as uniformitarianism and catastrophism, that attempt to bring geological time within the bounds of the human imagination.<sup>7</sup>

Pliny the Elder's observation that a plume of smoke from the volcano allowed inhabitants to predict the winds gestures at a human attempt to narrate such events and transform the aftermath of an eruption into foreshadowing. This strategy to impose causality is central to making geological ruptures legible, but such leaps also tend to romanticize the Mediterranean Sea as a primary mythological site for human adventure, conquest, and progress. The reality is that in our contemporary age, the Mediterranean is witness to the brutal passage of refugee migration, hazardous industrialization,

5. Francesco L. Chiocci et al., "The Stromboli 2002 Tsunamigenic Submarine Slide: Characteristics and Possible Failure Mechanisms," *Journal of Geophysical Research* 113:B10 (2008): doi:10.1029/2007jb005172.

6. Tamara Carley, email message to author, January 28, 2018.

7. Benjamin Morgan, "Scale as Form: Thomas Hardy's Rocks and Stars," in *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic times*, ed. Tobias Menely and Jesse O. Taylor (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), pp. 132–149, at p. 135.

and illegal toxic waste disposal. In 2009, for example, Riccardo Botto reported on the role of organized crime in waste removal. He interviewed an ex-member of the 'ndrangheta who admitted to sinking ships of toxic waste (arsenic and chrome, in particular) into the sea. Nicknamed "ships of poison," it is estimated that anywhere between twenty-five and fifty-five of these ships are lying at the bottom of the Mediterranean.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, reading only through the "geological" or "mythological" is too narrow a critical lens, as Elena Past suggests in her essay "Mediterranean Ecocriticism: The Sea in the Middle," where she argues that the Mediterranean requires an understanding of "migratory pathways of humans and nonhumans, circulations of global capital and toxic waste, narrative, alimentary, and energy cultures, to name but a few."<sup>9</sup> This project then attempts to do the work of scalar translation by collapsing geological, mythological, and contemporary temporalities through the medium of water. In contrast to the overly intelligible terrestrial, oceanic worlds are often imagined as unrepresentable and unknowable spaces in which new relationalities and forms of kinship can be illuminated. The cinépoems explore the "sea as witness" or even the "sea as co-protagonist," showing how the Mediterranean is home to rich layers of imaginative and material interconnections.

Using the influential methods of sensory ethnography filmmaking, my project particularly explores how suspense is temporally anchored in a liminal space better represented through the aesthetics of being underwater. Edouard Glissant argued in *Poetics of Relation* that the Mediterranean is an "an inner sea surrounded by lands, a sea that concentrates," as opposed to the Caribbean Sea, which "diffracts."<sup>10</sup> This focus on the nature of the Mediterranean's purgatorial and claustrophobic interiority makes it a useful eco-critical framework in which to aestheticize the paralysis of contemporary climate despair—highlighting a form of suspense that does not necessarily anticipate catastrophe, but rather lingers in that surreal realm where catastrophe is imagined to be endlessly deferred and time is eternally suspended.

In the following sections, I give a brief literature review of differ-

8. Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Waste and Consumption: Capitalism, the Environment, and the Life of Things* (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 28–29.

9. Elena Past, "Mediterranean Ecocriticism: The Sea in the Middle," in *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, ed. Hubert Zapf (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2016), pp. 368–384, at p. 373.

10. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), p. 33.

ent theories of suspension. This is followed by a short note on my methodology and, lastly, a close reading of one of the cinépoems.

### Theories of Suspense and Suspension

A recent cinépoetic example of poetry underwater is the first minute and a half of Beyoncé's "Hold Up" music video from her visual album *Lemonade*.<sup>11</sup> Beyoncé recites the poetry of British-Kenyan poet Warsan Shire in a submerged bedroom, floating in a bluish grey furnished underworld as she ponders whether a lover has been unfaithful. The scene is one of profound intimacy—the domestic setting, the anxiety about infidelity, the levitating figure trying to exorcise her own sadness. It suggests a feminist strategy for thinking *with* water and how this allows for a slower, denser representation of mental interiority. Indeed, this is not the modernist *stream* of consciousness. There is little freedom for improvisational movement in the water. Instead, the poem is recited in an almost jellied suspension of interrogation. The artist asks, *Are you cheating on me?* Waterlogged, but painterly and pristine, Beyoncé looks like a cryogenically frozen Madonna, perfectly suspended in midleap. The water is slow to react to her movements, making her appear not like a sea creature at all, but like a floating, bound apostle, her body shrouded in magenta fabric. That thinking *with* water and its slow, calming suspension of movement is representative of a depressive interior life here is perhaps too obvious. But water in the video, interestingly, acts an apparatus of protection. She is "held" together by water. The internal environment of the room is eerily still, an insulated chamber; however, the video gestures toward something else about how water suspends: it allows its speaker (Beyoncé) to go inward and outside of time before re-entering the world. To go "under" means to go "inward," and I argue here that this aesthetic is not so much a repressive mechanism as it is a form of deferral.

In their coedited book, *Cryopolitics: Frozen Life in a Melting World*, Joanna Radin and Emma Kowal explore the scarcity of coldness in the era of global warming. They look to experts who seek to understand new techno-scientific means of "deferring" death through freezing and argue that cryopolitics poses an important intervention to Foucault's biopolitical axis of life and death. The authors argue, "Cryopolitics intervenes in this axis of life and death to orient attention to a seemingly paradoxical conjunction of the 'cryo' and the 'political'—suspended animation and action—that produces a zone

11. "Hold Up," track 2 on Beyoncé, *Lemonade*, Parkwood Entertainment and Columbia Records, 2016, Streaming on Tidal.





Images 3 and 4: Stills: "Hold Up" " from Beyoncé's *Lemonade* album.

of existence where beings are made to live and not allowed to die."<sup>12</sup> In this new liminal political landscape, scholars are trying to produce a critical connection between temperatures and temporalities.

12. Joanna Radin and Emma Kowal, "Introduction: The Politics of Low Temperature," in *Cryopolitics: Frozen Life in a Melting World*, ed. Joanna Radin and Emma Kowal (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), pp. 3–25, at p. 6.

Furthermore, in an essay in the book entitled “Suspense: Reflections on the Cryopolitics of the Body,” Klaus Hoeyer explores the cultural and philosophical queries emerging from new ways that clinical suspension technology via cryopreservation has been used to “suspend” a sick or traumatized body to prevent death. “The suspension of life and death through hypothermia alters the meaning of life and death,” he writes, later suggesting that “[c]ontrol of temperature delivers the ability to ‘hold still.’”<sup>13</sup> Here, suspension is imagined as a way to buy time in a moment of crisis. Furthermore, *calmness*, already implicit the metaphors of temperature (“keeping your cool,” “don’t be hotheaded”), becomes the affective expression of this frozen animation, this suspension.

But this perceived calmness is a homeostatic fantasy. Consider the juxtaposition between the emerging scholarship on the *suspension* of life and the new materialist discourses emphasizing the uncontainable *excitability* of life via work done on vitalism and vibrant matter. While states of liveliness are theorizing treatises on chaotic and energetic environments that are ever entangled and becoming, states of suspension theorized in cryopolitics and Anthropocene studies imagine a frozen, inanimate, and temporarily immortal environment in the hope of some future homeostasis that might make life sustainable. This calmness of suspension’s temporary hold is actually a form of paralyzing anticipation. Wendy Brown argues that in crisis, our understanding of time is altered, resulting in a state of depressive anxiety where “you cannot move because of the bleakness but you cannot rest because of the anxiety; you can neither seize life nor escape it, neither live nor die . . . a seemingly eternal present with catastrophe limning its horizon.”<sup>14</sup>

In “States of Suspension: Trans-corporeality at Sea,” Stacy Alaimo explores the idea of suspension “as a sort of buoyancy”—focusing on the particular way that water can fix multiple objects’ “mise en scène.”<sup>15</sup> This buoyancy acts as a distinctly *blue* formal device, not only describing a rising action of an object, but also the whimsical way in which it “waits” or “hangs” in liminal, fluid space. Furthermore, the suspension acts as a temporary “cushioning”—a system of

13. Klaus Hoeyer, “Suspense: Reflections on the Cryopolitics of the Body,” in Kowal and Radin, *Cryopolitics* (above, n. 12), pp. 205–214, at p. 205.

14. Wendy Brown, “Untimeliness and Punctuality: Critical Theory in Dark Times,” in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*, ed. Wendy Brown (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 1–16, at p. 11.

15. Stacy Alaimo, “States of Suspension: Trans-corporeality at Sea,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 19:3 (2012): 476–493, doi:10.1093/isle/iss068.

support that allows a deferral of some action or endgame. Similarly, Timothy Choy and Jerry Zee argue that to “attend to conditions of suspension is to orient not simply to vertical location, but to what potentiates substances to disperse, to shift state, relation, and relative concentration so one might become held in another.”<sup>16</sup> This focus on *embrace* across scholars of suspension is crucial to an argument that suggests that the fantasy of surviving environmental catastrophe is one of cohesion, condensation: a material self-composing. When one says “keep it together” in states of great stress, what one means is literally to “hold” oneself as oneself. This is, of course, a commitment to literal form. If we extend this to our critical literary analysis, we might interpret the term “the suspension of disbelief” differently. Suspension of disbelief, which occurs when readers or viewers are willing to put on hold their usual critical faculties in order to entertain alternative understandings of the world, is also a strategy of trying to “unknow” the conditions and causality of their world.

Therefore, there are three arguments here about suspension. The first is about being “held”—an embrace that prevents a subject from an annihilating dispossession because of a temporary system of support for an otherwise vulnerable subject. Secondly, suspension allows for an epistemological shift suggesting that new orientations and relationalities made possible within this temporary system can reveal novel forms of intimacy. (I explore this further in my methodology section.) Lastly, the relaxing stillness of “being underwater” represents a false homeostasis, an affect that can be misread as calmness when it is actually a form of emotional and temporal paralysis. These arguments about suspension rest on the notion that it cannot last. Suspension exists within the conditional form. *If* this occurs, this other event *might* happen. In the Anthropocene, it is this exact model of anticipatory brace that informs our climate anxiety and despair.

### **Methodology**

My own project attempts to use some of the basic principles and methodologies of sensory ethnography filmmaking—immersive camerawork, the inclusion of atmospheric sound, action cameras, and contact mikes that are used strategically to emphasize nonhuman and elemental perspectives. *Leviathan*, a film by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel about a New Bedford fishing boat, is

16. Choy and Zee, “Condition—Suspension” (above, n. 3), p. 213.

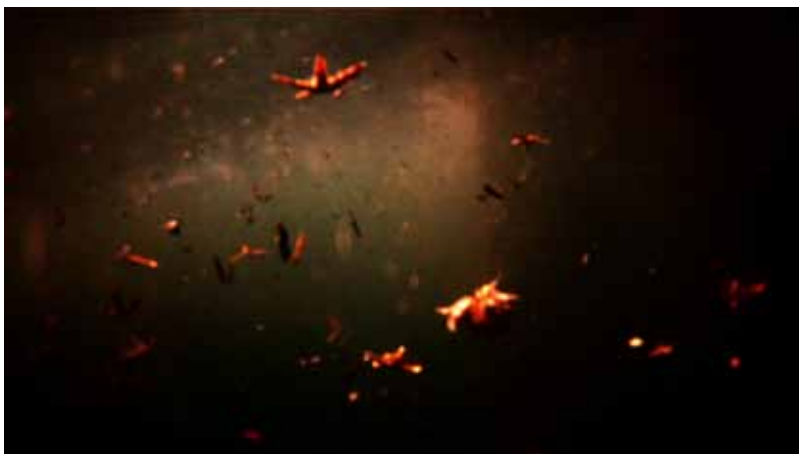
one of the most influential works for “The Poetics of Suspense.”<sup>17</sup> It is an immersive and mostly wordless documentary exploring the dimensionality of camera movements and cinematic space as well as the riveting agency of seemingly “inanimate” objects. The ships, fish eyes, seagulls, and lapping water seem to be anything but still; they roar and flush, they teem with a oceanic force almost incomprehensible to the viewer. Set on the waters by the old whaling town of New Bedford, the filmmakers use hero cameras fastened in unusual spaces on the boat and in the ocean itself to secure new perspectives of the fishing industry and life at sea. In one scene, the viewer bobs in and out of the water as the face of the camera is pointed toward the sky. A flock of seagulls dive into the water and resurface, and the camera, at the interface of sea and air, drowns momentarily and surfaces as we see bumping into the camera. The nets, sharp tools, floating and whirling starfish give new perspective to issues of scale and complexity of natural and technological systems. The undercarriage of the ship and rope nets look as much like sea creatures and participate in the ecosystem as any other submerged matter. In the repetitively tumultuous shots of the film, it is difficult to parse flesh from metal, sea animal from land creature. The film is an eerie and mythological series of nonhuman species portraits, but what marks it as essential for environmental criticism is the way in which it figures the “human” in relation to the ocean as opposed to the terrestrial, or even the extraterrestrial, as Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel suggest in an interview:

We wanted to create this multiplicity of perspectives that would relativize the human . . . (perspectives) that would make the spectator rethink humanity’s relationship to nature, in relationship to a plethora of other beings, of other animals, of other kind of inanimate objects—the elements, the earth, the sky, the sea, the boat, mechanization, fish, crustaceans, starfish—everything that is involved in the ecology of what’s going on in industrial fishing today.<sup>18</sup>

The claustrophobia that pervades the film is ceaseless, as stingrays are hung and sliced mechanically, fish blood is drained from the side of the ship, and refuse is poured back into the sea. In their routine of catch, gut, drain, clean, and throw over, the viewer gets an unromanticized account of how the interaction between organisms

17. *Leviathan*, directed and written by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel (New York: Cinema Guild, 2012), DVD.

18. Pat Dowell, “‘Leviathan’: The Fishing Life, from 360 Degrees,” NPR, March 16, 2013, <https://www.npr.org/2013/03/16/174404938/leviathan-the-fishing-life-from-360-degrees>.



Images 5 and 6: Stills: "Birds" and "Starfish" from Lucien Castain-Taylor and Verena Paravel's *Leviathan*.

creates a space of *estranged intimacy* where different species vitalities compete and violate boundaries. Yet, I am struck by how this estranged intimacy is, in part, deeply romantic in its spontaneity and unpredictability, the erotic proximity to unintelligible and exciting multispecies creatures, and how immediate the "subjects" and encounters feel. As a literary rather than visual artist, I was particularly drawn to how the medium of simple, amateur action cameras produced these amateur points of view of the wobbly nets and flexing starfish. The otherworldly shots felt like nothing I had ever seen in cinema, and I thought about this visual inscrutability, wanting

badly to experiment in an environmental visualization that resisted readerly interpretation, that said through its various shifting shorts: there is nothing here addressing you.

In poetry, this is significant, as lyrical address is not only the contact zone between the reader and poet, but also a form of hailing. Lyrical poems hail beloveds, animals, abstractions, many of them indifferent to the poet. The address to some “you” is often joyfully or sorrowfully epiphanic. Yet the contemporary poems about environmental anxiety that I chose to submerge describe being in a state of half-consciousness, thwarting the insight of civilization’s doom, all while in the dreamlike trance of calm waters. But the trance, etymologically meaning “a sleeplike state (as of deep hypnosis) usually characterized by partly suspended animation,”<sup>19</sup> feels sinister. While the elemental and earthly are within proximity (the volcanic rock of the seafloor, the sunlight shining on the shallow waters), being underwater mutes the original address of the speaker and finds new intimacies among the fish, sand, rock, seaweed, and the like.

## Sicily

Over the past three years, I have spent a significant amount of time trekking around Sicily with Elisa Giardina Papa, a Sicilian Internet video artist whose work has been shown recently at the Whitney, the Museum of Modern Art, and the 54th Venice Biennial. In particular, Elisa introduced me to the different lava rock (andesite) of each of the seven Aeolian Islands (each producing rocks with their own specific parental magma). Collecting the different andesite from Alicudi, Lipari, and Stromboli was one of my first amateur petrological forays into understanding the rich material specificity of Sicily.

I began filming in 2016 and chose as my first poem Catherine Pond’s “March 9th: Dusk,”<sup>20</sup> published in *Rattle: Poets Respond*.<sup>21</sup> This series is dedicated to poems responding to news or events happening in the world, and so the publications are usually very topical and comment on the current political happenings of the world. Pond’s poem is about the death of Taylor Force, an American who was murdered in Jaffa on March 8, 2016. The poem also responded to New

19. Merriam-Webster, s.v. “trance (*n.*),” accessed August 3, 2019, [https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trance?utm\\_campaign=sd&utm\\_medium=serp&utm\\_source=jsonld](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trance?utm_campaign=sd&utm_medium=serp&utm_source=jsonld).

20. Catherine Pond, “March 9th, Dusk,” *Rattle*, March 12, 2016, <https://www.rattle.com/march-9th-dusk-by-catherine-pond/>.

21. “Poets Respond@,” *Rattle*, last modified July 24, 2019. <https://www.rattle.com/respond/>.



Images 7 and 8: The Poetics of Calm. Stills: “I am on medicine for the visions” from Catherine Pond’s “March 9th, Dusk.” Island of Alicudi, Sicily.

York City’s record-breaking high temperatures for March, and also Maria Hassabi’s live exhibition with dancers at the MoMA called “Plastic.”<sup>22</sup>

What drew me to this poem was its resignation (“But now that you’re here, why not take my heart” and “We’ll die soon anyways”).<sup>23</sup> The speaker’s climate despair is described as a kind of mental disorder intertwined with site-specific corners of the earth, some “hotter”

22. The MoMA described the exhibition as using dancers who “move between poses at a barely perceptible pace across the Museum’s floors and down its staircases. At moments, their positions recall images of bodies in repose, collapse, or transition. . . . Exploring the tension between stillness and sustained movement, *PLASTIC* addresses the interface between artistic object and human subject.” “Maria Hassabi: *PLASTIC*,” MoMA, accessed January 26, 2019, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1611>.

23. Catherine Pond, “March 9th, Dusk,” *Rattle*, March 12, 2016, <https://www.rattle.com/march-9th-dusk-by-catherine-pond/>.

than others. The Mediterranean Sea becomes both the refrain of the poem and the site of civilization's end. Each region—from Central Park's blaring heat to the Zika virus spreading in Brazil to the lead leaking into the water supply of Newark—each of these microscopic ecosystems blooms quietly out of control, and yet the speaker is “on medicine for the visions” to improve her psychological health, settle her anxiety, lobotomize her fears, suspend the rapid thoughts, defer the knowledge of the end. Her resignation poses herself as our future Anthropocene reader, inhuman and indifferent.

The cinépoems capture the quiet, gurgling sound of the shallow seas with the remarkable visibility of the lava rock, courtesy of the piercing light of the region. According to a study on the island of Alicudi, “The Alicudi andesites have the most primitive isotope signatures over the entire Aeolian arc.”<sup>24</sup> Volcanologist Tamara Carley states that this refers to “the type of mantle material that is being melted to create the magmas.” She writes,

Every single time a mantle material is partially melted, our planet continues to “differentiate”. . . . As melting happens again and again and again and again (imagine this process continuing through 4.6 billion years of Earth's history . . . ), some parts of the mantle get really depleted . . . while in comparison, other parts of the mantle are “primitive” by comparison, resembling more closely what we think our original mantle must have been like back in early Earth history, before all of this differentiation redistributed elements in our planet.<sup>25</sup>

Here, the continuous remelting acts as a form of suspended history. Pond's poem about her hallucinatory powers, quelled by modern medicine, takes on new meaning against the bed of primitive volcanic rock in the lapping Mediterranean where myth and late capitalism are linked. Her visions have a long history in Greek and Roman mythology, where oracles huffing gas in caves and rasping prophecies now have geological data about the chemicals and underwater volcanic activity that support these theories of ancient intoxication through breathing in ground fumes. In fact, this very idea that prophecy might come from “sacred fumes” below rather than the heavens is important—shifting the source of poetic inspiration to the subterranean.

While the Pond cinépoem and others are ongoing, the experience of learning the geological and literary history of these underwater

24. A. Peccerillo et al., “Sr-Nd-Pb-O Isotopic Evidence for Decreasing Crustal Contamination with Ongoing Magma Evolution at Alicudi Volcano (Aeolian Arc, Italy): Implications for Style of Magma-Crust Interaction and for Mantle Source Compositions,” *Lithos* 78:1 (2004): 217–233, at p. 217, doi:10.1016/j.lithos.2004.04.040.

25. Tamara Carley, email (above, n. 6) (emphasis added).



environments and filming them within newly contextualized environmental fears has made me reflect on the temporality of suspension. The argument of the project might be that “deferring” has now become a pathology for coping with precarious environments. But this is an artist’s statement, not an academic paper, and I ventured into the waters as a poet before anything else. I went looking not just for the protagonists of our literary myths, luring them with enjambed lines from the deep with pleas for help to understand our contemporary world, but also to uncover the ways that those protagonists have become our mytho-aquatic ancestors. Underwater, suspension acts as a collapse of time. It also acts as a kind of pilgrimage. And as Alaimo suggests, it is not only that suspension is a sort of buoyancy, but that it is “a sense that the human is held, but not held up, by invisible genealogies and a maelstrom of often imperceptible substances that disclose connections between humans and the sea.”<sup>26</sup> The aim of the project, then, was to reimagine not just representation of environments, but *the form* of these environments, to move away from genres of catastrophe, to pose unanswerable questions via poetic fragments to the earth, and to produce a genre of environmental writing and art that is not committed to dire warning, but to a small fantasy of deferring an inevitable end.

26. Alaimo, “States of Suspension” (above, n. 15), pp. 477–478.