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Red Tide and the Anthropological Divide at Lake Merritt in Oakland, California

a response by Ben Jameson-Ellsmore

Lake Merritt is an ecosystem and public space where human and nonhuman forces perpetually subvert and overflow spatial divides. It is perhaps as close as it gets to an ideal public space; its users and landscape resist stifling regulation and subsumption to the logic of capital accumulation.¹ While access to much of modern public life and its amenities are determined by one's economic means, spaces like Lake Merritt where everyday users continually rewrite spatial codes of conduct have been regarded as increasingly rare and precious.² Often called Oakland's "crown jewel," Lake Merritt is a

¹ Mariana Mogilevich, *The Invention of Public Space: Designing for Inclusion in Lindsay's New York* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2020), vii; Swati Chattopadhyay, "Visualizing the Body Politic," in *Making Place: Space and Embodiment in the City*, eds. Arijit Sen and Lisa Silverman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 46; Saskia Sassen, "The Global Street: Making the Political," *Globalizations* 8, no. 5 (2011): 573-579, 575; Margaret Crawford, "Blurring the Boundaries: Public Space and Private Life," in *Everyday Urbanism*, eds. Margaret Crawford, John Chase and John Kaliski (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2008), 30; Dell Upton, *Another City: Urban Life and Urban Spaces in the New American Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 309; Julie Peteet, "The Writing on the Walls: The Graffiti of the Intifada," *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 2 (1996): 139-159, 145; Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities* (New York: WW Norton and Company, 1990), 123.

² Simon Sadler and Charles Moore. "You (Still) Have to Pay for the Public Life," *Places Journal* (2016): <https://placesjournal.org/article/you-still-have-to-pay-for-the-public-life/>; Jeremy White, "Public Space and Public Action: A note on the Present," in *City Halls and Civic Materialism: Towards a Global History*

shallow, Y-shaped, 140-acre tidal lagoon east of Downtown Oakland. A pedestrian path surrounds the lake, followed by sloping lawns (fig.1). These green spaces are then encircled by a sidewalk, car parking, bike lanes, the street, midrise apartments, and the skyscrapers of Downtown. Lake Merritt's unsettled politics revolve around the use of these radiating spatial bands. Here, thresholds between people, animals, sounds, and smells are porous in ways that challenge white supremacist, bourgeois, and anthropocentric spatial assumptions.

The lake overflows with the sounds and smells of public life—features that are occasionally met with hostility. Its surface is a membrane that amplifies and transmits noise. Almost daily, a dance or festival takes place at Walter Reed's 1913 City Beautiful-style Pergola and Colonnade, while roller discos occupy parking lots, blasting retro tunes.³ During rideouts and cruises, showy bikes and cars parade the lake's perimeter, slowing traffic to a halt.⁴ Bikers off-road into lawn and park spaces, as if daring the indignant among the crowds to call the authorities. High-rise penthouse residents complain to the police



Figure 1: The walking path around the east side of Lake Merritt barely separates pedestrians and runners from the shallow, trash-flecked water. Photo by the author, 2024.

of *Urban Public Space*, eds. Swati Chattopadhyay and Jeremy White (London: Routledge, 2014), 299; Michael Sorkin, "Introduction: Variations on a Theme Park," in *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*, ed. Michael Sorkin (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), xiii.

³ Charlie Lahud-Zahner, "A rollerskating revival spins up at Lake Merritt," *Oaklandside* (March 4, 2021): <https://oaklandside.org/2021/03/04/oakland-lake-merritt-roller-skating-revival-pandemic/>.

⁴ Pendarvis Harshaw, "The Power of Taking Up Space: Marshawn Lynch's Oakland Rideout," *KQED* (June 29, 2018): <https://www.kqed.org/arts/13836150/the-power-of-taking-up-space-at-marshawn-lynchs-oakland-rideout>.

that the beats of drum circles penetrate their lofty walls.⁵ In 2018, one now-infamous white woman, labeled “BBQ Becky” by Black Twitter users, called the police on two Black men for using a charcoal grill on the east lakeside.⁶ Black counterpublics responded by reclaiming the gentrifying shores of Lake Merritt, through “BBQing While Black” solidarity events.⁷ These events echoed historic Black Panther protests against a racialized 1970 ordinance prohibiting any conduct at the lake that “annoys or disturbs a reasonable person of normal sensitivities.”⁸ The lake’s public culture and landscape chafe against such attempts to reify white and bourgeois cultural norms.

The lake’s simultaneous roles as a public space, desirable real estate, wildlife preserve, and an environmental conundrum have historic roots. Before the arrival of white settlers, this land was a morphing tidal slough stewarded by the Ohlone Tribespeople and Mexican ranchers. White Gold Rushers purchased the land after it was stolen by the US government during the Mexican-American War. They then used the slough as a sewage dump. Among these actors was Dr. Samuel Merritt, who bought land west of the slough after making his fortune in San Francisco. Using his own capital, and rallying adjacent landowners, he dammed and dredged the swampy land in an attempt to freeze its contours in place.⁹ As mayor in 1869, Merritt declared the area a “public lake” and the first waterfowl sanctuary in the US in 1870, while also increasing the value of his property. He devised a sewer system to flush raw human waste deposited in Lake Merritt into the San Francisco Bay by harnessing natural tidal rhythms. The system failed when the tides refused to cooperate, creating a structural flaw that reverberates into the present.¹⁰ In short, the lake has offended human sensibilities and overflowed boundaries throughout its modern history.

The notion that Lake Merritt is Oakland’s “crown jewel” or “pearl” paints an insufficient picture of this beautiful yet disgusting place, and instead invokes the

⁵ Alex Werth, “Before BBQ Becky: Racial Reverberations at Oakland’s Lake Merritt,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 33, no. 4 (2021): 78-103, 85.

⁶ Dannie de Guzman, “Video shows woman calling police over barbeque at Lake Merritt,” *SFGATE* (May 10, 2018): <https://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Oakland-barbecue-Lake-Merritt-Sunday-confrontation-12902520.php>.

⁷ Sam Lefebvre, “Grill Against Gentrification at BBQ’n While Black,” *KQED* (May 22, 2019): <https://www.kqed.org/arts/13861227/grill-against-gentrification-at-bbqn-while-black>;

⁸ Werth, “Before BBQ Becky,” 93.

⁹ Zoë Beery, “The Long, Complex History of Oakland’s Man-Made Bird Islands,” *Atlas Obscura* (March 8, 2018): <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/lake-merritt-bird-islands-oakland>; Beth Bagwell, *Oakland: The Story of a City* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1982), 126; Richard Longstreth, “A Short History of Lake Merritt, 1850-1974,” Thesis (University of California, Berkeley, 1974), 4.

¹⁰ Bagwell, *Oakland*, 127; Longstreth, “A Short History of Lake Merritt,” 11.

Bataillean quality of excess.¹¹ While beautiful and repulsive are usually regarded as antonyms, they share a positioning beyond mere utility in Georges Bataille's framework. He analogizes jewels and excrement, referring to their symbolic conflation in psychoanalytic dream analysis; both are useless objects resulting from the expenditure of wealth or of bodily material.¹² If Lake Merritt is a "crown jewel," it is as a dual ejection or excess – it is expensive land set aside for waterfowl and the public, and it is strewn with trash and shit.

This sewage dump-cum-lagoon is jewel-like from the right vantage—a placid aqueous mirror reflecting a perimeter of string lights, lampposts, and the towers of downtown. Meanwhile, its fragrant algal and bacterial growth, excrement-littered pathways, and floating trash are

repulsive. Fertilizer, antifreeze, oil, soap, and other excesses of the city enter the lake through sixty storm drains (fig. 2). Thousands of pounds of trash are also removed from the lake every month. The Lake Merritt Institute gleefully records their strange "catches of the day," including but not limited to dentures, dildos, parking meters, and a "no littering" sign.¹³ These factors combined make a perimeter fence and the occasional



Figure 2: One of dozens of storm drains empties into the avian sanctuary on the north side of the Lake. Photo by the author, 2024.

¹¹ Bagwell, *Oakland*, 127; Werth, "Before BBQ Becky," 78; Georges Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," 116-129, in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press), 117.

¹² Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," 119.

¹³ Lake Merritt Institute, "A Year in the Life of Lake Merritt," (2002): <https://lakemerrittinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/A Year In The Life.pdf>.



Figure 3: Public binoculars on Lake Merritt’s north side point toward the human-made bird islands. Photo by the author, 2024.

sign warning against swimming lake seem unnecessary—the smell of decaying aquatic widgeon grass and the sight of floating trash keep joggers and flâneurs alert not to inadvertently fall in.¹⁴ The lake’s repulsiveness is such a given that a local news article states, “It should go without saying that no one should swim in Lake Merritt.” Although the article explains that humans would most likely not be harmed by the lagoon’s waters, it urges humans to keep their distance to maintain the waterfowl sanctuary.¹⁵

While occasional public binocular towers for observing the human-made bird islands would seem to reinforce a zoo-like anthropological divide at the lake, the birds are free to traverse it and claim human space (fig. 3).¹⁶ This is clearest when, in the

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Eli Wolfe, “Swimming in Lake Merritt: Is it safe or even legal?” *Oaklandside* (August 30, 2023): <https://oaklandside.org/2023/08/30/swimming-in-lake-merritt-is-it-safe-or-even-legal/#:~:text=It%20should%20go%20without%20saying,draains%20that%20empty%20into%20it>.

¹⁶ Zoë Beery, “The Long, Complex History of Oakland’s Man-Made Bird Islands,” *Atlas Obscura* (March 8, 2018): <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/lake-merritt-bird-islands-oakland>.

summer, thousands of Canada geese occupy the lawns, beaches, and walking paths.¹⁷ In this issue, Corey Ratch explores the less permeable divides at the London Zoo's early twentieth-century baboon exhibit called Monkey Hill. Surrounded by unjumpable ditches, it forcefully articulated human/non-human distinctions.¹⁸ At Monkey Hill, humans were beholders of the conquered non-human world, with animality (both our own and that of the other) kept behind uncrossable divides.

But such divides are still permeable in the sense that they also put human beholders and their anxieties on display. Zoo officials worried that the uncouthness of the near-simian baboons would degrade the moral character of the post-Victorian public. Bataille himself recalled being overwhelmed by the sight of the baboons, associating their colorful posteriors with the irrational animal excess that human society represses.¹⁹ Additionally, being forcibly transplanted from their vast habitats to a small exhibit space, the baboons were all but guaranteed to kill each other in territorial disputes.²⁰ Monkey Hill was thus a display of the human violence involved in constructing anthropological divides. Perhaps the distinctions between the birds, fish, and crustaceans of Lake Merritt and humans are more obvious and less subversive than those between humans and other simians, thus not requiring uncrossable barriers. But just as the mass death of the mistreated London Zoo baboons put human interventions in the natural world on display, so did a 2022 mass fish die-off in Lake Merritt.

The August 2022 red tide algal bloom siphoned enough oxygen from the water to litter Lake Merritt's edges with the asphyxiated bodies of fish, crustaceans, and mollusks. Decay could be smelled for miles. The stench penetrated masks and turned the stomachs of the seasoned sanitation workers tasked with removing the corpses.²¹ One viewer remarked, "It's a hard contrast because you've got the beauty of the lake and then you got all the death around you."²² This and other lake stench draw a line straight back to Samuel Merritt and his semi-successful attempts to turn the uncooperative slough into a useful technology for real estate development and waste management. The conditions for the red tide were linked to global human interventions in the environment. The 2022 climate change-induced atmospheric rivers abruptly ended California's drought but also changed the salinity of the Bay's coastal waters. The resulting algae made its way into the lake from the San Francisco Bay

¹⁷ Lake Merritt Institute, "A Year in the Life of Lake Merritt."

¹⁸ Corey Ratch, "Pineal/Perineal: The Anthropological Divide at Monkey Hill," *react/review: a responsive journal for art and architecture* 4 (2024): 21-35, 24.

¹⁹ Georges Bataille, "The Jesuve," 77.

²⁰ Ratch, "Pineal/Perineal," 26.

²¹ Ricky Rodas, "'It's the worst I've seen': Lake Merritt dead fish clean-up continues ahead of heat wave," *Oaklandside* (Sept. 1, 2022): <https://oaklandside.org/2022/09/01/its-the-worst-ive-seen-lake-merritt-dead-fish-clean-up-continues-ahead-of-heat-wave/>.

²² Rodas, "'It's the worst I've seen'"; Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," 119.

through the channel originally devised by Samuel Merritt, while the storm drains further diluted Lake Merritt's brackish water.²³

During the Anthropocene and the era of human induced climate change, clear anthropological divides are unsustainable. We cannot simply display the conquered world: it implicates us as it bleeds through unsustainable anthropological divides. The red tide fish die off was an example of human-made climate change becoming less abstract and distant by virtue of afflicting a major Western city's "crown jewel." For a moment, cumulative global carbon dioxide emissions since the industrial revolution and the distant human and environmental sacrifices made in the name of endless capital accumulation washed up on the shores of Lake Merritt. These externalities/excesses of capital return and assert their claim to urban public space as well. Lake Merritt is thus a public space for the Anthropocene, where humanity encounters itself through contact with its human, animal, and environmental other, and where stark human/nonhuman divides periodically disintegrate.

²³ Ricky Rodas and Darwin BondGraham, "Can Lake Merritt be saved from another fish kill?" *Oaklandside* (March 21, 2023): <https://oaklandside.org/2023/03/21/oakland-lake-merritt-red-tide-algae-atmospheric-river-rain-fish-kill/>.

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