

# **Decolonising Land Reclamation: Dis-entangling the Proto-geology of Belfast City Harbour**

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This paper is intended to outline current research investigating the conditions of materialism occupied by Belfast Harbour's land reclamation from the position of decoloniality, proposing to dis-entangle the complex temporalities of this proto-geology. The anticipation of this practice-based research is the instrumentalisation of alternative temporalities, reconfiguring the material conditions of the manmade geology through artworks and strategies of intervention. Such practices of decolonisation gain particular significance with the upcoming centenary of Northern Ireland in 2021.

The development of the City of Belfast was an industrially driven evolution, a product and producer of the Industrial Revolution. Its trajectory to become a leading industrial city of the British Empire was secured through an extensive project of reclaiming land from Belfast Lough beginning in the early 1600s. In 1613, the first quay was constructed at the foot of High Street, to load and unload goods subject to customs for the newly incorporated borough of Belfast. While Carrickfergus was the main portage in the lough at this time, by 1685 Belfast was reportedly "third in the Kingdom of Ireland for trade, with never less than 40-50 sail before it". Despite this volume of trade, the port suffered

severely from the shallow channel up to the very limited quayside, making the landing of cargo slow, difficult and expensive. It was only the smaller vessels that could proceed directly to the quayside without first having to lighten the ship by unloading part of their cargo onto shallow drafted gabbards while still at a distance from landing. Efforts to extend the quay into the strand were undertaken in the late 17th century but proved difficult to maintain in good order due to lack of funds. It was in 1729 after a number of attempts that the Irish Parliament passed an Act which gave the Corporation of Belfast clear powers to regulate shipping and raise money for the maintaining of dock and channel through the monopoly of the supply of essential ballast to shipping. However, it fell to the merchants themselves to extend the existing quay over reclaimed strand and building a new quay on the south bank of the River Lagan, but the difficulties of the shallow channel continued due to impotency of the Town Corporation. It was not until 1785 that a new body was formed by Royal Charter, the Corporation for Preserving and Improving the Port of Belfast, commonly known as the ‘Ballast Board’ and predecessor to the Belfast Harbour Commissioners that continues today.

This new body was charged with the development of the Port and Harbour, to radically alter the shoreline and seabed of Belfast Lough over the decades and centuries to come. The central feature for the future development of Belfast Harbour was the cutting of what would be known as the Victoria Channel, allowing deep draft vessels a direct passage to the expanding quayside. The natural topography of the lough was totally unsuited as a harbour. At low tide the lough exposed extensive mudflats or sloblands, with the River Lagan snaking a meandering channel through this eluvial muck. Colloquially termed sleech, a grey-black organic clay interspersed with shell and oyster deposits, this matter

formed a tidal plain up to a depth of 5 metres over the glacial till of the lough's floor. A soft and unstable material, efforts to deepen and re-channel a navigable route through the sleech were and remain a challenge to undertake and maintain, with the organic compound renewed and fed from the flow of the River Lagan. Nonetheless, following a substantial redevelopment of the foreshore and dock facilities, the first cut to straighten the channel to the quayside began in 1839, by which time Belfast was known as "first town for trade in Ireland". The second cut was completed in 1849 and a straight deep channel dredged to a depth of 5.2 metres at low tide by 1891.

Continuing through these periods, the Board undertook the reclamation of land from the lough, around the quay and extending down both sides of the channel. Through embanking off selected areas of slobland, and backfilling the subsequent enclosures, the land available for development increased dramatically. The excavated and dredged material from the lough was put to use, an enormous volume of ready at hand material to become new land, the sleech mixed with aggregates and other fill to increase its stability and create a more suitable ground surface. An extensive project of terraforming was underway, the re-sculpting of earth on a vast scale, under the authority of the Ballast Board. Through the 19th and early 20th century, Belfast participated in the colonial enterprise of the British Empire, with the city playing a significant role in a global network of trade and industry, which spurred the development of the city even greater. An ever-expanding mass, the reclaimed lands became the site of industry, trade, shipbuilding and aeronautics that commanded a global reach, rising to a peak in the late 20th century, amounting to a manmade land surface with an area of over 21,000 acres.

Today, contextualised by the recent discourse of the Anthropocene under which the human is designated with a geological agency, the project of land reclamation gains a particular significance. The extensive transformation of the earth's surface and the altering of river courses under the direction of the Ballast Board bears witness to the capacity of the human species to move "more sediment and rock annually than all natural processes such as erosion and rivers" (Gaffney & Pharande-Deschères 2012). Pointedly, this particular event of material dis-location is not confined to the local environment where sleech is massaged and modelled into more anthropocentric requirements. Attention must be directed to that key feature that provided the foundation for the mammoth enterprise that transformed the environment, namely the monopoly on the supply of ballast to shipping which delivered essential funding to drive the initiative forward.

Ballast was an essential component to windborne shipping, where weight was required to maintain an even keel. When a ship was empty of cargo, ballast was loaded to provide this extra weight. Typically, rock and quarried stone was used, giving the most weight to volume, with the added benefit of being of saleable value when a ship reached its destination. The Corporation acted as a geological agent, actively sending out discrete payloads of material into a network of trade that spanned the globe. Considered holistically, the development of the Port and City of Belfast is entangled in an artificially driven geological process with both local and global dimensions, through land reclamation and ballast distribution. This entanglement is marked with the developing global complex of capitalism and colonisation, capturing what James W. Moore has termed the 'Capitalocene'.

It is essential to emphasise that the discourse of the Anthropocene is not a celebration of human endeavour, wondering at the capacity of our species to modify the environment on such a vast scale. The Anthropocene is stricken with the recklessness with which the human interacts with the environment and the ecological catastrophe of climate change that impacts our lived present, pointedly implicating a futurity in which the condition of the human has itself become precarious. The manufactured development of Belfast Harbour has participated in arriving at the realisation of the Anthropocene, with responsibility arguably lying with a complexity of activities that include corporate industrialisation, colonialism and capitalism, rather than individual everyday human endeavour (Haraway 2015).

However, as confirmed in T.J Demos’ “Against the Anthropocene” (2015), it is the very systems that visualise and analyse climate change and other planetary processes that allows the Anthropocene to be made visible and designated such. Giving attention to a technological trajectory that includes the use of GPS, the World Wide Web, Geographic Information Systems, increased computational power and worldwide computer networks, accessibility to high resolution satellite photography, and the distillation of democratised globalised mapping such as Google Earth, the development of digital technologies simultaneously allows an expanded visioning the world which in turn shapes our relation to the world. Moreover, this postdigital condition is itself complicit with the circumstances of precarity that it scrutinises, and can itself be allocated a mineral or geological ontology under what media theorist Jussi Parikka describes as the “geology of media” (Parikka 2015). This underscores the aggressive extraction of mineral resources and rare earth elements from the planet’s crust and the contaminating industrial processes of refinement and manufacture that

dispense the essential materiality of the postdigital, framing a contiguous techno-geological landscape, extending from the mineralogy of the earth to the highest satellite. Notwithstanding the geological ontology of the media that allows us to view the current sum of the planet, “the thin line that exists between observation and agency when it comes to sensing, surveillance and subjectivity” (Turan 2016) is brought sharply into focus, with planetary computing complicit with the fault lines on which it resides.

To express what I have referred to elsewhere as this ‘entangled visuality’ of the Anthropocene, and in addition to framing this within the context of researching Belfast Harbour, I will draw upon an example of what could be termed speculative geology. The artist duo Revital Cohen & Tuur van Balen have proposed a series of speculative elements have been fabricated from technological waste, such as obsolete computers and other hardware. Most aptly, the waste products are drawn from the contemporary means of digitally storing memory and information, for these materials to be reformatted to propose speculative geological fragments that may arise in a future-to-come. This media materialisms prompt entanglements from which emerge the space-time conditions of geology, speculating on a futurity that is more-than-human. The techno-geological landscape proposed by Parikka’s ‘geology of media’ is actualised in the futurity made present that emerges from these speculative materials. The technologies of planetary computing complicit in the visualisation and designation of the Anthropocene are revealed as potential victims of their own prophecy.

It is under these circumstances that research on the land reclamation of Belfast Harbour will be undertaken. The project of industrial landscaping and

anthropocentric earth sedimentation proposes a proto-geology, a geology-to-come, with the artificial sleech striated ground becoming a potentiality. Equally, efficacy must be awarded to the technologies with which this research might be conducted and how these technologies of viewing and visualising are entangled with the subject matter. While the imperial global trade and industry that drove the evolution of Belfast has declined during the late 20th century, with perhaps the impetus of capitalism and colonialism, the new and developing industries of the 21st century that have come to replace them participate no less in the conditions and conditioning of the Anthropocene. Take a trip around the Belfast Harbour estate today, one will encounter industries with a distinctly planetary flavour. Oil and gas suppliers can be found, and other means of energy harvesting such as oil rigs and wind turbines. Of pointed significance are the digital industries that this energy supports and is developed by. It is under these contemporary conditions that the proto-geology of Belfast is to be investigated.

Cohen & van Balen's speculative geologies propose a future bound to the entangled visuality of the Anthropocene, declining an impetus towards capitalism and colonialism in effusion of a technologically determined condition. Such a capacity in favour of a status of decoloniality offers a distinct context for project of land reclamation and its proto-geology. Through a Deleuzian lens, the development of Belfast Harbour was the striation of smooth space of the ocean, the drive of capitalist industry to give structure to nebulous landscape of the sleech filled lough, deterritorialising it. But such an impulse is subject to reterritorialization by the smooth space, potentially taking on some of the qualities from which it is entangled. The visuality that will arise through the investigation of the proto-geology is entangled with the technology of that visuality, but entangled also with the contemporary situation in which the

investigation will take place, specifically the actually existing conditions of entangled visuality present in the Belfast Harbour estate. The complexities of the entangled condition of research, place and potential to-be-materialised futurities might then have a capacity for instrumentalization in abeyance of coloniality and capitalism.