

Works in the Works Presentation

by Dr. Nora Almeida, “Open Water

A review

On October 25th, we were treated to a presentation by Dr. Nora Almeida, “Open Water,” as part of the Humanities Department’s Works in the Works faculty lecture series. Dr. Almeida shared her expertise in participatory public art and her first-hand experience as an urban swimmer, a performance artist, and an environmental activist.

Doctor Almeida opened her talk by discussing her ongoing interest in participatory public art and her research project, “Open Water,” which she began as part of the NEA-funded Works on Water Program in Spring 2022.

In "Open Water," she examines the communication of swimming. She is interested in the association between residents and bodies of water and urban shorelines that surround them. In order to understand their unique relationship to water and their experience swimming during the Covid crisis, she conducted qualitative field research, including swimming narratives, testimonies, and participant/observation of outdoor performances.

Doctor Almeida introduced the challenges of presenting community “swimability” assessment criteria as artwork and a political document. The project provides an alternative reading of urban shorelines by considering swimming as an indicator of contested waterscapes and of localized social segregation. The exclusivity of swimming and the recreation of the leisure class represents a larger history of colonialism and race.

As part of her qualitative data, Doctor Almeida presented the audience with excerpts from oral histories conducted with Red Hook residents and urban swimmers. She also provided video documentation from facilitated somatic shoreline encounters in Red Hook and Coney Island. She intends to expand the Open Water project to other shorelines and incorporate demographic data and research about the history of ownership and use of the New York City waterfront, to explore the impacts of municipal regulation, urban planning, and privatization in coastal communities.

The presentation left the audience with a better understanding of a new form of communication, a view of swimming as an embodied encounter, and an expression of semantic harmony with nature and a form of communication.

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