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Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali  
Palazzo Pedagoggi 8  
Catania



**To Stay or Go**  
**Ethnographic Approaches to Coastal Retreat and**  
**Voluntary Relocation**

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Forced relocations for infrastructure-related projects have long been the subject of social science study. Often, scholars find that such relocations rip economic, cultural and social bonds, much to the harm of individuals and community. This paper explores the flip side of that dynamic – communities that lobby *for* relocation away from environmental harms. I draw on two ethnographic case studies from my own research to discuss two different drivers of voluntary relocation in two very different contexts. The first concerns a technological disaster, or the contamination of a low income African American neighbourhood. Residents of this neighbourhood believed that contamination was too widespread and entrenched to be remediated. Because they could not afford to move, they lobbied local, state and federal officials to pay for them to relocate. After 2.5 decades, they finally succeeded. In the second case, I describe how residents of Staten Island's southern and eastern shores petitioned the state to relocate them after Hurricane Sandy destroyed their neighbourhoods. They also demanded that their properties be returned to wetlands. While the state agreed to pay for a small number of relocations, the question of development remained murky. I discuss the outcomes of their relocation, including some of its unexpected consequences. In both cases, I explore the political imaginaries and dynamics through which activists forged their alliances and managed race, class and political divisions. I find a shared sense of disenfranchisement, betrayal, and outrage at the historic prioritization of corporate and financial interests, and state indifference to ecological concerns.

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