EDITORIAL:
ISLANDS – OBJECTS OF REPRESENTATION

by
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Island shapes, island sizes

Ask anyone to take a sheet of paper and to draw an island as seen from the air. Most likely, that person would draw a stylized image of a piece of land, without much detail other than being surrounded by water. It would fit within the space confines of the sheet. It would also, uncannily, have an approximately circular shape.

Why should this happen? Islands – hundreds of thousands in the material world, countless more in the fictional one – come literally in all shapes and sizes. There is no compelling reason why the whole surface of an island should fit onto a square sheet of paper. Greenland, New Guinea, Borneo, Madagascar, Baffin, Sumatra would only fit within the same frame if seen from space. Nor are islands circular. Actually, none of them are; moreover – other than planet Earth from space – very few get close.

Perhaps the answer lies in an obsession to control, to embrace an island as something that is finite, that may be encapsulated by human strategy, design or desire. Like Crusoe, can one be other than a Governor of one's own island (Redfield, 2000, p. 12)? Being geographically defined and circular, an island is easier to hold, to own, to manage or to manipulate, to embrace and to caress. Is this not part of the reason why so many islands are self-contained jurisdictions, perhaps precursors of the modern territorial, nation-state – as the paper by Philip Steinberg in this volume suggests? Just as much as anyone finding oneself on, or close to, an island experiences early on a craving to circumnavigate, circumambulate or climb its highest point and 'take it all in' (*e.g.* Baum, 1993, p. 21). A drawn island would thus tend to fit quite nicely on to a sheet of paper. Is it the boundedness and separation that makes islands so attractive to fantasy and mythology? Circular forms make the exercise easier, as well as somehow more perfect.

An island is

It is perhaps for the same compelling motives that statements and assertions abound about what islands and islanders are, or how they are meant to behave. It seems as if the geography is simply too gripping; the island image too powerful to discard; the opportunity to 'play God' on/for an island too tantalizing to resist. In sharp contrast, vastness overwhelms and frightens. We would make islands in our own image (Dening, 1980). Some of us are outright 'islophiles', island lovers, hooked to a career – or is it a pilgrimage? – of island hopping (islanding?), island living, though perhaps unable to describe exactly what it is that fascinates and drives us on. Others would be the exact opposite, committed 'islophobes', afraid of the dark and cabbalistic truths that lurk beneath the deceiving quaintness of island settings, as much as of the real danger of becoming stranded if the airport shuts down or the ferry stays in port. In any case, it is all too easy for most of us to confess that we are incorrigible 'islomanes': we succumb willingly to the 'indescribable intoxication' of islands. We are obsessed, excited or terrified – not necessarily in that order – by islands and their mysterious, haunting charm (Clarke, 2001, p. 9; Durrell, 1960, p. 1).

Traps

The temptation to define remains strong; still, it is unwise to categorize islands as if they represent a specific genre, type or trope. That would reduce and debase the myriad diversity which is one of the foremost characteristics of islands as laboratories for innovation, both in human and biotic terms. Advocates of environmental determinism, such as geographer Eileen Churchill Semple (1911) or psychologist Abraham Moles (1982), postulate the existence of a strong universal communality among island peoples, alleging that islandness triggers certain social features. Others would not go that far, but would concede that island(er)s have a sufficient commonality to warrant looking at them comparatively, justifying a systematic 'island studies' perspective (e.g. Baldacchino, 2004; Biagini and Hoyle, 1998; Tsai and Clark, 2003).
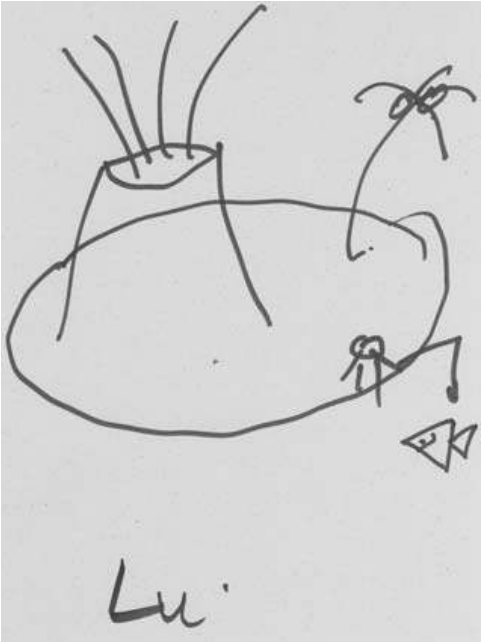
Meanwhile, islands have occupied such a power-

Fig. 1. The Island (1).

ful place in modern Western imagination that they lend themselves to sophisticated fantasy and mythology. Paradises, but also Gulags, are generally islands: compare and contrast Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) with Aleksander Solzhenitsyn's (1973) chilling analysis of the Solovki islands in *The Gulag Archipelago*. Folklore and make-believe are as much part of island culture as more pragmatic considerations, and usually well deployed in the context of tourism marketing exercises. Indeed, the association between small (especially tropical) islands and tourism is one of the best branding exercises in the history of marketing. The island mystique is a millenary tradition of the West, dating back to such ancient Greek epics as Homer's *Odyssey* (n.d.), repackaged in Western Europe's voyages of 'discovery', perpetuated by painters such as Paul Gauguin and pioneer anthropologists such as Margaret Mead (Baldacchino, 1997, p. 59; Gillis, 2004). Like Harry Potter's mirror of Erised (Rowling, 1999), islands, it seems, can stand for all things desired.

Duality

An island is a nervous duality: it confronts us as a juxtaposition and confluence of the understanding of local *and* global realities, of interior *and* exterior references of meaning, of having *roots* at home while also deploying *routes* away from home (e.g. Clifford, 1997). An Island *is* a World; yet an Island *engages* the World. Island societies '… are involved in both generating and sheltering themselves from processes of globalization in which contextually given boundaries are transgressed and displaced' (Singh and Grünbühel, 2003: 191). There is hardly any choice in negotiating these antinomies. Or, to be more precise, the only form of escape from them and their interplay of monopoly, totality and intimacy is, typically, exile (*read* ex-isle: Bongie, 1998). As Alex Law expounds in his essay in this volume on the island mentality of Britain, there are regular references – even by contemporary politicians – to the thematic troika of an island under siege, an island race as a model of high culture, and the navy as national protector: a far-flung empire held together by strategic island bases becomes a paradoxical source of inspiration for a distinct small island identity.

Right here

Samuel Selvon reminds us that *An Island is a World* (Selvon, 2000). It is a miniature universe; a bauble of community, society, ecology, economy. It imposes a sense of thick, proto-ethnic identity on its inhabitants and a sense of obvious and stark difference to all others, be they visible visitors or invisible inhabitants of lands over the horizon. It protects and preserves its citizens in a person-driven regimen of obligation, reciprocity, family, familiarity, gossip, assumed knowledge, tradition, social capital, networks but also anti-networks, often articulated via an own language or dialect, as well as an own sense of time, space and decorum. The 'management of intimacy' (Lowenthal, 1987) and tendencies towards monopoly are played out in a totalistic setting (Baldacchino, 1997). An island landscape is known very well, *too* well; the imprint of humanity often belaboured, deeply imprinted and excessive. Institutions are shunned in favour of 'friends of friends' (Boissevain, 1974), role conflict is rife, the individual occupants of bureaucratic positions exposed. The shoreline, with its shifting pattern, is a powerful draw, a source of psychological malaise, and often a keenly contested terrain. The all-embracing sea, while presenting dangers that occasionally lead to loss of life (dramatized now with global warming and sea-level rise), is a source of sustenance as well as a medium of security from invasions.
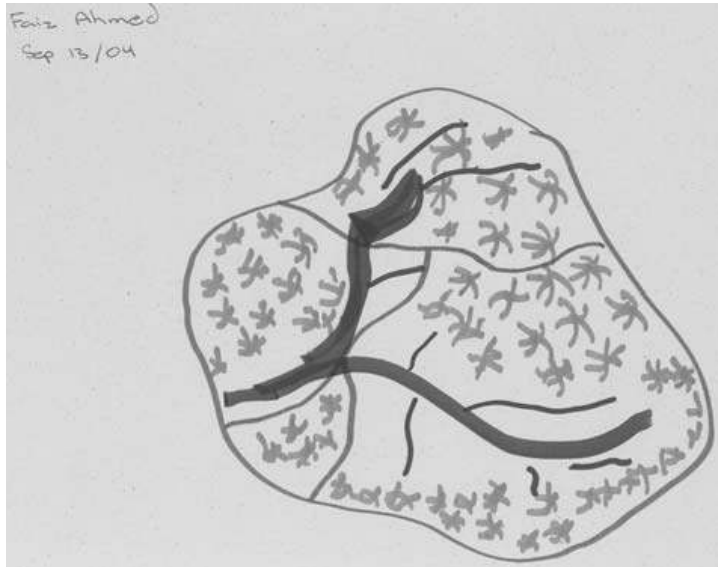
Fig. 2. The Island (2).

Right there

Yet, try as it might to image and reinvent itself as a closed world – as an expression of insularity – islandness is also beyond the immediate. Only such places as Easter Island/Rapa Nui have developed island cultures that apparently forget the skills of navigation and become incestuous and doomed, victims of frenzied, unsustainable consumption (Diamond, 1995, 2005, pp. 79–119). Islanders are first, by definition, settlers; but then they are mariners, pirates, fishers, travellers, merchants, brokers, prison guards, happy natives, environmental stewards, migrants, not necessarily in any particular sequence. If the threatened impacts of global warming on Tuvalu are anything to go by (see the paper by Carol Farbotko in this volume), then we may have to add refugees to the list. Yet islanders are polyvalent. They typically practise multi-tasking, or 'economies of scope' (Bennell and Oxenham, 1983, p. 24). They could very well be more than one of the above at any particular time, and with varying degrees of critical introspection. Island cultures are moving, dynamic, connected. Some islands have been deliberately settled or constructed as global platforms or trans-shipment sites, what Manwel Castells calls 'a space of flows' (Susser, 2002, p. 359). Theirs is a disturbing yet inevitable openness to trade, to visitors (tourists), to experts, to receipts from elsewhere. There is a general and chronic dependency on 'cargo' forthcoming from

beyond, yet a craving for more control over such traffic and its substance. It does not stop there: island(er)s seek to turn the tables on mainland(er)s, fighting stereotype with salacious counter-stereotype. Meanwhile, the archipelagic nature of most islands means that what is a peripheral island to some may be a mainland to others: some islands are actually called 'Mainland' – as in both the Orkneys and the Shetlands in Scotland (see Hache, 1998, pp. 49. 64).

Epilogue

Where does this reflection leave us? Where we started, perhaps: struck by the remarkable diversity and hybridization of insular forms and expressions; a tenacity to the (is)land and its natural or human characteristics; a sustained celebration of the 'glocality' of island life, with the co-presence of both universalizing and particularizing features (c.f. Robertson, 1994).
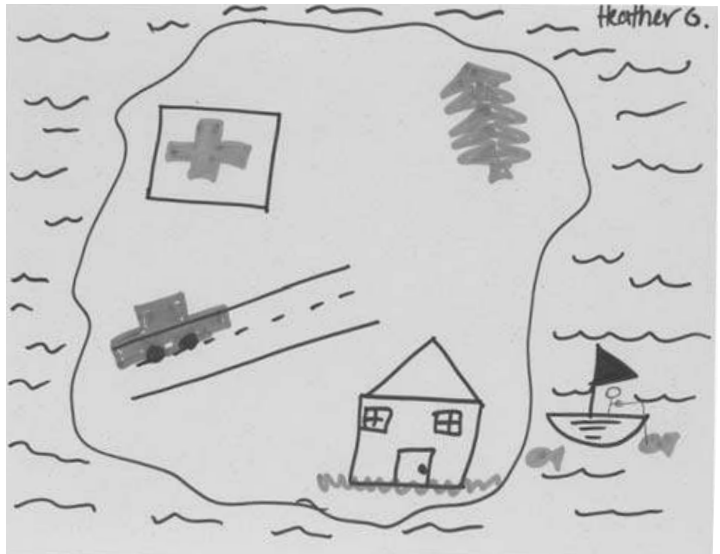
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Fig. 3. The Island (3).

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