


Guest editorial introduction: islanding cultural geographies

cultural geographies
20(2) 129–134
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DOI: 10.1177/1474474012469594
cgi.sagepub.com


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Islands allure imagination, thought and affect. Imagination, thought and affect conjure islands. Literary imaginations create islands more than any other geographical form.¹ Metaphorically, we use concepts of bounded and contained islands to think with, to an extent not commonly recognized.² Emotions and desires are moved by and commonly move us towards or away from islands. Relatedly, in a deeper time scale, islands have played a central role in the evolution of life forms, spawning biocultural diversity.³ Torsten Hägerstrand recognized this in identifying the ‘dilemma which arises from expanding over given boundaries while remaining sheltered [as] the eternal theme of first biological evolution and then cultural’.⁴ Islands bind and shelter, for better or worse, by design or imposition. Commonly associated today with escape – from tedious, stressful and mundane everyday lives; from financial regulation and taxation; from the chaos, destruction and chemical cocktails of modern society – islands serve a host of other purposes on the maps of higher authorities: for locating military outposts, incarcerating political foes, dumping waste, expanding markets or engineering sites of social experimentation.

If islandness is a particular state or condition of being, there is a corresponding action in islanding.⁵ We propose island as a verb, islanding as an action. Pacific poet and scholar Teresia Teaiwa asks, and argues:

Shall we make island a verb? As a noun, it’s so vulnerable to impinging forces . . . let us also make island a verb. It is a way of living that could save our lives.⁶

We need this verb to critique hackneyed notions and flashy brandings of islands: as isolates, cut off from the mainstream; as innocent, protected from the ravages of modernity; as *terra nullius*, pregnant with opportunities of ‘under-utilized’ resources; as pristine and particularly environmentally conscious societies; as ecosystemic quirks, extremely unstable and vulnerable. We need this verb to mediate and attenuate dizzying oscillations between paradise and prison, openness and closure, roots and routes, materiality and metaphor. For grasping the rich weave of relational space and place, such lurid dichotomies oblige constant vigilance.

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Accepting the logic of binaries, Gilles Deleuze⁷ reminds us that ‘geographers say there are two types of islands’ (well, actually, there are at least three, counting river/estuarine islands). But he moves us quickly from such typing (nouns) to the actions (verbs) that have made, and will eventually unmake, these spaces: erosion and subsidence creates continental islands; volcanism and coral reef activity creates oceanic ones. These acts of constitution and reconstitution are always works in progress: as islands succumb to global warming and rising sea level, other islands are born from the sea or emerge from erstwhile peninsulae. Only a specific time perspective deludes onlookers into thinking that these spaces are absolute, solid, and inviolate.

Perhaps it is the same agricultural revolution that transformed humans from foraging hunters into sedentary farmers and ‘place dwellers’ that also explains the obsession with fixity and immutability and the accompanying suspicion of things in flux. We need to understand spaces as not just contextual containers where the struggle for life unfolds; but environments that emerge and become – are ever becoming. Ingold’s conceptualization of ‘dwelling’,⁸ in turn based on the arguments of Heidegger,⁹ proposes such a heuristic device to explain our engagement with the seemingly material world. In this way, we are encouraged to move away from the incarnation and spatiality of islands to their deployment as meta-texts, rich palimpsests for fertile imaginations. To design, thus, is a corollary of being – *dasein* and *das ein*¹⁰ – and not a consequence of being a creator, a wily and plucky Robinson Crusoe thrust fortuitously upon a *tabula rasa*. ‘The island’ is made in the throes of colonization and the subjugation of nature.¹¹ It has shifted ‘from the register of the “found” to the register of the “made”’.¹² Hence, there can be no desert islands: their essence, Deleuze reminds us,¹³ is imaginary. Once an island is sought, it has already been discovered. There cannot *not* be an unknown island.¹⁴

Islands are caught in this vortex of being, becoming and much wishful, projected and programmatic thinking. In a world increasingly formed by seamless flows of matter and energy, of bundles of activities and movements between them, of isolating connections and connecting isolations,¹⁵ islands can help us to better understand how this flux comes together, permitting privileged glimpses of the quintessentially fluid ‘entanglements of life’.¹⁶ Such ‘a world of islands’ becomes a set of moments of assemblage, of connective tissue, mobilities and multiplicities.¹⁷ DeLoughrey describes this eloquently as an *archipelagraphy*: a re-presentation of identity, interaction, space and place that proceeds as different combinations of affect, materiality, performance, things.¹⁸ Such ‘counter-mapping’ requires first dislocating and de-territorializing the objects of study – the fixity of island-as-noun – and ‘constituting in their place a site or viewing platform by which they are perceived and analysed afresh and anew’.¹⁹

The matter of lived spatiality becomes an even more significant *problematique* in an age when ‘area studies’ seem to be recovering from a deep ‘epistemological crisis’;²⁰ and the excessive deterministic forays of early ‘island geographers’ – like Ellen Churchill Semple²¹ and Jean Brunhes²² – has certainly contributed to dampen serious interest in the scholarly study of islands. The status of place in a globalizing world needs to be carefully critiqued: rejecting those glib classificatory premises that have rested at the heart of many arguments in the social sciences;²³ while nevertheless recognizing that there is a keen ‘awherness’ in play;²⁴ there is a stubborn, visceral materiality in what we do.²⁵

By adding the verb to island, islanding, to our theoretical instruments, we are better equipped to maintain perspectives on islands as historical processes of ‘weaves of existence’,²⁶ as currently ongoing and commonly contested processes of creation and becoming, with largely indeterminate futures. There are many ways to island, each raising complex moral, social, political and cultural issues of their own. Our purpose here is not to set down analytical distinctions and tracks for further discussion. We believe this collection of papers provides a valuable point of departure for further discussion on what it means to island, and what islanding can mean for islands.

One attempt to ground this discussion is around the tortuous concept of race and its cultural cousin, ethnic group: scholars have long accepted the notion that ‘Polynesians’ migrated from somewhere in Asia to colonize the Pacific. But social network analysis suggests that such claims are historically naive and constitute ‘bad science’. In the first contribution to this collection, John Terrell locks horns with the fallacious albeit conventional wisdom of islands – and races – as discontinuous isolates, trapped in place/s and distinct identities; going on to consider why indeed a mythic, racialized narrative of Pacific historiography remains ascendant.

Another crucial question is how to align the study of islands as representations, images, ideas, metaphors with that of their appreciation as distinct, physical places. Owe Ronström takes up this challenge by delving into the development of ethnology in Scandinavia, reminding us how, often, an island is just a *locus*, a trampoline from which to jump off in order to delve into the subject matter of one’s research; the self-evident island as *focus* does not materialize and thus vanishes from the horizon of scholarly endeavour.²⁷ The burgeoning field of ‘island studies’ has already had its fair share of debate over this ontological principle: from Pete Hay’s preference for an exclusivist phenomenology, grounded in the physicality of islander lives, and of cultures as implicated in place;²⁸ to Lisa Fletcher’s equally persuasive case for performative geographies.²⁹

Islands maintain a unique grip on our imagination as intriguing places where fantastic utopic and dystopic worlds are possible. In the post-Enlightenment Age, such notions have found favour, reflecting the belief that unique political and social arrangements can be designed in places so distinctly separate, small and remote. Combine this search for, and by, ‘states of exception’³⁰ with the decolonizing drive of the 20th century, and you have a few of the world’s major powers – France and the United States, in particular – scrambling to hold on to various distant island spaces for geo-strategic ends. Elizabeth DeLoughrey explores how, in the context of the Cold War and the dawn of a promising nuclear age, some coral atolls in the Pacific were constructed as closed and militarized spaces by the US: part of a secret, scientific project off limits to all but a select few; and yet, ironically, spewing radiation that knows no bounds and is now deposited in the bone tissue of all human beings. The inhabitants of the Marshall Islanders, now independent, carry the burden of this ‘island as laboratory’ legacy, as victims of radiation sickness. This paper explodes the myth of island isolation, in this case used as a ploy to mystify and legitimize a military irradiation of the whole planet. The presumed isolate has turned the tables on the rest of us: ecologically, we are all islanders now. And yet, we must acknowledge that the tragedy of having trace elements in our bodies pales in comparison to the thyroid and other cancer-related deaths borne by the Marshallese.

From the Bravo H-Bomb test explosion on Bikini atoll of 1 March 1954, we move to the Haiti earthquake of 12 January 2010. Much like man-made explosions, natural disasters also privilege the demobilization and remobilization of people as these get caught up in complex, fragile and shifting webs of survival and interdependency. In her disturbing analysis of a different form of (mainly US) militarization, Mimi Sheller focuses on the Caribbean, a region whose history is rich in voluntary and forced migrations (indentured labour, slavery); but where a whole new layer of hegemonic ‘mobility regimes’³¹ and communication infrastructures – including satellite technology, GIS mapping and aerial surveillance – are brought into play in the wake of the Haitian crisis. The implicit outcome of these ‘vertical geographies’³² is described by Sheller as an ‘islanding effect’, in which the right to move, and the right to pause, become spatial expressions of power and ‘mobility justice’. Islanding here expresses a *relation* based on uneven capabilities for both physical and informational mobility. In the very midst of humanitarian responses to a disaster, the practices of a ‘kinetic elite’ may reproduce ‘marooned’ victims, islanded by border enforcement, coast guards, and visa regimes.

Islands are mediating fields, signs and imaginaries by which processes appear as privileged. Mark Jackson takes up these heuristic devices to focus on other consequences of modernity: garbage and decay. Just like the hubris accompanying the nuclear or navigational technologies showcased by DeLoughrey and Sheller, we have here a strident critique of the vibrant yet false engineering optimism that accompanies plans – and, by implication, many ‘green’ engineering agendas – for the transformation of the voluminous waste on the high seas – the euphemistically named ‘North Pacific Gyre’, north of the Hawaiian archipelago, in particular – into an artificial, sustainable ‘recycled island’. Non-biodegradable plastic, like radiation, is a ubiquitous component of modern living. And again, like radiation, it tends to disassemble and dissipate, yet remaining toxic, its materials reassembling in the bodies of living things, sometimes with fatal consequences. The paper broadly engages an analysis of immanent processual grounds for a materialist ethics, and argues that contemporary cultural and hybrid geographies are in a critical position to recognize and advance such an ethics. In considering the ontology of life and death, of the made, the non-made and the un-made, we are offered here a rich analysis of that which is chthonic, vital, at the heart of the future of life on Earth.

But islands are not just good to think about; they are also good to think *with*, as John Gillis reminds us.³³ We leave for last a methodologically different contribution that charts how islandness is *done*; how we island (as verb) in/as an ongoing iterative practice. Deploying non-representational theory, Phillip Vannini and Jonathan Taggart present us with islands as task-scapes: rich, storied landscapes of movement, rest and encounter. Spatiality is reaffirmed here as relational, affective, sensual and embodied; an outcome of bundles of ‘unique kinaesthetic performances’. They do not ask what or where is your island; but ‘how do you *do* your island?’³⁴

With this collection of papers, we wish to contribute to the islanding of cultural geographies, most definitely not in the sense of bounding off and isolating, but rather in the sense of bringing the stream of cultural and social theory into communication with alternative currents, byways and eddies created by islands. We believe that the islanding – in this sense – of cultural geographies is underway, and that there are new spatial understandings that can be brought into play from the island perspective. Finally, we hope this collection will encourage your participation in islanding cultural geographies.

Acknowledgements

Earlier versions of the articles in this special issue of *cultural geographies* were first presented as papers at ‘Finding their Place: Islands in Social Theory’: the 2nd international conference of the International Geographical Union (IGU) Commission on Islands, held on the island of Ven, Sweden, 27–30 August 2010, and in collaboration with the Department of Human Geography, Lund University, Sweden. We are very grateful to the Swedish Research Council; the Royal Society of Letters at Lund; and the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities for funding the conference. We also thank Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Mark Jackson, Owe Ronström, Mimi Sheller, John Terrell and Phillip Vannini for generous comments on an earlier draft of this editorial introduction.

Alicia Bauzà van Slingerlandt (†) organized and administered all things practical for the Ven 2010 conference, and participated as well. We dedicate this theme issue to her fond memory.

Notes

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