

## Re-marking Islands

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Humans can live on an island only by forgetting what an island represents...

Dreaming of islands – whether with joy or in fear, it doesn't matter – is dreaming of pulling away, of being already separate, far from any continent, of being lost and alone – or it is dreaming of starting from scratch, recreating, beginning anew. Some islands drifted away from the continent, but the island is also that toward which one drifts; other islands originated in the ocean, but *the island is also the origin, radical and absolute*.

Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts*, 2004

*Issue 4* focuses on islands. Inviting artists, scholars, art historians and curators, this volume provides an approach to reading and meditating on islands, thereby contributing to emerging discourse on islands as a subject of inquiry and creative practice.

Islands are nature's debris and as Jacques Derrida remarkably says, "there is no world. There are only islands." (Derrida, 2011) Broken away from the whole since the beginning of human consciousness, islands have been creations of nature's wrath. Yet with human evolution, the idea of a relationship to the concept of an island as an imaginary to articulate the human condition resides most poignantly in John Donne's oft-quoted opening line of his poem "No man is an island." Yet, at once, visualised often as a castaway, exotic, uninhibited, fearful, lonely, et cetera, an island is a potent compression of a country, a nation. Islands are imagined, visualised and romanticised in many ways but it is but an object and an objection in the vast seas. For example, while islands, such as Singapore and Hong Kong, remain ports of commerce, they are but negotiation sites for socio-cultural identities and transmigrational practices over the centuries; they do not represent the idyllic but rather a microcosmic world-making in the mirror of the great continents. The emerging contemporary island is a heterotopic space, and while integral and key to 21st century world-making, it is a site of geo-political determinism.

There is newfound energy in trying to contextualise island identities, cultures and contexts: island studies (Baldacchino 2007); nissology (McCall 1994); performative geographies (Fletcher, 2010) and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982) – all providing valuable insights to the place, presence and purpose of islands and their relationship to the adjacent, the historical, the sovereign and the political. But the agency of island cultures cannot be read merely through the lens of geo-political determinism or through the narratives of discovery or cultural representations. There are complex anthropocentric conditions of ownership (China's claim over the Spratly Islands), war (ethnic wars in Sri Lanka), conservation (Madagascar's palms verging towards extinction), and nature's calamity (rising sea-levels could see Maldivian islands disappear). Against this backdrop remains old 18th and 19th century concepts of being castaway or even exiled from civilisation, variably captured in literature and film, where the island remains the place to test human fortitude and deliver a philosophical exposition of the human condition.

Contemporary world re-fashions this condition of neglect, exile and the dark into an adventure for the urban individual. American television perpetuates this adventure through reality shows such as the long running machiavellist *Survivor*, hedonistic *Temptation Island*, Discovery channel's docu-drama *Naked and Afraid*. They reinforce a notional belief that western society's disconnect with itself and nature can be remedied through these enterprises which reveal nothing more than the dark side of human behaviour. Then, there is the romanticised notion of an island getaway, exalting solitude. With the flurry of island holidays from Jamaica, Hawaii, Bali, Phuket, Fiji, Mauritius, et cetera, the lure of basking in the sun, sand and the sea remains a populist tourist adventure, reduced to vagabondic lifestyle of braided hairstyles, beach massages, water-sports and seafood, but impactless on the consciousness of lived experience - one that was seeking solitude in the first place.

Recent times have seen an increasing number of islands for sale, on Google, to the wealthy to build their own paradise. But can paradise be regained through real estate? I extrapolate this trend to provide us with a possible canvas for emerging trend in global land acquisition. In *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (2014), sociologist Saskia Sassen eloquently raises the cruelty of the global economy. Foreign and domestic governments' rapid investments to facilitate a ready supply of natural resources is displacing cottage economies, localised communities and nature. On one level, this could be read as a socialist cry for anti-capitalism yet, the subjected and subjugated are expelled from their natural habitat as the financialisation of the non-economic sectors of society takes root. She notes, "What is new and characteristic of our current era is the capacity of finance to develop enormously complex instruments that allow it to securitise the broadest-ever, historically speaking, range of entities and processes" for "seemingly unlimited multiplier effects...To do this, finance needs to invade – that is to securitise – nonfinancial sectors to get the grist for its mill." (9). Sassen's reading, does not directly speak to islands. But they are the incubators for the further

perpetration of countries, continents and economies. In this emerging trend, the inalienable gets alienated, and loneliness becomes the close companion of the island and its inhabitants.

If at all, alienation and loneliness remain critical to the understanding of the human condition on an island. Alienation and alienability prospects the loss of connectivity (often realised through bridges) and economic potential, dependence on natural resources for sustenance, existential challenges of nation-building and population sizing and balance. These continue to plague many island nations as they negotiate the probability that islands are more vulnerable for disappearance through political acquisition, wilful neglect of resources and economies and people uprooting and migrating. Loneliness besets.

The vast literature around loneliness and solitude informs a human craving for consolidation – a life of the ascetic revisited. Often both are unfortunately conflated. Solitude purges the mind of clutter and searches for meanings whilst loneliness craves affect and searches for ways of meaning-making. There are not many islands that seek solitude but there are many that are lonely seeking to exert an identity and place themselves with a dialogue with the rest of the world. The dialogue is not necessarily convivial. It can also be adversarial. Loneliness can beget self-affection and interiority that develops a carapace against the belief that the world out there is harsh, cruel, total. Derrida's reading of this in the *Beast and Sovereign* (2011) maps the possibility that loneliness and islands draw attention to the consideration that there is no such thing as a common world, a unified world. Loneliness can be ambiguous and Derrida considers the possibility of the affected and the disaffected drawing closer in this loneliness to a common unity.

Perhaps, that is the fear, that one day the island will be alone. But the island as signifier propounds that it is not the central site but a signifier of the all things that it is not - that comes to interplay in the concept of being an island. The island differs by being unlike that continent, peninsula or hinterland adjacent to it, seeking to define its existence amidst a sea of trouble and possibilities. The island is that which is not. Its lack provides its strength. Its strength lies in its loss.

Philosopher Gilles Deleuze, known for bridging geography and philosophy in his seminal works with Félix Guattari, provides an ontological perspective. The island is the “origin, radical and absolute,” breaking away from essentialist doxa such as castigation and loneliness to a place where the incidental and adventurous come to play. Drawing from geographers, he articulates two kinds of islands: Continental islands which are accidental and derived and Oceanic islands which are originary and essential, both revealing “profound opposition between ocean and land” (Deleuze, 2004). Underlying this articulation is the inherent conceptual and existential divide that separates the real and harsh reality of being from a romantic notion of the idyllic. For Deleuze, these planes enmesh.

The constitutive qualities of the enmeshed planes form the basis of this volume of *Issue*. These essays, conversations and

exhibition have been curated to re-mark the 'island' and provide an aesthetic, yet interdisciplinary, interrogation of the theme. *Issue 4* speaks of the complex issues that I have raised above and it seeks to provide a rich palimpsest of unarticulated approaches to understanding the island as phenomenon.

## References

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