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Islands

メタデータ	言語: 出版者: 琉球大学国際沖縄研究所 公開日: 2016-06-03 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12000/34105

Islands

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Anyone who has ever sat on an island shore, watching a ship go by, will likely have experienced that uneasy blend of settled comfort and restless envy evoked by its passage. Reassurance of place and nostalgia for the unknown all wrapped up into one bundle of feelings. Of course, the watcher may be one of those islanders who has committed to memory the shape, the size, and the color of every ship that has ever gone by, which seems to be a favorite island sport. In that case, the passage of the ship is just part of the daily routine. That too says something about the mixture.

And what of those on the ship as they watch the island slowly drift by? Does relief at not being stuck in a nowhere place compensate for the longing for place? It is part of being an island that it is at once a place and nowhere, a nowhere place, so to speak. It is what makes islands a source of endless attraction “to get away from it all”—so long as getting back out is assured, except perhaps to the incorrigible beachcomber. For those given to motion, islands are places to escape to, but also to escape from.

Motion, with escape now and then in and out of a place for refreshment, revitalization, or the renewal of bonds deemed necessary to sociability. Smug, hobbit-like existence in a place that may or may not dream of other worlds but is unwilling or unable to exchange what is for what might be—like Laozi’s villagers who heard roosters crow in the neighboring village but had no interest in checking them out.

Islands and ships. Places and motion. They are metaphors for modernity. Modernity arrives with the victory of motion over place, ships over islands. If Newton’s first law of motion heralded the coming not just of modern physics but modernity itself, modern physics reached its apogee by setting everything in motion. Quantum particles are notorious for jumping around. Einstein’s thought experiments are about travelers in time and space. Einstein is postmodern to Newton’s modern. Postmodernity is all about motion. Islands, too, have been set in motion. Capital moves them. So does the war machine. Placelessness is as essential to the postmodern war machine as it is to the operations of global capitalism.

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Islands are the ultimate places, and islanders the ultimate indigenes/indigents: bounded, rooted, isolated, uprooted—at least as metaphors, for the realities have been at odds with the metaphors all along. They are also revealing of modernity's struggles with the metaphors of its creation. Escape to the islands is an escape from modernity. Escape from them, a return to it—or, for the islanders, arrival in a modernity they neither made nor desired, until they were forced to it, like Newton's bodies at rest. Like all indigenous peoples, they have been the spectral outcasts of modernity—at rest or in motion.

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Islands are what they are. They come in all sizes, shapes and colors. According to the United Nations Law of the Sea, an island is “a naturally formed area of land above water at high tide.” The legalese tells us little about islands. Islands are “water-lands.” There are islands made by humans and islands that keep growing. There are islands that barely survive the tide and islands that are mountains. There are continental islands, oceanic islands, tropical islands, desert islands. There are volcanic islands and coral islands, sea islands, lake islands, and river islands. There are clusters of islands and islands that stand alone. There are islands in islands in islands. There are islands that are rocks and rocks that are islands. There are islands that are rocks and islands that are continents. Some islands are continental, which makes continents into islands.

Islands are also what we make them. They are sites of imagined liberation, non-place places no less elusive than the liberation they promise. Isles of the Blessed. The Heliades. Penglai. Horai. Atlantis. New Atlantis. Utopia. Islandia . . . *Utopia* is a no-place island. It is one of the inaugural texts of modernity. *Islandia* is a no-place that longs for place against the artifice of civilization. Happy Isles in Oceania and in Merced River, Yosemite, are as close as we have gotten. Islands are also prison-houses. Real-life places of no escape. Devil's Island is an island. So is Alcatraz. Molokai held lepers so that Paradise could be sustained. Ellis and Angel are islands. Dreams fulfilled and betrayed. The Galapagos are a treasure-house of nature. Dr. Moreau's island and Jurassic Park are fantasies of transgression against it. Belafonte's islands are in the sun. The sun has set on Hispaniola in the same neighborhood. That was where Columbus read the riot act to a bunch of befuddled natives. It is also home to Haiti, product of one of the first revolutions of modernity, and the first in the “hemisphere” to win independence from colonialism, which sinks ever deeper into darkness. We cannot have Communism in the Western hemisphere. Cuba is socialist, still. Guantanamo on the same island has become the holding pen for the new functional Communists—terrorists.

The Comoros and Solomon Islands are among the ten poorest countries in the world, Hong Kong and Singapore among the ten richest. *The Economist* reported a while back that Pacific Islands are poor because they are rich. They have food in abundance, so they are lazy. They need Chinese and Indian workers to develop. In Fiji one village had to be moved because of the rising sea level; another has been getting more fish than ever for the same reason. The Maldives are the playground for the rich and famous. They also have

the distinction of the first-ever underwater cabinet meeting in preparation for going under the tide as the sea level goes up. No more island. One less member for the UN. Where will the rich and famous go? The Andamanese islanders shot arrows at helicopters trying to rescue them from the tsunami in 2004. There are Islands of History without histories.

And then there is the politics/War front. Some islands are colonizers; many are colonized. Does it have anything to do with their poverty and wealth? Some are “sub-colonies,” as Sun Yat-sen used to say of China. They are colonized by more than one colonialist simultaneously. Okinawa comes to mind. Taiwan used to be an unsinkable aircraft carrier. Now it is a liability. Some islands are irradiated by nuclear tests, others blown up by target practice. The People’s Republic of China is looking for the islands of immortals in the South Pacific. Sandalwood and sea slugs may be gone, but shark fins are still there. Socialist capitalism in the American Lake. Islands may not have had history until colonizers cast their light upon their *poliuli*, but upon them is inscribed the history of colonial modernity.

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I once cited in an essay these concluding lines from the late Epeli Hau‘ofa’s magnificent island manifesto, “Our Sea of Islands.” They are worth citing again:

Oceania is vast, Oceania is expanding, Oceania is hospitable and generous, Oceania is humanity rising from the depths of brine and regions of fire deeper still, Oceania is us. We are the sea, we are the ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth and together use it to overturn all hegemonic views that aim ultimately to confine us again, physically and psychologically, in the tinyspaces which we have resisted accepting as our sole appointed place, and from which we have recently liberated ourselves. We must not allow anyone to belittle us again, and take away our freedom. (Hau‘ofa, p. 160)

The manifesto constructs out of island places a space in which land and water become one. Utopia is no longer an elusive island. It is a moving space. It moves as the people move. It speaks for the lowly among the people as it speaks for the lowly among peoples. It does not annihilate place by space or time. It abolishes the distinction between them. Without place, there are no spaces, and without space, there is no time.

The everyday reality of the islands imbues the utopia with pathos, as reality does to all utopias. There is a poignancy to its merger of land and sea when global ecological recklessness promises to submerge the islands under the tides. But utopias are not intended to describe the world. They are designed to reveal what is wrong with it, offer critical perspectives, and foster hope in alternative possibilities.

Contrast Hau‘ofa’s decolonizing manifesto with colonialist versions of seas of islands. The American Lake. The “South China” Sea that the Peoples Republic of China seeks to make Chinese on the basis of a name that Europeans coined when everyone in the region, including historical Chinese, called it by different names. The “East China” Sea, where the PRC, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan are battling over rocks and what is under them. What used to be simply Southern or Eastern seas now come with nationalities,

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thanks not to disingenuous historical claims but to colonial mappings, which the nations have made their own. The battle is over naming rocks as emblems of national possession: Ryukyu/Liuqiu, Senkaku/Dioyutai, Dokdo/Takeshima, Spratlys/Xisha/Hoangsa

How do you draw lines in the sea? Chinese do it by surreptitiously painting rocks red from the Himalayas to the South Sea. The sea of islands to the powerful is something to be conquered and possessed. Hau'ofa's vision seeks to liberate. People, place, and nature over and above the spaces of nation and capital. Pele over oil and gas. It is the struggle between reality, so-called, and utopia.

Reference

Hau'ofa, Epeli. (1994). Our sea of islands. *Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (January), 148–61.