琉球大学学術リポジトリ

Musings on the World-Island

メタデータ	言語: English 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: Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12000/34125

IJOS: International Journal of Okinawan Studies
3.1 (2012): 81

Musings on the World-Island

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We are all islanders. I am from the island of Eurasia. And I have lived for fifty years on the island of the Americas, called the Greater Caribbean by Jack D. Forbes. These are big islands.

In 2001, I taught for a semester at the University of Hawai'i and fell in fascination, as one falls in love, with the idea of Oceania. I began to think, then, that neither "Europe" nor the "United States of America" could think of itself as an island, and therefore, they were out of touch with the reality of the world—not only that "no man is an island," but that we are all islanders.

In 2004, Maryse Condé invited me to speak to the descendants of indentured Indian laborers on the island of Guadalupe. I sang to them an island-dream song by Rabindranath Tagore and demonstrated to them how distanced we mainlanders had been, in our island fantasies, from the reality of their lives. India could not think of itself as an island, a corner of an island. I began to think, then, that the idea of nations, older than nationalisms—something like "born same-s," men harnessing reproductive heteronormativity to push away the bigger heterogeneity of the island—was ever in a double bind with our islandedness. History nestles in that denial of the impossible truth of space.

I now think of Oceania as a heterogeneous place, a model for the world-island, an invitation to develop island-consciousness beyond continentality. There is no mainland.

In today's world everything is modern. The promise is of a level playing field. If we develop island-consciousness, know that the globe is a cluster of islands in a sea of traces, and approach the heterogeneity of the ocean-world with patience, collectively, and bit by bit, rather than all at once, it's maybe the only way to find out why that field, that cluster, floating in the world-ocean, is so uneven a relief-map.

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