

Discover

Two ways – in twain – apart – asunder – away – between – privation – undo – reverse – turn out from – a lack in

Discovery

To remove from cover – make known – expose to view – reveal – betray – exhibit – to find out, as a first time

Of Manhattan, Albert Camus was said to have written “Sometimes, from beyond the skyscrapers, the cry of a tugboat finds you in your insomnia, and you remember that this desert of iron and cement is an island”¹. How distant this wry observation of a city at the centre of the world from my own contemplation of the splendid isolation of Tasman Island, the most south-easterly point of the island continent’s most south-easterly island state – Trowenna, Van Diemens Land, Tasmania. Gazing at the massive dolerite sea-cliffs of this small, bold island from a 35-seat vessel in the January of 2011, I was reminded that my fascination with islands is as much visceral as cerebral. At the sharp edges of this towering formation, cobalt waters churn to white foam, pounding in and slurping back through kelp gripped on terraced rocks with tenacious holdfasts. Sea-lions scratch on sun-warmed rock or herd fish into a tight ball of roiling water, and then rip through them in salty feasting. The circumnavigation of Tasman – a mere 1.2 square kilometres in area – is rapid. It is my first such orbit of any island, and I record it on camera with the avidity of a collector and islophile: the condition has been subtle of onset and long in coming.

Born on the Canadian prairies as far from an ocean as it is possible to be, occasionally I tap briny memories of being three ... a ‘60s trip to my mother’s land, Blackpool Rock sticky and sweet, donkeys on pebbled beaches, fish and chips at grey dusk. But it was when I was nine, on a trip to Antipodean waters and regions now home, that I think I truly *perceived* the ocean for the first time and discovered a string of islands – Hawaii, Tahiti, American Samoa, Fiji, New Zealand: Australia would beckon three years on. In idle conversations in the lead-up to this venture, I had been told by academic parents of anthropological bent about Gauguin and Rousseau, Mead and Malinowski. Of course, little registered about these figures and their representations of island life and island peoples beyond a certain sense of intrigue attached to Gauguin – and this because those beautifully stylised, naked women fascinated me. No, at nine I fixed upon the novelty of ‘70s style tropical resorts: greetings from natives decked in shell and

¹ Lisa Lovett-Smith (1999) *New York Living*, Whitney Library of Design, New York, p.9.

bead necklaces bearing frangipani leis or playing guitar; swimming pools echoing the forms of adjacent lagoons; colourful kiddie ‘cocktails’ served with naff paper umbrellas and maraschino cherries; large men with terrifying tattoos of mythical creatures – on their faces no less; and loud Americans in glaring ‘Hawaiian’ shirts my brother-in-law now collects as an icon(oclast)ic fashion statement of his retirement years.

One day, our father allowed my older sister and me to venture forth around an area behind Nadi’s Sun Lover Hotel, where we were to stay for nearly two weeks in the daily care of a Fijian maid named Mary, to whom – childlike – I became quite attached, my own mother to remain in Canada for several months before heading south. Her crisply ironed uniform of pale blue and white smelled clean and fresh, like my own mother’s scent.

For the awaited venture beyond the island that had become the hotel, I remember dressing in my favourite brown and white hibiscus-patterned dress, feeling something I might now describe as buoyant, ready to explore. Some distance from the hotel, there was Mary, small children playing in the dust around her as she washed clothes by hand in a large bucket outside a hovel made of cardboard and corrugated iron sheets and old wooden planks. A play-house it seemed to me, until my sister hushed me with a hissed “*she lives here silly*”. Later, inner voices would pick over the bones of my reaction by reference to cultural propensities for voyeurism and ventriloquism – for gazing at and then speaking for the Other. At the time, I felt raw shame and guilt. Here was a resolute knowledge that between us was a gulf of inequality I understood as fundamentally wrong and, I suspect, that awakened my conscience, my fascination with people and place, and my abiding concern for questions about development and justice. The idyll was fractured and then, for a time, largely forgotten or tempered by a growing awareness that neither maldevelopment nor the consumption of peoples and places are exclusive to islands.

The islands of the Pacific have as part of their geographic form certain characteristics of contentious interest to scholars of island studies – not least among them smallness of size and apparent isolation. Assuredly, size and isolation inform one’s perceptions of islandness such that, for example, a peculiar sensation of exposure – vulnerability even – attends the experience of standing in the middle of the airstrip on Funafuti in Tuvalu. That thin ribbon of coral sands and bitumen was built during World War Two when the Ellice Islands, as they were known, were key to the Allied Forces’ push against the Japanese. The sands used in the construction of the airstrip were taken from lands long held in customary title by the indigenes. Now, the gouges that remain are referred to as the Borrow Pits, and are filled with solid waste and sludgy

waters, over which perch precariously built stilt houses: lead paint tins and car batteries dip up and down in the ooze. Stand in the middle of the airstrip and look southwest to austral waters then gaze southeast or northwest: the shoreline is not 500 metres from your vantage point – the rest of the ‘world’ is thousands of kilometres away. Islandness as isolation in such places is ‘in-your-face’. It confronts in other ways as well, for during king tides waters may lap at kneecaps. My friend and colleague, Carol Farbotko, writes of Tuvalu in terms of islographs, “shared, non-static imaginations of islands, mediated through words, images and symbols” which show that “islands are paradoxical spaces and second, islands are imaginative geographies”².

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Despite its archipelagic status as 334 or more islands, islets and rocky outcrops, in Tasmania it is easy to overlook that one is on an island – especially given the ‘mainland’ is some 64,519 square kilometres in area. Small it is not; isolated it may be – but always in relative terms. I often neglect this geography: for reasons I cannot rationalize, away from the coast-line, for me this place might just as well be another region of any developed nation. As both an antidote to such moments of forgetfulness, and an inoculation against the reification of islands, it is useful to invoke Lisa Fletcher’s suggestion about islands. Fletcher advocates “approaching the study of islands from the perspective of performative geographies [which] foregrounds an appreciation of the dynamic and mutually constitutive relationship between places and the ways in which they are depicted ... the island [is] a live site in the production and reproduction of countless competing meanings legible from countless, often competing, perspectives”³.

The two young men who crewed the vessel moving 35 people around the sublime coastlines of the Tasman Peninsula on that fine day in January 2011 are missionaries; zeal colours their narratives of place. A red balloon from a wedding across the bay the day before bobs in spume outside a sea-cave of muted tones – pink and green algae overtop of grey and sandy rock washed by dazzling aqua and white. The offending balloon is quickly hooked up by one and removed from the sea. The other speaks of marine pollution, wildlife protection, and the need to protect this *island* place. The homily is deft, light of touch, and steeped in modern variants of

² Carol Farbotko (2008) Representing climate change space: islographs of Tuvalu, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, School of Geography and Environmental Studies, University of Tasmania.

³ Fletcher, Lisa (2010, in press) ‘... some distance to go’: A Critical Survey of Island Studies, *New Literatures Review* 47, pp.17-34.

the Romantic: here we are to have an *epic* experience touching on ancient natural processes, indigenous resource use, colonial heritage, and wilderness values.

In truth, the trip is just such a larger-than-life experience. But more: our trawling of spectacular coast shakes an ennui about this place that has settled on me after several years of inattentive residency preoccupied with work and sleep rather than with living in place – in the realities of this place. Not that the ennui is replaced with some roseate romanticism for this island state ... I know enough about its fractious history, complex geopolitics, fraught and painful environmental challenges and awkward intergovernmental relations that no such idealism will last. But, it is salutary to recall that each time I leave this place and then return, there is a sense of coming home: no idyll this, and no longer a reformatory, nevertheless the island where I live is the island I have chosen, and there is a consonance between choice and geographic form.

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The experience of Tasman Island underscores the idea that islands are indeed performed – but in ways manifestly different from the performance of mountain place, or forest place, or prairie. So, unsure if I will overcome the “ubiquity of habits of thinking which too frequently place islands on a sliding scale between the extremes of paradise and prison”³, I return to a contemplation of the edge, drawing on recollections of Jinmen or Quemoy – a bowtie of an island nestled in the Taiwan Strait and within shelling distance of China. Its fortified northwest coast-line is a stark reminder of the *real politik* of imperial impulses for territory. There, from small bunkered apertures in a crenulated fort the Taiwanese now dedicate to tourism and art installations, through a permanent industrial haze it is possible to steal glances to the foothills of the mainland. Nearby, gold sands are fringed with grasses and tall aloe in spiky flower, their forms aped by razor wire from which dangle red triangular signs with white writing – flowing calligraphy and its jarring translation: DANGER. MINES. A metre or so into pale turquoise water, rows of sharp, dark spears angle out of the water, and menace. One cannot imagine anything dissolving these forms – this is no mere flotsam. It is 2004, and our guide informs us that much of this coast-line and its associated near-shore cannot be accessed because of the military hardware that remains. She muses about lost opportunities, and reflects on a time when Jinmen was a prime destination for rich nationalists, whose ghostly and tatterdemalion holiday homes – now island heritage – we also visit. And she regales us with stories of resilience, a key island performance, and of how 100,000 Taiwanese troops reforested the island after the shells fell silent and birdsong returned: not least for those of ornithological bent, the island has become

an international tourist drawcard. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey would have it, such imaginaries are “a crucial reminder of the witness’s participation in and responsibility to that memory and history”⁴.

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So, what is it about islands that evokes powerful tendencies to romantic performance and binary thinking, and in turn warrants acts of dis-discovery: acts of creativity such as those which comprise this exhibition – *Dis-discovery* – that would, in the words of its curator, “remove island conditions from their layered cultural clichés and put an end to avoiding reality and a tendency to favour superficial ideas”? One is reminded of Deleuze. In his essay on desert islands, he philosophizes the presence of an “*elan* that draws humans toward islands”⁵ and draws attention to our propensity to dream of islands. But Deleuze also warns that this dreaming is one “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”. Let us dream, nevertheless.

⁴ Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey (2007) *Routes and Roots. Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*, University of Hawai’i Press, Honolulu, p.272.

⁵ Deleuze, G. (2004) *Desert Islands*, in *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953-1974*, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, pp.9-14; at p.10.