

Littoral Space(s): Liquid Edges of Poetic Possibility

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Abstract

Islands have inspired a history of folklore, literary genres and artistic visual work, continually captivating human creativity and imagination. This multi-media article presents work that moves beyond traditional boundaries of the educational field to link nationally with the Institute of Island Studies, located at the University of Prince Edward Island, Canada, and internationally with the Small Island Cultures Research Initiative, hosted by the Island Cultures Centre at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. Through the vehicle of video, interweaving imagery and improvisational music, the artist-researcher examines island as a distinctive geographical site and the spatial dimensions of island locality. The author applies methods of visual poetic inquiry while integrating perspectives of image-based arts with disciplines of island studies, philosophy, and human/cultural geography. The intentionality of the work is to stimulate a multi-layered “trans-disciplinary” approach (Baldacchino, 2006) to island studies and qualitative research and to represent the emergent process of developing an island aesthetic methodology. The aim of the article is to expand island studies

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as an artistic inter-discipline and to contribute to the growing theory of islandness or “nissology” (McCall, 1996).

Nissology, derived from the Greek root for island, *nisos* and study of, *logos* is defined as “the study of islands on their own terms” (McCall 1994a, 1994b). McCall claims that islands learn from one another through the promotion of international co-operation and urges that nissological knowledge be multi-dimensional in its approach. Current island studies literature strongly suggests the importance of studying islands, supports the need for gathering islanders together, and asserts the significance of expanding island studies as a “nissological interdisciplinarity” (Baldacchino, 2004; 2006; Hay, 2003, 2006; Stratford, 2003). This multimedia article is my response to the call to broaden island studies research paradigms and to participate in the collective engagement of reflexive scholarship among small island artists and researchers.

Islands act as the “loci of imagination” (Cosgrove, 2005, p. 302); they offer sites for invention, creativity, and experimentation. Islands confront us with dualities, juxtapositions of local and global realities, of interior and exterior references of meaning, of having roots at home and routes away from home (Baldacchino, 2005, p. 248; Clifford, 1997). “An Island *is* a World; yet an Island *engages* the World” (Baldacchino, 2005, p. 248; Selvon, 2000). Islands represent a microcosm of the universe—they thrive in a co-existence of autonomous and relational zones, in a mingling of universality and particularity. Islands simultaneously represent geographical entities and complex dimensions of space and place (Askevald, 1995; Baldissera, Johnson & McCabe, 2004; Massey, 1994; Tuan, 2004). As Péron (2004) suggests, “against the background of rapidly increasing personal mobility and globalization ... the island can be considered the quintessential physical place” (p. 334). An island is a place where identity is formed and mediated through evolving social/cultural constructions. Islands are also spaces that become place as they are transformed and endowed with special meaning (Tuan, 1977). To island dwellers, the significance of island as place resides in its potential to “offer distinctive identities and spaces in an increasingly homogenous and placeless world” (Baldacchino, 2007, 1).

Islands inspire mindscapes for imagining that reality may be experienced in its entirety. Beem (1992) illuminates the uniqueness of

islands and writes: “In its watery isolation, every island determines a state of mind”... (p. 86). Ritchie (1977) expands my understandings of the “island mind” by asserting “those who live on an island...have a view of the world that is spacious in an empty sense as the eye travels to an undisturbed horizon”...(p. 188). Part of the ‘lure’ or ‘fascination’ of islands (Baldacchino, 2007; Péron, 2004) is this suggestion of empty spaces, waiting for any conceivable human thought, act, or creative impulse. Visual artist, Jean-Yves Vigneau, in his work *Speaking of Islands* (2007) states: “My island is not merely a parcel of land surrounded by water; it is the focal point of all my horizons”. My sense of islandness emerges from lived experience and vision of island as fluid and permeable—a shifting liminality (Beer, 2003, 33), liberated zone, and site of possibility (Hay, 2006, 22). I linger in the edginess of islands, on edges of shores, unfixed and in flux, and within the inter-island spaces of relational meaning (Ellis, 1998; Hay, 2006).

The littoral—“of, relating to, situated, or growing near a shore” (McCabe, 2004, 7). In my video, *Littoral Spaces: Liquid Edges of Poetic Possibility*, I invoke island, inhabit island, and attend to modes of thinking about its space, its construction, and the narratives told in and through landscapes (McCabe, 2004, 53). I reveal the paradoxical nature of islands and lingering tensions in indeterminate spaces of movement/stasis, natural/corporeal, isolation/intimacy, migration/dwelling, home/away, placelessness/belonging. My sense of islandness is informed by Péron’s (2004) notion of island as “atemporal space” and Foucault’s (1967) idea of the “epoch of space” as simultaneous, juxtaposed, near and far, side-by-side, and dispersed. My island perspectives are further influenced by Tuan’s (1977) concept of space as movement and place as pause, and Bachelard’s (1994) notion of the internal space of primary perceptions—space of passions and dreams.

Tasmanian poet, Peter Hay (2006) contends that islands are “special paradigmatic places”, topographies in which meanings are emergent from deeply visceral lived experience (p. 34). I generate aesthetic constructions of islandness by exploring edges of islands literally and littorally as sites of poetic possibility. Littoral artifacts are created through modes of imagining and inhabiting to seek meaning and to distil qualities of island experience as I render phenomenological dimensions of islandness (Abrams, 1996; Moran, 2000; Seaman, 2005; van Manen,

1998). I employ visual poetic inquiry as a discursive practice, as a site for dwelling (Heidegger, 1971; Leggo, 2006), and as representation of voice, reflexivity and felt-knowledge (Thomas, 2004). Visual poetry embodies my search to represent island phenomena, to reveal feelings and essence of experience, while embracing complexity, ambiguity—opening spaces for multiple interpretations and epistemological uncertainty.

As in the work of Vancouver photographer, Jeff Wall (2007), my intention is for each “image, or sequence of images, to produce a relational fictive whole” (p. 339). Visual poems are “intuited fleetingly in the experience of depiction” and it is this fleeting quality that is stilled photographically through suspension. My aim is to capture more than a single moment of viewing to represent the transmutability of a world embodied in the ebbing, flowing, and entwining thresholds of the natural and human. I strive to propel the audience into a temporary suspension of time and space by overlapping and overlaying imagery to create a lyrical, visual narrative. Visual poems are created *in-situ* to represent site-responsive renderings of my embodied experience. I gaze from vantage points looking inward towards the shore and outward towards the horizon—to depict *detritus*, that which is washed ashore, and to record what is observed from a boat, as *heterotopia*. Foucault (1967) in his writing, *Of Other Spaces*, makes reference to the boat as countersite – “a floating piece of space, – a placeless place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea” (p. 6). I capture fleeting imagery from a sea kayak and fishing vessel to record my phenomenological encounters across ethereal waters, beneath surface depths of seas, and in ever-altering spaces of liminality where surf meets coastal shores.

Visual poetic inquiry and image-based methods are fused in my interpretation and aesthetic representation of islandness. I record photographs as a form of “visual note-taking” (Müller, 2005) and apply techniques of image-based analysis and photo-elicitation (Collier & Collier, 1986; Harper, 1994; Prosser & Schwartz, 1998; Stanczak, 2007; Thomas, 2007). I analyse visual dimensions of imagery from Wagner’s (2006) multiple perspectives: As artifacts viewed in their own right; as documents making visible elements of social/cultural island life; and as a record of my artist-researcher perceptions (p. 55). Recurring themes emerge in the juxtaposition of a myriad of shapes and natural/human

forms—the resonance of organic matter and human-made materials; reflections and contrasting states of living organisms washed ashore and under the sea’s surface; the mutability and changing forces of natural elements; the tensions, dramatic interplay, and delicate balance in the symbiosis of human and nature; the peripheral quality of island as a geographical site and ephemerality of island locality.

The intentionality of my work is to compel the audience to imagine the fluidity and complexity of space(s) between high and low tides, and the edge of shoreline as a permeable, boundary (Ledwell, 2002). In Kant’s terms, space becomes “the condition of the possibility of appearances” (in Muller, 2005, 143). I dwell on the possibility of appearances and disappearances—the peripherality of island edge and dimensions of shoreline as limen and boundary (McCabe, 2004). In rendering spaces of the littoral—points of convergence fuse thresholds between illusion and reality, between the world of perception and world of imagination. Representation of islands shores as liquid, liminal space(s) invite the audience to enter into aesthetic island/scapes, while highlighting the capacity for islands to spark passion, creativity, and imagination. My vision of islandness embodies Ritchie’s notion that (1997) that island experience is “within itself, with all its conflicts, potentially whole” (p. 188). I experience islands as intimate geographies, imaginative topographies—share an affinity with their shores, as I toss in seas of unpredictability, temporality, and move in a mingling and migration of dreamscapes and discovery.

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