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Discourses of Islands and Natives in Late 20th-Century Galveston Symbolic Circumscriptions of Penetrated Space

I know now that Galveston is a woman. But when I first began my fieldwork there, I thought she was just a place.¹ I ought to have checked beneath her skirts when I first began to encounter discourses of islands and natives in late 20th-century Galveston, but I could not conceive of her oleandered fringe as the feminine guise I now know it to be. Even when my cultural informants repeatedly referred to the Galveston Causeway as the source of the island's most serious pollution (that would be tourists and colonizers of the newly preserved historic districts), I failed continually to see the gendered-relations between that two-mile-long bridge from the mainland and an island that has been called, for the last 100 years, by one or another femininely engendered nickname—Queen City of the Gulf, the Shady Lady, the Open City, the Wide-Open City.² That last one, surely, should have registered in my mind.

Islands figure prominently in both the ancestral mythology and intellectual genealogy of anthropology and its disciplinary kin.³ The western imagination and anthropological discipline have long fantasized the island as feminine space. This truth can be traced back to the beginnings of globalism, when the likes of Spanish and Portuguese sailing ships set off half a millenium ago to discover, what in many a mind, was believed to be the lost world of Atlantis. Not only remote from the centers of the expanding world, but physically circumscribed in the most literal sense of the word, islands were discursively femi-

nized. Other so-called virgin territories may have been cut-off from other lands and peoples by harsh terrain or broad expanses or by incompatible linguistic distinctions, but none was imagined to be so literally unbreached and figuratively pure as the undiscovered island. From Darwin's Galapagos to Boas's Baffinland, to Malinowski's Trobriands, and Mead's Samoa, islands were imagined to be unequalled settings for the historical study of nature's laboratory of life. Fertile breeding ground for biological and cultural speciation, islands epitomized the primeval womb of nature.⁴ Inhabited only by "natives," they were not really inhabited at all, but wild places, lying literally dormant in Western time.⁵

Anthropology, like the rest of natural history's disciplinary descendants, thrived on this facilitating fiction, imagining the social customs of island natives to represent culture in its most original and therefore meaningful form—finding as well, in the essential boundedness of the island, an instrumental metaphor for rendering culture into a concept. Well into its adolescence, anthropology feminized culture as an island, endowing it with the temporal and spatial circumscriptions that seemed appropriate to peoples who lacked the masculinizing influence and logic of the written record and therefore an authentic concept of the past.⁶ Working alongside the colonial regimes that dominated these now dependent places, anthropologists paternalistically protected "their" peoples, by trying to shield them from the "unnatural" penetrations of colonialism and capitalism, commercialism and tourism, modernity and even now, postmodernity.⁷ Anthropology's Other seems destined to forever be an islander-kind of Other by simple virtue of the discipline's engendering of its subjects. Even when that Other is clearly a man, we secretly and self-effacingly presume him to have been emasculated by the subjectifying practices of anthropology and other western scientific traditions.⁸

How is it then that it took me so long to see Galveston as the woman I now know her to be? I can only imagine that it is because her only real boundaries are symbolically constructed—some out of the most anthropological appropriations one could possibly imagine. Discourses of islands and natives abound in Galveston, not only in a superficial, commercialized form, but more significantly, in an indigenous form. They are fundamentally expressions of cultural longing and belonging. But more importantly, they are products of a colonial encounter and Galveston's ambiguous resistance to it.

Islanders engage in caustic critiques of the collective wanna-be-exotic cultural-self, comparing, for instance, the Galveston airport manager and his followers who, in the mid-80s, wanted to restore the overgrown airstrip (at a defunct military airfield) to a cargo cult on a

Melanesian Island. Instead of chanting with a bone through his nose while he awaits, in utter futility, the arrival of Coca-Cola and bubble gum, Galveston's cult leader, one islander wrote, wears a three-piece suit and intones political gibberish suggesting that commercial airplanes may soon be arriving on the island with a cargo of high-class tourists—this in vast contradistinction to the day-tripping riff-raff that comes by car across the causeway.⁹

Island residents boast proudly of lineally-inherited economic and political affiliations which tie their family to one of the city's three elite clans, whose Fortune 500 wealth and ancestral imagery, seed mythologies of feudal island oligarchies and classic patron/client relations. Galvestonians conflate their history with their islandness, suggesting that had they not been an island, the hurricane of 1900 would not have taken 6000 of their lives and reversed the economic fortunes of the city. Had they not been an island (e.g., out to sea), they wouldn't have been so suited for rum-running during prohibition, they wouldn't have gotten away with such rampant institutionalization of prostitution, and they certainly wouldn't have been able to play host to such a thriving industry as illegal casino gambling, which along with these other illicit pursuits, served as the economic mainstay of the early 20th century, hidden carefully behind the glamorous cover of tropically-themed nightclubs like the Balinese Room, with its Big Band stage and massive murals of sultry South Seas scenes.

And certainly, if they were not such a laid-back island place, they wouldn't find themselves always being duped by outsiders who turn out to be conmen (so far they are never conwomen) who try to pass themselves off as one thing or another in order to take advantage of the naïve and innocent island folk.¹⁰ Nor would they talk about the island being "frozen in time" or "sealed in amber" or otherwise suggest that they don't pay attention to the vagaries of time.

Native-islanders have been known to claim their indigenous status, and therefore their cultural belonging, by noting in writing or speaking that they are "B.O.I.," an acronym for "born on the island." This establishes their cultural distinction and authority in the culturally-thinning era of historic district colonization and increasingly sophisticated-resort tourism. Newcomers often apologized to me for their non-nativeness or invoked an alternative acronym—I.B.C. (for "Islander by Choice"), which as best I can tell, became institutionalized by the local literati who sought to attend to these lost souls, themselves most likely among them, who were chronically afflicted with native-islander-envy: precisely the cultural longing that Galveston's commercial promotions of its collective cultural-self were designed to evoke in mainlanders.¹¹

When I realized the island was gendered, these things seemed more believable to me. I now understand them to be symbolic circumscriptions of a penetrated place. Although Galveston is in fact an island, when I began doing fieldwork there, the only significance I attributed to that geographic reality was the fact that perhaps it gave the appropriated imagery of palm trees and beaches a slightly more authentic edge over its competition from other supposedly tropical beach front towns. The Texas literati (and that is not an oxymoron) have written a great many nostalgic arrival stories featuring Galveston. None of them involves disembarking from a plane, but rather a long drive that leads them from Dallas or Houston down Interstate 45, which eventually bisects the city and deposits one right at the sandy shores of the Gulf of Mexico. What one sees on the way to the Gulf is clear evidence that Galveston's entire livelihood is now based upon its ability to draw tourists or seasonal residents to its beaches and more recently, to its growing commercial and residential historic districts. Although, the University of Texas Medical Branch is a prestigious university and major employer on the island, it is also a non-profit entity, and as such, does not generate much taxable revenue. As a result, the island looks like a place whose economic fortunes have suffered dramatic reversal. Broadway Boulevard (as Interstate 45 is called on its run through the city) is lined with fast food restaurants, gas stations, and Victorian-era homes in various states of repair. Absolutely nothing about the geographical realities of Galveston's island status, beyond its more outlying beaches, registered on any of the romantic or historical or mythical scales I had come to associate with islands, despite the fact that anthropology institutionalized its fieldwork technique based on the study of island cultures. Galveston wasn't the South Seas, it wasn't Hawaii, it wasn't even Key West by any stretch of the imagination. It was at best an almost by-gone place that had recently discovered how to parlay its huge corpus of Victorian-era residential and commercial architecture into a new source of revenue: heritage tourism.

My research, and certainly the grant that was underwriting my fieldwork, situated my investigation in the realm of the historic preservation movement and the patronage of that movement by two local dynastic families. My study was premised on the idea that historic preservation in the 1980s was doing so well because the elite families who funded most of it sought to further institutionalize their dynastic identities by restoring the city to some semblance of what they understood to be their own ancestral milieu. Although the corpus of these family fortunes was held, by the time of my fieldwork, primarily in legal trusts and family foundations, the business capital upon which those fortunes were based, had been accumulated during the Victo-

rian era, the time period being privileged by preservation.¹² No one was restoring the historic shotgun houses now home to the poorest of the poor. No one was restoring the built environment that referenced Galveston's so-called Open-City era—a period preservationists *literally* obliterated from history in their own narrative constructs.¹³ Only the remnants of what was classed as cosmopolitan, turn-of-the-century, Galveston were worth restoring.

None of this focused my attention on the city as "island." My gaze was fully turned upon the emerging entity promoted as "Historic Galveston" and its need to establish its hegemony in the touristic consciousness. This, I knew, meant displacing the Galveston embodied in the island's oft-quoted "32 miles of sandy beaches," but neither of these competing images really spoke to some indigenous island culture. Beaches line the Texas coast, and for that matter, so do other barrier islands like Galveston. They are sunny and sandy, but they are not exotic. They are places where one sooner or later steps barefooted upon tar that has washed ashore from the prolific drilling activity that animates the Gulf of Mexico. Tropical paradise does not enter the mind.¹⁴ Any other registers of islandness are pretty far-fetched or invisible as well. Galveston is home to 60,000 people. It's no clannish or inbred Martha's Vineyard or Nantucket. It may once have been home to a remarkably wealthy populous, but today Galveston is a heterogeneous mix of incomes and ethnicities. The very rich and the very poor live literally cheek by jowl. The local heritage industry finds in that fact something unique and saleable, but to most people passing through on their way to the beach, it is empirical evidence of urban decay rather than some islander sensibility.

Nonetheless, a few months into my fieldwork, the locus of my attention began to shift. Looking back through my journals I can attribute this shift to two sources: one unfolded slowly over the course of my fieldwork and involved the realization that the discourses of islands and natives were ultimately discourses of internal colonialism that sought to both effect and mediate the condition of colonization. The other happened literally in the blink of an eye and helped me to imagine Galveston as colonizable space.

During the summer of 1988, on a flight from Houston to Los Angeles, I decided to browse through *SPIRIT*, Southwest Airlines' monthly magazine. Naturally it was filled with articles and ads about enchanting tourist destinations. Tahiti, Bora Bora, Jaimaica, Raratonga—I casually thumbed through page after page with only passing interest. Then suddenly my heart stopped. What lay before me was a two-page spread featuring a gorgeous panorama of captivating architecture and inviting palm trees set against a sunset rich in orange and lavender

hues. "Imagine a Romantic Island," read the ad. "Kissed by the centuries, hugged by a gently bay and pounding surf . . . a rare and magical place. A turn-of-the-century seaport island in renaissance. . . ."

"Now THAT looks like a proper place for an anthropologist to do research," I said to myself with both surprise and pleasure. Only later did I realize how doubly ironic my momentary reaction to this image and text had been. For this photograph was but a startling view of a familiar place—Galveston Island—where I had by then been engaged in fieldwork for more than a year. Several weeks before, while observing a Galveston Historical Foundation Board of Directors' meeting, I had learned that the Galveston Parks Board was about to launch a \$250,000 "image campaign." Designed to integrate the city's emerging historical entity with its long-standing reputation as a beach and resort destination, I sensed that this campaign marked a watershed of mutual vision and cooperation among the various entities involved in Galveston's self-promotion. I left the meeting anxious to see the artwork and ad copy for this campaign. Still, I was completely unprepared for my first encounter with that \$250,000 image—it evoked in me all the romantic imaginings tourist agencies and airlines hope to plumb when they fill the parameters of our gaze with carefully framed images of island sunsets. Although I wouldn't realize it until some months later, what was effective in evoking that response from me was the visual illusion of temporal and physical circumscription that careful framing of the subject allowed. Beyond the photographer's viewfinder lurked indisputable evidence that the 20th century was alive, if not altogether well, on Galveston Island. But by foregrounding the rooftops of 19th century architecture, even the industrial artifacts which would otherwise bear witness to decaying urbanity faded softly into the pastel sunset, allowing the consumers of that vista to fantasize Galveston as the romantic island the ad suggests it to be. Such visual deceit abounds in the commercial self-promotion of virtually any island destination. What makes such imagery so powerful is not simply the fantasy of unspoiled island beauty, but the unspoken cultural representation that piggy-backs on the island concept: the notion of island *culture* as equally circumscribed and thereby exotic.¹⁵ Ironically, it is Galveston's successful sale of that diffuse notion to tourists and transplants that has fostered the development of a cultural consciousness and distinction in Galveston.

Anthropology has long understood that colonialism is the crucible in which indigenoussness becomes self-conscious fact. What I see happening in Galveston is in some ways a classic response to the colonial encounter. Colonialism has always fostered boundary maintenance—the erection of literal and figurative boundaries, between the colo-

nized and the colonizer, the dark-skinned and the fair-skinned, the natives and the colonials.¹⁶ But what happens when the colonial impulse comes from within, when the colonizing agent is also the colonized? As when Galveston sells itself as the islander (as in cultural) Other? If the concept of prostitution comes to mind, rest assured you are not alone. Islanders, particularly native-islanders, seem to understand the full implication of the act: it may be consensual, but the morning after, it feels an awful lot like rape.

The feminization and sale of the collective cultural self as islander-other is tricky business indeed. It requires on the one hand the marketing of cultural distinction as geosocial boundary so that tourists and residential transplants will sense their breaching of it as marking their entrance into an authentically circumscribed time and space. On the other hand, it also necessitates the difficult and more symbolically complex work of maintaining a barrier between the "self" as colonized indigenous Other and the "self" that is inclusive of the *colonizing* Other.¹⁷ And alas, even these colonials, in their new status as island "natives," must ultimately contend (alongside their indigenous counterparts) with being the Other "toured." Such is the price, and more importantly the confirmation, of living the island life. In an era when the most remote reaches of the earth have been penetrated by airplanes and the Internet, not to mention satellite receptions of "Gilligan's Island" and "Fantasy Island," the creative work symbolic circumscription must achieve is formidable.¹⁸ That Galveston manages to do it at all is a sure sign of gender superiority.

NOTES

1. The fieldwork upon which this paper is based was funded by a predoctoral grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (1989) and by Rice University Fellowships.

2. By way of introduction, Galveston, Texas, is an island-city with a population of about 60,000. Approximately two miles wide and thirty miles long, it is one of seven primary barrier islands that fringe the Gulf of Mexico, between the Texas/Louisiana border and northern Mexico. Located about 50 minutes south of Houston, at the southernmost end of Interstate 45, it is, as some Galvestonians are fond of saying, "on the way to nowhere." During the last half of the 19th century, Galveston ranked second only to New York in terms of per capita wealth. This status, and the distinction of having suffered (in the form of the hurricane of September 8, 1900) the deadliest natural disaster in the history of the nation, remains central to Galveston's historical and cultural sense of self.

3. See Henricka Kuklick's *The Savage Within* for an overview within the British anthropological tradition. Gillian Beer's essays move this discussion

well beyond anthropological discourses of the island. Several sessions at the American Anthropological Association meetings over the course of the last decade have also focused upon the island in anthropological imagining. For instance, Parman in 1989, Castaneda in 1994, and Lape in 1999.

4. Wallace wrote the definitive statement suggesting this perspective, but see Kuklick's article "Islands in the Pacific" for a more historiographical perspective linking natural history's evolution to that of British anthropology.

5. Naturally, this romantic mentalité permeated popular culture as well, as exemplified by the following passage from Hall and Nordhoff:

But one can't be wholly matter of fact in writing of these islands. They are not real in the ordinary sense, but belong, rather, to the realm of the imagination. And it is only in the imagination that you can conceive of your ever having been there, once you are back again in a well-plowed sea track. As for the people, whether native or alien, in order to focus them in a world of reality it is necessary to remember what they said or did; what they ate; what sort of clothing they wore. Otherwise they elude you just as the islands did. (9)

Also see Judith Williamson on the feminization of the "Other" and Cynthia Enloe on gendered colonialism(s). Sherry Ortner's work stands as the classic interpretation of woman as "nature."

6. Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other* and Eric Wolf's *Europe and the Peoples without History* are two important treatments of this issue.

7. See Asad, Crick, and MacCannell.

8. Even today, island sites remain important points of disciplinary reference, particularly as loci for some of the most heated debates about anthropological fieldwork and interpretation. Consider the Margaret Mead/Derek Freeman "controversy" sited on Samoa and the Sahlins/Obeyesekere point-counterpoint regarding Cook's fateful Hawaiian encounter. For further insight into the subjectifying practices of anthropological fieldwork and discourse, see Said's *Orientalism*, the collected essays in *Writing Culture*, edited by James Clifford and George Marcus, as well as commentary in *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, by George Marcus and Michael M.J. Fischer.

9. The cargo cult analogy is from Ken Shelton, Jr., whose essay on the topic was published as an opinion piece in what was at the time an important alternative newspaper on the island. The issue of drawing a higher class of tourist has been an issue for many decades. Galvestonians have institutionalized their vast disdain for day-trippers with the cliché "They come down here with a dirty t-shirt and a five-dollar-bill and never change either one of them!"

10. One can see what is perhaps the most recent example of this on the web site of the Galveston newspaper, specifically the "Special Report" and "Forum" related to a man who called himself "Tim Kingsbury" and moved with ease through elite society, until one day, when he was discovered to be someone else *entirely*. Particularly in the on-line forum related to Kingsbury, one sees the discourse of BOLism and its attendant meanings, as well as the gendered interpretation of his deception as almost a molestation or rape. On the other hand, many islanders clearly sympathized with his plight and continued to embrace him, invoking a different island discourse, one that plays

off the notion that islands have long been places to which one escapes. (Note, as well, the e-mail addresses that utilize the BOI acronym or some other reference to island geography.)

11. Island transplants could also claim to have “sand between their toes,” a status which was often fondly bestowed by natives upon non-natives as a surrogate condition approaching, in its status or value, equivalence to native origin.

12. For a discussion of these family business entities, see George Marcus, “Dynastic Families Among American Business Elites.”

13. See Castaneda, *Preservation and the Cultural Politics of the Past on “Historic Galveston Island.”*

14. If ever there was proof of this fact, it resides in the very successful commercial operation that greets one on the northern end of the island, just as one exits the Galveston Causeway from the Mainland. Here, the Moody Foundation constructed the multi-million dollar “Palm Beach at Moody Gardens,” complete with white-sand barged in from Florida, swaying palm trees, and concrete-graded (i.e., pristine) lagoons. Shortly after Palm Beach opened in the late 1980s, other “tropical” attractions followed, including the glass-encased “Rainforest Pyramid,” which simulates the rainforest environs of Africa, Asia, and South America, complete with key architectural wonders in dormant repose beneath overgrowing vegetation—pre-industrial state societies or “lost cities” the tourist can now stumble upon.

15. Buck, O’Rourke, and Tilley are but a sampling of a huge literature on this theme.

16. See, for instance, Asad, as well as the more recent articles in Pels and Salemink. The work of Anthony Cohen was particularly helpful to me as a lens through which to refract many of the phenomena I was observing in Galveston.

17. Ironically, the more successful BOIs are at creating boundaries between themselves and non-natives, the more legitimate and saleable they make commercial claims to some local islander-otherness. There can be no stronger evidence of this than the glossy brochures and travel columns that advise tourists to keep an eye out for Galveston’s BOIs, as if they were grass-skirted natives who might, at any moment, demonstrate their ambivalence toward outsiders by hurling a verbal spear or breaking into the hula. One need not “tour” the !Kung or travel the Sepik to understand how it is that resistance gets domesticated for commercial consumption.

18. Shot on location on a tropical Indonesian island, the recent television series *Survivor* capitalized on all the attendant stereotypes of beauty, isolation, romance, and bounty in order to stage a series of primal struggles pitting man against man, man against nature, and finally man against woman. Far more interesting than the scripted voyeurism, was the postmodern commentary the show offered to us in the form of the considerable trouble its production necessitated, such that real (actual) life on the island (hotel resorts and a camera crew complete with equipment and their own “camp”) had to be masked from TV viewers who apparently had no trouble suspending their disbelief in order to buy into the fiction.

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