



Review Forum

Reading Suvendrini Perera's Australia and the Insular Imagination

Australia and the Insular Imagination: Beaches, borders, boats, and bodies, Suvendrini Perera, Palgrave Macmillan, New York (2009). vii + 228 pp.; bibliog; index. US \$85.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-0-230-61353-9

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Geography was never intended to be equal

Elaine Stratford

It was Achille Mbembe (2003) who avowed that geography was never intended to be equal. Sustained engagement with Suvendrini Perera's richly evocative, intellectually provocative, and critically important intervention in the borderlands between cultural studies and geography underlines his observation.

Australia and the Insular Imagination will resonate deeply with readers of *Political Geography*, since both are concerned with the complex interrelationships between power and space. Most obviously, Perera's work is about "sea, land, nation, and the spaces between"; it is about "their conjunction in a specific formation, the island"; and, in particular, it is about the ways in which the island configures and shapes "territorial nationalism in Australia, the island-continent" (p. 1). Note the definite article here: this is Australia as monolith: insular, singular, inviolable. Yet, data from *Geoscience Australia* (2010) suggest this island-continent is, in fact, some 8222 islands, islets and rocky outcrops—an archipelago. Of such geographical formations, Baldacchino, Farbotko, Harwood, McMahon, and Stratford (2011, p. 6) note that they are "not essential properties of space but instead are fluid cultural processes, 'abstract relations of movement and rest', dependent on changing conditions of articulation or connection". In many ways, Perera's book is a challenge to the 'monologicality' of the island and an invitation to consider this other, perussual political geography—an archipelagic world. Here, for Perera, may be a "starting point for alternative historical understandings that 'should alleviate those fears that serve to deepen our isolation, and worse, our racist instincts'" (p. 100, following Dunn).

A key justification for focussing on the island is that it has a central strategic role in "the spatiopolitical organization of

territoriality" and performs significant labours "as a form of *geopolitical and territorial ordering*" (p.21). This role is both as presence (island as territory) and as absence (islands excised, territories rewritten). Such matters concern Perera initially in chapter one (Girt by Sea) and chapter two (All the Water in the Rough Rude Sea), and then unfold through the book in compelling fashion.

Three deeply interwoven chapters follow. In chapter three (Bodies, Boats, Borderscapes), Perera looks to those spaces that defy the borderscapes of island-Australia's territory, not least among them the bodies which arrive on boats—Suspected Illegal Entry Vehicles or SIEVs—and which are gravely feared and vilified as contagious and bare life. In chapter four (Tortuous Dialogues), and mindful of Foucault's biopower and biopolitics, Perera extends these Agambenian notions and works through Mbembe's ideas of necropolitics by reference to the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004; to dangerous geographies, disaster and the sublime; and to practices that order the life and health of populations. Island-Australia's position relative to the arc of insecurity is the subject of chapter five (The Gulliver Effect). Here, Perera interrogates the fear of small things—an under-developed archipelagic northern 'shatterbelt' of political instability and risk which includes Australia's own Northern Territory and particular Indigenous peoples; quarantine threats from tropical microorganisms; and illegally moving asylum seekers—and is concerned with their collective invasive or contagious effects and the use to which they are put in inscribing differences between and within.

With various insights from these chapters in play, Perera then focuses on the war on terror in chapter six (Our Patch), deploying the horizon, "a term signifying that which is at the limits, the very endpoint of the possibility of representation ... threshold and border" (p.114). She asks how "does [island-Australia's colonizing] appetite to *take in* the horizon shape the imaginative and affective borders of the island-nation and its contemporary maps of the region in a period of renewed imperial aspiration, the global war on terror?" (p.114). Moreover, Perera extends the horizon's analytical purchase to a consideration of the Northern Territory

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Intervention of 2007; then—via sweeping ‘reforms’ to health, socio-economic and land-title arrangements—the Australian Government interceded in Indigenous settlements deemed dysfunctional in ways she sees as paralleling its engagements in the Pacific among ‘failing’ neighbours.

In chapter seven Perera brings these diverse interrogations ‘home’ to the populous suburbs of island-urban-Australia’s iconic city of Sydney. This chapter, *A Pogrom on the Beach*, is concerned with the “effaced geographies of violence” (p.140): here Perera’s foci include Botany Bay—site of Captain James Cook’s 1770 landing, and Redfern—an inner-city suburb with large numbers of Indigenous people. The culminating point of this chapter is to expose diverse anxieties. In previous chapters such angst was mapped (as spaces of abjection, displacement, loss, bare life, contagion, vilification and terror colliding with spaces of colonial hubris, arrogance, distain, paternalism, and fear). Here it manifests as certain and stark ‘geographies of anger’ (after Appadurai) in race riots on Cronulla Beach—known as a heartland of white Christian and Anglo-Celtic sentiments, and within the same Shire as Botany Bay.

Throughout, Perera acknowledges the diverse labours performed by the island and the island-continent as forms and figures that have specific historico-spatial trajectories, but their effects in the present are her main concern. Accordingly, Perera recognizes island-Australia as a “product of certain foundational forgettings, as well as of specific political and imaginative choices, identifications, and ascriptions” (p.12). With continuous and considered reference to the island form and the logic of insularity, Perera seeks to explore “the dramas played out on Australia’s oceans, coastlines, and beaches, and the places, boats, and bodies that shaped its variable borderscapes in the first decade of the current millennium” (p.4). By means of creative and critical analysis of beaches, borders, boats, and bodies—the four elements that constitute the subtitle of the book, Perera is also deeply committed to mapping and understanding the “contemporary geopolitics of the war on terror” (p.1); the “historical imaginaries, national institutions, and geopolitical technologies” that produce island-Australia (p.5); and especially “the effects of Australia’s self-understanding as its own type of ‘insular case’—that it, its particular claim to racial-geographical exceptionalism” (p.11). Perera’s work to interrogate this last claim produces a highly disquieting space in the “intersection between historical geoimaginaries and contemporary geopolitics” (p.20).

Following Rogoff and Schneider (2008), Perera’s chief aim is to invoke forms of ‘productive anticipation’ to unsettle and unravel island-Australia’s racial-geographic exceptionalism. These are deeply institutionalized regimes and practices of exclusion and omission founded, at least in part, on ontological dread—a constitutive fear of allegedly empty (that is, violently untenanted) lands, whose insular antidote has been the “orderly form of the island” (p.20). Noting Gillis’ (2004) idea that islands are good to think with, but not uncritical of the ‘master metaphor’ he invokes, Perera underscores that the island has a key role in geopolitical and territorial ordering.

In the final analysis, as part of her project to disturb and disentangle island-Australia’s racial-geographic occlusions, Perera seeks to rewrite the island-continent and its geographies as “an act of ideological unmaking” and “an attempt to intervene in the ‘moral gap’ produced by territorial, and terrestrial, fundamentalisms” (p.32). Hence the sustained emphasis on, and eventual and concluding return to, the ocean, beach, coastline, and border—geographical sites in, and upon, and through which Perera identifies the repeated avowal and demarcation of the unequal geographies, boundaries, and contours of the island-nation. For her, as for many others, Australia’s geography is constitutive of an insidiously fearful national identity politics and the geo-body of the island is its plot, rationale and “ultimate justification” (p.162). These are matters upon which the rest of this review forum now focuses.

Monstrous symmetries: Australia’s alignment of space and nation

Elizabeth McMahon

Australia and the Insular Imagination offers searing insight into the geographical imaginary of the island-continent-nation-state of Australia. Specifically, Suvendrini Perera examines the interconnected operations of Australia’s involvement in global events in the twenty-first century, including Iraq and Afghanistan, and its renewed hysteria regarding the policing of its borders. For Perera, Australia is *in* but not *of* the Pacific region and, accordingly, needs to continually define (mutable) boundaries against its neighbours.

Perera has been a constant voice of protest regarding Australia’s refugee policy since the 1990s, in which a series of key conflicts focused the potency of Australia’s ‘insular imagination’ and its attendant xenophobia. The first half of the book focuses on crises concerning asylum seekers. Asylum seekers were demonized and misrepresented—even to the extent of being accused of killing their children—to create the fear that so often ensures re-election of an incumbent government. This racialized anxiety spilled over onto a violent and protracted dispute on one of Sydney’s iconic beaches in 2005, which attracted international condemnation. The second half of the book focuses on Australia’s involvement in humanitarian activities in the region. Here Perera critiques Australia’s beneficence and identifies a paradoxical operation whereby the assistance given to its neighbours in fact serves to define more sharply its separation from them.

Perera argues convincingly that Australia’s policies need to be understood in the context of its geopolitical imaginary of insularity as it is played out on the four sites of the subtitle: *Beaches, Borders, Bodies, Boats*. While Perera’s focus is resolutely contemporary, the study provides historical and ideological contexts by which Australia has been shaped and mapped. Chapter Six, for instance, titled ‘Our Patch: Racial Horizons and the War on Terror’, emphasizes events after 9/11. Perera sets out the chapter discussion as focused on:

the new mappings, dispositions, and dispersions of sovereign power in Australia post-2001, a date that marks not only the beginning of the global war on terror but, in Australian politics, the centenary of the federation of white Australia, the turning away by force of the *Tampa* refugees, and the initiation of the “Pacific Solution” (p.114).

These ‘new mappings’ are historically located in the politics of the twenty-first century but are presented as historically determined by an unbroken set of practices and a teleology of colonial possession. Hence the chapter opens with an account given by a celebrated figure of the colonial period, Samuel Griffith (1845–1920), a progressive premier of the Queensland colony and one of the architects of Australian Federation in 1901. Griffith reports almost incidentally that Queensland had successfully annexed the islands in the Torres Strait but failed in the same venture to annex New Guinea just to its north. Perera connects colonial Queensland’s acquisitional project with the present time when she asks:

How does this appetite to take in the horizon shape the imaginative and affective borders of the island-nation and its contemporary maps of the region in a period of renewed imperial aspiration, the global war on terror? What are the processes of spatialisation, the imaginative geographies and the territorial teleologies at work in a war that, through active, racially marked investment, emotional and material, of the state, remaps Australia’s horizons? (p.113).

As Perera's analysis makes clear, Australia has continued to acquire and discard the island objects on the horizon, which are at once coveted and dispensable.

These questions and teleological maps are fundamental to Island Studies, which has approached the West's possessive gaze on the island from a range of disciplines, and mapped its various realizations in colonialism. Yi-Fu Tuan's observation on the island gaze has become axiomatic in the field: "The island seems to have a tenacious hold on the human ... But it is in the imagination of the Western world that the island has taken strongest hold" (1998[1974]: 18). Equally foundational—and challenging to the assumed universality of island meanings—is Epeli Hau'ofa's argument that the Pacific peoples live in a sea of islands, a space defined by the interflow of land and water rather than by their opposition (Hau'ofa, 1993). Studies such as that by Philip Steinberg (2001) on cultural constructions of oceans further challenge the absolute difference between sea and land that underpins the Western island imaginary.

Perera's study identifies these different understandings of land and water, stasis and mobility, in operation and in conflict in the Australian context. Her examination of the Torres Strait islands identifies a history of flow and movement that was curtailed by the colonial imperative to delineate and control space. Perera quotes Paul Battersby:

Until Federation [in 1901] heralded stricter demarcation of political and cultural space ... the waters separating Australia from the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago were a vast lake across which roamed adventurers, migrants, guest workers and tourists from Europe and Asia (Battersby, 2004, in Perera, 2009: 4).

Perera later considers the naming of this space by the colonial navigator Matthew Flinders, who called the area the Malay Road. She writes:

Malay Road is the marking of a passage, a highway in the sea, linking two territorialities even as they are being written on the map as distinct continents, Asia and Australia. Malay Road: a designated route that organizes and delimits an ocean of exchanges (p.24).

Thus this moment of naming, which recognizes and translates a form of mobility into its own terms, is also the moment of solidification and possession. The colonial mapping of distinctions between territories and between land and sea disallows these flows, the commerce, the neighbourliness and the hospitality of this area. In its place are the static borders of the perceived containment of islands, their seeming promise of mastery for the desiring gaze and, as Gilles Deleuze asserts, the related illusion of a possible alignment between the human and geography: a space that contains the ego exactly (Deleuze, 2004: 10–11). As Godfrey Baldacchino (2005: 247) has observed, if you ask people to draw an island from an aerial view most would draw a circular shape on a page "without much detail other than being surrounded by water". Islands can be contained on a single page, they are imagined as fitting within the available space. But as Libby Robin (2007) has noted, if you ask an Australian to draw Australia they, too, will represent the continent as an island and misrecognize this image of comprehension as a form of mastery.

The perfect alignment between geography and nation has been instantiated into Australian nationalist discourse in terms of its singular status as being the only continent on Earth of only one nation. Meaghan Morris has discussed this alignment in relation to the pronouncement of Australia's first prime minister, Edmond Barton: "For the first time in history, we have a nation for a continent and a continent for a nation" (in Morris, 1996: 58). Libby Robin (2007) has also noted that one of Australia's

foundational history texts by Russell Ward is entitled *A Nation for a Continent*.

The confusion and slippage between Australia as an island and a continent is chiasmic or mutually constitutive, so that qualities proper to the island in the Western imaginary have become grafted or superimposed onto the continent and *vice versa* (McMahon, 2010). Australia's unique status as the island-continent becomes, in one manifestation at least, a monstrous hybrid of monolithic insularity. It is the paradox of Australia's status as an island-continent that preoccupies Perera's account of its peculiar form of endemic insularity. Perera locates the manner in which this rhetoric has become naturalized when she writes of the role of Australian maps in public buildings:

These images, regardless of whether or not they include the state of Tasmania, or the hundreds of other smaller islands around the coastline, register as a representation of *the* island nation, a singular territorial body girt by sea (p.10).

The pride in a unique alignment between geography and the nation state is instilled in the kind of holographic or magical chant that Australian children learn—that they live in the world's largest island and world's smallest continent (McMahon, 2003). Perera picks up on this figure to relate Australia's sense of singularity in relation to its insularity. It is as if, in a fulfilment of the illusion Deleuze identifies, Australia constructs itself as a perfect alignment of nation, geography and people, and there is no room for anyone else. It is a tautology of completeness in and of itself. To borrow a phrase from Eve Sedgwick (1993) in a very different context, island/continent/nation constitutes a 'lockstep of unanimity', a figure wherein a range of hegemonic discourses line up as one.

Not least of Perera's achievement in this study is her presentation of a geopolitical spatial imaginary that has been itself cast into a littoral domain of the periphery. In this way she augments and remaps the body of existing work on the spaces of Australia's imaginary from a range of disciplines and discourses, and their critical revision over the last two decades. The consideration of imaginative geography is the foundation stone of my own field of Australian literary studies, although this has been variously conceived over time. In its inception and hence in its canon, Australian literature—and the critical discourse around it—has privileged the site of the 'Bush' as representative of Australian experience and identity. The bush serves as a form of the colonial frontier, of the pastoral saga and the georgic lyric of rural labour, the narrative of the acquisition of land. From the colonial period onward this (imagined) site has been posited as representative of what is properly and distinctively Australian. Other key locations, such as the tropics and the desert of the continental interior, have assumed centre stage at various junctures, usually coinciding with new-found resources and economic drives, as Robin (2007) and Haynes (1998) amongst others have documented.

Another of these imaginary sites, which is occasionally focused by the national imaginary and of key relevance to Perera's study, is the island. Islands have been to the fore since the War on Terror, as they were in the period of World War II when the whole of Australia was perceived as an island besieged. Australia's islands have been constructed and reconstructed along conventional island lines. Tasmania, for instance, which was settled in 1803 as a convict colony, initially thrived on this free labour in conjunction with productive agriculture and mineral exploits. That is, from the outset it has operated according to the island trope of a plentiful utopia and cerebral dystopia. Until recently—and even now to some extent—Tasmania has occupied the role of the sink of Australia's imaginary, its perceived insularity acting as a kind of supplement to the idea of an expansive mainland involved in the flows of modernity. Accordingly, the literature of and on Tasmania has

re-iterated its pre-modernity, ascribing a regional authenticity in contrast to the evacuated no-space of the modern city. It is also often mistakenly left off the map of the country.

More recently Christmas Island, an Australian territory in the Indian Ocean but closer to Indonesia than Australia, has assumed a high value precisely for its distance from the continental mainland, and has become one of the main sites where asylum seekers are detained. (As I wrote the sentences above, the Australian Government announced that it will transfer 500 asylum seekers from Christmas Island to Tasmania to a new detention centre, thus reprising Tasmania's colonial carceral role.) Once again, the deliberate insularity of the prison is grafted onto the island as a natural alignment of geography and culture.

Perera's study makes important interventions into the analysis of Australia's spatial imaginary and its connection with historical and political events. First, as I have outlined above, is the addition of a rhetorical operation that has hitherto stayed under the radar of analysis precisely because the focus of non-Indigenous Australians has been on what was considered *inside* the boundaries of a new place. Perera shows us that the boundary itself is a trope of insularity. The implications of this finding are highly significant. Second, the work allows us to see that all of the sites of the Western imaginary in Australia—the bush, the desert the tropics, the island—are, in fact, tropes of insularity. Once the border is exposed as insular, the other sites fall like a pack of cards. Such an understanding enables us to see and disentangle the interconnected discourses at the imagined centre of the nation.

Dangerous geographies, rising tides

Carol Farbotko

Australia and the Insular Imagination tracks certain rationales of whiteness and imperialism as shaping and shaped by ground/water dialectics. The opening sentence of this important book poses the question “what if the ground beneath our feet turns out to be sea?” (p.1). The text goes on to explore, in intricate detail, the idea that what constitutes and defines Australia's political geographies in the early years of the twenty-first century is not terrestrial ground, but ocean and coastal zone. Suvendrini Perera convincingly, and heartbreakingly, maps nationalistic and state violence as an immediacy of the coast—the interception of boats carrying asylum seekers, for example, and beach race riots. But Perera also shows how such violence is further enabled by, and enabling of, more insidious forms of insularity, like water trickling between stones, normalizing problematic practices such as border militarization, disaster capitalism and institutionalized discrimination against indigenous Australians. This is a set of imaginative geographies that soars well beyond the limitations of Said's linear, yet still important, original theory. We see that ‘Australia’ imagines itself through tsunami-ravaged coasts, Timor oilfields, and off-shore detention centres; imaginings refracted through suburban backyards, dubious patches and seas crowded with bodies onto Bali, the Solomon Islands, West Papua, Sydney's Redfern and beyond.

And yet, in a book that minutely examines the shifting coastlines and ebbing tides of contemporary Australian insular politics, rising sea levels induced by climate change are a noticeable absence. What of the various politico-geographical struggles over coastal territory under threat from rising sea levels? Exploration of the ways in which waterfront property owners in Australia and inhabitants of neighbouring low-lying island-nations face a Pacific Ocean that is increasing in volume would add another dimension to the already complex watery political geographies of its pages. Rather than reading the absence of climate change as a shortcoming of

Beaches, borders, boats and bodies, however, I see it as an invitation to examine further the political geographies of climate change. The book provides powerful tools to analyse anew the political geographies of a warming world, from a perspective that centralizes the coastal zone. It is these possibilities that I would like to start to explore here, to begin to consider the effect of rising tides on the political spaces of Australia and its neighbours.

Some seaside residents in Australia—often among the most wealthy—are already rowing boats through their Australian backyards during king tides. Such people are rarely imagined as climate refugees. Rather, the rising tide imperative in Australia is framed in terms of asset loss. In contrast, for citizens of small Pacific islands, a climate refugee discourse has been externally imposed. It is a subjectivity resisted by the island populations named as climate refugees: alternative adaptation strategies are being voiced by, planned and put into practice by them. However, the refugee discourse has become dominant, and now is somewhat self-sustaining. The more that climate refugees are positioned by Australian politicians, journalists and environmentalists as needing rescue, the greater the imperative to ‘save’ them as victims. Alternatively, their rights to assistance are denied, and blame is placed with the victims—for presuming to inhabit a lesser geography (Barnett & Campbell, 2010). Central to the reproduction of this discourse in Australia is the question of processing islanders across Australia's borders as climate refugees. Small islands, apparently, do not count as assets. They seem to matter only if they disappear, as irrefutable proof of climate change for a sceptical audience. Tuning into these narratives, it seems clear that rising sea levels are ripe for analysis as shaping, and indeed being shaped by, Australia's insular political geographies. Since political refugees and climate refugees—real or imagined—are closely enfolded through discourses of security, the spatialities connecting these crises need to be illuminated. How is climate change spatialized into treasured territories such as sovereign ground? How do some territories become more worthy of protection from climate change damage than others? And how might climate scepticism and the logic of insularity be linked? It is not unheard of for climate campaigners in Australia, for example, to see green potential in mobilizing a climate refugee ‘threat’, to prompt Australians into action on climate change. There is much to unpack here.

In Perera's volume, the chapter devoted to dangerous geographies—an analysis of Australia's response to the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004—speaks most closely to these issues. Perera's idea of a dangerous geography draws on Bankoff's (2002) critique of vulnerability discourse and Agamben's (1998) notion of bare life to demonstrate how inhabitants of the ‘lucky country’ of Australia became distinguished, by aid and journalism, from the hapless inhabitants of tsunami-ravaged Aceh. The chapter draws on Klein's (2007) shock doctrine to consider the framing of disaster by spectators, the ordering of life by the witnessing of death, and the appropriation of disaster by capitalism, as governments and corporations partner to prey on populations shocked by disaster and implement plans for economic and social change that would be resisted in less fraught circumstances.

The rising Pacific is similarly a dangerous geography, mapped differently on different sides of the Australian border. The logics of dangerous geographies map subjecthood to an apparent separation from the forces of nature; that is, only Western subjects, equipped with reason, appear to have the ability to tame nature. Drawing on Mbembe's necropolitics, Perera problematizes “an Australia constituted as separate from the bare life that inhabits dangerous geographies, represented as incapable of mastering or overcoming its own environment (“nature”); consequently it lacks self-sovereignty and thus subjecthood” (p.81). Climate refugees, like other populations designated as bare life, are imagined as only

coming from *somewhere else*, on the other side of the border. Such imaginings are bolstered by persistent repetition of almost identical headlines insisting that the first climate refugees have been ‘discovered’ somewhere in the Pacific islands. As the Pacific Ocean expands in volume, once again Australia is, as Perera describes it, “in, but not of, the region” (p.13).

The disappearing Pacific island is yet another “theatre of sublime trauma as representational and affective spectacle, [with] the western subject positioned as both spectator and actor: a benevolent interventionist” (p.79)—here in the form of the climate refugee campaigner. Thus, Australia is implicated in a racialized mission, to be a generous neighbour and open its borders to those named as climate refugees, in the process denying more complex subjectivities, and a future more open to the possibility of self-determined physical and emotional safety. The imagined trajectories of climate refugees, who cannot (yet) be found in detention centres or boats headed towards Australian shores, form both a strange projection from, and an ominous shadow of, the politics of asylum seekers in Australia. Inhabitants of low-lying islands are not drowning *en masse*, yet there is an anticipation, a disturbingly performative expectation, that they will do so in the near future, like boat people before them.

In the present, islanders are pragmatically adding climate change to the challenges of daily life, even while they are tuned into the global discourse on their fate with fear and anger. Australia’s government radio station is prominent in the region’s airwaves, and internet access is reaching even the most remote islands. Pacific islanders are acutely aware of the ways in which asylum seekers are constructed and received in the larger neighbouring state, so it is little wonder they are resisting the so-called protection of refugee status. Meanwhile, leaders of small island states invoke climate change as a form of terrorism against their populations. A consideration of these political geographies would help us understand better links between the ‘war on terror’, with which the book is intimately concerned, and the ‘climate crisis’, which is not mentioned.

Rising tides are implicated in configurations of changing rationales of whiteness, imperialism and capitalism even more complex than Perera suggests, because taking rising sea levels into account necessitates a consideration of new shifts in the politics of nature. Climate change vulnerabilities demand alternative considerations of the excesses of capitalism—no longer does our pollution affect only our own lands. Global media corporations, meanwhile, have been quick to realize that climate refugee stories sell news. If small Pacific islands are ‘litmus-tests’ of climate change, they are also litmus tests of new forms of disaster capitalism. The forces of capital seem to be responsive not only to the traditionally understood immediacy of disasters, but to the slow, incremental aspects of the ‘climate crisis’. For instance, small Pacific islands are being sold to Australians as new frontier tourist destinations, places to visit in the coming years *as they sink*. With appeals to Western myths of Atlantis and dreams of lost utopias, low-lying islands are being repackaged as sinking holiday paradises, island disasters for consumption (Farbotko, 2010).

That the seemingly tired trope of the island paradise has triumphed again is testimony to its malleability in colonialist projects. From imperialism to mass tourism, the island paradise continues to be of service to Western political geographies, parts of which are geared towards the long lineages of Pacific mobility and seafaring prowess: it was forbidden to sail traditional ocean-going vessels during colonial occupation and many seafaring skills were almost lost; today, poor pay and conditions mark the lives of Pacific islanders employed as commercial seamen by global shipping companies and as seasonal workers in Australia. This ongoing project of denying or appropriating Pacific islander connections

across their sea of islands (Hau’ofa, 1993), in the interests of what Perera calls an Australian ‘cordon sanitaire’ (p.29), is now being reinforced again as Pacific people are denied their status as agents of their own, likely highly mobile, destinies in a warming world. Yet there are also myriad ways agency is reclaimed, a Pacific cultural revival of ancient navigational and sailing skills being just one example. Here is a fruitful area for critical climate change-oriented research in political geography, an attempt to further Perera’s call to “insert new border practices, itineraries of movement, and new relationalities” into geopolitics, in an effort to question “the static space of the Westphalian map of states” (p.71).

Further, with the spectre of climate change as anthropogenic, the ways in which nature is enrolled in projects of political violence is also changing. Climate change in the Pacific is not only a form of violence rendered by the industrialized world on distant others, it is also a project of self-inflicted violence that is being persistently internally denied. Climate scientists might, with just as much accuracy, state of each ‘natural’ disaster: “we cannot with certainty attribute the event to climate change” and “we cannot with certainty say that climate change had no effect”. The political potential for spinning these statements into opposing truth claims is realized frequently in Australia’s climate change politics. The contestation enables not only a denial of political violence committed against others by means of diffuse pollution and (only formerly unwitting) manipulation of climate, but of violence on the Australian nation itself. Cyclone Yasi and the Brisbane floods of early 2011 revealed some of the internal contradictions of this denial, with politicians and the public calling for a disaster fund in the aftermath, while wavering on carbon taxation for years previous.

Perera engages with the work of several artists in her book, including Richard Lewer, Kate Durham, and Guan Wei, both to inform and demonstrate her analysis. In a similar fashion, I would like to invoke the work of artist Tim Silver, whose Tuvaluan Project presents the low-lying islands of Tuvalu [as] a watery barometer for rising sea levels resulting from global warming (Keehan, 2008: np). Central to Silver’s work is a self-portrait of the artist, an Australian, as a castaway cannibal on the ‘disappearing islands’ of Tuvalu. By means of this graphic and disturbing image, Silver not only invites but forces a confrontation of the invisible workings of industrialization on atmosphere and ocean as a relation of cannibalism. Silver insists that, as the Tuvaluan ‘island paradise’ disappears, industrial capitalism can no longer escape itself. Confronting the issue of capitalism as the ultimate consumer of itself remains an urgent task for understanding the spaces of the ‘West’ in an era of climate crisis. I imagine Suvendrini Perera might agree.

Material geographies of contingent insularity and liminality

Mark Jackson

Zahra El Ibrahimy was buried on 15 February 2011, the same day that Suvendrini Perera’s book arrived on my desk via inter-library loan. She was one of twelve people interred that day in Sydney; all twelve had died together. Zahra drowned with her mother, Zman, her brother, Nzar, and approximately 45 other asylum seekers from Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Kurdistan, when their Indonesian fishing boat wrecked in rough seas on the rocky coast of Christmas Island. She was 8 months old.

A territory of Australia, Christmas Island lies some 1500 miles northwest of Western Australia’s coast and 220 miles south of Jakarta. For 35 years, the island has been the site of numerous asylum landings. Today the island’s privately run detention centre on Phosphate Hill holds over 800 asylum seekers who, because of their arrival in Australia, but outside of a prescribed migration

zone, have been refused refugee status by the Australian government. Zahra's father, Madian, a man in precisely this position, was already on Christmas Island when his daughter died. No doubt he knew nothing of his family's deaths until some time after the event; he had been in a corporate detention cell since arriving on the island similarly, though safely, in April of 2010.

The boat disaster in which Madian's family died is referred to by the Australian government and military as SIEV 221. SIEV stands for Suspected Illegal Entry Vehicle. With an extra 'e', 'to sieve' refers to the process of sifting the finer from the coarser, the latter of which are either reprocessed or discarded. Madian's security surveillance and the detention centre in which he lives are operated, as are six other similar centres in Australia, on a for-profit basis by a British based multi-national service company called Serco. Serco profits from SIEVs and their effects of reprocessing and discarding. In the first quarter of 2011, Serco's profits rose 21% on 2010 figures to £214 million; the company has an AU\$700 m-plus contract with the Australian government to detain, process and house the many asylum seekers who arrive on its many shores. There have been numerous SIEV tragedies; Madian's family simply died in one of the more recent. Serco will continue to exploit future desperate arrivals, and future tragedies. In a performance review dated 2 March 2011, the company identified increasing market growth opportunities in Australasian immigration, security and rehabilitation services (Serco, 2010).

Two months after his daughter's death, Madian was flown to Sydney for Zahra's funeral. After the funeral, Madian was flown back to detention on Christmas Island, where the bodies of his wife and son have yet to be found. Now suicidal, he remains enmeshed within, and a product of, the territorial effects of the chillingly named 'Pacific Solution', an Australian government policy to keep unwanted migrants off of its mainland and in its archipelagic peripheries. One irony, of course, is that Australia too is an island; 'mainland' is a management strategy used to proscribe domestic and neighbouring spaces. Another irony is that Zahra and her Iraqi family were fleeing a war brought to them by Australia and a wider 'coalition of the willing' in the name of democracy, freedom, and human rights. A third irony is that although the Pacific Solution officially ended in 2007, its effects, intensities and governmentalities, buoyed through the play of insular and territorial logics, continues.

Before being forcibly moved by a Serco security guard onto the bus for his journey back to the detention centre on Christmas Island, Madian approached the media present at his daughter's funeral. Grief-stricken, he exclaimed, "We believe Australia is a democracy and there would be respect for human rights and asylum-seeker rights. (Our) treatment is very bad. It's worse than a Third World country". Madian seemingly had good reason to believe in Australian and first world democracy. He was bombed by Australia and others in the name of democracy and human rights, and fled to the country which claimed these as constitutional principles. Tragically, it took the death of his entire family to realize that human rights are but the originary inscription of the nation-state on natural, naked life (Agamben, 2000). Like the state, rights are an originary fiction; indeed, they are but one story through which the state inscribes itself, and thus emerges as a parasitical body in its own right. No body, no state; no naked life, no secondary effect. What is crucial for critical understanding is how these fictions are wrought in their material particularities. Perera's book provides this means in the contemporary Australian and global war on terror context.

After concluding *Australia and the Insular Imagination*, I immediately went online to read more about SIEVs, solutions, and the effects of antipodean logics of insular exclusion. It was then that I learnt about the coincidence of the book's arrival with Zahra and

her family, and about multi-national private service companies which operate asylum detention centres to profit from the bare and accursed life (*homo sacer*) which is expunged only to be killed by anyone and everyone (unscrupulous Indonesian human traffickers, multi-national service companies, Australian tax-payers, nations of the willing, borders of refusal). Indeed, as Perera writes, we are all mired in the insular politics of productive anticipation which require us to produce and inhabit a series of fictions complicit with Zahra and her family's deaths (p.11). And then I wept in my office with rage and sadness.

It is not often that an academic text provokes such a response. Suvendrini Perera's book predates the 2010 Christmas Island tragedy by many months. Its careful, articulate and inventive analyses of the geographical and political technologies that depend upon, and bring into being, island grammars of inclusion and exclusion are key to understanding the neo-colonial continuities which render and reproduce Australia and its wider geopolitical resonances. Perera makes it her task to explore, in a series of intimately connected essays, the human and non-human materialities through which the inscription of the Australian state and its racial-geographical exceptions are manifest. The strength of her analysis is that she reads the material geographies of contingent insularity and liminality, rather than monological singularity, into how Australia imagines and aspires itself to territorial exceptionalism (as do its insulating parent states, chief among them, Great Britain, but also, after the war on terror, the United States) (p.11). And as her subtitle suggests, these particularities are the interplay of beaches, bodies, boats and borders. The book is oriented to reading through these emergent and flexible productions such that we might entertain how to "mix different desires as ingredients" to forming a new and "coming politics" (Agamben, 2000).

If *Australia and the Insular Imagination* explores the geographies, politics and materialities which enable how the fresh hell of Madian and his globally networked enmeshment emerges from and for contemporary Australia and its wider geopolitics, then at the centre of Perera's analysis lies the "topos of the island in the geopolitical order of western modernity" (p.164). Yet, what makes her research engaging and this book unique is that Perera begins not with the supposed terrestrial solidity that founds the imaginative geography of the island-continent as grounded, immovable, singular, enclosed, and thus, as legitimate—an order assumed from a colonial epistemology of *terra firma* nation-building. She begins rather with *terra Australis infirma*, a motile, shifting, contingent and watery foundation whose territorializing flexibility emplaces and articulates contemporary geo-embodied effects and affects in surprising and critically important ways for unpacking current geopolitical and ideological formations. Enrolling Brathwaite's 'tidalectics', Mbembe's 'necropolitics', and Hau'ofa's postcolonial island epistemologies, Perera begins with coasts, water, tides, beaches and other liminal spaces so as to address the naturalized ideologies which accrue in orthodox territorialities, those territorialities whose "imposed or apparent stabilities ... cover over internal fissures and aporias" (p.99). Unhinging the stability effects of supposed island coherence, Perera writes, the book takes "as its subject those sites where the ideology of the insular is most invisible because it is felt and experienced as utterly natural: the ocean, the beach, the coastline" (p.2). Addressing these liminalities, she argues for a labile logic of contrapuntally constituted insularity (p.5) to contextualize the emergent disciplinary technologies and imaginaries which continue to sustain Australia's often violent territorialities (p.14).

Perera's book ranges over natural everyday, the very everyday we take for granted as beyond refugee politics, nationalist ideology and territorial discipline. In engaging chapters on Australian beach culture and virulent nationalism, island NIMBY-ism and border-scaping, a South Pacific arc of excision, exceptionalism and

accumulation, and the links between island topographies, neoliberalization, terror and disasters, our geopolitical enmeshment within the geographies of intermingling exclusionary spaces and the racial definition of homeland subjects is brought home in intimate ways. To my own shame as a Northern colonial subject, much of what Perera presents was, in its specifics, new. While I had heard distantly of SIEVs, a Pacific Solution, and beach pogroms, Perera's book reveals how their horror and virulence is predicated through the political enrolment of island materialities into insular geographies of contemporary modernity.

However, the real value of *Australia and the Insular Imagination* lies for me in how it opens conceptual, political and methodological doors to understanding the labile forms of contemporary geopolitical materialisms. These openings reveal both the strengths of, and perhaps a weakness in, the book. One focus for island studies today, as with most disciplines, is the question of climate change. Islands, naturally, are frangible entities in the context of rising waters; but they are also emergent properties of wider material shifts. Take, for instance, the geopolitics of the global North and Arctic regions. Revealing island topographies, multi-national negotiations around borders, ocean shipping, and Indigenous life ways are all central to the problematic assemblage of ice, resources, sea levels, territorial access and geographical convergence at the top of our global sphere. Perera's book provides an exemplary application of conceptual grammars necessary for thinking about emergent material archipelagos or assemblages (ice, land, seabeds, animals, people, etc) which, now tenantable land, form increasingly for us in the West an ontological problem. Is an Arctic revealing-through-melting exposing what Perera refers to as an 'ontological dread'? How will we negotiate its subordination? We have until now rationalized its space due to rubrics of inaccessibility, waste, and otherness. Now though, island forms, and their material intersects will be central to how we territorialize through material disappearance and reappearance. Networked materialisms are thus key to the political agencies. Bringing together the political geographies which Perera draws from (Agamben, Agnew, Brathwaite, Kaplan, Rajaram, Rogoff, Raszack, Schneider, Taussig) and reading them in what is increasingly within political theory called 'new materialism' or 'vital materialism' (for example Bennett, 2010; Braun & Whatmore, 2010; Coole & Frost, 2010) would extend epistemological claims to the more radical onto-epistemological folds which are lurking in the background of Perera's text. One benefit of such labours would be to enrol the present island topographies which are the subject of Perera's analysis to the wider network geographies of hybrid human/non-human politics, and thus to more radical questions of otherness. If, quoting as she does Rogoff, geography is partly "disseminated by cultural fantasies of otherness" (2000: 164), could we take inspiration from Perera's skilful conceptual and methodological weaving and extend the labile critique to a postcolonial ecology, which, as such, deconstructs the human territorial centring of ecology itself? If beaches, boats and coasts are epistemic agents, as surely they are, are they also political agencies, and need to be treated as such? Would extending the more radical ontological claim, as Perera seems hesitant to do, help or hinder the political geographies of territoriality and exclusion? I rather think they would help and, indeed, these new materialisms themselves would do well to reach out to the rigorous critical politics Perera invokes so as not to risk the perception of overly theoretical alienation.

A second domain to which Perera's work provides itself as exemplary is that of addressing the mother island(s) from which Australia's exclusionary logics were born, that of Great Britain. At one point in the book, Perera refers to the British island case as more complex than the antipodean case. No doubt it is. But in my view, contemporary immigration politics in the UK is crying out

for just such an analysis as the one Perera invokes; too often it seems to return to the epistemologies of *terra firma* and enclosed singularity in conceptualizing nationalism and its others. The UK's present imperatives of national security are wrought within neoliberal logics and assimilationist pressures, and, as such, produce new spaces of racial fear and danger (p.143). These influences are the direct result of insular territorialities reproduced through social policies of privately sourced detention and means-testing, but also through popular representations of Englishness and nationalism. Witness the recent the exchange between the writer and producer of a popular television serial, *Midsomer Murders*, and the claim that the whiteness of the cast and story lines reflect the realities of English village life: "English villages don't involve ethnic minorities". This is an extension of the insular logic by which, we are told, islands do not need oceans.

And this is why thinking island spaces is so productive for contemporary political geographies; territoriality, governmentality, rights and bodies are all produced through the mingling of conceptual and material porosities. Perera's book is an exemplary series of essays, and pushes us to recognize the critical significance of contingent conceptual forms for thinking contemporary politics, matter and space. While it arrived via inter-library loan, we now have two copies on order, and it has already woven itself into my undergraduate and postgraduate curricula for next year.

Our third-year students are now about to graduate with their degrees in geography. They will have been schooled, as Rogoff defines geography, in "knowledge underpinned by nationalism, sustained by the regulating bureaucracies of the state and disseminated through cultural fantasies of otherness" (2000, as quoted in Perera, 2009: 164). One of them I know is pleased to have studied hard and well, and is about to begin a graduate job with Serco. Perera reminds us of our responsibility to show the political geographies of Zahra, Madian, and the many nameless who circulate the globe and by doing so enable our insular disciplinary and political fictions. And then I will show her that, a couple of weeks ago on 18 March 2011, the detainees—may be with Maidan amongst them—rioted in protest at their overcrowding and oppressive conditions. Their protest indicates that there *are* ingredients (all around us!) by which we may desire to live with one another; indeed, these imaginaries are products of always already porous and changing folds of becoming, wherein border ideologies of inside and outside are revealed as so many violences of insularity.

Struggles over geography

Suvendrini Perera

Inspired by the searching, evocative and moving commentaries by Elizabeth McMahon, Carol Farbotko and Mark Jackson, I began rereading *Australia and Insular Imagination* in preparation for writing this response. A little to my surprise I realized that the book is framed by two quotations. The first, only indirectly invoked in the Acknowledgements, is from Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*:

Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings (Said, 1993: 6, at p.vii).

Australia and the Insular Imagination ends with a line from Michel de Certeau that still sends a current through my body every time I read it: "what the map cuts up the story cuts across" (De Certeau, 1988: 129, at p.167).

The quotations suggest the ways in which this work of cultural studies is deeply engaged by questions of geography: with geography as *form*, with geographical forms, and with the violences those forms inscribe and underwrite—not only the obvious violence associated with “soldiers and cannons”, but the violence of geographical ideas, images and imaginings; and of maps, as technologies that excise, mutilate and *cut up* interconnected spaces, histories and materialities.

This is a book about sea, land, nation, and the spaces between. It explores their conjunction in a specific formation, the island: its makings, mappings, and meanings for the West; its workings in the contemporary geopolitics of the war on terror; and its configuring and shaping of territorial nationalism in Australia, *the island-continent* (p.1).

Australia and the Insular Imagination is focused on the geographical form of the island: “the topos of the island, organized by an ontologized division between land and sea, is ... central to the geopolitical order of western modernity” (p.3). It draws on Philip Steinberg’s argument that representations of the island in early portolan maps provided “the grammar for representing the territorial state” and “foreshadowed the almost identical conception of the sovereign territorial state that was to be applied to the mainland in the centuries that followed” (Steinberg, 2005: 259–60). At the same time, the island is understood as a space where the limits and potentialities of sovereignty, state and nation are tested and delimited: I noted that “since Thomas More’s Utopus founds his ideal state by carving it free, by the use of forced labour, from the continent to which it is bound, islands have provided the ground for political speculation and experimentation” (p.13). The island, in its key fictional representations such as *Robinson Crusoe* or *The Tempest*, serves as a crucible of colonial relations. And, in the present, insular spaces continue to be mobilized in the instrumental geopolitics of empire as the testing grounds of imperial power, where sovereignty is complicated by a chain of exception, dissociation and indirection. The not-quite-forgotten staging posts of empire, outpost islands such as Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, are both pivotal and invisible in the ongoing economies of dislocation, rendition and terror.

Australia represents a particular kind of ‘insular case’ in this political and sociogeographic imaginary: as the solution to the enduring cartographic enigma of *terra Australis incognita*, as the chimerical *great south land*, as the *ultima thule* of a colonizing imagination, and as that figure of geographical exception, the world’s largest continent and largest island. In her erudite and insightful commentary Elizabeth McMahon argues that “The confusion and slippage between Australia as an island and a continent is chiasmic, or mutually constitutive, so that qualities proper to the island in the western imaginary have become grafted or superimposed onto the continent and vice versa”.

The geographical singularity of the island-continent also sets it apart racially. This, *Australia and the Insular Imagination* argues, is foundational not only to the act of colonization but to the politics of the contemporary nation-state that has emerged from that foundation. The geographical artefact of Australia as *the island-continent* is what grounds the erasure and dispossession of the land’s original inhabitants and enables its isolation and excision from surrounding regions of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Where local histories and submerged geographies might locate what is now Australia as a link in the chain of the Indonesian archipelago or as part of the land–sea formations of the Torres Strait, island-Australia is premised on the fiction of a place untouched by its outsides and unmoored from history: *terra nullius*.

This is, from the beginning, a geography constituted by racial difference.

The figure of island Australia is one that frames the seeming vacancy inside and confers meaning on its apparent blankness, as it also fends off that other monstrous geography, “Australasia”, that threatens to overwhelm and engulf. Against the unknowable vastnesses within and without, the island is a shape that defines and secures ... As a kind of plot for nation, this geography organizes both the bodies that are able to be counted within Australia and those excluded from it (p.2, p.12).

The opening chapter of the book traces the history of Australia’s islanding through key episodes in the explorations of James Cook and Matthew Flinders (the latter credited as the first man definitively to establish the island nature of this new-found land through its circumnavigation and to give it a unifying name, ‘Australia’), while the second locates it within what Carl Schmitt describes as a new spatial order—one in which “the severance of land from sea became the fundamental law of the planet” through England’s imaginative mobilization of an insular identity (Schmitt, 1950: 48, at p.35). These chapters provide the backdrop for the detailed discussions that follow of defining events in the first decade of the war on terror (2001–2009). These range from the arrival of refugees of that war seeking asylum and the Kuta Beach bombings in Bali, to Australia’s own ‘policing operations’ in the Pacific and its response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

Both Farbotko and Jackson point out that public debates over climate change do not figure in these chapters on contemporary Australian politics. Farbotko notes, “In a book that minutely examines the shifting coastlines and ebbing tides of contemporary Australian insular politics, rising sea levels induced by climate change are a noticeable absence”, and poses the very pertinent question: “What of the various politico-geographical struggles over coastal territory under threat from rising sea levels?” Her words immediately evoke images broadcast globally in January 2011, the inundation of whole swathes of country including, especially, inner-city Brisbane where, in Farbotko’s words, residents were seen “rowing boats through their Australian backyards during king tides”. Such images, she suggests, could be referred back to the book, which “provides powerful tools to analyse anew the political geographies of a warming world, from a perspective that centralizes the coastal zone”.

Farbotko proceeds to offer an astute and far-sighted account of the contradictions and slippages that characterize debates over ‘climate refugees’ in Australia as distinct from the inhabitants of its surrounding region of small Pacific islands, understood as ‘a lesser geography’. At the same time, the Brisbane floods and the intense debates over climate change and its effects on the environment are, as she suggests, also deeply racialized questions *within* Australia:

Since political refugees and climate refugees—real or imagined—are closely enfolded through discourses of security, the spatialities connecting these crises need to be illuminated. How is climate change spatialized into treasured territories such as sovereign ground? How do some territories become more worthy of protection from climate change damage than others? And how might climate scepticism and the logic of insularity be linked? (Farbotko)

One answer is that environmental anxieties are closely linked historically to questions of population (its nature, size and composition), migration, and to the claim of a privileged and unique geography. Especially in the last years of the decade (2010–2011), climate change anxieties have manifested as forms of environmental racism, leading to what I describe elsewhere as the shift in official policy from ‘sovereignty to sustainability’: that is, a shift in emphasis from defending the borders against incursions on

national sovereignty by asylum seekers in small boats in the early years of the war on terror, to defending the sustainability of the island-continent by limiting migration (Perera, 2010). Running through this concern for environmental sustainability is a discursive history of xenophobia that is also able to mobilize contemporary anxieties about multiculturalism (and especially the visibility of Muslim Australians) into calls for sustaining cultural and racial privilege.

Farbotko's phrase 'rising tides' carries reminders, too, of how a rhetoric of inundation is inextricably tied to discourses of racial defensiveness and insularity—instantiated in notions of 'flood tides of immigration' and engulfing 'waves' of refugees. As the book discusses in some detail in Chapter 2, the genealogies of such phrases run from Shakespeare's celebrated island geopoetics in *Richard II* to Enoch Powell's infamous 'rivers of blood' speech (see pp.42–43). The shifts and loops of the 'climate change crisis' and 'sustainability' debates suggest the protean and adaptable forms in which the politics of racial exclusion are able to be deployed throughout Australia's history. If the assertion of sovereignty served as a rallying point for national insecurities in the opening years of the war on terror, sustainability, building on popular support for environmentalism, solicits, not always in more muted ways, many of the same aggressions, resentments and phobias clustered at the borders. Thus, "despite its environmentalist, progressive and cosmopolitan associations, sustainability is a double-edged term that is easily mobilized into defensive and insular nationalist discourses" (Perera, 2010: 7).

Can the urgencies of environmental crisis produce other strategies and different politics that cut across the insular politics which differentiate Australia as a large, white and rich island, from its small and impoverished Pacific surroundings? As Farbotko suggests, this calls for a new vision: a watery regional counterpolitics that is also alert to the cannibalistic, exploitative relations that have characterized Australia in the neighbourhood. Such a visionary counterpolitics can be extended perhaps as part of what is described in the book as a geopolitics from below, one that can re-compose or encompass:

the unpredictable itineraries of refugee boats and the movements of castaway bodies; regional counter-imaginaries of land and sea; Indigenous Australians' concepts of *country*; the envisioning of layered sovereignties, variable borderscapes, and transborder practices; of extraterritorial or "popular" forms of geopolitics; as well as "the struggle over geography"—that is, the knowledges, practices, technologies, and imaginaries that make and unmake *terra Australis infirma*: throughout the book these disparate elements are taken as components of [what Irit Rogoff and Florian Schneider call] "a still-developing alternative language through which to engag[e] with contemporary urgencies" (pp.11–12).

It is in these undercurrents and countercurrents too that I identify the potentialities of the "networked materialisms" and the "wider network geographies of hybrid human/non-human politics, and ... more radical questions of otherness" discussed in Mark Jackson's fascinating contribution. Where Farbotko focused on the Pacific, Jackson asks how the "conceptual grammars" of the book might be deployed more widely, for example in an Arctic constituted by "island topographies, multi-national negotiations around borders, ocean shipping, and Indigenous life ways" and "emergent material archipelagos or assemblages (ice, land, seabeds, animals, people, etc)".

In the Australian context, these wider connectivities and alternative ecologies of the human and non-human are most consistently and persistently brought into the political realm through Aboriginal struggles for *country*. The assertion of Indigenous land and sea rights represent the most profound challenge to the

ontologies that divide the terrestrial from the oceanic realm and the spatiopolitical order that they set in place:

The insistence on Australia as a land girt by sea depends from the start on a denial of this sinuous interplay of shapes and elements, the interrelation of shore and sea, their morph and flow one into the other. Reefs, sandbanks, mangroves, mudflats, high and low water marks are all features of sea-country ... The mangrove is an exemplary site where ocean, sky, earth, and river meet and commingle to produce a distinctive ecology. Mangroves confound the arbitrary division of land from sea. Together with the shifting shapes of intertidal zones, the confluence of fresh and salt waters, the life systems and organisms that thrive in interstitial spaces, mangroves are defining sites of a cosmology that encompasses rather than excises (pp.22–23).

In an inspiring essay written after the Mabo judgment rejected the doctrine of Australia as *terra nullius* at the time of colonization, the cultural geographer Richie Howitt called for a new spatial imaginary that could "confront the ambivalence and openness that is part and parcel of the complex, contingent and uncertain reality of co-existence" and for "a new lexicon of co-existence and explore socially, intellectually and culturally fertile edges in our real and imagined places" (Howitt, 2001: 242).

As belief in the possibilities of these post-Mabo geographies have receded in Australia, I am reenergized by Jackson's account of "new materialisms" or "vital materialism" that would "extend epistemological claims to the more radical onto-epistemological folds which are lurking in the background to Perera's text" and open up "wider network geographies of hybrid human/non-human politics". I am intrigued by his questions about the possibilities of treating "beaches, boats and coasts" not only as "epistemic agents" but as "political agencies".

While I, in my turn, await the arrival of *New Materialisms*, the book recommended by Jackson, via inter-library loan, Jackson's questions return me to Kamau Brathwaite's formulation of the tidalectical, described in Joseph Pugliese's review as that which "inscribes, both conceptually and methodologically, *Australia and the Insular Imagination*" (Pugliese, 2011: 136).

Tidalectics are technologies for un-islanding. The bounded territoriality of the island, the model nation-state, is revealed as no impregnable fortress, just as the ocean is not evacuated of, nor exempted from, the space of history. A watery economy undoes their separateness, returning to land that which has been cast away, an irregular and unpredictable forwards and backwards that overruns and exceeds carefully constructed states of security (p.48).

Tides and coastlines, like castaway boats and bodies, are surely political agencies, impelled by tidalectical countercurrents and undercurrents. As the commentaries by Farbotko, Jackson and McMahon all indicate, they inscribe contingent, surprising and productive geographies of connection as they enact a submarine geopolitics.

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Suvendrini Perera. it was amazing 5.00 Â· Rating details. Â· 7 ratings Â· 2 reviews.Â· Start your review of Australia and the Insular Imagination: Beaches, Borders, Boats, and Bodies. Write a review. Aug 28, 2011 Liz rated it it was amazing.Â· Perera grounds her analysis in a look at Indigenous concepts of land and sea. she demonstrates that the sea wasn't historically seen as something radically, dualistically distinct from land, nor as unincorporated in country, nor as a natural barrier to movement or contact with other peoples. she moves on to look at how colonial Australia has been constructed as a self-contained, discrete, bounded island nation, and how this plays out in Australian race and border politics today. Basically, it's super relevant and topical and makes a lot of fresh connections. Reading Suvendrini Perera's Australia and the insular imagination. E Stratford, E McMahon, M Jackson, C Farbotko. Political geography 30 (6), 329-338, 2011. 14. 2011. Reading the planetary archipelago of the Torres Strait. E McMahon. Island Studies Journal 8 (1), 55-66, 2013. 13. 2013. Archipelagic space and the uncertain future of national literatures. E McMahon. Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature 13 (2), 2013. 10. 2013. The Lateness and Queerness of The Twyborn Affair: White's Farewell to the Novel. E McMahon. Cross/Cultures, 77, 2010. Request PDF | On Aug 1, 2011, Elaine Stratford and others published Reading Suvendrini Perera's Australia and the Insular Imagination | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate.Â· 6 In her section of a collective review of such matters in work by Suvendrini Perera (2009), McMahon later points out that asylum seekers have been demonized and misrepresented (in Stratford, McMahon, Farbotko, Jackson, & Perera, 2011). Such processes of rejection and distortion recast the 'island home' as an unsettled and risky place in which one is overwhelmed by the Other, and they do nothing to aid sensitive debate about how to prepare for climate change emigration and resettlement. Suvendrini Perera is a John Curtin Distinguished Professor in the School of Media, Culture & Creative Arts at Curtin University. She completed her BA at the University of Sri Lanka and her PhD at Columbia University, New York. Since coming to Australia she has published widely on issues of race, ethnicity and multiculturalism, refugee topics, critical whiteness studies and Asian-Australian studies. Her recent books include Australia and The Insular Imagination: Beaches, Borders, Boats and Bodies and the anthology, At the Limits of Justice: Women of Colour on Terror (coedited with Sherene Razac Suvendrini Perera is a Senior Research Fellow at Curtin University of Technology, Australia. Show all. Reviews.Â· "Perera's book comes as a bolt of lightning to the increasingly stolid, and conservative, world of Australian Studies. Where the conventional approach has been to comment on the ways that the land has been constructed and worked over by colonial settlers, Perera offers a powerful and compelling understanding of the importance of the sea in the Australian imaginary and offers also a basis for critically engaging with recent political practices.Â· Bibliographic Information. Book Title. Australia and the Insular Imagination. Book Subtitle. Beaches, Borders, Boats, and Bodies.