



Island detention: Affective eruption as trauma's disruption



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 March 2015

Received in revised form

19 August 2016

Accepted 22 February 2017

Available online 31 March 2017

Keywords:

Detention

Migration

Borders

Trauma

Affective eruptions

Haunting

ABSTRACT

This article examines how remote detention facilities on islands function as transnational landscapes of sedimentation. Where trauma lies buried, affective eruptions move through seemingly fixed sites from hidden depths to surface. Detention facilities take many material forms in built landscapes: open and closed facilities, motels and military bases that have been repurposed, or state prisons. Much spatio-temporal logic surrounding island detentions assumes the possibility of enclosure and isolation of detainee bodies, subjectivities, and emotions. Research findings on island detentions debunk the assumption that people and emotions can be contained in the 'total institution.' On the contrary, detention facilities are transnationally embedded in families, communities, and material flows, and digitally wired in ways that connect detainees to others in their cohort who are either detained or free elsewhere. Trauma flows affectively and transcarcerally through encounters between people imprisoned and otherwise moving in and out of facilities. Often hidden and sedimented, trauma erupts into the present, making its presence known and haunting through affective eruptions. These eruptions connect colonial past and present, transmitting trauma between people inside and out. Data discussed in this article were collected from research on island detention carried out by Australia, Italy, and the United States.

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State authorities geographically imagine on islands what Suvendrini Perera (2009: 1) calls "the unattainable desire of insularity." They embark on creative efforts to experiment and contain, militarize, occupy, dispossess, and displace (e.g., Vine, 2009). Imprisonment ranks among these projects, with prisons historically built on islands to hold everyone from political prisoners to people deemed diseased or deviant. State projects on islands thus include their use for isolation, control, and regulation of human mobility. These are violent geographies (Gregory, 2007), and islands - like all places - are sites imbued with trauma and affect (Hay, 2006). This includes trauma that is "ethnographically visible" and sedimented layers of history that remain "ethnographically invisible" in their impact (Farmer, 2004). Often built on the grounds of colonialism, the histories of islands and people detained there and their experiences of confinement all feature various forms of territoriality, including dispossession and containment. Island detention centers are thus sites imbued with trauma; yet the trauma of detention proves uncontainable. These spaces of seeming fixity are also fluid. They express not only the reinforcement of boundaries, but also their disruption through the movement of trauma.

The past, too, is never contained and never disappears, but is actively at work in the present. As Stoler (2013) suggests with the concept of ruination, imperialism still actively remakes contemporary landscapes. Building on ruination, Teiwa (2015) understands Pacific islands - mined for phosphate and repurposed - as sedimented layers of land, rock, and colonial history. Constructed on some of the same grounds, island facilities where asylum seekers and migrants are detained occupy territory sedimented with trauma. On occasion these sedimentations break through to the surface, the past erupting affectively in the present. Building on Teiwa's use of layers of sedimentation to understand the ruination of Pacific islands, I draw an analogy to the material ground on which one stands, formed slowly and steadily over thousands of years. Can we understand trauma as similarly built and stored as the ground on which we live?

In this article, I focus not on trauma's sedimentation in the past, but on its eruption into the present. Much of the spatio-temporal logic surrounding island detentions capitalizes on the premise and power of limbo, presuming the spatial possibility of enclosure and isolation of bodies and emotions (Perera, 2009). But research findings on island detentions debunk the assumption that people and emotions can be contained within a fully enclosed institution. On the contrary, detention facilities and their inhabitants and

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workers are locally and transnationally embedded in communities, families, material and diasporic networks in ways that connect detainees to people on the outside. As Gill (2009) observes, although detention facilities are designed to halt human mobility, they also simultaneously become conduits of mobility and forced migration. Trauma functions as one such conduit, moving among people in ways that disrupt and distort time, space, and the boundaries surrounding facilities. Trauma moves through detention facilities in various ways: from past to present, among detainees and authorities, and beyond as people on the inside come into contact with people on the outside. Drawing on ethnographic research carried out in and around island detention centers where migrants and asylum seekers are intercepted and held, I explore how trauma lingers and haunts, erupting at times through layers of sedimentation.

Although states endeavor to confine people, their trauma is uncontainable. Jackie Orr (2016) articulates trauma as haunting, that which is not apparent. She engages trauma as a method, “a transmission that wants to perform.” It is this transmission, the carrying of trauma from person to person, that constitutes what I call “affective eruptions.” I argue that trauma moves through affective eruptions, and that these are revealing moments wherein past erupts into the present, rendering more visible the haunting of geopoliticized fields of power. I focus on these affective eruptions and the connections they forge across time and space.

In order to examine trauma's affective eruptions, I begin with brief discussion of how people end up in detention on islands, and the historical contexts of islands under study. Subsequently, I synthesize concepts from literature on emotional and affective geographies that inform this analysis. The argument then develops across two sections on findings, using data from interviews and participant-observation. The first explores trauma's movement through detention facilities. The second addresses trauma's eruptions among authorities. I conclude with a summary of contributions, implications, and openings.

1. Context: research on asylum seeking on islands

Asylum seekers are people crossing international borders in attempts to reach sovereign territory to make a claim for protection from a well-founded fear of persecution if returned home, the basis of the definition of a refugee in the 1951 *UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*. Their autobiographies often involve trauma associated with displacement, transnational journeys, border crossings and periods of confinement. Detention involves the imprisonment by authorities of foreign nationals. As the securitization of migration has intensified and global detention and border enforcement industries expanded over the last twenty years (Sampson, 2013: 9–10), it has become more difficult to seek asylum. The growing industries and spaces of securitization are blocking paths to asylum and instead resources are invested in proliferating forms of confinement. Offshore extensions of border enforcement and detention in transit regions that people cross en route to destinations have become more perilous terrain where spaces of confinement and forms of precarity proliferate. In these borderlands, islands emerge as sites of struggle over entry and exclusion. Sometimes islands are the closest territory that a person can reach to make a claim for protection (as in people leaving Libya or Tunisia and landing on Italy's Lampedusa, close to Tunisia). Other times, people are intercepted at sea and brought forcibly to islands for processing and detention. In recent years, the islands where asylum seekers are detained have transitioned from spaces of safe passage to spaces of confinement and expulsion (Andrijasevic, 2010). Research on islands shows that asylum seekers detained undergo prolonged uncertainty, trauma, and limbo as they wait (as

in other spaces of confinement, see Conlon, 2011): a period when time and life itself seem suspended.

Detention facilities on islands range in material form: open and closed facilities, motels and military bases that have been repurposed, or state prisons. Islands and island communities are exploited as punitive spaces that detainees can traverse but not leave; or inhabit as temporary residents, but not workers. Detention centers function as islands within islands, as if to accentuate and parody the desire to contain and isolate. And islands themselves function as prisons for those whose mobility is confined there. The construction of secure facilities on remote island territories such as Australia's Christmas Island (near the Indonesian island of Java) is an absurd, irrational, expensive undertaking, with little hope of escape from an island or invisibility from small island communities, if one were to escape a detention facility. Yet detainees (and islanders themselves) are often subjected to proliferating mechanisms of isolation: separating detainees from islanders, men from women, new arrivals from those already detained.

Data discussed in this article were collected through the island detention project with qualitative fieldwork gathered by a research team from 2010 to 2013 in Australia, Indonesia, southern Europe, and Pacific territories of the United States. The research team consisted of a Principal Investigator (the author), three doctoral students, and one postdoctoral fellow. Research methods included semi-structured interviews, participant-observation, and archival research - where available - on the histories of facilities, border enforcement, and islands where detention happens. Ethics approval was secured from the Institutional Review Board by the Principal Investigator. This review included a prison advocate on the board. Researchers made two summer visits to each field site, conducting approximately 200 interviews and generating several hundred pages of archival and fieldnotes to understand the complex histories and contemporary struggles unfolding there.

This project was shot through with emotions and trauma - of detainees, advocates, and researchers. That is to say, many layers of emotions were shaped by and in turn mapped onto landscapes of detention that intimately locate the border around the body of asylum-seeker, leaving scars of exclusion, whatever the outcome of an asylum application, length of stay, and depth of psychological trauma experienced in detention. Like emotions themselves, the project endeavored to move across boundaries - deploying project resources to trace flows of people, information, resources, and activism in and out of facilities.

2. Colonial context: islands as sites of migration and territorial control

Islands are sites of continuous interplay between containment and traversal (Sheller, 2009; Mullings, 2012). Some things and people get stuck on these assemblages of rock, wind, and people, while others move across (Teiwa, 2015). Brief consideration of their colonial pasts show important parallels and divergences.

The collective traumatic present on islands is often rooted in colonial and neo-colonial layers of sedimentation. Guam is unincorporated territory of the United States (US). Following histories of colonization by Spain, occupation by Japan, ‘liberation’ by the US, Guamanians (most of whom self-identify as Chamorro) have experienced decades and generations of militarization as the US established large military bases on the island after World War II, dispossessing locals of their land and dedicating that land to geostrategic location of bases that would serve as platforms from which to operate in the region (Rogers, 1995). Chamorros reference a mix of ethnic heritage associated with different historical migrations to the island: including Spanish conquest, Filipino labor migration, and Vietnamese ‘resettlement’ (see Lipman, 2012). Since

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