



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, processual 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).

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