

The paradoxical force of islands

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Something about islands captures the human imagination, evoking visions of utopia or hell, depending on the circumstances. This duality gives them a powerful and mysterious quality, making them the sites of legends, dreams and nightmares. Consider for a moment if Odysseus's voyage had been along a mainland shore. Could this ever have been described as *The Odyssey*, or would it simply have been an interesting and formative trip?

This strange power of islands is also incredibly hard to describe, and leaves attempts do so in a vague and uncertain space. Like many people, I have experienced the force of islands and found it to be life changing in a paradoxical way. The power of these experiences is hard to put my finger on because it's not as if there was a single event, like falling in love or being taken hostage by pirates, that changed me. Rather, it was a confluence of many factors mixing together to create a potent stew of things that could shift the way I understand and see the world.

Looking for a clear articulation of what it is about islands that gives them this quality, I turned to literature, but even a review of poetry on the topic doesn't fully capture it. The closest I've found are these lines in John Keats's poem "To Alisa Rock": "Thy life is but two dead eternities – The last in air, the former in the deep!" Or the opening lines from Yusef Komunyakaa's poem, "Islands":

An island is one great eye
gazing out, a beckoning lighthouse,
searchlight, a wishbone compass,
or counterweight to the stars.

But what is it about islands that gives them this unearthly influence? There is something about being locked in by a vast body of water that captures, concentrates and amplifies the human experience almost as a magnifying glass does sunlight. Open just about any travel magazine and you'll see them advertised as idyllic fantasy places where anxieties of the real world are held at bay and people can live their dreams with a kind of abandon and suspension of reality that just doesn't exist elsewhere. Unfortunately, history has taught us that dreams are not all made equal. Look a little deeper, and for every blissful island holiday there is a soul-destroying equivalent. Sometimes these contrasting points of view exist in parallel on the same island.

My first and most vivid experience of this was on Gorée Island, off the coast of Dakar, in my early twenties. Gorée Island is a fairly barren 67-acre section of volcanic rock that was developed in the 16th century as a centre of the expanding slave trade, when, for over 200 years, powerful kings in what is now the country of Benin captured and sold slaves to Portuguese, French and British merchants. The people brought to Gorée Island were held in a large 'holding warehouse' until they were shipped across the Atlantic Ocean to be sold in South America, the Caribbean, and North America in the most inhumane conditions. There is a harrowing little doorway known as the Door of No Return between the prison/warehouse and the rocky pier where the slave ships would berth.

Today, the island has been reinvented as a historically significant tourist attraction, which has also come with attempts to convert its meaning into something more hopeful and forward-looking. But no number of beach barbecues or cocktail parties can shake the island from its history. What's worse is the feeling that the beach party culture has been infused with remnants of whatever it is that drove people to treat one another that way in the first place. To give an example, I have heard people say things like, "You can still buy anything there."

On my first visit, I was a naive and ideological student of development economics, and although I went back a few times, it took almost a decade to make sense of the feelings and points of view that I discovered there. My naivety was the same

sort as that of people who think human beings are all fundamentally good, and I intellectualised antisocial behaviour as being attributable to a lack of opportunity in one form or another. But what I learnt on that island was that evil doesn't always recognise geographical distinctions or differences in opportunity but is something that can reside just about anywhere and in just about anyone. Gaining this understanding was a worldview changing experience that darkened my world view and depressed me.

The most awful metaphor for this understanding came in the form of the otherwise beautiful glass trading beads that were used as currency when buying and selling people into slavery across continents.

My brush with this feeling really took hold when I found one of these beads on the sea floor while snorkelling off Gorée Island's main beach adjacent to the old prison/warehouse. It was a small black bead, about the size of your fingerprint, with white stripes that had an almost magical and irresistible glisten to them as the bead shone up through the clear blue water towards me. Drawn by the enchanting glisten I dove down holding my breath and grabbed it – gasping, almost as Gollum would grasp at the Ring in Lord of The Rings.

Grabbing hold of it, I quickly, clasped my hand around it and shoved it deep into my pocket to take back to shore as a special memento of my visit. Today, in West Africa curio stores selling modern knock-offs of these beads are not uncommon, so I convinced myself that it must be a fake – having fallen from one of the tourist ferries – and that I didn't need to feel guilty about taking an artifact home with me. But the potency of losing my rosy worldview and then finding this trading bead off the shore of such an island filled it with a powerful, dark, superstitious symbolism that I also took with me.

This symbolism, and the bead itself, became my secret metonym for the evil that I learnt about there, and I am ashamed to say I even blamed a run of bad luck after my last trip to Senegal on the fact that I had taken the bead. It was as if a dark energy had seeped into my bones, sinking me into a cynical depression – the kind a depressed person feels, as though they are drowning inside a depressing world. I was (and still am) also acutely aware that my thoughts and experiences are indescribably trivial, and of course, this only served to reinforce my negative new worldview.

The trouble with a feeling like this is that it does have the power to change the world – at least insofar as it changes our experience of it. For me, it made the world a darker and less hopeful place, which also made me an angrier version of myself. And ever since that day, I've wondered if it would have felt the same if the events had not taken place on an island. But of course, it could never have been any other way.

Curiously, nine years later, something quite unexpected happened.

I had long since returned the black bead to Mother Nature and had begun learning to slowly reconcile the evil in the world with the good when I had another sudden worldview change. This experience was also strange because it wasn't as if there was a specific event (like falling in love or being taken hostage by pirates). Rather, it was a confluence of many factors blending together to create a potent stew of circumstances that could shift the way I look at and understand the world.

This time, the experience was almost as if it were an equal and opposite reaction to my experience with Gorée Island. It felt like it had the effect of concentrating goodness into some sort of more pure and potent force – exactly as a magnifying glass does to sunlight. Thinking back to this time I can still feel the sun and warm breeze on my skin while for a few moments I was suspended from reality – and with the world held at bay for a short while everything felt okay. The result was a shift in perspective that washed over and through me, somehow simultaneously bringing the negative into even sharper relief and into a finer balance with the positive. The shift provided an instant antidote to the one that led me to see the world as a dark and depressing place nine years before and has provided the foundation for a new lighter way of seeing things ever since.

This, by now I'm sure is obvious, was also an experience that took place on an island, although the specifics of this story are even harder to put my finger on – especially when set against the first. Again, I have to turn to literature, where the best description of these experiences I can offer is the final stanza of Komunyakaa's remarkable poem "Islands":

To lie down in remembrance
is to know each of us is a prodigal
son or daughter, looking out beyond land
& sky, the chemical & metaphysical
beyond falling & turning waterwheels
in the colossal brain of damnable gods,
a Eureka held up to the sun's blinding eye,
born to gaze into fire. After conquering
frontiers, the mind comes back to rest,
stretching out over the white sand.