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ISLAND PHANTASMAGORIA - Exploring the Political/Philosophical Underpinnings of Fictional Islands and Imagining a Future of Plastic- Pirate-Island-Utopias

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"The élan that draws humans toward islands extends the double movement that produces islands in themselves. Dreaming of islands—whether with joy or in fear, it doesn't matter—is dreaming of pulling away, of being already separate, far from any continent, of being lost and alone— or it is dreaming of starting from scratch, recreating, beginning anew. Some islands drifted away from the continent, but the island is also that toward which one drifts; other islands originated in the ocean, but the island is also the origin, radical and absolute." Gilles Deleuze

More than 50% of the world's population lives within 50 miles of the coastline, a percentage projected to rise to 75% by 2020. The coastline's landscape of instability is currently under threat of rising sea levels. On low-lying land like coastal river deltas, a sea-level rise of just one foot will send water thousands of feet inland. "Over the long term, much larger sea-level rises will render the world's coastlines unrecognizable, creating a whole new series of islands."¹ The new islands created by 'natural' processes will not be the only additions to the re-contoured landscape of the sea. While the sea eats away at our coasts, we will continue to implant our coastal cities through the age-old processes of geological prosthesis.² In a future of climate-change compounded with a parallel growth in construction of artificial islands, is it therefore possible to imagine that most of the world's inhabitants will be island inhabitants? What are the philosophical and socio-political implications of inhabiting an eternally mutable and potentially isolated landscape? An investigation of islands in fictive accounts, both written and cartographic, reveals key sociopolitical dimensions specific to the context of island habitation. Examining two contemporary utopic proposals for island habitation by placing them in the context of their historical precedents, both fictive and real, will allow a fuller understanding of the radically different sociopolitical possibilities in a future likely made up of island dwelling.

1 Seasteading Institute: Swimcity
Source: András Györfi, 2009

2 Synthetica: A New Continent of Plastics
Source: Fortune Magazine, 1940

3 Seasteading Institute: Rendering Freedom
Source: Anthony Ling, 2009

4 Aerial image of the site of the Burning Man Festival – as revived pirate utopia “island”
Source: NASA, 2005



I. HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS OF ARTIFICIAL TERRAFORMING:

A. Governmental Refuse

The process of artificial-terraforming began as early as prehistoric Scotland. The reasons motivating it rely primarily on the political aspirations of the constituencies developing the artificial islands, whether governmental, private developers or utopic visionaries. In the case of utopic visionaries, desire for political freedom remains the key motivator, while for private developers, it is real-estate speculation. For governments however, islands are typically ascribed the negative connotation of dumping-ground. The geopolitical implications of quarantine-prison-island are understood as a 'spatial response to suspicion, threat, and uncertainty.' New York City's islands from Hart to Roosevelt Island are emblematic of this desire to isolate unwanted members of society and undesired uses from the mainland onto islands. Rem Koolhaas' reading of Roosevelt Island confirms this notion of island-as-quarantine-site-of-exclusion: "Originally the island was the site of hospitals and asylums - generally a storehouse for 'undesirables.'"³ In the specific case of New York, the employment of island-as-home-to-municipal-reform-institutions started at the end of the nineteenth century. Perhaps it was inspired by the British Empire's isolation and transfer of its criminals to Australia, a trend that gained currency in the Seventeenth Century. The earliest identity of Australia was as a "floating-giant-continental-island-prison." Eventually, the vessel which transported criminals became the final destination—a floating artificial-prison-island moored outside of the city to house inmates.³

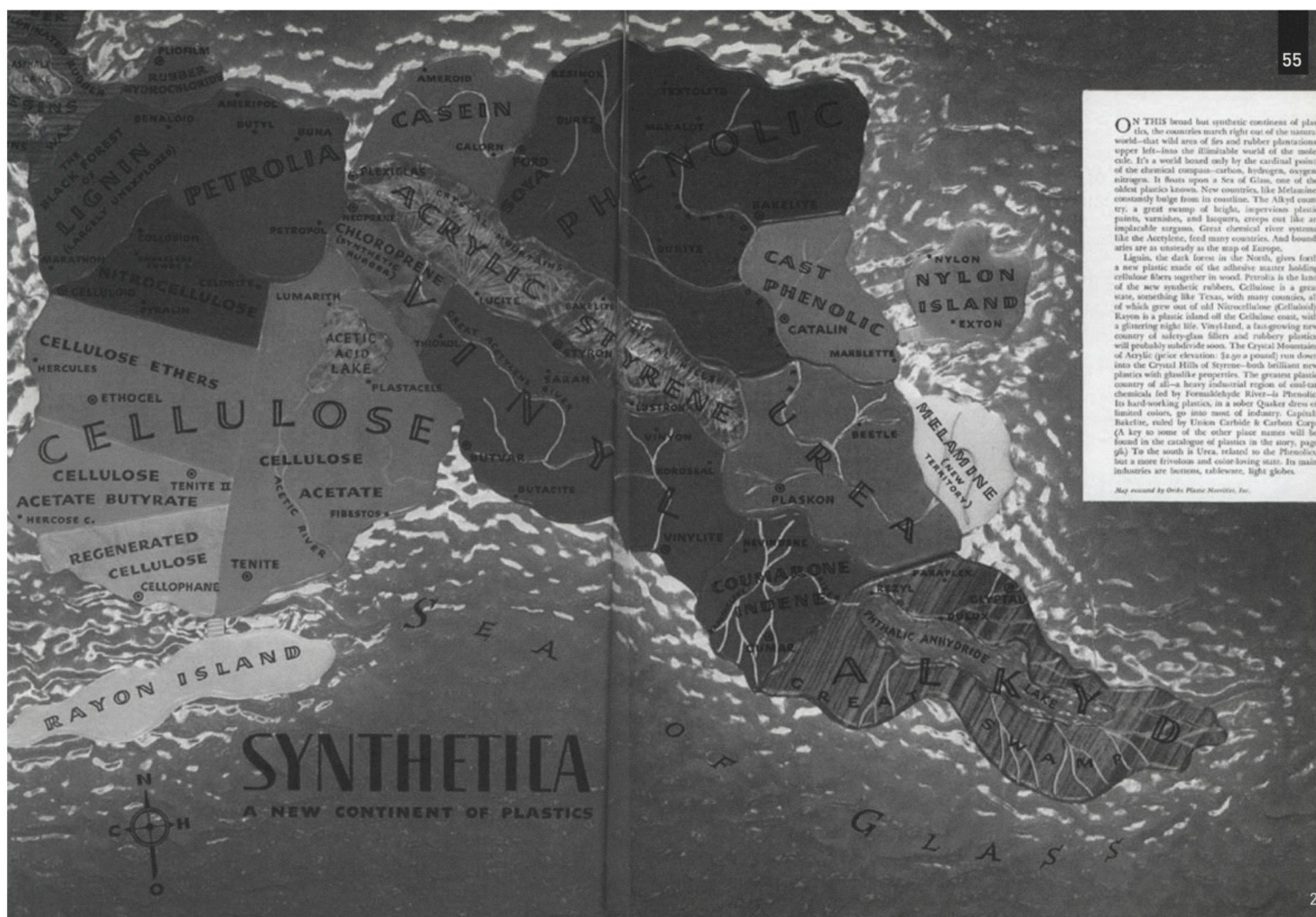
Prominent fictional accounts that depict this idea of island-as-prison include Dickens' 1812 *Great Expectations* which opens with the protagonist crossing paths with an escaped convict, whom he helps to obtain food and drink. Later on, this convict is captured and returned to "*The Hulks*"—described as "a wicked Noah's ark" moored in the neighboring River Medway.⁴ J.K. Rowling's fictional *Azaban*, the wizard-prison of the Harry Potter series, hints at the geopolitics of quarantine on a physically isolated island setting. It is portrayed to play a direct role in altering its prisoners' state of mind: "[the fortress of Azaban is]... set on an island, way out to sea, but they don't need walls and water to keep the prisoners in, not when they're all trapped inside their heads, incapable of a single cheerful thought. Most of them go mad within weeks."⁵ The trend of artificial-

hulk-island as prison continues on to the contemporary context, with two examples illustrating this: New York City's five-story jail-barge "the Bain" constructed in the early '90s which "stores" 800 prisoners. And the Netherlands, desiring to segregate its illegal migrant convicts from other prisoners, utilizes the recently constructed "Zaandam" barge to warehouse intercepted migrants.⁶

B. Real-Estate 'Utopias'

Unlike the negative connotation ascribed to islands by governments, private developers actively pursue construction of artificial islands as prime sites for real-estate speculation. The positive connotation of islands in the public subconscious could partially be attributed to utopic narratives such as Atlantis. Possibly the earliest account of a 'fictive island' Atlantis debuts in Plato's dialogues (circa 360 BC) as a naval power that conquered many parts of Africa and Europe. Due to their isolated setting, the Atlanteans developed greed and moral bankruptcy as characteristics that distinguished them from their mainland counterparts. It is implied that these characteristics were the ultimate cause of their demise as their island is finally submerged due to a natural disaster. Numberless spin-offs of the Atlantis narrative exist, most notable of which subvert the dystopic sociopolitical patterns on the island which Plato depicts and instead, portray a society where "generosity and enlightenment, dignity and splendor, piety and public spirit" were the commonly held qualities of the inhabitants.⁷ Francis Bacon's 1627 essay *The New Atlantis* portrays the island as a vision of the future of human discovery. Ignatius Donnelly's 1882 publication *Atlantis: the Antediluvian World*, renders Atlanteans as direct descendants from Neolithic culture, technologically advanced and biologically superior.

Real-estate speculators seek to positively reference/associate with these utopic-fictive-island accounts, some even directly borrowing their names, with Atlantis-esque projects existing from as far as the Bahamas to Dubai. Further, residential island projects such as Dubai's are emblematic of a desire to achieve a so-called social "utopia" in the sea. As stated by Anselm Franke: "Utopia [is] imagined as an island, artificially cut-off from the land - a place of exile for the perfection of society. [It] begins with the establishment of an extra-territorial space surrounded by 'social matter' it aims to leave behind." In the case of Dubai, the "matter left behind" is a segregated city of unbridgeable inequality between its expat workers and privileged locals.⁸



C. Islands-of-Separation

While governments conceive of islands-as-quarantine-sites and real-estate developers view islands-as-speculative-tools, visionary utopists seek to capitalize on the isolation of islands as a politically transformative tool. According to these visionaries, dilemmas of political division along ethnic lines or ideological orientations can now be solved through physical separation onto islands. Precedents exist in cartographers' renderings of fictive deluge scenarios to create islands-of-ethnic-separation.

For the contested land of Palestine/Israel, the French artist Julien Bousac, proposes a fictional "scenario" in his map *The Archipelago of Eastern Palestine* published in *Le Monde Diplomatique*. The map's controversy stems from the complete inundation of Israeli territory to create a fanciful Palestinian archipelago. Bousac refutes allegations of intentions to connote negative Biblical references, claiming that "the map is not about 'drowning' or 'flooding' the Israeli population, nor dividing territories along ethnic lines, even less a suggestion of how to resolve the conflict." More simply, he explains, it is intended as an illustration of the ongoing fragmentation of Palestinian territory. But this fragmentation already clearly signifies divisions along ethnic lines. Bousac heightens the irony by playing on the leisure/pleasure association with islands: "us[ing] typical tourist maps' codes sharpen[s] the contrast between the fantasies raised by seemingly paradise-like islands and the Palestinian Territories' grim reality."⁹

A visionary map of Belgium is in the similar vein of imagined cartographic depictions, where parts of a politically contested mainland are submerged to create islands-of-linguistic-separation. Ever since its inception in 1830, the Belgian Federation has existed in strife between its Dutch-speaking Flemings and French-speaking Walloons. This map plays on the binary nature of the Federation depicting a futuristic scenario, post-global warming, where the low-lying Flanders region is submerged leaving only some of its higher parts above water as newly formed islands-of-separation. Thus, unlike the Palestine/Israel map, the cartographer employed the less offensive logic of a post-global warming world to propose a solution to the Belgian conundrum.¹⁰

Capitalizing on this capacity of islands to separate politically-divided people, liberals seeking freedom from the restrictions of the mainland go out to sea to create artificial

liberal-islands. In the modern setting, this is mostly achieved by occupying vessels/oil-platforms. The trend was initiated as pirate-radio-station and abortion-clinic-islands. The latter movement began in 1999 by Dutch pro-abortion physician Rebecca Gomberts. Her *Women on Waves* project seeks to provide reproductive health services to women in countries with restrictive abortion laws. The pirate radio stations began in 1964, off the Dutch coast. Since Dutch law at the time did not permit commercial broadcasts, REM Island was created to house *Radio* and *Television Nordzee* outside of territorial waters. Later in the year however, the Dutch government passed a "REM law" which declared the seabed under *REM Island* as Dutch territory and led to the dismantling of the oil-platform-island.

REM Island marked the beginning of a fast-growing trend of pirate-media-islands. However, what initially started as a desire for media independence evolved to a desire to create sovereign micro-nations. Of these, perhaps the most consequential is the *Principality of Sealand*, erected on an oil platform in 1967 by Major Paddy Roy Bates, for the original intention of broadcasting his private radio station. Due to ensuing legal battles, Bates attempted to declare the *Principality of Sealand* as an independent sovereign state. It was not until *Operation Atlantis* in the early 1970s that the construction of artificial islands was pursued with the pure desire to create liberal/libertarian enclaves. *Freedom*, the concrete-hulled vessel was intended to act as the homestead for libertarian dwellers. Due to a hurricane, the project was aborted as the ship sank on its way from New York City to the Caribbean, where it intended to anchor itself permanently. Less than a year later, the *Republic of Minerva* was established in 1972. The founders anticipated a republic with "no taxation, welfare, subsidies, or any form of economic interventionism." According to Glen Raphael, "The chief reason that the *Minerva* project failed was that the libertarians who were involved did not want to fight for their territory." Ejection by troops from Tonga (who later on formally annexed it), marked the final ending.

II. CONTEMPORARY PROPOSALS FOR UTOPIC "LIBERAL" ISLAND HABITATION:

A. Pirate Utopias and "TAZ"

The projects of the late 1960s and early '70s set a crucial precedent to two contemporaneous theoretical proposals for island-utopias; the revival of pirate-island-utopias and the proposal for 'competitive' governments in the sea.

Inspired by pirate-island-utopias - secret islands once used for supply purposes by pirates—Peter Lamborn Wilson proposes the concept of Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZ), that “elude formal structures of control.” To Wilson, pirate utopias, such as the phantasmic *Libertatia* and the more real 17th century *Republic of Salé*, represent the earliest forms of autonomous “micronations” which existed beyond the realm of governments: “these pirate enclaves typified proto-anarchist societies in that they operated beyond laws and governments and, in their stead, embraced unrestricted freedom.”^{10, 11, 12}

Anarchy on islands emerges in precedent fictional accounts as the natural and dominant sociopolitical structure. Both Robinson Crusoe and Treasure Island for example, set the island’s anarchy in contrast to the mainland’s structured socio-politics. In the Crusoe account, the differences between the *Island of Despair* and the mainland are panned out through emphasis on Crusoe’s colonialist methods of replicating his own society on the island. Crusoe’s ‘civilized’ survival instincts—which propel him to build a private habitation grow crops, use tools (an allusion to European technology), and even make a calendar—are markedly different than those of the native island inhabitants. References to Crusoe’s political superiority as ‘king’ and ‘governor of the mutineers’ all reinforce the differences between the new, if rudimentary political hierarchy that Crusoe brings to the otherwise anarchist, savage society of the island. The motif of difference between the socio-politics on the mainland vs. islands is pronounced once again through the Stevenson account of Treasure Island. Set in Hispanolia, an island historically occupied by pirates and other vagabonds, the anarchist lack of political organization and indiscipline of the pirates is consistently contrasted with the virtues of the mainland heroes of the novel—namely; truthfulness, loyalty, thrift, religiosity, and discipline.

Wilson aspires to replicate the anarchy that is depicted to exist on these pirate-island-utopias in his Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZ) proposal.¹³ Wilson suggests concentrating on the present to release one’s mind from the controlling mechanisms that have been imposed on it. He emphasizes the temporary dimension because permanence deteriorates to a structured system. The closest contemporary application of Wilson’s concept is the *Burning Man Festival*, held annually in the Black Rock Desert in northern Nevada for the approximate duration of a week. The project seeks to create temporary “island-utopias,” free of political restriction, fostering “radical

self-expression” and “radical self reliance.”¹⁴

B. Seasteading

Clearly inspired by the 1960s and 1970s projects, seasteading is the other contemporary proposal for ‘liberal/libertarian’ island-dwelling. A portmanteau of *sea* and *homesteading*, seasteading proposes creating permanent dwellings at sea, called seasteads, outside territories claimed by the governments of any standing nation.¹⁵ On April 15, 2008, Wayne Gramlich and Patri Friedman founded The Seasteading Institute, an organization dedicated to creating experimental mobile ocean communities “with diverse social, political, and legal systems.” With a \$500,000 donation from PayPal founder Peter Thiel, the Institute is actively researching the idea of “an entrepreneurial, DIY mentality to creating oceanic city-states.” In an official statement, Thiel explains his motivation for supporting the mission of the Institute: “Decades from now, those looking back at the start of the century will understand that Seasteading was an obvious step towards encouraging the development of more efficient, practical public-sector models around the world.”¹⁶ The seasteads propose a revolutionary concept of competitive governments modeled on the competitive free-market economic system. For the young Friedman “government is an industry with a really high barrier to entry, you basically need to win an election or a revolution to try a new one.”¹⁷ With his seasteading mobile homes, “You can change your government without having to leave your house,” and islands compete to attract citizens.

Conclusion

In a post global-warming world, where possibly the only relic of human existence left will likely be non-biodegradable artificial plastic, is it possible to imagine living on plastic-garbage-patches as islands?¹⁸ What are the philosophical and socio-political implications of island-inhabitation? From the surveyed literature of fictive and artificial islands, we can foretell some of the possibilities. The simultaneous forces of isolation and constant flux due to a precarious coastal position will potentially allow society to replace rigid ideals of structure and classical notions of stability, with flexibility, responsiveness and adaptability. The possibilities of new forms of governance, and of existence in smaller networks due to mobility will thus become an increasingly attractive option for a future that is less politically restrictive t

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5 Ito, op. cit p. 149-150

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8 Bring and Wayembergh, op. cit. p. 180

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10 (Full Swing Golf website)

09 ISLAND PHANTASMAGORIA - Exploring the Political/Philosophical Underpinnings of Fictional Islands and Imagining a Future of Plastic-Pirate-Island-Utopias

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11 From Wilson's *Pirate Utopia on Sale*: "Salé... dates back at least to Carthaginian times (around 7th century BC). The Romans called the place Sala Colonia, part of their province of Mauritania Tingitane. Pliny the Elder mentions it (as a desert town infested with elephants!). The Vandals captured the area in the 5th century AD and left behind a number of blonde, blue-eyed Berbers. The Arabs (7th century) kept the old name and believed it derived from "Sala" (sic., his name is actually Salah), son of Ham, son of Noah; they said that Salé was the first city ever built by the Berbers" Sale, became a Pirate Republic in 17th century - a type of micronation with its own seaport argot known as "Franco". Like some other pirate states, it even used to pass treaties from time to time with some European countries, agreeing not to attack their fleets.

12 Peter Lamborn Wilson (aka Hakim Bey), *Pirate Utopias: Moorish Corsairs and European Renegadoes* (Brooklyn, New York, Autonomedia, 1995)

13 T.A.Z. is also inspired by Situationist ideology. From wikipedia.org: The Situationist International (SI) was a restricted group of international revolutionaries founded in 1957 with their ideas rooted in Marxism and the 20th

Century European artistic avant-gardes, they advocated experiences of life being alternative to those admitted by the capitalist order, for the fulfillment of human primitive desires and the pursuing of a superior passionate quality. For this purpose they suggested and experimented with the construction of situations, namely the setting up of environments favorable for the fulfillment of such desires. Using methods drawn from the arts, they developed a series of experimental fields of study for the construction of such situations, like unitary urbanism and psychogeography.

14 The loose working definition of islands I've used thus far in this paper: an island is an area of "suitable" habitation surrounded by an expanse of "unsuitable" habitation. In this case, the "suitable" habitation or utopic "islands" are the grounds for Burning Man, where one can freely express. It is an "island" because it is surrounded by an otherwise hostile and politically restrictive environment.

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