

A Nameless Island *

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I haven't been there, but I'm definitely going. It's all lined up, and the missus and kid are coming along for the ride. Such a distant place, a setting with a famed piratical past, history which informs the now which I have come to observe. "I'm a language scientist, not a journo," I continually told the island's diasporic population on a recent trip across The Ditch. There are more of them there than on the island itself. It didn't seem to change their opinion of me that much. They at least now know something of who I am. The writer can be understandably feared.

There are 48 of them on the outcrop. Four surnames. I won't list them lest I give away the nameless. Besides, it will make it all too easy, as names are what I am all about. Names for places, peopled landscapes made real through language. And here is an island and insular history steeped in an ancient criminal past, a yin yang like *mélange* of black and white, male and female, near and far. There were previous inhabitations, some archaeological residue. For the linguist, reliant on the written and the documented, I can only assume. There was a native name for the island—again I can't show my cards—and the micro names which dot the landscape. Some are clothed in circumstance—Broken Hip, Dan Fall, Where Tom Off—others in humour and slander—Side Dan Cack on Big Jack (the place Dan shat on Big Jack), Oh Dear. Names and the sensual; names and/as memory; the nostalgic seen through cartographies of the past in line with current mind.

So the process of interacting with my field site takes the role of documenter. I gather and assess, read and write, think, and piece together. There were crimes of the past—death, murder, mystery, intrigue, cultural distancing. Simultaneously within language I witness subordination (cultural not grammatical), the mixing of colour, word, and structure. Why did the English speaking men win out linguistically to the detriment of Tahitian? There were more women, and the location was definitely non-European. While I now search for the rules of creoled ways of speaking, I engulf myself in the cliché: some rules were meant to be broken.

A nameless island: past, seas, death, language. Wonderment, forward thinking, landed privilege, beginnings, the unspoken. It was never a

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pidgin, nor really a creole, nor is it anything any scholar seems to be able to capture. Perhaps that's another crime, the task of box fitting. When something doesn't fit, it's ridiculed. When it does, it's deemed to be grasped. Still, how can any way of speaking ever be ascertained or chronicled? Here, the language is the glue, yet it remains so ill understood, to the extent that in 2016 I will be the first professional linguist ever to have set foot on the island.

The criminal as inattentive scientist. The dereliction of duty leaves gaps in knowledge, gauntlets to be taken up. We'll arrive, sit patiently. I look forward to hearing them talk, to walking with them on their journeys across valleys and crevices to find the(ir) poetics of (the) place. Toponyms are the pinpricks evolved into the mapped domain. My job is to reveal these spheres and their role in charted reason, that which can be both seen and abstracted. There will be books, articles, texts like these, most of which will appeal to very few. We only go once. It's far and expensive. Do it right. Get what you can. Remain in touch. Remember the events and connections. Dream a dream. Then sail away.

The island is a result of a bounteous past and a Pacific present. There is the process and the result. The placenames as blessed monikers of fantasy inspired chronicling with a whiff of the world-made-now. It all leaves anticipation of the work to come, a self-questioning of one's ability. The trip is long, the travel far. We'll definitely be ok, but. If it doesn't kill you, it'll make you stronger. The island will be in us, a stamp in a passport, the arrival at an existential point of no return.

I want words, man. And pronunciation. And stories. And texts. The sentential, the adjectival, the nominal, the predicated. They create a picture of adaption, striving to be one with surroundings through the inabilities of the human to grasp the whole. This process could be called linguistic ecology and or an ability to mark the world with the word. I've perceived this game through the lens of pilgrimage, with travel to the island being an integral part of the project. I feel I've banged on about this process quite a bit, moving from the scientific to the personal through the membrane of data and experience. Yeah yeah, the researcher is a pilgrim, a journeyer to and through place via the vessel of language. He goes, engages in a kind of annexing (some could claim it profiteering), he returns, writes a book about the people, language, and place, and the game continues. Much might not have changed, though there is distinct distinction. Life goes on.

As a friend said before the start of my incumbency in my current establishment, mere travel to this place is a politicised enough statement. The events, a people, the names, merely travelling there. My linguistic ore as unwrought material is mineable yet malleable. And I will chase it and earn my keep. I promise to let you know of the result in time. And I vow not to become a linguistic insurgent.