Book review: Coastal works: cultures of the Atlantic Edge

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While Îléité deserves credit for being one of few works (another example is Daniel Graziadei’s Insel(n) im Archipel [2017]) that brings together—at least in the introduction—discussions of islandness in both English and French, it is rather selective in its engagement with discussions of literary islands, especially when these are not directly associated with the field of island studies. The most striking omission is the work of another scholar from La Réunion, Jean-Michel Racault, one of the most influential academics writing on island literature in French (as is Frank Lestringant, equally omitted from André’s book). Given the book’s postcolonial approach, it is also somewhat surprising that André ignores studies of (post)colonial islands in the anglophone world by critics like Diana Loxley, Rebecca Weaver-Hightower, or Dorothy F. Lane. Further, André’s book misses the opportunity of situating its case studies within a broader literary perspective on France and its island territories (one might think of the Martinican author Patrick Chamoiseau or the Tahitian novelist Célestine Hitiura Vaité).

All in all, Îléité provides an interesting and eloquent account of the tensions and anxieties connected to the aftermath of French colonialism in three different oceans. Despite some small mistakes (the Ouvéa hostage crisis is dated to 1998 rather than 1988), the book relies on thorough and detailed knowledge of the political and cultural contexts that shaped the primary texts. Its contribution to literary island studies may ultimately be modest, but it is valuable for its exploration of the links between poetics and politics in a set of works that remind us of France’s colonial past and neo-colonial present in the global ocean.

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The peripheral character of coasts might be why they are also at the margins of cultural analysis. To be sure, while ‘The Atlantic’ is relatively well-understood, the cultural meanings of British and Irish coasts remain an understudied area of academic inquiry. But in Coastal Works: Cultures of the Atlantic Edge, a group of literary and cultural scholars gather to invigorate the coastal edge as a way of investigating the constant cultural becoming that unfolds between land and sea. They do so, particularly inspired by the scholarship of John R. Gillis, by drawing the Irish and British Archipelago into what in recent years has been labeled ‘The Blue Humanities,’ or technically speaking ‘thalassology’: the historical understanding of water and its effects on human society.

After a concise and well-written introduction, the book uses 13 highly interconnected essays to explore the intricate cultural and literary meanings of the British and Irish archipelago. I say ‘essays’ because, while scholarly research, they are indeed—to varying extents—imaginative and exploratory. The book opens with Nick Groom’s remarkable essay on Thoughts of a Project for Draining the Irish Channel from 1722, an anonymous pamphlet that imagines a new Atlantic archipelago without the Irish Sea. While the pamphlet is obviously a thought-experiment, it nonetheless illuminates the sea as a space that is not simply there, not simply given: it can be colonized and territorialized. The book then moves on to Fiona Stafford’s engagement with the literary and geographical Solway Firth, through a critical reading of John Ruskin, as an ambiguous border between expansion and inundation, conquest and exchange, England and Scotland. Nicholas Allen explores the writings of Ciaran Carson, Glenn Patterson, and Kevin Barry in order to invoke a coastal perspective on the literary Belfast and the fictional city of Bohane, particularly as they pulsate with formations
and withdrawal of empire. In a similar vein, Andrew Gibson’s essay on Norman Nicholsen connects the coast to the question of where England is imagined to end. These intuitions about where England ends and begins then resurface in the essay of John Brannigan: an inquiry into the dualism of myopic English nationalism and island utopia off the Scottish coast in the writings of Louis MacNeice. Daniel Brayton too explores the coastal uncertainty between national solidity and aquatic fluidity, especially in Erskine Childers’s classic novel The Riddle of the Sands, followed by Damian Walford Davies’s exploration of Ronald Lockley’s archipelagic counter-imagination from the perspective of island studies. The book continues with three essays on the scientific coast: Nessa Cronin’s essay on Maude Delab who connected the coastal imagination, through naturalist field-work on the island of Valentia, with the emergence of modern European science; Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi’s and John Plunkett’s examination of the ways in which the peripheral coast of Devon inscribed itself into popular science in Victorian England; and Margaret Cohen’s investigation of Zarh Pritchard’s early submarine paintings and the ways they connect to the challenge of seeing under water among artists and engineers. In the final two essays, Andrew McNeillie takes inspiration from Tim Robinson to explore his own relation to the Aran Islands and the ways they connect to global history, and Jos Smith continues the focus on the Aran Islands as an exemplary instance of the way in which the archipelago is represented in Archipelago, the journal edited by McNeillie himself. Finally and appropriately, the anthology closes with an epilogue by Gillis.

What is intellectually born from Coastal Works is, in other words, a fascinating sibling of cultural nissology. For how long can you walk along the coast of an island? The answer, of course, is forever. The island is an infinite coast. Indeed, Godfrey Baldacchino has called the ‘island’ a “nervous duality”—constantly oscillating between, for example, the local and the global, the interior and the exterior, dystopia and utopia, routes and roots. Similarly, the cultural meanings of the coastal in Coastal Works are ambiguously situated between the inward facing and the outward facing. The coast, like the island, is culturally speaking both a rugged closure of land and a constant encounter with the open.

A problem with the book, however—though to varying extents, depending on the particular contribution—is that some of the responses to the coast border on essentialism. The afterword by Gillis is particularly telling. Setting out from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s observation that “the point of greatest interest is the place where land and water meet,” Gillis notes that “we have never been so conscious of shores as we are today.” The reader is then informed that “we like to think of edges as a product of nature” and that “it is the mental construct of the horizon that draws us outward into a time and space of the beyond, where we escape reality, if only for a moment.” Well, who is this we on whose behalf Gillis asserts the horizontal pull into an escapist time and space? Perhaps the generalization of a first-person perspective is not so strange in the essay as a style of writing. Maybe it testifies to a certain intellectual lineage that can best be understood as phenomenological, after all a widespread heritage among studies of space and place. Though I am fully aware that the book is disciplinarily rooted in literary and cultural studies—it is not ethnographic—I cannot help but feel analytically uneasy when ‘the coast’ is associated with a more or less well-defined form of perception.

Nonetheless, Coastal Works is a skillfully crafted collection of essays that converses intricately with the study of islands. In many anthologies, it is often difficult to really maintain a shared intellectual horizon throughout the book, but these authors succeed. The essays mirror each other. They deserve to be read by anyone who feels or remembers feeling in a particular mood when they walk along the coast.

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