

letters

Islands of the Imagination

re. Shannon Wiley's article, 'Vanishing Lands: Shishmaref, Alaska' (On Site review 27: rural urbanism)

I

As Sarichef Island continues to erode, and rising temperatures leave Shishmaref vulnerable to storm surges, I was struck by a perverse double of Shishmaref's efforts to preserve itself. Thousands of miles south of the receding ice flow, some of the world's richest capitalists are imagining other islands, where they can be safe from the damages they have wreaked.

In 2008, The Seasteading Institute was founded by an influential group of libertarians. While many around the world have fled real state harassment, the seasteaders instead imagine a utopia free from government intervention in their business plans: a sort of Shenzhen-on-sea. For those who think America – with its government, its social security, and its medicare – is now lost, the seasteaders offer a dream of mobile platforms, resting outside the control of government. Available to all. For a price, of course.

II

For the Inupiat, Sarichef Island and the Arctic landscape are not empty – places to be filled by utopian dreams – but full of meaning, and bound up in the Inupiat way of life.

So much European thought has imagined islands differently. The island has been a place of absence, where a new world could be imagined. Think of the success of Robinson Crusoe, who James Joyce named as the calculatingly taciturn exemplar of the British colonialist, or the continuing appeal of the fantasy of the desert island, where, apart from the humdrum of our working lives, we can finally be free. Or so it seems.

III

Island thinking reached its apex in the early modern period, as European thinkers struggled to come to terms with the existence of the Americas. What did it mean that these people lived so differently? Were they even human? In part, the tradition of natural right exemplified by the work of Hobbes and Locke was a way of coming to terms with this discovery. If tradition and custom could no longer be used to justify the way life was lived in Europe, perhaps by analysing man in his most basic state, one could arrive at basic rights and laws that applied to all humans.

IV

It is no mean feat, however, to get back to man in his most basic state.

This is where the islands come in.

In book six of *De Architectura*, Vitruvius writes of the philosopher Aristippus, who is shipwrecked on the coast of Rhodes. On the beach, with not a person in sight, he sees geometric shapes traced in the sand – signs of habitation. In the early modern period, this story was reinterpreted. What is important in the retelling is the not that the geometric shapes are a recognition of proximate humanity, but that they are recognisable at all. Even on a deserted island, humans can recognise those most basic shapes dear to Descartes. Even alone, we have reason, which binds us into the human community.

The thought-islands of the early modern period were places designed to strip man to his most essential, outside of tradition and culture. Grotius, the Dutch legal theorist influential in shaping natural right theory, wrote that in the natural state, man would have dominion over animals, nature, and his wife.

Suddenly, the deserted islands began to look rather like 17th century Amsterdam.

These island utopias may have been empty of people, but they were full of significance. Imagining man in his most basic state was also a way of imagining what the world should look like, and the world that was imagined looked much like a real world of increasing European domination, and the marginalization of those for whom islands were not empty, but places full of memories, ancestors, and ways of life.

V

Seasteading, with its incredible dreams of “permanent, autonomous, ocean communities” full of the “entrepreneurial spirit” seems rather like the thought-islands of the early modern period: both reimagine contemporary economic arrangements into a fantastic vision of what man could be. Unlike the early modern experiments however, Seasteading is based on a creaky ideology: government has made capitalism impossible; the old world is dead, and the new world at sea. As more and more of the world is opened up to resource extraction, and Sarichef island increasingly feels the cost, it was refreshing to read Shannon Wiley's article, which did not imagine fantasy islands, but thought poignantly about how to live on the islands we have.

Joshua Craze Toulouse