# Island

2017-11-15 11:25:53

By Pamila Gupta

Island. They are meditative, graspable and productive to think with. On the one hand, they are often conceptualized as the beginning of the world, sites of existential and utopian longing, tranquil and innocent: Paradise. On the other hand, they represent the end of the world, as sites of imprisonment and exile, places where contaminants are made to disappear, dumping grounds for society's ills, be it nuclear waste, military testing, undeclared taxes or most recently (African) refugees. Their double-sided quality carries over into how we think about the future of island-ness, both natural ones, some of which are starting to sink or rather waste away (think of the Maldives), and artificial ones that are fast becoming commonplace in an era of the Anthropocene. In this essay, I explore the weirdly fascinating yet deeply disturbing World Islands Development (or the 'World' as it is called by developers and tourists alike), a fantastical creation of fake islands recently built in the shape of the continental landmasses that make up the world, located four kilometers off the coast of Dubai (UAE), in order to read island futures in more cautionary ways.

The building of artificial islands is not new: they have a long and varied history (Jackson and della Dora, 2009). Yet the scale at which they are now being designed is; they are taking the world over, literally and digitally. To look from the sky above (and from an *Emirates* airplane as I have done on several occasions) at this strange aquatic terrain, a made-up puzzle of the world consisting of miniature parcels of land surrounded by a shimmering ocean, is to reflect on the future of fake islands and what I call slow islandness, in the spirit of Rob Nixon's "slow violence" (2011). In other words, the design of artificial island mega projects out of dredged sand and reclaimed dirt opens up questions of scale and value for writing about islands, not as geological formations found in nature, but rather as sites of experimentation, as by-products of waste and detritus.

> A journey. A saga. A legend. The World is today's great development epic. An engineering odyssey to create an island paradise of sea, sand and sky, a destination has arrived that allows investors to chart their own course and make the world their own. An array of island parcels means an array of possibilities. Engineered to be flexible and designed to be unforgettable: a blank

canvas in the azure waters of the Arabian Gulf (from the 'World Islands' official website: http://www.theworld.ae which was no longer functioning as of October 2016).

The 'World Islands' development as it was conceptualized above under the direction of ruler Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, and unveiled as a tourist complex in 2003, takes its cue from this same notion of (visual and environmental) gigantism that characterizes Dubai itself, a place that has a strangely ethereal beauty, one of a "forest of construction cranes reclaiming desert and sea" (Ali, 2010: 3). While Dubai is home to several artificial island projects, including the Palm Islands project and the Dubai waterfront, which are also human-made (much like the earlier Jebel Ali harbour, completed in 1976), the distinctive 'World Islands' development, under the direction of a group of Indian developers called Nakheel Properties is Maktoum's most ambitious project to date.



View of 'The World' in early 2009. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dubaiworld.jpg

The islands themselves are materially composed mainly of dirt and sand dredged from Dubai's shallow coastal waters and range from 14,000 to 42,000 m² in area, with an average distance of 100 m between separate islands. The entire 'World' covers approximately 6 by 9 km and is surrounded by oval-shaped breakwater islands. While roughly 232 km of

shoreline was created in the process of building this tourist haven, construction costs were estimated at US$14 billion back in 2005. With dredging close to completion, there are currently an astounding 321 million m³ of sand and 31 million tonnes of rock on these islands. On 10 January 2008, the final stone of the breakwater was laid, thus completing the creation of this fantasy island archipelago. Incredibly, this same year saw 60% of its islands sold to investors, a fact that was that was greatly helped by Sheik Mohammed's earlier "freehold revolution" decree of 2002 which allowed foreigners to buy luxury properties outright, not just on a 99-year lease. This massive real estate boom lasted until late 2008, when the effects of the global financial crisis were finally felt in Dubai. 'The World' project was then suspended briefly until the Dubai government provided US$8 billion in additional support to Nakheel Properties, enabling the corporation to complete its tourist and futuristic vision of 300 small private islands divided into four categories: private homes, estate homes, dream resorts, and community islands–all exclusively built for Dubai's "more well-heeled expatriates" according to sociologist Said Ali who writes about Dubai as a once and forever "gilded cage" (Ali, 2010: 8). That each independently owned island (and thus each owner) is part of envisioning a miniaturized archipelago of the world no doubt contributes to its tourist appeal as one gigantic imagined (island) community.

If every island is a "small continent" (Dening, 2004), then what does this imply for thinking about the stakes involved in conceiving and constructing the 'World Islands' tourist archipelagos? Can we conceive of these island formations as "anxious" or "promissory" spaces whereby people exist in a world insulated from the "rest of the world" (Jackson and della Dora, 2011: 295)? This tourism bubble also needs to be understood as actively reconstituting beachfront property; sand and dirt become pristine white beaches and valued prime property to be bought and sold to the highest bidder. Once all of Dubai's mega island projects are complete (including the Palms Trilogy, 'The World' and the future Universe archipelago), a disfiguring 950 kilometres of beachfront property will have been added to its landscape (Jackson and della Dora, 2011: 297), its future ecological consequences not realized as of yet.

Despite the seriousness of these looming environmental problems, 'the World' is creating a model of and for the world. Not only is the wildly speculative and speculating 'World Islands' instantly recognizable through the vertical gaze of Google Earth (Graham, 2016); it is also setting the trend for future fake fantasy island tourism in the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean and beyond (Ghosh, 2004). What also comes to mind is the more recent and ambitious project of Saadiyat Island ("Island of Happiness", a telling name no doubt), currently underway off the coast of Abu Dhabi as a premier cultural centre, and includes future satellite museum sites of the Louvre and Guggenheim (Saadiyat, 2015). In all of

these cases, ideas of nature and culture are taking on disturbing epic proportions. Enabled by advanced software-supported spatial programming and complex architectural mapping, they are "recoding and rescaling island spaces in new configurations of territoriality and governance" (Sheller, 2009). These newly emergent island formations are here to stay.

Finally, the 'World Islands' is an example of fakeness *par excellence*, operating to insert itself (and Dubai) in a world economy. These artificial islands tap into what cultural critic Akbar Abbas (2008) calls the discourse of the "fake," which is fast becoming part of the globalization process. Following Abbas: rather than dismiss the fake, we should see it as powerful symptom, one that becomes a way of relating to the global environment through the seduction of floating objects (Abbas, 2008: 263). Moreover, this generative idea of the fake allows us to understand this distinct islandness as integral to newly emergent forms of late capitalism, forms of "imagineered urbanism" (Davis, 2006: 47) that allow for island excess and privileged access while writing out the very real materialities that undergird these built environments.

However, it has not taken much time for those looking out the airplane window to start questioning the sustainability of what journalist Adam Luck described in 2010 as a "millionaire's playground." He offers us a dystopic viewpoint, describing the World as "299 mounds of bare sand sweltering in the 40+ degrees centrigrade heat" (Luck, 2010). Moreover, as early as the beginning of 2011 (a startling three years after completion), reports starting coming in that the artificial islands that make up the The World are gradually "falling [back] into the sea"(Spencer, 2011), a materiality that heralds a far more bleak, precarious, and synthetic future for islands more generally. Difficult questions need to be asked, like the one Ann Stoler posits: "what happens to island enclaves… [when they] become repositories of vulnerabilities that are likely to last longer than the political structures that produced them?"(2008: 203). Are these islands of whimsy in fact forms of "rubble" (following Gordillo 2014), cleverly disguised as idyllic beaches (Samuelson)? Will they become places where drift (Lavery) and dust (Caverly) are naturalized as part of island formations? For Rob Nixon, slow violence is "neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive." (2011: 2) Perhaps I am not so far off in suggesting a newly emergent form and content of slow islandness the world over.

Pamila Gupta *is Associate Professor at WISER (Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research) at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. She holds a PhD in Socio-cultural*

*Anthropology from Columbia University. She writes about Lusophone India and Africa, Portuguese colonial and missionary history, decolonization, heritage tourism, visual cultures and islands in the Indian Ocean. She has published in* Interventions, South African Historical Journal, African Studies, Critical Arts, Journal of Asian and African Studies, Ler História, Ecologie & Politique, *and* Public Culture, *and is the co-editor of* Eyes Across the Water: Navigating the Indian Ocean *with Isabel Hofmeyr and Michael Pearson (UNISA, 2010). Her monograph entitled* The Relic State: St. Francis Xavier and the Politics of Ritual in Portuguese India *was published in 2014 by Manchester University Press. Her newest collection of essays entitled* Portuguese Decolonization in the Indian Ocean World: History and Ethnography *is forthcoming with Bloomsbury Press (2018).*

**References**

Abbas, A. (2008). Faking globalization. In A. Huyssen (Ed.) *Other cities, other worlds: Urban imaginaries in a globalizing age* (pp. 243-264). Durham NC: Duke University Press.

Ali, S. (2010). *Dubai: Gilded cage.* New Haven CT: Yale University Press.

Davis, M. (2006). Fear and Money in Dubai. *New Left Review* 41 (September-October), 47-68.

Dening, G. (2004). *Beach crossings: Voyaging across times, cultures and self.* Victoria, Australia: Miegunyah Press.

Gordillo, G. (2014) *Rubble: the afterlife of destruction.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Ghosh, A. (2004) Folly in the sundabarans.
http://www.amitavghosh.com/essays/folly.html

Graham, Stephen. *Vertical: The City from Satellites to Bunkers* (London: Verso, 2016).

Jackson, M., and della Dora, V. (2009). Dreams so big only the sea can hold them: man-made islands as anxious spaces, cultural icons, and travelling visions. *Environment & Planning A, 41*(9), 2086-2104.

Jackson, M., and della Dora, V. (2011). Spectacular enclosures of the hope: artificial islands in the gulf and the present. In R. Shields, O. Park, & T. Davidson, (Eds.), *Ecologies of affect: Placing nostalgia, desire and*

*hope* (pp. 293-316). Waterloo ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Luck, Adam. "How Dubai's $14bn dream to build the world is falling apart, Daily Mail, 11th April 2010. http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/moslive/article-1263987/How-Dubais-14-billion-dream-build-The-World-falling-apart.html

Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Saadiyat (2005). Saadiyat. Retrieved from http://www.saadiyat.ae/

Sheller, M. (2009). Infrastructures of imagined islands: software, mobilities and the architecture of Caribbean paradise. *Environment and Planning A*, *41*, 1386-1403.

Spencer, R. (2011, January 20). The world is sinking: Dubai islands 'falling into the sea'. *The Daily Telegraph*. Retrieved from http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/dubai/8271643/The-World-is-sinking-Dubai-islands-falling-into-the-sea.html

Stoler, A. (2008). Imperial debris: reflections on ruins and ruination.' *Current Anthropology*, Volume 23, Issue 2 (2008), pp. 191-219.