Tropical Edens: Colonialism, Decolonization, and the Tropics

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ABSTRACT

This paper concerns the representations of tropical islands by three contemporary novelists: Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison (*Tar Baby*, 1981), Taiwanese woman writer Su Wai-zheng (*The Isle of Silence*, 1994), and Sri Lanka-born Canadian poet and novelist Michael Ondaatje (*Anil's Ghost*, 2000). Temporally spanning the last twenty years of the last century, the works under study are geographically spread across the Caribbean, the Indian, and the Pacific Oceans. Being scattered in "tricontinental" oceans, tropical Edens, nevertheless, tell colonial stories that are geographically determined. By reading the three works in tandem, I aim to investigate the dialectics between islands and continents, and between Western colonialism and tropical Edens in the East. I contend that tropical islands like Ceylon, Dominique, and Taiwan are, like the unnamed island in *Robinson Crusoe*, geographical bases and metonymies of Western colonialism. It is my argument that the spread of Western colonialism is tied with tropical Edenic islands, and that my reading of geographical dialectics will hopefully shed light to the "glocal knowledge" of the "Edenic island discourse."

KEY WORDS

Robisonade, islands in literature, the Tropics, tropical Edens, *The Isle of Silence*, Tar Baby, *Anil's Ghost*, the postcolonial

> Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises, sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.
>
> *The Tempest*, III ii

> All inhabitants of the hottest zones are, without exceptions, idle.
>
> Immanuel Kant (qtd. in Eze 116)

> The end of the world, as it turned out, was nothing more than a collection of magnificent winter houses on *Isle de Chevaliers*.
>
> *Tar Baby* 9

> It was the figure of the world the statue would see forever, in rainlight and sunlight, a combustible world of weather even without the human element.
>
> *Anil's Ghost* 306

> Danny asked once, "Why do you like the island?"
> Chen-mieng remembered clearly that she answered, "I feel whole. The big space means little to me."
>
> *The Isle of Silence* 402 (my trans.)

What Shakespeare, by way of Caliban, exalted in 1611 manifests a deep-seated Western geographical imagination of tropical Edens to be found in the Orient. *The Tempest*, as a romance located in the West Indies, was exemplary of the Western tropical imagination of the seventeenth century. Richard Grove maintains in *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens, and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1800* that "the developing scope of European

expansion during the Renaissance offered the opportunity for this search for Eden and the dyadic 'other' to be realized and expanded as a great partner of the . . . economic projects of early colonialism" (4). While the connections between tropical islands and European colonialism are worthy of explorations, the "glocal knowledge," as embodied in the "Edenic island discourse" (Grove 5), deserves critical attention.

My paper concerns the representations of tropical islands by three contemporary novelists: Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison (*Tar Baby*, 1981), Taiwanese woman writer Su Wai-zheng (*The Isle of Silence*, 1994), and Sri Lanka-born Canadian poet and novelist Michael Ondaatje (*Anil's Ghost*, 2000). Temporally spanning the last twenty years of the last century, the works under study are geographically spread across the Caribbean, the Indian, and the Pacific Oceans. Being scattered in "tricontinental"[1] oceans, tropical Edens, nevertheless, tell colonial stories that are geographically determined. I argue that Morrison's *Tar Baby* juxtaposes U.S. capitalism and Caribbean mysticism in the tropical island of Dominique, where, "three hundred years ago, [the shore] had struck slaves blind the moment they saw it" (8). The dynamics between islands and continents are also dominant in the geographical odysseys in *The Isle of Silence*. The winner of a major literary award in Taiwan, Su depicts the female protagonist's journeys across Guam, Bali, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan. While the novel has been read in light of female sexualities (Wang 1996; Yuan 1996), my reading focuses on the geo-political territoriality of the female Odysseus. Of particular interest is the figure of the "Dutch Father" in the novel, as the Dutch East India Company landed on the shores of Taiwan in 1624.

The Dutch colonial power was also prevalent in Ceylon in the seventeenth century. As the official Company Garden for spices, ebony, and other tropical timbers, the island of Ceylon had gone through a history of colonization before its final independence in 1948. In *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje depicts the quest of Anil Tissera, who returns to Sri Lanka after 15-years' self-exile in the West. It is important to note that Anil, being commissioned by the United Nations to identify the

missing populace in Ceylon's civil wars, returns as a forensic anthropologist. While her mission reminds us of those of Margaret Mead, Firth, Clifford Geertz, the figure of the anthropologist is remarkable.[2] As Anil unearths tropical island skulls, the collective enterprise of anthropology could be traced back to the works of Immanuel Kant, who, between 1756 and 1797, developed and taught the first modern courses on anthropology and physical geography.[3] As anthropology is inseparable from geography, it is important to point out that Anil names the unidentifiable skull, "Sailor." The naming is ironical, for it is exactly *sailors* like Columbus, De Gama, and Magellan, who brought about the death of the nameless Sailor three hundred years ago while traveling west to the tropics.

Reading the three works in tandem, I aim to investigate the dialectics between islands and continents, between Western colonialism and tropical Edens. I contend that tropical islands like Ceylon, Dominique, and Taiwan are, like the unnamed island in *Robinson Crusoe*,[4] geographical bases and metonymies of Western colonialism. It is my argument that the spread of Western colonialism is tied with tropical Edenic islands, and that my reading of geographical dialectics will hopefully shed light to the "glocal knowledge" of the "Edenic island discourse."

The paper consists of four segments. The first, "the Tropical Trope," studies the trope of the Tropics in the context of Western colonialism. The second, "the Island Imaginary," examines the role of the island in the sub-genre of Robinsonades. The third turns to Morrison and Ondaatje and argues that both deviate from the tradition of Robinsonades by composing alternative island narratives. The last focuses on the figure of the Dutch father in Su's novel. I argue that a geo-political mapping is indispensable in making sense of the "silence of the island."

I. The Tropical Trope

Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze studies the implication of Immanuel Kant's involvement in climatology and racial taxonomy. In his article

"The Color of Reason: The Idea of 'Race' in Kant's Anthropology," Eze discloses the raciological fundamentalism of the otherwise highly regarded philosopher. He emphasizes that Kant was the originator of the "most profound raciological thought of the eighteenth century" (qtd. in Eze 103). As a pioneer who developed original courses in modern anthropology and geography, Kant was in the forefront of classifying races on the basis of climatic distribution of the populations. Eze observes that "the idea of 'race'" follows a geographical discourse: "Kant's study of race and racial classifications on the basis of *physical* characteristics (skin color, to be precise) was done under the disciplinary domain of 'geography'" (106). It is important to note that in Section Four ("Of National Characteristics") of *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime,* Kant "classified humans into: white (Europeans), yellow (Asians), black (Africans) and red (American Indians)" (Eze 115). While the difference in skin color was attributed to the "mineral iron deposits at the subcutaneous level of the body" (118), Kant made a connection between climate and racial taxonomy,

> In the hot countries the human being matures earlier in all ways but does not reach the perfection of the temperate zones. Humanity exists in its greatest perfection in the white race. The yellow Indians have a smaller amount of Talent. The Negroes are lower and the lowest are a part of the American peoples. (qtd. in Eze 118)

The racialization of climate, or the geographical zoning of races, was thus intertwined by Kant in 1764. As Eze states, "[f]or Kant, then, skin color encodes and codifies the 'natural' human capacity for reason and rational talents" (119). That is to say, "the color of reason" coheres with the principle of climatic zoning. As the "perfection of humanity" is located in the temperate zone, "the color of reason" is (then) nothing but white.[5]

While Kant asserts the correspondence between European raciology and global climatology, Grove's study of Edenic islands in Western tropical imagination deserves critical attention. In *Green*

Imperialism, he maintains that the image of an Edenic tropical garden was first seen in "classical Greek writings and myth" (4). It was then wed to the colonized tropical islands as a result of European expansion in the sixteenth century. The image of Edenic gardens sustained, as Grove notes that "the search for an eastern-derived Eden provided much of the imaginative basis for early Romanticism" (4). The "Edenic island discourse" found its full sweep in the establishment of colonial Company Gardens in the Canary Islands, the Barbadoes, and Jamaica. Being responsible for the plantation of tropical herbs, spices, and timbers, Company Gardens were colonial exploitations of tropical economy. As Grove states,

> The tropical islands which were often the first landfalls and navigational points of reference, and which later became the first colonies, encapsulated an alternative . . . world as well as offering economic opportunities. . . . Inevitably, then, they became the subject of economic and literary interest, as well as myth, for the navigators of the early period of European expansion. (32)

Grove's insights are shared by other critics. French structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-strauss taught Sociology in San Paulo and did field work in Brazil between 1934 and 1937. His travel accounts *Tristes Tropiques* (1955; trans. 1974) becomes indispensable in any inquiry into the tribes and the tropics. Lévi-strauss is weary of European expansions in the Tropics, as he notes: "a proliferating and overexcited civilization has broken the silence of the seas once and for all. The perfumes of the tropics and the pristine freshness of human beings have been corrupted by a busyness with dubious implication" (37–38). While his tone is subtle, his realization of the European "quest for power" is profound. The tropics are "*tristes,*" as Lévi-strauss depicts how the "hot zones" are being rapidly transformed:

> Now that the Polynesian islands have been smothered in concrete and turned into aircraft carriers solidly anchored in the southern seas, when the whole of Asia is beginning to look like a dingy

> suburb, when shanty-towns are spreading across Africa, when civil and military aircraft blight the primeval innocence of the American or Melanesian forest even before destroying their virginity, what else can the so-called escapism of travelling do than confront us with the more unfortunate aspect of our history? (38)

The travels to tropical islands, in other words, witness the "unfortunate aspect of our history," that is, the over-developing capitalist system of world economy persistently seeking new buyers and next-wave marketing.

While racial prejudice is related to the tropics, Lévi-Strauss and his experiences in Brazil remind us of his Renaissance countryman, Michel Montaigne and the latter's famous article of 1580, "On the Cannibals." In a satiric voice Montaigne talked about the Western fascination with the cannibals, the imaginary savage tribes living in the jungles of the Amazons. He observed how the shipwreck off the shores of Brazil was related to the mischief of tribal Indians. Notoriously portrayed as being barbarous and savage, the Carib Indians were the European prototypes of the cannibals. The reference to Brazil, a country set in the Tropical zone, was not coincidental. As Groves notes that "the image of Paradise was important in motivating some of the early 'explorations' of Brazil" (32), the role of Brazil in stimulating early European imagination of the tropics is noteworthy. In a voice resembling that of Lévi-strauss, Montaigne speaks tongue-in-cheek "I find that there is nothing savage or barbarous about those peoples, but that every man calls barbarous anything he is not accustomed to" (82).

Robert Young in *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* classifies imperialistic operations into three categories: first, the "Roman, Ottoman and Spanish imperial model," whose "colonies were predominantly established for the purpose of forms of settlement" (17); second, the late nineteenth-century European model, whose colonies were "established for economic exploitation[s] without any significant settlement, such as American Philippines and Puerto Rico, British India, Dutch East Indies, etc." (17); and third, the "'maritime enclaves,' that is, those islands, harbors and other strategic points that were occupied

as bases for the purpose of global military and naval operations" (17). It is important to note that the colonies of the second category are geographically "situated in the tropics" (17) and that the colonized areas are, more often than not, tropical islands. In other words, tropical Edens are geographically determined to be buffer colony zones of European imperialism. Young's classification therefore fortifies the foundation of my inquiry of Western colonialism and tropical islands.

If Young defines tropical islands as a site of colonial expansionism, the works of Srinivas Aravamudan deserve more than a mention. In *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688–1804,* Aravamudan gives a name to tropical cannibals who have fascinated Europeans for centuries. Calling them by the name of "tropicopolitans," Aravamudan sets it off from its counterparts, the *cosmopolitans*, or the *metropolitans*. Originally applicable only to "species dominant in the tropical region," tropicopolitans are related to the process of tropicalization, which is used "in a more literal sense, to describe the acclimation of flora, fauna, and even machinery to warmer habitats" (6). The process of tropical acclimation is then likened to that of "transculturation" (6). Aravamudan argues, "tropicalization and transculturation suggest acts of cultural transformation, or 'going native,' in various colonial 'contact zones'" (6). The term "tropicopolitan" is, however, used in his book (as well as in this paper) as "a name for the colonized subject who exists both as fictive construct of colonial tropology *and* actual resident of tropical space, object of representation *and* agent of resistance" (4). In this doubled position, the concept is applied to Aravamudan's reading, in particular, of Haitian revolution hero Toussaint Louverture and African slave Olaudah Equiano. He argues that both Equiano and Louverture are representative tropicopolitans who "interrogate the nation as repository of colonialist thought" and, by doing so, "tropicalize the [project of] Enlightenment" (235).[6]

To come to a conclusion at this juncture, the trope of the tropical serves a multiple purpose. First, it is related to the ideologies of anthropology and geography, which, since the time of Kant, have fostered a discourse of racialized climatology. (That is, the hotter the

nation, the darker/dumber of the race). While Grove interrogates the colonial implication in the European imagination of tropical Edens, Young defines the tropics as a specific site of Western colonialism. It is Aravamudan, who points out the importance of the figure of the tropicopolitan, the agent of the "tropicalization of Enlightenment." In the following, I will turn to tropical island imaginaries and investigate how the figure of tropicopolitan emerges as both an "object of representation *and* [an] agent of resistance."

II. The Island Imaginary

In the West, there has been a rich tradition of islands in literature. Montaigne in the same essay stated that the island imaginary could be traced back to Aristotle, who talked about the discovery of a "vast island called Atlantis," which was even then imagined as an Eden on earth. Two approaches seem to have dominated in the study of island literature in the West. First, the island imaginary has been a topic heavily invested in the issues of colonialism and nationalism. In *Problematic Shores: The Literature of Islands*, Diana Loxley argues that the "centrality of the topos of the island . . . coincides with the era of high imperialism in Britain" (xi). In the context of European colonialism, the "island [provides] the space and focus for this basic context offering the possibility for absolute power and total dominion" (3). She continues: "The literary texts which invoke this topos of the island are distinguished by the fact that they are all reflections on origins, the site of that contemplation being the uninhabited territory upon which the conditions for a rebirth or genesis are made possible" (3). In this context, that *Robinson Crusoe* is taken as the proto-text of island literature is simply self-evident.

If *Robinson Crusoe* serves the function of the "archie-" narrative, it is noted by its "remarkable lack of erotic urges and sexual fantasies during his twenty-eight years of isolation" (Bell 29). Ian Bell states that "Robinson Crusoe's life . . . presents itself as a compendium of equally 'strange surprising' male possibilities suitable for the edification or an exclusive male readership from the very beginning" (31). Bell notes

how Robinson's mother tries to put pressure on his "wandering disposition" and it is met with resistance (33). Against his mother's wish, "Crusoe's activities are conducted in an exclusively male context" (34). Therefore it is not surprising that "the most sustaining relationships understood within the novel are those carried on between men of equivalent status" (34). As Crusoe survives the island, Bell surmises that "the intelligent and resilient English man can get on perfectly well in any circumstances, without requiring the help of others, including women" (35). Emotionally there is "no real sense of loneliness or the pain of isolation" (35). Bell concludes:

> In *Robinson Crusoe*, unlike other male-oriented popular fiction, women are never portrayed as faithless temptresses or as feckless emotional creatures or as threatening or challenging figures in any significant way. . . . In their own quiet and unobtrusive manner, tucked away in the margins of the text, Crusoe's women represent the stable and enduring features of a world constantly put out-balance by the a ggressive forces of male impulsiveness. (44)[7]

Richard Phillips in *Mapping Men and Empire: A Geography of Adventure* points out that the Crusoe subjectivity[8] of being "white, middle-class, Christian, British [and] male" (31) is "invented on the island" (31). Crusoe is literally "reborn as he enters the island" (31). Phillips cites James Joyce, who spells out the symbol of Crusoe

> The true symbol of the British [colonial] conquest is Robinson Crusoe, . . . He is the true prototype of the British colonist, as Friday . . . is the symbol of the subject races. The whole Anglo-Saxon spirit is in Crusoe: the manly independence; the unconscious cruelty; the persistence; the slow yet efficient intelligence; the sexual apathy; the practical, well-balanced religiousness; the calculating taciturnity. (qtd. in Phillips 33–34)

Where the divide between Crusoe and Friday is unequivocal, Phillips also pays attention to post-colonial Robinsons and

Robinsonades. Among them, he cites William Golding, Michel Tournier and J. M. Coetzee as examples. Golding in *Lord of Flies* "sought to reposition himself in a decolonising world, to decolonize metropolitan masculinity" (146), and relate the island imagery with European "geographical fantasies onto non-European, real geographies, including the Americas, Africa and Australia" (intro.). Michel Tournier's *Friday, or the Other Island* (1969) "suggests Tournier's intention to retell the story from Friday's perspective" (Phillips 155). In other words, Friday should be taken as one of the early tropicopolitans.

If Robertson Crusoe represents the male figure of the island imaginary, Ariadne on the island of Naxos would be that of the female. Arnold Saxton in his article "Female Castaways" points out that "women on islands figure prominently in [Western] mythology (141). He gives an account of the legendary princess Ariadne, who is abandoned by Theseus on Naxos and is later saved by Dionysus, while waiting for the arrival of Hermes as the messenger of death.[9] The awaited messenger appears not to be Hermes, that of Death, but Bacchus, that of love (144). Saxton contends "the desert island is a symbolic place, and its highly stylized stage depiction with a vaginal cave for Ariadne's retreat, and the irruption of the phallic prow of Bacchus ship, serves to underline this" (144). That is to say, Ariadne, a deserted woman of Naxos, is now being redeemed by the love of Dionysus and taken as a noble revision of the male island imaginary.

In regard to the feminization of the islands, Jules Verne's *Mysterious Islands* (1875) gives a good example. While getting ashore, the crew shouted out, "how beautiful our island is" (qtd. in Loxley 54). Diana Loxley argues that "upon a land progressively mapped as the female body—a tempting site indeed—it is the desire of the scientist to implant his fertile reason" (54). The island as the female body adds spice to the male imaginary of the island in the West. Loxley eventually takes the island imaginary as the metaphor of the relationship between (Western) men and nature (55–61).

Moreover, Jean Giraudoux in his novel *Suzanne and the Pacific* (1921) creates the story of a female castaway who is the only survivor of a shipwreck. Yet very different from Crusoe, Suzanne does not

proceed with the praxis of husbandry or housewifery for that matter. On the contrary, she casts away clothes and "walks naked as Eve through her Paradise" (145). Saxton maintains: "The effect achieved is that, without lifting a finger to change the island, Suzanne, by the power of her imagination, has transformed them into an extension of the France she knew" (145). It's clear to see that the elements of fancy and pornography are explicit in Giraudoux' imagination of Eve in the island of Eden. It is interesting how women are not associated with practical matters of survival; it is pornography, for the naked Eve is seen by nobody else but a male voyeur.

Saxton contends, "the relationship between the woman and the island, seen as a female presence in itself, seems a strong element in the stories of both Ariadne and Suzanne" (Saxton 146). The island of Naxos is "female-orientated" (147): "both heroines are associated with the power of transforming the island or themselves in ways which Crusoe would not have recognized" (147). Saxton argues that "if Robinson Crusoe himself has become one of the most fertile of literary archetypes, we can find in modern reworkings of the legend of Ariadne . . . and Suzanne . . . something of the quality of myth, though a different myth from that created by Defoe" (147).

To sum up, the island imaginary in the West could be divided between the male-dominant myth of a desert island that is to be progressed into civilization with *Robinson Crusoe* as its proto-text; and the female-centered myth of Ariadne in Naxos, who signifies an island imaginary of female eros: that the island could indeed be a paradise for women to be consummated by the "entry" of some princely figures like Dionysus.[10] In terms of postcolonialism, I cite Richard Phillips again: "To unmap Robinsons, Robinsonades and other adventure stories is to open space in which to invent new worlds, to make room for new voices and new construction of geography and forms of identity" (160). While the Western tradition serves as a point of departure, I will now turn to island imaginaries of Morrison and Ondaatje.

III. Morrison and Ondaatje

Tar Baby: "The Greenhouse on the Equator"

Morrison's fourth novel features an island of excess: "too much light. To much shadow. Too much rain. Too much foliage and much too much sleep" (qtd. in Lepow 365). The image of an abundant tropical island is depicted clearly from the beginning of the narrative: "hills and vales so bountiful it made visitors tired to look at them: hougainvillea, avocado, poinsettia, lime, banana, coconut and the last of the rain forest's champion trees" (*TB* 8). With a characteristic touch of magical realism, Morrison rewrites the story of "discovery" from the point of view of nature (flowers to be specific): "Only the champion daisy trees were serene. After all, they were part of a rain forest already two thousand years old and scheduled for eternity, so they ignored the men and continued to rock the diamondbacks that slept in their arms" (*TB* 7).

Lauren Lepow argues that *Tar Baby* retells the "myth of Eden" (365). She states, "the *Isle des Chevaliers* is certainly a tropical paradise" (366). While "both the tar baby story and the myth of Eden are stories of creation" (365), Lepow argues that Morrison re-writes the story of Genesis and "merges the Genesis story with the tar baby folk tale" (365). Moreover, she compares the paradisiac setting of *le Isle des Chevaliers* with Milton's *Paradise Lost* (366).

The name of the house that Valerian builds is also symbolic. *L'Arbe de la Croix* signifies the "Tree of the Cross," which designates the tree from which the Cross is made. As Lepow states, "the 'croix' foreshadows the agony that the house's inhabitants will experience and the redemption they may or may not attain to" (367). The house is "garden-like," being "wide, breezy, and full of light" (qtd. in Lepow 367). Lepow compares it with Satan's Pandemonium, both being "elaborately constructed mansions" (367).

The construction of a greenhouse on the *Isle des Chevaliers* by the New England entrepreneur Valerian Street, with its "Northern

flowers" like hydrangeas and dahlias (*TB* 13), moreover, signifies a colonial interest in manipulating nature by cooling its heat. As Lepow notes, Valerian wants to "transplant hydrangeas from Philadelphia to the Caribbean and see that they grow" (370). Valerian could be likened to Prospero in the sense that he is indeed a magician, yearning for "a greenhouse on the equator" (*TB* 13). In the greenhouse on the Equator, Valerian is the Satanic Creator, who creates Jadine, the tar baby (Lepow 376)[11], as well as the white *babies* of Margaret and Michael. While Margaret is symbolically the Principal (Maine) Beauty, who's transplanted to the tropical island, Michael is never given the opportunity to grow. They both wither away as a result of ill tropicalization. The family's destruction — Valerian's downfall, Margaret's demise, and Michael's death—can be taken symbolically as the total defeat of the "greenhouse on the equator."

The house is metaphorically the "end of the world." At the end of the novel, Jadine leaves the island in search of herself in the metropolis of Paris, while Son is being "absorbed into a mythic world, [and] joins the blind horsemen of the island's interior" (Lepow 375). The Edenic Island turns out to be utopian. By rejecting the Edenic garden offered by either Son (Eloe, Florida) or Valerian (*Isle des Chevaliers*), Jadine turns her back on the blood and becomes her own person. In contrast to the accusation that Jadine betrays her culture, I argue that, by doing so, Jadine challenges the role of the "tar baby." As Jan Furman argues, "Jadine is a feminist who lives outside" (64). I contend that like Sula, Jadine wants more than anything to be a woman on her *own*. And Morrison grants her such a choice.

Furthermore, in the context of the Robinsonade, it is interesting to note that it is the man who is "absorbed into the interior" of the island while the woman goes away. In other words, unlike Robinson Crusoe, Jadine does not stay on the island and makes it her home. Yet, nor does she believe in what Valerian has done. Jadine has made a hard choice: she wants to make it on her own.[12] While Jadine refuses to be the *tar baby* defined by her culture, the novel of *Tar Baby* is a far-cry from the genre of Robinsonade as well.

Anil's Ghost: the Sailor and the Island

While Jadine leaves the *Isle des Chevaliers* in search of self, Anil Tissera in *Anil's Ghost* returns to her native island of Sri Lanka to search for "truth." Her quest, an anthropological mission in disguise, turns out to be one that investigates the connections between the past and the present, between tropical resistance and postcolonial turmoil.

The novel begins with Anil's return to Sri Lanka. The moment she steps out of the terminal, Anil is welcome by tropical sunlight, and she is instantly reminded of a phrase she read in the West, "The dawn comes up like thunder" (*AG* 9). It is important to note that "[Anil] was the only one in the classroom to recognize the phrase physically" (*AG* 9). I'd like to argue that the physical recognition of tropical heat serves as a divide between the West and the "hot zone," in terms of climate, as well as ideology. The tropical sunlight highlights the fact that she's home. The very physical dimension of the tropical, the heat to be precise, is the key of Ondaatje's rendering of the imaginary return to *his* native island. The physical epistemology of tropical heat, therefore, serves as the foundation of tropicopolitan survivance,[13] as we will see in characters such as Sarath, Palipana, and Ananda.

Rebecca Davies argues that "*Anil's Ghost* is a novel of identity. Ondaatje traces numerous dimensions of an island and people [being] tormented by identiary strife" (241). As Davies observes, it is "Ondaatje's obsession with truth that drives the book" (241). W. H. New contends that *Anil's Ghost* "unearths Canada's Asian connections" (569). The connections with Asia derive from a colonial past. Anil's mission is in this light to unearth the connections between the past and the present. It's about the story of an "anthropologist whose bone discoveries, if pursued, will tell tales on government authorities" (New 569). The past then becomes a ghost, which is now haunting Anil, hence the title of the novel, *Anil's Ghost*.

The ghost derives from the colonial past. The history of Ceylon's colonization is closely tied with that of European expansionism. The Dutch experiment of the "Company Gardens" was first developed

between 1652 and 1700 in colonial islands like St. Helena, Mauritius, Java, and Ceylon (Grove 128–41). The British invasion in the late 1700s resulted in the colonization of Ceylon from 1825 to 1948. Sri Lanka was granted universal suffrage in 1931, when the forces of decolonization started to emerge (Young 9). The legacy of colonialism in post-independence Sri Lanka is how the regime is troubled by "ethnic groups that had earlier been regarded as oppressors or privileged minorities" (Young 59). (The Tamils have been identified as a source of disturbance to the government.) In *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje depicts the crash of three forces: "the government, the antigovernment insurgents in the south and the separatist guerrillas in the north. Both the insurgents and the separatists had declared war on the government" ("Author's Note"). The postcolonial turmoil is related to the issue of nationalism, as Aravamudan states: "the nation [is part of] the repository of colonialist thought" (235).

Anil's happy that she's back: "the buried senses from childhood alive in her (*AG* 15). It's important to point out that the "buried senses" are connected with weather: "Those first days in Colombo it seemed she always found herself alone when the weather broke. The touch of rain on her shirt, the smell of dust in the wetness. Clouds would suddenly unlock and the city would turn into an intimate village full of people acknowledging the rain and yelling to one another" (*AG* 15). It's interesting how Anil's memories of her childhood in Colombo are integrated with those of the weather, especially the monsoon. She recalls how at a garden party in May her father did not go inside the house when the rain came: "[he sat] at the table, celebrating the break in seasons, as earth turned to mud around them" (*AG* 15).

If the "buried senses" are resurrected in the memories of monsoon, it is the imagination of earth, which characterizes Sarath's vision. An archaeologist by profession, his dream is however to "write a book about a city in the south of the island that no longer existed. Not a wall of it remained, but he wanted to tell the story of that place" (*AG* 29). The place is also related to weather: it's a "favorite monsoon town of a certain king" (*AG* 29). Anil recalls that this is Sarath "at his most expressive, almost enthusiastic, . . . drawing the shape of the city with

his hands, sketching it in the dark air" (*AG* 30).

If Sarath is idealistic, the pigraphist Palipana is even more so. He's the representative tropicopolitan in the novel, not only because of his scholarship, but because of his conviction in Sinhala nationalism. He draws a different map: "While the West saw Asian history as a faint horizon where Europe joined the East, Palipana saw his country in fathoms and color, and Europe simply as a landmass on the end of the peninsula of Asia" (*AG* 79). Living an ascetic life in the groves, Palipana is committed to the recovery of the Stone Book of Polonnaruwa, "a boulder carved into a rectangle four feet high, thirty feet long, the first book of the country" (*AG* 83). It's important to note that Palipana's work is also related to heat. When he tries to decode the letters carved in the stone, "[He would lay] his bare arms and the side of his face against this plinth that collected the heat of the day. For most of the year it was dark and warm and only during the monsoons would the letters be filled with water, creating small, perfectly cut harbors, as at Carthage" (*AG* 83). That is to say, the Stone Book is only readable in the monsoon season when the carved letters are made present by the rain. That the readability of the Stone Book is embedded in the most notable weather of the island tells the passion of Sinhala nationalism. It is stored in the bosom of Palipana. The blind epigraphist is now in his seventies, still "writing in cursive script and racing the truth out of himself" (*AG* 84). If, as Davies says, the novel is about the recovery of truth, the "truth" that Palipana knows is the one carved in the Stone Book.

Palipana is important because he's the one who introduces Ananda to Anil and Sarath and helps them piece together the face of Sailor. While the identification of Sailor is crucial, it is clear that his name is metonymous: "to give him a name that would name the rest." The rest of what? That is, the rest of the un-named skulls who are sacrificed in the post-independence civil wars in Sri Lanka. Moreover, Ananda is the artist who paints the eyes for the Buddha at the end of the novel. It is Ananda, his wife being killed in the civil insurgence, who highlights the figure of the tropicopolitan. A dispossessed man after the death of his wife, Ananda resumes the ceremony of Eye Painting as an

ascent in status and a revival of Sinhala spirit. Seeing what the Buddha sees, Ananda.

> And now with human sight he was seeing all the fibres of natural history around him. . . . He could feel each current of wind . . . every lattice-like green shadow created by cloud. . . . The rain miles away blowing like blue dust towards him. Grasses being burned, bamboo, the smell of petrol and grenade. The crack of noise as a layer of rock on his arm exfoliated in heat. (*AG* 307)

It is the vision of the tropicopolitan, that of the Buddha, as well as of Ananda, which ends the novel. By turning to the tropical landscapes of Sri Lanka, Ondaatje draws the currents of the tropics as if to inhale the elements of heat. By returning to the climatic element of the tropics, *Ani's Ghost* is tropicopolitan in its very rendering of the "great churning of weather above the earth" (*AG* 307).

IV. *The Isle of Silence*: The Dutch Father

If Ondaatje gives us a novel that is wrapped in tropical heat, and if Morrison one that is centered on female agency, Su does both in *The Isle of Silence*. Moreover, I argue that *The Isle of Silence* is a feminist essay on sexuality that centers on the image of the island, and that it is a tropicopolitan novel which asserts the identity and autonomy of the island. This session herewith investigates the relationship between the *topos* of Taiwan and the imaginary of the island state.

Unlike the fecund imagination of the island in the West, the island of Formosa has been depicted in terms of the "ruins" (廢墟台灣), which howls against the waste and devastation of the island; the "margins" (島嶼邊緣), which tries to go beyond the confines of the island by focusing on its "margins" as a form of resistance; and, most significantly, the "beautiful island" (美麗島), which originated from the Portuguese "discovery" of the island of Formosa in 1545. The name of Formosa has been employed as the nominal and symbolic icon of the island, especially in the opposing bloc of the Democratic Progressive

Party in the Eighties.

That the island compels a strong and collective conscious in the *mythos* of its inhabitants is undoubted. Wong Xuang-yi states in his article "Tracking the Smell of Love" that the island is a synecdoche of space and a metaphor of love (310). The metaphor of love could be related to the myth of Ariadne. Thematically, like the myth of Ariadne, *The Isle* depicts the life of the female protagonist Huo Chen-mieng, who is doubled in the twin sisters of Chen-mieng and Chen-an. Metaphorically the island is the woman, and *The Isle of Silence* is about the story of a woman. In this sense, Su's novel could be compared to a trans-cultural recurrence of Ariadne on Naxos. To be exact, it is the South China version of the myth of Ariadne, in contrast with its counterpart in the Aegean Sea.

This comparison is not made without qualifications. While female figures have not as much to do with the nationalistic or colonialistic import as Crusoe does, it is important to point out that Ariadne, Circe, Calypso, and the Sirens are all images of the female created by men. In other words, these female island figures are still attachments to male-dominant narratives of adventure. The island is but a point of connection or "entry." It is not meant to be a site of permanent residency. And women, like islands, are but points of connections or sojourn, but not "home."

In comparing the female subject to an island, the West unfolds a tradition that has taken women to be submissive and conquerable. But Chen-miang is not a female castaway; nor the counterpart of Robinson Crusoe, or Susan Barton. Chen-miang is never Ariadne, waiting for men to get ashore and to be saved. Rather, like Jadine, she is an island of and for herself.[14]

In terms of self, I argue that the island imaginary in *The Isle of Silence* is closer to the Arnoldian individualism or insulationism. As Yuang Quan-quan says, "everyone is an island," and each one's job is to have one's self (305). The island is therefore individualistic and personal. In this way, Yuang Quan-quan is echoing Wong Dewai, who cites Matthew Arnold and the "Dover Beach" as an illustration of the kind of individualism and sovereignty that Su asserts in her island

imaginary (20). Wong Xuang-yi also argues that the image of the island signifies a small space, where "I can easily run into things happening" (310). Moreover, the significance of the island lies in its completeness. The vastness of continental spaces does not mean too much to the female protagonist in *The Isle of Silence* (310).

Yet radically different from Arnold, Su's island imaginary is a profuse signifier of female sexuality. Like Ariadne, Chen-miang is herself an island to be explored. Yet unlike Ariadne, Chen-miang does not "lay" there. Instead, she goes places and travels. While Chen-miang visits Danny in Germany and sojourns in Singapore, she works in Hong Kong, and vacations in Bali. Geographically the islands scatter across Hong Kong, Bali, Singapore, and Taiwan and form the watery region of the South China Sea. Taken together, *The Isle of Silence* tells the story of the South China Sea—the watery region that compels a rhizome of female sexuality.

Moreover, the South China Sea, I argue, forms a watery region that is analogous to and different from the Mediterranean Sea as we see in Homer's *Odyssey*. The most obvious difference is that the protagonist is a woman; in other words, I'm reading Chen-miang as a female Odysseus. Like her male counterpart, Chen-miang goes from place to place. In other words, this female Odysseus travels, which is quite different from Greek female island figures like Circe, Calypso, or the Sirens. An interesting reversal is being observed: in the postmodern South China Sea *Odyssey*, the wandering disposition is centered on a female protagonist. Traveling among the islands in the South China Sea, Chen-miang could be compared to a transnational female Odysseus. And the story of a wandering female Odysseus is noteworthy in two aspects: not only the *topos* of *Odyssey* is relocated in the South China Sea, but the *eros* focuses on the woman *for* the woman. The man only comes to help realize the woman.

What is interesting is also how the imaginary of the foreign works in Su's narrative. Chen-miang's father is half-Dutch. Her boss Dulan is a pale-skinned Muslim from India. Her lover Danny is mixedblood descent of German and Asian American background. Chen-an is a gay lover of the Asian American Daniel, while Danny is German. Xing is a

Singaporean homosexual. Chen-miang works in both Hong Kong and Taiwan. Chen-an gets married and is settled in England. Chen-miang likes to vacation in Bali. In other words, the geography of the islands crosses national boundaries and renders an investment in internationalism that orchestrates the interweaving issues of androgyny, homosexuality, bisexuality, and inter-racial marriage.

In this rhizome of global transgressions, Su is able to add the passion of female erotica to the islands. The novel has an indelible flavor of internationalism, which manifests how Su's island imaginary goes beyond the geographical confinement of an island state. It shuffles between continents and islands and moves toward the horizon. It is not a story about a specific island, but about the island imaginary. In other words, the island should not be identified with that of Taiwan, and should instead be read as a metaphor of female *topos* and *eros*.

In other words, I am arguing that women being islands is the theme and topography of the novel. That is, the island connotes a state of being, erotically and topologically. That they are plural is manifested in the twin sisterhood in the novel. Yet, as both Yuang Quan-quan and Wong De-wai argue, the multiplicity of Chen-miang is not only probable, but also plausible (305, 21). As Dung-nieng says it is the search of the Libido Man (Times 286), which characterizes the female sexuality in *The Isle of Silence*.

I argue that the anthropological studies of insular cultures across the South Pacific and the South China Sea could be discursively connected with an earlier phase of colonial expansion in the Far East--to be more precise, the establishment of the Dutch East India Company in the Moluccas in 1605 as the base of the Dutch monopoly of the spice trade in the region (Grove 169). The "Dutch Father" is therefore of unusual significance in the "silence of the isle."

To conclude, I would call for attention to the trope of the island and to the region of the South China Sea as a geographical discourse of literature in East Asia. As the odysseys in the Mediterranean Ocean planted the seeds of Western civilization, it would be interesting to observe how the travels in the South China Sea tell the story of Taiwanese diaspora. If the island of Formosa was "discovered" in the

1600s by the Portuguese, the "discovery" of the "silent island" by Taiwanese woman writer Su Wai-zheng provides us with a springboard to leap for new imaginary of the topos, eros, and *ecritures* in the South China Sea.

* * *

Hendrik van Reede, the Dutch governor, was accredited with the success in Ceylon. He wrote in his journal: "nothing can be compared with the pleasant and nice aspects of the Company's garden" (qtd. in Grove 141). While the voice of Van Reede seemed to echo that of Caliban in 1611, yet the voice of van Reede, a Dutch colonialist, is far different from that of Caliban, a Caribbean native. Caliban's "curse" has been recursively re-visited in the works of Retamar (1971); Spivak (1985); and Baker, Jr. (1986).

The encounter between Western expansionism and tropical Edens is more than commercial, but cultural and racial. As Lévi-strauss observes, "while the whites maintained that the Indians were beasts, the Indians did no more than suspect that the whites might be gods. Both attitudes show equal ignorance, but the Indians' behavior certainly had greater human dignity (76). It is the "writing-back" of native islanders which I have examined in this paper. While the model of Robinson or Robinsonade has been dominant in the West, writers as diverse as Morrison, Ondaatje, and Su demonstrate how the writings of tropical islands could be diverted from the model of Robinsonades.

To conclude, the three texts under study explore geopolitics of tropical Edens in the Caribbean, the Indian, and the Pacific Oceans. The incorporation of Caribbean mythicism, Sri Lanka Buddhism, and Taiwan tropicopolitanism tells alternative stories of "discovery" and "odyssey." While Morrison creates a black woman leaving the island en route to the discovery of self, Ondaatje, by way of the fictive female anthropologist, returns to his native island and digs deep into the heat of the tropics (in search of "truth"). If Morrison creates a feminist narrative denouncing the myth of Eden, Ondaatje manifests a postcolonial return to his tropical home(is)land. Different from both, Su, cruising across tropical islands visited by Captain Cook, Melville, Conrad, Mead, Firth, and Geertz, unconsciously patches up the

Austronesian Region, where Taiwan is situated on the northern tip. The tropicopolitan islands of Ceylon, Dominique, and Taiwan, therefore, embody the glocal knowledge of colonialism, decolonization, and the tropics.

NOTES

[1] This is Robert Young's term in *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, by which he means the "Third World," that is, the political bloc composed of Latin America, Africa, and Asia, as a form of resistance against the "First World" (4–5). It is used here to designate the three continents where most tropical Edens are located.

[2] As a matter of fact, there are two anthropologist characters in *The Isle of Silence*, Denny and Zu.

[3] Please see Emmnuel Chukwudi Eze's article "The Color of Reason: The Idea of 'Race' in Kant's Anthropology," which I will discuss in the first segment of the paper.

[4] As John Robert Moore notes, the fictive island is probably located near the mouth of the Orinoco, "where Crusoe was to be shipwrecked" (337). The story of Alexander Selkirk, "on a real desert island 3,500 miles to the southwest of Crusoe's imaginary kingdom" (336), is said to be influential to Defoe. Please see Moore, "Robinson Crusoe" 335–42.

[5] On the intricate relationships between geography and raciology, please also see the chapter "Maps for the Masses" in Susan Schulten's *The Geographical Imagination in America, 1880–1950*, in which she studies nineteenth century American maps, such as Rand McNally's *Pictorial Atlas of the World* (1898), and observes the same racial division derived from Kant.

[6] Equiano published *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* in 1789, arguably the first slave narrative that is taken as the predecessor of Frederick Douglass.

[7] Physically there is "far less any suppressed erotic yearnings or twinges of sexual desire" (35). Bell even mentions how upon seeing the footprint in the sand, the possibility of woman is ruled out. Thus, "the virtual absence of women, the sense that a man-to-man relationship is entirely satisfactory and fulfilling may suggest some latent misogyny in the [novel]" (37).

[8] Phillips accounts how writers such as Joseph Conrad, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Jules Verne are fascinated with maps and how, in particular, Stevenson wrote *Treasure Island* "when he was gazing at the map of an imaginary island he had drawn for his young stepson" (1).

[9] Saxton also mentions the examples of Circe, Calypso, and the Sirens in Homer's *Odyssey*. He states, "each of them inhabits an island, though not as a castaway, and is identified with it, seeking to attract men who come close" (142). One of its retelling myths of Ariadne is done in the form of opera by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, whose work *Ariadne auf Naxos* was premiered in 1916. Hofmannsthal proposes that "the island [is] an image encapsulating aspect of the human condition and specifically that of being in love" (144).

[10] J. M. Coetzee's Susan Barton in *Foe* comes to mind and should be taken as one that follows this tradition of female island imaginary.

[11] Lepow's reading is utterly biblical: he regards the gardener Gideon as Adam and the servant Therese as Eve. States she: "when Gideon and Therese steal his apples, Valerian judges them and exiles them from Eden" (368).

[12] We can argue that Jadine is a female Crusoe without an island.

[13] This term is borrowed from Anishnaabe writer/critic Gerald Vizenor, who coins the word to connote both survival and resistance that he deems central to Native Americans. Please see *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence* (15).

[14] This is the reason why reading Jadine in light of feminism is important within the context of this study.

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