

ON SERIALITY

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ABSTRACT: Evans and Harris’s article on salmon examines the manner in which the anadromous fish connect various marine and terrestrial locations and create assemblages between and within them. This short response piece discusses concepts of seriality pertinent to their article and suggests the potential usefulness of such concepts to Island Studies particularly with regard to its address to combinations of islands and marine spaces.

KEYWORDS: seriality, archipelagos

“Assemblage theory has come to Island Studies” (2018: 1), Mike Evans and Lindsay Harris contend in their article on salmon as symbol and guide in this issue of *Shima*. Alongside widespread images of islands as isolates or dependencies they find a number of attempts to introduce concepts and perspectives that underline “the dynamic connectedness between terrestrial and marine environments and between individual islands and elsewhere”. The impetus, they note, come from different directions, among them Latour’s Actor Network Theory (2005), Deleuze and Guattari’s *agencement* (1987) and, more specifically for Island Studies, from Hau’ofa’s image of “a sea of islands” (1994), the archipelagic views of Strafford et al (2011), and the aquapelagic vision of Hayward (2012). To this list of theoretical approaches to assemblage theory as an emerging Island Studies paradigm Evans and Harris add yet another, seriality, following on from ideas that I myself presented at conference in Vietnam (Ronström 2015). They argue that their study of salmon can offer insights into the dynamic connectedness of islands, continents and seas, and of humans and other species. By “tracing the many and varied ways that salmon (and other actants) connect ocean, island and other land forms in an ongoing inter-species dialogue” their aim is to “dissolve Islands into a multispecies dialogue made in movement” (2018: 1). Such “multispecies ethnography”, they continue, “may provide a productive lens through which to re-examine how Islands are related in a process that starts in seriality, and works out in practice.”(ibid: 5).

The article addresses two core issues in Island Studies, namely the notion of “an island”, and how this entity relates to and interacts with the world at large. By applying perspectives from assemblage theory Evans and Harris attempt to find a way out of essentialism and “naïve empiricism”. “The basic point”, they argue, “is not that Islands are not Islands, but rather that some entities that are not surrounded by water are reasonably located within the series of “Islands”. However, although seriality seems an advantageous

concept, it comes with a Pandora's box-type problem, since "once we open up Islands to such series-like thinking, how is seriality to be constrained; that is, what beyond the logic of seriality itself, links Islands (or aquapelagos or archipelagos)?" (ibid: 5). Evans and Harris's answer to this pertinent question is ethnography, a case study of how the interspecies symbiosis between two migratory actants, humans and salmons, "systematically linked Islands to each other, to the North American continent, and to the modern world system" (ibid: 7). Most ethnologists and folklorists will like myself probably nod approvingly – the analytical strength of any concept has to be tested in practice, by solid empirical fieldwork. Nevertheless, before going too far "beyond the logic of seriality itself" I think that it might be necessary to dwell a bit more on the logic of seriality itself and ask: what kind of concept is seriality, and to what kind of problems can seriality offer insights?

Sarte's seriality

'Seriality', in the sense it is used here, is borrowed from Jean-Paul Sartre's influential (and notoriously difficult) 'Critique de la raison dialectique' (1985, first published 1960). The concept is introduced in a discussion of alienation in modern capitalist societies. Sartre reflects over the difference between group and series. A 'group' is a number of people actively and purposefully engaging with each other, recognising each other and sharing objectives and strategies to reach common goals. A 'series' is a number of people passively brought together by orienting themselves towards an object or behaviour, thereby establishing certain types of relations to each other and to the surrounding material conditions. His best-known example is the bus queue. People line up, orient themselves towards the bus and become defined by their place in the line. For Sartre, seriality is negative: because people negate their mutual dependence of the Other by not realising it, they do not interact beyond the superficial. Thereby they become a whole only as "a plurality of isolations" (Sartre, 1960: 256, cited in Kyung Ock Chun 1982: 35). Seriality, Sartre maintains, is a mode of everyday life commonly experienced by individuals, a passive and anonymous relation, governed and limited by the circumstances, habits and routines that regulates the objects or behaviour that people orient themselves towards.

Iris Marion Young's seriality

Sartre's main point is that a series forms a whole that is qualitatively different from the parts, in the same way as words become stories by adding one after the other. And as words in a story the parts do not have to have anything more in common than being part of the whole. Therefore, Iris Marion Young argues in her much read essay 'Gender as Seriality' (1994), seriality offers an escape out of a difficult problem in feminist theory and politics. Feminism as a political movement centers on the category "woman". You have to be able to speak about and for 'women' as a group, if only for practical and political reasons. But at the same time the essentialisation, normalisation and homogenisation that follows this kind of talk must be avoided. This is precisely what becomes possible with the concept of the series, Young argues. To describe something as part of a series it is not necessary to determine a set of common characteristics that are attributed to all members. Membership is not determined by what something is, but by a common orientation towards an object, phenomenon or structure:

Membership in the series does not define one's identity. Each member of the series is isolated, Other to the Others, and as a member of the series Other than themselves. Finally, there is no concept of the series within attributes that clearly demarcate what about individuals makes them belong. The series is a blurry, shifting unity, an amorphous collective... Applying the concept of seriality to gender, I suggest, makes theoretical sense out of saying that "women" is a reasonable social category expressing a certain kind of social unity. At the same time, conceptualizing gender as a serial collectivity avoids the problems that emerge from saying that women are a single group. (Young, 1994: 728)

When Young picks up 'seriality' from Sartre, it is in a different context and as an answer to a different problem. For Sartre, seriality is a problem to be solved if not by philosophers like Sartre himself, so by the working masses through collective action. For Young, seriality is a positive analytical tool in feminist theory, a possibility to come to grips with the essentialising and homogenising of women, and, perhaps more importantly, an empowering tool in the political struggle for equity and justice.

What seriality can do for Island Studies

It is seriality in terms of Young rather than of Sartre that has inspired me, as also Evans & Harris. The context is again different, as is the politics. Sartre's seriality is basically used as a descriptive term for a mode of human interaction, when a number of people orient themselves towards something. Also Young's seriality focus on how humans can be related to each other, but from an analytical "outside" position. Shifting to even more abstract relations between human and non-human actants, such as islands, islanders and salmon, will have important implications for the use and meaning of the concept. These and more differences notwithstanding, the main problem remains the same, perhaps one of the most challenging there is: how to come to grips with naïve empiricism, essentialisation and homogenisation, and conversely, how to allow for diversity.

A good deal of academic research in Island Studies, as indeed in the humanities and social sciences at large, depart from and rest on two-part divisions, dyads, dichotomies, binaries of different sorts. Stratford et al. (2011) note that there are two common ways to relate to islands in the social sciences and humanities. Either their singularity, distinctiveness and uniqueness is underlined, with the border between land and sea in focus, or they are viewed as dependent and different, with the border between islands and mainland/continent in focus. If the first way has emphasised the islanders' own perspectives, voices and life worlds, reversing the common exoticisation of islands and islanders, the other has underlined neo-colonial and postcolonial perspectives on geopolitics, power and subordination. However, Stratford et al argue, such perspectives may also contribute to lesser complexity, by producing "dominant discourses *about* and *on* islands and islanders, rather than with from or for them". ((Stratford et al 2011: 114). On the one hand, the emphasis on the border between land and water as constitutive and definitive leads to ideas about boundedness. This reinforces two common ideas, islands as complete small worlds for themselves, and islands as isolated and insular. The emphasis on relations to mainlands on the other hand produces an image of islands and continents as each other's "other" in absolute terms, the one big and the other small, an image that tends

to amplify another common set of ideas: islands as vulnerable and dependant and problematic.

But if islands are vulnerable and dependant, Stratford et al remark, this is because the duality 'continent- island' is not only constituted by size, but also by a number of other underlying hierarchical values: presence/absence, sufficiency/ insufficiency, positivity/negativity, completeness/lack etc (Gibson-Graham, 1998: 2, cited in Stratford et al 2011: 116). Baldacchino summarises the position of much Island Studies nicely:

An island is a nervous duality: it confronts us as a juxtaposition and confluence of the understanding of local and global realities, of interior and exterior references of meaning, of having roots at home while also deploying routes away from home. (2005: 248)

A nervous duality, indeed – everywhere dichotomies. Islands as linguistic and geographical entities, and as ideas, pictures, metaphors and metonyms are built on and of dichotomies. They may look "natural", but just as maps they are not so much 'models of' as 'models for' reality (Geertz, 1973).

Beyond the dichotomies?

In Island Studies there is now a lively theoretical debate, driven by a strongly felt need to explore alternative cultural geographies, other ways to experience, map and represent the object of study. A main objective is to find ways out of perspectives that represent islands as either unique and distinctive, dependent and vulnerable or as remote, isolated and backwards. Godfrey Baldacchino has rightly described the field of Island Studies as "grappling with uncovering the patterning of uniformity in a sea of revealing diversity, as well as with revealing the diversity persisting in an age of encroaching uniformity." There is hardly any choice, because as Baldacchino have noted "the only form of escape from them and their interplay of monopoly, totality and intimacy is, typically, exile (read ex-isle)" (Baldacchino, 2004: 279; Baldacchino, 2005: 248; and Bongie, 1998).

It is in this context Young's line of reasoning about seriality becomes readily transferable to islands. And of course, Island Studies is already equipped with a common term for a series of islands, a network or assemblage, 'archipelago'. According to Stratford et al to think with archipelagos, is to see at islands as "inter-related, mutually constituted and co-constructed: as island and island" (Stratford et al 2011: 113f). Baldacchino sees a future for an island research that not so much departs from dichotomies of the mainland-island type, with all that's comes with it, as from how islands relate to other islands: "the fragmented (continental) narrative of the many islands of the world can be profitably replaced by a reclaiming, pan-archipelagic script of 'a world of islands'" (Baldacchino, 2007: 17). To achieve this Elizabeth DeLoughrey has coined the term "archipelagraphy" – "a historiography that thinks about chains of islands in changing relations to their surrounding seas, islands and mainlands. To DeLoughrey "archipelagraphy" is a form of "counter-mapping", that demands a double destabilisation: "dislocating and deterritorialising the objects of study - the fixity of island difference and particularity – and constituting in their place a site or viewing by which they are perceived and analysed afresh and anew" (DeLoughrey, 2007, cited in Stratford 2011: 114 and 122).

What this perspective particularly aims at is a destabilisation of common ideas about island singularity, isolation, dependence and peripherality. Instead it urges us to look at how "a world of islands" can be understood in terms of seriality, networks, assemblage, connections, mobility and diversity. In Island Studies seriality and "archipelagraphy" seems important for at least three reasons:

- 1) As in feminist theory, it may offer a way out of the essentialisation, normalisation and homogenisation that for so long has characterised the understanding and handling of island in politics, popular culture and research.
- 2) It may also offer a way out of the common dichotomisations that commonly ends up by representing islands as the negative and lesser counterpart of their contrastive mirror reflection, mainlands.
- 3) Last but not least, serial, archipelagic thinking may offer a way to account for the diversity of island worlds.

The series is, as Young writes, "a blurry, shifting unity, an amorphous collective" (1994: 728). It does not demand active membership, common values, a common identity. Therefore, seriality and archipelagic thinking may serve as a starting point for an island research that allows for the diversity of islands and thereby contributes to a more complex and accurate representation of a world of islands.

A Finale

Words are performative, charged with a capacity to produce what they name. A major dilemma in dealing with any object of study is to establish a language that does not predetermine what can and cannot be said (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1992: 52). In Island Studies it seems especially important to establish a language that allows for the diversity of islands, a language that does not in practice reduce a world of islands to dichotomies and dualities. Seriality may offer this.

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