

# MAPPING A PEOPLE TO COME

Lessons from stressed islands and island assemblages  
in archipelagic Southeast Asia and other transversals

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**ABSTRACT:** In *Desert Islands* (2004) Deleuze discussed the concept of second origin and how a people's second birth is borne out by its transversal becoming as an island assemblage. Today, islands and open seas, aquatic spaces and land assemblages have become materials or objects of capture that reflect the volatility of geopolitical interests, involving sovereignty issues, historical rights of ownership, effective occupation, etc; all revolving around economic returns and military gains. One particular case is archipelagic Southeast Asia with its active border disputes and inter-island ownership claims. Deleuze took up the promise of transversality, among others, in the notion of island assemblages where islands become consciousness and consciousness becomes islands. What better way to renew this promise other than in Island Studies today? Even so, transversal islands call for reinventing cartographies and island diagramming as much as renewing critical awareness of totalising assignments. The latter involve actants (human and nonhuman) that Deleuze identified with modern forms of subject assignments, such as the state's reterritorialisations of identity representations, but also with the creative (nonhuman) energies of subjects seeking totalising reductions. This article offers a critical survey of these assignments with especial focus on archipelagic Southeast Asia.

**KEYWORDS:** abstract machine, deterritorialisation, reterritorialisation, archipelagic Southeast Asia, Island Studies, transversality

## Introduction

Between a desert island as a mythical concept of origin (Deleuze, 2004) and what Deleuze described (later, with Guattari) as a fluent space of composition, independent of “any determined path” (1987: 371), comes a concept of a people that literature alone commands a power to invoke; a people producing itself as force producing new lines of becoming. Like the movements of production and imagination, these becomings are transcendent to “the difference between artificial and natural” (ibid: 69) to the extent that a people's origin, like an island's, is “radical and absolute” (Deleuze, 2004: 10). Both islands and peoples have the same movement in the sense that they transversally become-other, whereby the island “would be only the dream of humans, and humans, the pure consciousness of the island” (ibid). However, each also has a different goal: the island acquires consciousness through a people who “bring the desertedness to its perfection... such that through them the island would become conscious of itself as deserted and unpeopled” (ibid). As a consciousness of what it is not, the island defines itself autonomously of human signification. It becomes itself

out of that seeming *intermezzo* between the material and immaterial, geographical and sublime; arising in their middle like a *rhizome*, an *interbeing* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 25). As in modern Island Studies, between the archipelago and aquapelagic (Hayward, 2012a, 2012b) each surfaces and evolves in transversal lines of becoming-other (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 296).

In their close collaboration, Deleuze and Guattari envisioned a people as an assemblage along these lines of transversality, and “all the closer,” as they saw it, “to the abstract machine,” which, resembling an abstract surface, acquires a sense of having “more lines without contour passing between things” through which a people expresses its “power of metamorphosis” (1987: 512-13). In the sense of a people, an abstract machine does not operate or perform “by the signifier or the subjective” (ibid: 512). Transversal machines are supposed to be disinclined to embrace and seek resolutions in subjectification typical of reterritorialising practices, such as those of the modern state and also possess the basic tendencies of a machinic drive to embrace spontaneity and the pure vitalism of chaos (1994: 42). Already, in this sense, abstract machines must know the risks that are indigenous to their drive to create, their desire for second births.

This article is subsequently divided into two sections and the conclusion. The first of these briefly discusses the background within which a people’s search for an island is situated within a double-bind: a people’s consciousness can represent the island for what the island is not. The concept of second creation is deployed therein by mobilising a concept of people’s search for islands as a quest for origin. But this origin is not “pure” origin in terms of the pursuit of first creations as a stand-alone model of exemplarity that ultimately serves the stratic interests of power.<sup>1</sup> Critical diagramming and cartography, for instance, deflate the exemplarity of myth-making by tracing the lineaments of the movement and production of imagination backwards before the rise of modern subject formations.<sup>2</sup> These critical steps do not aim to represent the truth or the real, say, behind a myth, “but rather construct a real that is yet to come” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 142). To this end, the first section builds on a number of cases of border conflicts in archipelagic Southeast Asia, vis-à-vis reterritorialising routines and practices of subjectification by state powers that exacerbate a people’s capacity for second births to naturalise their origins in accordance with an exemplary causality. Backward mapping reveals how this capacity for creation and second birth is reterritorialised, for instance, in the “sovereign judgement” (ibid: 377) of the State (sovereign in its final causality). But, at a more fundamental level, this capacity (ie literary and mythical –which constitutes “legwork” in the Deleuzian sense) also contains a potential for intensive transversality that can freely serialise the movement and production of imagination to so-called “cutting edges of creation and deterritorialization” (ibid: 531). Deleuze and Guattari refer to “diagram construction” and “map-making” as operational and

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<sup>1</sup> In the succeeding discussions, we will identify how stratification is simulated by molecular acts of resistance that reproduce acts of capture “striving to seize whatever comes into their reach” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 40).

<sup>2</sup> Colonial history is one example of subject-formation that diagram construction can bring to scrutiny. Hau’Ofa (2008) laments, for instance, how in the case of Oceania, the “objectifying science” of “conventional ethnography” promoted by former colonial powers produces “depersonalizing effects” on native subjects confronting issues of identity representations (White in Hau’Ofa, 2008: xi) that are at odds with their actual experience as peoples of “oceanic islands”. Needless to say, their history is still dominantly framed by those of “continental islands”, of major European and Western economic and military powers. (For the difference between continental islands and oceanic islands, see Deleuze, 2004: 9).

effective tools against reterritorialisation, even against tendencies among abstract machines to proceed “without taking precautions” (ibid: 161), “to seek reductions” (ibid: 94) and, in doing so, pitch themselves into a “black hole” (ibid), ie the “supreme hole named castration” (ibid: 31).

The second section takes up a recent example of regional conflict in Southeast Asia with regard to issues of sovereignty, border rights and historical and titular ownership. The article explores a more nuanced orientation of archipelagic consciousness that stands a better chance of reconciling with island consciousness – seeking for imaginary origins – than it does an exemplarist pursuit of second births.<sup>3</sup>

The conclusion extends the argument of the previous sections, calling for renewed awareness of the wonders of serialisations. Deleuze originally envisioned a nomadic form of cartography that traces the movement of a people’s imaginary that creates an island consciousness *before* and *after* its chiasmatic becomings. Island Studies proposes the same approach through transversal lines of composition that place the human world side by side with non-human assemblages whose spatio-temporal beginnings precede the emergence of anthropic thinking organisms and other destratifying actants within an inclusive ecology (Hayward, 2012a, 2012b).<sup>4</sup>

### The Myth of Exemplary Causality

In Desert Islands Deleuze propose the concept of the “human who precedes itself” as a form of proto-consciousness, a “consciousness of Earth and Ocean” (2004: 11). As archetypal consciousness, a people embodies a vital assemblage whose inhabitants are created by literature or “legwork” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 371). Through legwork, an idea of progress is deduced from work which in turn represents a people’s quest for never-ending virtuality. Here a double movement yields an island consciousness: on the one hand, we have humans drawn to the islands; on the other hand, we have islands separating from continents. Humans set sail to islands that attract peoples into their geographical and aquapelagic singularities in pursuit of their own myths (ancient flood myths are a good example of this movement). As second creation, an island reveals the condition for diagramming the kind of creation that precedes the beginning itself, that which can “deepen (the beginning) and delay

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<sup>3</sup> A powerful *category* such as that identified by Tran (2014) in relation to a longstanding dispute in South China sea, for instance. This relates to this search for imaginary origins which should be treated with caution with regard to its tendency to direct a people’s drive for second birth to a kind of exemplarism, a micronational claim, for instance, which reflects the abstract machine’s participation in subjectification to certain “proceedings and assignations of subjects in language” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 78). A micronational claim can be perceived as a form of reterritorialised subjectivity that blocks a potential for genuine becoming through the loss of “contact with the real” (ibid: 12).

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that the Deleuzian notion of transversality in which human-centered ecological framing gives way to multiplicities of becoming that involve “non-human actants” (Hayward, 2012a: 3) has now acquired a new ecological syntax, if I may put it that way, in the era of the Anthropocene. The concept of the Anthropocene is itself transversal: it places humans at the last scenic displacement of what used to be its ontological privilege, as being that is now at risk of extinction. Hayward (2012a: 5), for instance, utilised the concept of “chorography” that he borrowed from Maxwell (2012: 27-29) in arguing for a more “temporally fluid” composition of the concept of island assemblages. Through its transversality chorography renders a space for the disarticulation of human epistemic privileges. (Also see Pugh, 2018: 98-110 for discussion of the intersection of the Anthropocene and Island Studies.)

it in the passage of time” (Deleuze, 2004: 14). Diagramming posits a people to come but at the same time recreates them, so that in their being re-created a certain movement can be mapped backwards. Backward mapping can produce a virtual consciousness of the lineaments of a people’s movement, nomadic traces of legwork, for instance, identifying migration patterns as reflected in flood myths during post-glacial rise of sea-level thousands of years ago (Wang and Qianyu, 2008: 17).

Southeast Asia is a special case in point, drowned by polar glaciers at the time of the Last Glacial Maximum (approx. 26,500 years ago), its lowlands were subsequently inundated to form assemblages of archipelagos/mountains under water (Nunn, 2009: 132). In a time of rapid ecological changes that threaten to repeat the devastation caused by former climate regimes, we will not be surprised to see desperate movements of peoples returning to the islands to craft new cycles of myths of creation. It is the island that calls on a people to carry out legwork across open seas and “self-vibrating regions(s) of intensities” called plateaus (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 2) – planes of composition independent of any predetermined path, determined by either the subject or the signifier, an individual ego, a person claimant or a bloated ego, such as a nation-state.<sup>5</sup> In the Deleuzian sense, fishermen stumbling upon unknown navigation lines (unknown to them, or simply those they do not recognise as limits to motion) are, in effect, searching for second creations. But, as always, state machines threaten to replace new people’s attempts to return to their origins. With the threat of state machines, continents instead of islands are claiming the right to second births.<sup>6</sup> This time fishermen are replaced by state commissioned and commercial sailors in search of strata and territories rather than islands. Territories do not have consciousness. Islands have. When islands are seen as territories to occupy, the pursuit of first creations is ignored in favour of sea vessels, cargo ships and a fleet of war machines blocking a people’s movement towards second birth.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, abstract machines can also be led to believe that they alone are “effectuating the assemblage” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 121) from a causal self-determinist standpoint, claiming that power emanates from them. The price of exemplarism makes the abstract machine unable to enter a plane of becoming by failing to harness its own force. Accordingly, Deleuze and Guattari refer to harnessing as “mapping” whose function is to make the abstract machines produce their most deterritorialised content and expression (1987: 141). The purpose of such mapping is to keep them open to serialising the assemblage into further transversal lines of becoming. Reminiscent of Spinoza’s ethics, Deleuze describes this transversality as free and open expressionism: “[w]hat is expressed has no existence outside its expressions; each expression is, as it were, the existence of what is expressed” (1990: 42). It calls into question the assumption that power emanates from the abstract machine in the sense that it is naturally coupled to an “exemplary causality”. Instead abstract machines must harness themselves into something that does not resemble anything such as a causality. The

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<sup>5</sup> Hau’Ofa, for instance, similarly defines an ocean as “uncontainable,” paying “no respect to territoriality” (2008: 55). Another Island Studies scholar echoes the same observation concerning Pacific Islanders, for instance, who were deemed unlikely to “share the continental distinction between land and sea” (Edmond, 1997: 1).

<sup>6</sup> In the sense that molar continental aggregations of power (such as transcontinental treaty organisations like NATO, APEC, etc.) are congregating island formations under one umbrella structure, strictly defined by economic and military alliances.

<sup>7</sup> Also, speaking of colonial imprints on colonised subjects that are present even today, the movement and production of a people’s imaginary is thwarted by “externally generated definitions” concerning a people’s “past, present, and future” (Hau’Ofa, 2008: 41; also, Edmond, 1997).

example of a recent island conflict in North Borneo discussed in the following sections underscores this point.

### Stressed Islands

Long before any island became subject to issues of modern territorial sovereignty, ancient nomadic and seafaring peoples would have recognised the integrity of the abstract in islands. From abstract art we can arrive at a suitable analogy of these spaces: “[m]ultidirectional, with neither inside nor outside, form nor background, delimiting nothing, describing no contour, passing between spots or points, filling a smooth space” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 575 n38). But spaces like these could not have emerged outside of a critical geological event, what Deleuze could have in mind when he wrote of the Earth’s transformation in terms of “the general distribution of continents, the states of the seas, and the lines of navigation” (2004: 12). This geological picture fits into an ecological frame in which we could imagine how the rapid melting of polar glaciers gave birth to new plateaus, island formations and assemblages that sparked peoples’ migrations, new principles of organisation and composition out of what remained of the flooding, for instance, in Southeast Asia. New planes of compositions led to a creative process of organising new forms of subjectivities until modern subject-formations that consider islands no longer as consciousness but as territories to occupy put an end to nomadic serialisations. Reterritorialising the islands into modern objects of stratification is well summarised, for instance (but not restricted to) the following case of China:

*The Chinese case (its assertion of sovereignty in the South China Sea) is well documented, going back to references made in Chou Ch’u-fei’s Ling-Wai-tai-ta (Information on What Lies Beyond the Passes) during the Sung dynasty... and in the records of Chinese navigators during the Qing dynasty ... Problems are compounded by the fundamental question of whether proof of historical title today carries sufficient legal weight... (Discovery) only creates inchoate title, which must be perfected by subsequent continuous and effective acts of occupation, generally construed to mean permanent settlement. (Joyner 1999: 59).*

The example of Southeast Asia is central to our focus here as modern nation-states in the region appeal to discovery accounts and historical titles in claiming island assemblages (Womack, 2006: 182 n64; Koo, 2006: 149). Others either defend their claims over islands by continental shelf provisions (arguably the kind of ownership logic that is most proximate to the nature of vital assemblages indifferent to human signification), or resort to effective occupation as proof of indisputable ownership. In all these stratic provocations, the presence of rich natural reserves, such as oil, natural gas, fish stocks, etc, provides a powder keg waiting to explode.

The recent sinking of a Filipino fishing boat by what has been identified as a Chinese militia vessel under the command of China’s People’s Liberation Army (McCarthy, 2019),<sup>8</sup> places on the centre stage the chief economic reason behind any future military escalation around of the most contested islands in the region, the Recto (Reed) Bank in the West Philippine Sea. According to the United States Geological Survey (USGS), the Recto Bank alone could “hold up to 5.4 billion barrels of oil and 55.1 trillion cubic feet (tcf) of natural gas” (Rappler, 2013:

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<sup>8</sup> See Rajagopalan, (2016) for discussion of the militarisation of Chinese fishing boats.

online). This means that the Recto Bank carries half of the total oil and natural gas deposits of the entire South China Sea that China asserts near-exclusive rights over (ibid).

As the above incident underlined, the economic benefit of protecting the disputed islands for long-term material and capital gains has transformed the islands into objects of capture. The islands cease to be deserted and unpeopled and begin to become arrested streams of life that block creations and serialisations. Islands cease to be on the living continuum of people’s libidinal energies that have known islands for their wonder, for the sustenance they give as a contingent favour of nature, and the abstract space they offer to activate new legworks for transversal becomings. At time of writing, the Chinese government has admitted its vessel hit the Filipino boat but brushed off the sinking as a regular maritime traffic incident. It was not reported why the Chinese crew left the Filipino crew adrift after sinking their fishing vessel. A Vietnamese ship, anchored at miles’ distance from the incident, rescued the Filipinos “clinging on plastic barrels and wood”; a gesture that earned the crew popular support among Filipinos condemning the sinking (PTV, 2019).

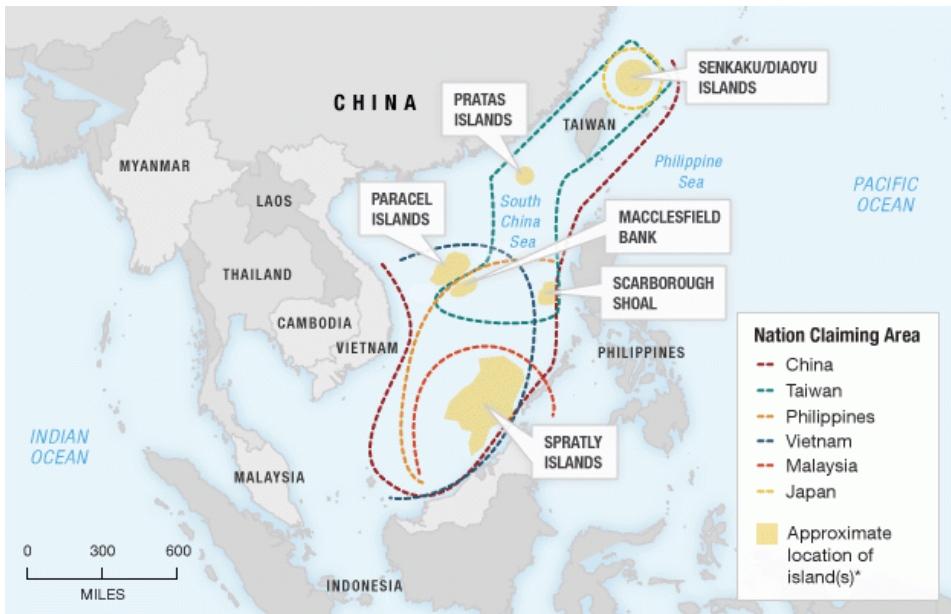


Figure 1 - Map of the South China Seas, showing disputed areas (Reed Bank being located at the north-east corner of the Spratly Islands) (Source: Stephanie d’Otreppe, 2018)

The capsizing of a Filipino boat by a Chinese vessel is the first incident of its type in the dispute between The Philippines and China concerning a number of islands that both claim to have sovereign rights to exploit. But the region is not new to hostilities and armed conflicts. The first military clash related to maritime and sovereignty disputes in this area claimed three Vietnamese ships and 74 Vietnamese lives when Vietnam and China, both communist states, clashed on the Johnson Reef, part of the Spratly island chain, in 1988 (Koo, 2006: 153). This incident was preceded by a clash in 1974 when South Vietnamese forces and the China’s People’s Liberation Navy (PLAN) exchanged fire around the Paracel Islands (Elleman, 2011: 141; see Figure 1). A terrestrial border war between Vietnam and Cambodia

also occurred in 1978. China's support of Cambodia, motivated in part by conflicting claims over both the Spratly and Paracel Islands and by Vietnam's alliance with the Soviet Union with which China has caused a long-standing border dispute (pitting three communist states against each other) led to a mobilisation of 85,000 Chinese troops in 1979, pouring across the Sino-Vietnamese border and "leaving behind a trail of destruction" (Koo, 2006: 151). Meanwhile, in the East China Sea, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan are engaged in separate maritime border conflicts with China (Schoenbaum, 2008).

These stratic manoeuvres are tethered to conventional arsenals of war in which capital invests its own serialising potential, *vis-à-vis* the abstract machines that alone can potentially derail claims of sovereign territoriality in the nomadic sense of constantly revising lines of navigation. This potential remains in the abstract machines but is presently overlaid with stratic determinations in which any movement towards becoming and serialisation is reterritorialised into fixed geopolitical assignments, national or state-sanctioned interests. These are then complemented by the peoples' oblivious relation to their own strength in the sense that they tend to forget the myths that created them. As Deleuze argues:

*Mythology is not simply willed into existence, and the peoples of the Earth quickly ensured they would no longer understand their own myths. It is at this very moment literature begins. Literature is the attempt to interpret, in an ingenious way, the myths we no longer understand... since we no longer know how to dream them... Literature is the competition of misinterpretations that consciousness naturally and necessarily produces on themes of the unconscious.* (2004: 12)

Deleuze, in a separate essay, describes abstract machines as those for whom a certain form of nomadic literature, such as conventional or "major" literature,<sup>9</sup> presents as health: "[h]ealth as literature, as writing, consists in inventing a people who are missing" (1998: 4). But what if the abstract machine missed the whole point of pursuing a second origin?

### Island assemblages turning into black holes

It is worth recalling an international incident in 2013 that nearly escalated into full military conflict between two sovereign states. The incident involved a well-funded war machine, the armed forces of Malaysia, and a nomadic war machine composed of battle-weary farmers, rural workers and peasants led by Jamalal Kiram III, the Sultan of Sulu, a Muslim territory in Mindanao in the south of the Philippines. The latter's predicament began in 2012, when the Malaysian government brokered a peace deal between the Philippine government and the largest Muslim insurgent group in Mindanao (Cordero, 2012).

Under the general terms of the peace treaty, the Philippine government agreed to grant self-governing status to territory controlled by the largest Islamic separatist group in Mindanao, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), in exchange for MILF disbanding its military force, with its troops being assimilated in to the state's official war machine.<sup>10</sup> Isolated by

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<sup>9</sup> I am referring here to the Deleuzian concept of major literature within which "a minority constructs... a language... with a high coefficient of deterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 16). It is also associated with a "nomadic movement of deterritorialization that reworks [a major] language" (ibid: 25 - bracket emphasis mine).

<sup>10</sup> The Moro Islamic Liberation Front occupies an area that remains a divided island.

the this agreement, the Sultan of Sulu turned his attention to Sabah by pressuring Malaysia to bring him to the negotiating table and by demanding that Malaysia return the jurisdiction of Sabah to his family in exchange for abiding by the ceasefire. The Sultan's claim rested on several historical circumstances reported by Tregonning (1970), who proposed recognition of the Sultan of Sulu's claim to Sabah, arguing that:

*although the Government of the Philippines abolished the political powers of the Sultanate of Sulu... it did not... eliminate the Sultan. He received his pension and remained the spiritual head of the Suluks... [The] successor of the Sultan is not the Government of the Philippines. (1970: 168)*

In proclaiming himself to be the true claimant to Sabah (a land known to its native population as “the land beneath the winds”), the Sultan first summoned his people living in North Borneo, the Tausugs (a term meaning “people of the current’), to forcefully occupy, barricade, and defend the area at all costs (Quismundo, Burgonio, dela Cruz, and Lagsa, 2013). Hundreds of the Sultan's clan from Mindanao (who called themselves the Royal Army of the Sultanate of Sulu) were then ordered to travel through Malaysian waters in order to reach Lahad Datu, in western Sabah. The Sultan's main claim to proof of ownership of the land was that Malaysia has long been paying rental fees to the Sultanate (although only a pittance compared to the millions of dollars the government is earning from the territory's natural oil deposits – Ramses, 2004: 1163-164).

The land in question is claimed to be part of the sovereign territory of the Sulu Sultanate in pre-colonial and post-colonial times, which extended from Sulu, in Southern Mindanao, to Sabah, North Borneo (Figure 2). This is an example of a literature, an historical memory, written or unwritten. If much is unwritten, as is the case of the Sabah claim, collective memory makes a vigorous literary “present” from oral and folkloric traditions – the unconscious rituals of the past that endure in a people's intuition of a bygone age that is “prolonged in the present” (Deleuze, 2004: 28). Collective memory here serves as a testament to a people's “soul” and their pursuit of second origins as descendants of their first creators, the forgotten ancestors who found the Sulu archipelago (that in turn found them), as first seekers of origins, deserted and unpeopled. Thus, the early beginnings of this ownership question, concerning Sabah, remain murky. Its contested genealogy is supposed to have arisen from an incident in 1704 when one of the prospective contenders to the throne of Brunei (with which Sulu once formed part of the vassal states of the Majapahit empire based in Java, Indonesia<sup>11</sup>) formed an alliance with the Sulu Sultanate to eliminate a rival whose army was much larger in numbers and strength (Singh and Sidhu, 1997: liii; Ortiz, 1963: 5). The military campaign was successful and as a reward the new Sultan of Brunei ceded a large portion of Sabah in North Borneo to the Sultanate of Sulu. The succeeding Sultan of Brunei subsequently denied that this historical incident ever took place (Marston, 1967: 108).

During the Spanish colonisation of the Philippine islands, the then sitting Sultanate of Sulu was forced to negotiate with the British North Borneo Company (BNBC), acting under the auspices of the British Crown, whose representative approached the Sultan in January of 1878 asking him to give Britain a lease to Sabah. A written contract was sealed between the representatives of the two parties, with the Sultanate agreeing to lease Sabah and the latter

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<sup>11</sup> See Hall (2016: 1). Claims by some Filipino historians that Sulu was part of the former Majapahit empire have been disputed by independent Filipino scholars (see Rausa-Gomez, 1967: 63-107).



agreeing to pay rental fees to the Sultanate for \$5,000 (Malayan) a year.<sup>12</sup> In an article that appeared in the *Ateneo Law Journal* in 1963 it was reported that the then Sultan of Sulu (Sultan Sri Paduka Maulana Al Sultan Mohamed Jamal Al Alam) was forced to sign the contract “because he thought it was the best he could make of a bad bargain” (Ortiz, 1963: 6). He was reportedly pressured into this concession since the Sultan of Brunei was preparing to attack and reclaim Sabah by force and Spanish invaders were closing in on Jolo, his capital on the island of Sulu and he needed the advanced lease money to buy arms to combat Spanish aggression. The money did not come and the Spanish forces finally overran the Sultanate’s capital. Then, under duress, the Sultan of Sulu wrote to the representative of BNBC in July of 1878 cancelling the contract, six months after the lease agreement was made.<sup>13</sup>

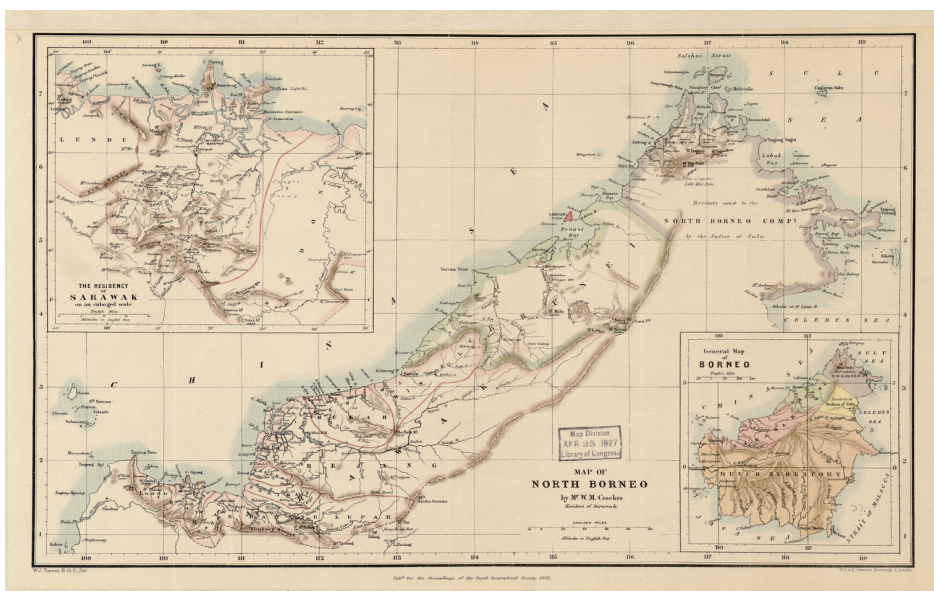


Figure 2 - Lower right portion of the map shows the general division of North Borneo between the Dutch empire, the sultanates of Sabah and Brunei and the BNBC. (Source: Croker 1881.)

Fast forwarding through less than a century of forging complicated treaties, trade and military pacts, involving European states, the sultanates of Sulu and Brunei, and other international bodies (not to mention the outbreak of the Second World War), the fate of Sabah was finally decided in 1963 when the people of North Borneo agreed to join the federated state of Malaysia in a general referendum (Fernandez, 2007: 53-64; Ramses, 2004: 1163). The positive spirit arising from the success of the referendum led the Malaysian

<sup>12</sup> An English translation (from Malay) of the contract between then Sultan of Sulu and Baron Gustavus de Overbeck, representative of the BNBC is available on the Sabah Government website (nd). The transcript of the contract was the subject of an article detailing the intricacies of the Sabah dispute (Marston, 1967) that outlines that there was a substantial issue of legal interpretation concerning the English word “lease,” and its relation to the Malay word *pajak*, which means “cession” (ibid: 117).

<sup>13</sup> It was not known why the Sultan had to write the representative of BNBC when the promised lease money never arrived. In effect the latter was in breach of the contract.

government to honour the agreement made by its former British colonisers with regard to the whole 'Affairs of Sulu and Borneo'.<sup>14</sup> Under this historical legacy, the Malaysian government continues to provide the lease money owed by the BNBC to the descendants of the sultan (Rasul, 2013). The North Borneo standoff in 2013 put this matter of lease payment at the centre of the Sultanate's predicament. Through an official channel, the office of past Philippine presidents (Ramos and Arroyo), the Sultanate had been seeking new arrangements on lease terms with the Malaysian government, including an increase in rental payments (Dañguilan-Vitug, 2013).

By the time of the Lahad Datu incursion, the then Sultan, Kiram III, had altered the terms of the Sultanate's demand from modifications of the terms of the lease to a complete takeover of Sabah from Malaysia.<sup>15</sup> The Lahad Datu invasion threw the governments of Malaysia and the Philippines into a regional stalemate.<sup>16</sup> As expected, the storming of Sabah resulted in a one-sided battle. Armed with machetes and few vintage carbines, not to mention sorcery and fabled amulets, abstract machines were ordered to plunge into black holes. Their sultan, who should have charged his people to perform the kind of "legwork" that can invent and reinvent a people's consciousness (which is also the consciousness of the land they claim to

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<sup>14</sup> The 'Affairs of Sulu and Borneo' is the collective description of various treatises and agreements between the Philippine Sultanate and British North Borneo that were "presented to both Houses of the [British] Parliament" in 1883 (Ortiz 4, n.9) in which the promised lease money was included.

<sup>15</sup> There had been a previous attempt by the Philippine government to take advantage of the burgeoning population of the *Tausugs* in North Borneo. In 1968, in the early years before his imposition of martial rule, then President Marcos sanctioned an operation to train young Muslims (mostly *Tausugs*) under the pretext of "a general recruitment plan for the elite Special Forces unit of the armed forces of the Philippines" (Asani, 2007: 305). But known only to the commanding officers, its actual mission was to destabilise Sabah and finally occupy it. The plot was foiled when, upon completion of their training, the whole unit refused the order to proceed to Sabah. They were killed by machine gun fire by their commanding officers and their bodies were dumped by helicopters into the South China Sea. The single survivor of the massacre led opponents of the Marcos administration to expose the incident (referred to as the 'Jabidah Massacre'). The massacre united the ranks of Muslims in Mindanao, who were mostly *Tausugs*, which later paved the way for the founding of the separatist rebel group, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). A faction of this separatist insurgent group launched coordinated action in September 2013 (six months after the Sabah standoff ended) laying siege to the city of Zamboanga in western Mindanao, taking hostages, burning houses, and proclaiming autonomy from the central government (Mangosing, 2013). The assault resulted in the destruction of public and private properties, displaced hundreds of thousands of inhabitants and precipitated an outbreak of diseases.

<sup>16</sup> It is arguable that the Sulu Sultanate's claim over Sabah could fall under the category of a "micronational" one of the type that Tran (2014), for instance, describes in a separate study of the Spratly Islands. Micronationality is a powerful category that suggests that persons' claims to island ownership, however fanciful, can have an "impact at macro-national level" (ibid: 54). Tran cites the example of Tomas Cloma, "a Filipino fishing fleet operator", for instance, who in 1956 personally claimed a group of islands within the Spratly chain on the basis that "it did not belong to any regional nation... and declared the region to be a free autonomous territory" (ibid: 55). Cloma's claim later became the basis of the Philippine campaign to pursue sovereignty over a number of islands in the Spratly group, which is disputed by Vietnam and Taiwan. Similarly, the Sultanate's claim over Sabah became the basis of the Philippines' claim, *vis-à-vis* Malaysia where the land is geographically located. These examples merit a Deleuzian analysis: the Sultanate's and Cloma's (presumably abstract) search for second origins were reterritorialised into exemplary causality. However, the Sultanate's case may be significantly different since in pre-colonial times it had been a recognised sovereign entity and a political, cultural and economic force that regional sultanates (such as Brunei) and the vassal states of the former Majapahit empire had to engage with (Marston 1967: 107). But the Brunei Sultanate still exists today and its Sultan is an internationally acknowledged head of the state. By contrast, the Sulu Sultanate was disbanded long ago and the Sultan's role since then has been reduced to a personal and spiritual one.

represent), tossed them into open battles they were certain to lose and may never recover from.<sup>17</sup> Deleuze and Guattari's proverbial lines from *A Thousand Plateaus* outline what might have been a more productive strategy:

*Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous plane on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment... Connect, conjugate, continue.* (1987: 161)

In recent estimates, more than half of the 800,000 Filipino *Tausugs* in Sabah remain undocumented and, for decades, have evaded arrest (Del Callar, 2018). As illegal settlers in a land whose myth is arguably traced to their lineage, the *Tausugs* ("peoples of the current") may be described in a Deleuzian sense as peoples of deserted island, of the land beneath the winds, "[i]maginary and not actual, mythological and not geographical" (2004: 12). It is a classic Deleuzian injunction to return "to the movement of imagination that makes the deserted island a model, a prototype of a collective soul" (ibid: 13). But Deleuze and Guattari also speak of the risk of challenging stratification, especially in an archipelagic setting, without the critical work of mapping (1987: 161). As the *Tausug* uprisings in Lahad Datu show, lines of flights can be conjugated to a plane of extemporaneous combustion.

In an early essay Deleuze envisages the archipelago as "a world in process" (1998: 86). As he adds, it is not:

*a puzzle, whose pieces when fitted together would constitute a whole, but rather a wall of loose cemented stones, where every element has a value in itself but also in relation to others; isolated and floating relations, islands and straits, immobile points and sinuous lines* (ibid).<sup>18</sup>

Taken in this light, an archipelago bears a critical relation to a map in that what distinguishes a map "is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real" (1987: 12). By losing this "contact", subjects become fixated to a form of assignation that deems the islands no longer as revisable consciousness, but rather as fixed object-territories.

## Conclusion: Inventing an island people

I want to stress here that the task of diagramming a people's movement (which, in the case of the *Tausug* uprising, is pre-assigned by an obsession with colonial past) will always begin with and begin anew in works of literature, ie in collective "legwork" as, in itself, a literary practice that creates and recreates a people's "soul". Hau'Ofa's ethnographic experiences in Oceania, for instance, are a telling example. In *We are the Ocean*, Hau'Ofa admonished his people, long since burdened by their colonial past, to "wake up to [the] ancient truth" that

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<sup>17</sup> In 2016 the Malaysian and Philippine governments agreed on a gradual repatriation of Filipinos in Sabah (Ranada, 2016) that is still in progress.

<sup>18</sup> In recent Island Studies literature, the concept of the archipelago has evolved from its mainly geographical denotation, such as "an aggregation of islands" (Hayward 2012a: 5), to the connotative notion of "fluid cultural processes" (Stratford, Baldacchino, Farbotko, and Harwood 2011: 122) which, unsurprisingly, connotes a Deleuzian transversal concept of becoming-other, such as the becoming-aquapelagic of the archipelago (Hayward, 2012a).

they “are the sea” and as a people must not confine themselves “in tiny spaces that [they] have resisted” (2008: 39). In this sense, a damaged soul, a soul riveted to a colonial past, must awake to a second origin. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari admonish abstract machines to “(act) in the middle, by the middle (standing opposed) to all planes of principle or finality” (1987: 507); a people awakening to their second birth as *rhizomes* (ibid: 25). Hau’Ofa tells us that several peoples of Oceania do exist in terms of this transversal resistance to closure; enterprising Tongans who, for instance, “(fly) back and forth across national boundaries, the international dateline, and the equator, completely undaunted by the deadly serious discourses below,” which involve transnational economic treatises that have far-ranging effects on the way they cultivate their lives (as well as others who depend their livelihood on their transversal creativity and serialisation of the energies of life, but cultivate they do “in their own ways” [ibid]). To this extent, people lead their lives indiscernibly. As to how to become indiscernible, in ‘Nomadic Thought’ Deleuze mentions the kind of legwork that creates, for instance, the indiscernibility of Nietzsche and Kafka:

*In terms of what he writes and thinks, Nietzsche’s enterprise is an attempt at uncoding, not in the sense of a relative uncoding which would be the decoding of codes, past, present, or future but an absolute encoding—to get something through which is not encodable, to mix up all the codes... The similarity I see here is with Kafka, what Kafka does with German, in accordance with the linguistic tradition of the Jews in Prague: he builds a war machine in German against German... gets something through in the German code which had never been heard before. Nietzsche, for his part... seizes on German to build a war machine which will get something through that is uncodable in German. (2004: 254)*

This is precisely the reason Deleuze and Guattari liken a nomad to a surfer, “(sliding) with new substances of being, with wave or snow” (1994: 71). But also, a surfer is a “conceptual persona” (ibid), the same character we can ascribe to island consciousness, as a people migrating from place to place who, in between rest and motion, settle as an interbeing, a rhizome that, like a concept, must inhabit a place “by pitching one’s tent, by contracting a habit” (ibid: 105). This is a significant formulation with regard to what could have occurred in mainland Asia after the Last Glacial Maximum, when a flurry of peoples’ migrations took place in the region and, over time, set off farming activities in lowlands and near coastal areas where the Negritos of the Philippines, for instance, settled.<sup>19</sup> There is common agreement that mainland Austronesian-speaking Asians, mostly, the Taiwanese of today, introduced systematic farming in the Philippines. From a Deleuzian perspective, these expansions, first from out of Africa, which brought the Negritos to the Southeast, and then from mainland Asia, which gradually displaced the Negritos, are movements toward second births.

Exposed to the elements, several nomad tribes were displaced from the coastal areas on the advent of expansion from Southern China. Those who opted to settle in highlands and valleys, like the Negritos, were isolated from agri-centres established by the new settlers. But certain nomadic peoples, including the Negritos:

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<sup>19</sup> While there are questions about the origin of Philippine Negritos, a number of anthropologists have maintained that Southeast Asian Negritos originated from African Pygmies “based on similarities in skeletal traits, hair, form and skin color” (Junker, 2002: 131-66).

*Accustomed to including marine food in their diet would have tended to wander along the coastal fringe of East Asia, rather than going far up the valleys down which their ancestors had come. In this way, people may have spread along the entire western rim of the Pacific, reaching what is now easternmost Russia by at least 20,000 years ago. (Nunn, 2009: 73).*

As Deleuze also suggests, in order to achieve regional and world peace abstract machines need to reclaim their nomadic spirit so as to “overhaul the general distribution of continents, the state of the seas, and the lines of navigation” (2004: 12). Assuming this is the precise serialisation pattern that happened thousands of years ago, we may argue that the nomadic desire for “destratifying transversality” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 335) in search of new beginnings, is still alive today, although overlaid with reterritorialisations blocking their exits to never-ending virtuality (ibid: 508). But the future is still open to new cycles of serial creations, of “dreaming the islands,” which comes in two forms: either of “dreaming of pulling away, of being separate, far from any continent, of being lost and alone, or it is dreaming of starting from scratch, recreating, beginning anew” (Deleuze, 2004: 10). Certainly, as Deleuze identifies, this will be a difficult challenge for nomadic thought whose task here is unmistakable – to trigger new island deliriums.

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