

A Sea of Stories: Islands as *Shima* in Rattawut Lapcharoensap's *Sightseeing*

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Rattawut Lapcharoensap, born in Chicago in 1979 to a Thai family fleeing the military crackdown on leftists in their home country, and raised and educated both in Bangkok (1982–1987 and 1990–1995) and the U.S., stresses that he wrote the stories in his 2005 collection *Sightseeing* partly as a reaction against the portrayal of Thailand by contemporary expatriate writers¹ (qtd. in Larkin 7). The typical gaze of these writers and their narrators—who are thrown into a strange world of drugs, corruption, sex, and Thai characters that “speak in aphorisms, like a Zen master” (7)—can be characterized as that of the independent tourist. In a study that traces motifs and tropes from European colonialism in narratives of independent tourism, Alex Tickell identifies that gaze as an exercise in self-actualization and self-transformation, with the foreign place as a mere vehicle or trigger: “[I]t is the encounter with the self, by way of ‘Otherness’, that concerns the independent tourist” (41).

The attitude apparent here, which implies that what the traveler sees does not need to bear any relation to the actual, authentic local culture (Urry 11, Tickell 43), shows many parallels to the way islands have traditionally been looked upon and used in Western literature and discourse; so many, in fact, that the island motif could be called a precursor to, key ingredient of, close relative of, or necessary precondition of the modern tourist narrative. Islands in fiction have long functioned as representations of a “site where everything is different” and where “the radical variation from normal life ... promises to challenge the individual in his or her existential ideology” (Classen 69), while “in all these instances, the ‘realness’ of an actual island is an irrelevance, even an inconvenience” (Hay 554). Given the status of islands as the founding sites of the tourist gaze,² as well as the fact that tropical islands, the objects of “one of the best branding exercises in the history of marketing” (Baldacchino 248),

indeed play a very real part in Thailand's tourism and tourist literature industries, it is only logical that a thorough rewriting of the island motif is at the beginning and the core—quite literally, since both the first and the title story of the collection deal with islands—of Lapcharoensap's literary response to the expatriate writers. In this article, I will analyze how in *Sightseeing* the traditional Western imagination of islands as small, static places of absolute difference whose meaning is created only by their discovery through visiting mainlanders gets systematically countered and replaced with island imagery strongly reminiscent of the way the Japanese linguistic and cultural concept of *shima* has always understood islands, that is, as central, not marginal places which are well-connected and whose identity is inextricably linked to their inhabitants.

Using a Japanese idea to help capture and illustrate how a Thai American author counters certain Western notions of islands and Thailand is of course not without its problems. The approach seems to suggest a homogenization of 'Eastern cultures' (Japan and Thailand together versus the West) that is not only generally naïve but in this case particularly jarring. Given the history of Japanese imperialism in Southeast Asia in the 1930s and 1940s, it appears odd to imply a collaborative Thai-Japanese liberation project by proposing that Thai reactions against outside influence follow patterns that could be seen as culturally Japanese. These concerns are valid. However, from an empirical standpoint, *shima*, Japanese or not, simply constitutes the best conceptual framework to describe what Lapcharoensap is doing. Correcting what is factually wrong and normatively problematic about the traditional (Western) view of islands, it offers the most convincing systematic alternative to the latter (as is evidenced by the fact that the leading social/natural science journal on research into islands is named *Shima*). And it can be argued that this descriptive power of *shima* outweighs the above-mentioned concerns from a (broadly speaking) postcolonial perspective. After all, Lapcharoensap, writing for a country that has never been colonized, is far more keen on countering a specific school of writers who happen to be Western—and, by extension, a specific concept that underlies and symbolizes the school's attitude—than on countering 'the West.' As he is interested in rewriting islands, not in establishing, postu-

lating or even discussing a generalized non-Western or pan-Asian identity, one is similarly justified as a critic in employing *shima* on account of its ability to illuminate the island rewriting, in spite of the pan-Asian undertones some might read into this. Using *shima* does not necessarily express a comment on how Japanese *Sightseeing* is. Its sole function is to shed as much light as possible on what Rattawut Lapcharoensap does with the island motif.

For Europeans and North Americans, who are “incorrigible ‘islomanes’ [succumbing] willingly to the ‘indescribable intoxication’ of islands” (Baldacchino 247), the island has long worked as a canvas to project their dreams and fears on. In literature and film, it represents utopia or hell, in the form of either an earthly paradise, an asylum, an exile, or a place of deadly boredom (Classen 69). Utopias range from the Isles of the Blessed described by Hesiod, Pindar and Horace to Aldous Huxley’s *Island* (1962) and punk-pop band Weezer’s only half-ironic 2001 hit “Island in the Sun” (“We’ll run away together / We’ll spend some time forever / We’ll never feel bad anymore”). ‘Robinsonades’ where stranded individuals have to prove themselves in hostile surroundings include not only Defoe’s 1719 original but also Robert Zemeckis’s 2000 movie *Cast Away* and the *Survivor* reality TV show (whose fifth season was filmed on Thailand’s Koh Tarutao). Downright hellish scenarios can be found in the nightmarish violence of William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954), in the prisons of Henri Charrière’s *Papillon* (1969) and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973), and in films like the planned *Dark Island* or video games like the first-person survival horror title *Dead Island* (2010).

The mainlander-perspective that virtually all these narratives have in common reveals what Carmen M. White and Mensah Adinkrah identify as a primacy given to landmasses within the Western imagination (102). The viewpoint of the mainlander leaving the ‘real’ world is so dominant that it appears to be the only possible one, the natural one—not only for writers and their narrators, but also for scholars and critics who reflect on the stories. When Albrecht Classen, in order to explain why islands are suitable settings to discuss extraordinary challenges, states that “[o]nly few people get to an island” (69), he automatically ignores those

who might be there already, just as Elisabeth Frenzel does in her classic analysis of the island motif in world literature, where she carefully classifies different types of “island dweller” without even bothering to clarify that all of them have come in from dry land (381; translation mine). As a consequence, within Western discourse, islands do not seem imaginable without the mainland observer. Without the latter, they do not exist; they are brought into being only by mainlanders and their need for some contrast.

If they are largely a creation of mainlanders, islands are necessarily not quite as ‘original,’ ‘authentic,’ or ‘alive’ as the continents of their creators. The secondary or subordinate status island narratives afford their subjects is reflected by the stereotypes real islands face. Small islands or island nations and their inhabitants are regularly portrayed as “basket cases” dependent on aid (D’Arcy 35), and as static, immobile, out of touch and stuck in the past (Jolly 419)—provided they are acknowledged and taken seriously at all. In a study that illuminates how far the association of islands with inauthenticity goes, Simone Pinet argues that in the discursive separation between fiction and falsehood on one side and reality and truth on the other, begun in early modern poetics, islands (the ideal place to relocate marvelous contents to) “came to signify fiction,” to the extent that diatribes against fiction and diatribes against islands were the same thing (173, 175, 180). Pinet, via Foucault, identifies the island in Western discourse as a “non-place” which, like the *Ínsula No Fallada*—the “not-found island”—in Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo’s *Amadís de Gaula*, cannot be described (Pinet 180–81). In other words, thanks to their “phantasmatic geography” (181), islands count as less ‘real’ than continents. This notion still persists, as shown by works like Michael Bay’s movie *The Island* (2005), which depicts a dystopian society that systematically employs the allure of a (non-existent) paradise island to keep its citizens quiet.

The word ‘island’ thus is not used to denote anything with a strong presence, anything bustling or at the center of one’s current *lebenswelt* (one rarely hears people refer to Manhattan as an island, although it is one). The Japanese/Ryukyuan term for island, *shima*, works rather differently. As Jun’ichiro Suwa explains, the concept of *shima* understands

‘islands’ not as places outside the real world one can escape to, but as the very building blocks of our world; “all communal spaces are mimeses of islands” (6). *Shima*, which Suwa compares to cells (7), are not created by mainlanders or secondary to them. On the contrary, islands precede and structure—indeed create—mainland discourse: Many Japanese family names bear the prefix *Shima-* or the suffix *-shima* or *-jima*, as do numerous cities, even those which are landlocked, like Fukushima (7). Far from referring to something unreal or marginal, ‘island’ connotes worldly presence; in mainland Japan, the word *shima* describes a “sphere of influence” (7). In Japanese culture, both metaphorical and actual islands are the places where things happen. As places “virtually inseparable” from the settlements and people they house (6), *shima* are “performative;” they are events, the “ground for culture” (9). All in all, the concept offers a complete contrast to Western notions by envisioning islands (and their inhabitants) as original, primary, real, lively, cultured, and central.

In “Farangs,” the opening story of *Sightseeing*, Lapcharoensap rewrites the Western island motif in the spirit of *shima*. The tale is set on an unnamed tropical Thai tourist destination simply called “the Island,” and narrated by an unnamed local whose mother runs a beachfront motel and whose father, an American soldier, abandoned the family long ago. Perpetually infatuated with *farang* (Caucasian) girls, the protagonist, together with his aging pet pig Clint Eastwood, befriends American tourist Lizzie and shows her around. The two start an affair, which comes to an abrupt end when Lizzie’s cheating boyfriend Hunter, with whom she falsely claimed to have broken up, confronts the two in an outdoor restaurant. In the final scene of the story, Hunter and his friends, with an unhappy Lizzie in tow, are hunting Clint Eastwood, while themselves being pelted with mangoes by the narrator. Clint, who can swim, escapes into the ocean.

The transformation of traditional island imagery here does not only lie in the obvious shift in perspective from the mainlander to the islander. The changes run much deeper and indeed amount to a *shima*-style move from mainlander-created dream islands of the mind to projections of “the Island”—the not-incidentally-capitalized center—on those fleeting

and slightly unreal figures that come to visit, and the faraway places that might be their home: Lapcharoensap has his Thai narrator turn the tables by affecting the tourist gaze of self-actualization himself, with very little interest in what the objects in his gaze are actually like. Western characters show up in short vignettes only, often in flashbacks, always mediated by the heavily subjective and metaphorical views of the protagonist: “I admired . . . the gleam of that soft, rose-colored tongue quivering between [the teeth] like the meat of some magnificent mussel,” is how he presents Lizzie (4), managing to give a description that is at the same time dreamy and mock-comical. The Americans continuously come across as outlandish, otherworldly creatures, like the narrator’s father, “known to me only as Sergeant Marshall Henderson” (5), who used to instruct his little son with “Not Daddy . . . Remember you’re a soldier now, boy. A spy for Uncle Sam’s army” (5), and would go on reconnaissance missions “through the thickets of farangs lazing on the beach,” yelling “I don’t have a good feeling about this, Private” (5–6). Seen through the eyes of the protagonist, even Hunter’s fairly conventional look turns into something grotesque: “He’s dressed in a white undershirt and a pair of surfer’s shorts. His nose is caked with sunscreen. His chest is pink from too much sun. There’s a Buddha dangling from his neck. He looks like a deranged clown” (16).

In “Farangs,” a cultured islander—as if to underscore the clumsy Hunter’s exotic strangeness, the narrator wears a tie, an object that appears to confuse the American (17)—provides caricature-like snapshots of fantastic creatures from foreign mainland shores (a postcard from a girl that urges him to visit but does not say where she lives!). These images, exaggerated and blurry at the same time, make it obvious that he is not interested in an objective portrayal of the mainland or mainlanders but rather uses them as symbolic representations of his dreams and fears. He creates them as he needs them. Wondrous and episodic, the events display an islander fantasy of the continent as much as Sancho Panza’s famous *Ínsula Barataria* in *Don Quijote*, “a linguistic, not a material one” (Pinet 184), constitutes a continental fantasy of an island, an “island of style” that forces Sancho to “consider himself” (184–85). Lapcharoensap’s islanders project on the visiting mainlander precisely

those utopian and dystopian ideas that have become key ingredients of the island motif dreamed up by the West, or, more specifically, of the Thai island narrative by tourists and expatriates. Firstly, the incoming guests and their world represent an earthly paradise—to be exact, a paradise of sexual bliss where the almost comically willing mainlander, described literally as a heavenly creature, cannot resist the allure of the local insider, who exudes such presence that he does not even have to move to get what he wants:

With a quick sweeping motion, Lizzie took off her bikini top. Then she peeled off her bikini bottom. And then there she was—my American Angel—naked on the back of Uncle Mongkhon's decrepit elephant.

"Your country is so hot," she said, smiling, crawling toward me on all fours. [The elephant] made a low moan and shifted beneath us.

"Yes, it is," I said, pretending to study the horizon . . . (13)

Secondly, the outsiders' universe stands for a foreign place where one has to prove one's worth, as illustrated by the *Survivor*-like missions Sergeant Marshall Henderson takes the narrator, who remembers "crawling through the sand with a large stick in hand, eyes trained on the enemy" (6). Thirdly, the world of the intruders also serves to conjure up a veritable hell: The crazed pursuit of Clint Eastwood by "Hunter" is a not-so-subtle allusion to the devilish pig-slaying tribe called "hunters" in *Lord of the Flies*.

Lapcharoensap's strange mainlander tales do not just reverse Western landmass-centered island fantasies, they also mock them. The quick, arbitrary succession in which hell and heaven replace each other highlights their status as artificial constructs. Moreover, the bizarre humour which infuses the parodies of island narratives suggests that the originals have a certain air of ridiculousness about them. Reading about an American girl on a moaning elephant throwing her clothes away and pouncing on a Buddha-like narrator while borrowing clichéd words from Paris Hilton to express her arousal, one cannot help but notice the absurdity of similarly hyperbolic expatriate accounts, related without a hint of

irony, of exotic island beauties who cannot wait to please the irresistible newcomer. The 'island as hell' metaphor also loses a considerable amount of authority when parodied with a pig that outsmarts the rather pathetic devil/characters "[Clint] is making a fool of them, running in circles one way, then the other, zigzagging back and forth through the sand" (21–22). The classic facets of mainland discourse on tropical islands get exposed as silly fabrications.

Lapcharoensap's island characters are acutely aware of these fabrications, and shrewdly use Western fantasies and misconceptions to their own advantage. Uncle Mongkhon for instance, whose elephant-trekking business provided the narrator with the opportunity to seduce Lizzie, happily exploits the stereotype of the backward, out-of-touch islander, thereby proving it untrue:

MR. MONGKHON'S JUNGLE SAFARI, a painted sign declared in their driveway. COME EXPERIENCE THE NATURAL BEAUTY OF FOREST WITH THE AMAZING VIEW OF OCEAN AND SPLENDID HORIZON FROM ELEPHANT'S BACK! I'd informed Uncle Mongkhon once that his sign was grammatically incorrect and that I'd lend him my expertise for a small fee, but he just laughed and said farangs preferred it just the way it was, thank you very much, they thought it was charming, and did I really think I was the only huakhuai who knew English on this god-forsaken Island? (8)

As children, the protagonist and his friend Surachai came up with a similarly lucrative routine that played off both the idea of islanders as savages and the allure of the robinsonade. They advertised themselves as "the Island's Miraculous Monkey Boys," climbing trees and fetching coconuts for tourists, while "[i]n one version of the speech I gave before every performance, I played the part of an American boy shipwrecked on the Island as an infant. With both parents dead, I was raised in the jungle by a family of gibbons" (19).

Thus, in "Farangs," the secondary or subordinate status of islands gets transformed in two ways. On the one hand, the Western fantasies that have established this status are unmasked and ridiculed by islanders;

on the other hand, the islanders, rather than just reacting to being the object of a dreamy gaze, develop fantasies of their own and create the mainland as a 'mainland of the mind.' The very last scene, the pig hunt, where Lapcharoensap revisits the monkey imagery, combines both elements. The narrator, in an effort to help his pet, tells of how he is "climbing through that tree like a gibbon, swinging gracefully between the branches, grabbing any piece of fruit ... that I can get my hands on. ... I'm throwing each mango with all the strength I have" (23). Within his highly symbolic use of the mainland world as an abstract representation of an existential threat ("They have surrounded him now, encircled. There's no way out for my pig" [22]), Lapcharoensap's narrator directly counters Western ideas of island savagery by turning the monkey, in sharp contrast to the primitive and barbaric hunters, into a "graceful" and resourceful hero.

The title of the story explains the twofold strategy even better. "Farang," an all-purpose word to describe Caucasians and everything associated with them (both admiringly and disparagingly), is so ubiquitous a term in Thailand that it irritates a lot of foreigners; therefore, to label a story "Farangs" is just as generic, imprecise, and unimaginative as the titles that tend to characterize island narratives: "Island," "The Island," "Island in the Sun," "Dark Island," "Dead Island," to repeat a few. The author mocks the tourist gaze and calls attention to its self-serving shallowness by presenting the (presumably Western) reader with an example that will strike him or her as quite obviously unpleasant. This, however, is only part of the story. As Pattana Kitiarsa argues with a nod to Edward Said, "farang" is not merely a simple Thai identification marker of the West, but "an occidentalization project," a "reflexively tactical method" that produces the "Thai-ized version of the West." It represents an "ethnocultural mirror measuring and projecting the hierarchical distance and otherness between the imagined Thai 'We-Self' and the constructed 'Western Other'" (5). In other words, the Westerners—or here, mainlanders—labeled "farang" are a Thai (or island) creation that serves to establish Thai (or island) identity via alterity: the title of the story shows the same paradigm shift towards central and primary islands producing the world around them as the story itself.

Complex and insightful as this shift is, one might still argue that it is not enough to make Lapcharoensap's Island a *shima*. After all, giving islands presence and power over the mainland is essentially just a role reversal still dependent on the same framework of ideas; an entertaining exercise in postcolonial revenge, but in itself hardly a signifier of a fundamentally different island philosophy. The *Sightseeing* collection, however, displays further affinities with the *shima* concept. One is related to the issue of boundaries. The Western notion of what 'island' means—no matter if in literature or ordinary language—emphasizes, if not fetishizes, the fixed border that separates it from the rest. Often, 'border' is seen as the island's prime characteristic. When Albrecht Classen categorically declares, "an island is not defined by its particular properties, but by being separated from firm land" (70), he is not arguing, but merely means to repeat a self-evident fact, lest it has been forgotten. Godfrey Baldacchino's observation that most people who are asked to draw an island produce one easily fitting within the confines of the sheet, with a neat, perfectly circular border (247), also strengthens the impression that the Western imagination treats the clear boundary as a given. Indeed, the idea is so ingrained that even distinguished practitioners of cultural studies, whose job description includes questioning culture-based metaphors, use 'island' as a synonym for 'completely separate entity with fixed and impermeable borders.' Wolfgang Welsch, in an uncanny resemblance to Baldacchino's circle-drawers, describes the factually wrong and normatively dangerous approach to cultures he wants to overcome as a conception of "cultures as closed spheres or autonomous islands" (195), and repeats the analogy over and over again: "Cultures constituted as spheres or islands ... must ignore, defame, or combat each other. ... [I]nterculturality still proceeds from a conception of cultures as islands and spheres. ... [I]ntercultural problems stem from the island premise" (196). Needless to say, neatly and clearly delineated islands make it much easier for the tourist gaze to attach itself.

Once again, *shima* sees islands in a very different light. *Shima* is a relative term (Suwa 8). Borders continually shift, depending on one's perspective. Tokunoshima Island certainly is a *shima*, but so is each of its forty-five local communities or villages, and the Amami archipelago that

Tokunoshima belongs to (7). Far from being fixed and stable entities, *shima* shrink and grow, “overlap with each other,” form multiple new boundaries: “Okinawa or Yamato versus Amami, Tokunoshima versus the rest of the Amami Islands, and small shima against each other (etc.)” (8).

Lapcharoensap’s Island in “Farangs” is such a shapeshifting *shima*, not an easy-to-pin-down Welshian closed sphere. Since the reader does not get a name or a precise description of the place, he or she can only guess the Island’s size (or, for that matter, its location, or what it is surrounded by). The—rather vague, but omnipresent—clues the author provides give hints that appear to be conflicting. At times, the Island seems to be quite large. It has, for instance, its own TV channel: “The Island Network is showing *Rambo: First Blood Part II* again” (2). A rant by the narrator’s mother also suggests a vast place, as it apparently has a lot to offer: “[S]he’s tired of farangs running all over the Island . . . ‘You give them history, temples, pagodas, traditional dance, floating markets, sea-food curry, tapioca desserts, silk-weaving cooperatives, but all they really want is to ride some hulking grey beast like a bunch of wildmen, and to pant over girls . . .’” (2). On the other hand, the late arrival, relative to other islands, of Big Business makes the place look small again: “. . . before the people at Monopolated Elephant Tours came to the Island and started underpricing the competition, monopolizing mountain-pass tariffs . . .—doing, in short, what they had done to many other islands like ours” (8). From the fact that Lizzie’s hotel is “on the other side of the Island” (12), one could infer a compact size as well. Paragraph by paragraph, different signs are offered. The effect is an island that grows and shrinks before our eyes (not only changing size, but also character, in terms of the level of development for example). Whenever we think we have finally fixated the place, this impression is quickly destroyed, and we have to adjust our perspective.

In fact, one can take the *shima*-influenced reading of the Island’s boundaries even further. If there are *shima* within *shima*—if the term ‘island’ can, at the same time, meaningfully refer to a place like Tokunoshima, its villages, and the successively larger units it is itself a part of—then it makes sense to ask whether Lapcharoensap’s “Island”

might not simultaneously stand for several different places, too; including some that may not be islands according to the geographical definition. Indeed, it is possible to replace the place-holder or marker “the Island” every single time it appears with varying concrete *shima* without losing any coherence or meaning. The following passage works when “the Island” is substituted by place names such as “Phuket” or “Koh Samui,” but also with “Thailand,” or “the tropical tourist destinations of island Southeast Asia”:

This is how we count the days. June: the Germans come to the Island—football cleats, big T-shirts, thick tongues—speaking like spitting. July: the Italians, the French, the British, the Americans. The Italians like pad thai, its affinity with spaghetti. They like light fabrics, sunglasses, leather sandals. The French like plump girls, rambutans, disco music, baring their breasts. The British are here to work on their pasty complexions, their penchant for hashish. Americans are the fattest, the stingiest of the bunch. They may pretend to like pad thai or grilled prawns or the occasional curry, but twice a week they need their culinary comforts, their hamburgers and their pizzas. They are also the worst drunks.... August brings the Japanese. Stay close to them. Never underestimate the power of the yen. Everything’s cheap with imperial monies in hand and they’re too polite to bargain. By the end of August ... they’re all consorting, slapping each other’s backs, slipping each other drugs, sleeping with each other, sipping their liquor under the pink lights of the Island’s bars. (1)

Different readings of “the Island” render different but equally plausible meanings. When Uncle Mongkhon stresses the English skills on the “godforsaken Island,” when the protagonist’s mother is “tired of farangs running all over the Island,” those utterances can be read as statements regarding an actual small island and, more broadly, Thailand or island tourism in general. The *shima*-like openness of what “Island” can signify means Lapcharoensap simultaneously follows Pete Hay’s call to rehabilitate small islands and the “unique and positive cultural experiences

of island living” by “reclaiming the territory” against the projections of the mainland and the “arrogance of the centre” (Hay 553–54). Further, Lapcharoensap comments on the ‘island’ Thailand and the complex Occidentalization process that characterizes the dealings of Thais with the Orientalist ‘mainlanders’ or farangs, and sheds light on tropical Southeast Asia’s packaging as tourist paradise and its subjection to the independent traveler’s gaze. Of course, these issues (or, to follow Suwa, perspectives) are by no means separable, but intimately linked—a real-existing Thai small-island native will have to negotiate backward tourist discourse as well as Thai identity discourse and general discourse on the tourism industry. And the position he or she takes in one area will influence the other areas. Lapcharoensap’s *shima*, just like the ones in the original concept, overlap; their borders are anything but fixed or impenetrable. The ending of “Farangs” suggests that this is a good thing: After all, Clint Eastwood escapes by crossing the island’s boundary—by jumping into the sea.

This last observation leads to another important aspect of *Sightseeing’s* island rewriting, related to but not identical with the issue of stable borders. The latter turns islands explicitly into disconnected units in the Western imagination, stressing their isolation. In biology, for instance, the term ‘island’ is employed to describe isolated gene pools, divergent evolutionary patterns, and closed ecosystems (Eriksen 133). The *shima* idea of islands as cells which together form a larger body, in contrast, evokes connectivity and a symbiotic relationship between islands and the rest (the sea, the mainland, other islands). The most eloquent and powerful formulation of such a symbiotic island universe can be found in an essay by Epeli Hau’ofa. Explaining that the idea of isolation has been historically imposed on islanders by colonial thought and politics and is thus artificial, Hau’ofa redefines the South Pacific/Oceania as “a sea of islands” instead of “islands in a sea,” thereby communicating “a homey expanse of connection” (Jolly 419):

There is a gulf of difference between viewing the Pacific as “islands in a far sea” and as “a sea of islands”. The first emphasizes dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from the centres of power.

When you focus this way you stress the smallness and remoteness of the islands. The second is a more holistic perspective in which things are seen in the totality of their relationships. (Hau'ofa 7)

Paul D'Arcy develops this imagery further. An existing, empirically demonstrable network of political, economic, and social links between islands and other communities and localities logically means that the seas are “bridges rather than barriers”: the ocean can be seen as “a highway” (D'Arcy 37). Islands as parts of a bustling web of activity, connected rather than separated by water—by a “boundless sea of possibilities and opportunities” (D'Arcy 35)—are a far cry from ‘closed ecosystems’; and as anthropologists generally side with Hau'ofa, D'Arcy and the *shima* concept in concluding that the association of islands with isolation is both descriptively wrong and potentially harmful (Eriksen 133), a re-writing of the Western notion is not just a strategy to restore island pride, but corrects some very real misconceptions.

In Lapcharoensap's collection, a sea of islands as well as of possibilities and opportunities can be found in the title story, “Sightseeing.” Here, the narrator, an unnamed young male as in “Farangs,” is on his way from Bangkok to Koh Lukmak, “the last in a long chain of Andaman Islands” and “so small it rarely appears on most maps” (72), with his mother. She is going blind, and the trip of approximately twelve hours by train and eight by boat is meant to give her a (last) glimpse of heaven: “Her boss had called it paradise, and though I remember Ma telling me as a child that Thailand was only a paradise for fools and farangs, ... she's willing to give it a chance now.... Sightseeing, Ma said We'll be just like the tourists” (72). Significantly, however, the two never make it to the dream island during the course of the story. Even more significantly, the failure to get to Koh Lukmak is not bemoaned, it is not even addressed—maybe mother and son will still reach it later, maybe not; it does not seem to matter. The isolated, famous Koh Lukmak and the Western-style yearning for paradise it represents, about which Ma's statements display a certain ambivalence anyway, simply become irrelevant as the trip goes on. It is the voyage itself that matters, the seamless

move from firm land to sea to various other islands, on D'Arcy's metaphorical highway.

Traversing the homey expanse of connections together, from the capital to the Southern coastal province of Trang and then Koh Trawen, the (fictitious) first of the Andaman Islands, triggers an open, long-overdue discussion between mother and son about all the critical issues that for some reason could not be talked about on *terra firma* in Bangkok. The unspoken tension between mother and son has been the impending move of the protagonist to the North of Thailand for college. He obsesses about his getting away, turning it into his very own classic 'island' fantasy of escape, but also feels guilty about it. "I ... dream of the mountains that nestle the campus, of a steady provincial peace away from Bangkok's cacophony ... I pack and unpack into the night hours though my departure is still many months away" (74), he reports, only to add soon: "I cannot look at those maps without imagining my mother blind and alone in the house, and I'm starting to wonder, for the first time in my life, about what kind of son I really am" (79). On Koh Trawen, the mother tackles the long-suppressed issue head-on: "You're going up north at the end of summer.... It's what I want for you" (96). Her pronouncement cannot be understood as a loving mother's noble sacrifice that is supposed to shield the boy from her problems and thus merely continues the pretensions and cover-ups. Far from playing a martyr, the mother, smoking and drinking on the beach, is blunt, pragmatic and down-to-earth, speaking with precisely that no-nonsense openness that the relationship, marred by too many layers of mutual consideration and guilt, needs: "She takes her hands away, tilts the beer against her lips. 'I'm not dying here, luk [child]. I'm just going blind. Just remember that. That's a big difference—a whole world of difference—even if both of those things happen to good people every day'" (96). It is not as if anything is solved, but the topic is finally on the table, and the strangely paralyzed mother-son relationship can move forward again.

D'Arcy's "sea of possibilities and opportunities" rings true here because Koh Trawen, which brings about the change, is nothing more than a short, unplanned overnight stay on the way (the name "Trawen" sounds like "travel" when pronounced the Thai way). It is part of the

open ocean network, not an exceptional closed sphere; even in itself, it is not 'one' clearly delineated place: "I realize that what I had perceived, from a distance, to be one large island is actually a series of them, four or five smaller islands rising around a larger mound" (91).

Lapcharoensap does briefly allude to the classical island-as-exile motif, but only to dismantle it. The narrator relates Trawen's history as a penal colony in the 1930s and 1940s,³ where the prisoners were left to starve and ghosts are rumored to haunt the island. Yet when a mysterious flame moves across the surface of the ocean, the exiled ghosts—and with them, symbolically, the prison-island imagery—are soon shown to be an illusion. The narrator states: "I think of the spirit of dead prisoners, of fishermen's tales, but realize quickly that it's only Ma with the oil lantern" (97). The notion of isolation gets explicitly replaced by a sea of islands connected by water: "*It's my mother walking on water*" the narrator thinks when he sees her moving with the lantern, on a then-invisible sandbar, from one of the small isles to another (97).

The space between the islands takes on a strong presence; it is not simply an empty expanse to be traversed, but a vital part of the whole. It makes the narrator see clearly—paradoxically by making him *not* see clearly—how his mother feels, bringing them closer together. The following passage shows the protagonist diving:

I open my eyes this time as I rush to the bottom, kicking hard against the surface. I see soft shafts of sunlight slicing through a thick, bleary haze. Clusters of blue, clusters of yellow, clusters of green disperse all around me, moving as if suspended midair, little pellets of color swimming through a depthless tapestry of light. I hear my feet kicking, my heart beating, the warm water rushing around me. An indistinct seafloor rises up to meet me. I crash into the sand. Perhaps, I think, this is what Ma must feel in the grips of her oncoming blindness. These indistinct visions. These fragmented hues. This weightlessness. . . . I come back up for air. . . . I raise my hand up out of the water to wave to my mother. . . . It's me, Ma. Me. I'm swimming back to shore. (94–95)

The shore is a bridge (between the ocean and the island, between mother and son), not a border. An even more expressive symbol for the interconnectedness and power to connect that characterize Lapcharoensap's island world is the sandbar. In the very last scene of the story, with the mother on the smallest island and the son on the main one, the sandbar's discovery is presented as a magical moment of the highest significance: "And then I see it. I see a thin luminous line out of the corner of my eye. I see a thread running faintly across the bay. An opaque sandbar stretched between the islands like an exposed vein" (97). Consequently, "Sightseeing" can conclude with an image of hope and togetherness, as the protagonist is crossing over: "I'm walking onto the sandbar, warm waves licking up across my bare feet, out to watch the sun rise with Ma, and then to bring her back before the tide heaves" (98). It is a fitting ending for a story that turns the island from the "favourite metaphor for the contained and sovereign self" (Hay 554), from a place where one person, alone and isolated, tends to reflect upon himself, to a metaphor of openness and reaching out, to a place where people connect with each other and the outside world.

Since the redefinition is obviously at the heart of Lapcharoensap's writing, one could now, in a final step, take the new island metaphor and apply it to the collection itself—see *Sightseeing* as a sea of connected story-islands. "Sightseeing" and "Farangs," while certainly powerful on their own, both gain from being read together, and also help the reader understand the remaining stories in the volume. The sincerity and humanism of "Sightseeing" correct the impression which may arise when one reads the cartoonish and parodic "Farangs" on its own: that Lapcharoensap is mainly engaging in a mockery of clueless tourists. The irony and cheekiness of "Farangs," on the other hand, makes it clear from the beginning that the quest for harmony in "Sightseeing" should not be confused with naïve sentimentality and the old island romanticism. "Farangs," with its discussion of Thailand and tropical islands as breeding grounds for both Orientalist and Occidentalist fantasies, serves as the necessary introduction to the volume; it acts as a safety gate where one is persuaded to dispose of one's tourist gaze before moving on to the grittier and more realist stories that follow—stories that hardly mention

foreigners any more and could be easily misconstrued as putting up front seats to watch the Plight of Thailand (in the jargon of liminality, “Farangs” could be called a threshold). “Sightseeing” is the centerpiece which, with its connectivity theme, further establishes that the stories do not indicate a Thai exceptionalism, do not offer up Thailand as an ‘other’ to the reader. Overall, with Lapcharoensap’s *shima*-like imagery, the ‘island’ Thailand (and with it the actual small islands in the South) emerges as a lively, central, well-connected and very real part of the real world.

Notes

- 1 Western writers residing, at least temporarily, in Thailand.
- 2 The phrase “tourist gaze” is not mine, but taken from John Urry’s book of the same name.
- 3 In this sense, Trawen is obviously modeled on Koh Tarutao, which was used as a prison island during World War II.

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