ISLAND MEMORY AS ASSEMBLAGE:

Desire, islandness, and the lure of immersive opacity

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ABSTRACT: This article approaches island memory as a way of exploring how past island encounters continue to shape the stakes of critical thought today. It draws out how previous attachments linger and press on the present under changing conditions of legitimacy. Working through recollections of island encounters and Caribbean participatory projects from the 1990s, the article reflects on how relational openness, immanent becoming, and opacity came to feel ethically charged and compelling within a wider milieu of thinking with islandness – often understood as ways of refusing the external gaze and the claims of mastery. Memory, however, brings into view a quieter continuity rather than a simple displacement. These orientations do not recede, nor are they merely replaced by new critical vocabularies; instead, they persist under altered assemblages of affect, desire, and institutional alignment. As critique increasingly organises itself around responsiveness, attunement, and 'staying-with,' contemporary modes of governance come to work *through* the immanence, relational openness, and opacity of becoming itself, relying on forms of registration that are provisional, iterative, and continually reworked.

KEYWORDS: Island memory, assemblage, archipelagic, opacity, refusal

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This theme issue invites contributors to reflect on how islands stay with us: how island encounters become memorable, how they return, and how they continue to shape intellectual trajectories. This invitation is not simply autobiographical. It asks how memory itself is composed – how experience is carried forward, reworked, and reactivated across time. Approached in this way, island memory is neither a private interior residue nor a stable recollection waiting to be retrieved. It is mediated through diaries, field notes, recordings, photographs, friendships, disagreements, and institutional timetables – sources that are partial, situated, and often contradictory. To write island memory on these terms is therefore not to recover what 'really happened,' but to account for how a usable past is assembled: what is selected, what recedes, and what is made to matter under present conditions.

I take this invitation literally by approaching memory through assemblage theory – not as a loose metaphor for complexity, but in the more demanding Guattarian (1992) sense in which assemblages organise desire. On this view, assemblages operate as "desiring machines": configurations of relations that shape what comes to feel possible,

compelling, or necessary. Central here are affective relations and diagrammatic arrangements. Affect names an atmospheric capacity to affect and be affected, intensifying some possibilities for becoming while closing-down others. Diagrams refer to the alignment of relations – including institutional and administrative forms – through which affect is channelled and stabilised as particular bodies, practices, and capacities. From this perspective, memory is not a storehouse of past experience but an event of reterritorialisation: not a return to origins, but a recomposition in which earlier arrangements of desire are reworked through altered affective forces, institutional and ethical demands. To underscore, I do not develop assemblage theory in depth here; I use it as a compositional aid for island memory and as a diagnostic for shifting conditions of legitimacy.

The stakes in what follows are islandness as a milieu through which today's recognisable conceptual orientations started to take hold and began to organise legitimacy – the immanence of relational becoming replacing a 'Gods-eye view', the opacity of relation and a suspicion of standpoints that claim to possess the island as objective knowledge. In the period that matters for memory assembled in this article – roughly the 1990s into the 2000s, including a Caribbean fisherfolk project I was involved in – these orientations were not simply personal preferences. They were part of a gathering atmosphere in which legitimacy increasingly attached to the generativity of being inside the immanence of relation and allowing meaning to be generated through becoming rather than secured in advance. What matters is not that islands 'exemplify' these orientations, but that islandness helped name a practical sensibility. Distance and mastery came to feel suspect, while return, co-presence, and the refusal of external standpoints increasingly carried ethical weight.

In Caribbean intellectual worlds, this sensibility was widely articulated through figures such as Édouard Glissant, for whom relation and opacity were not evasions of history but ways of living with it otherwise. Fanon was never absent, yet his insistence on structural violence often sat uneasily alongside hopes invested in relational futures. This tension matters because it marks islandness not as a settled ethic but as a historically situated desire: a search for ways of working that do not simply reproduce the violence of capture.

The Caribbean fisherfolk project I return to here took shape within an archipelagic imaginary in which generativity was expected to follow from sustained involvement, responsivity, and opacity. Remembered now, those commitments return less as settled virtues than as emergent properties of a critical imaginary still in formation – one whose implications were not yet fully apparent, but which would later place new demands on how accountability, demonstration, and legitimacy were to be sustained. What follows therefore approaches the project not as a case study to be evaluated, but as a scene of return – one through which the changing conditions under which critique secures its standing can be traced.

The fisherfolk project as an assemblage of desire

The project's beginnings matter because they clarify what was being refused and what was being hoped for. In the late 1990s, while undertaking doctoral fieldwork on participatory planning in Barbados, I observed a marine management initiative along the west coast of the island. Like many such projects at the time, it relied on a familiar

participatory toolkit, promising empowerment, consensus-building, and stakeholder inclusion. In practice, however, participation functioned less as emancipation than as a means of producing a particular account of the coast and its proper use – one that aligned readily with the interests of luxury hotel resorts, tourism operators, and marine scientists, while fisherfolk found themselves marginalised and alienated. What struck me was not simply exclusion, but the way legitimacy was being organised: knowledge counted insofar as it could be extracted and rendered stable within predefined formats.

By the early 2000s, participation was widely debated as having reached an impasse: on the one hand, deeply implicated in governmental rationalities and donor power; on the other, still holding out the possibility of experimental openings that could not be reduced to the 'dark side' critique. My own experience aligned with that ambivalence. The question became: what would it mean to push participation away from consultancy toolkits and toward a different organisation of authority and expertise – one that did not simply reproduce the figure of the external analyst who arrives, extracts, and leaves behind a report.

It is against this background of restriction that the Caribbean fisherfolk initiative I draw out here took shape. In 2003, the initiative was successfully pitched to the British High Commission in Barbados by three Barbadian fishers and myself (newly post-PhD). The rationale was blunt: fisherfolk across the Caribbean should be their own paid development consultants, rather than having others do the job on their behalf. This was not simply about fairness in remuneration (though that mattered), but about attempting to reconfigure the subject-position of expertise itself: to interrupt the default arrangement in which knowledge and legitimacy are authorised by outsiders – whether international consultants or local professionals – who still occupy a position of interpretive mastery. At the time, this wager drew its force from a wider shift in how authority was being decided: legitimacy increasingly attached to return and being-with, and the external standpoint increasingly read as a problem rather than a solution (see Pugh and Grove, 2017).

The first phase involved fisherfolk in Barbados leading the research and producing a report that documented constraints and possibilities as they understood them. Early findings already suggested what an alternative arrangement of authority might generate. Fisherfolk observed the geopolitical dominance of Bridgetown (the capital of Barbados) and the way its fisheries market was regimented by mechanised clock time, while evidence pointed to the significance of more decentralised and informal fishing practices across the island, including the undervalued but productive Six Mens community (a fishing village on the west coast of the island near Speightstown). I still remember the contrast as a felt rhythm – Bridgetown's timed routines and official routines on the one hand, and, on the other, the slower, improvised cadence of talk and work through which Six Mens made itself intelligible to those already inside it. The point here is not the empirical detail as such, but the reorganisation of what could count as backbone, value, and legitimacy. This is another way the island stayed with me: not as content, but as cadence – something no toolkit could fully translate, yet which any account still had to render legible.

The project then scaled archipelagically. Over a two-year period, it expanded to seven islands and employed 128 fisherpeople, with support from multiple British High Commissions and an array of Caribbean networks and collaborators. The explicit claim at launch, picked up by Caribbean media, was that "no British, Canadian, or American

development consultants" were flying in to write a report that would sit on a shelf. Fisherfolk would be paid directly, and fisherfolk would research with other fisherfolk. The project's movement between islands was not incidental. It mattered because it staged an alternative geography of expertise: knowledge travelled through fisherpeople's relations, not through the itineraries of external consultants.

All of this was, from the outset, an experimental wager lodged within a wider milieu in which islandness had already begun to function as a practical condition of legitimacy. The project was enabled by a broader sense – common in that moment – that island relations intensify the impossibility of standing apart, and that critique could legitimate itself through being inside rather than through mapping from outside.

The project's demands were felt as the point, not the problem: evidence that this was not consultancy-as-usual. Fisherfolk left their home communities and livelihoods to work elsewhere. Travel was exhausting. The project's structure – fisherfolk moving between islands, carrying stories and practices, learning by being-with – reflected an archipelagic sensibility. The wager was not simply that immanence would be ethically better, but that it would be recognisable as legitimate: that the work could hold its standing precisely by relinquishing the position from which the island can be obtained externally as knowledge. Thus, what justified staying with the work also began to reorganise what staying demanded. In this sense, the project reads less like a discrete 'case study' than like a lived crystallisation of a shift in the organisation of critique. The project did not only 'implement participation;' it installed a particular collective machinic unconscious of immanent legitimacy – an atmosphere in which certain practices felt self-evidently necessary (return and co-presence) and others felt increasingly illegitimate (distance, exit).

Opacity as shared condition, algorithmic governance as administrative form

What returns here as island memory is the way these earlier island encounters are reactivated under present conditions of legitimacy. Because in the project meaning was no longer presumed in advance, knowledge could not be settled once and for all; it was produced through relation. What has since become clearer is that this was not confined to the Caribbean as an empirical setting. It was the shared condition of a much wider, reconfiguring assemblage and investment of desire: funders, universities, and development agencies inhabited it too. They also lacked stable grounds of value. They also needed assurance that what mattered was being produced. In other words: the project did not sit outside the institutions that funded and evaluated it; it condensed a wider predicament in which value could no longer be secured in advance and therefore had to be continually evidenced.

The result was not an external imposition, but an intensification of capture structurally aligned with the project's own conditions of legitimacy. Once legitimacy is secured through ongoing responsiveness, demonstrability becomes the medium through which that legitimacy must be sustained. I can still remember the feel of the reversal: the moment the question stopped being "what did we do?" and became "where is it recorded?" – logs, templates, deliverables, where being inside did not remain an ethical posture; it became the currency. In this setting, governance could no longer stabilise outcomes; it could only demand demonstrability. Algorithmic forms did not resolve this condition so much as operationalise it, requiring repeated registration to show that

engagement was still happening. By "algorithmic governance" I mean not only automated computation but the broader metric–platform ecology through which contingent processes are made enumerable, comparable, and continuously actionable (dashboards, templates, indicators). Its power lies less in any single algorithm than in the requirement that capture be fleeting but pervasive. Each report settles uncertainty momentarily, only for the opacity of relational becoming to reassert itself, demanding further registration, further refinement, further demonstration.

This is the point at which the neoliberal university and development machinery cease to look like an 'outside' that corrupts the project. They are better grasped as the administrative form of the same world the fisherfolk project already inhabited. The discomfort is precisely that the virtues most prized in contemporary critique – care, humility, responsiveness – are indistinguishable from the means through which this form operates. Funders of the fisherfolk project did not ask whether participation was appropriate; they asked how it could be evidenced. Universities did not question this posture; they asked how it could be demonstrated and coded. Participation itself became an object of evaluation – not only through outputs, but through duration, intensity, and the performance of relational engagement.

This is also where the project's history becomes personally consequential. The refusal to route funds through the university (and the insistence on paying fisherfolk directly) posed an ethical challenge to development consultancy norms. But the project nevertheless existed within a broader institutional milieu increasingly organised around audit, metrics, and the extraction of value from precisely the kinds of affective, collaborative, and experimental labour that participatory work demands. These were not university-specific pressures, but the conditions under which legitimacy increasingly had to be sustained across an assemblage of development, research, and funding worlds in which the fisherfolk and I were co-constitutive. The desiring machine that made the project compelling – care and ongoing involvement – was also what aligned it with a shifting administrative logic that required legitimacy to be maintained through the ongoing registration of becoming, rather than secured once and for all. That alignment is the point: the more legitimacy attached to ongoing responsiveness, the more 'proof of responsiveness' became the practical medium of legitimacy.

In this sense, the condition did not oppose capture; it generated it. This does not mean that refusal is impossible, only that refusal cannot be secured by deeper immersion alone once immersion itself has become the currency of legitimacy. And islandness, as a milieu for immanent legitimacy, did not sit outside algorithmic governance; it helped produce the conditions in which the demand for iterative measurement could be endlessly renewed.

Contemporary ethnographic method makes the institutional shape of this demand especially clear. Julietta Singh describes how attending to failure and vulnerability can open "new possibilities for nonmasterful relations," with directionality rendered effectively without endpoint (Singh, 2018: 174–175). Videoing during research is illustrative. Increasingly undertaken in real time to make the gaze explicit (Kindon, 2003), intensive videoing enables cuts to be continually monitored, marked, and revised, tracking bodies, movements, affects, and spatial relations as they unfold. Distrust of capture coexists with acquiescence to its usefulness, and the work of delimiting and revising the gaze becomes perpetual (Garrett and Hawkins, 2014). This is how productivism and reflexivity converge in the contemporary university: the world's

opacity becomes not a limit but a mandate, demanding ongoing methodological effort, demonstrable responsiveness, and ceaseless ethical labour. Put in assemblage terms: the university does not simply 'pressure' an otherwise autonomous ethics; it participates in diagramming the very affective field in which care, humility, and reflexive attentiveness become desirable, sayable, and professionally legible. The contemporary academy's productivist pressure does not negate this demand; it metabolises it. Slowness becomes a deliverable. Care becomes an output. Duration becomes a metric. These dynamics make it possible to read the fisherfolk project less as an exception than as an early crystallisation of a wider administrative form.

Thus, what has later become clear is that the fisherfolk project's difficulty did not reside in participation as such, but in how opacity was affirmed as an ethical condition of legitimacy. Once meaning was treated as immanent – generated through ongoing involvement – opacity no longer functioned as a limit that governance encountered, but as the condition through which legitimacy had to be organised. Knowledge could not be settled, only sustained; legitimacy could not be secured, only continually evidenced. In this configuration, algorithmic governance did not enter an otherwise open experiment, nor operate as an external response; it named the administrative form through which that ethical sensibility was made durable. The project did not then gradually unravel because it was captured; it disclosed the form that capture necessarily takes once opacity is affirmed as a good to be maintained rather than a limit that interrupts governance.

Relational openness as inheritance, not rupture

Returning to the fisherfolk project now, as a memory under the pressures of contemporary critique and research, what stands out is not simply its aspirations, but how seamlessly these aligned with the shifting stakes of critique. At the time, relational openness felt like a corrective: a way of loosening the grip of abstraction, mastery, and distance that had shaped earlier development practice and academic critique. Islands, participation, and co-presence appeared to offer a means of stepping outside those inheritances.

Rei Terada's (2023) work helps clarify why this hope was so compelling – and why it was also structurally limited. As Terada shows, relational openness is not a late ethical supplement to modernity, but one of its organising commitments. From Enlightenment thought onward, relation is repeatedly cast as the condition of development itself. For Hegel and modern thought, seas and islands functioned as particularly exemplary spaces of exposure and circulation, where contact with difference is imagined as catalytic, educative, and progressive. Openness is not opposed to modernity's project; it is one of its engines.

Seen this way, the problem is not that modernity failed to value relation, but that it organised relation as an evaluative demand. Those deemed capable of openness are positioned as historical, developmental, and educable; those marked as insufficiently open can be rendered backward, static, or resistant to becoming. Relationality thus operates as both promise and test. It secures movement and vitality for some while disciplining others through the very language of openness. In other words, the productivity I have described above is not an incidental distortion of relational critique; it is one of the ways relational openness has long been organised as obligation, demonstration, and proof, rather than simple ethical orientation – and it reorganises

method as endurance, attention as labour, and ethics as continual evidencing. In this sense, what felt like a movement beyond modern reasoning in the fisherfolk project was also its continuation under altered affective conditions. Relational openness did not undo evaluation; it supplied new criteria through which evaluation could proceed in a world where meaning was no longer settled in advance.

What more recent and current critiques make visible is the point at which this logic tightens rather than loosens its grip. Dixa Ramírez-D'Oleo's (2023) insistence in the critical work *This Will not be generative* presses precisely on the assumption that relation, openness, and involvement can function as ethical goods in themselves. Under the sign of relation, difference is too easily rendered available in advance – valuable insofar as it can be engaged, learned from, or made productive within an existing horizon of meaning. Read alongside Terada, this clarifies the structural limit at work. Relational openness does not merely invite engagement; it demands it. Refusal, withdrawal, or non-participation risk being read not as limits to the world, but as failures to meet its requirements. Difference must remain worldable. Disturbance must be followable. Opacity can be affirmed – but only insofar as it can be thematised, worked on, and returned as a warrant for "more relation." Thus, it is actively mobilised as the condition through which engagement, evaluation, and capture can continue. Once meaning is understood as contingent—produced through relation rather than grounded in advance – it cannot be judged once and for all. It must be continually assessed, revised, and re-demonstrated. Axelle Karera (2019) helps sharpen the point: opacity is not the outside of relation but one of its operative media – precisely because it can still be organised as an object of ethical work, rather than as a structural limit, remaining available, in principle, to further engagement.

Seen in this light, the fisherfolk project did not gradually succumb to an external impact agenda. It revealed the form that governance must take once meaning is no longer anchored elsewhere. The demand to demonstrate depth, care, responsiveness, and sustained involvement followed directly from the project's own ethical commitments. Opacity became value; value demanded continual registration. Thus, the stakes become the point where this process can no longer be mistaken for ethical deepening. Following Karera, the key distinction is not between transparency and opacity, but between opacity and undecidability. Opacity – however radical its rhetoric – can still be folded into relation as a topic, a virtue, or a method. Undecidability, by contrast, does not name a more authentic register 'beneath', but names the Other as always already the limit suborned to the world, such that no further care or responsiveness can secure legitimacy without reproducing capture. From this perspective, contemporary invocations of humility, hesitation, unlearning mastery, and failing better do not stand outside capture. They are the affective dispositions through which a contingent world continues to govern itself without ground. What changes, once undecidability is kept conceptually distinct from opacity, is the target of diagnosis: the issue is not that critique fails to respect opacity, but that critique often treats it as the highest available limit – thereby keeping the demand for relation intact and keeping capture in motion.

Marriott's (2018) figure of "corpsing" (a term derived from the theatre) helps clarify how this limit is lived without romanticising an "outside." Corpsing is not a deeper truth finally expressed; it is the moment a role collapses and is exposed as role. In the fisherfolk project, the most decisive rupture was not exhaustion or loss of commitment, but a recognition that participation had become a compulsory performance: to remain, one had to keep re-enacting recognisable participation. It could be as banal as leaving a

template unfilled, not submitting the next budget line, or not booking the next inter-island leg. Today, we see this clearly from the perspective of contemporary assemblages as desiring machines: the only way to become in the world, in development, in the university, is to be productivist in the sense drawn out above.

Memory, inspiration, and the problem islands keep returning

Returning to the fisherfolk project now, as an act of memory, is therefore a re-entry into an assemblage or desiring machine, which can now be understood to have been emerging during this time, and whose stakes have become much clearer today. Memory is reactivated desire. Thus, the fisherfolk project remains memorable not because it succeeded or failed, but because it condensed an historical transition in how critique is authorised: from a world in which knowledge could be presumed and captured in singular reports, to a world in which meaning must be continually registered, audited, and recalibrated.

On the editor's terms, this is also why the "sources" of memory matter in the present tense: the project returns not just as narrative, but as a bundle of documents, recordings, reports, images, email trails, and institutional traces that keep reorganising what can be said about it and what can be learned from it. Those traces do not simply evidence the past; they participate in its reassembly – what becomes foregrounded and what becomes newly difficult to defend. The editor's question – how islands stay with us – can now be answered more clearly. Islands stayed with me first as an ethical lure: as milieus in which involvement seemed to offer a way out of mastery, and where opacity could be affirmed as a condition of care rather than a failure of understanding. But remembering those encounters through assemblage and desire also makes visible how easily that lure can be folded into capture once legitimacy itself is secured through demonstration.

This is the point at which refusal becomes newly legible – not as a posture of detachment, but as a problem that contemporary critique struggles to face. If relational openness has become both the promise and the test, then refusal is what cannot easily be granted standing. It is liable to be read as ethical failure: insufficient care, insufficient openness, insufficient willingness to become involved. It is precisely here that recent Afropessimist-related analytics intervene, refusing the expectation that relation must always be desirable or reparative (Marriott, 2018; Wilderson, 2020; Pugh and Chandler, 2023; Ramírez-D'Oleo, 2023). On this point, Ramírez-D'Oleo (2023) is scathing about the Environmental Humanities that infuse much Island Studies today, precisely because they continue to treat relation as obtainable, enrollable, and ultimately worldable. But if critique is to mature, such stakes can arguably no longer be ignored. Afropessimism is instructive for Island Studies because it renders visible a structural limit to relational repair once worlding itself becomes compulsory. What island memory helps clarify is how thoroughly critique's virtues – responsiveness, humility, the willingness to 'fail better' – remain tethered to a world that continues to demand relational availability.

For John Sutton (2024, p.602), writing in the field of Memory Studies:

> *If we retain the disjunctures between past and present… as both 'this-was' and 'this-is', we do not conjure an illusion of presence or transparency, or of some literal form of 'mental time travel', but rather allow the seams of*

> *the presented past to fray, the interface to reappear, and the medium between us and the past to stay visible.*

Memory, in this sense, is productive "evoking the tangling or overlaying of multiple traces" (Sutton, 2024, p. 602). In my contribution to this theme issue of *Shima*, island memory, read as assemblage, is a re-entry into the organisation of desire through which certain orientations acquired legitimacy. In the 1990s and early 2000s, relational openness and opacity carried the promise of loosening capture by relocating authority into being-with. From the present, what stands out is not a later takeover by 'logistical' demands, but the way opacity and administration were already co-constitutive: once meaning is treated as immanent and unfinished, legitimacy cannot be secured in advance, but must be maintained, evidenced, and iteratively refreshed. Opacity, under these conditions, does not stand apart from administration; it supplies the very medium through which demonstrability becomes necessary, and responsiveness acquires an institutional form. Island memory returns, then, not as a story of betrayal, but as a record of how critique's own virtues can become the mechanisms through which capture is renewed.

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