# REMEMBERING THE ISLANDS

## Some responses to *Shima's* special issue on Submergence

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**ABSTRACT:** *Shima's* special issue on the theme of submergence (v10 n1) approached the topic from a range of disciplinary positions using a variety of islands, covering classic myths and legends, fiction, entertainment, and music. This short response develops several themes running through the issue, focusing on memory and exploring imaginations relevant to understanding the significance of island submergence and (re)emergence.

**KEYWORDS**: submergence, islands, memory

> *Submerged by history,*
> *Submerged by time,*
> *Islands remain*
> *In memory sublime.*

It is often explained how island cultures connect with the water surrounding them. Some islands rely on the water underneath them for freshwater, such as through aquifers and lenses. How are cultures of islands shaped by the water *over* them? An odd question. Two immediate, practical possibilities leap to mind. First, the air tends to hold water vapour. Is this an esoteric query about solving drought through using renewable energy sources to condense water out of the atmosphere? Or, the second possibility, are we in the polar regions with islands such as Greenland topped by glaciers or on high-elevation islands with peaks often snow-capped such as Mauna Kea in Hawai'i? A third possibility might seem more fanciful: submerged islands. An underwater location is still literally a piece of land surrounded by water. Except that if it is underwater, *is* it a piece of land? Where does the island start and stop? Do all the ocean floors represent a single island?

Many submerged islands were previously above water. The land sunk, the water rose, or both. Time progressed and the environment changed, perhaps rapidly, through subsidence during an earthquake, perhaps slowly, through the planet's ice sheets melting, adding water to the oceans. Many other processes could be at work. Rivers change their course, such as the millennial weaving of the Mississippi delta until humans engineered it. Meanwhile, water expands as it heats above 4ºC, so warmer times across the Earth witness higher sea levels.

Submergence thus displays multiple causes over various time scales—and over various space scales from local subsidence due to groundwater or fossil fuel extraction through to planetary sea-level rise as greenhouse gases warm the atmosphere and oceans. What happens to, and what do we know about, islands submerged by these mechanisms?

The special issue amply answers this question, exploring island submergence and (re)emergence from numerous perspectives. Many of the articles have an implied theme, which seems rather obvious, but which is rarely stated explicitly: *We somehow knew about the islands*. On occasion, we find them accidentally but more often we search for them due to records, myths, stories, or legends—or we create memory of them through fiction. Somehow, tendrils or tomes of information were retained in humanity's collective memory, always bubbling at the surface as with Atlantis through the centuries (Smith's paper) or entirely submerged, as with Lyonesse (Mitchell's paper). When Atlantis and Lyonesse are examined together through the internet (Hallerton's paper), memory is being created and perpetuated—but then also submerged given the fleetingness of memes and the flavour-of-the-hour, easily buried by the next trend.

The submergence and (re)emergence of information and memory parallel the submergence and (re)emergence of islands. At the beginning of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), the narrator intones, "The play is memory, and being a memory play, it is sentimental, it is dimly lit, it is not realistic". The connotations are negative, as if it is problematic that memory naturally means errors and ephemerality. But without memory, what else is there? Many of Williams' characters in *The Glass Menagerie* and his other plays are islands unto themselves, submerging and creating memories and truths—similarly to oral histories, songs, documentary sources, and the internet, as explored in the papers in the special issue.

Submergence is scrutinised in and through multiple dimensions, as representation, as perception, as imprinting, as interpretation, as experience, as memorialisation, as mythologising, and as learning. Memory guides in understanding and dealing with these different forms of submergences, in turn being guided by what we wish to retain and highlight from the swirl of stories and histories of the islands sought, discovered, and created. Memory does not create reality so much as becomes reality, often the reality we wish to have.

The Wachowski Brothers' *Matrix* film trilogy, explores the modulation and melding of memory and reality. Characters wonder that, if they do not remember reality, if all they know is what they think they are experiencing, then what difference does it make whether or not it is reality? They submerge themselves in the matrix, the dreamworld, rather than being submerged underground in reality, away from the machines.

Not remembering features in Christopher Nolan's *Memento*, a film about a character Leonard Shelby who lacks short-term memory but who searches for a man he believes murdered his wife. Shelby can function day-to-day, including speaking and driving. He can recall fragments from his life. He cannot remember what happened five minutes, five days, or five weeks ago. He has become his own island in time. Even as he is manipulated by those around him—from being charged for two hotel rooms simultaneously to being convinced to kill alleged criminals—he takes control, creating his own tattooed and polaroid mementos which then become his artificially remembered reality, his island of reality for himself. He relates how "I have to believe in a world outside my own mind. I have to believe that my actions still have meaning, even if I can't remember them". He is trying to (re)emerge from his submergence, knowing that he cannot succeed.

In the Philip K. Dick short story *We Can Remember It for You Wholesale* (1966), a company offers false, implanted memories. They become muddled for a client when his requests for memories turn out to be based on his real but suppressed (submerged) experiences. Dick's

writing frequently probes confusion amongst reality, experience, and memory, based on hallucinogens, psychedelics, and other drugs, presumably drawing on his own experimentations. He explores the islanding of the mind through substance-induced submergence away from reality. His worlds are dystopically wavering realities, like the sea shimmering in the heat, for which the power of controlling memory and presumed experience is key.

Grasping this power and controlling memory assists in many situations portrayed in the papers here. Simpson discusses the creation of floating micronations, to preserve ideals of libertarianism and of cultures. MacKinnon's investigation of *Stargate Atlantis* broaches similar themes in fiction, also referring to the island "as a constructed spectacle" (39). In Dick's work, *Memento*, and the *Matrix* trilogy, we similarly witness experience, memory, and reality dancing around each other, sometimes diverging and sometimes overlapping.

The confluence of such ideas in the music papers in this issue supports the understanding of submergence and (re)emergence for making memory. Drexciya begins with real events leading to "the construction of culture and the invention of tradition" (Gaskins: 75). In such art, this might mean altering experience to alter memory, creating experience to create memory, and representing history and myths as we wish to have them remembered. Fitzgerald and Hayward see this approach in the performances of The JAMs and The KLF, evoking tangibility in the island myths of Mu, Atlantis, and Crete (through Minos) alongside intangibility through the musicians' real actions on Jura.

Atlantis and King Minos epitomise and memorialise power, leadership, love, sin, betrayal, and ultimately calamity. How to deal with catastrophic memory or anticipation of submergence? Following disasters, over the short-term and the long-term, survivors can find that focusing on a constructed memory or expectation of destruction can in itself be personally destructive. Survivors might continually replay disaster images in their minds and in their dreams, feeling guilty about outcomes or what they did not do, thereby failing to escape the vivid detail of memory or anticipation. The media can be culpable, seeking to perpetuate this vividness by having those affected reiterate their tales. For some, the retelling and publicity help, for others, they harm. In discussing Azealia Banks' song "Atlantis", Burton describes "a video awash in water imagery a month after Hurricane Sandy swept through the New York area where Banks resides" (82-83). While the waves and water in the video could represent a hurricane or just the ocean, a recurrent erupting volcano, a lightning strike, and an apparent firestorm provide further potential disaster imagery.

Other media present their own disaster representations. These representations—what is and is not shown, what is and is not written—can create the collective memory of the disaster. Where that differs from people's own memories, who judges which one is *dismemory*—as per the title of a 1998 Swan Christy song—and how is the judgement made?

Representations of disaster frequently island it, surrounding disaster-affected populations with the sea of apparent 'normality', constructing the disaster as the unexpected, unusual, abnormal, and separate situation. Yet the conditions that create disaster, the process of vulnerability which makes individuals and communities unable to deal with common occurrences such as earthquakes and storms, are everywhere.
Vulnerability is poverty, inequity, oppression, power distribution, and resource distribution, which means that some people cannot afford to retrofit their property to withstand shaking or are forced to live in the floodplain without adequate flood-countering

measures. The disaster is the everyday conditions in which people are forced to live, rather than the extreme forces and energies that occasionally pummel people and properties. In our rush to isolate the extremes as the disaster, we create a collective memory that willfully neglects the typical day-to-day situation forcing many to be unable to deal with typical nature. We island the extremes as extremes when they really represent manifestations of everyday conditions.

Consider the Atlantis fetish, shown in the papers by Smith, Simpson, and to some extent MacKinnon. Atlantis's sins were everyday, being both part of the common culture and the disaster afflicting the island. The moral, perhaps, is that the island's submergence was not a disaster because it averted further disaster of continued sinning. Engraining morals in collective memory could have been the motivation behind Plato possibly fabricating the Atlantis myth, as discussed by Smith. After all, a standard fable is that those who stray from the ethical pathway will come to ruin, so the best pathway is healing the sin.

In *Memento*, Shelby intones, "If we can't make memories, we can't heal". In disaster hitting an island leading to submergence, not remembering is one way to heal, to forget the tragedy and the devastation, instead accepting a calm and stable life in which catastrophe does not appear. Until it does. Ultimately, collective forgetting and denial do not help for dealing with disaster, whereas collective memory can lead to positive collective action.

In Arthur C. Clarke's classic 1953 novel *Childhood's End*, humanity as a species retains a submerged collective memory—but from a future calamity. The future situation is so devastating that it echoes back through time, shaping human conditions and fears as the species' culture evolves. Since humanity's fate is inevitable, the collective memory from the future helps to cope, even while not being recognised as memory.

The articles in the theme issue of *Shima* fuse memory and dismemory from the past and future, through representation and misrepresentation plus expression and unexpression, all for different forms of island submergence and (re)emergence. As Goodall writes:

> *Before the development of archaeology in the 19th Century and accurate dating methods in the 20th, the major obstacle to a scientific understanding of the remote past was a total misunderstanding of the true age of the planet, the human race, and its cultures.* (121).

Somehow, history and memory had to be created and constructed, with timelines being skewed depending on the level of accuracy and precision of the evidence found. Even today, various techniques for estimating dates lead to error bars and discussions regarding how narrow or wide the time band should be.

Aspects of timelessness emerge, submerging time in the future for *Stargate Atlantis* (MacKinnon) and the past (Smith, in noting some of the concatenated timescales for transferring the oral history of Atlantis). They evoke critical thinking for submerged island cultures and histories in terms of media, memorialisation, excavation, and display. The subtexts of control, power, and responsiveness underlie, ostensibly seeking collectiveness and individuality for remembering submerged entities with the hope or expectation that we can avoid recurrence.

The hope morphs the memory of past disaster into something we wish to remember, often sentimentally, perhaps dimly lit, and with debatable realism. We assemble the menagerie of mementos as memory, intertwined with the discourse of submergence and

(re)emergence. It is as fragile as our illusions that our social structures and infrastructure are strong enough to withstand future submergence—of places, of peoples, and of cultures. We create the memory, but the memory creates us, having inspired the scientific and cultural investigations to create and shatter myths. The articles in the theme issue are both scientific and cultural investigations, preserving rather than submerging memory for the future.

> *Islands as memory,*
> *Islands as time.*
> *History submerges,*
> *Depths yet to climb.*

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