[Paper]

Beyond Words to Find Words:
Creative Hermeneutical Dialogue During COVID-19

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Abstract

This article puts forward several offerings to go beyond words using words to find words. With island studies, late modern discourses in human geography, and fringy takes on linguistics as a base, the dialogue involving the hermeneutics—the branch of knowledge dealing with interpretation—of creative and scientific formulation is extended. Elements of the political and social current of Australia in an evolving COVID-19-affected, island-bound present—a During—are discussed against a backdrop of the epistemology of Some Islands, an experimental academic group and forum the authors use to mediate some of the Befores, Durings, and Afters (capitals intentional) that have evolved during COVID-19 times. The authors and their work are presented as inhabiting island-like spaces within the academic and creative industries.

Keywords

Art, island studies, language, linguistics, metaphorical islands, music, photography

Introduction

> The breakdown of language actually testifies to one's capacity to search out an expression for everything. . . . In actuality, speaking has not come to an end but to a beginning. (Gadamer 1975, 93)

Island studies is no stranger to inheriting and deliberating on some of the effects of a COVID-19-affected world. There is nearly no need to detail the number of writings that have been produced around COVID-19, societal change both big and small, mainland and island, and dry-continent and wet-isle. Within months of the start of the steady flow of

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lockdowns around the world, critical studies in the COVID-19 Island Insight Series (2020; 2021) (http://islandstudies.com/island-insights-series/) appeared, detailing how lifestyle, tourism, and health on islands such as Malta (Briguglio and Moncada 2020), Grenada (Telesford 2020), and the Okinawa Islands (Kakazu 2020) had been altered significantly. In this position article, we do not recount how these aspects of island life have changed.

Instead, this article has several aims relevant to the theoretical posing of islands as places of innovative vocation. First, it outlines a work-in-progress method involving three scholars from diverse fields around literal and metaphorical conceptions of what islands are and might be regarding creative production. Second, because only one of the authors works explicitly in island studies, with foci otherwise being on creative writing, photography, and music composition, this article bridges gaps across these disciplines and inculcates broader possibilities for how island studies and the human geography of islands may exist more ably in a current and post-pandemic world. Means of identifying and navigating breaches between scientific and artistic pursuits and outputs and the nature of, to use a tired word, collaborations when things are looking wobbly and unstable in the academic world are outlined. Our takes subsist in parallel with contemporary trends in islands and creativity, e.g., Centre for Island Creativity in the highlands and islands of Scotland (https://www.uhi.ac.uk/en/research-enterprise/centres/centre-for-island-creativity/), and with trends in assemblage, geography, art-based tourism, place-making, and the reconciling of art practice in the periphery and on islands (Prince 2017a; Prince 2017b; Prince, Petridou, and Ioannides 2021; Prince, Qu, and Zollet 2021).

It is essential to position and juxtapose islands, time, and duration. This present activity at the hands of our frisky threesome riffs similarly to Harney and Moten's (2021) *All Incomplete* and Morton's (2013) *Hyperobjects* in the sense that, for example, the effect on islands of hyperobjects such as global warming is nonlocal and temporally undulated. What we do and the resultant hyperobjectified consequences are not in the same place. This is nowhere as obvious as how large-scale world events impinge heavily on small, water-surrounded, and remote island places. In the same way that we are trying to grapple with *a* or *the* new in a temporal jungle, the consequences of changing climate, lost islands, and the mozzarella-like nature of pending occasions and events' Futures, we cannot help but dwell on Chandler and Pugh's (2021) and Pugh and Chandler's (2021) position on islands being emblematic places and figures for anthropocene- and anthropo-scenic thinking. Gadamer's end of speaking as a new beginning, the melding of a loss of language, and the subtitle to Chandler and Pugh's (2021) article that "there are only islands after the end of the world" leave the gate open for a new perspective implicating time-space, location, islands, language, and a soft-hard critique of disciplines. Welcome to our exploratory honing, one which, like the other things we are reading, appears perched perilously on the end-edge of the world.

Because our take is language-based, and because one author is a linguist, our position necessarily implicates recent work on island languages (Evans 2020; Nash et al. 2020;

Nash, Markússon, and Baker 2021) and island toponymy (Hayward 2021). Our treatise is as much about failings as it is about being found within being lost. We employ the Before-During-After triad as a spatio-temporal insinuation to get our job done. Let us begin.

Some Islands: Islanding and Beyonding

We are three generalists. Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic, we were engaged in a long-term project called Some Islands which studies islands, both literal(ly) and figurative(ly). Some Islands is an experimental academic medium that takes as its point of departure and basis the hardcore linguistic, a realm of prospects melding the analysis of language and the tools linguistics offers. Here linguistics is posed as the scientific study of language as a system. The wonky assumption that language is indeed an analysable scheme is more than merely and just a simple stretch. It is sketchy ground yet supple enough upon which to place many possibilities. Enter Some Islands as an investigational thinking plot for opening up what linguistics is and might be and letting such ideas graze in the open airs and potential of art and science.

Some Islands celebrates the blatant nothingnesses and extreme importance of all that islands offer: the languages, the cultures, natural and spoken landscapes, ways of being. It is about being lost at sea and trying to find a mooring in a safe berth where things are okay. Remoteness and insularity are stages for so many things: Pitcairn Island, that mystical and remote island in the South Pacific, is one basis; linguistics as tool and device; art as a thorough thought thoroughfare; sentimentality and nostalgia as means to open up the can of worms of thingyness and ways to catch yourself doing and feeling the unknown.

The pandemic has been a radical disruption not only to our undertaking but to our ways of working and interacting with each other and with others. We remain island scholars in that we now examine the figurative islands on which we washed up through the social isolation and border closures instigated by the pandemic. And we are taking a hermeneutical approach, inspired by Gadamer (1975), in the sense that: "Things that change force themselves on our attention far more than those that remain the same" (xxii). Here we explicate our approaches to our tripartite dialogue we are engaged in borne of a frustration with words seeming to fail us, and how we moved and continue to move *beyond words to find words* to incorporate artistic and creative practices and collaboration in our dialogue. There are clear Befores, Middles, and Afters in our treatment [proper nominalisation—capitals—intended; plurals possible, plausible, and pertinent; prepositions, conjunctions, adverbs].

For Gadamer, "a dialogical engagement with a work of art, wherein we listen to and contemplate what the work has to say to us, brings about a disclosure of something unexpected, something previously hidden that has come to light" (cited in Nielson and Liakos 2020, 5). Our proposition is that the act of creating an artwork, or being creative in our being-there-ness response to the situation in which we find ourselves, can similarly reveal something meaningful and unexpected, partly because the act of creation involves being

in dialogue with the situation itself. Nielson and Liakos (2020) explore this concept of dialoguing with COVID-19 directly, suggesting that our "collective and personal encounters with COVID-19 accord with Gadamer's definition of genuine hermeneutical experience as altering and shaping our orientation to things" (5). Earlier we were somewhere else, a Before. Now we are in some kind of After, albeit an After on shaky ground about which we know little.

We inhabit an island-like nexus of collaboration of hermeneutical inquiry through our own practices of specific artforms. Scientific inquiry and open, freeform philosophical musings using online communication platforms accommodate the necessities of doing research and living with(in) a pandemic. The Befores have necessarily become the Afters with a rickety Middle-During. Although the core of our inquiry presently is around the failings and failure of words for each of us to express and create meaning or articulate effectively an interpretation of our holistic experience/s of living with(in) a pandemic, we do not give up on words. Instead, we respond here to the challenge posed by Risser (2019) that words do not fail us at all, but rather, he suggests, the answer to the question of "where are we to find the words for what we cannot at first say, I would now answer, accordingly, in the evocative power of our words in living language—what I think can best be described quite simply as the future of our words" (9).

Risser (2019) stresses in reference to the hermeneutical approach of Gadamer that the "interplay between conversational partners in dialogue is itself caught up in the interplay that language itself is undergoing. [. . .] Language is not a stockpile of words but a virtuality of words, which is simply that of an open potentiality with respect to the performance of meaning in language" (6). For us, finding those possible words of the future involves leaving words behind and engaging in creative acts, sharing images and sound, immersing ourselves in a being-there-ness in a world rendered strange after having once been so familiar. Some Islands has operationalised several of these prospects.

Words Fail Us: The Art of Dialogue During COVID-19

Nielson and Liakos (2020) write, "Our dialogue with COVID-19 not only expands our understanding of the virus, but it requires an immediate response" (4). Labels are necessary: Sprott is a writer. Nash is a linguist and island studies scholar. Sweeney is a musician. We distinguish between linguistics—the scientific study of ways of speaking (language, if you will) as a system—and language (things people speak), languages (English, Swahili, Bengali), and Language, the philosophical, historical, and scientific concern of understanding the how, why, and when of human speaking and using language. While we bow down to these disciplines, especially Nash because he has been banged into shape as a student on the anvil of linguistic science for more than two decades, we are not irreverent to what these strands may offer us lexically and epistemologically. After all, the words they have provided us have failed us. Sprott ditched words for a camera (fig. 1). Nash got rid of lots of heavy linguistic baggage and opted for documenting silence and

creative non-fiction as a way to represent processes of islands, language, sounds, place, and ways people speak (fig. 2). And Sweeney has always been the silent one with a penchant for being a little more than hushed (fig. 3) and islanded (read: isolated). Our current work with Some Islands is nestled and betwixt methodologically and theoretically two obvious and large disciplines: art and science.

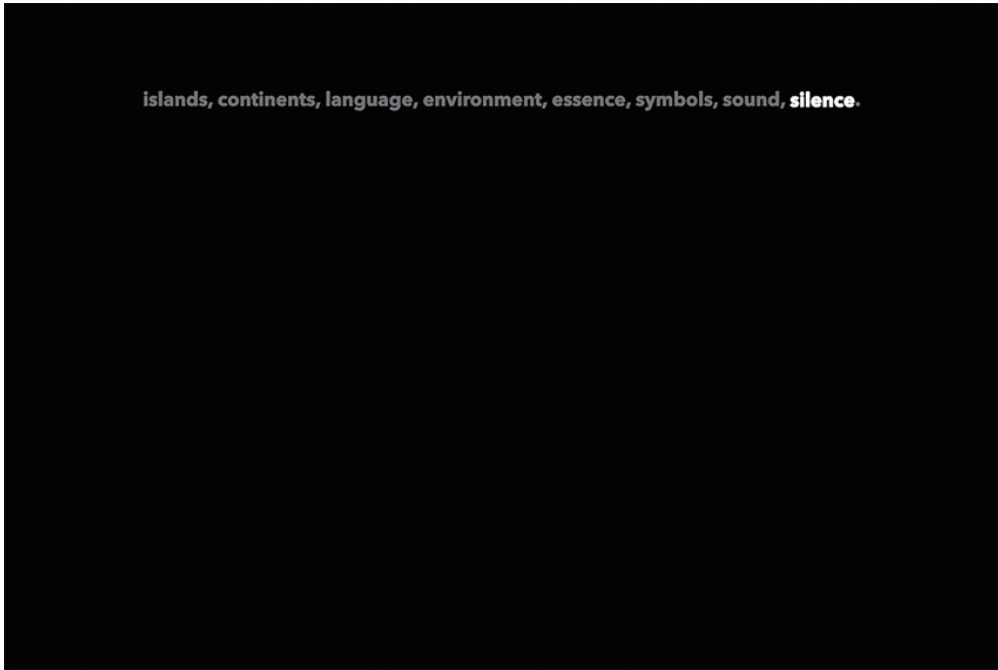FIGURE 1. Burra landscape (Sprott 2020).

FIGURE 2. Screenshot of Norfolk Island film edit (Nash and Sweeney 2018).

FIGURE 3. TED Talk, New York (Sweeney 2018).

For those in Australia, a definitive Before of this pandemic begins amidst an already fraught experience with a severe bushfire season, the extremity of which had captured international attention. Between Before and After is the lingering and complex territory of During. The flames of the fires might well have died down, but we are still not at the point of After the extreme weather events wrought by climate change (see Bromhead 2021 for a treatise on disaster linguistics, climate change semantics, and the 2011 Queensland floods). Nor are we yet at the point of After the COVID-19 pandemic. During is key, for it is where we currently are and will remain for the foreseeable future. During: an active and possible nexus implicating the before, middle, and after of time and a project of which we are trying to make sense. Moreover, we are still stuck on an island. There is a way out of this island somehow. Ah, waiting for the After to come.

An overwhelming array of photographic/filmic images filled our screens in late 2019 through early 2020. Smoke-filled skies impacted our daily lives, affecting our ability to breathe. Words were not needed, to some degree, as we were all forced into a being-thereness of visceral dimensions. While our eyes were affixed to the horrifying devastation across the country, occasionally infixed news stories would mention a threat of a pandemic looming. COVID-19 was on its way to our large island home. In late March 2020, Australia went into international lockdown. The pandemic had made it to our shores. Australia and Australians' perception of themselves and their *island home* changed overnight. What was and is Australia now in terms of the world? Where do we fit in? As borders closed, flights stopped, and new technological possibilities were called to task, Australia became what it actually is: an island. Things were never going to be the same. What mattered previously in terms of physical mobility and communication was changed forever.

This confluence of horrors, the fires and the pandemic, emerged as an ineffable, overwhelming reality that brought us to the limits of language and specifically words to express, or make sense of, lived experience. Before wanted to become After. But what kind of After? Not only the enormity of both tragedies unfolding and about to unfold, for they were literally large in scale, but the shock of the newness of the experiences made it difficult to articulate in words what was felt or understood. Yet we were not just observers. We were in this world of newness, attempting to navigate it as though newly arrived travellers in a foreign country where we do not speak the dominant language. As Nielson and Liakos (2020) suggest, "our dialogue with COVID-19 calls us to *radically* and immediately change our lives and ways of being with others" (4). Even as we finalise this piece, the During-After we wished for in our previous Before is far from among us. Melbourne, "the most locked-down city on the planet," only "opened up," after several months of lockdown, at 11:59 p.m. on 21 October 2021. How insular (double meaning: relating to and from an island; ignorant of or uninterested in cultures, ideas, or peoples outside one's own experience) is Australia?

In truth, the 2019–2020 pictures fairly screamed louder and more effectively than words could. Fire is spectacular and terrifying in its fierceness. There is no doubting the

deadly threat. And then the images started flowing through of hazmat suits in China, of people being welded into their homes. Then came mass graves. Bodies piled up outside hospitals. Field hospitals in public parks. The empty streets of major world cities as lockdown instructions were issued. The bushfires were forgotten (see Bromhead 2020 for a semantic analysis of "bushfire" in Australian English) as we collectively entered a state of shock and bewilderment. This is now a Before. The During-After in Australia is now: "Do you want to eat out and have a drink in a pub? Only for the vaxxed."

So before COVID-19, there was trauma and despair and terror and grief over the bushfires. This threshold on which we collectively stood was already fragile. Ready to break and deposit us all into an abyss. We moved from Before to During to Before-and-During and have yet to make it to any semblance of After. The fires died down, but recently came the floods. Climate change is sitting heavily upon this threshold refusing to go away. And across the world, as extreme weather events continue, so, too, does the death toll of COVID-19. No one talks about the *new normal* anymore. The curve never really flattened. This is obviously here to stay. We are still on a really big island. Ah, After.

Eric Gilder (2020), writing about his experience as a scholar of the humanities, notes how the crisis has "caused me to [. . .] lose my ability to think [. . .] clearly" (2). He reflects upon previous experiences, with the AIDS epidemic having taken an emotional toll, and notes of the current pandemic, "I find myself reprising in an awkwardly similar fashion the same feeling of existential dread" (7). Our own failures with words reflect a similar confrontation of inability to think and process clearly into language. This is why we decided to explore creative ways to seek meaning, express meaning, and remain open to a dialogue that moves beyond words in order to return perhaps one day from this playful interaction to using/finding words that do not fail to express that which we seek to express. Or not. There may be no finite end to this dialogue between us but rather an ongoing experimental, creative interplay using various formats/media and words intermingled as we reflect upon and continue to seek meaning in the unfolding lived experiences. After all, this, too, shall pass, right?

We adopt a positive attitude and embrace this unorthodox means of "discussion" and "talking" to each other, which Susan Cain (2013), argues is actually more beneficial, "Group brainstorming doesn't actually work [. . . .] Studies have shown that performance gets worse as group size increases[.] . . . The one exception is online brainstorming . . . a worthy goal, so long as we understand that social glue, as opposed to creativity, is the principal benefit [of group brainstorming]" (88–89). To our specific method.

Sprott on Photographing the Landscape: The Island of Self and Subject through the Lens

Sprott uses a camera to dialogue with the pandemic to facilitate her being-there-ness and capturing moments that line up, frame by frame, each moment, revealing something different to the moment before as the sun moves on its axis, casting subtle shifts in light,

and the ecology of the location teems with life being lived (by non-humans). Time is a factor. During lockdown orders, which came and went from time to time in 2020 and 2021 and kind of stayed in a bizarre semblance of "doing the right thing," only an hour per day was allocated to leaving residential locations for exercise or being outdoors. This distillation of time allowed to be outdoors as a landscape photographer became intensely valued and deeply meaningful, for this hour created a figurative island borne of the intensity of focus upon the literal being-there-ness. This focus was sharpened (and literally framed or guided by) the camera lens.

Keith Harder (2006), a landscape painter, writes about his creative practice as a hermeneutical quest, suggesting of the practice of being located in place, "that a reader/traveller is not in a one-way relationship, or even in charge of an encounter with the unknown" (334), and "in engaging the effort to understand the new, through interpretation and interrogation, the traveller should expect be to be interrogated, in turn, by that encounter" (334) and upon returning from this encounter find oneself "re-interpreted upon returning to the familiar" (334). Sprott describes her experience of being situated in a location, observing and photographing a scene, as moving between a being-there-ness and conscious actions associated with framing the shot. The experience is intensely focused, immersive and overwhelming, visceral to the degree her intellect fails to grasp or process via words the *what* of this moment that unfolds in tiny details, often reaching a peak of beauty that leaves her almost breathless. As though she/I am merging with the Everything. But photographs are static, and being in the world is a sensory experience incorporating all five senses.

Sweeney imbibes this aural dimension in the dialogue, both in the literality of field recordings and through the creative interpretation of musical and sound compositions that interact with photographic images. This creative collaboration between images and sound is how we engage in dialogue, a negotiation where we let go of words and the formal structures of language and the strivings of linguistics and hope for an encounter beyond words, as artists, that might reveal something important, or new, or helpful to our future words, while simultaneously trusting the artwork itself will speak to those encountering it.

Nash on Linguistics and the Unspoken: The Island of Self and Spoken Absence

Nash uses words, sentences, and bourgeois publication venues to share his ideas. COVID-19 puts aspects of these possibilities into disarray. As grant-funding bodies scrambled to make sense of how budgets and timelines were now going to work, the need to publish was almost turned on its head. Journal articles and book chapters did not seem to matter much. In part, they almost died, stopped meaning much. This kind of writing seemed like a Before. It was more the emotionally unspoken, that *feeling* of dread and unnerved anticipation that won out over the recorded written. Still, words were needed. And where Nash has for many years drawn on the words of others (read: language docu-

mentation and linguistic fieldwork on islands, where he documented placenames, ways of speaking about landscape, and spatial grammar), he turned to radio as a means to tell his own stories of other people's stories: a During with the hope of becoming an After. And it seemed to work. Sweeney, the sound composer, checked in weekly to record the twenty radio interviews over more than four months between Nash and Ewart Shaw, an Adelaide radio personality.

The interviews began by phone, because, well, no one could go anywhere, right? A non-water-based island within a city. Then when allowances were allowed and affordances afforded, they started meeting in the studio. A non-water-based island within a studio. They spoke. They joked. They cajoled each other. And the developing conversation of everythings and nothings led to its own islandic amalgamation of self-in-spoken and absence-in-thought experimentation. All the while, there was and still is a developing archive, what Nash and Sweeney have labelled their *Invisible Archive*, a way of working, of teaching, and of learning that queries the nature of the membrane, curtain, the apparent, and that which can be documented. It is a call to task for how academic knowledge(s) is/ are presented, argued, and documented and how teaching may be evolved into different directions involving the new apparatus that COVID times and isolation have forced onto us. A Before moving through a During to a hopefully hope-filled After. Being failed by words made Nash look deeply at his wordage. Every lost involves a found.

Sweeney on Musical Composition and the Tech: The Island of Self and Sound and Wires

For Sweeney, music has always aligned with his desire for solitude and creativity as a preferred act-of-one. The music studio is an acoustically sealed island. It is the closed door, the *do-not-disturb*, the signalling of a possibility of creativity: that something might emerge, as song or score, and then be swiftly cast out into the digital ocean of sound, of abundant music content, a saturated social space existing in the vast streaming network of platforms like Spotify and Apple Music. Sometimes the signal may get caught in a net, on the net, and a listener listens.

A musical instrument, perhaps, is an island. A space to land and inhabit for a short space in time in order to compose, in order to arrange one's thoughts in musical form. For Sweeney, there is no written score, no claiming of ownership to the sounds made. The music is in commune with the player of the piano, the organ, the sampler, the laptop. A solitary practice, indeed, but one that is made public in the stream of internet media, ear witnesses to a work made on an island of sound.

Sweeney's collaborative practices with Nash and Sprott have often been undertaken in separate spaces, through long-distance file-sharing, from personal spaces of solitary work. Prior to March 2020, Some Islands, a collaboration between Nash and Sweeney, had already been a series of films and documents made while Sweeney was in Adelaide and Nash was in Aarhus (Denmark) and Armidale (New South Wales, Australia). Swee-

ney and Sprott have been adept at remote working practices since the advent of electronic media sharing in the late 1990s. One could say that Some Islands was COVID-ready, pandemic(ally) equipped. As individuals, we were already "tooled up" to work across wires, using the sharing technology at our disposal. Sprott eventually and organically joined Some Islands.

The internet itself, beyond its burgeoning wireless and satellite delivery, is a network of wires travelling under the ocean, delivering unimaginable data speeds between continents, between islands, deep sea data that we rely on to keep our dry lands and digital lives functioning. As thinkers, writers, artists, musicians, and developing island studies scholars, this invisible behemothic creature maintained by a shipping network is integral to our work, to our practice as collaborators and communicators. The sheer magnitude of this network is beyond words to most of us, and yet, here we are, tapping away at ideas that rely on its functionality, its stable network capacity. We stay dry on our islands while the wires soaking beneath us keep us afloat. We express disdain when the signal goes offline as if it is somehow sabotaging us on purpose.

Concluding in Progress/Process: There is No After

The dialogue outcomes, some of which are Some Island-y, presented at https://www. joshuanash.net, demonstrate the ways in which Nash has drawn together a small group of thinkers, both academic and creative, and encouraged an art(s)-science collaboration unbounded by strict rules or methodology as a response to being in the During of a global pandemic. It signifies a definitive Before in the annals of future histories that will be written of the years 2019–2021 and beyond. It is a collection of clear and unclear thoughts expressed variously through the media of image, film, audio, and text/s.

With island studies and linguistics as ballast in the choppy seas of the During within which we find ourselves we are pleased that we have shared some of the art and science Some Islands offers the world. As large proportions of the Australian population, those inhabiting Sydney and Melbourne, come out of months of brutal lockdown, the scars of which will remain for years, the After for which we, as an island nation but a not-wanting-to-be-cut-off-from-the-rest-of-the-world country, are hoping is foggy at best. As we write, we are still During the ravages of climate change and the global COVID-19 pandemic. And as we finalise this piece on Friday 17 December 2021, news of the Omicron variant riddles our bulletined world. Journalists and writers—Gadamer, Harney and Moten, and Morton—talk about the time–space of islands Before and After words, of Before and After and the sketchiness of time, and of the During of the Anthropocene and an articulation of "why it matters that work seeks to bring island characteristics—or what we might call the generative force of 'islandness'—to the forefront for thinking through the Anthropocene" (Pugh and Chandler 2021, x). In Australia, we watch a Before war breaks out in our region; China, Indonesia, somewhere else, someone else. One can almost hear the splintering wood of this threshold we stand upon, balancing the various calamities that

now inform our existence. The concept of After feels much like the futility of scanning the horizons of seas spread far and wide around an island (Australia), upon which we are castaways, in the hope that rescue vessels will/might magically appear. Australia's hitherto island-like hard borders will once again soon open to more laxed and vaxxed internationalising. The process of Aftering is filled with nothing but buoyant optimism.

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