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Errantry

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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05/07/2021

Date

Paul Ramirez Jonas

Thesis Sponsor

05/07/2021

Date

Carrie Moyer

Second Reader

Dedication

For Maxine

and

Herman Reginald Wong,
affectionately known as Tommy.

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October 8, 2020, 10:52 AM

I flew into Montego Bay on October 5th. At the airport a TSA officer said the COVID lockdown would begin again on Wednesday. Feeling both excited and nervous about leaving New York for Jamaica. After not really going far from home in Brooklyn, since March– it felt strange to leave, and leave my pod behind– Dina and Lizania. After a long wait to be checked in for my quarantine by the customs officer, (I still have not yet checked in with them, now that I've arrived to "Road End"– no one picks up the phone) I took off my mask, for the first time since leaving NYC when I was alone in the rental car.

Tropical storm Delta rolled in shortly after I did. It was cruising by and it was rainy driving into my rented humongous Two BR apt/studio in Treasure Beach. That night I was greeted by a large, but clean field rat that was looking for an exit through an open window as I settled into the apt that was quiet, other than the wailing of the breeze and the rustling sounds of the many plants surrounding me. What do rats signify? Probably not anything good, in any case, I went outside and waited for him to leave, which he did. It's been four days and I haven't seen him since.

I heard the sea across the street on my first night but the rain was pouring and I decided to stay put. The weather began to clear up in the afternoon the following day, when I made it down to the beach. I walked through the yard of the property with the "brown dogs" following me, barking, and one nipped friendly at my finger. Walking out the gate, I saw two minibuses pulled up on the side of the road. One, mostly white and putty colored, the other a bright blue. The back of the blue van was open and a man was soaking wet, disrobing from a black gown, with a full suit underneath complete with white shirt and black tie, the other man shirtless and changing, it

seemed, on the other side of the bus. The whole scene caught me off guard, I walked by quickly through the small wooden gate that leads to the beach. A few steps past the gate, I turned around and went to speak to the older man, that was in the wet robe. Turns out he is a Preacher, I think his name was Jeff-

“Many people are afraid of the sea, but many prefer it to the pool in the church for their Baptism.”



Fig. 1.

Outrigger. Blue Blacks. On Trade Winds with Tommy.

Errantry

On a three-month research trip to Treasure Beach, a small town on the south coast of Jamaica, beginning on October 5, 2020, a chance encounter with a mysterious handmade found object, constructed of wood, wire and rubber, sparked a two-month long conversation with fisherman Tommy Wong, inspiring my current body of work, *Errantry*. The multi-channel video installation with related sculptural works centers the polyphonic rhythms of the coastal space, the surrounding Caribbean Sea, and the life sustained by them.

Errantry uses projection and sound to depict a quality of wandering between subjectivities, localities, imaginaries, real and fictionalized worlds. In a single take, the first channel of video depicts two men in a fishing canoe pulling at a taut rope, laboring in a continued repetitive flow suggesting tension within the water. The second channel consists of a non-linear montage centered on a fisherman character, the coastal landscape he wanders, and trawling for fish and setting traps for lobster at sea. As the film unfolds the harmful effects of human intervention in the landscape and at sea become apparent. The title “Errantry” is inspired by a key term used by Édouard Glissant, in *Poetics of Relation* – that suggests an act of navigating and acknowledging multiplicities of cultural influences.

I have never lived near the sea or in a rural community, the parish of St. Andrew in Jamaica, where I grew up, is somewhat suburban, on the outskirts of Kingston, more a business district than a tourism destination and is situated far from the beach. Also, having lived outside of Jamaica for a long time, there is a familiarity to this unfamiliar town, perhaps it reminds of another period of time in Jamaica, one that now only exists in my memory.

During my time in Treasure Beach, I made a daily practice of either writing, recording atmospheric sounds, radio programming, having conversations with people I met and making photographs and or shooting video, that directly and indirectly comprise this body of work. I solicited interviews and had conversations with many people across different social and economic backgrounds with the intention of uncovering connections or disconnections between the people living in the community and the omnipresence of the sea. Despite being Jamaican, people knew I was not from the community, and I was still considered to be an outsider, which could be sensed in some responses that felt performative, in a way that is often reserved for foreigners. Regardless, most people I spoke with indulged me and were generous with their responses.

While I recorded many good stories– from a group of off-duty police cadets line fishing– to the person known for catching errant crocodiles; the conversations I had with Tommy were the most compelling. I was interested in his experience working as a fisherman and in particular, the experience of spending much of his life at sea over the past fifty years, beginning at age twelve. He was interested in my work as an artist, as he had recently started painting. We also spent a lot of time over coffee, talking about current events, including the U.S. Presidential election, that was a month away and issues related to climate change and how it was impacting his livelihood. Tommy also shared methods of reading weather patterns he learnt from observation, as well as from other fishermen over his many years working at sea. After several engaging conversations visiting with Tommy, I worked up the courage to ask him to record our conversations that are used to drive the loose narrative of the film.

Although we overtly discussed many subjects over the two months, themes in relation to labor, local fishing knowledge, and climate change; these only make themselves subtly apparent throughout the film through Tommy's narration paired with my framing of images in the film, suggesting multiple subjectivities embedded with the singular, roving narrative. Sound plays a critical role in the installation and is composed of diegetic sounds with edited spare moments of dialogue (in Jamaican patois) from our conversations.

In the film, I combine candid documentation of Tommy at work and at home with staged scenes as a fisherman character with a small trap made for the film, set along a coastal route of footpaths and trails between the bays where he lives and where I set up a provisional studio. The non-linear sequences and fragmented narrative blur the boundaries between documentary and fiction. Conceptually, this is important in the film to suggest a speculative future on land at sea, based on the realities of the present moment as described by Tommy throughout the film.



Fig. 2.

A trap made by Tommy.

In spending time with Tommy, I gained new insight into a small part of a globally connected industry that is not visible as much of the labour occurs off shore. Sea labour is dangerous and hard work to begin with, and under current conditions at sea with piracy and a dwindling fish stock from overfishing, harmful fishing practices and the effects of climate change, making it even more difficult for fishermen to earn a living, causing ruptures and displacement with families and communities. Piracy is becoming a major problem for fishermen in the close-knit community of Treasure Beach. While there is a competitive spirit among the fishermen of the four adjoining bays that make up the place known as Treasure Beach, historically there has been no theft among them. That has changed, some fishermen I spoke with cite fishermen from neighboring Parishes coming in and stealing their catch.

Typically, fishermen attach a buoy or “floaters” to the traps to mark its location, to be retrieved at a later time. Rampant “Criminal-ism”, as Tommy describes it, has forced fishermen to find creative ways to set unmarked traps, as the floaters make for easy targets for dishonest fishermen, that steal other fisherman's catch or sometimes the whole trap, which is a major upfront cost the fisherman must bear. To thwart theft at sea, the fishermen now tie two traps together with a length of rope and throw them overboard, marking the location with a handheld GPS system. The process of retrieving the traps requires dropping a piece of – a 50 lb. chunk of “iron”, which is a chunk of metal, often retired engine parts, attached with a hook that is dragged across the seafloor, disrupting the grasses, corals until it catches the length of rope joining the traps. A solution to one problem (theft), creates a new problem (ecological rupture). “If you float it, they will take it away, so we just have to do like everyone else... to survive, but I know that it

destroying everything on the seafloor.” The tension between survival and environmental degradation is embodied in the struggle to raise the trap from the depths.

Fishermen often lose traps or discard their traps at sea, that continue to ensnare marine life, despite them being declared no longer viable, in a phenomenon known as ghost fishing. The idea of “ghost traps” brings to mind, a passage from *Familiar Stranger*, the memoir of the Jamaican-British Cultural Theorist, Stuart Hall, that describes the way colonialism continues to perpetuate, even as it has been declared a thing of the past.

“Though time has been called on colonialism’s earlier forms, you have only to read a daily newspaper or turn on the TV news to appreciate that the so-called colonial world is still unfolding – more accurately, unravelling – inside the post-colonial, in the wake, in the devastating aftermath, of an untranscended colonialism: a disaster-littered, protracted, bloody and unfinished terrain which, in its globally transformed state, still occupies our world.”¹

In my work for this thesis project, I use sculpture to conflate the harmful effects of so-called ghost traps with the still unfolding aftermaths of colonialism. This idea is explored by recreating my own version of the fish traps, that I imagine occupy the blue-black depths of the sea. The sculptures installed with the two-channel installation create an immersive world that centers the frontline of the current climate crisis from the margins.

¹ HALL, STUART. *FAMILIAR STRANGER: a life between two islands*. pg. 24



Fig. 3

Errantry. Two-channel video installation – Video Still 1



Fig. 4

Errantry. Two-channel video installation – Video Still 2



Fig 5

Errantry. Two-channel video installation – Video Still 3



Fig 6

Errantry. Two-channel video installation – Video Still 4

Transcript of Voice Memo

October 28th, 2020, 5:40 PM (GMT-5)

Old Wharf, St. Elizabeth, Jamaica

After the sea takes someone, you just look at it differently.

Driftwood start to look like bones

when you looking at sand

it's almost like you looking

to see

if you see body parts

exposed rock, darkened, blackened

look different, feel different

coral on the rocks look like bones

green moss on the rock

exposed at low tide

the sharpness of the rock

feels like a grater,

that could make grater cake with flesh

the brown dogs start to look like scavengers

(water softly audible)

Bibliography

HALL, STUART. 2018. *FAMILIAR STRANGER: a life between two islands*. [S.l.]: DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS.