

A Topographical Approach to Re-Reading Books about Islands in Digital Literary Spaces

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Abstract

This article takes a topographical approach to re-reading print books in digital literary spaces through a discussion of a web-based work of digital literature, ...*and by islands I mean paragraphs* (Carpenter 2013). In this work, a reader is cast adrift in a sea of white space extending far beyond the bounds of the browser window, to the north, south, east and west. This sea is dotted with computer-generated paragraphs. These fluid texts call upon variable strings containing words and phrases collected from a vast literary corpus of books about islands. Individually, each of these textual islands represents a topic—from the Greek *topos*, meaning place. Collectively they constitute a topographical map of a sustained practice of reading and re-reading and writing and re-writing on the topic of islands. This article argues that, called as statement-events into digital processes, fragments of print texts are reconstituted as events occurring in a digital present which is also a break from the present. A new regime of signification emerges, in which authorship is distributed and text is ‘eventalized’ (Hayles). This regime is situated at the interface between an incoherent aesthetics, one which tends to unravel neat masses, including well-known works of print literature; and an incoherent politics, one which tends to dissolve existing institutional bonds, including bonds of authorship and of place. Galloway terms this regime of signification the ‘dirty regime of truth’.

Keywords: islands; castaways; topography; reading; variable text; digital literature.

Resumo

Este artigo adota uma abordagem topográfica enquanto forma de releitura de livros impressos em espaços literários digitais através da análise de uma obra de literatura digital em linha, ...*and by islands I mean paragraphs* (Carpenter 2013). Nesta obra, um leitor encontra-se à deriva num mar de espaço em branco que se estende além dos limites da janela do ‘browser’, para norte, sul, leste e oeste. Este mar é pontilhado por pontos gerados por computador. Estes textos fluidos invocam cadeias de variáveis que contêm palavras e frases recolhidas de um vasto corpus literário de livros sobre ilhas. Individualmente, cada uma destas ilhas textuais representa um tópico – a partir do grego *topos*, que significa lugar. Coletivamente, constituem um mapa topográfico de uma prática sustentada de leitura e releitura, de escrita e reescrita sobre o tema das ilhas. Este artigo argumenta que fragmentos de textos impressos, designados eventos-afirmativos em processos digitais, são reconstituídos como eventos num presente digital, que é também uma rutura com o presente. Um novo regime de significação emerge em que a autoria é distribuída e o texto é ‘eventivizado’ (Hayles). Este regime situa-se na interface entre uma estética incoerente, que tende a desmontar conjuntos arrumados, incluindo obras conhecidas da literatura impressa; e uma política incoerente, que tende a dissolver laços institucionais existentes, incluindo ligações de autoria e de lugar. Galloway denomina este regime de significação de ‘regime sujo da verdade’.

Palavras-chave: ilhas; naufragos; topografia; leitura; texto variável; literatura digital.

This article will take a topographical approach to discussing the re-reading, re-searching, and re-writing of print books in digital literary spaces. In particular, this article is concerned with books on the topic of islands. In “A Topical Paradise,” (2010) Hernán Díaz argues that islands have been pervasive throughout literary history because they are a perfect ‘topic.’ The word ‘topic’ derives from the Greek *topos*, which originally only meant place, but over time came to refer to commonplace motifs in literature. “This is exactly the trajectory of literary islands,” Díaz argues: “They are places that have become commonplaces” (79).

Today topography is generally associated with cartography. A topographic map locates topics—such as elevation, population, forestation, and rainfall—on a map in a graphic manner. But in classical times topography referred to geographers’ written descriptions of places. A *topos* is a place in discourse and a place in the world. Through *topos*, location and narration are inextricably linked. Susan Barton, the castaway narrator of J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Foe* asks: “Is that the secret meaning of the word story, do you think – a storing-place of memories?” (1986: 59). The practices of textual and visual topography aim to locate topics in memory. In *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print*, Jay David Bolter argues that with the advent of digital writing *topos* are now located in the data structure of the computer (29). As such, he writes: “Electronic writing... is not the writing of a place, but rather a writing with places as spatially realized topics” (36). In a programming language like C, variables indeed refer to specific locations in computer memory. In a programming language like JavaScript, however, the operation of processes including memory are distributed across networks and devices. The arguments a variable refers to may be located anywhere. Once it has been referred to, through a process known as garbage collection, an argument may disappear. Or, the reference to it may disappear. JavaScript’s mode of dispersed, temporary, and transitory memory allocation is well suited to the re-reading, re-searching, and re-writing of transient, variable texts.

This article will interrogate the shifting location of the ‘topic’ of literary islands in digital writing spaces through a discussion of a recent web-based work of digital literature called *...and by islands I mean paragraphs* (Carpenter, 2013).¹ *...and by islands I mean paragraphs* casts a reader adrift in a sea of white space veined blue by lines of graph paper. Whereas horizontally lined paper such as loose leaf or foolscap offers a guide for linear hand writing, the intersecting horizontal and vertical lines of graph paper offer a guide for locating positions, or intersections, along orthogonal axes such as latitude and longitude, North and West, and time and distance. Although the computer-

¹ *...and by islands I mean paragraphs* was first exhibited in the *Cherche le texte Virtual Gallery* launched at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris September 2013, and later published by *The Island Review* in October 2013 and *Drunken Boat 20* in 2014.

generated texts in this work draw upon a corpus of print literature, the graphic reference to graph paper refers to a more scientific realm of mathematics, navigation, and cartography. The cartographically inflected narrative space of *...and by islands I mean paragraphs* extends far beyond the boundaries of the browser window: to the north, south, east and west, in cartographic terms; or, to the TOP, BOTTOM, LEFT, and RIGHT, in HTML terms. It must be stated here that creating horizontally scrolling web pages is neither an obvious nor an easy thing to do. Like text that is handwritten, typed, or printed on a page of paper, when unformatted HTML text reaches the far right edge of a web 'page' it will automatically line-break and return to the far left margin. By default, text overflow will cause a web page to vertically scroll. The horizontally scrolling browser window may be situated within a broader context of reading extending to papyrus and parchment scrolls. The horizontally and vertically scrolling browser window presented by *...and by islands I mean paragraphs* may be situated within a broader context of reading extending to maps and sea charts too large to be easily printed or viewed in their entirety and thus printed in segments which are then stored folded or rolled. In reference to the sea chart antecedent, overlaying the graph paper background are images of clusters of numbers and words collected from a corpus of sea charts of the North Atlantic. These numbers refer to depths obtained by sounding the ocean floor (Carpenter, 2015: 263-264).

Navigating this narrative space reveals that this sea of white space is dotted with islands, and by islands I mean small paragraphs of computer-generated text. These fluid compositions draw upon variable strings containing fragments of literary texts harvested from a vast corpus of essays, plays, poems, novels, and travel writing on the topic of islands. Sources include: Díaz's afore mentioned essay "A Topical Paradise" (2011), Gilles Deleuze's essay "Desert Islands" (2004), Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* (1996 [1610–11]), Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe* (2000 [1719]), Elizabeth Bishop's poem "Crusoe in England" (1971), J. M. Coetzee's novel *Foe* (1986), J. G. Ballard's novel *Concrete Island* (2011 [1973]), and Richard Hakluyt's *Voyages and Discoveries* (1903 [1598-1600]). Individually, each textual island on this web-based map points, however temporarily, to a location in computer memory and to a location in literature. Collectively these topical islands constitute a topographical map of a sustained practice of reading and re-reading, searching and re-searching, and writing and re-writing on the topic of islands.

My conflation of the terms 'island' and 'paragraph' in the title *...and by islands I mean paragraphs* is informed by Díaz's suggestion that texts about topical islands are themselves topical islands:

These textual shores (or *paragraphs*) are marginal in the triple sense that they are not part of the central body of text, that they are a physical space on the page that separates the text from the writer's desk or the reader's fingers, and that they surround and enclose the text in the same

way that a margin surrounds or encloses a lake. (83; the emphasis is the author's).

This article will focus upon *topos* emerging from perhaps the most famous of all English books on the topic of islands, Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). The island Defoe exiles his Crusoe to is based on the Scottish sailor Alexander Selkirk's first-hand account of an uninhabited island in the Juan Fernández Islands 670 kilometres off the coast of Chile. Selkirk wilfully marooned himself on this island rather than continue on board a ship rotten with wood worms and captained by a man he detested. Selkirk survived alone for four years and four months, September 1704–February 1709. The ship he jumped did indeed sink; aboard the ship that rescued him sailed the captain he had so detested serving now as first mate. The twentieth-century American author Elizabeth Bishop takes up the topic of Robinson Crusoe in her poem, "Crusoe in England" (1971), which presents a striated textual topography, a collection of *topos* from multiple sources, a conflation of islands and coastlines Bishop visited, read about and wrote about over a period of many years. Bishop's Crusoe's island resembles neither Defoe's Crusoe's island nor Selkirk's island, but rather, Charles Darwin's descriptions of the Galapagos Islands in *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1838), a book which Bishop "admired, consulted, and drew upon" throughout her life (Doreski, 1993: xiii). Of the volcanically formed Galapagos Islands Darwin writes: "black truncated cones were extraordinarily numerous: from one small eminence I counted sixty of them, all surmounted by craters more or less perfect" (1997 [1838]: 356). In "Crusoe in England" Bishop wearily replies:

Well, I had fifty-two
 miserable, small volcanoes I could climb
 with a few slithery strides-
 volcanoes dead as ash heaps.
 I used to sit on the edge of the highest one
 and count the others standing up,
 naked and leaden, with their heads blown off (*Poems*, 1984: 162).

Upon discovering that he has mixed up specimens collected from two separate islands, Darwin admits: "I never dreamed that islands... formed of precisely the same rocks... would have been differently tenanted..." (1997: 374). Similarly, Bishop's Crusoe has nightmares about cataloguing islands:

...infinities
 of islands, islands spawning islands,
 like frog's eggs turning into polliwogs
 of islands, knowing that I had to live
 on each and everyone, eventually,

for ages, registering their flora,
 their fauna,
 their geography (*Poems*, 1984: 165).

A process of re-reading and re-searching for topics common to Bishop's poem "Crusoe in England" and Darwin's descriptions of the Galapagos led to the creation of a new topical island. Within the cartographic space of *...and by islands I mean paragraphs*, this island is located to the south-east of the main title, under a re-drawing of the Galapagos Islands made by Darwin. The following source code reveals the process of re-reading across these two texts:

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'My island #{island} #{volcano}. #{climate} #{beaches}. As I walked
along, #{walk}. The tortoises #{tortoises}. #{dreams}. #{complaint}'
(Carpenter, 2013)
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Each variable string, as indicated by the words in curly brackets, contains topics collected from both texts and relocated within the data-structure of the computer. In the following two examples of paragraphs generated by the above statement-event, the lines in bold are Bishop's and the others are Darwin's:

My island **seemed to have been permeated, like a sieve, by subterranean vapours.** Immense deluges of black naked lava spread over miles of sea-coast. All the hemisphere's left-over clouds arrived and hung above the craters. **The sun set in the sea; the same odd sun rose from the sea, and there was one of it and one of me.** As I walked along, a large tortoise gave a deep hiss and drew in its head. The tortoises made excellent soup. **I had nightmares of islands spawning islands, like frog's eggs turning into polliwogs of islands. Just when I thought I couldn't stand it another minute longer, Friday came.**

My island **is free to a remarkable degree from gales of wind. I had fifty-two miserable, small volcanoes I could climb with a few slithery strides—volcanoes dead as ash heaps.** Excepting during one short season, very little rain fell. **A glittering hexagon of rollers closing in and closing in, but never quite.** As I walked along, a large tortoise gave a deep hiss and drew in its head. The tortoises drank large quantities of water. **I'd shut my eyes and think about a tree, an oak, say, with real shade, somewhere. The hissing rain and hissing, ambulating turtles got on my nerves.**

Just as Bishop's poem "Crusoe in England" contains no attribution to Darwin, so too, in this computer-generated text, no distinction is made be-

tween which lines are Bishop's and which are Darwin's. None of the authors whose works have been *détourned* in *...and by islands I mean paragraphs* have been named within the body of the work, though a link to a list of sources is offered (<http://luckysoap.com/andbyislands/bibliography.html>). McKenzie Wark argues, "for past works to become resources for the present requires their... appropriation as a collective inheritance, not as private property" (2011: 37). In all of the computer-generated texts presented in *...and by islands I mean paragraphs*, although words, phrases, and whole sentences have been copied from an original, these copies are not quotations as such, but rather, examples of *détournement*. For Wark: "Détournement is the opposite of quotation. Like *détournement*, quotation brings the past into the present, but it does so entirely within a regime of the proper use of proper names" (40). For Deleuze and Guattari: "The proper name is the instantaneous apprehension of a multiplicity" (2007: 37). As such, "[t]here are no individual statements... Every statement is the product of a machinic assemblage..." (37). The spatialised, eventlized nature of the computer-generated text redistributes topics and makes them commonplaces.

Consider the following example of another work of digital literature which calls fragments from two separate well known works of print literature into a computer-generated text process. The words in Nick Montfort and Stephanie Strickland's poetry generator *Sea and Spar Between* (2010) come from Emily Dickinson's poems (d. 1886) and Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick* (1851). In 2012 the French magazine *MCD (Musiques & Cultures Digitales)* commissioned a review of this work, imposing a strict editorial constraint of 800 characters (including spaces). The work was described by way of calling statements generated by the work directly into the body of critical text, resulting in a text which alternates between analytical and lyrical modes. A similar method is employed here to describe Montfort and Strickland's *The Sea and Spar Between*, calling this constraint-based writing generated in response to the work directly into the body of this article:

Imagine the combined corpus of Emily Dickinson's poems and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. The spaciousness of Dickinson's dashes – 'you—too—' – merging with the oceanic churning of Melville's prose—'leagueless sing and steep.' Stanzas assembled from words common to both and unique to each. As many stanzas as there are fish in the sea. Fast-fish, loose-fish, nailed to the desk or nailed to the mast, 'dash on / for pauseless is the sea.' The sparsity of two systems loosely coupled creates a vast verse-scape, settled at widely spaced intervals, chartable by longitude and latitude, navigable by keystroke, mouse-click, or scroll-wheel. The source code comments are prose of beauty and the minimal variable strings return rhythms, generate whole gestures. 'listen now / then blameless is the sea.' (Carpenter, 2012)

In 2013 Mark Sample adapted the source code of *Sea and Spar Between* to create a new work, *House of Leaves of Grass*, based on the combined corpus of Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves* (2000) and Walt Whitman's poetry collection *Leaves of Grass* (1891-1892). The corpora of these examples, and of my Bishop-Darwin island, combine and thereby dissolve formal distinctions between works of poetry and prose. Both *Sea and Spar Between* and *House of Leaves of Grass* contain links to pages which frame the work. In keeping with their watery theme, Montfort and Strickland write: "*Sea and Spar Between* is a poetry generator which defines a space of language populated by a number of stanzas comparable to the number of fish in the sea, around 225 trillion" (2010). In keeping with his house theme, Sample writes: "The number of stanzas (stanza, from the Italian word for 'room') approximates the number of cells in the human body, around 100 trillion" (2013). In keeping with the island theme of the combined corpus of Bishop's "Crusoe in England" and Darwin's writing on the Galapagos produces near infinities of islands,

...islands spawning islands,
like frog's eggs turning into polliwogs
of islands... (Bishop, *Poems*, 1984: 165).

Bishop's Crusoe's nightmares about other islands come partially true with his rescue to the island of England, which, he says, "doesn't seem like one, but who decides?" (166). This thought is echoed by Susan Barton, the traveller come castaway first-person narrator of another book based on *Robinson Crusoe*, J. M. Coetzee's novel *Foe*: "They say Britain is an island too, a great island. But that is a mere geographer's notion. The earth under our feet is firm in Britain, as it never was on Cruso's island" (2010: 26). Similarly, Díaz argues, "One could even claim that Britain and Manhattan are not islands: despite being surrounded by water, they are far from being isolated, and each in its own way has extended beyond its shores" (2010: 79). In the terms Deleuze puts forward in his essay "Desert Islands," Britain and Manhattan are continental islands, "accidental, derived islands... separated from a continent, born of disarticulation, erosion, fracture..." (9). Within these terms we can say that in J. G. Ballard's novel *Concrete Island*, the traffic island is doubly continental: born of disarticulation from the urban mainland of London, and derived from the literary mainland of *Robinson Crusoe*. The castaway Maitland mumbles to himself: "Maitland, poor man, you're marooned here like Crusoe... If you don't look out you'll be beached here forever" (32).

In contrast to continental islands, Deleuze proposes, "*Oceanic islands* are originary, essential islands... emerg[ing] from underwater eruptions, bringing to the light of day a movement from the lowest depths" (2004: 9). Though the *locus* of *Robinson Crusoe* is an oceanic island, the topical island Defoe creates is far from originary. Robinson Crusoe rewrites the continental island of

England onto the volcanic island of Juan Fernández using tools and provisions salvaged from the shipwreck which he alone survived. In the cartographic space of *...and by islands I mean paragraphs*, a topical island located to the west of the main title perpetually re-writes Defoe's Crusoe's relentless collection and enumeration of provisions through the following statement-event:

I had now been thirteen days on shore and eleven times on board the ship, in which time I brought away # {provisions}.' (Carpenter, 2013)

The # {provisions} are exhaustive. Nothing is invented on Defoe's Crusoe's island, everything is provided by the ship and thus the referential mainland is recreated on the island, prompting Deleuze to quip: "One can hardly imagine a more boring novel" (2004: 12).

Considerably less well-equipped, having brought away no provisions from his ship, having not even an 'e' to add to the end of his name, J. M. Coetzee's Cruso endures his topical island in a state of resignation. Inured to the world as it is, he keeps no record of the past, holds neither hope nor desire for any different future. Upon her arrival, Susan Barton asks him: "Is it not possible to manufacture paper and ink and set down what traces remain of these memories" (Coetzee, 2010: 17)? He replies: "Nothing I have forgotten is worth the remembering" (17). In vehement disagreement, Barton urges Cruso to keep the topics of the island stored in his memory:

[S]een from too remote a vantage, life begins to lose its particularity. All shipwrecks become the same shipwreck, all castaways the same castaway... The truth that makes your story yours alone... resides in a thousand touches... When you made your needle... by what means did you pierce the eye? When you sewed your hat, what did you use for thread? (18)

The computer-generated narrative composed of topics from Coetzee's novel *Foe* takes Barton's "thousand touches" for what they are—a variable string from which a thousand partial truths may be output selectively. In the cartographic space of *...and by islands I mean paragraphs*, this island is located due south of the main title, next to an image of the continental island of England. In the narrative space of this new topical island, boring old Cruso has been eclipsed by variable strings pertaining to Barton's determination to write her own story, to remember and recount her own truths – of the island, and of her time adrift on the waves, of the island of England, of her story, of her questions, of her self.

'The island upon which I was cast away # {theisland}. I # {island}. # {castaway}. # {ontheisland}. # {waves}. # {sea}. # {english}. # {story}.

{questions} Questions echo in my head without answer. The world is full of islands. I am # {iam}.' (Carpenter, 2013)

N. Katherine Hayles argues that, in digital media, the text “ceases to exist as a self-contained object and instead becomes a process, an event brought into existence when the program runs” (2006: 181-182). Most of the words in most of the islands in *...and by islands I mean paragraphs* are collected from print texts. Yet called by variables into digital processes these words refuse the fixity of the printed text. They are reconstituted as statement-events occurring in a digital present which is also a break from the present. As a result, a new regime of signification emerges, one in which authorship, memory, and location are distributed, resulting in dissemination and deterritorialization. In *The Interface Effect*, Alexander Galloway situates this regime at the interface between an incoherent aesthetics, one which tends to “unravel neat masses” (46), including well-known works of print literature; and an incoherent politics, one which “tends to dissolve existing institutional bonds” (47), including bonds of authorship. Galloway terms this a “‘dirty regime’ called *truth*” (142). It is from within this dirty “[u]nder-appreciated and elusive” (50) regime that Barton demands the truth of *Cruso*, insisting: “Touches like these will one day persuade your countrymen that it is all true, every word” (Coetzee, 2010: 18). And it is in dismissal and defiance of this regime, in preference for a coherent politics organised around the stable institution of labour that *Cruso* responds mutely: “He opened and closed his hands, sinewy, rough-skinned hands, toil-hardened” (18).

In keeping with the live-ness of the digital text event, following the launch of *...and by islands I mean paragraphs* in September 2013, a live performance iteration of the work was developed through an exploration of the printed performance script as an intermediary form operating between and incorporating aspects of JavaScript source code, computer-generated text, appropriated text, and spoken voice. The resulting text, *Eight Short Talks About Islands ...and by islands I mean paragraphs* (Carpenter, 2014),² is conceptually based upon a ‘talk’—an intermediary form operating between spoken and written text, an informal lecture written to be read aloud rather than on the page. This approach was loosely informed by two texts: Anne Carson’s “Short Talks” (2000), and Judith Schalansky’s *Atlas of Remote Islands: Fifty Islands I Have Never Set Foot On and Never Will* (2010). In the introduction to “Short Talks” Carson writes: “Early one morning words were missing... I began to copy out everything that was said. The marks construct an instant of nature gradually, without the boredom of a story” (29). Thirty-one ‘talks’ follow, on seemingly unrelated topics—“On Ovid”, “On Walking Back-

² *Eight Short Talks About Islands ...and by islands I mean paragraphs* has been performed at ‘In(ter)ventions: Literary Practice at the Edge’ at The Banff Centre in February 2013, Modular Form at Roehampton University in March 2014, and Storm & Golden Sky in Liverpool in April 2015.

wards”, “On Orchids”, “On The End”. These texts defy easy categorisation. Prose poems, or paragraphs perhaps; some no more than one sentence long. Or, as Carson’s introduction suggests, instants of nature for which there appear to be no written forms. For example, from “On Reading”: “I glimpsed the stupendous clear-cut shoulders of the Rockies from between paragraphs of *Madam Bovary*” (39), and from “On Rain”: “Out on the sea it is raining too. It beats on no one” (39). Presented as a collection of talks, these moments resist the fixity and ‘boring’ formal dictates of the written story.

In the introduction to *Atlas of Remote Islands* Schalansky puts forward a methodological stance toward working with and détourning ‘found’ literary, cartographic, antiquarian, and archival material akin to the method adopted throughout the composition of *...and by islands I mean paragraphs*:

All text in the book is based on extensive research and every detail stems from factual sources. I have not invented anything. However I was the discoverer of the sources, researching them through ancient and rare books and I have transformed the texts and appropriated them as sailors appropriate the lands they discover (20).

Schalansky’s writing on the topic of remote islands reveals her process of reading in the following example. Of Robinson Crusoe Island, as the island in the Juan Fernández Islands upon which Alexander Selkirk was castaway is now known, Schalansky writes not of the physical island but of her search for spatially dispersed documents pertaining to topics associated with the island: “Robinson Crusoe’s diary is in Berlin, lying on a forgotten shelf in the State Library of Prussian Cultural Heritage. So claims David Caldwell of the National Museum of Scotland. The Library is busy... Each desk is an island kingdom” (74). Though an atlas may seem an odd form to inform a live performance, Schalansky argues: “It is high time for cartography to take its place among the arts, and for the atlas to be recognized as literature, for it is more than worthy of its original name: *theatrum orbis terrarum*, the theatre of the word” (23).

Eight Short Talks About Islands ...and by islands I mean paragraphs comprises a brief introduction and eight short ‘talks’ composed of a selection of fragments from the computer-generated islands’ variable strings. Whereas in the web-based iteration, a reader can read any island in any order for any length of time, the linear progression of speech dictates these talks be ordered and presented one at a time. As these talks are performed, a tension emerges between the spoken words read from a fixed text and the constantly shifting texts temporarily ‘printed’ on screen. On the page, square brackets and other syntactical grammatical artifacts of JavaScript serve to visually differentiate variables from one another, thus aiding in the reading of these otherwise grammatically impossible sentences. Somewhat ironically, *Eight Short Talks About Islands ...and by islands I mean paragraphs* was published in *Journal of Writ-*

ing and Creative Practice 7.1 in 2014, thereby returning the topical islands therein to the material of print.

The first talk, “Topical Islands”, is based on the computer-generated island which appears just west of the title in the web-based iteration of *...and by islands I mean paragraphs*. This island is composed of fragments of text collected from Díaz’s previously-mentioned essay “A Topical Paradise”, from which the conflation between islands and paragraphs was also borrowed. The talk is composed of a subset of the arguments called by the generator’s variables:

Islands are [‘places that have become commonplaces’, ‘perfect topics’, ‘literal metaphors’, ‘possible only in literature’]. Topical islands are [‘figures of radical isolation’, ‘off the map’, ‘off the chart’, ‘always virgin’, ‘blind spots on the surface of the known’, ‘shrouded in obscurity’, ‘isolated in the present’, ‘silent’, ‘beyond time’, ‘in a time zone of their own’]. They are paragraphs. They [‘separate the narrative body from the referential mainland’, ‘separate the text from the writer’s desk’, ‘separate the text from the reader’s finger’s’, ‘surround and enclose the text’, ‘create their own context’]. They are [‘textual shores’, ‘marginal’, ‘not part of the central body of the text’, ‘a physical space on the page’, ‘engulfed in a textual sea’] (Carpenter, 2014).

This talk is neither the essay “A Topical Paradise”, nor the source code which generates the topical island on the topic of topical islands, nor a topical island output by that source code. It is, rather, a translation which contains aspects of all three of these states. Re-sounding Schalansky’s above-cited statement, through a process of reading and re-reading, searching and re-searching, writing and re-writing the essay, the source code, and the generated texts: “I have transformed the texts and appropriated them as sailors appropriate the lands they discover” (20).

Presented before a live audience under strict time constraint, a talk aims to engage a listener. To do so it teases out certain details and omits to mention others. This is particularly evident in the talk based on computer-generated island based on fragments of J. G. Ballard’s novel *Concrete Island*. A process of re-reading and re-searching revealed that the word ‘grass’ is mentioned many more times than the word ‘concrete’. In the web-based iteration of *...and by islands I mean paragraphs*, this island, appearing to the south east of the main title, is composed of topics including the island itself, the traffic, the crash, and the grass:

‘The island #{islandafter}. The #{traffica} traffic #{trafficafter}.
#{grassbefore} the grass. For the first time since the #{crash},
#{crashafter}. #{islandbefore} the island. The grass #{grassafter}.’
(Carpenter, 2013)

The talk “Concrete Island” speaks only the first and last sentence, selecting certain details of the island whilst omitting others and making no mention of the traffic and the crash. Of the variable strings called by those sentences, not all variables have been selected; those that have been have been reordered to better suit a spoken text. The result is a talk which speaks almost entirely of grass:

The island [‘pointed towards the west and the declining sun’, ‘was sealed off from the world around it’, ‘was moving back in time to an earlier and more violent period’, ‘dated, in parts, from before World War II’, ‘appeared covered by a dense and luxuriant growth’, ‘and its green swaying ocean’]. The grass [‘grew waist-high’, ‘festered over the ground’, ‘rose and fell like the waves of a brisk sea’, ‘weaved and turned, moving in endless waves’, ‘opened a dozen pathways’, ‘opened and closed as if admitting a large and watchful creature to its green preserve’, ‘swayed in the night air’, ‘seethed in the light wind’, ‘seethed in the night wind’, ‘seethed and whirled, as if sections of wilderness were speaking to each other’, ‘rustled excitedly’, ‘swayed reassuringly’, ‘flashed with an electric light’, ‘jostled on all sides like a hostile crowd’, ‘was a vital medium’, ‘was silent now’, ‘was quiet’, ‘barely moved’, ‘covered all traces’, ‘was over four feet deep’]. (Carpenter, 2014)

The final talk, “Castaway” returns to the topic of Susan Barton’s story. The title of Coetzee’s novel *Foe* refers to a fictional author named Foe, after Daniel Defoe, author of *Robinson Crusoe*, whom Barton has engaged to write the narrative of her time on the island, which she continually refers to as “Cruso’s island.” Barton spends most of the novel telling Foe, in person and in letters, precisely what he should be writing. Why doesn’t she write her own story, as she had implored Cruso to do? Early on in the book she rails against Cruso’s vagaries: “the stories he told me were so various, and so hard to reconcile one with another...” (Coetzee, 2010: 11). And yet a process of re-reading and re-searching *Foe* for Barton’s own statements about her own experience reveals a woman who refuses any fixed definition of her self:

[‘I was a bottle bobbing on the waves with a scrap of writing inside’, ‘I was carried by the waves’, ‘Through the hours of despair on the waves’, ‘The the roar of the waves’, ‘The wind and wave-roar’, ‘The waves picked me up and cast me ashore’]. I am [‘cast away’, ‘a castaway’, ‘indeed cast away’, ‘not a bird of passage’, ‘not a prisoner’, ‘not a story’, ‘not persuaded’, ‘unknown to myself’, ‘wondering how I come to be here’, ‘saved’, ‘on an island yet’, ‘alone on the waves’, ‘alone’, ‘all alone’, ‘a woman alone’, ‘a woman cast ashore’, ‘a woman washed ashore’, ‘a free woman’, ‘now a madwoman’, ‘waiting for the book to be written that will set me free’]. (Carpenter, 2014)

In *The Interface Effect* Alexander R. Galloway states: “The political is that thing that cannot happen” (139). The book Barton waits for is political, insofar as it can never happen. Barton’s politics are incoherent. Her story retains the orality of the sailor’s yarn. Its thousand touches refuse to coalesce. They emerge as fragments from an archive of *topos* stored temporarily in computer memory only to be dispersed again across networks and devices; they emerge as utterance, as event. Called as variables into statement-events Barton’s statements become eventalized. Uttered aloud in a live performance context the topics presented in the above-quoted short talk become the speaker’s own: I am # {iam}. Here the ‘dirty regime of truth’ returns with full force (Galloway, 2012: 142). Susan Barton’s instance on truth and her refusal of fixed definitions has set the stage for a new topography in which re-reader, re-searcher, and re-writer are engaged in perpetually re-sounding Barton as the topic of her own island narrative.

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