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## ARTICLES

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### THEIR, OUR SEA OF ISLANDS: EPELI HAU'OFA AND FRANTZ FANON

#### 1. HACHA — ACTUALLY EXISTING COLONIALISM<sup>i</sup>

It is an intriguing piece of trivia, that amongst the 16 remaining official colonies in the world left today (as recognized by the United Nations) 14 of them are islands in the Pacific, Atlantic or Caribbean.<sup>ii</sup> One of arguably the most successful mandates of the UN has been its efforts at decolonising the world and moving the world from one which was mostly colonies and empires, to today, one which is mostly independent nations. This year of 2010 ends the second decade of UN attempts to eradicate colonialism from the world, a task which Corbin Carlyle, an international observer, notes is failing at miserably. Part of the reason for this is that colonialism and therefore decolonisation have lost contemporary meaning for scholars, and are notions which only exist to invoke the racism of the 19th century or the failures of the Third World Project (Vernet). Both are things most people might rather forget.

Although colonialism continues to be an anathema to the globalized world and something which most people would swear is abhorrent to things such as democracy and freedom, this forgetting is possible because of the way the concept seems to be quarantined in its most formal forms in these small islands. It is for this reason that decolonisation and colonisation are topics which are still very much alive in the Pacific, at both the political and theoretical levels. There are still Indigenous peoples who struggle to reclaim their land from various colonisers, and also peoples who struggle with cultures that anthropologists or sociologists claim are shattered, impure or tainted by modernization.

The island from which I come from Guam, is one such site. It has been for the past 110 years, a territory of the United States and was for more than two centuries before that a colony of Spain. The first island stumbled upon by Europeans when Ferdinand Magellan landed there in 1521, it has the dubious distinction of being the first colonised in the Pacific and one of the last to

become decolonised (Rogers). Guam remains one of those 16 territories listed by the UN as still needing to be decolonised.

As part of Guam's colonial present, 30% of its 550 sq km are US Navy and Air Forces bases. Residents of Guam, those who are Indigenous Chamorro like me or otherwise, even if they are US citizens, do not get to vote for the US President, nor do they have a voting representative in the US Congress. Despite this lack of representation, all US Federal laws apply to Guam and supersede any local law. For me, as a scholar and a grassroots activist in Guam whose work deals with researching and theorising decolonisation, this issue is hardly abstract, it is something which I hope to see manifested in many ways both in my lifetime and those of my children.

This paper is a discussion of decolonisation in the Pacific via the theories of one prominent voice in Pacific Islander Studies, Tongan scholar Epeli Hau'ofa, and of the theories of someone largely absent in the Pacific and in other contemporary scholarship, psychoanalytical and decolonisation theorist Frantz Fanon. I will begin with an analysis of Hau'ofa's seminal essay "Our Sea of Islands" and how we might conceive of his call to radically re-imagine the Pacific as a call for the region to decolonise. From there I will mix in the theories of Fanon, most notably his arguments in *The Wretched of the Earth*, in order to conceive of what might be the next stage of decolonisation in the Pacific in order to build upon Hau'ofa's initial foundation.

## 2. HUGUA – A NEW SEA OF ISLANDS

The words of Epeli Hau'ofa, since his first article in 1975, "Anthropology and Pacific Islanders," have had a profound effect on the young but always-growing body of academic literature known as Pacific Island(er) Studies (Davidson 7). In his essay "Our Sea of Islands" which was originally delivered as a lecture in Hilo, Hawai'i, Hau'ofa engages a broad critique of the dominant ways in which the Pacific and Pacific Islands have long been represented, as empty, small and without real value:

According to this view, the small island states and territories of the Pacific, that is, all of Polynesia and Micronesia are too small, too poorly endowed with resources and too isolated from the centre of economic growth for their inhabitants to ever be able to rise about their present condition of dependence on the largesse of wealthy nations (28).

Hau'ofa laments his own complicity, early on in his academic career, in the reproduction of these ideas. Despite the "objective" way in which he taught

these colonialist tropes or recounted them to his students at the University of the South Pacific, who all came from the islands that he was describing, he re-infused them with life. He was remaking, he admits, that same colonial geography, reinforcing that colonial gaze and passing on the paralysis it engineers to the next generation of potential Pacific Island leaders.

...two years ago I began noticing the reactions of my students when I explained our situation of dependence. Their faces crumbled visibly, they asked for solutions, I could offer none. I was so bound to the notion of smallness that even if we improved our approaches to production, for example, the absolute size of our islands would still impose such limitations that we would be defeated in the end.

But the faces of my students continued to haunt me mercilessly. I began asking questions of myself. What kind of teaching is it to stand in front of young people from your own region, people you claim as your own, who have come to university with high hopes for the future, and you tell them that our countries are hopeless? Is this not what neocolonialism is all about? To make people believe they have no choice but to depend? (29-30)

That was the most ironic part of Hau'ofa's admission. The notions of smallness and dependency in the Pacific were so pervasive and hegemonic, that there was no way of teaching them objectively, or in other words, there was no way to teach them where their might be another side to that story, or a way that they could be wrong or countered. As he later argues, these ideas come from somewhere else, they are rooted in the ways others see the Pacific, but the way they entered his classroom, his speech and the bodies and consciousness of his students, gave them the feeling of being part of the bedrock of reality. After all, he is not simply teaching these students as if they were blank slates for this knowledge, but rather these tropes are already a part them, ones they already know and feel, and bring with them into the classroom. The spectacle of a Pacific Islander professor reaffirming them might feel like a cruel final nail being hammered into their collective coffin.

Hau'ofa therefore calls for a radical shift and a rejection of this way of looking at the Pacific, of the ways in which Pacific Islanders *live* the Pacific as place and space. His plea touches on a number of different visions of the Pacific; firstly, there is a call to reinvigorate a way of imagining the Pacific that has persisted for millennia but has now been supplanted by dominant European understandings of sustainability, geography and development (28). This call is animated when Hau'ofa quotes one of the most stirring lines of poetry

from Banaban poet Theresa Teaiwa, “*We sweat and cry salt water, so we know/that the ocean is really in our blood*” (41). He asks us to (re)imagine the Pacific as a part of us, not something that divides us or inhibits us, but unites us and sustains us. Secondly, Hau’ofa calls for us to recognize that, although academically and at other levels of representation, the notion of the Pacific as a region might be laughable, yet islanders, in the ways they move across and traverse this grand region, still embody that principle. Thus, Hau’ofa asserts this idea as that which should take us forward – not necessarily a return to a distant authentic past, but rather a shifting of our vision and imagination, to take into account the ways in which the peoples of the Pacific survive and thrive through the Ocean in us – and that those of us in academia have an important responsibility to help with tying together this sea of islands.

Hau’ofa calls for a decolonisation of the Pacific, by challenging and contesting the remnants of colonialism that have seeped and settled into the most intimate ways in which Pacific Islanders conceive of themselves. But, since Hau’ofa’s essay deals with a re-imagination of what space and ideas signify, his call for decolonisation is in fact a call for reclamation. In Hau’ofa’s essay, what the space of the Pacific signifies is always open for contestation and it is there that he intervenes. For his essay represents an explicit attempt to intervene in the process through which the Pacific is signified, and to provide a theoretical and academic force to aid in the process of shifting and reversing the discursive ties between islands, all in an effort to change what the Pacific signifies for Pacific Islanders. This re-imagining does not originate from the essay, but is possible because it already exists in the world – all of the elements that constitute this re-imagination are already existent in Indigenous productions of the Pacific and the lives that navigate it. Thus, Hau’ofa merely reminds one to constantly re-think and contest, like all hegemonic formations, the colonial version/vision of the Pacific and its islands.

According to that colonial/Western epistemological cartography, the ocean is a source of weakness that limits and isolates people in the Pacific. Here, the Pacific is a vast wasteland that the peoples inhabiting it have no hope of navigating or conquering, thus being condemned to always dependent existences. Re-imagining the Pacific, then, requires a refusal of this colonial gaze, so that the ocean is a source of strength, something that binds together our islands and, rather than stripping us of possibility and sustainability, in fact generously offers it to us. In another essay titled “The Ocean in Us,” Hau’ofa models precisely that, by re-thinking the ocean as a metaphor for Pacific Islander sovereignty and sustainability, a force through which Islanders can be animated into that act of reclaiming, thereby producing a route that can move them forward towards sustainability and self-determination.

### 3. TULU — INTERNAL SOVEREIGNTY

While the inspirational value of Hau'ofa's essay is obvious, when one comes to the end of his remarks, there is an obvious question that remains unanswered. Is this primarily an internal or external plea? Is it something accomplished within or without the Pacific? When he calls for this re-imagination, the most obvious nature of his claims is an internal one. He is addressing primarily people from the Pacific, scholars or not, since he is speaking of "our" islands and the ways in which the people who call these islands home live. Part of the appeal of Hau'ofa's essay is the way he does not only re-imagine geography, but also ownership, the way he works to argue that what islanders already have, with their islands, their oceans and their traditions is not worthless, but *full of value*. The internal argument is appealing because it is on the one hand, a simple, obvious twist of power, but nonetheless a very powerful and compelling reversal of fortune; to move from feeling poor and empty one moment, and the next suddenly rich with possibility (Bhabha).

With his call to see and make real this "sea of islands" it is easy to assume that all the work, and all the most important work to be done is within the Pacific, that the focus of our efforts must be ourselves. This is decolonisation in the sense of rejecting the stories the coloniser has long told about you, which you somewhere along the way accepted as your own, and resurrecting your own stories, cherishing and valuing them for the power they can offer you.

This is a beautiful sentiment, and one which gained prominence because of the way it seemed to give life to practices and beliefs in the Pacific which people had grown up with or accepted as theirs, but always felt a battle over whether or not they could keep it, or whether or not everything had to go, and the path to progress and development was fire sales across each atoll and island in the Pacific.

This internal interpretation, I would argue is an important component of decolonisation, but it is still not sufficient to bring about the empowerment that Hau'ofa is calling for. Interestingly enough, Hau'ofa ends his essay with the hint of something more, with an inkling of his theoretical offering moving beyond this level of being something primarily internal to the Pacific. He ends his essay with the fleeting notion that the thing which has been taken from the Pacific and its peoples, the right to have its own meaning or its own sense of sovereignty and empowerment has to be *re-taken*, that it must be taken back.

Oceania is vast, Oceania is expanding, Oceania is hospitable and generous, Oceania is humanity rising from the depths of brine and regions of fire deeper still, Oceania is us. We are the sea, we

are the ocean, we must wake up this ancient truth and together use it to overturn all hegemonic views that aim to ultimately confine us again, physically and psychologically, in the tiny spaces that we have resisted accepting as our sole appointed places and from which we have recently liberated ourselves. We must not allow anyone to belittle us again, and take away our freedom (39).

This final passage is one of his most stirring, but also in a way haunts the rest of his essay and leaves open what exactly he is asking of the intellectuals and the people of the Pacific. The internal interpretation is supported by the anecdotes and the cultural beauty that Hau'ofa cites throughout his essay, but at the very end he seems to lead the struggle outside of the Pacific.

This is another essential component of decolonisation, which remains latent largely throughout the essay, but emerges in its final sentences and at last gives us a fuller vision of what this decolonisation might entail. It is a process of first recognizing the structure around you, and then, in acting to change it, to re-articulate the meanings that once pinned you down and stripped you of power. But here he is also implicitly calling on Pacific Islander scholars to contend with the world outside of the Pacific, most specifically, the places from which colonial tropes originate. The places where these colonial ideas are still produced and where governments, militaries, anthropologists and economists still casually claim to hold the destinies of various Pacific islands and peoples. The tendency to interpret Hau'ofa's arguments in an internal way helps to facilitate the abstraction of those who belittle the people of the Pacific and have taken away their freedom, turning them into faceless academics and anthropologists or long-dead explorers or travel writers. With the newfound value of the Pacific way or culture glowing in our hands, it is easy to miss how the withholding of freedom and the belittling is still taking place. In order to build off of those final words of "Our Sea of Islands" I will now turn to the theories of decolonisation from Frantz Fanon.

#### 4. TULU — FALSE AUTONOMY

One of the most curious aspects of *The Wretched of the Earth* is the way in which it does not follow the usual culture lines of thought that other radical decolonisation texts do, which prop up the importance of cultures and what they offer to those seeking decolonisation.<sup>iii</sup> In his thoughts on National Culture, Fanon makes clear that culture is crucial, for a national culture which can sustain a fight against a coloniser and survive to create a better world after that conflagration has to come from something (221). But when articulating what the colonised creates in their efforts for decolonisation, Fanon does not refer to any ancient political systems or any traditional ways of organising societies as being the

models that have to be followed in order to truly decolonise.

Hau'ofa in his essay "Our Sea of Islands" hints at what these counter-forms would be, that is he draws out how Pacific cultures have decolonising potential. But Fanon rejects this route and almost obsessively promotes a modern political form, the independent nation-state, as the goal of decolonisation, as the vehicle for the hopes and dreams of colonised peoples. An important question is why?

In *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon makes a number of derisive attacks on people who believe that culture or ancient traditional pasts are the keys to decolonisation in the present. He mocks those who believe that the ancient cultures or peoples in Africa or Latin America are the keys to their liberation and decolonisation by arguing that "The past existence of an Aztec civilization does not change very much the diet of the Mexican peasant of today" (221).

The colonisation of a people results in radical changes at every level. Languages change, cultures, economies, societies, the power dynamics between genders change, the very socio-political landscape can be radically disrupted. But as every attempt at colonising another place is the telling of a story of why the coloniser should colonise this place, why he should have authority over it and what would happen if his power left, then the ideas of time and history become skewed in this process as well. The future, the hope for a better, modern and more ordered future lies with the coloniser and what he offers and through deference to him. The colonised holds the past, he or she comes from the past and either their past remains a refuge where they are safe from the battering or the coloniser and his demands upon them, or the past is something archaic, old and ancient (McClintock 40). It becomes something which might be beautiful in a museum, but has no *real* place in the modern world (Fukuyama 18).

For Fanon, the retreat that so many decolonisation movements take into distant, ancient pasts or pre-colonial culture and moments in order to find sovereignty is deceptive. It gives you the impression that your true self existed long ago, or that you are only half of something or less and that you need to dig through dirt, rocks and sand in order to find what you truly are. What the internal argument about decolonisation can lead to is fantasies of false autonomy; it can give you the impression that all you need to do is hold fast to what is truly yours and your sovereignty will be regained or that decolonisation will be achieved. For Fanon he sums up this dangerous moment when he warns people to avoid making the sari sacred, or imagining that in a struggle for freedom you should substitute what someone has taken from you, with what they tell you is already yours (233).

It is problematic, because as Fanon noted, things of the ancient past do not

feed the stomachs of those who live today. The present is where the fight for decolonisation takes place, and to imagine that its battleground or even its most important ground is somewhere in the past is to reinvigorate those colonial tropes about what the coloniser offers and what the colonised is stuck with. Ultimately, the past is an illusion for Fanon. It contains artifacts necessary to create a national culture; it creates a historical list of injustices and forms of oppression, but the answers are not there. Fanon chooses the modern nation-state as the vehicle for decolonisation; this process is not an issue of the past and valorizing the pre-colonial practices or structures of the “natives”. It is instead the dismantling and reshaping of the contemporary world; it is about the present, and all that leads you away from this point is deceiving you (Bevacqua, 2010).

For example, while you could argue, accurately, that Pacific Islanders were able to navigate the seas without much fear and with great success long before Europe even existed as a faint notion. What would it accomplish to do so? Such is the inspirational part of Hau’ofa’s essay, the celebrating of a great and regal legacy which accomplished great things long before Europeans ever did. We should recall at this point the warning of Fanon to not substitute the glories of the past for the realities of the present. This idea of the Pacific can be a powerful force, but it is not a magic spell, it cannot alone be the goal or the hope, but rather we should focus on what it can promote or help push into being.

Culture, national culture or even pan-ethnic culture, of which Hau’ofa’s arguments in the Pacific are a very integral part, is a necessary thing in the struggle for decolonisation, but it does not exist in its own sacred function (221). It does not exist as an internal object to be celebrated or enjoyed. In decolonisation, the empowering idea that the Pacific be a sea of islands and not disparate, hopelessly dependent peoples, is a force which must push the people in the Pacific to confront those who have taken away and continue to hold the meaning and the freedom of those in the Pacific. This is why the theories of Fanon can offer some interesting interventions, because from the very first pages of *The Wretched of the Earth*, he argues forcefully that decolonisation is about conflict, and a key moment of confrontation and violence between the coloniser and the coloniser and the strength which can come from that.

##### 5. FATFAT — SEA OF INFINITY

Although much of Fanon’s work on decolonisation deals with the corporeal, physical aspects of violent decolonisation, the base truth we can glean from *The Wretched of the Earth* is that the sovereignty which decolonisation is supposed to produce is not created within, does not magically appear in the midst of the

coloniser, it is rather created through its taking (94). While Fanon focuses his thoughts on decolonisation on the physical violence of it, you could also argue the importance of *symbolic violence*, the confronting of the coloniser, or to put it in terms which are often used in the Pacific, decolonisation is the willingness to bite the hand that supposedly feeds you, to question those fundamental ideas of dependency and try to wrench free what was once yours (Bevacqua, *Everything You Wanted to Know About Guam But Were Afraid to Ask Žižek*). This means that in order for the empowerment that Hau'ofa is envisioning to take place, one cannot condemn colonisers in absentia, one cannot simply say that we will take back our sovereignty from anthropologists or from economists. Instead one must seek the how, the network of discursive ties which has drained the Pacific of meaning, and seek to challenge where those pipeline lead to today.

One thing which is missing from Hau'ofa's arguments is the question of where the meaning, the power and the freedom which has been taken from the Pacific over the past few centuries, where has it gone? What has it been transformed into? Just as colonisers occupy new lands and extract labor, culture, minerals and other commodities, Fanon asks, does the same happen with sovereignty or with possibility (58)? As the Pacific has been transformed into a vapid and empty place, has other places such as Europe, Asia or the United States gained presence and become more sovereign in the process? G.W.F. Hegel argued in his *The Philosophy of History* just this point, saying that,

The sea gives us the idea of indefinite, the unlimited and the infinite; and in feeling his own infinite in that Infinite, man is stimulated and emboldened to stretch beyond the limited: the sea invites man to conquest and to piratical plunder, but also to honest gain and to commerce. The land, the mere valley-plain attaches him to the soil; it involves him in an indefinite multitude of dependencies, but the sea carries him out beyond these limited circles of thought and action (95).

For Hegel it was the ability that European peoples had to dominate the sea, to explore it freely and without fear of the ripples of the infinite and unknown that covered it, which allowed them to become a truly global people, who could be assured the most coveted place in world history (Connery 182). This statement from Hegel is far from unique, but can be seen manifested in centuries of European and American interactions with the Pacific, in literature, culture, anthropology and national identity.

It is at this point that I believe we can finally see the ultimate task to which Epli Hau'ofa is assigning to us in his essay. As the peoples of the Pacific have long been entangled in colonising fantasies of their inability or their smallness,

those who dominate the Pacific whether through power or knowledge have enjoyed that fantasy of piercing the infinite and through their control of its manifestation on earth. The emptying of the Pacific, of its islands and of its people results in the filling of others elsewhere. The task is to find what has been filled, who has become sovereign and who has become powerful elsewhere through the disempowering of the Pacific?

#### 6. GUNUM — THE OCEAN IS FEMININE

One of the limits of this essay is its reliance on Fanon for its theoretical intervention. Although I believe his ideas to be important and critical in understanding what decolonisation as a concept is, he has long been critiqued not only for his emphasis on physical violence as the essential core of decolonisation, but also the masculinist and nationalistic tenor of his writings. Fanon's work frequently refers to the "men and women" and constantly refers to the struggle for decolonisation as belonging to them, but despite this, the decolonised nation of Fanon is one which is taken straight from the European modernist blend, which is built upon among other things what Carol Pateman refers to as the "sexual contract" which reconfigures a previous hierarchy of men into a equal horizontal regime, standing above the rights of women.

One task that remains and is similar to my own intervention with this essay, is the work of bringing to theoretical life, the inspirational and abstract dream that Hau'ofa is conjuring for us. This paper has been an attempt to force Hau'ofa's dream into something productive in terms of decolonisation, but I am making no claim as to what decolonisation might look like from within this sea of islands, what new relationships or connections might be formed, and as a result what a Pacific Islander form of it would be? In the work of feminists from Native American and Pacific Islander communities we might find some answers which build upon the theoretical foundation that both colonisation and decolonisation are gendered processes, both of which require an intentional feminist analysis either to combat or bring into the world. Cherokee scholar Andrea Smith and Native Hawaiian scholar Kehulani Kauanui canvas discussions on how to maintain and articulate the inclusiveness that sometimes characterise the sovereignty of Indigenous people, but without falling into the traps of multiculturalism or settling for mere recognition of your sovereignty by a more dominant power.

#### 7. FITI — FINAKPO<sup>IV</sup>

To conclude this paper, I can only reiterate that the task of reimagining the Pacific as this new sea of islands, requires tracing the meaning of our islands back to the governments which claim them as their colonies or their territories.

It means tracing the meaning of our islands back to the militaries who have long used them for bases or for the testing of nuclear weapons. If anything, the belittling of the Pacific and the robbing of its meaning has resulted in the colonial quagmire with which I began this paper, the creation of a place where colonialism can not only thrive and be acknowledged, but even more actually accepted as necessary. The work of forging this new sea of islands cannot be done amongst the islands alone, but it requires the challenging of those to whom we must take or wrestle free the destinies or the meanings of these islands.

In his essay "The Ocean in Us" Hau'ofa expands upon his initial speech and also gives some examples of what type of politics this new unity might entail. Much of this next level of his argument is explicitly internal, about how we can build, based upon concrete connections and actions that sea of islands. But again, the nature of Hau'ofa's internal arguments eventually refer to the need for external action. One such example is the issue of global warming, which is already affecting numerous Pacific Island peoples, where atolls and small islands have already begun to disappear beneath the rising tides. The rising of the ocean level is very much a Pacific problem, something which at least for the moment must be taken more seriously by Pacific Islanders than all others. But the fixing of this problem or the slowing and stalling of it is not something which can be internalised. Like, the creation of a new sea of islands, it is not something which you can accomplish as an internal process or something which should even be considered as primarily an internal issue. The countries which are most contributing to climate change and causes these adverse effects in the Pacific all exist outside of the Pacific, and in order to protect the Pacific, one must venture outside of its borders and go to those who are inadvertently threatening to sink whole islands and people.

At the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference or the Copenhagen Summit, delegates from 43 Pacific and Caribbean Island nations traveled to Denmark precisely in an attempt to start this work. Activists from these islands protested, their government leaders gave speeches. The island state of Tuvalu went so far as to stop the proceedings of the conference for an entire day insisting that the demands of the small-island nations be heard and not ignored at backroom meetings between the larger countries. After the demands of the island nations were tabled until the next meeting a year later, the Prime Minister of the Cook Islands noted dryly that "Some parties are not willing to respect our right, our right to survive" (Global).

The metaphor of the sea in this case ended up extending beyond the Pacific and its islands, it was something that they brought with them thousands of miles into Europe. The connections that they felt between islands which all face the prospect of rising sea levels, loss of food and water supply because of

global warming, they forced the rest of the world to see. While for most in the world the affects of climate change might be abstract and can be ignored in the same way the infamous frog in the pot does not notice itself being boiled to death, this is no longer so in the Pacific, especially for nations comprised of atolls, such as the Cook Islands, the Solomon Islands, the Marshall Islands and Tuvalu.

But by bringing this evidence to the rest of the world, by putting a concrete face on the destruction and danger of climate change, they are extending the possible sea of islands, connecting beyond just their island neighbors, to the rest of the world. Just as the ocean both holds the possibility of separating or uniting people, so too does a cause such as global warming.

These long journeys are not some exceptional part of the task of creating and sustaining a new sea of islands in the Pacific, they are essential. Even if, the Pacific is your home and what you are seeking to defend, protect or revitalise, your fight cannot stay there, it must go elsewhere. And for Hau'ofa, the sea, as something both imposing and yet comfort provides the means for doing so. The ocean, which was once thought to limit the people of the Pacific and cut them off from the world and each other, becomes their means to become global. As he concludes "The Ocean in Us," "...the sea is our pathway to each other and to everyone else, the sea is our endless saga, the sea is our most powerful metaphor, the ocean in us" (58).

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PETER DAWNCY

## CONSTELLATIONS

we sit on the bonnet at Trig to watch  
the herd's evening graze. we flick  
cashews across the dirt, try  
to connect the threads as we  
listen to the coos of topknots  
in the dogwoods, and  
spot flocks  
of Arctic terns  
whirling on the skyline as the  
wind dies, a wombat plods by  
and the first star opens its eye.