LIVING THE COAST

On Property and Possession, the Netherlands and Indonesia, and the Free Sea

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Abstract

When Sigmund Freud visited the Netherlands in the 1920s, he oversaw the Dutch landscape while travelling by rowing boats, carriages, and on foot. The reclamation of the Zuyderzee especially made an impression. He concluded that this drive for culture to control nature was similar to how the Ego wanted to control the Id. Of course, this was not a recent phenomenon in the Netherlands. During two earlier visits (in 1908 and 1910), Freud visited the major museums of the Netherlands where he was especially interested in the landscape painters of the seventeenth century. Landscape is actually one of those Dutch words that was adopted in many other languages. Embodying the scaped land, or, exploring the ways in which nature is scaped by men, painters like van Jacob van Ruisdael, Albert Cuyp, and Rembrandt van Rijn, may be seen as part of a particularly Dutch tradition of engineering that also included creative thinkers like Simon Stevin, Antonie van Leeuwenhoeck, and Christaan Huygens.

The Dutch not only felt the need to control the sea (ergo the unknown, the Id) in the Netherlands but also in their former colonies, in particular, Indonesia. Overcoding its islands and seas with their ideas of control had major consequences for how the land and the sea could be lived. Nowadays, we need to imagine a life otherwise. With Amitav Ghosh, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, and especially the stories and songs of those who live at the coast, we need not to control but to understand the sea again. It is time, once more, to understand the ways all the organic and non-organic forms of life transcode themselves into each other, resonate together, and offer us the sonorous hum of life.

Keywords

Hugo Grotius, Indonesia, islands, Jan Pietersz, Coen, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Sigmund Freud, the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC), property and possession

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Literature is the attempt to interpret,
in an ingenious way,
the myths we no longer understand.
-Gilles Deleuze

INTRODUCTION: FREUD AND THE NETHERLANDS, THE SEA, AND THE LAND

During the 1920s, Sigmund Freud's immersive expeditions throughout the Netherlands offer us an interesting analysis of the dynamics between the land, the sea, and the human beings that live there. His exploration of this terrain via diverse modes of transportation, including rowing boats, carriages, and traversing on foot, marked an intimate engagement with the evolving Dutch scenery. Of particular significance was the profound transformation of the Zuyderzee, an ambitious undertaking to reclaim land from the sea that resonated deeply within Freud's perceptive psyche (1990). Analyzing these changes in the land and their consequences (environmentally, socially, psychologically), Freud discerned a compelling parallel between the ambitious human endeavor to control and reshape nature (creating land in order to tame the sea), and the inherent psychological inclination of the Ego to dominate the instinctual impulses represented by the Id. This revelation, far from an isolated epiphany, represented an evolution of thought nurtured through Freud's earlier forays into the Netherlands. His prior visits in 1908 and 1910 were devoted to exploring the Netherlands' cultural heritage, wherein the seventeenth-century landscape paintings seized his attention within the precincts of the nation's major museums.

Landscape, an etymologically Dutch term that has been adopted by many languages (often through English), encapsulates the symbiotic interplay between humanity and the "scaped" land—a landscape that involves "nature" that is always already deliberately shaped, molded, and infused with human conceptualizations. Landscape paintings thus never simply "copy" nature but rather work from an imagined or realized ideal of how the world can be idealized. Artists like Jacob van Ruisdael, Albert Cuyp, and Rembrandt van Rijn emerged not merely as painters of scenic vistas but as *architects of perception*, articulating the Dutch ethos of imbuing nature with human aspirations and cultural identity.

Of course, this ethos to "control" the land (and the sea), and the way our environment is subsequently cultivated and scaped, is deeply woven into the fabric of Dutch culture throughout history, extended beyond artistic expression to encompass a broader tradition of engineering and innovation emblematic of the Dutch Golden Age. Visionary scientists such as Simon Stevin, pioneers like Antonie van Leeuwenhoeck in the realm of microscopy, and polymaths like Christiaan

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Huygens in mathematics and physics, epitomized the ethos of sculpting and manipulating nature to align with human desires. Their endeavors are in line with the artistic craftsmanship of painters, reflecting a concerted effort to carve canals, to devise scientific instruments, and to unravel the latent mechanisms governing the universe. Freud's discerning analogy, derived from the metamorphosis of the Dutch landscape, unveiled an important insight into the collective psyche of a society that did not aim to coexist with nature but sought to imprint its desires upon the very fabric of the land. Indeed, in many ways, this strong desire to control and order the world around us was obviously central to how the Dutch lived the land and the sea since their Golden Age. Given the influence of these *architects of perception*, and the way their ideas were embraced by Hugo Grotius (of whom more in a minute) and international law, perhaps even "the colonial idea" as it developed afterwards, and "the Modern mind," seemed somehow fixed in a Freudian way on ways of *possessing and controlling* the land. To map and explore exactly this desire is key to my contribution here and I propose to contrast it by how this "Dutch mindset" was critiqued by Indonesia's most prominent anti-colonial writer, Pramoedya Ananta Toer. Toer, for me, in his fiction, is a pivotal example of an author who explored the sea and the land otherwise, giving a voice to traditions in knowledge that practice a very different idea of nature and life, of *property* and of caring for the world.

GROTIUS AND HIS INTERNATIONAL AND EVERLASTING INFLUENCE

As the title of my contribution already clearly indicates, the starting point of my analysis is the sharp division that Freud made between the land and the sea, particularly because it somehow strongly echoed the way in which Hugo Grotius, at the very beginning of the Dutch Republic (and its overseas activities), created the strongest distinction between the land and the sea in his disputation. Grotius has not been discussed yet, but as a contemporary of most of the influential artists and scientists mentioned above (the "architects of perception" as I called them), the impact of his ideas when it comes to differentiating between the land and the sea far outreaches theirs. This is because Grotius, a legal scholar, on the insistence of the Zeeland Chamber of the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC), was asked to reflect upon the Portuguese claims on seas in Asia (as part of their colonial aspirations). His pamphlet entitled "the Free Sea" or "Mare Liberum" (from 1609) would turn out be the single most important document for "the rights of the sea," that *up to today* forms the basis of all international treaties that concern the sea, fishery, and the ownership of maritime territory.

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When it comes to defining the sea in relation to the land, Grotius's arguments can be summarized in three conclusions. First, because the sea and its resources (such as its fish) are apparently inexhaustible, the sea can also not be property. Second, the sea (which includes the fish and the sand) is fluid and ever changing, and thus cannot be possessed. Thirdly, as the sea cannot and should not be property or possession, the sea cannot be used (utility): "[t]he sea therefore is in the number of things which are not in merchandise and trading, that is to say, cannot remain proper" (Grotius 30).

It is important to be precise here when it comes to the words that Grotius uses. First of all, he speaks of property, a very old word/idea that derives directly from the Latin *proprietatem* (nominative *proprietas*) which means "ownership, a property, propriety, quality," and which could also be translated quite literally as "special feature." A loan translation of the even older Greek *idioma*, it can also be read in *proprius*, which means "one's own, special," such that it is not distinguishable from the self. Property should thus be seen as a word that describes "one's own," or "what makes oneself."

The second term, possession, though also deriving from Latin, is more recent, and refers to *possidere,* "to have and hold, hold in one's control, be master of own." It is linked to power, to *potis,* "having power, powerful, able" and sedere, from *sed-* "to sit." In other words, to possess something means to have power *over something*, to master something. It is not at all an indistinguishable part of the self; on the contrary, it could even belong to someone else. Yet, in the end, the one who possesses it has control of it, owns it.

This then leads us to the third conclusion Grotius draws. Because the sea is not part of us and also cannot be controlled, it also cannot be set to "use;" it is not an economic entity that can bought and sold. Of course, it is rather disturbing (and telling!) that Grotius sees property and possession equally fit for serving economic gain. It seems a crucial foundation for the capitalist enterprise. Gaining profit ("use") from anything that is somehow "within reach" almost serves as a dialectical *Aufhebung* of two very different ideas of ownership. As if, from an economist's perspective, it doesn't matter if something of value is an intrinsic part of you or something else over which you have control. In a way, it prehands the way companies that make the most profit today are those that own practically nothing, yet somehow are able to "set to use" a lot (think of how social media firms control data and companies like *Uber*, *AirBnB* and *Booking* find ways to "master" the markets of, respectively, taxis, rental apartments, and hotels).

Back to the seventeenth century, obviously Grotius was defining the sea (in three steps) contrary to land, with which I mean that he considered these three

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ideas of ownership impossible when it concerned the sea, but perfectly possible with the land. The land could be one's property, it could be possessed, and it could be made of use (exploited, sold, traded, rented, etc.). In my reading of these three, I emphasized that the term property is older than the term possession, and for a good reason. Land could be considered one's property since pre-Roman times. It signals the bond between humans and their land, or better even, it shows that in many ways, our land was part of us. I call this pre-Roman because it was only since Roman times that the land of others could become one's possession. Although perhaps pre-Roman is also confusing, as this idea that we and the earth that we grow are one, that the life our plot of land has to offer *is* our life, is us in every way, is not so much limited to a period of time or even of space.

Perhaps this unity that is us and our land (in other words "property") concerns all societies, is universal, and it was only with the Roman urge to conquer the land of others, as Michel Serres (2015) so eloquently explained it, that possession became more important than property in the European economic system. Rome, as we know, considered itself the child of razed Troy (see also Serres chapter 2), and therefore, in its paranoia, chased its enemies infinitely. These Roman conquests (institutionalized as a Catch-22 situation as they committed themselves to give every general of its army a plot of land once retired, land that was often not owned by the empire yet) set the tone for how all European powers, *since then*, were not so much interested in the land that was proper to them (or their people), but rather in building their economies to possess more land and as many products as possible. Through wars, through conquering, land could be expanded (an empire could be set up) and a prolonged existence would be secured (for now). But of course, at the borders, there was always hunger for land that was not yet part of the empire. The step towards (proto-) capitalist exploitation, which would make land under control, and products of the land under control, a primary object of trade, was easily made. Again, this very much installed the eventually dominant mindset in Europe since Roman times and it is not difficult to see how the infinite quest for more land was elementary to how capitalism developed in Europe, setting the tone for colonialist exploitation.

TRADE = WAR

The Free Sea by Grotius was, as noted above, not a juridical meditation but very much written on the insistence of the Zeeland Chamber of the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC), the Dutch East India Company. The VOC was set up

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in 1602 as a collaboration between different seafaring companies and is known as the first joint-stock company in the world. Chambers were run through different cities or provinces, as the Dutch Republic at that time was not one country (it also did not have a capital city; that happened much later) but a cooperation. The VOC was allowed to strike its own coins, to imprison and execute convicts, to negotiate treaties, to wage war and to establish colonies, and one could well say that the Netherlands, as a country, was actually the consequence of this collaboration.The sole aim of the VOC, secured by its stakeholders, was therefore to "make more profit," and it was extremely good at that. In terms of employment and trade with Asia, it was bigger than all other European companies combined.

The VOC's powerful Zeeland Chamber asked Grotius to write this treatise because of the *Santa Catarina* carrack issue and was much in line with their aim of making profit. In 1603, Dutch ships captured the Portuguese's *Santa Catarina* on its voyage from Singapore to Malakka and took its cargo which was said to have been enormous. This sole capture increased the VOC's capital by 50% *Borschberg 12*. Portugal was, of course, not pleased with this theft and demanded its goods back. Written in the aftermath of this incident, Grotius's claims obviously served to defend the VOC case and objected to the *Mare Clausum* principle that Portugal (and England) cited. In a broader sense, the ship's capture was an attack on the monopoly of the Portuguese traders, who had started colonizing these parts of the world before the VOC arrived. In the end, the VOC became, by far, the most powerful colonizer in this region, with its headquarters in Jayakarta (renamed Batavia) and its possessions that stretched from settlements in contemporary Sri Lanka to the artificial island of Decima in Japan. It also drew the map of what is now known as Indonesia, where most of the spices that still dominate the world's cuisines, come from.

Unlike the nineteenth century colonial model which was based on the plantation economy (coffee, tea, and tobacco) and the late-nineteenth and twentieth century model, which was based on fossil fuels, the spice trading as the colonial model in the seventeenth and eighteenth century was not based on major land possessions. Jan Pietersz Coen and his successors obviously had a major impact on how the land, the sea, and the inhabitants of what is now Indonesia, were controlled and (re-) organized in this area and far beyond, though not by directly controlling (grooving) the land.

Coen, who, in his days was already known as a brutal, merciless ruler and conqueror, in many ways proved himself to be a bookkeeper of the worst kind, meaning that he was very goal-oriented and knew that the aim of the VOC was to make more profit. This translated easily into his motto, which made him already famous in his time, which was that *trade and war are actually the same*

thing. In 1614, Coen developed his plans for Asia in his *Discoers* (van Goor 2015), a monograph which serves as the blueprint of how colonialism was a nasty offspring of early capitalism, only a few years after Grotius delivered his *Mare Liberum*. Importantly, it was based upon the same economic model, with no fundamental difference between property and possession—all that is somehow under control is fit for trade and can be exploited, even with brute force. That was very much what Coen proposed.

No doubt, some of the darkest pages in Dutch history concern the politics of land. Most striking is the Banda genocide of 1621, which unfortunately offers us a good example of how the colonizers were hoping to get a grip on the land (and the sea). Located at the heart of the Moluccas, home of nutmeg and other spices that had been popular around the world for centuries, Coen decided that the entire population of the island (estimated between 5,000 and 15,000 souls) needed to be replaced by workers that would obey his monopoly. He had approximately half of them killed and exported the other half to Batavia's slave market. Plans were made to not only control the global trade in nutmeg and other spices, but also to optimize the production site. If that meant replacing an entire population, then so be it. Trade equals war.

In a magnificent and rigorous reading of the history that was unfolding here, Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* shows how early capitalism, or early European modernism for that matter, was always already about the radical restructuring of the land. Its focus on monocultures comes with a very different land use, when compared to how the land was prioritized by the societies that lived there before, simply because more crop means more money. The spice trade seemed to have had only an impact on the harvest, when compared to later plantation economies which insisted on colonizing the entire land, and the oil economies that grabbed the sea, the land, and all that was underneath it. Yet the spice trade surely demanded the human and more-than-human lives of Indonesia to adjust to this new economic reality.

Ghosh examines how this early capitalist approach to land use is completely different from how the "indigenous group"—as he calls them—understands the importance of the land. For them, "landscapes remain as vividly alive today as they ever were" (*Nutmeg's Curse* 35). For the Bandanese (before Coen arrived), although nutmeg was obviously also an object of horticulture and commerce, it was just as much the blessing of the land, part of its larger ecosystem, and unmistakably related the land to the sea, the winds, the tides, its history, and its future. Apparently, the *Myristica fragrans* tree that gave them nutmeg (and mace) agreed with this, as it was only centuries later, after many botanical experiments, that the English were able to grow them outside of the Spice Islands.

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The wounds that capitalism wrought are still there, are still being felt by the human and non-human lives of the islands. Travelling through these islands today, listening to the stories and songs of the offspring of the Banda massacre survivors now living on neighboring islands, Ghosh concludes: “Through these stories features of the landscape speak to people just as loudly as the human voices that historians bring to life from documentary sources” (*Nutmeg’s Curse* 35). He quotes Max Liboiron to explain how these stories and songs speak to a land that was not their possession, but which was part of them as much as they were part of it: “the unique entity that is the combined living spirit of plants, animals, water, humans, histories and events . . . “ (Liboiron qtd. in Ghosh 36).

Nevertheless, although this colonial model was not keen on a strict reorganization of the land because of agricultural necessity, it is fair to conclude that the colonial government in the newly-established capital of Batavia did practice a politics of land and was keen on “scaping” the land and the sea in terms of possession and utility (which was possible with the land as Grotius would have described it). Overcoding existing political structures—simply adding the colonial rulers on top, the VOC, and later the Dutch Government—redefined the entire territory. After British and French interventions and due to wars in Europe, leadership was taken over several times, leading to a much stronger emphasis on changing the entire infrastructure of the land, and the Dutch government took over from the VOC, incorporating a much stricter and centralized organization of the land (van Reyboeck Chapter 2 and 3).

The sea, however, in line with Grotius, was always considered “free,” so freedom in the archipelago was always nearby. Contrary to the Netherlands, a small land mass with the sea at its limits—building high dykes in the end could protect the organized land (the Ego) from the wild and uncontrollable sea (the Id)—the archipelago of Indonesia was always already close to liberation, having its many seas, entangling its many islands so dramatically.

TOER AND THE MEMORIES OF THE LAND AND THE SEA

Is the overall presence of the sea the reason why Indonesia, already fired up by nationalist, Islamist, and communist powers within its border since the beginning of the twentieth century, was so fast and determined in liberating itself from its colonial superstructure, right after World War II ended? Surely the fact that Europe (and especially the Netherlands) was in ashes in May 1945 signaled to colonies

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all over the world that the power balance had shifted. But wasn't the presence of the sea—endless in its resources, always fluid and changing, and impossible to be used—the most important source of freedom for Indonesia in the end? Wasn't the sea, always so close by, always washing the endless shores of the archipelago, always already ungrooving the land and smoothening it? The waves do not stop at the shores. Its sights and sounds, its tastes and smells, are present in all its human and non-human lives. From Gamelan music to the *Myristica fragrans*, the nutmeg tree, the rhythms of the waves flow everywhere. Isn't the salty sea, in all its presences and abilities to connect and detach, the most revolutionary power par excellence?

The presence of the sea in the writings of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Indonesia's most prolific and influential post-independence writer, convinced us, in many of his stories, of the revolutionary power of the sea. The calmness of the Java Sea, the richness of the Banda Sea, the diversity of the Celebes Sea, and the unexpected rages of the Timor Sea—don't they all, in relation to the Indian and Pacific Oceans that embrace the archipelago, make up the lively, restless, and revolutionary amalgam of organic and non-organic powers, that together give rise to multiplicity of life engaged with the equator, we call Indonesia? Toer, time and again, reminds us of these rhythms, remembering the forces that, in the end, successfully resisted the hegemony of colonial rule, but also, after the first wave of the revolution had calmed down, the contra-revolutionary regime (the New Order) installed by General Soeharto, which kept the archipelago in its grip for most of the second half of the twentieth century. Toer's stories, whether addressing the issues directly, or by means of very subtle, mythological ancient narratives, were always able to speak truth to power. That is, speak truth by means of his stories to the peoples of Indonesia, who, surrounded by the many seas, sometimes, like all of us, need to be reminded of the rhythm of the waves, their ability to shake things up, and to wash away the grooves that prevent us from living the lives we choose to live.

In his novel, *The Girl from the Coast*, Toer tells a simple story of an unnamed fourteen-year-old girl living a peaceful life with her family in a small coastal town on the island of Java. Until one day:

> —there was a man who had taken note of her and informed his employer in the city of this village girl's beauty. One day, the man returned to the village and paid a visit to the home of the girl's parents. No more than a few days later, the girl learned she had to leave her heart and home behind. (Toer 4)

Her response can easily be understood:

> The girl didn't understand. Neither did she know what lay ahead. All she knew was that she had just lost her entire world. Why couldn't she live where she wanted to, she asked

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> herself with fear and apprehension, among the people she cared for and loved, in her seaside world of pounding waves? (Toer 5)

Obviously, coming from poverty, her new life was welcomed by her family, as she and they became highly respected by people in the village and were elevated to a high-class society as well. Being the wife of a nobleman gave the girl an aristocratic life, but of course, this was not how she experienced her new life. The humans and more-than-human individuals that made up her community, and the coast with which she grew up and that was always already a part of her, were not present in the city. To live without the waves, the inexhaustible resources of the sea, the fluidity, and ever-changing waters, meant poverty to her. What is life without the rhythm of the waves? What is life if the grooves that mark the land, that mark society, that, in the end, complicate everything, prove themselves the painful dogmas that stop the time, that capture us and our worlds?

Carl Niekerk makes an important spatial analysis of Toer's novel (to which he refers in the citation below), noticing how the difference between urban life and coastal life translates into a sense of space (18):

> Reminiscing about life in the village, the girl observes that people act differently in the village, something that her servant Mbok confirms: "I know. They eat together, sit together, drink together. And when the husband isn't off at sea, they talk about things together" (Toer 84). In the city, in contrast, "it's usually the men who are in control" (84). Spatial organization in the village is different from in the city. Mardinah, who accompanies the girl as her servant and to keep an eye on things, notices to her dismay that there are no bedrooms in the dwellings in the village (173). Instead, everyone, including guests and strangers, shares a common sleeping platform (187). This lack of privacy is the other side of what appears to be a highly inclusive public sphere.

Things become even more interesting when they speak of culture. In city life, as expected, traditional Javanese shadow puppet play (Wayang Kulit) was important. Yet our protagonist was not a fan, as it was obvious to her that the narrative, once again, was beneficial only to those in power. Mbok, the girl's servant, summarizes this well: "the giants are always defeated by the thin and delicate noblemen" (Toer 81).

At the coast, these plays were never popular. Instead, similar to the offspring of the Banda massacre that Amitav Ghosh was interested in, local stories and songs were important to the village community. Dul, the village singer—and in many ways someone who negotiated between the land and the sea, the sane and the insane, peace and war (love and rape)—is not at all interested in maintaining the social hierarchy, in serving those in power. Being the true artist, living at the margins

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of the island, it is through improvised singing that harmonies of past, present and future are being experimented with. He sang about the infamous postal road initiated by governor Daendels during Napoleonic times, but also about the big tidal waves that flushed the village occasionally, and he expressed a hope for the good times to come (Toer 171).

CONCLUSIONS: IMPROVIATIONS AND TRANSCODING

Improvised songs set out a territory in their newfound rhythms, melodies, and harmonies. Much may be learned from these sources we have been deaf to for so long, as Ghosh and Toer show us. These songs do not simply "speak about" coastal life, as we saw above, *they practice it* and actively engage with its milieus and rhythms. It is in the act of singing, in Toer's novel, as well as in the interviews Ghosh had with the offspring of the Banda massacre (400 years after their forced migration), that the (more-than-human) community reaches out to one another, to the land and the sea, to the nutmeg and the plants that surround it, to the floods that reach the village, to the coconuts in the palm trees leaning over the beaches, and the salty waters underneath in which they will soon fall.

When speaking of music and how sonority is everywhere, Deleuze and Guattari stress how music, how improvisation especially, allows us, by alluding to all sorts of resonances (in language, in sound, in vibration, and the combining of all of them), to engage with the *transcodings* as they organize the space, provide us home, and situate all the lives dear to us (314). Deleuze and Guattari speak of how improvisation is synchronous to these transcodings. It does not just happen when artists like Eric Dolphy, Olivier Messiaen, and Paul Klee play and improvise with the twittering birds. Practicing a more-than-human approach (long before it became fashionable in theory), their art surely shows how musical improvisation is perfectly able to imagine the transcoding from the vascular structure of the leaves to the raindrop, from the proteinaceous spider silk of the spider's web to how the fly flies. Is not the noticing of these transcodings, the engagement with them, and the capturing of their sonorous rhythms, *exactly* what the communities at the margins of the island are doing when they sing their ways to live their villages, to occupy their land and their sea proper, by heart, by will, and by chance?

Are the waves, the infrasound of the tides, the Earth's deepest hums—as together they roar the coasts of Indonesia forever—perhaps providing us with the most foundational rhythm according to which we begin, time and again, our

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community to come? The free sea keeps on washing the shores, our bodies, and our minds, offering us motifs and counterpoints according to which we can situate ourselves anew, freed from the grooves of the powerful. It is the free sea that keeps on offering an infinite and inexhaustible number of opportunities (in past, present, and future), and new ways to connect. Always on top of the land, the sea washes away all possessions and makes us proper, like Toer's girl from the coast, again.

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