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Kath Weston

GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, Volume 14, Number 2-3, 2008, pp. 217-237 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



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# A POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF “UNNATURAL OFFENCES”

**State Security, Queer Embodiment,  
and the Environmental Impacts of Prison Migration**

**Kath Weston**

From the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, European and colonial governments sentenced hundreds of thousands of political prisoners, housebreakers, rioters, forgers, and petty thieves to transportation to penal colonies that were purposefully situated at a far remove from the places where the accused were apprehended. France transported prisoners to New Caledonia in the South Pacific and French Guiana in South America, where the unlucky might find themselves assigned to the notorious offshore prison on Île du Diable (Devil’s Island). Britain shipped many convicts to the Americas until its colonies there gained independence. From 1788 to 1868, Australia then became a preferred destination. Colonial governments extended the practice by establishing satellite penal settlements of their own. Along with the slave trade, transportation produced one of the most massive forced transoceanic relocations in history.

“Before we knew it the ship had transformed into a moving cloud, & as the cracked pastels of sunrise began to escape into the early morning sky behind [the Commandant], he was pointing out the future as we flew over it,” observed the protagonist of *Gould’s Book of Fish*, Richard Flanagan’s fictional meditation on transportation and natural history.<sup>1</sup> And what sort of future was that? Robert Hughes recounts in *The Fatal Shore* how remote penal colonies like the one in Tasmania, deliberately constructed to emphasize their isolation, allowed prisoners (and tourists after them) to “crawl through the bushes to their unfenced rim and gaze down on the wide, wrinkled, glimmering sheet of our imprisoning sea.”<sup>2</sup> For convicts, isolation could be torment enough. As for more conventional sorts of

persecution at the hands of crew bosses, guards, and wardens, there would be plenty to offer.

When it comes to histories of migration, this “big story” of transportation has had little to say about queerness.<sup>3</sup> For that matter, queer theory and LGBT studies have largely ignored forced migrations of this sort, preferring to focus on less overtly coerced movements from village to city and country to country, when they have considered migration at all. That colonial histories of prison migration might also teach something about linkages among environmental politics, queerness, embodiment, detention, and the state is a proposition that has yet to be formulated, much less illustrated or tested. This essay proposes to make a start by focusing on a “small story” that occurred a century ago at the penal settlement founded in 1858 by the East India Company at Port Blair in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, off the coast of what was once British Burma. My aims are threefold: to call attention to queer resonances in accounts of forced migrations compelled by security-minded states; to locate those resonances in a genealogy of offshore incarceration and detention; and to open a dialogue between the interdisciplinary fields of political ecology and queer studies with an eye to understanding how certain disciplinary formations directed at bodies can reshape, even devastate, the environments in which they operate.<sup>4</sup>

Under British rule in places like India, some people were sentenced to transportation explicitly for the crime of having committed an “unnatural offence.” Others, duly convicted on unrelated charges and transported, received extra punishment for “unnatural crimes” allegedly committed while serving time in a penal colony or offshore prison. Here the significance for queer studies seems obvious. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code prescribed fines and imprisonment of ten years to life for “carnal intercourse against the order of nature, with any man, woman, or animal.”<sup>5</sup> This provision had analogues in statutory and common law in many other colonies, including what are now Fiji, Hong Kong, Zimbabwe, and New Zealand. In India Section 377 remains in effect years after independence and has recently become the target of a grassroots movement for repeal.<sup>6</sup>

Yet what constituted an unnatural offense was—and is—not at all obvious. Indeed, a certain slipperiness could be said to be the animus of the term, since the charge of unnatural crime tended to mobilize economic ambitions and political rivalries as well as garden-variety emotions such as fear or envy. Although unnatural crime often figures in the archives as a proxy for homosexuality, the category was also brought to bear against bestiality and other forms of suspect intimacies, not to mention against enemies who had done nothing more than incur the accuser’s wrath.

In the historical application of the term, readings that exceeded sexuality came into play. Colonial officials at Port Blair bruited about neo-Malthusian theories that focused on the dangers posed by demographic imbalances between male prisoners and female prisoners (who were not even included in the first shipments of convicts). What else could authorities expect but lax morals and "unnatural vice" under such conditions? Wouldn't prison discipline suffer accordingly? The suggested remedies ranged from encouraging female migration to creating round-the-clock visibility to discourage liaisons of the sort more culturally suited to the dark. But these remedies were never the palliatives that penal colony administrators hoped they would be, not least because some of the men continued to pursue male partners without a care for who could see, some of the new female migrants seemed more interested in one another than in securing husbands, and some of the heterosexual marriages arranged between prisoners with administrative approval allowed couples to use their newfound privileges to bring in a little extra money through sex work.

Crackdowns on unnatural crime could also have ecological effects that at first glance seem unrelated to the regulation of sexuality. So it is that this small story about the prosecution of unnatural offenses in a penal colony in the Bay of Bengal opens onto an inquiry about the relationship of forced prison migration to the disciplinary technologies enlisted by state security regimes and the environmental impacts of using queered prison labor to remake a landscape.

### **Of Labor, Lust, and Lamp Oil**

It is a simple enough machine, the oil press. An iron bar laden with weights extends at waist height from a cast-iron bowl. Pressure applied to the iron bar rotates a screw mechanism inside the bowl that tears coconuts apart, squeezing every retrievable bit of oil from within the shell. The device is the very picture of sustainability, for it requires neither steam engine nor electricity, just animal power, broadly conceived. Perfect, then, for the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, where the penal colony established to house political prisoners following the 1857 war against British colonization of the Indian Subcontinent supplied the labor to keep these presses running.

In the museum of the British Cellular Jail at Port Blair, now a historical landmark, a mannequin turns one of these presses into a synecdoche for the hardships visited on the men and women transported to the archipelago by the colonial government from 1858 until 1942, when Japan conquered the islands. At the side of the press where a bullock might have been hitched, this life-size

replica of a sweating man stripped down to his dhoti pushes steadily on the bar. The mannequin's emaciated body is nothing but sinew and muscle. To escape punishment, his real-life predecessor would have struggled to meet a production quota of thirty pounds of coconut oil per day. After ten pounds, his hands would have flayed from the relentless chafing, fingers laid open to infection.

In the exhibit, a wooden tag hangs from a circlet around the prisoner's neck, condensing his history in the penal colony into a bureaucratic alphabet. The archives provide tools to make sense of this cryptography: "D," for example, stands for "Neck Ticket—Bad Character." Around and around this mimesis of a man plods in the heat, driven ever onward into repetition by the lick of the overseer's whip when he falters or whenever the overseer decides to supply a little "encouragement." So hard were the prisoners he represents worked that in memoirs written by survivors of the penal colony, assignment to the oil mill often amounted to a death sentence.<sup>7</sup> Reports filed over the years by the settlement's medical officers tended to corroborate this assessment.

And what was the inspiration for setting up an oil factory on one of the Nicobar Islands in the late nineteenth century, with this bone-jarring device as its centerpiece? Alternatively, what was the rationalization? A demand for lamp oil, to be sure. But in the shadows of that demand lurked a government crackdown that would reshape the political economy of the islands, a crackdown formulated in terms of an already world-traveling category called "unnatural crime."

In 1879 or 1880 a committee appointed expressly to inquire into the matter of unnatural crime in the Port Blair penal colony issued a series of recommendations designed to root out the troublesome practice. The committee framed its objectives in terms of prison reform, long considered a worthy object of government attention. Prison reform movements had become a staple of British political life since the 1770s, when John Howard published *The State of the Prison in England and Wales*.<sup>8</sup> The Home Department dispatched investigative committees fairly regularly to prisons and penal colonies throughout the empire. Sometimes those committees formed in response to incidents such as the murder of a visiting dignitary by an inmate (e.g., the assassination of Lord Mayo, the Viceroy of India, on his visit to the Andamans in 1872). Sometimes committees formed in response to political pressure brought to bear by hunger strikes, prisoners' relatives, nationalist organizing, and so on. Occasionally committees took up problems such as high mortality rates that colonial administrators themselves recognized would invite unwanted scrutiny. The "problem" of unnatural crime seemed to qualify as one of the latter.

As Jeffrey Weeks has pointed out, the expansive criminalization and prosecution of male-male sexual contact in Britain after 1870 can be understood only against "a background of a sharpening definition of and hostility towards homosexuality in the late nineteenth century, not only in Britain but in other European countries."<sup>9</sup> Unnatural crime, a commodious term that once had extended as easily to the advocacy of contraception as same-sex eroticism, increasingly began to narrow its meaning to homosexuality. The late-nineteenth-century obsession with unnatural crime in Port Blair, one of the empire's leading penal colonies, might be considered a precursor to the sexual purity campaigns that would shake the metropole in the early 1880s when a series of scandals involving male same-sex eroticism hit England and Ireland.

While the metropolitan campaigns linked homosexuality to prostitution and condemned the two as of a piece, the situation in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands was a bit more complicated. There the administration had taken a decision in the 1870s to authorize sex work and elevate prostitution to a category of prison labor, with a view to maintaining discipline among unattached men in the settlement police force. State-appointed sex workers, all female and all convicts, received protection of the meager sort that governments administering forced labor are wont to give.<sup>10</sup> Sex work conducted outside this framework by men or women was prosecuted, along with homosexuality as understood by settlement authorities.

After the committee investigating unnatural crime among convicts in Port Blair issued its report, E. H. Man, the penal colony superintendent, seized on one of its recommendations in particular. A better system of lighting could be introduced "without extra expense by re-establishing the manufacture of cocoanut [*sic*] oil at Camorta."<sup>11</sup> Nicobaris would provide coconuts; convicts, at that time primarily Hindustani, would manufacture the lamp oil. These innovations (Man was keen on innovations) promised to bring malefactors to light, rather literally. This was the era when European children in cold climates were encouraged to sleep with their hands outside the sheets, fully visible to inspection, lest they indulge in onanism (masturbation) under cover of blankets and night. Visibility coupled with surveillance of the optic, if not always panoptic, sort promised to cure all manner of sexualized vice. Where more so than in the colonial prison, which already trafficked in the extraction of pain-capital using disciplinary technologies such as the central guard tower that depended on sight?<sup>12</sup>

If the mechanism of a crackdown prosecuted by lamplight seems quaint, the political machinations involved are scarcely dated. The setting is one of the

more infamous in the history of offshore incarceration, a term I have used elsewhere to describe forced detention in a place of ambiguous legal jurisdiction, a place understood to exist at a great remove from the locus of a detainee's ordinary life.<sup>13</sup> Long before the chicken-wire cages thrown together by the Halliburton Corporation at Guantánamo Bay, long before the twenty-first-century transnational archipelago of secret prisons, long before the attempts to detain "enemy combatants" indefinitely in floating holding cells on military brigs, there were the men's barracks on Viper Island, the Female Jail on Ross Island, and the British Cellular Jail at Port Blair. All these facilities were located in *Kala Pani* (Black Water), as the penal colony in the Andamans and Nicobars was better known. *Kala Pani* represented a place beyond exile, a site for incarceration imaginatively figured as a back of beyond from which detainees might never return.

Then, as now, "political prisoners" and (later) "terrorists" were the headlines, with major media attention given to those charged with participation in bombings and conspiracies. (After India achieved independence in 1947, those erstwhile terrorists graced nationalist histories as heroes and "freedom fighters" who had struggled against the unjust imposition of colonial rule.) Then, as now, apparently, the majority of people incarcerated in such places had little to do with the kind of politicized activities that the state professed to have in its sights. My point in calling attention to such resonances is not to mount a presentist argument, for there are many crucial differences between colonial detention regimes in the Andamans and imperial detention regimes today. Rather, it is to note that contemporary security states trail behind them a history that is just as important as discussions of legality or rights for confronting the atrocities that such regimes may perpetuate in the name of security or improvement.

In the discussion that follows, I occasionally reference current events such as the immigration legislation proposed in the U.S. Congress in 2005 in order to show how theoretical insights gleaned from the historical study of forced immigration to penal colonies such as Port Blair might sharpen questions formulated in other times and places. To bring these distinctive contexts together is not to intimate similarity or even continuity. Rather, it is to begin to construct a genealogy of security regimes and involuntary migrations, especially their queerer aspects, which can take account of the disciplining of landscapes that suffuse but also exceed the bodies that produce and inhabit them.

What makes the crackdown on "unnatural crime" at the Port Blair penal settlement more than just another note from the archives, more than just another story of homosexuality under prison conditions, more than just another painful incidence of the persecution of same-sex lust and love in less "enlightened" times?

To answer such questions, I want to explore briefly but, I hope, suggestively three discursive practices operative in the Port Blair penal colony that remain central to perpetuating state security regimes: a politics of surmise; the transformation of everyday activities into unnatural, actionable offenses; and modes of accounting for bodies that obscure the political ecology of erotic relations. The story of the establishment of the coconut oil factory at Camorta turns out to be not so small after all, for it illustrates how sexuality can inflect histories of immigration, criminalization, and detention in unexpected ways, with important ramifications for political ecology and for social theory more generally.

### **The Politics of Surmise**

A politics of surmise is often built into accusation: You took more than your share again, I can tell. I can tell you right now where your watch went: the servants must have taken it. Just look at their faces, those two have been "doing it" in the dark! The satellite photos you are about to see clearly indicate the sites where weapons of mass destruction are concealed.

Rather than acknowledge conjecture as conjecture, surmise stakes an ontological claim: what I infer to have happened has happened. A politics of surmise places surmise in the service of politicized goals, the pursuit of which may as easily entail flogging someone for having sex as explaining away an inability to find what you seek or legitimating a war.

When the first ships landed at what would become Port Blair following the 1857 War of Independence (a.k.a. "Indian Mutiny"), they carried a mandate to establish a colony for political prisoners in a place that Europeans had not yet colonized. (An earlier attempt to found a British settlement in the Andamans in the late eighteenth century rapidly succumbed to hubris and disease.) In the settlement's early days, before convicts felled sections of the forest to build their own barracks, they slept in the open while their overseers retired to the perceived safety of ships in the harbor. The guard detail, which was understaffed, spread stories about bloodthirsty "wild Andamanese" to discourage their charges from fleeing into the jungle during the night. Capital punishment awaited prisoners who surmised otherwise, tried to escape, and were caught.<sup>14</sup>

For Andamanese and Nicobaris, the impact of land seizures, the roundups designed to bring them forcibly to "civilization," the logging of the forests, and a geography utterly recontoured by penal colony enterprises would be profound. Far from living up to the savage reputation cultivated by the new security regime, the islands' first residents demonstrated an astute grasp of power relations within

the penal settlement and often drew much more refined distinctions among their opponents than they could expect to be accorded in return. During the Battle of Aberdeen, which took place in 1859 in the vicinity of Port Blair, allied Andamanese forces escorted convicts in shackles to safety, reserving their arrows and their wrath for their would-be colonizers.<sup>15</sup>

During this early period in penal colony history, the dark supplied a trope for danger, but also the opportunity to elude surveillance. Who could say what went on between sunset and starlight? Prisoners were still caught in flagrante from time to time, in which case regulations decreed that their backs be laid open by the whip. Prisoners caught in the act more than once could be assigned to the Habitual Offenders Gang, a work crew arrayed in readily identifiable chocolate-striped uniforms described by one colonial official as “hideous.”<sup>16</sup> In the early days of the colony, all such cases involved relations between men, since no female prisoners had yet been transported to the islands.

Of course, much could be surmised about any prisoner who appeared in such garb, just as surmise alone could offer sufficient grounds for classification as a habitual offender. The habitual offender occupied that middle ground where acts and identities, behavior and species-being, enjoyed greater intimacy than many theorists have allowed. Nothing in penal colony regulations specified that guards had to observe a behavioral infraction in order to constitute someone as a habitual offender. Indeed, what counted as “habitual” was itself so vaguely defined that the Indian Jails Committee established in 1919 urged that prisoners be classified as habitual offenders only if a previous conviction could be documented or if the state had issued an order “to find security” under Sections 110 and 118 of the Criminal Procedure Code. Neither caveat, of course, addressed the element of surmise so often incorporated into convictions in the first place.<sup>17</sup> As a result, many individuals landed in the habitual offender category thanks to animosity or hearsay. To complicate matters, unnatural crime itself constituted an offense for which prisoners could be transported, with seventeen men arriving in the colony in 1904–5 alone after being convicted of charges under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code.<sup>18</sup> Conviction did not require a firsthand witness.

In the islands, the politics of surmise came into play perhaps most obviously in death. Administrative reports include many cases of convicts who defended themselves after being charged with the murder of other prisoners, on the grounds that the deceased had “interfered” with them, “foully abused” them, made “illicit advances” to someone with whom the accused already had an “unnatural connection,” or simply “proposed a criminal intimacy.” Chunnu, Life Convict No. 16406, was charged in 1901 with killing a detainee named Ghasita.

He claimed that the deceased "wished to commit unnatural crime with him." Not only that, Ghasita had threatened to file a report that would "have him [Chunnu] placed in the Habitual Recipient gang if he refused to accede to his wishes." The colonial government hanged Chunnu for the murder, regardless.<sup>19</sup>

Interesting, then, that more than a decade before Chunnu's case was heard, officials had looked to visibility for relief from all such adjudications. Lamp oil from the new factory at Camorta promised to decrease the number of "unnatural offences" and put an end to special pleading by taking away the dark. If convicts were messing about, guards would see them. If convicts lied about unwelcome advances, their stories would lose credibility, because if they were telling the truth, surely someone would have observed them. It was as though visibility alone would supply the antidote to surmise. Except, of course, that surmise continued to lurk in the deployment of measures enlisted to dispel it, not least in assertions of absence: if they *had* done something by lamplight, surely someone would have noticed.

There had always been an element of visual scrutiny to the punishment of same-sex relations in the penal colony. The flogging meted out for unnatural offenses took the form of public display rather than privatized punishment. By the 1880s, when the oil factory was established, prison reforms emanating from England had already begun to place greater stress on visual modes of surveillance. The proposed lighting system was just one of several initiatives in the Andamans and Nicobars that symbolized a more modern and allegedly humane approach to incarceration than corporal punishment. In 1906 convicts finished construction of the British Cellular Jail, a winged variation on Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon design that tourists, researchers, and relatives of former prisoners can still visit in Port Blair today.

As queer theorists have recognized, visibility has a complex relationship to power. Evelyn Hammonds has pointed out, for example, that the political empowerment claimed for the increased visibility that took the form of coming out in the United States during the 1980s existed in tension with the hypervisibility that produced discriminatory police stops of black and brown people, including queers.<sup>20</sup> In Port Blair at the turn of the twentieth century, the powers of visual surveillance encoded in the Panopticon design of the British Cellular Jail could have served more than one master. Inspectors noticed that iron gratings had been installed by convicts in a way that would allow detainees to lock the guards in the central watchtower, where guards could ineffectively survey their charges to their hearts' content.

After the administration redesigned the gratings and completed work on

the jail, the superintendent abolished the Habitual Offenders Gang, which, despite the backbreaking labor, had at least allowed prisoners to move about the islands. In the name of humane treatment, the settlement's medical officers assumed the task of identifying "recipients in unnatural crime." Surmise continued to direct their investigations by bringing particular convicts to their attention. Once duly "inspected" and classified, habitual offenders were no longer flogged but confined to solitary cells in the new jail, "specially set apart for them," where they could be isolated and "more securely kept."<sup>21</sup> Out of the shadows, indeed.

In the Andamans experiment with offshore incarceration, the introduction of a politics of visibility never displaced the politics of surmise. The new light projected into dark recesses of corridors, cells, and barracks, thanks to deadly labors carried out elsewhere on the islands, fanned the flames of the conjecture it proposed to extinguish. One might even argue that the new visibility reaped all the moral authority now associated with contemporary bureaucratic talismans such as "transparency" while relying on a politics of surmise for its implementation.

The same letter of 1880 in which the superintendent of Port Blair and the Nicobars proposed to compel prisoners to manufacture coconut oil, the better to light up the unnatural, also recommended that "no convict under 22 years of age nor those suspected of being addicted to unnatural crime be sent to the Settlement."<sup>22</sup> This missive, in effect, established an anti-immigrant policy for an archipelago chock-full of compulsory migrants. We will do our part, the superintendent promised the administrators responsible for the onshore jail system, but keep your jailbait and your same-sex "addicts" off our shores. This new policy selectively targeted bodies presumed to have some special affinity for others of their kind. Surmise merely repositioned itself at the gates or, in this case, the harbors.

### **Prosecuting the Pedestrian**

The production of cheap, plentiful lamplight for the colony using prison labor did nothing to stop unnatural crime from being sublimated into other categories of infraction. Of course, the reading of archives itself involves elements of surmise, since historical records so often bridge the centuries with fragments. In the annals of offshore incarceration in the Andamans and Nicobars, there are at least three repeated but fragmentary references that suggest the possibility—though only the possibility—of same-sex eroticism under rubrics that illumination did nothing to dispel. The first, something called "bad local conduct of the applicants," came into play when prisoners petitioned the authorities to marry. This term referenced any infraction of settlement regulations, of which there were many (regulations and

infractions both), including but hardly limited to those that prohibited same-sex erotic relations. The second, "prostitution," regularly captured higher numbers of men than women: in 1872–73, for example, eighteen males and thirteen females were officially charged with prostitution.<sup>23</sup> The third fragmentary reference, on which I wish to focus here, records punishments meted out for bestowing gifts on other prisoners, to wit, "giving presents to females in section."

Authorities began recruiting Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim women from the Subcontinent to go to the Andaman Islands as early as 1860, two years after the founding of the penal settlement. Initially they hoped to locate marriage partners for self-supporters, the name given to first-class prisoners who had served a specified number of years in the colony with good behavior. (For reasons of maintaining the peace and "protecting" indigenous groups from disease and assault, penal settlement authorities did not consider Andamanese women appropriate spouses for male convicts, nor would they certify such marriages.)<sup>24</sup> However, the "Convict Family Emigration Agents" who toured the Subcontinent in 1858 had little to show for their efforts. Nor were male convicts in Port Blair who were already married necessarily enthusiastic about complying with state-sponsored schemes to transport their wives to a place widely perceived as isolated and disease-ridden.<sup>25</sup> Mortality rates in the settlement were indeed astronomical, especially in the nineteenth century.

When the colonial administration had difficulty persuading free women to make the journey to this figurative back of beyond, it decided to build a jail to house women sentenced to transportation for life. The Female Jail allowed authorities to bring female migration to the Andamans under state control, with the goal of creating a rehabilitative social formation they called "the convict family." Even then, the first women convicts volunteered for transportation to the Andamans from jails in Calcutta, Lahore, and other cities on the Subcontinent. Recruiters promised them new lives, renewed marriage prospects following the disgrace of imprisonment, a chance to work the land. When numbers failed to keep up with demand, authorities abandoned the voluntary aspect of the policy. The archipelago soon became a standard destination for Hindustani women sentenced to transportation for life. By 1890 women awarded fixed terms (i.e., sentences of specified duration) joined life convicts on the prison ships that made their way across the Bay of Bengal to the islands. Their consent was solicited, but not required.

The Female Jail became an important source of labor for the colony, where women inmates milled tons of grain and manufactured mounds of prison-issue clothing. Assignment to the grinding mill provided an analogue in the gendered

division of prison labor for operation of the oil press, because of the harshness of the work. As anticipated, the establishment of the Female Jail created the infrastructure for a thriving side business in arranged marriages. With or without weddings in their futures, the vast majority of Hindustani women migrated to the archipelago under duress as prisoners, just like the male convicts, whose marriage privileges supplied the rationale for the women's transportation.<sup>26</sup>

Male self-supporters, also known as ticket-of-leave prisoners, had the opportunity to farm the salty land or to set up shop in the little bazaar in Port Blair. Yet self-supporters were far from free. They had to carry their ticket-of-leave papers on their persons at all times. Their movements and conduct were heavily policed, with the threat of being remanded to solitary confinement or a chain gang perpetually hanging over them. If a husband died before his wife and his wife had not completed the term of her sentence, regulations provided for her to be reincarcerated in the Female Jail. When one or both members of the couple were term convicts with separate release dates, preserving the marriage became a worry for authorities once husband but not wife (or vice versa) attained freedom and hence a certain mobility. Whether abandoned wives should be allowed to remarry in the colony if they had served their time also represented a conundrum. On the one hand, these female self-supporters retained land and property that made them sought-after spouses. Officials in Port Blair feared the effects of their ostensibly unattached, unregulated sexuality. On the other hand, the state had considerable investment in preserving marriages that it had helped arrange through the laborious recruitment of female convicts. In the end officials resolved to handle such situations on a case-by-case basis.<sup>27</sup>

Both marriage and settlement rules circumscribed relations between female and male convicts on the islands. Authorities routinely issued passes to male convicts to visit the Female Jail to arrange marital alliances, which required presentations of gifts as part of the wedding negotiations. Authorities also routinely distributed gifts to Andamanese in the vain hope that presents would help put an end to indigenous resistance to colonization. In these and many other contexts, giving presents was considered a salutary, even government-sponsored, activity. Gift giving came in for censure only when the recipient was a female prisoner and no state-sanctioned marriage was in the offing.

The settlement regulation that prohibited giving presents to females in section targeted heterosexual courtship, with men the expected givers and women the forbidden recipients. (Records note no parallel infraction for giving presents to male convicts in section.) Nonetheless, in 1872–73, to take but one year, eleven

males and four females were convicted of the offense. That's four women convicted and punished for giving gifts to other women.

Although such entries typically lack background information, these would have been women classified as "native" and transported from the Indian Subcontinent. The penal colony hosted only a few European prisoners in its earliest days, all of them men. Magistrates occasionally imprisoned Andamanese for such offenses as murder or fleeing the census, but the more common forms of incarceration inflicted on them involved captivity in the name of "friendship" and coercive resettlement. To colonialist eyes, this did not count as imprisonment, quite, at least not of the sort that would merit the assignment of convict numbers for inclusion in annual reports.

While gift giving, of course, cannot serve as some free-floating indicator of intimacies, its prosecution in specified contexts associated with migration, forced or otherwise, is emblematic of how a legal apparatus can criminalize the most pedestrian of activities. Something so unremarkable that it would previously have gone unreported becomes resignified as a criminal act. Once the act becomes actionable, the grounds for government intervention expand, often radically. A political regime that turns to the pedestrian to secure its objectives gains an incredible leverage.

The anti-immigrant, anti-immigration legislation introduced in the 2005 session of the U.S. Congress, HR 4437, offers a recent case in point. HR 4437 proposed to transform the simple acts of fixing someone a plate of food, handing someone a glass of water, or giving someone a place to stay, into felonies if the giver "knowingly aids or assists" a recipient who could not produce certain government-issued papers. Hundreds of thousands of people poured out of schools and workplaces into the streets to oppose the bill. Latino youth, especially, mobilized in large numbers. Opponents of the bill rightly emphasized that the legislation would criminalize not only undocumented immigrants but acts of compassion as well. Once people become legally liable for small kindnesses or cursory actions, the necessarily uneven prosecution of everyday practice that ensues cannot help but inflict its own random sort of terror.

States have also taken refuge in the pedestrian in the course of naturalizing the horrific. If the contemporary debate in the United States about what counts as torture—a debate reserved until recently in modernity as beyond debate—has taught anything, it is that the most vicious technologies of power can appear perfectly innocuous. Torture, like flirtation, need not enlist any dedicated device. Arms outstretched in greeting, in love, deform easily enough into the coerced pose

of crucifixion or abjection. Wakefulness can be a blessing for the doctor working the night shift, an ungodly affliction for the body forcibly deprived of sleep. Water, the most basic requirement for life, becomes a killer when administered in wretched excess.

Officials running the infamous French penal colony in Guiana at Devil's Island spoke openly of the "sun cure," an interrogation technique effected by the simple measure of staking a man beneath the tropical sun until he, almost inevitably, talked.<sup>28</sup> Was he tortured, or merely standing? In the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the ingenious technology of the coconut oil press, propelled by a well-fed bullock, bears little resemblance to the oil mill used to torture prisoners of the British colonial state in the course of their labors. Except, of course, that these two devices were one and the same.

Unnatural offenses, then, can widen to embrace the quotidian, now riddled with suspicion, even as state-sponsored atrocities acquire the trappings of sensible, natural arrangements. In legal parlance, "surmise" entails submitting a charge or making a formal allegation. It was the formal allegation of "unnatural crime" that set conjecture in motion in the Andamans, in ways that would lead convicts to their deaths, impact relations of production, establish new forms of trade, and transform the political ecology of the islands, all under cover of law. The circles worn into the earth by the blistered, shackled feet set to milling coconuts at Camorta to produce lamp oil would eventually extend far beyond the perimeter of the oil factory. The "gift" that cheap lamplight would bring to the Nicobars was the criminal (but never criminalized) seizure of land for coconut production, the instigation of innumerable conflicts, and the decimation of an ecologically integrated landscape.

### **Toward a Political Ecology of Queer Embodiment**

Violations—in their legal, corporeal, and state-authored senses—are seldom as circumscribed as they initially appear. In a bid to extinguish unnatural offenses, the British colonial state decided to light up the room. Before its officials could light up the room, they chained prisoners for hours to an oil press. Before they could push the prisoners' bodies beyond the point of endurance, they had to find coconuts to put in the mill. To source enough coconuts to supply an entire penal colony with light, they authored a policy of engagement with the growers of coconut trees. To meet the growing demand for coconuts, a world changed.

Political ecology takes as its object the ways that politics, economics, and environmental issues intertwine. From Richard Grove's *Green Imperialism* to Paige

West's *Conservation Is Our Government Now*, its analysts have set their sights on colonization, development, corporatization, differing conceptions of nature, even the master narrative of "the environment" itself.<sup>29</sup> Yet the often sparkling analyses in this interdisciplinary field have had little to say about queerness, just as LGBTQ studies has had little to say about political ecology. With the exception of the occasional gay organization that litigates for its right to proper credit on the signs that list groups picking up trash along roadways in the United States, environmentalism and queer politics seldom seem to intersect. This dislocation rests on a narrow association of ecology with visible landscapes and sexuality with visible bodies bounded by skin. In the pages of journals, as in popular culture, attractions may range far afield, but the field itself merely offers a place to suffer or to frolic, a simple backdrop for the playing out of sexual politics.

By using the story of the oil mill to explore the links between forced migration, prison labor, contested sexualities, and ecological transformation in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, I have tried to make visible something less tangible. The bodies of incarcerated migrant laborers, like their imputed desires, extend in this story deep into the jungles they were sentenced to fell, deep into the European markets they fed with timber, deep into the budgetary arguments that administrators hoped to quell with a bid for self-sufficiency in lamp oil or blankets. Embodiment inside and outside queer theory must count for more than the worlding of an organism or the tortured production of a corpse.

Catherine Gallagher has argued that a kind of rhetoric she calls "somaeconomic" pervaded nineteenth-century European society, shaping everything from treatises on political economy to character development in Victorian novels.<sup>30</sup> Somaeconomic rhetoric construes economic relations by way of bodily sensations. The inhabitants of Coketown in Charles Dickens's novel *Hard Times* did not pause in their dismal labors to question the association of toil with melancholy. Economists such as David Ricardo did not look too closely at their coupling of productivity with desire or their translation of wealth into enjoyment.<sup>31</sup> Somaeconomics offers a less literal, less bounded, and ultimately queerer reading of embodiment than the ones that begin and end with bodies visibly conceived.

Forced migration, criminalization, and torture may begin by taking bodies as the objects of imperial desire, but these practices come to inhabit bodies in ways that extend far beyond the corporeal, far beyond the practices codified as regulations or techniques in prison manuals and military training handbooks. In the case of the Andamans and Nicobars, a political ecology of the unnatural offense begins with examining a politically motivated crackdown, the charges brought against individual prisoners, and the tactic of using light to ferret out same-sex

contact, but it can hardly stop there. Equally politicized, equally consequential for the environment, were the rationales advanced to refit the oil press for human operation, the impossible quotas imposed on prisoners, the razing of the bush for monoculture, disputes over the price of coconuts, and shifting forms of property relations. Here the somaeconomic rhetoric of the “disgusting” acts that prompted officials to prosecute the unnatural by using oil from a mill run by tormented labor shades into a somaecologic rhetoric of the pain and sacrifice involved in placing a value on trees, seasonal contracts, and nuts.

Michael Taussig has argued that violence and ideology, like commodity production and melodrama, become inseparable when dissolved into the tortured body in the process of conquest.<sup>32</sup> In the superintendent of Port Blair’s original instructions of 1880 to the officer in charge of the Nicobars, he was careful to state that he “sanctions the re-starting of the [oil] factory as a tentative measure on the understanding that no pressure is to be put on the natives. Monthly report of how many [coco]nuts have been voluntarily supplied and success of experiment to be sent.”<sup>33</sup> Yet concerns about how the oil factory would affect “the natives” coexisted with policies that authorized officials to hunt down Nicobaris who resisted the clearing of the jungle, to stage moonlit raids on “wild” Andamanese villages, and to kidnap Andamanese children for relocation to the settlement orphanage.<sup>34</sup> Each initiative remained integral to the administration’s dreams of self-sufficiency for the islands, a vision that depended on expropriating hope, health, lumber, land, sweat, life expectancy, capital, kinship ties, and erotic attraction. Like the crackdown on unnatural offenses that took the oil mill as its centerpiece, each initiative also yoked somaeconomics to the rhetoric of betterment and civilization.

By the 1890s the felicitously named V. Solomon, one of the rare missionaries to double as magistrate and government agent under British colonial regimes, was stationed at Car Nicobar, hearing case after case about coconuts, no longer so voluntarily supplied. In a passage from his diary dated October 6, 1899, and subsequently published in the *Andaman and Nicobar Gazette*, Solomon described one such adjudication:

Four Burmans and some Nicobarese of Sawi came with disputes about cocoanut dues. The Burmans say that in consequence of their vessel “Sattrajulu” not coming here in time, they bought a few bags of rice from Mahomedan traders for the value of cocoanuts and that the Mussalman traders are now pressing them for cocoanuts and therefore they wanted the nuts due to them by the Nicobarese. The latter say that as this is not the trading season of the Burmans and as they are pressed by the Mussalman

traders, they are unable to satisfy both parties. As the Burmans wanted coconuts only for their maintenance and not for making *kopra*, I told the Nicobarese to give them a portion of their dues, which they consented to do.<sup>35</sup>

The hidden party to such disputes, of course, was the British administration, whose historical intervention into already transnational economies with the construction of the oil mill, reestablished on a far grander scale than before, had accelerated the commodification of coconuts. The oil mill did not, strictly speaking, demand a commodified transaction at its inception; the coconuts were, after all, consensually supplied, however intense the pressure to produce them, for manufacturing processes executed by unwaged convict labor. Yet that same mill became implicated in the formation of specific, seasonal commodity chains of the sort that would one day shape conflicts between Nicobaris and traders of various nations. In an extended sense, one might say that the hidden parties to these later disputes were legion: the utopian dreams of self-sufficiency in food, shelter, and fuel that preoccupied the penal colony administrators-cum-ethnologists; the regulations that penalized gifting among prisoners while privileging gift exchanges designed to establish "good relations" with Nicobaris and Andamanese; the crackdowns on same-sex eroticism and affections in the increasingly globalized form of the prison; the economic depression sweeping the world in the 1880s, which forced all manner of colonial bureaucracies to try to do more with less.

When queer theory looks at death or political persecution or colonialism or embodiment, it has to become capacious enough to take into account bodies other than those of the desiring and the accused. During the relatively brief period when "unnatural crime" became an administrative obsession in the Andamans and Nicobars, the bodies affected included, of course, the ones directly charged and, in the case of gift giving, obliquely convicted. But the bodies brought into play by the pursuit of an administrative remedy also included the ones who died to make the lamp oil, the ones who lost their land, the ones who adjudicated disputes, and the ones who secured coconuts by sacrificing the forest to a cash crop. Bodies of laborers, bodies of land, bodies of water, bodies of the newly criminalized, all were portrayed as suffering in the back of beyond. Somaeconomic bodies lashed together with sensations, commodity chains, and words.

"To moralize the state," Wendell Berry once wrote, "they drag out a man, and bind his hands, and darken his eyes with a black rag to be free of the light in them. . . . To kill by design, deliberately, without wrath, that is the sullen labor

that perfects Hell.”<sup>36</sup> Within a politics of surmise, there are hells, and there are hells. One takes same-sex desire as its provocation. Another transforms illumination into the unforgivable offense.

## Notes

Special thanks to Geeta Patel for talking through some of the connections between environmental politics, discipline, and corporeality. I am always grateful to Ajantha Subramanian for her engaged readings of sources and debates in political ecology, which materially improved this essay. I also owe a debt to the three anonymous reviewers whose questions provoked revisions that I hope have sharpened the final version of this essay.

1. Richard Flanagan, *Gould's Book of Fish* (New York: Grove, 2001), 101.
2. Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia, 1787–1868* (London: Folio Society, 1986), 558.
3. For background on the history of transportation, see A. Roger Ekirch, *Bound for America: The Transportation of British Convicts to the Colonies, 1718–1775* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Hughes, *Fatal Shore*; Gwenda Morgan and Peter Rushton, eds., *Eighteenth-Century Criminal Transportation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); David Neal, *The Rule of Law in a Penal Colony: Law and Politics in Early New South Wales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Deborah Oxley, *Convict Maids: The Forced Migration of Women to Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Peter Redfield, *Space in the Tropics: From Convicts to Rockets in French Guiana* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); and Stephen A. Toth, *Beyond Papillon: The French Overseas Penal Colonies, 1854–1952* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).
4. Disciplinary in the Foucauldian sense, of course, but also disciplinary in the sense that A. R. Radcliffe-Brown's Andamans research, conducted with support from penal colony officials, exerted a formative influence on the emerging scholarly discipline of anthropology.
5. Thomas Macaulay, *Indian Penal Code: A Penal Code; Prepared by the Indian Law Commissioners, and Published by Command of the Governor General of India in Council* (Clark, NJ: Lawbook Exchange, 2002). See also B. M. Gandhi, *Indian Penal Code*, 2nd ed. (Lucknow: Eastern Book Company, 2006).
6. On the contemporary movement to overturn Section 377 and recent cases in which courts have applied the statute, see Alok Gupta, “Section 377 and the Dignity of Indian Homosexuals,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 18, 2006, 4815–23.

7. A sampling of references to these prisoner memoirs in a variety of languages, including English, can be found in the bibliography of S. N. Aggarwal's *The Heroes of Cellular Jail* (Patiala: Punjabi University Publication Bureau, 1995).
8. Norval Morris and David J. Rothman, eds., *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
9. Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain, from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quartet Books, 1977), 15, 18.
10. Satadru Sen, "Domesticated Convicts: Producing Families in the Andaman Islands," in *Unfamiliar Relations: Family and History in South Asia*, ed. Indrani Chatterjee (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 261–91.
11. Administrative summary of a letter dated March 29, 1880, from the superintendent of Port Blair and the Nicobars, E. H. Man, forwarded to the home secretary to the government of India. Although the letter is, to the best of my knowledge, no longer extant, the proceedings published annually by the superintendent's office includes an abstract of the original, keyed to the headings "Unnatural crime—Report" and "Unnatural crime—Suppression" (*Proceedings of the Superintendent of Port Blair and the Nicobars* [Port Blair: Superintendent's Office, 1880], 639, letter serial no. 992, Oriental and India Office Collection, British Library [hereafter cited as OIOC]).
12. For the application of the phrase "extraction of pain-capital" to conditions of colonial prison labor, I am indebted to the acumen of one of the anonymous reviewers for this piece.
13. See Kath Weston, "Escape from the Andamans: Tracking, Offshore Incarceration, and Ethnology in the Back of Beyond," in *Central Sites, Peripheral Visions: Cultural and Institutional Crossings in the History of Anthropology*, ed. Richard Handler (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 41–68.
14. M. V. Portman, *A History of Our Relations with the Andamanese*, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1899); Weston, "Escape from the Andamans."
15. See Weston, "Escape from the Andamans"; Sita Venkateswar, *Development and Ethnocide: Colonial Practices in the Andaman Islands* (Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2004). The Battle of Aberdeen is also memorialized in nontextual media, such as the depiction of Andamanese resistance to colonialization in a painting that hung in the museum attached to the British Cellular Jail in 2001.
16. This was a retrospective view, recorded at the time when such uniforms were abolished (*Report on the Administration of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the Penal Settlement of Port Blair and the Nicobars for 1906–07* [Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1908], 16, OIOC).

17. Vidya Bhushan and Jyotsana H. Shah, *Prison Administration in India* (Delhi: S. Chand, 1970), 23.
18. *Report on the Administration of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the Penal Settlement of Port Blair for 1904–05* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1906), 56, OIOC.
19. *Report on the Administration of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the Penal Settlement of Port Blair for 1901–1902* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1902), 13, OIOC.
20. Evelyn Hammonds, “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,” *differences* 6, nos. 2–3 (1994): 126–45.
21. *Report on the Administration of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the Penal Settlement of Port Blair and the Nicobars for 1906–07*, 16.
22. See note 10 above.
23. *Report on the Administration of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and the Penal Settlements of Port Blair and the Nicobars, for the Year 1872–73* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1873), 31, OIOC.
24. See Satadru Sen, “Policing the Savage: Segregation, Labor, and State Medicine in the Andamans,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 58 (1999): 753–73. On the underside of the rhetoric of protection in its application to Andamanese and Nicobari subjects, including a discussion of the kidnappings, murders, and raids on local villages sponsored by penal colony authorities in the name of protecting indigenous life, see Weston, “Escape from the Andamans.”
25. On the state’s involvement in encouraging female migration to the Andamans, see Sen, “Domesticated Convicts”; Satadru Sen, “Rationing Sex: Female Convicts in the Andamans,” *South Asia* 30 (1999): 29–59; and Aparna Vaidik, “Settling the Convict: Matrimony and Domesticity in the Andamans,” *Studies in History* 22 (2006): 221–51.
26. Sen “Domesticated Convicts”; Sen, “Rationing Sex”; Vaidik, “Settling the Convict.” See also the discussion of the system of local marriage in the 1897 address by R. C. Temple, chief commissioner, delivered at the Volunteer Drill Hall in Port Blair (Supplement to the *Andaman and Nicobar Gazette*, July 3, 1897, p. 67, OIOC).
27. Sen, “Domesticated Convicts.”
28. W. E. Allison-Booth, *Devils Island: Revelations of the French Penal Settlements in Guiana* (London: Putnam, 1931).
29. Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens, and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Paige West, *Conservation Is Our Government Now: The Politics of Ecology in Papua New Guinea* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006). For a critical overview of political ecology as an emerging arena for scholarship, see Aletta Biersack and James B. Greenberg, eds., *Reimagining Political Ecology* (Durham,

- NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Raymond L. Bryant and Sinéad Baily, *Third World Political Ecology* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Richard Peet and Michael Watts, eds., *Liberation Ecologies*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004); and Paul Robbins, *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004);
30. Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
  31. Gallagher, *Body Economic*, 51–57, 63.
  32. Thus the argument that torture is intrinsic to the so-called civilizing mission. See Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 29–30. See also Rita Maran, *Torture: The Role of Ideology in the French-Algerian War* (New York: Praeger, 1989); and Jasbir Puar, "On Torture: Abu Ghraib," *Radical History Review*, no. 93 (2005): 13. On the practice of torture under colonial rule on the Indian Subcontinent, see Anupama Rao, "Problems of Violence, States of Terror: Torture in Colonial India," in *Discipline and the Other Body: Correction, Corporeality, Colonialism*, ed. Steven Pierce and Anupama Rao (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 151–85.
  33. *Proceedings of the Superintendent of Port Blair and the Nicobars* (Port Blair: Superintendent's Office Press, 1880), 31, letter serial no. 90, May 13, 1880, OIOC.
  34. Weston, "Escape from the Andamans."
  35. V. Solomon, "Diary of Catechist V. Solomon at Car Nicobar," *Andaman and Nicobar Gazette*, February 4, 1899, OIOC.
  36. Wendell Berry, "The Morning's News," in *Farming: A Handbook* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 19.