



12-2022

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Shayla Frandsen  
*Brigham Young University*, shaylawfrandsen@gmail.com

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Frandsen, Shayla (2022) "I suppose an island dweller should expect it to be so": The Contradiction and Drama of Maternity and Islands in Caleb's Crossing," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 15: Iss. 2, Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol15/iss2/3>

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“I suppose an island dweller should expect it to be so”

The Contradiction and Drama of Maternity and Islands in *Caleb's Crossing*

*Shayla Frandsen*

The change that came over us was almost physical—the longer we drove down that single stretch of highway bracketed by ocean on both sides. After what seemed like interminable waits in the rental car line and an hours-long drive from the airport, we had finally arrived at Conch Key, an island in the Florida Keys where we would be spending the next week of our honeymoon. It wasn't just the joy of escaping after a whirlwind several days of cake-cutting, mingling, posing, and planning that ushered in such calm. No, it seemed like Conch Key itself, that sandy, divine island, had also worked its wonders on us. Our lives slowed to a blissful cadence, the perfect weather was nearly hypnotizing. We found ourselves exclaiming multiple times a day how perfectly we could envision ourselves moving there, and the distance from our bungalow to miles of glassy blue ocean—five feet!—felt like a revelation. Count us among the believers of the magic of island life.

We aren't the only ones for whom islands hold an attractive sway; they have a long tradition of capturing human imagination and functioning as a space that nurtures both magic and mystery. Arianne C. Reis agrees, writing that island's

“frequently singular landscape, their clearly defined boundaries, their isolation from other land masses and the cultures that develop within those limits have lured tourists and scientists for centuries” (3). Prospero echoes this sentiment near the end of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, commenting on the mythic sway the island has had on its visitors by saying, “You do yet taste / Some subtleties o’th’ isle” (5.1.124–5).

What are these “subtleties o’th’ isle” of which Prospero speaks? Subtlety is, perhaps, the most appropriate word to elucidate the ways in which islands operate, for they are geographic locations which seem to transcend taxonomy while retaining an essence of familiarity. It is in these liminal landscapes where complex human experiences become even more fraught. One such complex human experience that sees its borders redrawn when enacted on an island is motherhood. Reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, conception, pregnancy loss—what does the drama of maternity look like when it occurs on such a place as an island?

One place we might search for answers is in Geraldine Brooks’s novel *Caleb’s Crossing*. Bethia spends her entire childhood and early teenage years on Martha’s Vineyard in the 1660s. While Puritan religious structures and strict patriarchal values are still in place, the island also offers to Bethia freedoms that might not have been available to her in a more constrained location. When she becomes a mother, she is heavily influenced by her island upbringing. Her experiences emphasize the contradictory nature of motherhood; motherhood might be the only other notion that is as inherently contradictory as islands. To be clear, islands and motherhood are not in opposition to each other in this paper—instead, both are filled with opposing concepts which somehow seem to operate as true at the same time. As such, we can use Bethia’s experience to inform our reading of islands and their pressurizing of fraught conceptions of motherhood. She herself comments on the tensions inherent in island life, noting, “Fair winds and foul . . . Waters, wild and wide, shallow and still. How these things have marked out the chapters of my life. I suppose an island dweller should expect it to be so” (Brooks 282). Paradox lies inherent in both islands and maternity. I will layer a reading on maternity from *Caleb’s Crossing* onto an examination of the phenomenon by which islands navigate the space between binaries to reify the existences of both motherhood and islands as places of inherent contradiction.

# Both Foreign and Familiar

In many ways, islands are foreign in every sense of the word. The word “island” originated in English as “isolated land,” a “place apart” from the mainland (Meeker 197). Islands have grown so notable as a tourist fantasy *because* of their existence as separate from, or other than, quotidian landscape (Meeker 197). Visiting an island feels like an escape from mundanity—a vacation.<sup>1</sup> Islands may be foreign in this way, yet they’re also familiar. A destination like Hawaii could feel non-threatening to the anxious traveler: “exotic” enough to serve as a getaway, yet still safe due to the familiar use of English.

This interplay between foreign and familiar is found both within islands and maternity. The pregnancy silhouette is familiar, yet it carries with it a specific type of social status in society, one immediately fraught with contradiction: “Pregnant women in our society are often wrapped in an aura of sacredness—the pregnant body is idolized as a symbol of maternity and femininity . . . [yet] expectant mothers are also more extensively scrutinized and are subject to constant control and monitoring” (Neiterman 337). Pregnant bodies are a part of society’s everyday landscape, yet they are still treated as foreign bodies, subject to scrutiny, criticism, and other idolizing. This has long been the case, and perhaps even more so in early modern America. Puritan knowledge surrounding pregnancy was limited (Schnucker 656), women’s bodies were regarded with extreme suspicion (Reis 16), and society was rigorously structured by Puritan leaders who saw themselves as “Old Testament patriarchs” (Westerkamp 573). Despite these rigid views of maternity and women’s bodies, Bethia’s image of herself as a mother is remarkably fluid and forgiving, an emblem of the island that has shaped her. This fluidity is manifest in various ways that will be illustrated in this paper, one of the most remarkable of which is Bethia’s adoption of her friends and peers Joel and Caleb into her maternal sphere.

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1 Vacations are certainly a tantalizing prospect, yet problematic when considering the destructive forces of typically White middle- and upper-class tourism against delicate island ecosystems and non-White island communities. This intrusion by non-native and potentially damaging tourism movements cannot be overlooked. Islands also function as unknown quantities operating outside of the typical purview of patriarchal and capitalist hegemony: radical land, unapologetically foreign.

Caleb teaches Bethia the Wampanoag tradition of viewing oneself as an island dweller. Wampanoag means “People of the First Light,” the first to see the “milky light” of the sunrise (Brooks 12). Bethia feels immediate connection with this: “Since I was born here [on the island], I too have come to feel that I am a person of the first light, perched at the very farthest edge of the new world, first witness to each dawn of the turning globe” (Brooks 2). This unique identification informs her entire life, and she often sees herself as singular, hopeful, and holding a unique sense of the world. Evidence of this is found when she sees a beached whale, which she describes as “huge, glistening, luminous, a pregnant shape that the surf pulled this way and that” (Brooks 28). The whale’s pregnancy directly parallels Bethia’s own pregnancy later in the novel. Equally significant is how Bethia notes the whale moving with the tide “as if she still had vigor and was not already doomed” (Brooks 28). There is hope in her words, acceptance of the whale’s doomed state side-by-side with its vigor. She seems able to straddle the contradictions inherent in pregnancy and motherhood, approaching both with the fluidity and acceptance of ocean tide against island shore. She accepts the hardship of life without trying to find blame in cosmic recourse. Space is held for the speculative and the seemingly unbelievable.

As a young woman, Bethia is torn about her own maternal future, desperate to get an education yet also accepting of the probability that she will bear children of her own. Later in the book, after two years of marriage to Samuel, she writes “we had . . . begun to resign ourselves to the possibility that God would not bless us with issue” (Brooks 276). She appears to have the same acceptance and all-seeing calm that she did with the whale, hope and resignation working in tandem. When she does have a child and understands “there would be no other” due to significant health risks, she is equally accepting (Brooks 276). This further signifies the extent to which the freedom of the island has influenced Bethia to accept the mystery and hardship that surrounded—and continues to surround—maternity.

## Connection and Autonomy

The contradictions within maternity are similar to the ways in which islands function: at once foreign and known, they also act as both autonomous entities and interconnected within larger natural structures. Scholars note that “the

sea is a natural highway," so while islands are autonomous in their distinct identity and isolation, they also have placement within a globe-spanning community of interconnected coastlines, waterways, continents, and other islands ("LAND, SEA AND SKY" 48). Further entwined with these interchanges of the sea is the way in which human behavior reflects, or is influenced by, proximity to the ocean. What can we make of representations in contrast to island life? Additionally, how can we interpret the collective identity of the communities (Reis 5)? Bethia herself challenges Caleb's equation of their island childhood with utopia, telling him at one point, "We are neither of us children who may run hither and yon, as if this isle were another Eden. If it were so, once, then those gates are closed behind us now" (Brooks 148). Among current discourse in island studies this problematizing of island identity—and its possible performative element—is called "aquapelago," which is defined as

a social unit existing in a location in which the aquatic spaces between and around a group of islands are utilized and navigated in a manner that is fundamentally interconnected with and essential the social groups' habitation of land and their senses of identity and belonging. (Hayward 5)

Crucial to the concept of "aquapelago" is the island's spatial relation to the sea. In speaking about the forceful presence of the sea, Godfrey Baldacchino writes, "The fluidity of water unsettles us; the immensity of oceanic expanses belittles us; the wrath of ocean storms frightens us; the richness of marine protein sustains us; [and] the mystery of seabed resources drives our explorations" (180). The sea, with all its power, acts as a watery highway connecting once autonomous entities and spaces.

Striking, then, are the instances when Bethia's connective maternity are juxtaposed with her desires for autonomy. Sometimes these instances occur nearly at the same time, warring for supremacy. For Bethia, this war between interconnectivity and autonomy is often reflected in her interactions with her surrounding geography. One such instance happens towards the end of *Caleb's Crossing*, when Bethia discovers that her dear, longtime friend Joel has been horrifically murdered on a nearby island named Coatuet. His death has community-spanning ramifications: this is the devastating loss of a scholar, husband, son, and friend. Of Coatuet, Bethia writes, "I have written so little in my various scrawls throughout the years about our sister island" (Brooks 287). Her father often visits the island, and he finds his reports to

be underwhelming, noting that he “made it out in every way inferior to our own island—smaller, flatter, less various, more windswept—and barely worth braving the treacherous few miles of rock-strewn shoal” (Brooks 287). Their islands are neighboring, connected by waterways and familial ties, yet Bethia hardly pays any attention to it. She has never even been there. In this instance, Bethia’s isolated island lifestyle has a direct influence on her method of interaction with other locations.

## Sons of Metaphor

After her childhood friend Joel is murdered, she travels with Joel’s father Iacoomis, along with her husband Samuel and their young son, to the site of the horrific crime. It is significant that she traveled not just with Joel’s family, but with her own. Was she wanting to preserve her maternity in this moment, a boon with which she could more easily face the crushing news of her childhood friend? Upon arrival at Coatuets, Bethia and her family are informed of the brutal gravity of Joel’s death at the hands of “wicked troublemakers,” learning that once the ship had run aground, “Joel confronted them most bravely, making arguments in their own tongue as to why they should forbear, but this only enraged them more against him, seemingly, and at the last all of them together set upon him most cruelly” (Brooks 289). It’s a devastating, stunning revelation, one which Bethia’s traveling group bears as a connected whole. They travel not just as a community, but as a family. Of additional interest is the fact that Bethia often took on a mothering role in her friendship with Joel, spending many years cooking and cleaning for him while he pursued his own education. Joel became her metaphorical son, receiving many of the benefits of her strong maternal care.

After learning of the terrible circumstances of her friend, the next moment is one that Bethia steps into all by herself: “When I could speak, I turned to Iacoomis and told him, in Wompaontoaonk, that it would be my very great honor to be permitted to wash Joel’s body and prepare it for Christian burial” (Brooks 289). It’s something she decides to do on her own, perhaps even *must* do on her own, this sole act that demonstrates the strength of her connection to her friend and quasi son, Joel. She speaks in the language she had been covertly, then openly, learning for years. It’s a language very few white men in her life have ever commanded with ease, if at all, but it is a language that she

has learned so that she can communicate with the Wampanoag, particularly somebody like Joel, her friend and sometimes son.

Bethia's proficiency in Wompaontoaonk is an endeavor she did solely with Caleb's help—a subversive act that would not have been possible anywhere other than their island home, which provided the two with hours of time to themselves. She writes of their illuminative time together, "I followed [him] as . . . he walked through the woods like a young Adam, naming creation" (Brooks 23–24). In this instance, she is like a child in relationship to Caleb, who takes on more than just a friendly role—he takes on a fatherly one, as well. Just as an island is both familiar and foreign, so Bethia leaves behind her familiar spaces to learn and explore with Caleb, a foreign entity who becomes as familiar to her as anybody in her own family, a father figure closer to her than her own father. Caleb also familiarizes her with an island that initially felt foreign; she writes that "so many things grew and lived [there] that were strange to us, because they had not been in England . . . when he named a plant or a creature, I felt that I heard the true name of the thing for the first time" (Brooks 24). For Bethia, Caleb is the person that helps her bridge contradictions. Just as he completed a crossing of his own over the course of the novel, so too does he often help her cross between the seemingly opposite ideas that exist at the same time within her and around her. Fascinating, too, is the switch—the crossing—that occurs later in the book, when Bethia becomes the maternal figure, and Caleb, like Joel, becomes her metaphorical son.

## Crossing Over the Binary

There are some instances, however, when Caleb is not present to help Bethia with her own crossing. He's not there, for example, when Bethia and her family visit Joel's murder scene. It's a crossing from interconnectedness to autonomy that she must perform on her own, one that even supplants her role as a mother. Regarding her desire to prepare Joel's body for burial, Bethia says, "Samuel tried to turn me from the task. But I looked into his eyes, and said I would do it, and it was a measure of how we had become, as a couple, that he simply took [our son] from my arms and nodded as I left for the place where they had laid out Joel's shattered corpse" (Brooks 289). She separates from her son to care for her childhood friend Joel, taking a moment from her family to



engage in this private, autonomous act. Preparing Joel's body is another act that casts him as her metaphorical son. This is one of Prospero's "subtleties o'th' island" referenced at this paper's introduction, wherein minor shifts work to add new complexity and significance to existing situations. Bethia leaves her son with her husband, but caring for Joel redirects her maternal efforts, ultimately keeping her maternity intact.

Unfortunately, this was not the last time that Bethia's friends required her maternal efforts. When Caleb is dying, Bethia grows anxious to help her closest friend and metaphorical son—anxious enough that she once again strikes out on her own, leaving behind her husband and son, to find some way to ease her "son" in his final moments. And where does she go to fulfill this "fool's errand" (Brooks 300)? The island, of course: "I . . . plucked up my courage," she writes, "and, with Samuel's blessing, bespoke me a passage to the island" (Brooks 300). It is a taxing trip. When Bethia returns to Caleb's bedside she is acting on her own, having reimagined the borders of motherhood by finding long-term care for her biological son in order to care for her metaphorical one (Brooks 299).

## Isolation and Community

Isolation is another aspect of islands that is in constant play with its opposite. The sea acts as a connective tissue by which individual islands, and the people inhabiting these islands, feel less isolated. Unless, of course, isolation is the reason that people seek out islands in the first place. Herein lies another inherent contradiction of islands: they capture the human imagination, yet they also act as spaces of confinement, violence, and loneliness. Islands have figured as liminal, magical, mysterious places in literature such as classical Greek lore, Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, and the plays of Shakespeare (Meeker 199). In addition to attracting human interest on a temporal level with magical weather, quick access to oceanic vistas, and vegetation of staggering beauty, islands also feel imbued with magic and wonder, capturing the imagination with their richly utopic fantasy (Meeker 199).

Bethia cannot resist the pull of her island either, saying "The island cried out to me . . . If I answered its call, soon enough I would live again in the familiar rhythms of its seasons . . . I knew that life; I knew my place in it"

(Brooks 231). She even imagines her future as a mother on the island: “If I threw my thoughts forward I could see myself at every age . . . the number of children at my board ebbed and flowed—but the woman at the center of the vision was clear; in bud, in blossom, and blown” (Brooks 231). Bethia’s idea of her maternal experience is inextricably bound with the island, home to her vision of herself with children. The number of children itself is blurry, but the island as backdrop is clear and unmistakable. In fact, it is her history as an islander which informs her idea of herself as a mother. The views are inseparable.

Islands may maintain their firm hold on imagination, but they have a darker side, as well. Islands are easily breached, have historically been the sites of marginalization and oppression, and have stories of misery that sometimes go unnoticed due to “human imagination [persisting] in its vision” of such idyllic locales (Meeker 200–202). In geopolitical discourse, islands are frequently places that feel the controlling press of the colonizer’s boot. Some scholars have noted the challenges that globalization poses to island tradition (Gülzau, Fabian, et al. 7) while Adam Grydehøj adds “island geographers must resist ‘the lure of island’ as pure place outside of space” (431). Essentially, islands must be contextualized by their spatial relations to the sea, other islands, and their global situation.

Also significant is the island serving as a site of distancing and separation. Quoting Gilles Deleuze, artist and architectural theorist Manar Moursi writes, “Dreaming of islands—whether with joy or in fear, it doesn’t matter—is dreaming of pulling away, of being already separate, far from any continent, of being lost and alone” (52). Bethia is no stranger to this feeling of loneliness, of a darker side. *Caleb’s Crossing* in its entirety is saturated with her longing to find connection, pursue education on her own terms, and find the time and space to relax from the legion of maternal duties that have been relegated to her. Yet even when Bethia is on the island, helmed by her husband and son, she still feels pulled by restlessness. She describes riding her old horse Speckle whenever possible, “often with Samuel and the babe” but sometimes alone: “I wanted to share my memories . . . But some things I did not share” (Brooks 285). Bethia’s words might ring true to any mother living a life of inherent contradiction: the overwhelming joy and never-ending stress of children, the sensation of feeling both lost and found at the same time, wanting to hold one’s

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children one minute then desperately needing to be alone the next. Bethia's maternal journey on her island home demonstrates that crossing back and forth between contradictions is a pursuit that takes a lifetime to learn.

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