Why Santorini?: A Response in Two Voices

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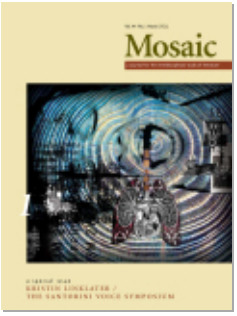

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Why Santorini?
A Response in Two Voices

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At twilight the sky in Santorini takes on a particular hue of blue so deep and translucent that I somehow have the impression I can see *its infiniteness. The blue hour is enchanting. The white walls of the Pension Carlos nestle into that blue sky, and a soft, warm breeze embraces it all. It is peacefully quiet. I am home. Not in any of my autobiographical homes, but home nonetheless. Sitting on the patio swing, I breathe the moment in and am filled with a fluttering sense of possibility. In a few days the event my father and I have been planning for over a year will begin, and although I can feel the excitement coursing through me, I am also completely at ease; at ease because I trust that Santorini is the perfect place to host what is now to come.*

But why Santorini?! Thousands upon thousands of tourists, packaged and transported to the island each summer, people you would rather not meet back in Peoria or Winnipeg much less on a Cycladic isle, would surely be enough to keep you away. Why, then, Santorini for the Voice Symposium in July 2009?

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As a creative producer, I have learned how crucial the location of an event can be. It would be critical for the work that we were setting out to do—which (at the planning point) had not been defined beyond a gathering (and hopefully a genuine coming together) of actors and philosophers around the subject of the voice and Kristin Linklater's work—to find a space that would support our endeavour. We would need somewhere that could provide focus, support, space, time, nourishment, relaxation, quiet, and inspiration. We would need to work in a place that had relevance, that inspired the senses as well as the mind, and that provided a strong sense of community. We would need to be somewhere that would support creativity, play, noise, chaos, and collaboration. I was certain that Santorini (and the Pension Carlos) would supply all of that for us—and more.

Santorini holds special relevance in that Greece is hailed as the birthplace of both philosophy and theatre. How fitting, then, that we should have a meeting between those two worlds in this historically rich place. It would be meaningful to the serious philosopher and the committed actor to stand on the history of his or her profession. Furthermore, when planning anything of value, personal relevance is key: Santorini is a place with which my father and I are deeply connected. Perhaps there was something about the energy in Santorini that enhanced the connection between actor and philosopher as much as between father and daughter?

Additionally, the artist in me knew that with such a relatively short period of time to work, and with such a meaningful task ahead, we would need to work in a deeply concentrated manner. The simplest and most effective way to accomplish this would be to take people out of their "everyday lives." It was imperative, in fact, for this collaboration to be successful, that we create the kind of openness and relaxation that is often attained only while on vacation; and although this would clearly be a working vacation, it was important to have all the supportive "vacation" elements in place. We could count on the energy and beauty of Santorini to support our project and on the Pension Carlos to become a home away from home for all the participants.

Perhaps most simply, however, I knew that Santorini would be an easy place to entice people to come to! We were asking people to take a leap of faith and to join us on an adventure into the unknown. It was important, at the very least, to guarantee a spectacular setting, excellent food, and wonderful company. The beauty of Santorini and the strength of the elements there are incredibly inspiring. Creativity simply flows there. There is inspiration everywhere you turn, from the widest horizon, to the most breathtaking sunset, to the largest boulder of volcanic ash, to the brightest little flower—the sun, the moon, the zillions of stars, the blue, blue sea, and the endless sky.

And what has all of that to do with the voice? About as much, one might think, as the vast oak or beech under which you sit and read Shakespeare's sonnets has to do with the sonnets themselves. You can read them anywhere, sceptics would say. Let the sceptics beware, however, and let me beware of my own scepticism. For all we know, that vast tree on whose roots you sit and read, or perhaps some distant cousin of that tree, may have communicated some of its energy to the bard himself, and not merely to his readers. The places and spaces where we go to work and to learn are probably much more influential than we ever suppose. Nietzsche says we should not worry much about the "four last things" of traditional Christian culture (Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell), but that we should worry a lot about the four closest things, the most proximate of these being our immediate natural surroundings. It is part of our Puritan heritage to believe that body and mind can function well enough just about anywhere—that it's merely a matter of gritting your teeth and bearing it. For actors, however, who always take their bodies with them when they go to work, and even for philosophers after Nietzsche, who have a more developed sense of the embodied energies that fuel creativity, the site of the work is decisive. On that we are agreed.

The first time I planned to travel to Santorini, many people told me that it was the most beautiful place they had ever been. For weeks I seemed to keep having these conversations. I was on the phone with a woman from Continental Airlines because I wanted to use my miles for the trip. She asked me for a contact number or hotel in Athens and I explained that I would actually be flying on to Santorini (on an internal flight). Suddenly her voice was filled with deep nostalgia: "Oh, wow! I was there sixteen years ago. I fell in love with a painting there and have dreamed about going back and buying it! I think about that place all the time. It's magical." I told her I had heard similar stories from many different people over the past month, people who felt deeply about the island, and that I could not wait to experience it for myself. "You're going to love it," she affirmed. She then proceeded to find me a ticket for 30,000 miles less *than what she had previously quoted. My trip was off to a good start! With such high expectations it was no surprise to me that when we landed I thought, "It's incredibly beautiful, but I'm not sure I quite understand what people were talking about." The next morning, however, I awoke, nestled between the crisp, white sheets at the Pension Carlos. As I got ready to go downstairs for breakfast I was aware that everything in my body (my pulse, my breathing) seemed to have slowed down. I could not believe that one night of sleep had relaxed me so completely. As soon as I stepped outside, smelled the salt-sea air, saw the brilliant blue sky, and felt the power of the sun above and the volcanic earth below, I knew that I would be connected to this place forever. And so it was. Now Santorini feels like home to me. I have absolutely joined the legions who have fallen in love with this spellbinding place.*

Two or perhaps three words explain it all: *energy* and *beauty*, or, if not beauty, then *energy* and *sublimity*. If philosophers have cracked their heads against the concepts of the beautiful and the sublime, physicists and cosmologists have long puzzled over energy. On Santorini, however, energy is both beautiful and sublime, although that makes matters still more difficult to explain. Energy, as in caloric? Yes, from the relentless sun, but also from the earth. Beneath this southernmost of the Cyclades, the Libyan-African and Eural-Asian tectonic plates collide, the former slipping under the latter for the past four million years at the rate of two and a half centimetres per year. Which is fast, as plates go. The resulting friction has been causing both earthquakes and sudden eruptions of molten earth—volcanoes—ever since, and with no end in sight. Energy, then, from Demeter the Earthmother wringing her hands and fretting over the disappearance of her daughter Persephone, now underground. Of course, the names of the goddesses were different here on the island back during the Neolithic and Bronze ages. We have no written records and hence no names from those times, although we do have the most astonishing—and, yes, *beautiful*—wall paintings of the women and their crocuses swallows mountainlions ducks monkeys and dragonflies, all captured in gestures so graceful and lively that every visitor to the Archaeological Museum at Fira or the Cycladic Museum at Athens wants to know, "Who were these people?" The energy streams also from the people who live on Santorini, or Thera (as it is also known) today. They are as energetic now as back then, in the face of cataclysm after cataclysm. Native Santorinians say that you can see it in their eyes: whereas other Greeks appear to be a happy-go-lucky sort, the Therans bear the memories of earthquake and volcanic explosion. The energy of Santorini is serious, and the hospitality fuelled by that energy runs deep.

There are places to which one returns again and again because of the people. Santorini, and particularly Akrotiri, in the southern part of the island, is one of those places. Almost everything about the hospitality there is hard-won: as fertile as the soil is, consisting as it does entirely of volcanic mineral and ash, the lack of rainwater for five months in the year—the very months of the tourist invasion—makes hospitality a labour requiring significant energy. We knew even before the plans for the Santorini Voice Symposium jelled that we would hold it at the Pension Carlos in Akrotiri, run by Eva Matsadou and her children Maria, Arsenio, and Raphael, whose hospitality we had enjoyed for many years. To say nothing of Eva's cooking—human energy passes in good part through great food.

In mid-summer the island of Santorini is bustling with tourists—on that we are agreed. On the southern end of the island, however, lies the quiet town of Akrotiri. This is

where the lovely Pension Carlos lies. It is impossible to imagine this symposium had we not held it in Santorini and certainly had we not stayed at the Pension Carlos with the Matsadou family. The Matsadous define *hospitality. I knew they would embrace the symposium participants as they had my father and me and that they would be integral to providing the support we would need for our work. Eva, the owner and the mother of the family, is the consummate caregiver. She beams generosity and love and has been the strength and foundation for the family since the death of her husband, Carlos, a decade ago. She raised their three beautiful children, who in addition to pursuing their studies now help her run the Pension. It is a modest place, but filled with love and care. Many of the guests are "repeat customers," making a point to return every year for a visit (some of them boasting a tradition of over fifteen years of visiting there). Eva is there to greet everyone in the mornings, and no matter how early one gets up she has most likely already been out to her fields and returned with baskets filled with fresh tomatoes, vegetables, and herbs. Almost all the food at the Carlos comes from fields owned by Eva or her extended family, or, of course, from the sea. There I have enjoyed some of the most fresh, most delicious foods I have ever had the pleasure of tasting. Eva is also the head chef, and her meals are exquisite. The nourishment and care for the symposium could be handled, single-handedly, by Eva. There was no doubt in our minds about that. The fact that there were additional supporting factors was a bonus: three amazing bonuses, named Maria, Arsenio, and Raphael. Eva and her children not only provided us with nourishment and care, but also offered the example of a beautiful family (of which we were all about to become a part). They took us into their home and set us up to accomplish a successful collaboration. After a long day of working, an essential part of the synthesis was the opportunity to sit down together and share an exquisite meal and a wonderful glass of local wine.*

And then there is the sea. The deep blue water of the Caldera is crystal clear and almost always smooth as glass. I love water and am happiest near it, and we knew that being able to walk to a beautiful, quiet beach during our breaks or in the mornings and evenings would be incredibly important. It was a way to cool down, to unwind, relax, re-energize, a moment to absorb the beauty and the power of the natural elements, to exercise and play. I believe everyone at the symposium would agree that being surrounded by the sea and being able to swim every day was an essential part of his or her experience.

But to back up a minute and consider in more detail that energy streaming from the sun, sea, earth, and subterranean realm. Sometime between 1654 and 1500 BCE, this island, which the Greeks called "The Round Island" (*Strongyle*) and "The Loveliest Island" (*Kalliste*), blew up, surrendering three-quarters of its mass to the sea.

It was one of the most destructive volcanic explosions in human history, more powerful than the explosion of Krakatoa (located between Sumatra and Java) in 1883, which killed 36,000 people. Remarkably, by contrast, no one died in the horrific explosion on the ancient island: earthquakes and minor eruptions had already warned the Cycladic settlers of what was coming, and they fled to safety. The ash pillar resulting from the explosion, which left only a narrow crescent of the once "round" island, rose some forty kilometres into the ionosphere. Heavy ash fall occurred across the Aegean and from Egypt to the Black Sea; lighter ash fall extended to the Pacific Northwest of America and to the Greenland ice bank. The volcanic cone at the centre of "The Loveliest" had spewed so much molten material into the air that it gradually hollowed out; the crust of the volcano then collapsed and allowed the surrounding sea to rush in and form a *caldera*, or cauldron, where the bulk of the island used to be. A tsunami some fifteen metres high (that's about forty-five feet) devastated both fleets and ports at Crete and on the coast of Turkey. Some archaeologists speculate that the explosion and the tsunami spelled the end of the great Minoan civilization on Crete. In any case, the sky must have remained black over several growing seasons, destroying crops and all hopes of harvest for years. An explosion of such magnitude, volcanologists tell us, occurs only once in every 10,000 years of earth history.

It is therefore fitting that legend locates the mythical "Atlantis" precisely here, on Santorini, the Greek Thera, even though Plato, our source for the legend, locates the island far to the west of Gibraltar. Even so, much of his physical description of the mythical island—which is round and is encircled by various waterways—suits in many respects the ancient Thera. Since Plato's time, an entire literature has grown up around the ancient utopia and its catastrophe, all the way down to Donovan's "Hail, Atlantis!" Why not go for utopia? we asked ourselves. Yet utopia seems to be bound up with natural catastrophe. Eruptions have continued to occur in the area throughout human history, well beyond the times of myth and legend. At what might be the very centre of the site of the Cycladic-Minoan explosion, subaquatic eruptions began to form a new islet starting at about 197 BCE. The geographer Strabo reports that "between Thera and Therasía [a fragment of the original Strongyle to the northwest of the main island], flames leapt from the sea for four days, making the sea bubble and blaze, and gradually, as though by leverage, raising above the surface of the sea an island of some 2,300 square meters, composed of incandescent masses." Major eruptions, with lava flow gradually building up the islets today known as the Old and the New "Chimneys" (*Palea Kameni* and *Nea Kameni*), occurred in the years 46 and 47 of our own era, and then again in 726. The chronicler Theophanes reports on the latter eruption:

> In the summer of that same year, 726, steam, as from a fiery furnace, bubbled up from the depths of the sea between the islands of Thera and Therasía for several days, and in a short while, after it had increased and hardened by the furious heat of the blazing fire, the smoke began itself to seem like fire, and, on account of the thickness of this solid matter, large pumice stones were spewed out all over Asia Minor and Lesbos and Abydos and towards those parts of Macedonia that overlook the sea.

Theophanes was not exaggerating. Today you can climb a high hill south of the village of Akrotiri and discover, perched on the white tephra and pozzuolana that constitute the top layer of the soil, a glistening black boulder. It shines like obsidian. No one carted it up here. And yet you are at least two kilometres as the crow flies from the volcanic centre of Strongyle. Volcanologists call these huge boulders *bullets*. That is the kind of energy we are talking about.

Another major eruption occurred in 1570–73, another in 1707–11, another in 1866–70. Between 1925 and 1928 the islet of Nea Kameni increased by about a third of its former size. More lava flowed between 1939 and 1941, and the most recent eruption occurred in 1950. The most recent earthquake, in 1956, caused half the population of the now crescent-shaped Santorini to flee. Not many returned. There is therefore something distinctly odd about the hordes of tourists who invade the island each summer.

When you visit Nea Kameni today you must wear good shoes. You walk on clinkers and you pause to examine the fumaroles releasing steam and sulphur just shy of the boiling point. From the top of the Old and New Chimneys you gaze across the Caldera—unbelievably blue because incredibly deep, almost four hundred metres down to the restless seabed—to the scarred walls of what used to be "most lovely" and "round." Today Santorini is perhaps more sublime than beautiful. Or, if the layers of black, red, and white *are* beautiful, that beauty, once again, is hard won. From here the villages and towns are all tiaras on the head of a rough-and-tumble queen: Oia to the north, the most picturesque of the towns; Fira, the bustling busiest; Akrotiri, the least adorned and hardest working; and farther south, at the tip of the crescent, Pharos, the lighthouse, warning the approaching ships from Crete.

Your own boat, as it returns to the mainland from the Chimneys, will pause and shut off its engines until the sun sets. After that gigantic red egg sinks into the molten sea, as though reversing the motion and the sequence of events that brought the island and it fragments forth in the first place, night comes on quickly. You'll need a sweater.

If you forgot to bring a sweater, Maria will bring you one! From the outset I knew that I would need a strong ally when it came to executing the many details that went into organizing and running the symposium. I had the best ally I could ask for in Maria, Eva's eldest daughter. She is a good friend and likely the one person who is more organized and diligent than I am! Aside from speaking at least five languages, Maria has the uncanny ability to anticipate problems before they arise. She is a producer's dream. There was not one single organizational hitch during the entire symposium (and I am a perfectionist). That is close to miraculous. But I leaned on Maria to help me not only during the event but also in the planning stages, where she was critically important. We were set with a place to stay during the symposium, but we needed to find a place to work. Though the dining room of the Carlos was available to us, I expressed the importance of finding a space that was separate from where we were living. I wanted us to have a workspace that we could occupy but then leave. As important as it is to focus on work, it is also important to take clean breaks from it, especially in creative ventures. We needed a spacious, open room, large enough for Kristin to teach all of us and to allow for physical movement, but also intimate enough to create a strong sense of the "group." It had to be within easy walking distance from our hotel, and we also had to be free to make noise (the symposium being, in part, a voice workshop after all!). I made all the demands, but it was Maria who took on the negotiating with the townsfolk of Akrotiri and who secured permission for us to use the local schoolhouse. At a mere three-minute walk from the Carlos, it was the perfect place! It is a beautiful, sturdy building, constructed in 1890; everyone in Maria's family (including her grandparents) attended elementary school there. It was a wonderful space for creativity and learning. The schoolhouse consists of one large room with a playground in the back (which was shady enough in the mornings to allow us to work outside). In the front of the building the courtyard, trimmed with red carnations, overlooks the magnificent Caldera. The view from the courtyard is unforgettable.

Speaking of unforgettable views, Maria also helped to arrange a boat trip around the island on our day off. This turned out to be one of our best days: sailing on a boat around the island of Santorini, with beautiful people on board. We saw breathtaking scenes: beaches whose sands and surrounding cliffs are a deep red, and then, around the next bend, dazzlingly black, and around the next bend, startlingly white (all due, apparently, to chemical reactions in the rocks during the various volcanic eruptions). We stopped to dive into the sea near Bouda, swimming in the most beautiful, deep, clear water. The already amazing water we had experienced in Santorini was outdone by this magnificent spot, accessible only by boat, and nothing shy of perfection! Later we took volcanic mud baths, and just when we thought the day couldn't get any better, a fantastic meal was spread before us on the deck. That was followed by a magnificent sunset—how silent

everything and everyone became—before finally returning "home." I hope this day will be engraved in my memory forever: a perfect day that elevated the experience of the symposium, and of the group, from wonderful to sublime. We could not have done any of this without Maria.

The two boys, Arsenio (the middle child) and Raphael (the youngest), were essential in cultivating a sense of community and family. They were there to greet us at meal times, to rescue us from the sweltering noon-day heat with iced café frappes, and generally to make everyone feel at home. Arsenio took it upon himself to give us a cultural education as he arranged a wonderful night of Greek dancing. His local dance troupe came and performed for us and then taught us Greek dances. The Matsadou family became an essential part of our experience in Santorini because we, as a group, became like family to them. After the symposium ended and only three of us remained (my father, Professor Kevin Miles, and myself), and we sat together in the now-empty dining room (the Meltemi winds were blowing, and so we were eating indoors instead of on the outdoor terrace), Raphael walked past our little table of three, paused, looked back at us and said, rather matter-of-factly, "Their ghosts are still here." From a perceptive fifteen-year-old, that said it all! The presence of everyone from the symposium was felt all around us, and even after the event, Raphael was taking care of us and giving voice to those who had already parted. It was clear that he missed them all as much as we did.

One word more, if I may, about that caloric energy. Perhaps one has to distinguish between the energy released by the sun and the energy that rises from beneath the earth's surface. The sun's energy seems to be a gift without any sort of economizing. No wonder it became the symbol for Georges Bataille's notion of "potlatch"—borrowed from the peoples of the Pacific Northwest—that is, the sacrifice of one's most valuable possessions to the sea or to fire, not in order to get anything in return but as a sign of feast and celebration. To be sure, the sun will burn out, but only Charlie Brown worries about the time it has left. The rest of us just bask in its light and warmth. By contrast, the heat that erupts from beneath the earth is catastrophic and is the result of friction and pressure. The philosopher Heidegger wrote about the "striving" between world and earth, as human beings pit their weak wits against—but also, when things go better, cooperate with—the forces of nature. Yet the volcanic activity on Santorini is a striving of the earth with and against itself. What is most curious about the strife of those tectonic plates is that philosophers and political theorists have always taken such intense natural conflict to be the very secret of utopia, in both its rise and demise. For Plato, "Atlantis" was the ideal city, and in *Critias* and *Timaeus* he describes it with great care and in considerable detail. The city's hubris,

that is, its attributing its prosperity to its own merits rather than to the generosity of the gods who dwell in the sky and beneath the earth, caused those gods to destroy the island and let it sink into the sea. Ever since that time, thoughts of utopia have been linked with the catastrophic forces of nature. Perhaps the two of us, the voices of the present piece, were thinking or dreaming of utopia when we selected the isle of Santorini as our site—not knowing whether the energy would fuel our efforts or blow them apart.

In any case, to repeat, what has all this to do with *voice* work? Only after the fact, only after the event, perhaps, can something be said about it. Long ago, William James showed how important the workings of the throat and mouth are not only for speech but also for thinking itself, even though we are blissfully (or woefully) unaware of these workings. One may say that Kristin Linklater expands the realm of the larynx, teeth, and lips all the way down to the hips and the feet: the explorations of the Santorini Voice Symposium proved to be explorations of the entire body and all its energy fields and energy sources, of everything in us that gives voice to voice. Although a one-to-one reduction or correlation is impossible, inasmuch as living bodies are a *Gestalt*, in which the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts, the energies of the sea in the mornings and evenings, of the fiery sky and the volcanic earth throughout the day, of the sustaining love and support from the Matsadou family, and of the teamwork inspired by Kristin Linklater's exercises and her example—all these contributed to the powerful impact of the symposium on its participants.

Yes, the symposium could have taken place elsewhere. Plato and Socrates held theirs in Athens, and at nightfall. Yet we are convinced that no one can subtract the energy, sublimity, and beauty of Santorini from the equation of the Voice Symposium. As with all equations, of course, however compelling and direct as they may be, this one too keeps its secrets. Perhaps the only way to plumb these secrets further will be to return to the Loveliest and Most Sublime Island in order to pursue the work once more. We're game.