

Island Worlds

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For as long as human cultures have been imagining and constructing worlds there have been island worlds. Island topographies have occupied a considerable place in the cultural imaginary from some of the earliest recorded literature, and they are to be found in discussions of mythology, philosophy, and religion across vastly divergent historical and literary cultures. They are important symbolic landscapes that carry a weight of cultural meaning within the popular imagination. In attempting to define precisely what an island is, however, we find that these divergent meanings often collide. Islands are at once insular and small, as well as vast and unbound; they are cut off from the mainland but occupy an important structural relation to it. Islands imply isolation and oneness, but they are also the symbols of interconnectivity, representative of the continuous geomorphological processes occurring beneath the earth's surface. They are microcosms and entire worlds; places of refuge as well as suffering; sites of freedom and imprisonment; and landscapes of punishment and redemption. They are neither small nor big, neither one thing nor the other, but represent what Godfrey Baldacchino terms a "nervous duality" (2005, p. 248).

Rather than thinking of islands in isolation, an island "confronts us as a juxtaposition and confluence of the understanding of local *and* global realities, of interior *and* exterior references of meaning." (Baldacchino, 2005, p. 248). Islands are thus characterised by their interstitiality, and the polyvalency of their cultural signification. They have been defined variously in terms of their "boundedness" and as "places of possibility and promise" (Edmond and Smith, 2003, p. 2). They are "laboratory environments" (p. 3) for various social, anthropological, and botanical experiments, and serve "as early warning signal from which we can examine human impacts on a small scale." (Walker and Bellingham, 2011, page xii). The concept of an island "brings with it at once the notion of solitude and of a founding population," (Beer, 2003, p. 33) as well as serving as an "aesthetic refuge from the confused, congested public realm," (Conrad, 2009, p. 15) and as a place of "healing, inspiration and perspective upon the vulnerability of our own present civilization." (Manwaring, 2008, p. 1). Islands are "reflections on origins" (Loxley, 1990, p. 3), "places of arrival and departure" (Edmond and Smith, 2003, p. 7), and "metaphors for individual lives, with a beginning, middle, and end" (Rainbird, 2007, p. 13). They are an "existential terrain" upon which the individual is "confronted by edges, or by the end" (Conrad, 2009, p. 7-8). The island metaphor also functions as a "dynamic space of becoming" (Lane, 1995, p. 16), a "place of reflection where one knows oneself as is and would be" (Denning, 2004, p. 100) as one is forced to fend for oneself. Indeed, it is upon the island that the "conditions for a rebirth or genesis are made possible" (Loxley, 1990, p. 3). Islands are "site[s] of double identity" and are "always-already in the process of transforming the particular into something other than its (original, essential) self" (Bongie, 1998, p. 18). Indeed, islands should enable people "to enter into a different state of consciousness" (Manwaring, 2008, p. 9). The appeal of the island image within the cultural imagination "is both fed by and feeds upon the use of the concept of island in reality or metaphor by artists and writers" (Royle, 2001, p. 13). The island image has thus been rehearsed and reused throughout literary history, and its symbolic function has been informed both by the uniqueness of its physiological characteristics and the various historical periods across which the trope has been carried – from mythological antiquity to those fictional voyages of discovery, and from European exploration into the Southern Seas to contemporary islomania, and the cultural obsession with islands.

It is precisely the fluctuation "between the perceived and the projected, between the actual and the imaginary" (Manwaring, 2008, p. 63) that constituted early imaginings of islands as fictive worlds. Islands are "the most glorious map of the imagination" (Manley and Manley, 1970, p. 228) for it is through and with islands that our early fictions began to spatialize our earliest literary-historical mythologies. Island landscapes provide "metaphors that allow us to give shape to a world that would otherwise be formless and meaningless" (Gillis, 2004, p. 1); they are originary *topoi* upon which narratives of birth and rebirth have been written. John Gillis rightly notes that "Any history of islomania must begin with the *Odyssey*." (2004, p.5). It is no coincidence that Homer elects to set so much of the action of his Greek epic on the islands of the Ionian Sea, the birthplace of much of the earliest historical Greek myths. Islands are essential to the spatial narrative of *The Odyssey*, and Odysseus's journey from one island to another affords the narrative an expansive imaginative geography that often, though not always, overlaps with the material geography of the extant Ionian. Most famous of the islands encountered in *The Odyssey*, perhaps, is Aeaea, belonging the sea-witch Circe, and Siren Island, home to the infamous sirens, creatures who in all respects resemble beautiful young women, and who lure passing sailors to their deaths. From their earliest inception, islands were cast as threatening, corrupting places to and from which men were exiled; they were places which impelled action and travail, and which called out to be explored. Most significantly, Circe's island is reported to be located at the edge of the known world, far beyond the oceans that Homer's contemporaries had explored. While the islands of *The Odyssey* represent mythological geographies upon which we can imagine our own conception, they also plot a fictive cartography within the cultural imagination of other islands yet to be discovered.

In the era of antiquity, islands were speculative utopias, “no-places” that were rumoured to exist elsewhere, and which were perceived to be idealized landscapes for the settlement and development of human society. It was, for example, upon the island of Atlantis that Plato elected to set his allegorical vindication of ancient Athens’ military superiority, in the *Timaeus* (circa 360 BC). According to Plato, the island-state of Atlantis represented a cultural and social ideal that was bested only by Athens’s great might, and served as a testament to Plato’s ideals for the constitution of a sustaining political and social nation-state. That Atlantis is eventually submerged beneath the ocean towards the end of Plato’s allegory is an important detail in the cultural conception of islands: the cultural mythology that has grown up surrounding Atlantis –the lost city that has yet to be rediscovered– only further underlined the mythic quality of islands as speculative landscapes that emerged from and submerged beneath the sea in a continuing cycle, and which were at once both fictive, imagined landscapes and physical, geological landmasses. The ambiguity as to whether island utopias were real or not further fuelled the human imagination. Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, written considerably later in 1626, is a continuation novel, of sorts, of the Atlantis myth laid down by Plato, but nevertheless compounds the notion that islands are sites for the discovery and nourishment of human ideals. Much like Atlantis, the mythical island of Bensalem is presented as a functioning utopia, a place in which the political, social, and economic structures of governance are of great benefit to its inhabitants, who coexist peaceably upon a tropical idyll.

However, given the limited advances in exploration at this time, there remained much debate as to the validity of these accounts, as very few people travelled beyond their own homeland. Island utopias were always reported to exist in faraway places, “for every culture has tended to assume a location compatible with its own limited knowledge of the world, and to the detriment of any real geographical investigation.” (Ford, 1981, p. 17). Early travellers’ accounts of islands were treated with a mixture of awe and suspicion, and though Europeans longed for the promise of these islands, there was no direct evidence to support the (often fabricated) reports of travellers. This shifted somewhat in the intervening years, and following the publication of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (1321). That Dante envisioned purgatory, the metaphysical gateway between Heaven and the earthly paradise, as a mountainous island floating in the unexplored oceans of the southern hemisphere, led many religious pilgrims to conclude that the lost paradise was indeed to be found on an as-of-yet discovered island. Coupled with the burgeoning mythology of utopian islands that had sprung up in the wake of Plato’s Atlantis, it is not difficult to imagine the conflation made in the minds of 14th-century religious scholars and devout pilgrims, who desperately sought evidence of the Biblical Eden. Though Julian Ford is correct to note that no unilateral opinion on the location of the earthly paradise exists, he also asserts that “Nearly all the myths concur in saying that the original seat of gods and men lay in a land of perpetual sunshine, light, and warmth, and this definitely tallies with the extraordinary assumption expressed by Dante.” (Ford, 1981, p. 26).

From the 14th century onwards, advances in navigation and sailing technologies enabled European explorers to travel further than ever before, which brought them in to contact with previously unreachable oceans. The desire for knowledge of the unknown, to verify the reputed existence of these islands, was coupled with the economic potential of untouched islands, replete with an abundance of raw material wealth. John Gillis has noted that European explorers often “filled their maps with unknown islands, betting that they would surely turn up some day.” (2004, p. 55) A flurry of voyage narratives appeared at this time, all of which purported to have discovered lost tropical islands, and which gave credence to the widespread belief in the existence of hitherto imagined islands. *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, which appeared circa 1357, details the journey of an English knight who, the narrative contends, ventured to several islands in the regions of modern-day India, Persia, and Turkey, and encountered all manner of fantastical inhabitants (Homo sapiens with canine heads, one-legged men, etc.). Though the account —and the personage of Mandeville, himself— was fictitious, much of the text’s geographical descriptions remain accurate, thus underlining the difficulties faced by early cultures in disproving inaccuracies in these fictional accounts. Perhaps the most famous imagined island of the early modern imagination is that of Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia*. Published in 1516, More’s account of a fictional island society is told by another traveller-figure, Raphael Hythloday, who has supposedly spent several years on the island observing its peoples and customs. Much like Plato’s Atlantis, Utopia is an exemplum of a perfectly realised socio-political model, but one that nevertheless remained elusive. Despite its lack of basis in reality (or perhaps in spite of it), *Utopia* realised the idea of a humanist paradise that had long been sought for in the early modern imagination, and many Europeans viewed it as an attainable possibility for future living, and as “a way of understanding possible worlds and hence their own world” (Porter and Lukermann, 1976, p. 203).

In much the same way that “writers did much to encourage such superb fantasies” (Manley and Manley, 1970, p. 118) about islands, so too were islands “being discovered all over the world and were exciting the readers of diaries, letters and reports from early mariners” (1970, p. 229). While a certain ambiguity as to their authenticity persisted, the discovery of the Pacific region by European explorers in the 16th century gave much credence to the view that a tropical Arcadian garden-island was to be found, and which would prove to be the elusive *pairidaeza* of Eden. Indeed, as Gillis noted, “Each tropical island encountered seemed at first to fit the description of paradise” (2004, p. 70) that had been laid down in earlier writings. Ingrid Daemmrich has also asserted that “the last earthly paradise locations to be discovered were the Pacific Islands” (1997, p. 11) which

may, in part, account for the cultural mania for islands, and for the many voyages of exploration into the Pacific that were to shortly follow. In addition to the paradise myth, a concurrent secular mythology grew out of these discoveries, which asserted that islands were, by their often natural abundance of plants and vegetable matter, bucolic idylls for the restitution of jaded urban(e) societies of the continent. This secular mythology is linked to the “long” modernity of the capitalist world-system, implicated in the discourses of material exploitation and colonization that originated in the fifteenth century and developed throughout the Enlightenment” (Deckard, 2010, p. 2). There was, at the time, a growing feeling of nostalgia that coincided with the growth of early modern industrial nations in the global north, and the tropical haven provided by seemingly untouched and remote islands was believed to be restorative in its “vision of perfect bliss” (Daemmrich, 1997, p. 205) and reminiscent of a prelapsarian time prior to modern society. This secular mythology was another motivating factor in European exploration, but it later evolved into a new myth, “justifying imperial discourse and praxis” (Deckard, 2010, p. 2). These newly-discovered islands became colonial outcrops and literal gardens for the mining of natural resources and the (re)production of the colonizing culture. Islands, thus, have repeatedly been employed as settings for narratives of “management, control, and a simplified replication of the Old World” (Lane, 1995, p. 2).

Jill Casid has asserted that the “most influential imperial gardens of the eighteenth century were the island gardens of narrative fiction, particularly Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*” (2003, p. 283). Following the publication of Defoe’s most influential novel in 1719, islands became synonymous with tales of castaway-adventurers; they were seen as colonial metaphors, landscapes for the reproduction of colonial culture, and spaces of conquest, upon which imperial narratives were staged and British expansionism justified. Crusoe’s self-reliant individualism posited him as an ideal cipher for the colonial mandate, as his will to conquer and possess his island became emblematic of Britain’s wider colonial projects. The Robinson Crusoe story has become universally synonymous with popular cultural understandings of shipwrecked islander narratives, and, the myth of Crusoe himself has become “inexorably bound up with that imagined island” (Downie, 1996, p. 13-14). Alexander Selkirk, a Scottish sailor who was marooned in 1704 on the island of *Más A Tierra* off the coast of Chile, in the Pacific, is believed to be the real-life inspiration for Defoe’s castaway-hero. But the fact that Defoe elects to strand his Crusoe on an unnamed (fictional) island off the coast of modern Venezuela, in the Caribbean, further added to the obfuscated mythology surrounding islands, and the impossibility faced in authenticating castaways’ accounts. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey has noted, “Defoe’s conflation of a Pacific island (*Más a Tierra*) with a Caribbean one (Tobago) led to a confused geographical setting for *Robinson Crusoe*.” (2010, p. 11). Defoe’s novel, then, and the imagined world of Crusoe’s island, became “the fictional elaboration of a non-fictional adventure”, wherein “Fiction has achieved the substance of history” and “invention has become event.” (Smith, 1996, p. 62-63). Islands were no longer imagined *topoi* made real for the global north through historical discovery; rather, the symbolic power of the trope had, with Crusoe’s island, transcended its own speculative nature and had solidified itself as an essential feature of Western (broadly, European) political, economic, and cultural thought. *Más a Tierra* was later renamed “Robinson Crusoe Island”, thus underlining the supremacy within the cultural imagination of mythological islands. Defoe’s novel soon took on an atemporal, ahistorical quality (Stimpson, 1996, p. 299), as several hundred incarnations of Crusoe and his island appeared in its wake.

Jonathon Swift’s 1726 novel, *Gulliver’s Travels*, appeared not too long after Defoe’s, and is perhaps the most well-known of its contemporaries –not least of all for its deliberate satirizing of the accounts of pseudo-travellers such as John Mandeville. Swift’s protagonist, Lemuel Gulliver, tells of his journeys across many far-flung and fantastical island cultures –from the island country of Lilliput, home to a race of tiny people, to Glubbudubdrib, where he apparently converses with the spirits of long-dead historical figures, and to the floating island of Laputa. Indeed, the conceit of the floating or transitory island was an important symbol for the new discoveries and exchanges in cultural influences that were taking place at this time. Islands have been ubiquitously present in the later-modern literary and cultural imagination as floating signifiers, collective sites of meaning that signify not just the plight of the individual castaway-figure marooned in isolation, but wider social and historical issues that have come characterize the post-Enlightenment period. Indeed, the metaphoric floating island itself becomes a floating signifier, linking “the metaphoricity of floating or travelling islands with the translatability of culture” (Stephanides and Bassnett, 2008, p. 8).

The global West’s fascination for and obsession with desert islands, or “islomania”, reached its apex from the mid-18th century until approximately the mid-to-late 19th century, during which time some of the most enduring works of Robinsonade fiction (or desert island stories in the tradition of *Robinson Crusoe*) were written. In 1812, Johann David Wyss marooned his family Robinson upon an unnamed tropical desert island in the East Indies, in the hugely popular work *The Swiss Family Robinson*. Wyss’s island idyll—which the characters christen “New Switzerland”—is not only a pseudo-colonial site for the reproduction of the colonizer’s culture (and, indeed, his family), but, as Wyss infers through the vast array of animals and plants that populate it (ranging from wolves to onagers, and from fir trees to an entirely fictitious root of sugar cane), it is a geographical and biotic impossibility. Thus, the more detail Wyss applies to authenticating his story, the

more the fictitiousness of his island *topos* is underlined. In the story, the Robinson family (an unambiguous nod to their literary predecessor) are shipwrecked on the island, and the narrative revolves around the patriarch William's attempts to instruct his young children (all boys) in the ways of providing and fending for themselves.

The same is true of the triumvirate of British schoolboys shipwrecked on an imaginary Pacific island in R. M. Ballantyne's 1858 work of juvenile fiction, *The Coral Island*. However, Ralph, Jack, and Peterkin are left without parental guidance, and as such are free to undertake whatever manner of adventure they wish. Ballantyne's tale is a morally didactic one, and the island serves as a space upon which nascent muscular Christian practices are nurtured and imperial ideology is successfully inculcated within the young. This sense of unrestrained freedom is important, as it not only affords the (presumably juvenile, male) reader an opportunity to follow the exploits of his literary counterpart and to learn the "correct" codes of masculine behaviour, but it is also "the first and essential prerequisite for personal *Bildung*." (Kontje, 1993, p. 4). The 19th-century island becomes a site of *bildungsroman*, whereupon the castaway develops a righteous self-dependence and matures through interaction with the physical landscape. The German term "Robinsonalter" thus came to be used to signify the point at which a young boy on the verge of puberty "discovers himself on the island of responsible life." (Stimpson, 1996, p. 2). Similarly, Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island* (1874) may be conceived as a coming-of-age story of Ballantyne's schoolboys: it follows a group of grown men who have been shipwrecked, once again, somewhere on a fictionalized Pacific island, and who apply the skills of the endeavouring engineer Cyrus Smith to colonize the land, making fire, building bricks, and a rudimentary telegraph system. Verne's all-male island colony reinforces contemporary homosocial norms, and underlines the productive economy of earlier muscular Christian ideals. The eponymous "mystery" of the island—the revelation that the paternal Captain Nemo has been watching over and sanctifying the castaways' actions from the time of their arrival—only consolidates the popular appeal of this and other boys' adventure novels as loosely-coded imperial narratives. Indeed, so successful was this form that many well-regarded writers of the period turned their hands to creating islands, such as the fictitious Treasure Island of Robert Louis Stevenson's titular 1883 novel; Noble's Isle in H.G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896); and Neverland in J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1904). Given the popular weight of these authors, and the longevity of their fictional islands within the cultural imagination, it is not without consideration that John Gillis asserts that isomania is a "central feature of Western culture", and that the West "not only thinks about islands, but thinks *with* them." (2004, p. 1).

Due, in part, to the sheer saturation of the Robinsonade genre for most of the 19th century, there was a dearth of fictional and imaginary islands within mainstream culture for the first half of the twentieth century, with the notable exceptions of Neverland in J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* in 1904; the unnamed island in H. De Vere Stapoole's *The Blue Lagoon* in 1908; the island of Caspak in Edgar Rice Burroughs' *The Land That Time Forgot* in 1918; and Skull Island in the 1933 monster movie *King Kong*. It was not until the advent of the Second World War that islands became politically important features in the global *polis*, once again. Some of the fiercest battles of World War II took place in the Pacific theatre, and many island countries (particularly Palau in Western Micronesia and Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands) became strategically important sites that were occupied by Allied forces, in order to impede further incursions into the Pacific by Japan's imperial army. As such, islands re-entered the cultural imaginary as radically-altered sites of meaning: whereas prior to the mid-20th century they had, broadly, been viewed as utopian idylls, paradisiacal gardens, and sites of plenitude and freedom, islands were now seen as dystopian symbols of loss and destruction, upon which individual lives and the course of history were irrevocably changed. Much of the cultural output of this period reflected these shifts: Aldous Huxley's 1962 novel, *Island*, for example, charts the final days and decline of the fictional Polynesian utopia of Pala, as the military leaders of a neighboring country attempt to assail the island and covet its lucrative oil assets. Indeed, Huxley's island is a testing-ground for the exploration of such modernist themes as overpopulation and the exhaustible limits of democracy, two particularly salient issues in global politics at the time of his writing. Most famous of the post-war dystopian islands, perhaps, is that of the unnamed Pacific island in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954). Inspired by *The Coral Island*, Golding's island plays host to a cultural and sociological experimentation of sorts, during which a troop of young British schoolboys descend from from civilized, well-educated children into primitive, murderous savages in the absence of parental control or authority. Unlike the responsible freedom and the potential *bildung* of the protagonists in Ballantyne's tale, however, Golding makes it clear that his island *topos* is symbolically representative of humankind's essential capacity for both good and evil, and that it is a testing-ground for exploring the limits of human interaction beyond traditionally repressive socio-political structures.

While the advent of new media and film technologies has allowed for the replication of traditional island imagery in new forms, films such as the 1958 musical *South Pacific*, and popular mainstream television series such as *Gilligan's Island* (1964-1967) and *Fantasy Island* (1977-1984) nevertheless display a tension between staging islands as ahistorical, atemporal tropical utopias, and re-presenting the vast cultural, historical, and ecological global shifts that have occurred since the Second World War, and the testing of nuclear weapons on many Pacific islands. More contemporarily, the island trope has been employed as a cautionary symbol for the cultural and ecological effects of globalization and political capitalism: films such as *Jurassic Park* (1993)

and *The Beach* (2000) highlight variously the exploitative economics of harnessing island ecologies for post-globalized tourist practices, and underline (in the extreme) the adverse consequences of commercializing islands. It is now upon islands that contemporary societies “learn lessons for applications to mainland habitats, and attempt to reverse the unfortunate trend of environmental damage.” (Walker and Bellingham, 2011, p. xii). Television programs such as *Survivor* (2000-present), however, continue in many ways to undermine this move towards ecological mindfulness, merely reinforcing the economizing of small island communities for the staging of North American neo-colonial narratives; while the submergence and emergence of the island across time and space in the popular serial drama *Lost* (2004-2010) can be seen as the logical progression of this global ecological exploitation, as well as a metaphor underlining the ultimate potential for the island signifier to collapse under the weight of its own culturally polyvalent meaning. Islands have also been utilised to great effect in computer games, as interactive *topoi* through which spatial construction and navigation is practiced. The traditional bounded nature of islands in games such as *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990), *Myst* (1993), *Yoshi’s Island* (1995), *Riven* (1997), *Tropico* (2001), *Just Cause II* (2010), *Dead Island* (2011), and *Far Cry III* (2012) has provided developers with a certain narrative logic, which allows them to contain their interactive worlds within a specific and (usually) isolated location.

What is needed even more contemporarily, however, is a meta-discourse on the epistemological nature of islands in the 21st century, encompassing various interdisciplinary fields of study, and incorporating a discussion on the ways in which we talk about, utilize, and construct islands for and within a *shared* cultural imagination. Critics and scholars need to move beyond *Robinson Crusoe* and his lofty individualism, and to address more contemporary literary and filmic island worlds, teasing out the *archipelagic* connections between these fictional island *topoi*. In a time of increased social isolation, mirroring the decline of traditional tribal and communal social structures, it is not without resonance that we read Thurston Clarke’s words: “we love islands because they are the only geographic feature that echoes our isolation and individuality.” (Clarke, 2001, p. 328). It is through these archipelagic connections, re-positioning islands within our social and cultural imaginary frame, that we might begin to reclaim a sense of how islands function communally, and beyond the micro-world of the isolated castaway.

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