

ISLANDS AS NOVELTY SITES*

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ABSTRACT. Being on the edge, being out of sight and so out of mind, exposes the weakness of mainstream ideas, orthodoxies, and paradigms and foments alternatives to the status quo. Islands are thus propelled as sites of innovative conceptualizations, whether of nature or human enterprise, whether virtual or real. They stand out as sites of novelty; they tend toward clairvoyance; they are disposed to act as advance indicators or extreme reproductions of what is present or future elsewhere. This article, which is essentially bibliographical, celebrates islands as the quintessential sites for experimentation, with reference to the physical sciences, the social sciences, and literature. *Keywords:* island studies, islands, paradoxical spaces.

Mainlanders often harbor a subconscious obsession to frame and map an island cognitively, to “take it all in,” to go up to its highest point or walk around its shore, thus capturing its finite geography. They appear to hold a deep-seated urge “to go to the centre of the island and from there to sing or shout or reflect that, however shattered it might seem to others, the island experience is, within itself, with all its conflicts, potentially whole” (Ritchie 1977, 188). In so doing, one feels that one knows, and therefore controls, the island more thoroughly and intimately.

Unlike mainlands, one can actually buy and own a whole island (Satterlee 2002; Vladi Private Islands 2007). Virtual islands can be, and have been, conceived, engineered, and fashioned in strict accordance with the whims and ideals of their (invariably male) masters: Consider Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* ([1719] 2007), or Jules Verne’s *The Mysterious Island* ([1874] 1965, reviewed by Loxley 1990). The act of material ownership and insular commodification can easily delude one into thinking that an island and its habitat/habitants can be managed and molded to one’s desires, as in D. H. Lawrence’s tragic short story, “The Man Who Loved Islands” ([1927] 2001). As Richard Grove generally surmised: “The island easily became, in practical environmental as well as mental terms, an easily conceived allegory of a whole world” (1995, 8–9). Note the doubly dubious reference to “easily.”

AN ISLAND FOR ALL SEASONS

Thanks to a self-evident vulnerability, “the island,” with fallacious simplicity, can be conceived as a convenient platform for any whim or fancy. An island is for all seasons and for all tastes. An island can be both paradise and prison, both heaven and hell. An island is a contradiction between openness and closure, between roots and routes, which islanders must continually negotiate (Villamil 1977; Kirch 1986;

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Péron 1993, 16; Clifford 1997; Connell and King 1999, 2; Jolly 2001). Islands are paradoxical spaces that are difficult to pin down: “Islands . . . absolute entities . . . territories, territorial; relational spaces—archipelagos, (inter)dependent, identifiable; relative spaces—bounded but porous; isolated, connected, colonized, postcolonial; redolent of the performative imaginary; vulnerable to linguistic, cultural, environmental change; robust and able to absorb and modify; . . . utopian and dystopian, tourist meccas, ecological refugia” (Stratford 2003, 495).

A significant component of the contemporary intoxicating lure or fascination of islands has to do with the fact that they suggest themselves as *tabulae rasae*: potential laboratories for any conceivable human project, in thought or in action (King 1993; Baum 1996, 2000). Something about the insular beckons alluringly. It inspires a greater malleability to grand designs. It is a condition that erodes inhibition. It is a proneness to a more genuine, “gone there, done that” (even if psychological) finality. It provides an opportunity for a more thorough control of intervening variables, which then are more likely to guarantee successful outcomes (for example, Baum 2000, 215). Yet the small, remote, and insular subject also suggests peripherality, being on the edge, being out of sight and so out of mind; such and similar situations expose the weakness of mainstream ideas, orthodoxies, and paradigms while formulating alternatives to the status quo.

The combined outcome of these features is a presentation of islands as sites of innovative conceptualizations, whether of nature or human enterprise, whether virtual or real. More scope for tinkering is generated; there is a greater readiness for either making the strange familiar (breaking out of the mold) or making the familiar strange (finding your soul). Thus, Innisfree Island, in Ireland, is marketed as one such “refuge for the soul” (Royle 2001, 12), with the Sligo Tourist Board seeking to capitalize on the text of “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” by the Irish poet William Butler Yeats ([1893] 2005). Or else take Ricardo Montalbán, who fulfilled the wildest dreams of his rich and eccentric clients every week from 1978 to 1984 on the television series *Fantasy Island*. The more remote and smaller the island, the greater its propensity to innovation. Islands are the first, the harbingers, the pioneers, the miner’s canary (Baldacchino and Milne 2000, 241). In the words of U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, islands are the frontline zones where many problems associated with the environment and development are unfolding (United Nations 1999).

It should therefore come as no surprise to us that islands, both real and earthy as much as concocted, or even those occupying the fuzzy space in between, stand out as sites of novelty, of coy experimentation, of deliberate or coincidental pathbreaking events. These are some of the many diverse roles that islands perform as objects of representation. In fulfilling these functions, human action, human imagination, and nature act in concert.

This article documents some of the range of new episodes and situations that emerge from island scrutiny. The benefit of this exercise lies primarily in two considerations. The first is that matters relating to islands are often obscure or assumed to be insignificant; this review, as central to island-studies scholarship, instead places

islands at the focus of scrutiny. The second notes that observers and critics often suffer from the strictures imposed by the academic disciplines that fashioned their training, perspectives, discourses, and career paths and possibly rendered these observers and critics knowledgeable about *some* island matters but totally oblivious of others. The difficulties here are understandable, and one must be alert to being accused of treating the subject matter superficially or of failing to adopt the rigor and discourse expected from, and associated with, a specific disciplinary canon. In fact, this article's originality may lie precisely in teasing together observations about island novelties that are hardly likely to be found side by side.

CELEBRATING ISLANDS AS EXPERIMENTAL, EXTREME, OR FRONTLINE SITES

At first sight, Charles Darwin's study of finches on the Galápagos Islands and Alfred Russel Wallace's study of birds of paradise on the Aru Islands may have appeared to be inconsequential, island-based, island-specific fieldwork (Darwin [1859] 1979; Wallace [1880] 1975). Yet crucial new insights, particularly in our understanding of evolutionary biology and zoogeography, emerged from these investigations. The forays of Bronislaw Malinowski among the Trobriand—or Kiriwina— Islanders of Papua New Guinea, of Margaret Mead to Samoa and the Admiralty Islands, and of Raymond Firth to Tikopia led to the birth of ethnography and the consolidation of social anthropology as a discrete social-science discipline with its own methodological rigor (Malinowski 1922; Mead [1928] 2001, [1934] 2002; Firth ([1936] 1983); DeLoughrey 2001, 35; Baldacchino 2004a). More recently, researchers have been "islanding" by exploiting the laboratory conditions of smaller islands to deduce observations of extraordinary and extrainsular relevance, as in the case of Daniel Simberloff and Edward Wilson's controlled experiments among the mangroves of the Florida Keys (1969). As prototypical ethnoscares, islands have also spearheaded the study of how locales are conceived and produced in the human imaginary (Appadurai 1996, 180; Baldacchino 2006b). Islands tend toward clairvoyance. They act as advance indicators for what will occur in the future, or as extreme renditions of what exists elsewhere in less exceptional form (Baldacchino 2007).

Consider first the evidence of islands as frontline zones, sites of novelty or exaggeration as emergent from the natural sciences. David Quammen surveyed Aldabra, Aru, Ángel de la Guarda, Galápagos, Guam, Hawaii, Komodo, Madagascar, Mauritius, Rakata, and Tasmania to support his assessment that we are witnessing widespread ecosystem decay (1996). Insularity has been described as "the flywheel of evolution," with copious island-based examples of endemism, including giantism—such as the Solomon Island rat—and dwarfism—such as the Icelandic horse (Carlquist 1974). Angela Cropper confirmed that between 66 and 97 percent of endemic plant species on the Lord Howe, Saint Helena, Rodrigues, Norfolk, Ascension, Juan Fernández, Canaries, Seychelles, and Galápagos Islands are rare, threatened, or extinct (1994).

Islands occupy 1.86 percent of Earth's surface area—and just 1.47 percent without Greenland (Depraetere and Dahl 2007); but, as of September 2006, 13 per-

cent—108 out of 830—of UNESCO's World Heritage sites were on islands or were islands in toto (extrapolated from UNESCO 2006). The latter category include Chile's Easter Island, Ecuador's Galápagos Islands, Gambia's James Island, Greece's Patmos, and Russia's Solovetskiye, to name but a few. Papua New Guinea is the world's largest depository of language diversity (Crystal 1997). The island of Mafia, off Zanzibar, is the World Health Organization's test site for the elimination of advanced lymphatic filariasis or elephantiasis (Economist 2003). The islanders of Tristan da Cunha may hold the key to asthma and lung-cancer genes (Scott 2003). The Micronesian islands of Pingelap and Pohnpei have the highest known incidence of color blindness (Sacks 1997; Gabilondo 2000). Iceland is today a leader in genetic decoding, thanks to its extensive, well-documented genealogical heritage (Vesilind 2000).

In geophysical terms, everywhere is born. Islands, however, can be and are born quickly (such as Surtsey, off Iceland, or Kavachi, in the Solomon Islands; see Nunn 1994); and they can have their entire living biota wiped out (such as Anatahan Island, in the northern Marianas; see NASA 2003) or be totally annihilated as a consequence of natural activity (such as Krakatoa, in Indonesia; see Whittaker 1999). They can also suffer terribly at the hands of humankind, as has Bikini Atoll, in the Marshall Islands, where fifty years ago the world's largest nuclear-bomb explosion test took place. Sea-level rise may be to blame for the wholesale disappearance of two uninhabited islands in Kiribati—Tebua Tarawa and Abanuea (*Independent on Sunday*, 13 June 1999, cited in Royle 2001, 39)—and of India's Lohachara Island, once home to 10,000 people (Lean 2006).

Consider next the social sciences. Geoff Bertram and Roy Watters examined Tuvalu, Niue, Kiribati, Cook Islands and Tokelau, identifying in the process the mutually reinforcing features of a rent-driven "MIRAB" economy (1985). MIRAB departs from the more orthodox conceptualization of economic development as driven by indigenous productive forces (Baldacchino 1993), surviving instead on out-migration flows that provide remittances and on foreign aid that finances a local bureaucracy. Joseph Barnes and Jeremy Boissevain developed the foundations of social-network theory from their respective fieldwork on the Norwegian island of Bremnes and in a village on Malta (Barnes 1954; Boissevain 1974). George Doxey set up his "irridex" (a tourism-irritation index) after fieldwork in Barbados (1976). Both Alfred Crosby and Richard Grove reminded us that Mauritius was the site of the modern world's first environmental debate, involving the extent to which, if at all, alien biota should be deliberately imported into other territories (Crosby 1986; Grove 1995, 9). David Landes documented the island groups of Azores and Madeira as the world's prototype plantation economies (1998, 69).

The separateness, distinctiveness, and more manageable small size of islands render them obvious starting points for designing sustainable ecotourism programs through biosphere reserves, national parks, and other diversity-rich areas (Di Castri and Balaji 2002). Chumbe Island, near Zanzibar, remains one of a few successful prototypes for ecotourism projects among warm-water islands (Gössling 2003);

various cold-water islands appear to have more hopeful prospects for sustainable tourism (Baldacchino 2006c).

The impact of tourism is nowhere more sudden, pervasive, transparent, and perhaps even irrevocable or unsustainable than on small islands and their (more fragile) habitats and/or communities (Conlin and Baum 1995; Briguglio and others 1996; Lockhart and Drakakis-Smith 1996; Apostolopoulos and Gayle 2002; Gössling 2003; Baldacchino 2004b). UNESCO recognized this island condition early on in reviewing case studies of tourism effects in five island territories: Bali, Bermuda, Cyprus, Malta, and the Seychelles (De Kadt 1979).

Examples of high population density and its effects as played out on a bounded territory can be glimpsed from life on the atoll of Malé, Maldives, with a population density of 5,200 persons per square kilometer. Population density figures for Singapore, Bermuda, Majuro, Malta, and South Tarawa would not be much less (UNEP 1998). All these islands, however, lag far behind Ap Lei Chau, Hong Kong, with its 80,000 people in an area measuring just 1.3 square kilometers (World Island Information 2007).

Island creativity also extends to political economy. It is today common for various islands to trade in their sovereignty, or part thereof, in exchange for economic largesse. Although forty-three of the world's sovereign states—22 percent of the total—are exclusively island or archipelagic territories (CIA 2006), an additional 120 subnational island jurisdictions are known to enjoy a degree of autonomy without sovereignty (Watts 2000; Baldacchino 2006a; Baldacchino and Milne 2006). “Creative political economy” involves the sale of postage stamps, Internet domain sites, and telephone-dialing codes (Prasad 2004), as well as hosting movie productions (New Zealand, Easter Island) or religious pilgrimages (Iona), marketing one's own island identity (Fairbairn 1988), and attracting other, rent-based revenues (Kakazu 1994). Other islands have exploited their “in-betweenity” in time—Bermuda—and/or space—Iceland, Ascension, Kinmen (Baldacchino and Greenwood 1998, 10).

The realm of the literary and fictional is not immune from similar insights, even if the discovery is of one's soul, one's mission, or one's self, rather than of buried material treasure. On the mysterious isolated islands of the mind, standard biological or political processes need not apply. Imagined geography, Antonis Bala-sopoulos reminds us (2002, 59), can legitimately conjure up the ideal commonwealth of *Utopia* (More [1516] 2002), the microcosm of Lilliput, and the mobile panopticon of the flying island of Laputa in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* ([1726] 1999, parts I and III, respectively). Meanwhile, the “geographical precision” of an island exacerbates a sense of psychological distinctiveness and specific identity (Weale 1992, 81–82). Literature by writers from islands is replete with struggles to articulate particularity (Hay 2003).

Islands, especially small islands, lack hinterlands (Baldacchino 2006d), but that does not prevent islands from serving as material or spiritual hinterlands to others, as tourists would readily attest. Many fictional characters who travel to islands in the course of a story, whether alone or accompanied, usually return disturbed, bro-

ken, refreshed, redeemed, resolute, shaken, or somehow transformed by the experience. Islands shake their visitors out of the complacency of contemporary social mores, whether by releasing the atavistic anarchism as in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* ([1954] 1978), by giving free rein to the noble intentions of social engineering as in H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* ([1896] 1999), or by catalyzing a spiritual experience as in Douglas Glover's *Elle* (2003), where the heroine (for a change!) is marooned on the Île des Demons.

As William Shakespeare reminded us—via the prototypical islander Caliban—in *The Tempest*, that early specimen of island-framed literature which melds reality with illusion, “Be not afeard, the isle is full of noises” ([1611] 1987, act 3, scene 2, line 138). Noisy it is indeed. The theme of island redemption is central to Western historical inscriptions of island sites (DeLoughrey 2001, 35). As John Gillis points out, the cultural history of “the West” is primarily an island story (2004). Such islands became “the loci of imagination, desire, hopes and fears, the goal of dreamers and mystics and misfits, multiplying, drifting, disappearing and reappearing: malleable moulds into which cosmographers and cartographers could pour both art and science, material spaces which the merchant venturer, pirate, colonist, and governor could penetrate and exploit” (Cosgrove 2005, 302).

Many former island colonies now desperately seek to market themselves as tourism destinations on a similar—though repackaged—mythical allure, laced with whiffs of fecundity and exoticism for the erogenously inspired and/or spiritual healing for those tickled by what is beyond the flesh (for example, Gabilondo 2000, 99). The magnetic attraction of such unsullied fantasies continues unabated. In 2001 the box-office hit *Castaway*, starring Tom Hanks, was filmed on Monuriki Island (Yasawa Group, Fiji); separate rounds of the television-serialized crowd-puller *Survivor* were filmed on the islands of Pulau Tiga (Malaysia) and Nuku Hiva (Marquesas Group).

NEW IDEAS TO CONSIDER

Islands have historically served as refreshment stops on long maritime journeys (DeLoughrey 2001, 28). They can still serve that purpose, but now they also provide refreshing ideas about the condition of nature, humankind, or simply for their own sake. “The heretofore obscure histories of remote islands deserve a place alongside the self-contemplation of the European past—or the history of civilisations—for their own remarkable contributions to an historical understanding. We thus multiply our conceptions of history by the diversity of structures. Suddenly, there are all kinds of new things to consider” (Sahlins 1987, 72). This is a sharp contrast to an imperialist (often fatal) contact that transformed such islands into cargo cults and welfare-maximizing communities, wedded to the metropole (Worsley 1968). Islands are increasingly acknowledged as sites of agency, depositories of “new things.” The fragmenting, continental narrative of the “many islands of the world”—which summarily leaves such bothersome dots out of maps (Hau‘ofa 1983)—can be profitably replaced by the panarchipelagic script of “a sea of islands” (Hau‘ofa, Waddell, and Naidu 1993). The treasures that islands deliver include powerful messages, bearing

the fullness of new and vital noises; of these, as Caliban reminds us, we should not be afraid.

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