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Editors

Imaging Identity

Text, Mediality and Contemporary Visual Culture

palgrave
macmillan

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Island Images and Imaginations: Beyond the Typical Tropical

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INTRODUCTION

Today, 'warm water' islands are often the objects of what may be the most lavish, global and consistent branding exercise in human history. They present themselves—and find themselves presented—as locales of desire, platforms of luscious paradise, habitual sites of fascination, emotional offloading or spiritual and psychological pilgrimage. The association with mystery, fantasy, redemption, utopia and refuge is a long-lasting one that continues to be exploited by literature (*The Swiss Family Robinson*, *The Mysterious Island*, *Lord of the Flies*) and global media (consider *The Blue Lagoon, The Beach*). The manifestation of this interpellation of islands, by insiders and outsiders, as 'typically tropical' both haunts and drives island industries, and is the thrust of this chapter.

The global tourism industry is itself replete with representations of islands as 'paradise' destinations, competing amongst themselves for the title of the industry's 'best guarded secret' and scrambling to maintain a

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Fig. 14.1 One of many images where the tropical, erotic and exotic meld together in an expression of lush and enticing island exuberance (https://pixabay. com/illustrations/island-tropical-paradise-beach-sea-1515109/)

freshness and exuberance that is sorely tested by the weight of mass tourism (Fig. 14.1). In doing so, such islands piggyback on texts, old and new, which tauntingly promise transformations and renewals to visitors who often visit the fictional islands begrudgingly or accidentally. Islandness gets to work on its subjects, aided by the conscribing physical geography of the set. Think, in some chronological order, of Homer's *Odyssey*, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie*, R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, J. M. Barrie's Never Never Land (the dwelling place of Peter Pan and Tinker Bell) and *South Pacific* (the 1958 American romantic musical adapted as a Hollywood film) (cf. Loxley 1990; Kinane 2017). Think also of the US television series *Fantasy Island* (with Mr. Rourke welcoming guests who wish to have fantasies fulfilled); and, more recently, *Survivor* and *Lost*. Even in recent versions of the popular video-game *Tomb Raider*,

buxom heroine Lara Croft is suitably stranded on a tropical island (Nyman 2013).

Of course, these fantastic islands largely belong to the realm of fiction, and many existing islands are diametrically opposed to the image of the tropical island we have inherited from these textual universes. In the real world, Malta, Singapore and various 'urban islands' such as Manhattan and Stockholm are cosmopolitan spaces with high population densities and traffic management challenges (Grydehøj 2015; Warren and Enoch 2010): not exactly your typically imagined island. But the representational industry is nevertheless cluttered with islands that suggest themselves as (ideally) empty spaces, waiting and wanting to be possessed and tinkered with (Redfield 2000, Chapter 1). They enjoy a lingering charm, allure and fascination: qualities that are well suited to tempt and taunt visitors who are eager for (or prone to) unsettlement, salvation, reinvigoration or escape (Péron 2004). 'The Island' is so thoroughly steeped in emotional geography that it is perhaps impossible to determine where island dreams stop and island realities start; it is awkward to disentangle geographical materiality from metaphorical allusion (McMahon and André 2018).

Indeed, there is a real quandary in discussing islands as a form with a suggestively simple geography—what could be neater than a piece of land surrounded by water?—because the preciseness, isolation and separation that the definition invariably evokes is shaped by nostalgic desire. It discards shifting island contours, downplays the impacts of tides, accretion and erosion, and neglects the observation that most islands are really archipelagos (Baldacchino 2016). To acknowledge this positioning and posturing is to become critically aware of how rendering the island in this way serves to lure its visitors into a sense of mastery and authoritarianism that smacks of neo-colonialism and plays to a deeply held need for control. Put differently, and reminiscent of Cowper's poem on Alexander Selkirk, the first 'real' documented Robinson Crusoe, islands seek to nudge their temporary sojourners into feelings of lording over territory:

> I am monarch of all I survey,
> My right there is none to dispute;
> From the centre all round to the sea
> I am lord of the fowl and the brute. (Cowper 1782)

At work here may be the same forces that beget nascent nationalism on islands, explaining why smaller islands may harbour desires of secession

from larger islands, and why almost a quarter of the world's sovereign states are islands and archipelagos (Hepburn and Baldacchino 2013). This hunger for lording and sovereignty may also be driving the interest in branding and marketing islands *qua* islands: beautifully poised and self-contained nuggets of experience. There are attractive, physical and psychological characteristics of islands that can be easily added to the mix: a self-evident physical separation, jurisdictional specificity, cultural difference, 'getting away from it all,' and the possibility of claiming an understanding of the totality of the locale as trophy: after all, a small island is a place that you can get your arms, and mind, around (cf. Baum 1997; Gössling and Wall 2007).

ISLANDS AS PROTOTYPE BRAND EXERCISES: FIVE JUSTIFICATIONS

Indeed, islands had been the stuff of branding long before the concept found its way into management schools and contemporary marketing discourse. Already in the tenth century AD, Eric the Red, an early settler on what is a large and remote island, is reported in old Icelandic sagas to have named that new territory *Greenland* in order to attract other settlers there. Common folklore recounts how, in 1497, the crew of the adventurer John Cabot needed only to lower a basket into the sea to fill it with cod (Macdonald et al. 2009). Islands have been prototypes, targets for some of the earliest systematic attempts at branding: advancing, and romancing, a meaningful and desirable difference in a world crowded by too many competing candidates (Martin 1989; Baldacchino 2010).

There are at least five reasons why islands are powerful brands unto themselves today. First, islomania is the outcome of an enduring western tradition which has held islands in high regard, assigning them a key role in the economic, political, religious and social life of the Mediterranean and then Atlantic and (later still) Pacific worlds, given the way that myth, icon and narratives of/from islands have functioned for mainland cultures (Gillis 2004; Kinane 2017, Chapter 1). Second, and starting at around the European age of discovery, is the construction of islands as outposts of aberrant exoticism, peopled by innocent and exuberant natives, captured so tantalisingly in early photography (see Fig. 14.2) and, before that, in the paintings of Frenchman Paul Gauguin (Connell 2003; Edmund and Smith 2003). Third is the island as background for the enactment of a

Fig. 14.2 Women from Katorai village on Sibiru island (Mentawai group), now Indonesia (Photograph by Albert Friedenthal, 1910)

(usually) male and heroic tribute to colonialism, enterprise and settler endurance: the subject of *Robinson Crusoe*-style stories that extend up to the present in the likes of the Hollywood hit *The Martian* (2015). Fourth is the development of the notion of going on vacation as a regular activity by the world's burgeoning middle classes: whether for relaxation, adventure or self-discovery, islands project themselves as ideal destinations for such itinerants (Löfgren 2001). Fifth is the realisation by many developing island states and territories that they can 'sell' their sea, sun and sand (and perhaps sex, but more hopefully their salt, seashells and other unlikely

souvenirs) to such visitors by appealing to their constructed modern need for travel and associated consumerism, and thus carve out for themselves an alluringly easy route to development (De Kadt 1979; De Vita and Kyaw 2016); almost all of the world's dozens of small island states are in the temperate or tropical regions, so this allure is 'fit for purpose.' The single yet notable exception is Iceland, which has carved a powerful brand image that capitalises on its unique geology and 'cold water' location: volcanoes, glaciers, geysers, *aurora borealis* (Baldacchino 2006).

That the deployment of the notion of the tropical island, with its associated attributes of small physical size, lush vegetation and warm water, is a central and gripping trope within Western discourse is therefore not surprising. The powerful representation of island space is boosted by its very visual capture as a bounded materiality, a place that exhibits a "nervous duality" that includes stark (though fluid) land-sea borders meant to keep living things in *and* out (Baldacchino 2005, 248).

With these captivating and contradictory traits come a series of challenges, as (typically small) islands and their residents seek to navigate survival and decent livelihoods in an age dominated by (industrial) considerations of scale and efficiency (Krugman 1980) as well as "data overload" (Toffler 1970; *The Economist* 2011). The most salient challenges include the following, and in this order: (1) the struggle to stay, or become, visible as a potential destination for tourism or investment; (2) the inability to tinker much with an island's reputational construct; and (3) the absence of congruence between 'the island' as a brand unto itself and 'island brands,' meaning that products and services belonging to or hailing from the island—and whose originators would have their own specific brand identities and strategies in mind—would do well to complement, and therefore ride on, the brand of the island itself (Baldacchino and Khamis 2018). Let us review these in turn below.

Being 'on the Radar'

First is the challenge of being noticed. There are many populated islands—at least 200 with 100,000 residents or more (Depraetere and Dahl 2018)—and many offer what appear to be similar 'sun, sea and sand' experiences or products to their erstwhile visitors. The destiny of an island that is 'off the radar' is to remain 'undiscovered' and therefore neglected. Others find themselves permanently eclipsed by more strident and showy, often larger, competitors. Thus, one is more likely to know of the

Dominican Republic than smaller Dominica: both are sovereign states in the Caribbean, but the former is much larger than the latter. One could say the same about Bermuda and similarly sounding Barbuda: the former is an autonomous jurisdiction, a UK overseas territory and a financial service hub; the latter, battered by hurricanes in 2017, lies in the perennial shadow of larger Antigua, with whom it forms a federated, archipelagic state. In similar cases, smaller islands suffer from double insularity and get sidelined by the marketing drive of a larger neighbouring island. Thus, when thinking of Mauritius, how many would also think of Rodrigues, an island that forms part of the same state? Or how many would acknowledge Carriacou and Petite Martinique when thinking of Grenada? Or of smaller Gozo next to Malta? Here, being a jurisdiction in one's own right is a net advantage. It creates a dedicated administrative machinery (with, say, an island-specific tourism board or investment promotion agency) that has an interest in promoting the island per se as a destination: for tourism, for investment, adventure, immigration, education or retirement. That places like Malta and Grenada also use the name of the largest island in the archipelago as the name of the state as a whole does not help the junior partners in the assemblage. On the other hand, one may try and make a virtue out of being 'out of sight, out of mind' and focusing on a narrow, niche concept of supply, where exclusivity becomes the bait and knowledge of the privilege of place is disseminated mainly by word of mouth. Think of five-star St Barthélemy in the French Caribbean: its short and only runway ensures that only a few but wealthy tourists land there with every flight (Cousin and Chauvin 2013; Orengo Serra and Theng 2015).

The visual corollary of these challenges can be witnessed in the in/visibility of islands on maps, including those on the World Wide Web. Being noticed and known to exist is, after all, the most basic principle of marketing: by definition, most will not contemplate travelling to a place unless such a place is known to exist in the first place. Maps already misplace various archipelagos that form part of larger states, neglecting them or consigning them to the 'tragedy of the inset' which distorts scale and relative location. For example, Shetland has mounted a successful campaign to feature in its proper place on maps of Scotland (*The Economist* 2018b); it dislikes being home to the 'box people': those that inhabit the box in the sea usually located by cartographers off the North west coast of Scotland (e.g. School Atlas of 1852; Map Shop 2014; see Fig. 14.3). The far-flung French overseas island departments of Martinique, Guadeloupe, Réunion and Mayotte (along with non-island French Guyana) may be integral to the French

Fig. 14.3 Shetland in a box, already on this map from 1806. The islanders are not amused and have reclaimed the right to their location (Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division)

state; yet they must contend with hovering at the edges of maps of continental France (Baldacchino 2016). But this situation can get even worse, since various maps of 'France' completely exclude these territories, sticking to the 'continent,' and only portraying the much closer island of Corsica, usually as an inset, if at all. Alderney in relation to Guernsey, Union in relation to St Vincent, Azores and Madeira in relation to Portugal, Hawai'i (and non-island Alaska) in relation to the United States, Rotuma in relation to Fiji and Aldabra in relation to Seychelles are additional suitable examples of far-flung settlements that get short shrift on national maps. Indeed, all locales that could appear as insets risk elimination from pictorial representation and thus can get consigned to the abyss of visual (and therefore cognitive) exclusion. The smaller the island within an archipelago, the further away from the archipelago's centre of gravity and the smaller its resident population, the more likely that its presence, let alone its location, will be summarily dismissed as insignificant—to the casual onlooker, this elision is simply the loss of a minor detail that is amply justified by the resulting larger-scale rendition of the main (is)land(s); but, to the islanders concerned, it could be the road to oblivion.

Additional, deliberate acts of invisibility may occur when neighbouring islands belong to different states which are not necessarily on the best of terms. The islands in the Aegean, historically known as the world's first archipelago, belong mainly to Greece and Turkey (Sfenthourakis and Triantis 2017); and various Greek islands lie literally within a few kilometres of the Turkish mainland. Yet, representations of the Greek state, or of the ferry services that serve its islands, tend to make no visual reference to mainland Turkey, or to any of its own islands; as if that neighbour simply did not exist (Greece Aegean Maps 2014; Spilanis et al. 2016). Turkey, of course, can return the compliment, and pretend that Greece and its archipelago do not exist, although its coastal regions are 'hemmed in' by various Greek islands (e.g. Turkey Travel Planner 2017). National pride and state territoriality, with some doses of wish fulfilment, act in concert to excise a looming, neighbouring and possibly threatening jurisdiction (*The Economist* 2018a). This occurs even in situations such as those involving the world's only ten inhabited islands shared between two or more countries (Borneo, Hispaniola, Ireland, New Guinea, Tierra del Fuego): politics trumps geography, with maps in play which would show just that part of the island which represents the state in question, rather than the whole island (Hepburn and Baldacchino 2013). The strangest example of all here may be East Timor and its exclave of Oecussi, which

secured independence from Indonesia in 2002. The country has been reproduced on maps with just the faintest reference to the rest of the island of Timor (which belongs to Indonesia) (e.g. UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2007).

Conversely, invisibility can be an advantage in those situations where a small island deliberately wishes to stay off the (tourist) map. Thus, a raised coral atoll like Aldabra—a UNESCO World Heritage Site that is reached by only a few visitors (mainly scientists) annually—may prefer not to proclaim its existence; invisibility here aligns nicely with a jealously guarded inaccessibility (Šúr et al. 2013). Mustique, part of the state of St Vincent and the Grenadines, plays a similar game: in its case, it is totally apportioned to a few dozen wealthy and expatriate owners, who prefer and value their privacy (Sroka 2016). In much the same way—but for different reasons—the tourist map of the Hawaiian islands, available on the official Hawai'i tourism website, purposely excludes Nihau (a private island) and Kaho'olawe (a sacred island): both of these islands are taboo and 'no go' sites for tourists (Go Hawaii 2014).

Managing One's Own Reputation

The second challenge faced by islands and islanders is the difficulty of tweaking one's own reputation as a place in the regional or global marketplace. The smaller, poorer or less populated the island gets, and the more bereft it is of the "resourcefulness of jurisdiction" (Baldacchino and Milne 2000), the more likely it is that the island's online and literary content, its very (re)presentation, is dictated, penned or determined exogenously by non-islanders, which includes those who have never been to the place at all. All too often, one is faced with a situation where the *subject* matter—the island as much as the islanders—becomes *object* matter: a 'looked at' reference group (Baldacchino 2008). Thus, the island becomes a platform for the enactment of processes dictated by interested outsiders. These would have been mainly explorers, missionaries and traders in the past; nowadays, they are more likely to be airline and cruise ship companies, hotel chains and media firms. Feed any (small) island name to a search engine and see what textual and visual material comes up: over how much of that data and content does the island—and do the islanders—have a say, let alone control?

This situation creates a 'core-periphery' power asymmetry within the world archipelago. Small island groups are not exempt from dependency

dynamics that unfold elsewhere. Urbanisation, migration, gross fixed capital formation, investment … these are manifest as flows of labour, talent and resources away from the periphery and towards the core. The dynamics are also evident within archipelagos. Here, mainlands and some islands—or perhaps just one—grow their populations at the expense of all others, exacerbating a vicious "cycle of decline" (Royle 2007) while adding to the strain of the infrastructure of the receiving island—and typically, the capital city (e.g. East and Dawes 2009).

From a tourism perspective, the ascendancy of the main island is also reflected in its status as a gateway to the whole archipelago. With its (usually considerably better) transport infrastructure, the main island—think New Providence/Nassau in the Bahamas, Viti Levu in Fiji, South Tarawa in Kiribati, Majuro in the Marshall Islands, Mahé in the Seychelles or Tongatapu in Tonga—is the main port of call for incoming air or sea passengers. Most of these visitors choose to stay on this island, depriving the other members of the archipelago of tourism-related economic benefits. In promotional material, this hierarchy may be visible in the very logo of the archipelago. Thus, the logo of the Guernsey tourism organisation has "Guernsey" on the top line, with Herm—Sark—Alderney laid out below (Visit Guernsey 2014). The pecking order is obvious.

Of course, the inhabitants of most small islands will not take this situation lightly. Sensing that tourism may be *the* solution to their stubborn peripherality and economic misfortunes, islanders will lobby vigorously—and, in democratic contexts, often successfully, sooner or later—to have their own airports, ferry/cruise ship terminals or connecting bridges/tunnels, in order to share in the spoils. The politico-economic elites of these smaller islands will expect such transport infrastructure to be in place and operating, even if unprofitably, citing social welfare needs and a chronic vulnerability where connectivity is tantamount to sheer survival and the key to any economic competitiveness (e.g. CPMR 2002; Baldacchino and Ferreira 2013). Thus, on the official tourism website for the Canary Islands, one finds the names of all its seven main islands prominently displayed, and in fonts of equal size; one is also invited to "get to know each island" (Turismo de Canarias 2014). Politics can be commandeered to ensure that each island gets a proverbial piece of the action.

Some idea of the replication of infrastructure and services that these dynamics engender has been calculated for the South Aegean, which consists of some 40 inhabited Greek islands spread over the Cyclades and Dodecanese island groups. If the region's population was living on just

one island, a maximum of 3 ports would be sufficient, while now there are 50, along with 14 airports instead of one; 21 power production plants instead of one; 5 hospitals instead of one; 211 primary schools instead of 90; 35 waste water treatment units instead of 8; and so on (ESPON 2011; Spilanis et al. 2012, 211).

Resonance Between 'Island Brands' and 'The Island' as a Brand

Third, any populated island finds itself riding inadvertently on parallel reputational messages: those pertaining to the island itself and those that arise from the particular products and services that the island has to offer. Here, brand convergence and complementarity help to send out congruent and mutually reinforcing signals: say, spicy pepper sauce is a good fit with the vibrant party culture of the Bahamas; and the pirate history of rum resonates nicely with fun and frolic in the themed touristic appeal of Jamaica. Many islands have little influence in determining their own brand; the challenge of brand identity and consistency becomes more daunting when thrown into the brand mix is not just the island but each and every product or service that the island offers. Ideally, there is some concerted attempt at strengthening the island brand, while the island brand in turn offers a welcome and ready platform on which the specific product or service brand can ride and advertise. But the task is fraught with traps and obstacles. Not all local providers may wish to have their product aligned with their island base; in some cases, the understanding by the business is that an island association may actually dilute or cheapen their product's brand power: does it help to know that one popular anti-virus computer software has actually been developed in Iceland (Baldacchino and Vella Bonnici 2005)? Indeed, the island connection does not feature *at all* in various examples of brand conceptualisation and development, also because affirming and articulating such an association with one's island geography does not come naturally, not even to islanders.

Finally, even where attempts at brand consolidation are entertained, motives and outcomes can clash and jar. Consider Prince Edward Island (PEI), Canada's smallest of ten provinces: an island of some 5656 km² in land area with a resident population of some 150,000. The island's claim to fame rests on three distinct and unrelated episodes, each of which has been recognised and celebrated on a PEI vehicle licence plate: (1) "the Birthplace of Confederation," remindful of the historic meeting that took

place in 1864 in Charlottetown (the provincial capital) and which eventually led to the establishment of Canada; (2) the context for the endearing *Anne of Green Gables* book series by Lucy Maud Montgomery, probably the most famous islander; and (3) the 14-km-long Confederation Bridge, an engineering marvel which has linked the island to the Canadian mainland since 1997. As far as branding is concerned, the island is known as "Spud Isle" and "the million acre farm" for its potato production; its working country-scapes are sought for and lauded by over a million tourists annually. The rolling fields of "the Island," and modest investments in wind energy, have collectively contributed to the promotion of the place as "The Green Province," following a branding exercise in 2006. The slogan is now on the current PEI vehicle licence plate, and is accompanied by a section of red soil on which is perched a solitary wind turbine (Fig. 14.4). Meanwhile, the powerful tourism industry, not to be outdone, undertook its own visioning campaign, and developed the sound bite "The Gentle Island" (in French: La douceur de l'île); these are the phrases that introduce the province's tourism brochures and other publicity material.

How well does "The Gentle Island" or "The Green Province" work for PEI? That there is more than just one clear, official statement of what the island purports to be already muddies the waters. And for a province that

Fig. 14.4 1967 licence plate for Prince Edward Island: does this help the Green Island Province of Canada attract hi-tech, hip and cool? (Photograph by A. W. McPhee)

has launched a C$200-million "prosperity strategy" that rests on four "innovative sectors"—biosciences, information technology, aerospace and energy (Government of PEI 2008)—the notion of the 'gentle island' does not fit so comfortably. PEI wants to be 'up and running,' and not just a laid-back location of calm, indolence and *dolce far niente*: the latter is good for attracting frazzled tourists wishing to unwind on a sandy shore in the short summer, sure; but not useful for much else beyond the beach (Baldacchino 2010).

Conclusion

Our obsession with islands knows no bounds, but our islands are paradoxical spaces: they are both self-evidently bounded and selectively accessible. Islanders, even those living in island *jurisdictions*, have fallen victim to the widely popular appeal of social media. They have largely been disempowered of the ability to advertise their own island places: the haunting postcard and travel brochure have now been replaced by millions of tourist photos and comments that are posted regularly on such sites as Snapchat, TripAdvisor and Instagram. This demand-driven democratisation of island identity makes it therefore even more imperative for island policy makers and entrepreneurs to seek to influence the exercise from the supply side. This would involve the assiduous crafting of lingering and powerful brands, not just of 'the island' per se—remembering always that we may be dealing with an archipelago, in which case some semblance of complementary (even if contrived) differentiation may be a strategic approach to follow—but also of the products and services that emerge from the same island community. In spite of obvious diversity, brand signals emanating from different goods and services should ideally communicate and converge around a somewhat consistent message, resulting in a rich, emotional, evocative and multi-sensorial attachment to place (cf. Anholt 2010).

There are many islands in the world but we can be excused for assuming otherwise. These places rarely feature on our metaphorical radar; and, when they do, they risk doing so according to terms, tropes and ontologies determined by others. Does the island of Giglio—with a land area of 23 km^2—off the west coast of Italy ring a bell? Possibly not. Or your memory might be tickled if I added that, on the night of Friday, 13 January 2011, the *Costa Concordia*, a cruise liner with some 4252 passengers and crew, ran aground off this island (Alexander 2012). While its captain ran

away from the scene of the tragedy—32 people died—the mayor of the island organised the rescue effort. The islanders offered food, hot drinks and accommodation to the distraught visitors. The stricken vessel was eventually taken off the island and scrapped. The island's 1500 residents had found themselves at the centre of an intense but short-lived media frenzy: represented as heroes and generous hosts; famous for one night.

Giglio has now reverted to invisibility, a generic media blackout. But it can count itself lucky for the positive manner in which it has been portrayed, even if fleetingly, as the backdrop and spontaneous refuge to one of the most tragic accidents affecting the cruise ship industry in recent decades. Other islands and islanders are not that lucky: faced with an uncritical commentary in favour of the topical tropical, what are they to do? They could contest the representation, presenting instead what *they* hold as distinctive and valuable characteristics of their culture and identity, but risk a response of apathy and indifference. Or else, they could stoically soldier on, begrudgingly tolerant of the fake and constructed sound bites, logos, designs and narratives that would have them be suitable and attractive, tropical destinations to visitors, appreciative that a sham profile is better than no profile at all.

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