An Introduction to Coolabah's Special Issue on Mythical and Fictional Islands

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Island Studies as a distinct but interdisciplinary field of scholarly enquiry is relatively new, coalescing around the year 2000 (see Grydehøj 2017 and 2020 for an overview of the field). In these past two decades island scholars have grappled with island typologies (Royle & Brinklow, 2018), their location and distribution across the globe (Depraetere, 2009a and b), island epistemologies and methodologies (Baldacchino, 2008), and the complex relationship between the terrestrial, aquatic, and living/non-living elements of island places (Hayward, 2012a and b). As well as discussions around the geographic particularities of islands, scholarly attention has turned to the depiction and representation of island places and spaces in fictive literature (Crane & Fletcher, 2017), and other media (Fitzgerald & Hayward, 2016). In such examples, islands are often used as a metaphor for "socio-political or ontological conditions, challenging and deconstructing common ideas about island spaces and thus inventing and even establishing, [...] new island myths" (Dautel & Schödel, 2017: 229).

Islands are enduringly irresistible; they entice, ensnare, imprison, inspire, relax, and revitalize to the point that some people are said to suffer from 'islomania' - an obsession with islands (Weale, 1992; Gillis, 2004). Islomania can manifest itself as a physical draw to be islanded in space, separate from the influence of the frenetic humdrum of continental life, or as a psycho-emotional draw to construct or consume 'islandness'; the essence of geographical precision, comprehensible scale and boundedness by water (Conkling, 2007). Islands are said to occupy "such a powerful place in modern Western imagination that they lend themselves to sophisticated fantasy and mythology" (Baldacchino, 2005: 247-248), and as such they are often "presented as locales of desire, as platforms of paradise, as habitual sites of fascination" (Baldacchino, 2010: 373-374).

It is no surprise then that islands feature frequently in western mythology such as The Fortunate Isles in Classical Greek mythology. In Celtic mythologies Tír na nÓg, Mag Mell, Hy-Brasil, Emain Ablach, St Brendan's Isle, Annwn and Avalon are all island paradises where everlasting beauty, health and happiness reside, and a similar tale can be found in Russian mythology in the island of Buyan. Such mythical islands are not confined to western folklore; the Isles of the Blessed are winterless places of abundance that are an important aspect of the Taoist search for longevity and immortality, and a similar, albeit less cheerful version, also appears in Japanese

mythology. In Hindu cosmology The *Puranas,* written between the eighth and tenth centuries CE, refer to celestial bodies as islands (the planets) within a cosmic ocean.

Fictional islands have formed a central motif of western fantasy literature since Classical times such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, to Renaissance works like Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), colonial-era works like Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), to more modern works like Edgar Rice Burroughs' Caspak Trilogy (1918), Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* (1990)*,* Christopher Priest's Dream Archipelago in *The Islanders* (2011) and Michael Crummey's (2014) *Sweetland.* Recently thematic atlases of fictional islands have gained popularity such as Lewis-Jones' (2019), *Archipelago: An atlas of imagined islands* and Dirk Liesemer's (2019) *Phantom Islands: In search of mythical lands*. 'Unreal' islands have featured on screen to contain and contextualise fantastical narratives such as the films *Attack of the Beast Creatures* (1980 dir. Michael Stanley), and The Wicker Man (1973, dir. Robin Hardy), as well as television shows such as *Thunderbirds* (1965-1968), *Lost* (2004-2010), *Stargate Atlantis* (2004-2009) and *The I-Land* (2019). Such fictional islands tend to be either primeval places where nature rules or high-tech compounds of human ingenuity. Fictional islands have also featured within other media such as the long-running BBC radio programme Desert Island Discs where celebrity guests choose eight recordings (usually musical), a book, and a luxury item with which to be castaway. Fictional islands have also been the subject of several pop songs such as Madonna's 1987 hit 'La Isla Bonita':

> Tropical the island breeze
> All of nature wild and free
> This is where I long to be
> La isla bonita

Madonna herself admitted she invented the name San Pedro, "I don't know where San Pedro is. At that point, I wasn't a person who went on holidays to beautiful islands".[1] Aussie-New Zealand band Crowded House released a song entitled 'To the island' in 2020. Lead singer, Neil Finn, commented that the song was partially a response to the Coronavirus pandemic, "Everyone's looking for a refuge, a place to escape, a myth or a mystery to follow…"[2], the lyrics include:

> Oh, let me move you (Off my feet)
> Come to the island
> Where we can save our souls
> It's just the right size
>
> The world is beyond us
> It's too enormous
> But oh, the island is just right
> It's the perfect size

Several island scholars have warned that the "richness of literary and cultural islanding could be so obtrusive and pervasive that it could actually threaten and dismiss the physicality of islands as 'real lived-in places" (Baldacchino; 2008:44), and could re-produce "geographical imaginaries that orientalize an other" (Mountz, 2015: 636). This is certainly possible as some islands have been mediatized to the point of a 'mythscape' being created (see MacKinnon &

Hannan, 2017, although in this case St Kilda no longer has a permanent population). One island scholar has suggested that Island Studies should move away from theories of what constitutes 'islandness' that can emphasize the limited characteristics that islands share, 'toward an engagement with psychologies of island experience' (Hay; 2013: 209). Other island scholars have acknowledged that there is a striking diversity between the islands of the world while at the same time there is a 'standardized genre of *the island*' that features in media as more than a simple container or backdrop for stories (Owe Ronstrom 2012: 153). Increasingly literary studies and media studies have become sub-fields within Island Studies as a means for understanding the significance of islands within popular culture for human geographical awareness and imagination (Crane & Fletcher, 2016).

To this end, several Island Studies journals have published special editions exploring mythical and fictional islands. *Shima*, *The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures*, published a thematic issue in 2016 with various papers discussing the mythical island of Atlantis and in 2018 a thematic issue on Mermaids, Mercultures and the Aquapelagic Imaginary, while in 2017 T*he Island Studies Journal* published a special thematic section on island fictions and metaphors in contemporary literature. More widely, island scholars have also begun to consider the representations of islandness within media; these include, Graziadei et al.'s discussion of Michael Bay's film *The Island (2017)*, Lucchitti's (2013) discussion of the Blasket Islands in Irish literature, Kinane's (2016) Theorising Literary Islands – The Island Trope in Contemporary Robinsonade Narratives, and Crane and Fletcher's (2017) *Island Genres, Genre Islands* discusses islands in popular fiction. In 2020 I wrote a paper about seasteading in speculative fiction literature as a way of bridging the fields of Island Studies and Speculative Fiction Studies. I concluded that while island scholars have begun to engage with media and literature on or about islands there is much discussion to be had about the interaction of sentient beings with their aquatic and terrestrial surroundings outside of an Earthly setting.

This special issue of *Coolabah* features a series of papers that explore how islands are imagined and articulated outside the geographical and biological parameters of reality. Philip Hayward's paper explores the evolution of the depiction of Skull Island within the King Kong franchise. Juni'chiro Suwa discusses Japanese cosmology through the performance of one of Japan's earliest written legends. Henry Johnson analyses the representation of a fictitious Channel Island and how a 'converse parody' challenges depictions of islanders. Sotirios Triantafyllos' paper offers a critique of islomania as a draw to the purely paradisiacal, through examination of Early Modern literature that presents islomania as a more nuanced psychological phenomena shaped by political, religious and social mores of the time. Almudena Machado Jiménez's paper offers a feminist critique of Thomas More's Utopia and explores the role of women as dominated 'matrixial entities', whose roles in society are limited to their embodied (re)productive capabilities and are islands within an island. It is hoped this special thematic issue of Coolabah will introduce Island Studies to a new audience of interdisciplinary scholars and in doing so will encourage new debates and/or viewpoints to engage with the field of island research.

Endnotes

1. As quoted in Rolling Stone: https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/madonnas-50-greatest-songs-126823/la-isla-bonita-from-true-blue-1986-100592/
2. From Crowded House's Twitter feed: https://twitter.com/CrowdedHouseHQ/status/1362159652683702272

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