

# 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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