

ISLAND SOJOURNS

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ABSTRACT. Islands have long held a central place in Western cultures' mythical geographies. They have been associated for centuries with heroic journeys and holy quests, imagined realms of magical transformations. Islands have also been sites of significant rites of passage, and they continue to perform this function in the modern secular world. Today, popular islomania is expressed in the frequency of seasonal sojourning on European and American archipelagos. No longer destinations of permanent residence, islands now provide access to a sense of temporal and spatial rootedness that is no longer available on mainlands. They loom large on the mental maps even of those who rarely, if ever, visit them. *Keywords:* America, Atlantic Europe, islands, mythical geography, Pacific, place, rites of passage, sojourning, time travel.

The boatman said in a quiet voice, "Look, it's loomin'." We turned in the direction of his pointing finger to see Great Gott Island, previously just visible on the horizon, appear to levitate and float toward us. We stared, fixated on the image until it faded. Soon the vision was only a memory, but the word haunted me. As I was to learn later, looming is a phenomenon known to all sailors, accounting for the boatman's lack of excitement. It is what landlubbers call a mirage, produced by a certain set of light and atmospheric conditions. Ships, mountains, and coasts are also known to loom, to float, and to even turn upside down, but I will always associate looming with islands (Stilgoe 1994).

As Greg Denning tells us, looming allows us to "see beyond the horizon, beyond the ordinary limits of our vision" (2004, 33). These horizons are temporal as well as geographical, allowing us access to other times as well as other places. The chimerical character of islands is not just a product of physical conditions. It is equally a result of culture—Western mainland culture, to be specific—which has attributed to islands certain wondrous features that it rarely bestows on other landforms. For centuries islands have been playing tricks on us, appearing and disappearing, changing shape and size, moving about not only in space but also in time. No other landform has been so illusory, none so subject to dream and nightmare. These are tricks that our unconscious minds play on our conscious awareness. We attribute to islands atemporal, liminal qualities that we would never associate with mainlands. Despite our efforts to historicize them, to pin them down to our geographical coordinates, islands continue to be projections of the deepest layers of our subconscious.

Lawrence Durrell called this "islomania," a word that first appeared in his *Reflections on a Marine Venus*, attributed to a fictional character named Gideon, who used it to describe the mental state of English expatriates gathered on Rhodes in the wake of World War II. "There are people, Gideon used to say, . . . who find islands somehow irresistible" (1953, 15–16). The word caught on and by the 1970s was used

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