

ARE ISLANDERS INSULAR? A PERSONAL VIEW*

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ABSTRACT. I use my personal experience as an islander doing fieldwork among islanders in the West Indies to explore the meaning of “insularity.” I then expand on that personal experience by drawing on literary sources, particularly Homer’s the *Odyssey* and Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, both of which express an island worldview. The island worldview is contrasted and compared with the continental worldview on the basis of differing modes of navigation and cartography and differing modes of orientation as defined by cognitive psychologists. *Keywords:* egocentricity, Greece, insularity, Ithaca, Nantucket, Nevis, portolan cartography, Saint John (U.S. Virgin Islands), Staten Island.

Queequeg was a native of Kokovoko, an island far away to the West and South. It is not down on any map; true places never are.

—Herman Melville, [1851] 1950

There was basically only one paved road in the early 1970s, when my anthropologist wife, Karen, our Samoyed dog, Fudde, and I lived on Saint John, in the U.S. Virgin Islands. This was the Centerline Road—or the “Old King’s Road,” as it also was called—which wound its way up the hill from the port of Cruz Bay. Cruz Bay was, and is, the island’s main connection to urbanized Saint Thomas and from there to the continental world. Cruz Bay was the only place on the island that remotely resembled a town, with a couple of shops, a few bars, a signless restaurant, a gas station, an apothecary, a bank, and the local seat of government. It was here that the bulk of the island’s two thousand or so inhabitants lived. After a few miles of continuous twisting climb, the road straightened out and made a beeline east across the center of a volcanic plateau before winding down to a newly constructed asphalt route that clung to the crumbling cliff side of a mountain, before entering Coral Bay village, at the island’s northeast corner (Figures 1 and 2). Coral Bay, when we lived in the bay area, consisted of a magnificent, centuries-old wooden Moravian church, a new barracklike school, a fire station of sorts, an abandoned gas station, a few houses, and the Sputnik bar and grocery, with its resident Great Pyrenees dog, Churchill.

At Coral Bay village the main road made a swing right, to the south, following the twisting contours of the island’s eastern shore; and after a short while the asphalt gave way to broken and potholed slabs of poured concrete. The road passed through the nineteenth-century family-land settlements of freed slaves with names like “Calabash Boom,” “Hard Labor,” and “John’s Folly,” the last two of which be-

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