

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Polish Access to Island Studies: A Literary Perspective

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Keywords: island studies, Polish islands, Polish contemporary literature, utopia, dystopia, archipelagic identity

<https://doi.org/10.24043/001c.154575>

Island Studies Journal

Vol. Early access, 2026

Poland never possessed noticeable island territories, leading to the natural conviction that a mainland sensitivity dominated. This was also signaled in the shift from the older name for an island, *ostrów*, meaning a place surrounded by water, to the modern word *wyspa*, indicating the accumulation of some material. As contemporary Polish literature reveals, there has been a significant shift in Polish representations of islandic experiences, with imaginative travels to islands gradually being replaced by records of personal encounters. In analyzing this turn through case studies, the paper itself will shift in its approach from constructivist to post-constructivist literary criticism. In her short story *Wyspa*, Olga Tokarczuk builds a performative intertextual geography to question the masculine myth of Robinsonade texts. In a series of books on Iceland, Hubert Klimko-Dobrzeński notes the impact of islandic entrapment and transforms his Polish identity according to an archipelagic pattern. Maciej Wasielewski visits a Pacific island where sexual abuses occurred and creates a phenomenology of the island losing its utopian potential and sliding into dystopia. Lastly, Piotr Oleksy describes the geography and history of 44 islands in the estuary of the Oder River, where he spent his childhood, and challenges Polish mainland identity writing from the marginalized position of a Polish islander. Poland's case as a European culture without overseas colonies (and being colonized itself during the nineteenth century), studied through the lens of its contemporary literature, demonstrates the growing importance of overlooked islandic testimonies within countries dominated by mainland thinking. One of the reasons for this is today's environmental sensitivities, since the island story is always to some degree also a parable of the fate of mankind, which seems appealing in light of the global climate crisis.

1. Introduction

Polish island thinking has usually been considered limited due to a lack of important historical experiences and cultural representations. This can even be seen in the etymology of Polish terms for island. Long ago, the Polish language shared with other Slavic languages the word *ostrów*, meaning

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some territory bounded and surrounded by water. This is still visible in the names of the oldest parts of Polish towns, where early medieval Christian cathedrals were built on river islands. Hence, they were referred to as *ostrów tumski* (cathedral islands), and these labels are still used in Poznań and Wrocław. The early Polish language thus accurately described the island as a naturally safe space and the preferred setting for a prince's fortresses and religious sites. The same can be said about a former settlement called Ostrów Lednicki on Lednica Lake near Gniezno, where Poland was said to have adopted Christianity. Gradually, however, the Polish language lost this connection with the primordial experiences of river and lake islands and began to use the word *wyspa*, which remains in use today. This name causes some embarrassment for linguists (Bralczyk, 2021), who complain that the original, precise, descriptive term was replaced by a word meaning a heap or pile of some substance poured onto some place. Etymologically, *wyspa* is the result of the accumulation of materials in some area.

This short linguistic excursion is intended to point out how uncommon the experience of the island is among the dominant images in Polish culture. Poland has never possessed overseas colonies and, moreover, during the era of European colonial imperialism was itself colonized by the Russian, Prussian (German), and Austrian empires from the end of the eighteenth century until the end of World War I. The country never perceived itself as a maritime superpower, though it consistently claimed rights to part of the Baltic shoreline and important ports like Gdańsk. For all these reasons, Polish variants of the island experience are quite interesting. At first, it is obvious that for a country like Poland, with a dominant mainland sensitivity, the island would be treated as a distant space and object. We also need to realize that the Polish perspective has been historically situated outside of Western European colonizing practices in the Caribbean or Pacific areas, which has made it more open to sympathizing with colonized and decolonized island communities. This is demonstrated in the disputed case of the Polish British writer Joseph Conrad (Meisel, 2020) and suspicions about the images disseminated by colonizing countries. The island in Poland has usually been a universal motif, a bit exotic, a bit imaginary, but not as central to its culture as it has been in most cultures analyzed in island studies (Hay, 2006; Kinane, 2017). It is, however, noteworthy that translations of canonical novels such as *Gulliver's Travels* influenced Polish authors, who described imaginary islands as a space of utopian and exotic existence, for instance, in Ignacy Krasicki's novel *Mikołaja Doświadczynskiego przypadku* (*The Adventures of Nicholas Experiensky*) (1776). Similarly, the 19th-century author Sygurd Wiśniewski published his adventure writing as *Koronacja króla wysp Fidżi oraz inne nowele, obrazki i szkice podróżnicze* (*The Coronation of the King of the Fiji Islands and Other Short Stories, Sketches, and Travel Notes*). An island motif was used metaphorically by the Polish anticommunist post-war émigré Andrzej Chciuk, who titled his memoirs from pre-war Poland *Atlantyda*

(*Atlantis*) (1969). The utopian potentialities of an island were also examined in literary presentations, such as Zbigniew Herbert's short story *Król mrówek* (*The King of Ants*) (1999), based on ancient Greek mythology.

This provides a background for the following observations concerning the island in contemporary Polish literature. These descriptions, which appeared in Polish culture after 1989, were elaborated after the end of a long-lasting iron curtain isolation that prevented Poles from experiencing islands of any kind, which further deepened the supposed remoteness of the object, but also resulted in refreshing Polish literary insights into living on an island. The present short panorama will begin with works in which the island is perceived as an imaginative and intertextual construct (Graziadei et al., 2017a, 2017b), then we will note the gradually rising impact of first-hand experiences, which will lead to the recent example of a renowned book that questions Polish mainland identity and pushes it towards recovering its island characteristics.

In following this shift from intertextual to textual-realistic perspectives, the methodologies applied will differ and will follow a route typical for contemporary literary studies, that is, a move from constructivism to post-constructivism. A similar tension was detected some time ago within island studies as the tension between metaphorical and real islands (Hay, 2003). The first case will be analyzed within the context of performative intertextual geography. This seems to be a well-established way of reading Robinsonade texts and is positioned within the wider paradigm of cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and geopoetics. The literary records of some Polish personal encounters with the island realities will demand the use of terms borrowed from the new phenomenology, the philosophy of presence, ecological realism, and the spatial turn. Finally, the case for recovering the inner Polish island experience also calls for the tools of the descriptive turn and postcritical reading.

Two more preliminary remarks seem necessary. Firstly, “mainland thinking” and “mainland sensitivity” are used here as general terms for a discourse marginalizing island experiences as unimportant and not noteworthy. Secondly, there are numerous examples of Polish post-accession migrant literature in the British Isles, which are not mentioned here. This omission was intentional. Unfortunately, as the eminent literary critic Dariusz Nowacki once stated, Polish migrant prose concerning experiences in the UK and Ireland was generally of poor artistic quality. It addresses island issues but does not reveal significant perceptive changes caused by islandic realities (Nowacki, 2016).

2. Feminist Robinson

Island studies have put forward a critical attitude towards masculine narratives of outcasts or adventurers conquering exotic archipelagos (Kinane, 2017, pp. 6–7). The canon of these books was formed by novels written by male authors and promoted virtues typical for European soldiers, sailors, or gentlemen. Counternarratives by women have also been discussed within island studies, and among these, we should include a short story published in

2001 by the Polish Nobel Prize winner Olga Tokarczuk. The story, entitled simply *Wyspa* (*Island*) (Tokarczuk, 2001), refers not only to masculine adventure tales, but also to other textual patterns typical of island narratives: the motif of utopia, the story of individual transformation, and the experience of refugees. Tokarczuk is also placing her work within, crucial at the moment of its publishing, postmodern practices of rewriting history to include components of herstories. As Linda Hutcheon has suggested (Hutcheon, 1988, pp. 105–123), this mode of retelling the past should be called “historiographical metafiction,” since the female narrator, being a writer, presents war testimony sent to her by an old man who wanted her to narrate in her fiction what he did not dare to describe in his well-known biography. This unacceptable and subversive testimony questions past images generated by “hard” historians and reveals their textual and fictitious dimension. Tokarczuk’s narration could be perceived as an intertextually performative island image. Its geography is strongly dominated by literary generic modeling and the deliberate decision of the female narrator not to allow us to resolve the problem of the authenticity of the island and the testimony as a whole. Blurring the lines separating fictional and real geography moves the story towards the sphere of intertextual performative geography (Fletcher, 2011, pp. 26–30; Tingcong & Ping, 2022, p. 30).

The plot confronts us with the dramatic events of 1944, when the anonymous male narrator, during his escape from Nazi-occupied Poland, sails from Greece smuggled in a little boat to Palestine. The ship is torpedoed, and the man lands alone on an unknown Greek desert island. Day by day, he improves his living conditions and even calls himself “Robinson” (Tokarczuk, 2001, p. 80). At one point, a canoe washes ashore with the corpse of a dead woman and her still living child on board. The man loses any hope of rescuing the little baby, which is dependent on his mother’s milk, but then he undergoes a strange bodily transformation and realizes that his nipples have grown, and he is capable of male lactation. The extraordinary phenomenon allows him to save the child, which he tells as his secret to the female writer and informs her that the baby is now his mature son, who has his own children (Tokarczuk, 2001).

This feminist intervention within the realm of masculine island narratives assumes a new means of fashioning Europe’s founding stories: the Garden of Eden, Odysseus’ journey within the Aegean archipelago, Ovid’s *The Metamorphosis*, and visions of Utopia. The desert island resembles an Edenic garden, with the first male representative of the human species finding beautiful lakes and olive and fig groves. The island’s feminine character was marked by two protruding breast-like mountains that rose above the surrounding Edenic landscape:

The island was oblong – two enormous, asymmetrical rocky breasts jutted out from the sea. (...) A shady valley stretched between the hills. When I decided to go down there, I didn’t expect to find wonders. There was a stream that flowed down

a steep mountain, from the sky, in beautiful waterfalls, spraying mist everywhere. (...) The water (...) was so azure that its color stunned me. (Tokarczuk, 2001, pp. 84–85)

After some time, he gets the feeling he is being watched by some being. Nonetheless, there is no Eve for this wartime Adam, and the most determining cultural task for woman—breastfeeding her child—has been transferred to the man. This island story is meant to shake and subvert male-female divisions, and to reveal gender identities as being purely performative, open to a transgender perspective, where even bodies transform when there is a compelling need, which results in the undermining of rigid dichotomies. Tokarczuk chose the island for a far-reaching operation on the collective imagination, one in which she proposes a redesigning of core cultural codes related to human gender and identity.

This story of transformation also refers to the specific self-perceptions of the island inhabitants. During his first days as an outcast, the man feels imprisoned: “closed within myself (...) I was something that encapsulates somebody else” (Tokarczuk, 2001, p. 78). This initial impression turns into the sensation of an individual being split into two persons, one called “Robinson” and another who speaks to him, which could be an effect of the castaway’s confrontation with the island and a demonstration of its transformative potential. This canonical island transformation story pattern provides a means for imagining such a place as a training ground for man’s enhancement (Clarke, 2001; Hay, 2006; Kinane, 2017), where he successfully faces dangers, civilizes unfamiliar surroundings, and proves his resilience to any obstacle or misfortune. Tokarczuk appears skeptical about the possibility of this kind of transformation, rather supposing that the art of survival requires taking a few steps down the evolutionary or civilizational ladder. In order to overcome these challenging conditions, the man discovers within him a hidden and complex subjectivity, which allows him to experience a fluid exchange of male and female features. The philosophical background for this story is Tokarczuk’s fascination with Jungian psychoanalysis and its archetypal concepts of anima and animus, but it also resonates with other cultural texts, such as the Chinese yin and yang as inseparable components.

The title of the story, the common and general name *Wyspa*, expresses the author’s wish to experiment with universal, standard variants of the island narrative. This piece of writing condensed and refashioned the Robinsonade genre in European literature and used its performative energy to create a more feminine cultural identity and geography for these kinds of texts. It is also a vivid example of the island seen through a constructivist lens and offers a starting point for further analysis of writings where the theme is less textual and more real.

3. Forming Polish identity anew on Iceland

Part of island studies deals with the image of the supposed happiness of the island way of life and its healing influence on the subject (Hay, 2006; Kinane, 2017). This might be one reason why some Polish migrants who started to travel freely around the globe after 1989 decided to taste island life. Some of the destinations were rather surprising, such as moving to cold Iceland, to which many Polish migrants arrived. A memorable personal encounter with this unique space, with its challenging climate and geographic majestic beauty, was recorded in the works of Hubert Klimko-Dobrzaniecki.

His book, composed of two longer stories, “Dom Róży” (House of Rosa) and “Krýsuvík” (Klimko-Dobrzaniecki, 2006), initiated a series of reports from Iceland, which included *Lullaby of a Hang Man* (Kołysanka dla wisielca, 2007), among many others. We would like to focus on the first volume in the series, *Dom Róży/Krýsuvík*, in order to examine the island experience as a decisive factor in the creative writing process and a fortuitous reformulation of the Polish identity of the migrant. The book is among the numerous records of the migration of Poles to Scandinavian states in search of jobs and better economic and living conditions. The large minority of Poles living in Norway and Iceland was the result of their country’s high rates of unemployment, so their traveling to Iceland was not because of the possibility to exploit it economically, to supersede aboriginal communities, or to colonize a supposedly desert land – as colonial narrative patterns suggest – but to consciously take a position at the very bottom of Iceland’s economic, social and political system. Spending time together with Croats and other Balkans and Eastern Europeans, they formed “creolized” groups of migrants – a scenario analyzed in depth in island studies (Glissant, 1997). Here a surprising European positioning is voiced by the author within his island story. He seems to suggest that when you are an Eastern European, then you are not in a dominant position, being ‘European’ can mean being on the lowest level of society and having the least protection within the island community.

The main character bears the same name as the author, Hubert, and shares some biographical details with him. He accepts an offer to work in a nursing home, where he meets old-age pensioners who have been neglected by their families, experienced limited state protection, and have been encouraged to consider euthanasia. During his free time, he visits spectacular glaciers and geysers, but also tries some intensive sports activities:

The weather is good, the glacier is clearly visible, a few more bends, waterfalls, and rivers, and the asphalt ends (...). I’m on the mountain, sitting and watching. Some people say that on the summits you’re closer to God, I haven’t heard a better excuse, people can make that up, but I’m no better, after all, I’m sitting here and believing in a miraculous recharging of my

battery. (...) I think I'm already charged enough to throw myself down on the snowboard. And I do it, and only now do I feel good. (Klimko-Dobrzaniecki, 2006, pp. 82–83)

This experience gives him a sense of the non-human presence of the island, and also develops in him a fascination for sports such as snowboarding, as he becomes immersed in the material surroundings of his new life (Gumbrecht, 2004, 2012). This contact with island materialities makes him feel a part of Iceland, of its presence, and delivers him a sense of the unquestionable acceptance of the “here and now.”

Hubert's analogous immersion in Iceland's social system did not occur as smoothly, though he is willing to become a regular citizen of the island. He abandons his plans for a literary career in Poland, learns the local language, and publishes books of poetry in Icelandic. What prevents him from becoming an Icelander is not only the reluctant attitude of the Reykjavik community, but also an encounter with a blind resident of the nursing home, Miss Rosa. When Hubert says his reason for coming to the island was his curiosity about the way of life there, she does not believe him. Rosa knows intuitively that he escaped from what he could not accept in his Polish identity and in Poland in general, and remarks:

People escape to the islands, they feel safer, but this is an illusion, you won't escape from yourself, you won't escape. An island is a prison, everything comes out of people here and it happens quickly, more quickly than somewhere else. (Klimko-Dobrzaniecki, 2006, p. 110)

Hubert feels a need to narrate the traumas of his childhood, when he was an object of his parents' conflicts, and his life in Poland became more and more painful. Dropping his Polish identity and escaping to a form of identity as distant as possible from what he considered Polish was no longer a viable solution. A decisive step here occurs during another meeting with Rosa, who asks him for her name in Polish. “Róża,” he replies, and though she cannot pronounce it correctly, she very much likes her name in Polish and demands Hubert call her that (Klimko-Dobrzaniecki, 2006). The island other makes Hubert realize that what is Polish can be attractive, desirable, and creative. From that moment on, he starts to write in Polish again, and the book *Dom Róży/Krýsuvík* manifests his recovered artistic abilities.

Still, there is some new topography of identity to be commented upon here. After confronting the full spectrum of island life, Hubert becomes a Polish writer again; nonetheless, he stays in Iceland, preferring his migrant position to returning to his homeland. What we seem to be seeing here is a phenomenon revealed by island studies scholars in their research concerning archipelagic identities. It concerns the most important legacy in some Caribbean cultures, where life is commonly associated with a loosely connected constellation of islands, inhabitants being open to others, creolized

thinking, and constant migration (Glissant, 1997; Ping & Shoujuan, 2022). Hubert's decision to prolong his residence in Iceland can be understood similarly; his renewed access to Polish identity occurred under very special conditions related to thinking about Poland and Polish identity in an archipelagic manner. For Hubert, as a Polish writer, Poland is no longer a solid and unified mainland state, but an archipelago of loosely connected, inviting, and open groups of citizens living in temporary settlements around the world. We still need to discern this kind of creolization from the creolization grasped by Glissant; nonetheless, there are new "archipelagic" diasporas emerging nowadays, and Polish contemporary diaspora is just one of them. This is also the story in which certain textual and constructed features of the island are connected with the experience of presence and could be perceived in a new materialistic fashion.

4. Heart of Islandic darkness

I would say that Maciej Wasielewski continued a route marked out by Klimko-Dobrzaniecki. One of his first non-fiction writings was a description of the Faroe Islands and its dwellers. Soon after, he decided to confront himself with the highly mythologized paradisaical image of living on a tropical island i.e. in the Pacific islands. This area is powerfully represented today in movies, reality shows, and travelogues analyzed with the highest level of scrutiny by scholars as a kind of islomania (Clarke, 2001; Kinane, 2017). They have identified a tradition of Western cultures representing Oceania through a tension between its alleged heavenly spaces and cruel savage aborigines, which justified colonizing practices (Kinane, 2017). As Ping et al. (2022) put it: "scattered across vast ocean, islands were believed to be wild, backward, and blank, waiting for industrialized Europe to carry out social, political, and economic experiments on them and transform them into 'civilized' and capitalized lands" (p. 4).

In another report supplementing these representations, the book *Jutro przypłynie królowa* (*The Queen Arrives Tomorrow*, Wasielewski, 2013), Wasielewski navigates carefully within this field, avoiding Western frames in this Pacific island narrative. This was a peculiarly demanding one, since in it described the Pitcairn Islands a few years after a shocking trial concerning child sexual abuse among its inhabitants. He chose to reverse both of the typical anticipated scenarios. Pitcairn here does not resemble paradise, but rather a harsh piece of land with challenging islandic conditions for its inhabitants. On the other hand, these people are not portrayed as a bunch of savages, but as a community experiencing the greatest difficulties in maintaining social discipline in a forgotten area.

Two discrete factors actively modulate the story from the perspective of the Polish writer. The first is connected with the retelling of the islanders' history, since they are the descendants of sailors who rebelled against Britain and settled on the Pacific island with a group of Tahitian slaves at the end of the 18th century. I would add some important context, which seems very

important to every Polish writer referring to anti-colonial revolts: during the same period of time in another distant archipelago, Haiti, there was a memorable revolt among Polish troops sent by Napoleon to suppress an insurrection there. These Poles stood on the side of the revolutionaries and became creolized Haitian Poles, known as *Lapologne*, and who today still proudly declare strong ties with their former Polish identity. This is one of the reasons why a writer such as Wasielewski will clearly sympathize with the British mutineers and their struggle for independence on the Pitcairn Islands.

On the other side, I would argue that Wasielewski travelled to a place where a lack of contact with the outside world and controlling legal procedures led to horrors in the lives of common people, which led him to challenge issues of colonial oppression that resembled those from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. This Polish tradition obliged him to produce an uncorrupted description of the fate of generations of underage girls who were sexually abused for decades. His journey turned into a merciless vivisection of the traumas caused by unique conditions that resulted in part from a harsh islandic boundedness and a deficit of communication with others. One of the abused women commented on her island captivity using a poignant metaphor:

Have you seen the Patcarnian playing with a gecko? (...) He releases it from the jar, laughing, the gecko is going crazy, very afraid, jumping all over the walls of the closed room, stupid, expecting to escape to freedom. Have you seen it? That's what happened to us on the island. (Wasielewski, 2013, p. 45)

During Wasielewski's interviews with these victims, his phenomenology of the island (Hay, 2006) points to the ways in which the Pitcairniens' strivings to create a utopia lose out to the irreversible and petrifying reality of an islandic dystopia (DeLoughrey, 2011; Ping & Shoujuan, 2022). Almost no child is ever born there, with many dwellers leaving for New Zealand or other destinations. Its scenery resembles that from the poem *Utopia* by Wisława Szymborska, where there are only traces of human feet leading towards the sea.

The book is also open to being read as a kind of an ecological parable. As scholars have noted, some island stories are images of the future global fate of the whole of humankind (DeLoughrey, 2011; Grove, 1995). After initial turmoil, Pitcairniens seemed to have established a harmonious symbiosis, as they share all goods in common and live in a balance with nature. This state of affairs is sometimes still recollected when inhabitants praise their island to visitors:

You get the land for free, and the entire community helps you build a house. When Atkins' garden burned, all the men put out the fire (...) Everyone works for two, and we share responsibilities fairly. (...) We are guided by clear principles: we

strengthen the spirit through work; we honor the body. We do not drink alcohol or strong coffee. We have abandoned passion. (Wasielewski, 2013, p. 19)

However, uncontrolled conflicts within the community and unrestricted use of the island's limited natural resources turned it into a neglected area as witnessed by the writer immediately after his landing. As we can read on the very next page after the above quoted paradisaical image:

There's little sign of Adamstown, the only settlement. A single tool strewn across the road, abandoned cans, a gravel bucket. I walk along a steep path called the Road of Toil. Undergrowth everywhere, tree stumps bursting from the ground. Buildings appear: workshops and junkyards. Children's bicycles, deformed wheels. Pickaxes, rakes, and manure forks are strewn about (...) What lies beyond the next bend, in the next pile of junk? (Wasielewski, 2013, p. 20)

He visits not a harmonious community, but a divided group of people, jealously protecting their own properties and sometimes dreaming of migrating to somewhere else (Wasielewski, 2013). Treated as an environmental parable, this island story offers a highly pessimistic warning about the possible future of our globe, when there is no planet B and no queen will ever arrive to save us.

Wasielewski's report stripped Polish islandic stories of any naivety and made the audience aware of how much they need to care for the islandic realities they encounter in order not to end up in a traumatic dystopia. His book came closer to practices related to providing care and precise descriptions of what really happened. Pitcairn in Wasielewski's presentation is not limited to the ontology of social construct; it influences the reader with a powerful sense of the tangibility of the abuse that took place on the beautiful Pacific island.

5. Poland as an archipelago

A few years ago, a literary prize was awarded in Poland to Piotr Oleksy for *Wyspy odzyskane. Wolin i nieznany archipelag* (*Islands Recovered. Wolin And the Unknown Archipelago*, 2021). This volume could serve as a new stage for Polish island writing. The subtitle ironically recalls adventurous colonizing expeditions to unknown savage archipelagos, but the reader soon realizes that the book introduces a marginalized islandic perspective at the very heart of Polish literature and culture. Oleksy's formulation of his own islandic testimony demanded a reworking of his relation to his hometown, situated on Wolin – the main island within the estuary of the Oder River. This is why his book opens with a long descriptive section where the realities of the geographical landscape of 44 Polish islands are depicted.

Of the over forty-four islands lying at the mouth of the Oder River, which flows into the Baltic Sea, the vast majority are primarily habitats for birds, and occasionally, wild boar. Low, sometimes flooded, and covered mainly with reeds, with occasional lush vegetation and even substantial trees, they have their own names, which are usually quite colorful: Wielki Krzek, Maly Krzek, Wiszowa Kepa, and Konski Smug. Before flowing into the Baltic Sea, the Oder must pass through the Gulf of Szczecin, the largest freshwater body of water in Poland, six times larger than Lake Sniardwy, and slightly larger than Lake Balaton in Hungary. The term gulf is misleading, introduced after 1945. Previously, the area was called the Bay of Szczecin. However, it is actually a coastal lagoon, a part of the sea cut off from it by a barrier in the form of a reef or sandbank (Oleksy, 2021).

The mode of the old “description of the world,” as Marco Polo once put it, is triggered here. Scholars representing the descriptive turn (Houser, 2020; Marcus et al., 2016) could see in this an example of an accurate report on a land’s specificity with surprising “points of precision” (Stewart, 2016), where the description concentrates on territorial details, and adequate linguistic representation.

As a kind of life writing, Oleksy’s book brought to light the surprising experiences of someone who, as a child, lived on Polish islands and for whom Poland was originally archipelagic. All of his visits to the local capital, Świnoujście, required him to wait for a ferry, and the constant crossing of water to reach “the other side” of another island was his habitual transportation practice. These everyday life activities and perception of Poland as an archipelago stood in sharp contrast to what he was taught at school, where the only represented option was the mainland perspective, and during history lessons, the textbooks never even mentioned his local homeland (Oleksy, 2021). The only visibility of Wolin Island was connected with the short seasonal invasions of tourists arriving at Baltic resorts in July and August.

The work aimed to recenter a lost perspective, after Polish islandic identities were erased in spite of their once-powerful character. This history was an important factor in Poland’s state of affairs, since Wolin was a place of people who came and went, of refugees and new settlers. After World War II, the island’s German inhabitants were forced to leave, and Poles arrived in their place, mostly those who had lost lands to the USSR in the East. They did not possess any maritime traditions, and in order to survive, they gradually learned the ropes of large-scale sea fishing. Wolin also attracted artists who were initially part of a writer’s commune created by the socialist authorities in nearby Szczecin. They were soon transformed by islandic life conditions and sought to immerse themselves in the local everyday practices and express the unique mobile state of living in an archipelago. Their attempts were ignored and eventually forgotten, and the writers eventually returned to the mainland. Some of them became dedicated to sea life and spent most of their lives as sailors working on a fleet that contributed to

Polish postwar maritime writing. Unfortunately, the sea novels promoted by the communist regime were quickly abandoned after 1989. The author comments on these marginalization processes and an underestimated potential appreciated by a select few: “For a very long time after 1945, the islands were treated as a Wildest West, the last frontier – faraway and forsaken place, where you can hide and create yourself anew” (Oleksy, 2021, p. 261).

Chapter by chapter, Oleksy makes us realize why mainland cultures tend to cause ruptures in the local histories of islanders and push them to the margins. Building his own narrative led the writer to combine certain textual strategies with the help of local non-human actors, which postcritical criticism would read with the assistance of actor-network theory (Felski, 2015). The remains of prewar factories, archeological excavations revealing the splendid medieval past of Wolin, cows and birds on the desert islands of the Oder estuary, fishing techniques transferred by the leaving German inhabitants to incoming Polish settlers, and ferry facilities remembered from the writer’s childhood all occur as necessary elements of his writing, alongside German archival materials and the horrifying postwar stories of Polish pioneers who suffered abuses at the hands of Soviet soldiers. Recovering this island narrative also required establishing a strategic partnership with German writers from Wolin, as Oleksy demonstrated in his essay on Britta Wuttke. Her writings have been studied attentively by him, and this has allowed Oleksy to create numerous ways of intermingling Polish and German islandic testimonies in his amateur island studies project (Oleksy, 2021).

All of this helped him to overcome the pressure of supposed Polish mainland sensitivities and to activate what seemed thus far possible only within the works of devoted migrants like Klimko-Dobrzaniecki. He took the route of reformulating Polish identity, where the dominant component was its archipelagic topography, one that is more imagined in Klimko’s writing, and more tangible in Oleksy’s testimony. We can also trace an iterative shift in contemporary writing from constructivist to post-constructivist sensibilities. Oleksy’s work calls for analysis typical of today’s descriptive turn, where we should not omit the narrator’s efforts to stay close to island realities in his asymptotic descriptions (Houser, 2020): some of them closer, others more distant, from the multi-sensually experienced island presence.

6. Conclusion

European cultures not possessing a history of their overseas colonies provide another variant of the islandic narrative. For example, Skórczewski (2020) writes about Poland being not only an object, but also a subject of colonization. Polish literature remains traditionally skeptical about Western colonizing modes of island writing. What remains unexpectedly challenging for cultures such as Poland’s is their own suppressed islandic experiences. Exposing them leads to repeated acts of subverting the dominant mainland positioning within culture. On the one hand, this demands a wide-ranging imaginary operation concerning performative geographies, identities, and genders. On the other hand, it leads writers to describe with heightened

accuracy the realities of islandic experiences, delivering precise reports on particular real islandic geographies and the fates of human and non-human bodies. All of these help in developing the positive potential of island reality, described for centuries as heavenly and utopian. Without these deliberate efforts, the island can easily turn into a form of prison or the forgotten remnants of a former community sliding into dystopia. This also needs to be situated in the present-day context of the global environmental crisis, which island narratives address metaphorically and realistically. As the example of Polish literature demonstrates, the time for recovering marginalized island narratives in mainland cultures is now.

Submitted: August 10, 2024 CST. Accepted: October 30, 2025 CST. Published: January 21, 2026 CST.



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