

Rethinking utopian and dystopian imagination in island literature and culture

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Abstract: The trope of the utopian island occurs in a variety of cultural traditions. For example, in the West, the literary imagination of ideal islandness made manifest an imperialist rhetoric and contributed to European exploration and colonization. The tension between utopia and dystopia is an intrinsic feature of Western utopian island imaginations, which were complicit in colonial exploitation and oppression. Western models of island utopias and dystopias have been imposed on non-Western cultures, whose scholars have engaged in decolonial practices by adapting, reshaping, and transforming these conceptualizations. This special section, demonstrating the inherent intercultural qualities of utopian and dystopian island visions from diverse cultural traditions, contributes to decolonization efforts in island studies.

Keywords: colonialism, decolonial practice, dystopia, islands, literature, utopia

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The figure of the island has been a source of fascination and enchantment since ancient times. In different cultures around the world, there has been a tendency to imagine the island as the site from which life began; the paradise where the dead, deities, or immortals reside; or the innocent and blessed place where mortals live carefree, idealistic lives. The significance of the island thus “lies in the imaginative realm” (Tuan, 1998, p. 118), and the symbolic/figurative meaning of insularity is integral to the island’s history and physicality.

Despite the tendency to project ideality onto islands, the Western imagination of insularity is unique in its entanglement with European exploration and colonization. Although Western culture’s figuration of island ideality can be traced back to the ancient Greeks, for whom “islands were anchors of security or oases of life in the ocean waters” (Tuan, 1998, p. 120), the popularization of the utopian island in the West was driven by colonial desires and processes: Thomas More’s (1516/2014) seminal work *Utopia*, which initiated “a whole new literary genre and method for thinking futures” (Bagchi, 2019, p. 327), was inspired by European colonial expansion and imperialism (Vieira, 2010, p. 4).

In Western imperialist discourse, the island was imagined as a remote and isolated space to be seized and possessed by white explorers, who had “been ‘taken in’ by the island’s allure as a site of fantasy and, in seeming contradiction, by its metafigural capacity to embody materiality itself: the perfect spatial commodity” (McMahon, 2016, p. 181). Often scattered across the 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 (Savory, 2011, p. 37). Alternatively, they could be “distant places where undesirables might safely be settled” (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 16). This conception of islandness was a result of the belief that wildness, backwardness and blankness provided legitimate reasons for colonizing the island while remoteness and isolation, ensuring easy control and defense, were critical to the successful implementation of colonial projects in insular space (DeLoughrey, 2007, p. 8; Grove, 1996, p. 63). As Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2007, p. 15) notes, “over time, metropolitans came to identify the island as a remote, tropical, and geographical ideal divorced from the industrial temperate north, which of course was created by exploitation of the islands of the global south.” With their favorable conditions for international trade as well as strategic positions in global expansions and commodity flows of the imperialist ventures, islands became targets of colonization by Western powers. The colonial desire for islands, in essence a desire for profits, was thus “a trademark of European maritime empires” (DeLoughrey, 2007, p. 6), which has led Yifu Tuan (1998, p. 118) to state that “it is in the imagination of the Western world that the island has taken the strongest hold.”

The island *topos*, since its origins as a representative trope in European discourse, has encompassed multifarious meanings and functions for and within Western culture and literary imagination (Kinane 2016; Lowenthal, 2007; Gillis, 2004). Besides the

classics on islands and sea, such as Homer's *Odyssey* (800 BCE), Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611), Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883), H. G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), island metaphors continue to be frequently deployed in popular fiction (Crane & Fletcher, 2016, 2017), literature (Dautel & Schödel, 2017), and poetry (Patke, 2018). There has already been much valuable theorization on island literature both in the form of articles (e.g. Graziadei et al, 2017a, 2017b; Fletcher, 2011a) and monographs (e.g. Riquet, 2019; Kinane, 2016). Literature is the product of fantasy and imagination based on reality, and island literature reinforces this idea by providing a geographical and metaphorical space within which creative minds can convey their visions of the future of a nation or all humanity. Since the age of colonial expansion, European literature has increasingly presented islands as laboratories for "various political, sociological, and colonial practices," and these literary imaginations of insular spaces, manifesting the imperial rhetoric, "must be recognized as ideological tools that helped make colonial expansion possible" (DeLoughrey, 2007, p. 13).

In literary imagination, the island is a fertile land that can be fictionalized both as utopia and dystopia. Although the optimistic view of utopian ideals dominated the European colonial discourse, the tension "between utopian and dystopian qualities" has always been an intrinsic feature of "utopic islands and the representation of islands more generally" for the reason that "the relationship between utopia and dystopia is not a simple binary but a doubled system of negatives in that each oppositional term is inherently contradictory in and of itself as well as contradicting its putative opposite" (McMahon, 2016, p. 179). The contradiction between utopia and dystopia is most evident in the utopian island imagination of colonial expansion, which "was ideologically complicit in the most brutal dystopic practices of the day—specifically slavery and empire building" (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 17).

The utopian and dystopian island dichotomy has drawn much critical attention. Jill Casid (2003) writes about how European plants were introduced to the soil of colonies as agricultural conquest, and their seeds were sown in the island gardens imagined by 18th-century European writers such as Daniel Defoe, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre to fertilize and build the empire in the guise of an ideal and harmonious utopian garden. Casid (2003) reveals how literature helped promote the concept of empire by covering up the violence in colonial projects and practices. Elizabeth McMahon (2016, p. 16) investigates "the operations of the island dichotomy as both a paradise and a prison and as a supplement to the continental dominant" in fictional works of island literatures such as Trinidad-born Australian novelist Ralph de Bosiere's *Crown Jewel* (1952), Māori author Patricia Grace's *Mutuwhenua: The Moon Sleeps* (1978), Australian author Chloe Hooper's *The Tall Man: Death and Life on Palm Island* (2008), Aboriginal Australian authors Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) and Terri

Janke's *Butterfly Song* (2005). McMahon's discussion deconstructs the binarism in the imperialist worldview and identifies such internal features of islands as dynamism and interconnections. Niall Sreenan (2017, p. 267) establishes "a genealogy of post-Darwinian narratives in which the island facilitates a specifically utopian dream of individual autonomy, which is bound up with the ideology of capitalism." Sreenan (2017, p. 267), drawing upon Gilles Deleuze's philosophical reflections on "the nature of material islands and their psychic function as fantasies of transcendence," explores the co-existence of "utopian, capitalist fantasies of human sovereignty" and "deterministic pessimism" in four Western literary works centering on island imagery: Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), H. G. Wells' *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896), Aldous Huxley's *Island* (1962), and Michel Houellebecq's *The Possibility of an Island* (2005). There remain many other theoretical conceptions to be explored, such as Michel Foucault's theory of the heterotopia and eco-critical formulations of island ecotopia.

Studies of the themes of utopia and dystopia in island literature and culture have, however, tended to take Western perspectives even when discussing non-Western islands. Except for a few pioneering works, such as Bin Luo and Adam Grydehøj's (2017) article on conceptions of islands in ancient and imperial China, there has been insufficient study of the role of islands in non-Western literature and imaginations. The (post)coloniality of islands and the positions of islands within imperialism are increasingly being investigated through revaluations of classics and rediscoveries of neglected works in literary history (Fletcher, 2011b; Kapstein, 2017; DeLoughrey, 2019), but much work remains to be done to decenter the West in island literature studies.

Both the concepts of island and utopia have a Western origin. Although there are similar imaginations of ideal and insular spaces in other cultures, subtle differences often exist in their conceptualizations. When we use the words island and utopia to refer to or translate their non-Western counterparts, those differences and subtleties are suppressed or erased, a sacrifice to be made for the sake of cross-cultural communication and international recognition. For instance, compared with "the dominant Western model of the remote tropical oceanic island" (Hong, 2022b, p. 3), Chinese insular imaginaries are more flexible, diversified and heterogenous, including not only distant and disconnected ocean islands but also islands that do not fit in the conventional Western paradigm, such as marsh islands, river islands and near-shore islands. This is related to the significance of hills and mountains in the Chinese ideas of island. In traditional Chinese culture, insular geographies are often perceived as mountains, which is demonstrated by the fact that the Chinese character 岛, the counterpart of the word island in Chinese language, is made up of "two constituent characters, 鸟 (bird) and 山 (mountain)" (Luo & Grydehøj, 2017, p. 28). As a mainland culture, traditional Chinese culture conceives of islands considerably as hills and mountains, large or small, in inland areas and environments, marked by "volatile enclave status" and "amorphous

riverine geographies” (Hong, 2022b, p. 11). Landscape features aside, islands are only present if one wishes to see them, and the very act of seeing and defining islands imbues them with meaning (Su & Grydehøj, 2022).

Similarly, the traditional Chinese imaginaries of utopia differ significantly from the Western utopian stereotype. In Chinese cultural and literary tradition, two forms of utopia are prominent and related to insular spaces: an ideal island mountain in the sea where gods or immortals live and an agrarian, self-sufficient, and carefree county that can be reached by boat through a cave at the end of a grove with peach trees in full bloom. The first can be traced back to ancient Chinese mythology while the second originated in Chinese poet Tao Yuanming’s *The Peach Colony* 桃花源记, which imagined a perfect Taoist society “characterized by spontaneity, simplicity and detachment” (Hong, 2022b, p. 6). Both forms are divergent from the ideal island polity in the European maritime model of utopia. In Chinese cultural tradition, the dystopian imagination appeared relatively late in the mid-18th century with the publication of *Accounts of Sea Travel* 海游记, a novel focusing on moral degradation in a bad oceanic island society. Yet the Western type of utopia and dystopia emerged still later at the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) and in the 1980s respectively, obviously influenced by Western literature and culture (Hong, 2022b, p. 7).

Due to European colonial expansion and imperialism, non-Western cultures have generally suffered epistemological invasion and colonialism, an ongoing process of repressing non-Western modes of knowledge production and “making European rationality as the aim for all peoples” (Goyes, 2018, p. 326). This has not only occurred in countries with a direct colonial history but also in countries like China, which has not been fully colonized by Western imperial powers. According to Luo and Grydehøj (2017, p. 26), the residues and aftermaths of epistemological colonialism are still evident today:

There is more than just a whiff of lingering imperialism in the scholarly drive to use Western representations of non-Western characters and landscapes as a means of giving meaning to the non-Western world. It is a product of imperialism that even many of the most enlightened and well-intentioned scholars can regard it as legitimate to apply Western island metaphors as a universal standard, irrespective of the endemic, alternative island understandings that may be in place locally.

This is especially true with those Westernized elites and scholars who, influenced by the discourse of Western modernity and superiority, accept unquestioningly the universality of Western knowledge and values, as exemplified by the Chinese scholar who believes a near-shore island is not an island because its closeness and connection to the mainland do not conform with Western norms of islandness (Hong, 2022a), and the critic who

betrays “the sway of the stereotypical marine imaginary of islands” by mistaking the river island in the novel *The Roaming of a Beggar* 乞儿流浪记 (2009) for an oceanic one (Hong, 2022b, p. 10).

The task of decolonization, especially intellectual decolonization, is thus relevant and urgent to all countries and regions that belong to the non-Western world, although the difficulty and inconclusiveness of this task was predicted by Yaso Nadarajah and Adam Grydehøj (2016, p. 240) when they launched the decolonial project in island studies six years ago:

The difficulties inherent in this process are perhaps nowhere as evident as in attempts to balance the competing demands of a Western-oriented ‘modernity’—of fitting into the globalized world—and the desire to maintain and revitalize indigenous, non-Western traditions. Thus, for example, the urgent need for intellectual decolonization can come into conflict with struggles to create an autonomous intelligentsia in former colonies. The creation of a Westernised indigenous elite and the further undervaluation of indigenous knowledge are frequently and problematically coupled with colonized people’s efforts to achieve self-determination and stand as equals among other nations.

In response to such a dilemma, Luo and Grydehøj (2017, p. 40) highlight that a truly decolonial practice must go beyond simply imposing Western terms and thoughts on Indigenous or non-Western contexts and should embrace epistemological diversity by supporting alternative, minority cultures and knowledges “that predated, have existed alongside, or arose in spite of imperialism and colonial processes.” However, this is not easy to achieve, especially in the international academic community where Western epistemology and knowledge production are still privileged (Nadarajah et al, 2022).

In order to have their voices heard, a compromise made by non-Western scholars who are sensitive to the epistemological hegemony is to transform the contents and connotations of Western concepts when adapting them to local conditions, thus subverting the worldviews and values that are carried with these concepts and that have been complicit in colonial and neocolonial discourses. For instance, Western utopianism may be reshaped, localized and modified by merging with local visions of ideal spaces, a process that contributes to the fact that since its introduction to the public in China by Chinese intellectuals, the borrowed term 乌托邦 (a transliteration of utopia) has transformed its meaning adaptively in the Chinese context. Being a widely circulated term in Chinese society today, it evokes images of peach blossoms, boats, farmland, islands, and their symbolic meanings in the collective memory of Chinese people. These transformations may ultimately challenge, affect, and reformulate the Western utopian paradigm, with a growing number of Chinese scholars publishing about Chinese

utopianism in international journals. Similarly, the concept of the island has broadened in scope due to the increasing participation and visibility of non-Western scholars in the field of island studies. The hegemonic influence of Western concepts may lend a kind of subversive power to localized, non-Western alternative conceptualizations.

This special section on utopian and dystopian imaginations in island literature and culture aligns itself with the decolonial practice in island studies initiated by Nadarajah and Grydehøj (2016). It aims to enrich the field by bringing together and examining the literary and cultural representations of utopian islands from different parts of the globe and to demonstrate how studies of utopian island literature and culture can contribute to island decolonization efforts.

Within a cross-cultural comparative framework, the seven articles in this special thematic section consider the coloniality of the Western concept of the utopian island and the decolonial potential of its literary and cultural representations and transformations in non-Western contexts. Gang Hong (2022b) analyzes the imagination of utopian islands and insular geographies in Chinese literary works from a variety of historical periods by focusing on how Chinese imaginaries of ideal islandness diverge from and challenge the dominant Western model of island utopias. Tingcong Lin and Ping Su (2022) investigate, from an intertextual performative geography perspective, the dynamic interplay between the literary and cultural representations of Shamian (a river island in Guangzhou, China) as an island utopia and this colonial enclave's spatial reality and practices. They highlight how Shamian was discursively constructed into a utopia by colonial discourses in the second half of the 19th century. Emily Eyestone (2022) illustrates the ecofeminist geopoetics developed by the Martinique-born writer Suzanne Césaire and argues that Césaire's resistant geopoetics, based on the chaotic and unstable Caribbean culture, disrupts (neo)colonialist representations of Caribbean islands as tropical utopias for seeking pleasure or backward dystopias in need of modernization and technological development. Ping Su and Shoujuan Huang (2022) introduce the concept of creolotopia, a special utopian vision formed in the Caribbean through archipelagic thinking and creolization, and investigate how the tension of coexisting dystopia and creolotopia presented in Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* subverts the European norms of utopian islands and the dominance of Western epistemology. Mingwen Xiao and Huafei Chen (2022) discuss the utopian and dystopian perceptions revealed by the eating practices and culinary patterns depicted in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and argue that the novel deconstructs the concepts of linear progress and binarism in imperialist discourses. Tommy Tran (2022) studies the perception of Jeju as a tourist utopia in the island's development since 1963 when tourism and leisure became markers of modernity in Western discourses and points out that the comparison of Jeju to Hawaii has been promoted in public statements rather than official planning documents. Phillip Hayward (2022) analyzes how the word Avalon, referring to an idyllic and paradisa-

island in Arthurian legendry, has been applied to name diverse places across the globe in both colonial and postcolonial periods, thus demonstrating the transformative floating of the concept of utopian islandness associated with the word in these naming practices.

The cultural and geographical scope of the articles in this special section is accompanied by the contributors' disciplinary diversity. These articles offer a glimpse into the imaginaries of ideal or bad island spaces from different cultural traditions and the inherent intercultural qualities of utopian/dystopian island visions.

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