

Elizabeth McMahon (2016) *Islands, identity and the literary imagination*, London and New York, Anthem Press. 312pp, ISBN 978-1-78308-534-7. US115.00.

Islands are inherently duplicitous spaces. Apparently fixed and bounded, time and tide prove the lie to such certainties: especially so in the age of global warming. For many travellers, especially those of more romantic tastes, islands are the epitome of the elsewhere that promises a reprieve from melancholia and the sense of ennui that Baudelaire captured in the phrase *l'horreur domicile*. Yet while the island may be an archetypal site of escape, it may also be a space of entrapment and despair: utopia and dystopia, as McMahon demonstrates admirably, cohere inevitably and uneasily in the fractured space of the island imaginary. For a book that reaches ambitiously across texts and contexts, this is one of the central ideas to which the work returns: the duplicity of the island in literary discourse. The other key idea in this book is that the representations of islands in literary discourse provide significant sites for understanding what McMahon terms the “cartography of modernity,” and also for challenging the hegemony of that formation: for exposing the corruption of the status quo and for thinking through ways of being that are just and sustainable. It is these coordinates that guide McMahon’s analysis of island literature, specifically Australian literature, and serve to orient the reader who risks feeling at times lost in the archipelago of ideas and insights that McMahon charts.

Islands, identity and the literary imagination, is a welcome contribution to the interdisciplinary field of Island Studies, especially for those critics, like myself, who come late to the field. Noting the contributions to this field from literary and cultural studies scholars, McMahon points out in her introduction that Island Studies is a recent development that intersects with the humanities and social and geographical sciences. It is a field notable for the tension between materialist concerns for historical and economical inequities and contingencies (the island as a key to European mercantile expansionism, and non-European appropriation and underdevelopment), as well as for the idealism that surrounds islands, captured in statements like Donne’s “No man is an island.” Indeed, like many of the postcolonial theorists with whom she engages, McMahon is acutely concerned with the employment of the poetics of insularity and the homologies of interiority that are used to obscure material acts of violence and dispossession that are a key feature in so many colonial island histories. In this respect, McMahon’s book demonstrates a key approach of literary studies: the sophisticated employment of close reading to expose the operations of real politics. Her first chapter, which provides a genealogy of Donne’s dubious maxim, is a case in point.

As this chapter demonstrates, on one level *Islands, Identity and the Literary Imagination* is a rewarding examination of the mythologies and values attributed to islands in colonial and postcolonial discourses since the inception of the so-called Age of Discovery. McMahon observes that literature has been a major site wherein “the Western imagination repeatedly rehearses and develops the enthrallment of the island. This island enchantment has created a kind of violent ideogram in the collective psyche, one that connects identity, space and desire and which has fuelled colonial acquisition as much as it has provided mental space of reflection.” On another level the work is a concerted (re)examination of the functions of islands in Australian literature. Yet, McMahon is not concerned solely with Australian literature as a symptom or projection of a national cultural imaginary, so much as providing a set of coordinates from which to consider the way that islands real and imaginary have been constructed within Western colonial and postcolonial discourse. In this respect, McMahon is in step with the recent comparative turn in Australian literary studies that approaches the field as one node within a transnational network.

McMahon sets out from the observation that representations of Australia often oscillate between the landmass as continent and as island, and she “investigates the relationship between Australia’s seemingly contradictory geography and its literary imaginary to identify both specific effects and nodes of regional and global interconnection.” McMahon seeks to “identify distinct aspects of Australia’s representations of itself as lived space, according to its designation as an island continent, and to contextualise these qualities in the genealogy of globalisation and [Australia’s] literary archive.”

In undertaking this task, and after dissecting the heritage of Donne’s maxim, in Chapters 2 and 3 McMahon reads a number of Australian texts and authors with and against Caribbean exemplars. Using the conceit that the European annexations of the archipelago of the Caribbean and Australia (the first and the last of the “new” worlds) book-end the first phase of colonial expansionism, McMahon compares and contrasts the terrains of their postcolonial literatures. The comparativism of *Islands, identity and the literary imagination* is on display too in the book’s extensive appendix, ‘Colonial Ties between the West Indies and Australia’.

The final chapters contain, for me, the most interesting material. Chapter 4 analyses the sub-genre of shipwreck fiction (in prose and poetry), and reads such fantasies as projections of an impending catastrophe of colonialism. Chapter 5 is a nuanced treatment of the nexus between utopian and dystopian fantasies of the island, and acts as a kind of riposte to the apocalyptic visions of colonialism examined previously. It is here that McMahon brings together her central ideas about island duplicity and the possibility of the island to serve as a site for the recasting of modern social life. The discussions examine the association of colonialist island cultures with commodity fetishism and xenophobia in readings of texts that include Tasmanian model villages, Trinidadian-born Australian social realist Ralph de Bossiere’s 1952 novel *Crown Jewel*, Maori author Patricia Grace’s *Mutuwhenua* (1978), Chloe Hooper’s *The Tall Man* (2008), Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* (2006), Torres Strait Islander myths, and Terry Janke’s *Butterfly*. For McMahon, such exemplars of the postcolonial literatures of island cultures challenge and undo the worldviews that European imperialism has sought to impose.

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