

Confessions of a Nesomaniac

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I confess that I am a nesomaniac. This addictive condition may be new to you but you certainly know the names of some of others that have had this affliction: James Michener, Paul Gauguin, Robert Louis Stevenson, Herman Melville.... There are also scores of others whose names you wouldn't recognize, probably because they never recovered from this malady and, consequently, never returned to mainstream civilization.

You may have guessed by now that a nesomaniac is someone who is crazy about islands and loves being on them. A nesomaniac also could be someone who goes crazy while on an island and maybe that applies to me as well. My wife tells me that I certainly act differently when I'm on an island than I do when I'm on the mainland. I'm more relaxed, often sun-burned, my mouth is sore from eating too much pineapple.... but I'm almost always happier.

My essay is about islands, why I'm crazy about them. Clearly to me, the origin and incubation of it started and then worsened over the 30 years I taught a semester-long course at Berkeley's Gump Research Station on the island of Mo'orea in French Polynesia called the *Biology of Tropical Islands*. I taught there this fall semester and if that wasn't enough of the island experience for me, I spent another month after the course on two larger Pacific islands, Taiwan, and Luzon in the Philippines.

Everyone has experienced strong images about islands portray positive feelings. Vacation advertisements emphasize sensuality, escape, the chance for desired solitude, seduction, and self-sufficiency. However, islands can have negative images as well and often are used effectively in novels and movies. There islands can be presented as lonely, inhospitable, forbidden, mysterious, and dangerous.

In fact, islands can elicit stereotypical responses strictly based on their location. For example, Arctic islands are typically depicted as inhospitable and isolated, while Caribbean islands are friendly, bountiful, and carefree. No islands, however, can evoke romance and allure as those of the South Seas. Tahiti, like Timbuktu, is almost a "brand". The name itself produces instant responses in the human imagination.

Advertisers capitalize on the charms of tropical islands in the Caribbean and the South Pacific to promote not only travel getaways, but also casual clothing and lifestyles, and as a mechanism for escape and fantasy. The message in selling the island experience is clear: islands will do for you what mainland life can't, and people can come to islands either to find themselves.... or to lose themselves.

Let's start by looking at how islands can be portrayed in the media. Clearly to me, the archetype of television shows featuring islands is *Gilligan's Island*. Universally ridiculed by critics, this 1960s television show was produced for only four years. But reruns of its 98 episodes continue to be seen, and cartoons and even movies have revived the original story. A recent book (*Gilligan Unbound*) actually maintained that this television series mirrors the beliefs of 1960s America, and is a "window" into the liberal democratic culture present at that time. I could note that the author of this book is described on the book jacket as being a "Top Prof", according to *The National Enquirer*.

More recently, the first popular reality-television show in the United States, *Survivor*, was initially set on an uninhabited island off of Borneo, and many other Pacific islands--the Marquesas, Pearl Islands, Cook Islands, Palau, Vanuatu, Fiji--have been the location of subsequent installments. Concurrently, British television featured *Castaway 2000*, where contestants spent months living on an uninhabited island off the Scottish coast. Unlike the (sometime) comedic message of *Gilligan's Islands*, these reality shows emphasize the danger of islands, where contestants are forced to be resourceful in order to "survive" in the island wild.

These island reality shows also serve as a populist social experiment, often showing viewers how the select society of participants react when confronted by the forced isolation islands provide. Even though the participants in these television shows choose to be on islands, these are not island experiences typically desired by the vacation bound.

Islands have been locations for other popular television shows as well, including *Hawaii Five-O*, *Hawaiian Eye*, and *Magnum PI*--all set in Hawaii, *Temptation Island* and *Death in Paradise* in the Caribbean, and *Fantasy Island*, *Man from Atlantis*, and *Lost* set on fictional islands. In all of these shows, some of the benefits of island living are presented, although crime and human frailties are always present as an undercurrent. Television shows set on islands have also contributed catch-phrases to popular culture, sometimes becoming painful with their repetition, but fortunately short-lived, such as "Book 'em, Dano" from *Hawaii Five O*, "The plane, the plane" from *Fantasy Island*, and "Voted off the island" from *Survivor*.

Well over 1,000 movies have the word "island" appearing in their title. However, rather than drawing on real islands many of these films draw on the metaphor of island isolation or loneliness. This has a tradition probably even before John Donne's famous 400-year old poem that many of us memorized when we were young--"No Man is An Island".

There are, however, hundreds of additional movies without "island" in the title that take place on islands. These latter films evoke the idea of survival or the noble savage (*Robinson Crusoe*, *Castaway*), freedom from adults (*Blue Lagoon*, *Lord of the Flies*), an idyllic paradise interrupted by an outside event (the arrival of Europeans or missionaries such as in *Mutiny on the Bounty* and *Hawaii*, respectively), and internal conflicts or disagreements (*Rapa Nui* and *Tabu*). Of course, World War II movies recount great battles on islands of the Pacific (*Guadalcanal Diary*, and *Tora! Tora! Tora!*). The contrast between beautiful island settings with the atrocities of war, have long been a staple of Hollywood.

Like other forms of popular culture, cinema has also explored the duality of island images, exploiting both the positive and the darker sides. Beyond loneliness, films set on islands have suggested the possibility of being eaten (*Cannibals of the South Seas*), visiting the lair of villains (*Dr. No*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*), and even encountering non-human monsters (*King Kong* and *Jurassic Park*). More recently, the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series has added a supernatural element to island adventures.

The 1958 movie *South Pacific* gave us one of the most romantic movie images ever created—the mythical Bali Hai. This, like Shangri-la in the book and movie *Lost Horizon* (which was set in the Himalayas not on an island) has become synonymous with paradise, love, and especially transformation. To me the key song in *South Pacific* is *Bali Hai*. The lyrics and melody of this song evoke the feeling of transformation by suggesting that people “live on a lonely island and long for another, a special island”. Perhaps reflecting this, the name Bali Hai has been applied to resorts throughout the Pacific, sometimes thousands of miles apart.

Although movies and television are more recent additions to the popular culture canon, islands have figured prominently in literature for centuries (*The Odyssey*, *The Tempest*). The island novel that may be foremost for to most readers may be Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. Based on the actual marooning of a Scottish seaman on M^as a Tierra (which is 400 miles from Chile), it changed the images of islands from fearful places (albeit lonely ones), to sites of redemption and freedom.

Many of the great island novels are based in the South Pacific. This huge ocean has spawned a rich number of stories that have become popular lore. American writers over successive generations, from London and Stevenson to Nordhoff and Hall to Michener, along with writers of other nationalities such as Burke (of Australia) and Loti (of France), have contributed to the island fantasy of free love and free coconuts.

A more recent trend has been to revisit islands and sites from previous voyages (Horowitz’s *Blue Latitudes* retraces Cook’s Voyages) or of those evoking strong popular culture images (Theroux’s *Happy Isles of Oceania*). Unfortunately, some examples of this genre seem to be searching for a zoo-like paradise. Comments in these books about modern life on islands range from being condescending to mean-spirited such as when the authors discover that not only television but cell phones have joined the traditional culture they had hoped to find.

Just as sight and sound convey images of islands in television and movies, culinary tastes may reflect images of islands. Perhaps not unexpectedly, many of these tastes are actually continental creations. For example, starting in the 1930s and continuing to the present day, Polynesian-island themed-bars (also referred to as “Tiki bars”) and restaurants have appeared. Names like “Tiki Village,” “Don the Beachcomber’s,” and perhaps most famously “Trader Vic’s” are known to many of us. By providing decorative escapism and an assortment of rum-based drinks, with exotic names such as Black Widow, Zombie, Missionary’s Downfall, Samoan Fog Cutter, and Mai Tai, they have captured the exotic spirit

of island mythology. The food that is served in “Tiki bars” often contain non-Polynesian ingredients such as cooking sherry and Worcestershire sauce. Reportedly these foods are the origin of the Chinese “take-out” food now widely consumed for decades. Décor of the Tiki bars includes fishing nets and floats, A-frame design, masks, and spears. One of the interesting aspects of the design of many of these island-themed restaurants is that oftentimes patrons have to cross a bridge (sometimes even over a gurgling stream) to get from the entrance to the restaurant interior. It has been suggested that this design subtly represents a “symbolic crossing” and an escape from reality to fantasy.

The often idyllic and exotic styles of “island music” also have become part of popular culture. Arguably, Jamaican music has had a greater influence on worldwide popular culture than the music of any other island. Interest and appreciation of reggae music make it one of the few aspects of island popular culture that has extended into both developed and developing countries.

“Reggae” is practically synonymous with Jamaica, and the icon for the reggae movement remains the late Bob Marley. His songs are as likely to play on classic rock radio stations as they are on TV commercials or as background music in elevators. His face is as common on t-shirts as Che Gueverra’s, another island icon. While the dreadlock hairstyle, open use of marijuana, and even tri-color flag—all mainstays of reggae style—had their roots in Jamaica’s cultural upheaval, they have since been widely adopted by non-Jamaicans seeking to express a sense of acceptable non-conformity.

Other Caribbean islands have equally rich musical traditions, some of which developed from centuries-old African and European influences. For example, the beginning of calypso in Trinidad purportedly was a musical means of communicating information among working slaves because conversations in the fields were banned. But by the 1950s, modern calypso, enhanced by the steel-pan drum, became a worldwide craze, largely from Harry Belafonte’s *Banana Boat Song*. A dance/parlor game, the limbo also became associated with music from the West Indies. However, in terms of culture proceeding in the opposite direction, other islands have altered Western music to create their own native sound, most notably Cuba. This was popularized by the film *Buena Vista Social Club*. This venue never actually existed as a specific place for music but tourists to Cuba now proudly talk of having visited the spot on their highly regulated tours.

Polynesian music, mostly emanating from the tourist areas of Hawaii, is also immediately recognizable. The first broad exposure to Hawaiian music was at the Panama-Pacific International Exhibition in San Francisco in 1915. This introduced the slack-key guitar and the jaunty strumming of the ukulele. Hawaiian music, or at least Americanized versions of it, was an immediate hit.

Hundreds of Hawaiian-type songs were penned by American musicians, with nonsensical titles like *Oh How She Could Yacki Hacki Wicki Wicki Wo*, to *On the Beach at Waikiki*, and *Lovely Hula Hands*. Singers like Bing Crosby and Jimmie Rodgers added Hawaiian sounds to their repertoire. Hawaiian music had a particularly strong effect on country music, having incorporated the tones onto the steel guitar (best exemplified by masters such as Jerry

Byrd and Chet Atkins), which can still be heard in the genre today.

The ukulele, a staple instrument of Hawaiian music, was popularized in the United States by singers like Bing Crosby and the early television host Arthur Godfrey, and often had a pineapple shape that both reflected an island image and produced a “warmer sound.” The height of the Hawaiian Islands' music popularity was arguably Don Ho's *Tiny Bubbles*, in 1966. By any measure, the song was a diluted offering of true Hawaiian styles, but it brought attention to the island's sounds, with Don Ho himself serving as a figurehead.

Few other islands in the world have had as much pop-culture impact as the Caribbean and Pacific islands, with two notable exceptions: Ibiza and Ireland. Although the Mediterranean islands have long had an association with music (including the irresistible song of the Sirens from *The Odyssey*), the Spanish island of Ibiza became a tourist destination precisely because of its music. In the 1980s, with the rise of electronic dance culture and techno-raves, Ibiza started many trendy nightclubs. By the 1990s, its reputation as a hedonistic, sun-drenched, and music-saturated paradise gave it iconic status as a popular culture sanctuary for both partying and music.

Over the last quarter-century, Ireland has been the island with some of the most popular and successful musical groups. Many of these groups maintain ties to the country's older roots by drawing upon Celtic melodies and rhythms. For example, the immensely popular band U2 has embedded a distinctly Celtic context in their music. Incorporating Irish symbols, U2 evokes a mystical, isolated romanticism of Ireland as an island.

The allure of islands has widely been used by advertisers to attract consumers. They have capitalized on the top fantasy vacation for men being marooned on a tropical island with several younger women. Likewise, advertisers have played on sensual images of islands very effectively. Couples holding hands and sharing loving glances (again, often with the male considerably older than the female in magazines catering to men), beautiful sunsets, and deserted beaches have been the staple of tourist advertising to either specific islands or collective, exotic island locations. A further staple of island vacation-advertising is promoting the impossible combination of luxuriant tropical vegetation (which needs quite a bit of rain) and continual sunshine!

However, travel is not the only product that island advertising sells: skin-care products are named “Bali Orchid Body Lotion” and “Bora Bora Sand Scrub,” rum commercials that offer “slow down” images, and “Souper Star Hawaii soups” appear on television and in print advertisements. The successful clothing chain Tommy Bahama's slogan is “purveyor of island lifestyles” and it has expanded from clothing to include even home furnishings. The message in using islands in advertising is clear: islands will do for you what mainland life will not.

Islands have long been used as indications of personal status. The elite American families have gone to Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard for generations. Private islands in the Thousand Islands area of the St. Lawrence River have castles built on them, and Atlantis (the lost continent originally described by Plato) has become a luxurious island resort in

the Bahamas. In fact, the inaugural issue of *Fortune* magazine in 1930 suggested that “As a great symbol of possession, the privately owned island, may yet supplant the steam yacht.”

Every island seeking tourists is advertised as having friendly and welcoming natives. But, at least one crime-ridden Caribbean island has a “Visitors’ Society” that provides clothing to tourists whose luggage has been stolen and has members that visit victims of violent crime during their stays in local island hospitals!

The gesture that now has become the connotation of the island life style by young people throughout the world is the “shaka” sign. First associated with Hawaii and surfing it now is widely used by teenagers to denote a carefree, “hang loose” attitude associated with islands. This gesture has an interesting origin. A Hawaiian sugar-cane worker had lost his three middle fingers in an accident. His hand gesture of “all clear” became the shaka!

In conclusion, every day we see images that remind us of islands - people in Hawaiian shirts, dreadlocked travelers, advertising posters, beauty products. A popular parlor game that has been played for decades is “If you were stranded on a deserted island what books or music or movies, or what person, would you want to take with you?” The connotation of this question is one of isolation, but maybe also, one of possible contentment.

Through their incorporation into popular culture, islands provide an accessible view of the exotic. “Come to an island and your life will be changed, even if it’s only while you are here.” Perhaps we have made islands a romantic icon because we need something to help us to escape life’s inevitable tedium and troubles. Maybe a dream of going to a “better place” (even if it’s only through what we wear, taste, or see), lets normal life be less overwhelming. But beware: isolation, loneliness, and to some workaholics and type A personalities the worst affliction of all--boredom--may also await the island visitor as well!