CHAPTER EIGHT

Imaginary Worlds

Plural Seas, Liminal Foundations, Contested Identities

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INTRODUCTION

History has been shaped by the powerful, and the cultural history of the sea as a space of imaginary worlds is no exception. Norms of description, such as taxonomies of difference and similarity, stifle our vision of the vivid internal heterogeneity of oceanic imaginations. Critical race theorist Sarah Ahmed has observed that “differences become congealed in entities; differences become sediment, heavy histories that weigh us down” (2015: 95). Ahmed’s work reveals a sentiment that resonates across other intersecting categories of alterity. Maritime histories based on a canon of difference are not liquid like their subject matter. The tired and exotic tropes of medieval oceanic dichotomies such as “Self” and “Other” and an obsession with Orientalism are suffocating if attended to at the expense of other narratives, yet their cultural force is the foundation of European colonial hegemony and defines the history and heritage of both Europeans and those affected by colonization. As editor Elizabeth Lambourn has described in the Introduction to this volume, the work of establishing a comprehensive cultural history of the sea is a work in process and requires flexibility. A history of the imaginary sea is even more problematic, for it rests on ever-shifting liminal foundations and contested identities.

Late medieval literature and culture scholar Marianne O’Doherty describes this liminality well when introducing the Indies as a unit of medievalist analysis that is “neither a fixed, bordered entity that can be plotted on a modern map nor
an abstract discursive construct without referent in the physical world or impact upon individuals" (2013: 5). Historician arguments that instrumentally convert story into primary source material without nuance run the risk of trivializing the cultural heritage of already subaltern voices. The imaginary world exists at a threshold between categories of being. As in the literary genre of magical realism first deployed in the postcolonial Americas—in which the fantastic and the real seamlessly merge without division—the plural oceanic imaginaries explored in this chapter do not observe boundaries between types or degrees of reality, be they mythical, magical, or supernatural in nature (see Zarur and Faris 1995). By privileging multiple worldviews and cosmologies that mingle levels and forms of reality, these forms of knowing share perspectives made strange by the enforced boundaries of Western empiricism and rationalism. The medium of narrative transmission is of key importance, be it histories, texts, stories, material culture, or ideas percolating through the oceans of the world.

Claiming that themes and stories are part of a shared imaginary world should not be oversimplified or turned into a master narrative. Matthias Egeler, a scholar of Norse and Irish place, has pointed out that exploring mythmaking and storytelling as part of a "deep history" in cultures that are known to be historically connected is hazardous (2017: 15-16). It is necessary to look for "complex, non-trivial" correspondences rather than purely thematic similarities. Elements within mythologies should be compared within the context of their own time and place of creation and should rely on primary sources rather than claims made in secondary literature. As Egeler puts it, "the main aim of studying [...] contact is not a mere history of motifs, but a history of human encounters" (16). This is also true of imaginary worlds: studying their differences or similarities uncritically is not useful or culturally sensitive.

To understand the interactions within this chapter, imaginary worlds or otherworlds must be understood as a community of interacting individuals, cultures, and world systems, and not as a cascade of abstracted themes and motifs to be compared like a family tree. The fecundity and plurality inherent to the folkloric, mythic, spiritual, and literary visions of imaginary worlds within the oceans are unified by a form of culturally nuanced reading familiar to medievalists. The way visions of life, death, exile, or return are expressed is unique, situated temporally and culturally as a core strand of place and identity. There is not one sea but as many seas as there are cultures to experience them. In fact, as Sinophone island theorists Bin Luo and Adam Grydehøj posit, global imaginaries are co-implicated: historical Western island imaginaries bear strong resemblances to those in the East, and the cultural history of the sea implies a shared and interwoven history (2017: 25-6). As Luo and Grydehøj point out, "Russia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, the near-shore islands of Africa as a whole, and South America have been largely missing from island studies' worldview, thereby limiting our ability to engage in a truly informed and truly global island studies" (4). To ignore all of these regions to only study Europe continues a colonial epistemology in need of deconstruction.

Medieval minds were hypnotized by the whisper of myths in the waves and refracted them into new multi-themed and multilingual confections (Smith 2016). Water is a different face of medieval literary and historical reception and adaptation, endowing the oceans of the world with the power to hold cultural narratives, acting as a laboratory of stories. As geographers Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters have described, "like the ocean itself, maritime subjects and watery dreams can move across, fold into, and emerge out of water in unrecognized ways," (2015: 261). Cultural beliefs swirled through the waves in eddies and flows of medieval thought and its global contemporaries, as waves in eddies, paradoxes, myths, and stories that make the sea restless coming with afterlives, myths, and stories that make the sea restless coming with afterlives. The worlds that emerged were both spatialized with human story and identity. The worlds that emerged were both spatialized with human story and identity. The worlds that emerged were both spatialized with human story and identity. The worlds that emerged were both spatialized with human story and identity. The worlds that emerged were both spatialized with human story and identity.
Asia-Pacific, Oceania, the Indian Ocean, the Islamicate world, and Europe in equal measure, moving from East to West. Its attention is to deliberately diffuse. In this chapter, you will also encounter a wide array of supplements from disciplines such as anthropology (Scott 2012), geography (Steinberg and Peters 2015), indigenous culture and materiality (Rosiek, Snyder, and Pratt 2020), and popular history (Tallack 2016) to name but a few.

The very mutability of imaginary worlds defines our experience of the sea, and the Middle Ages participated in this long thread of intermingling narratives, adding its own unique resonances that are with us still. The cultural reality of these powerful stories is strongly felt, and cultural imagination or ocean-going life cannot be conceived without their presence. They are part of what manuscript scholar Martha Rust (2008) has termed the “manuscript matrix,” a mnemonic-technical, imaginative and textual space in which the diverse material and embodied practices of manuscripts combine to form a world within a text. They are also oral history and storytelling, passed from generation to generation for millennia. They are machines of identity as medievalist Jeffrey J. Cohen (2003) describes it, spilling out of the body and into the world. Like Rust’s matrices, environmental engagement creates a cultural symbolism without boundaries, it creates an embodied reading experience tying the environment to a long history of myth (Siewers 2009: 5–6).

To read the sea, one must be entangled in an assemblage of ocean, archipelago, coast, and hinterland in which different registers are spatially encoded and navigated. One must engage in a wet ontology that privileges the aqueous transactions of stories (Steinberg and Peters 2015). How can we reconcile the conflicting narrative forces at play? Postcolonial knowledge is more accommodating (see McCusker and Soares 2011). We might imagine the eddies and currents of oceanic knowledge tidalectically, as Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite did, rather than dialectically. Brathwaite scholar Anna Reckin describes the tidalectic as “a kind of recursive movement-in-stasis that is anti-progressive (the tidalectic) but also contains within it specific vectors” (2003: 2), such as the movement of the slave trade across the Atlantic. Menz has added to the call for another path, arguing that “Geography may not quite be destiny, but in today’s era of environmental uncertainty, a history that embraces nonhuman ecological systems seems essential” (2016: 562). Nonhuman history is never linear, singular, localized, or exhaustible in meaning.

Take the example of islands. Powerful repositories of the oceanic imaginary world, places and spaces where mysteries hide within the concealing bulk of the ocean, islands are a crucial actor in the stories to come. We might see these islands as existing within a network of both real and imagined waterscapes, corralled together into an “aquapelic assembly”—defined by island and maritime cultures specialist Philip Hayward as “a social unit existing in a location in which the aquatic spaces between and around a group of islands are

ISLANDED OTHERWORLDS OF OCEANIA

Belief in a maritime afterworld is a common theme in the mythologies and cultures of Oceania. Exploring this theme requires a more respectful engagement with indigenous approaches to materiality and nonhuman agency as well as time and space (Rosiek, Snyder, and Pratt 2020). To do so here, we begin in the East and move to the West. Imaginary worlds and their cultural expression bear a striking resemblance to the narrative phenomenon of the “matter,” described by anthropologist Michael W. Scott as “not the evolutionary precursors to so-called national epics—but the prolific, unsorted, unreconciled, living prima materia—both written and oral out of which such epics have sometimes been selected, arranged, and edited” (2012: 120–1). Matters are familiar to European audiences in the form of the “matter of Britain,” the body of myths and stories surrounding legendary kings and heroes such as King Arthur.

Using the example of Makira island in the Solomon Islands, Scott describes loosely cohering tales and traditions that are truly nebulous, consisting of
undelimitd tangents spinning off from and producing sacred centers, holy
lands—motherlands and fatherlands—emotion-laden landscapes shaped by
marvelous deeds and events" (2012: 121). Like the enfolding cloud of ideas
that is a European medieval matter—the Brendan legend and its archipelago
of wonders might also qualify—tales of the ocean are the substrate from
which culture, identity, and myth are formed around a sea of islanded tales
and identities. Pacific island cultures contain many islands with traits like those
found in European myths: Tongan and Fijian mythology speaks of an "Island
of Women" filled with beautiful but dangerous goddesses (hotuone) located
somewhere to the northeast (Egeler 2017: 308). These stories may share
qualities, but they represent separate manifestations of what Egeler terms a
"willingness to locate otherworldly places of myth within coordinates of the
real world" (308). Imagination in and with the ocean bonds stories together.

We begin in Aotearoa-New Zealand, where the island of Hawai`i occupies a
notable premodern role in Māori history and myth as well as a continued living
cultural importance. This insular narrative defies Western epistemologies, existing
beyond the restricting ambit of the word "imaginary." It is twenty-first-century
culture and materiality, as alive today as in the past. European anthropologists
and folklorists of the nineteenth century have belittled the mentalities and beliefs
of Oceania's islanded peoples, understanding them as stories of half-remembered
historical fact waiting to be "unpicked." This is inaccurate: a history that is a
spiritual place and a myth that refers to historical events are more capacious than
the term "imaginary world" allows. Taking steps to decolonize this mentality is
a fundamental theme of twenty-first-century island studies.

European knowledge regimes have long clashed with the cultural complexity of
Hawai`i: although accounts differed between the tūi (tribal groupings), early
travelers to Aotearoa were told matter-of-factly that these islands were not the
original home of the Māori. The story of how Aotearoa came to be peopled
by Māori is filtered through an ancestral island known as Hawai`i, somewhere
beyond the northeastern horizon. In the best-known version of the story, an
explorer named Kupe from this place discovered a bountiful new home—at
some point between c. 800 CE and an estimate of the fourteenth century CE—
and named it Aotearoa, the land of the long white cloud in te reo, the language
of the Māori. Kupe returned to Hawai`i, told his people of his voyage, and led
a "great fleet" of canoes to the new land.

Recent archaeological research has supported this chronology. Radiocarbon
dating reveals two distinct phases of expansion from Western Polynesia to the
Society Islands and on to Aotearoa-New Zealand, the first between 1025 and
1121, the second from 1200 to 1290 (Wilmshurst et al. 2011). The discovery
on New Zealand's South Island of parts of the hull of a sophisticated Polynesian
voyaging canoe dated to c. 1400 CE (Figure 0.8) embodies the technologies of
long-distance maritime travel that enabled these voyages (Johns, Irwin, and Sung
2014). The passengers of these canoes were the ancestors of the Māori people
(Tallack 2016: 20). Orbell points out that the story represents a transposition of
memory into myth, not a literal representation of "fact" as sought by European
empiricists (1991: 8). The "matter" of Hawai`i is a spiritual repository for a
spiritually codified otherworld as well as a history. There is trivialization in the
European collection and curation of myths and legends from across the world
that must be challenged.

Hawai`i is an enduring substrate of the physical fabric of Aotearoa. Material
objects are thought to dwell within the land; objects with remarkable powers or
value might have come from there. Treasured tikis and pendants of greenstone
owned by hānui families were handed down from generation to generation
from the first ancestors who had come to Aotearoa in their canoes.
Māori—stones, stone images of portions of soil or sand—contain the life
principle of plants, animals, or sea life. Many had come from Hawai`i (Orbell
1991: 52) and were deposited in places where they could exercise their power.
Their mana was supernatural because it was of a supernatural place, but the
physical object was also from another place. As Dilys Johns and her coauthors
remark in their analysis of the sea turtle carved on the Anawaka canoe (Figure
8.1), turtles are uncommon in Māori iconography but ubiquitous in East
Polynesian art, myth, and ritual and carry a heavy symbolic and religious load
(Johns, Irwin, and Sung 2014). As a largely pelagic species that nevertheless
relied upon beaches to lay their eggs,

sea turtles were known to make long migrations in open ocean. They came
from the deep sea onto land and they also crossed symbolic boundaries. On
occasion they could represent humans or gods. Turtles were associated with
voyaging to the afterworld and assisted in a successful passage of the spirit
after death [...]. A sea turtle on a 600-y-old Polynesian canoe is a unique and
powerful symbol.

(Johns, Irwin, and Sung 2014: 14729)

In the Anawaka canoe Hawai`i is alive in Aotearoa, even several centuries after
the island's first settlement.

In 1793, Chief Tuki Tahua was asked by Europeans to draw a map of
the islands of Aotearoa, originally sketched on the floor in chalk it was later
transposed to paper and then reproduced in later publications (Figure 8.2). He
reproduced the islands with great accuracy and also included, as seen in the
dotted lines on Figure 8.2, the path of a "spirits road" running the length of the
North Island. The road led to Te Reinga Wairua, marked as "Terry-inna" on
the map, a point at the extremity of the North Island to the northeast of Cape
Maria Van Diemen, on Cape Reinga, where the pohutukawa or "leaping place
of the spirits" was located. This was a place where each spirit would dive into
the ocean and swim toward the other world and be reunited with Hawai`i.
FIGURE 8.1 Low-relief carving of a sea turtle, from part of a much larger East Polynesian voyaging canoe excavated on New Zealand’s South Island and radiocarbon dated to around 1400 CE. © Dilys Johns.

FIGURE 8.2 Engraved copy of the so-called “Tuki’s map,” originally drawn in 1793 chalk by the Maori chief Tuki Te Terenui Whare Pirau for Philip King, Governor of New South Wales and Norfolk Island. The spirit road to Te Reinga Wairua, marked “Teri-inga,” is clearly visible at the top of the map. From Collins (1798). © Out of Copyright (public domain).
Europeans recorded the account but were unable to digest its episteme. The mythical home of the people was also prelife as well as afterlife, the place from which new life sprang and came into the islands of Aotearoa (Tallack 2016: 21). It was the place where Io, the supreme spirit, created the world and its first people. For the Māori iwi, Hawaiki is origin, destination, home, and afterlife.

Although the peopling of Aotearoa-New Zealand coincided with the European Middle Ages and is thus a “medieval” story in some sense, other cognate examples demonstrate the continuity of islanded otherworlds and the permeability—and often meaninglessness—of temporal descriptors. On the island of Mabuiag in the Torres Strait Islands, for example, the island of Kibu was beyond the North–West horizon. After death, the spirit would travel to Kibu and live as a markai or ghost, returning home temporarily if they wished or warring with the living if they chose (Tallack 2016: 17–18). Islanders could invoke the markai through divination or spirit consultation, or in “death dance” ceremonies held several months after someone had passed away. In a story told on Mabuiag, a handsome young man named Tabepa is promised in marriage to Ug of Kiba, a markai girl. After a courting process that spans the worlds of the living and the dead—with the spirit girl visiting her betrothed at night and returning to Kibu by day—Ug takes Tabepa to visit her on Kibu. The story ends tragically when Tabepa is killed by Baz, a markai jealous of Ug’s betrothed, and joins the dead himself (Lawrie 1972: 105–7).

Island cultures of the Pacific share the notion that the realms of the dead and living are not wholly separate but interchangeable and semipermeable. Other mobile maritime practices share this sense of permeability, tying them together through the common membrane of the ocean. Movement is possible, but only under certain circumstances. European folklorists and anthropologists spent decades trying to rationalize and spatialize the “location” of these places, only to miss the point. The living can visit the dead, and vice versa, but this does not mean that these places exist in space or time. Travels from the islands of the living to those of the dead trace paths through a shared cultural sea, similar in many ways to other travels from island to island. The ancestors are close, and islands are separated by space rather than time or ontological status.

**EAST ASIAN CELESTIAL DOMAINS**

Moving northwest to elaborate East Asian literary cultures such as those of China and Japan, the ocean was the site of celestial courts and supernatural entities caught in wonderous versions of earthly disputes and politics. Their conflicts, interactions, and transactions were the fabric on which the mandate of heaven was written—they shaped what was ordered and what was disordered in the times to follow. In a parallel multilingual, polyvalent, and intertextual legendary spanning the European Middle Ages and unfolding over preceding millennia,
FIGURE 8.3 Section from a handscroll depicting the Immortals’ islands of Fanghu, Yingzhou, and Penglai, part of the Isles of the Blessed, Ming dynasty, fifteenth century, artist unknown after Puguang (active c. 1286–1309). Ink and color on silk. Overall dimensions 31.5 × 970 cm. Royal Ontario Museum, 2005.22.1. This acquisition was made possible with the generous support of Mr. and Mrs. A. Charles Baillie. © Royal Ontario Museum.
literary culture shaped and reshaped its oceanic legends as it reinvented itself. It was not and is not dependent on European norms or standards for its reality.

The primary traits of otherworlds within the oceans of the Asia-Pacific imbued hidden islands and underwater realms with traits not found on land: immortality, perfection, timelessness, magic, elemental power. They beat the bounds of the possible, the correct, the moral, and the natural, setting up the world order. In Taoist myth, the divine Yellow Emperor Huangdi pacified the disordered waters by defeating Kuei, an ox-like creature found on Flowing Waves Mountain deep in the East Sea. Like many global myths of cosmogony, the exploits of Huangdi iteratively gave form to the natural order and its expected behaviors. Kuei was a rogue actor: his passage through the ocean caused terrible storms, and his voice created catastrophic thunder. Only by overcoming Kuei’s elemental fury and defeating him could the Yellow Emperor advance his quest to balance the primordial world, creating the model for future kingship (Palmer and Zhao 1997: 50–2).

Elsewhere in Taoist narrative, the figures of the Eight Immortals cast a legendary shadow over the seascape and its wonders. They were said to live on Mount Penglai—known as Hōrai in Japanese mythology—and four other islands hidden within the Bohai Sea. Also known as the Isles of the Blessed or the Mystic Isles, this archipelago was the setting for legendary deeds, appearing on maps to haunt future generations and yet shaped out of mythology and deep time (Perry 1921: 158). The islands once floated with the tides, never fixed, but were eventually supported on the back of giant turtles (159). While often dedicated to the Taoist Immortals date back as far as the Han dynasty of the third century BCE to first century CE, depictions of the Eight were first executed during the twelfth to thirteenth century under the Jin dynasty. Figure 8.3 shows a Ming copy of an originally late-thirteenth-century painted scroll depicting zhemen or perfected beings borne by crane birds and clouds approaching the islands of Fanghu, Yingzhou, and Penglai. On these superlative isles, like their Western counterparts—the Irish Tir na nÓg of Land of Youth, for example—there is no pain, no winter, and no want. Food is plentiful and magical fruits grow that can cure disease, bestow eternal life, and raise the dead. Palaces are made from gold and platinum, everything is white, and jewelry grows on trees (Luo and Grydehøj 2017: 28–9). Figure 8.4 shows an island with its palace and blessed inhabitants. The painter’s contrast of the mundanity of daily life on the islands with the surging, stormy seas that surround them communicates perfectly the extent to which these islands parallel the real world and yet remain unreachable, isolated from it, accessible only by cloud or airplane. The sea itself and islands are remarkable for the absence of boats or mooring places. Although not always the subject matter of painting, the Isles of the Blessed are ingrained deeply into the religious and literary fabric of the religions and cultures that permeated the ocean, crossing the waters between Korea, Japan, and China and tying them together through their shared waters.

The desire to discover these islands stretched back to the beginning of China. The First Qin Emperor Shi Huang-di was obsessed with the secrets of immortality and sent an emissary—the alchemist Xu Fu—to locate the mystical islands to the east after a bird carried a strange plant with the power to revive the dead to the mainland. Xu Fu was dispatched to the island to acquire the herb. After finding nothing and returning to the Emperor in a panic, the alchemist lied instead, claiming that the Sea God of the Eastern Ocean had demanded lavish tributes in exchange for the miraculous herb. Instead of being forced to undertake another impossible task, Xu Fu fled and founded the nation of Japan (Wang 2005: 8–9).

In addition to forming a classic exemplar of how dishonesty only spawns more lies, these tales had a long-standing influence on the Chinese imagination of Japan. Like Europeans visiting the Americas and expecting to find Cathay, the Chinese expected to find the legendary civilization of Xu Fu in the Japanese Isles and behaved accordingly. Japanese mythology contains a similar story, with the character of Wasobiwe replacing Xu Fu (Egeler 2017: 309–10).

Below the sea, wonders and struggles continued. One prominent subaquatic world is the palace of Ao Guang, Dragon King of the East Sea (Luo and Grydehøj 2017: 33). In Japanese mythology there is Ryūgū-jō, the palace of Ryūjin, the dragon kami or spirit of the sea. Secure in his fortress beneath the waves, the dragon spirit was lord of all he surveyed, a powerful and fickle elemental force embodying the wealth and power of the East Sea. The skirmishes of the dragon spirits and the Eight Immortals express a kind of environmental psychomachia, giving voice to natural disturbances. In one tale, the dragons of the four seas
create a tsunami to destroy their adversaries after a series of tit-for-tat conflicts between land and sea. The Immortals then retaliate by pushing Mount Tai into the sea and filling it with dirt, to which the dragons then respond by referring the Immortals to the High Court of Heaven and the Jade Emperor for crimes punishable by the law of heaven (Yuan 2006: 130). In Japanese folklore, a young man named Urashimataro is taken by a turtle to the Dragon Palace at the bottom of the sea, and there he meets Princess Otohime and her maidens. When he returns to the surface, he finds that three hundred years have passed (Kawai 1995: 107).

The ocean provides a refuge for the powerful spirits and gods of mythology and the disordered chaos beyond the mandate of kingship. Conflict and political antagonism are required before the framework of order can emerge. The modern form of these myths was often cemented and formalized during the period now known to Europeanists as the Middle Ages, inspiring art, poetry, literature, and the telling and retelling of folk myths, accompanied by folk practices honoring figures such as the Eight Immortals and the Dragon King. Lsu and Gregory argue that a “truly decolonial island studies must go beyond simply considering ‘local’ reactions to island metaphors imposed by the West” (2017: 40; this is a lesson that this case teaches in abundance, and should be applied to all non-European imaginary worlds of the ocean. Acknowledging their force on an equal and parallel epistemic footing is an essential task for a global cultural history of the sea: East Asia has its own islanded imaginary, entangled but independent of Western narratives.

A DROWNED TAMIL HOMELAND

India and Southeast Asia participated in the wider network of ocean-going narratives, part of the Buddhist religious world and the circuit of trade stretching across Asia. Their traditions were united by one of the great world circuits of the precolonial Indian Ocean world described by world historian Janet Abu-Lughod (1989), the Eastern segment of an Indian linchpin tying the Islamicate and East Asian worlds together. Buddhist studies scholar Sarah Shaw describes the Indian storytelling seascape as “a ‘pool of signifiers’ from which storytellers drew, applicable between traditions, as well as within them” (2012: 132). This pool, spanning the pluralistic traditions of Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, was part of a wider Indian Ocean region teeming with variants on narrative.

As discussed in the “Introduction” to this volume, Hindu mythology is filled with powerful creation imagery in which the admixtures of the oceans makes order from chaos. The Indian Ocean is a womb and a catalyst, a pool of creation and destruction. Our case study for this section comes from southern India and Sri Lanka, and mingles history, mythology, environmental catastrophe, medieval reception, and modern adaptation. Tamil mythology speaks of a lost continent known today to many as Lemuria, circulated through sword and sorcery, adapted in Europe by mystic sects such as the Theosophical Society and enduring in popular culture. First popularized in the late medieval Kanda purana of Kachippara Sivasacharyar (Weiss 2009: 90), a Tamil version of the Kanda purana—a gathering of Hindu religious texts—the legend draws on a long history of stories relating to lost lands known as Ramayana kandam between what is now Tamil Nadu in India and Sri Lanka. After transmission and adaptation by various medieval Tamil authors, the story was taken up by European scientists and ethnological fantasists of the nineteenth century as proof of a “lost continent of Lemuria” and later became a powerful facet of Tamil history. It is part of a wider complex of stories depicting a land stricken centuries ago by inundation (by ocean), a possible reference to a large tsunami (Ramaswamy 2004: 142). The symbolic significance of this drowning is keenly felt within Tamil culture: the antediluvian words and works of an ancestral homeland are not accessible. As cultural historian Sumarthi Ramaswamy poignantly phrases it, “instead of sustaining Tamil homes and hearts today, their patronage lies consigned to a ‘watery grave’ at the bottom of the Indian Ocean” (142). Oceans have the powerful affordance of absorbing cultural histories but preserving their memory, hiding them just out of sight to eternally reemerge from the waves into political and cultural discourse.

There were many medieval accounts of the Tamil Pandyan kings—various branches of whom ruled from the fourth century BCE up until the sixteenth century CE—losing a large tract of land to the ocean. Flood survival and loss is built into the cultural memory of the Southern Indian peoples, dating back to the mythical floods of Hindu mythology. Legendary accounts of lost lands, cities, temples, and shrines map a tenuous coastline prone to sudden shifts in topography and cataclysmic flooding. To imagine the loss suffered by the Tamil people, one would have to conceive of a large littoral chunk of what was once the antique or medieval European world being gone, disappeared beneath the waves. Something more culturally immediate than Atlantis, no more Greece or no more Italy, for example. Drowned Lemuria exists still in the cultural memory, but the sea has swallowed it up. As Ramaswamy concludes, this sense of loss became a fundamental element of an emerging Tamil nationalism, with complex interactions that shaped a sense of cultural history, sociopolitical loss, and contested vision. The amalgam of scientific and mythological claims to authority inherited by twenty-first-century Tamils are “incongruous and impoverished, meeting the demands of neither history nor fantasy” (Ramaswamy 2004: 226). When fact-finding and mythology combine, no observer is satisfied.

The legacy of European pseudo-history also had a long arm, influencing romantic deep-time racial fantasists such as Robert E. Howard, author of the Conan stories. In his essay The Hyborian Age, Howard imagined an antediluvian world of pure empires brought low by climate catastrophe, the canvas on which he paints his tales of sword and sorcery. In Howard’s lurid imagination, “volcanoes broke forth and terrific earthquakes shook down the shining cities of the empires.
Whole nations were blotted out” (1936). Howard vindicates strong criticism of the mythmaking associated with lost continent theories by subsuming them into his notoriously racializing fantasies of human prehistory. As Ramasawmy puts it, the story has become “a staple among those freelance scholars in Europe and the United States who write about Earth’s prehistory under the sign of ‘lost continent’” (2004: 2). This genre of fantastical pseudo-scholarship seeks to “crack” the mystery of Easter Island, or of Machu Picchu, by resorting to stories of Atlantis, Lemuria, or another lost land known as Mu.

These discourses wholly deserve the scorn that they attract from Ramasawmy, but they also explain a great deal of the romance attached to imaginary worlds today. For these writers, it is not possible for the ocean to be a realm of living stories and plural histories. It must instead be a place of disappeared realms, lost cultures, and vanished races. As Ramasawmy points out (2004: 3), the question of what it means to categorize a place as “lost” is a more pressing question than if it ever existed. The symbolic capital of naming something lost shares a kinship to the naming of a place as imaginary: the past returns to haunt the present as “the disappeared, the vanished, the submerged, and the hidden.” Every culture has a story that haunts it through the centuries, and the oceans of the world echo the call. The story of Lemuria is far from over, another manifestation of premodern literary culture birthing a repetitive and adaptable resonance.

MARVELOUS ISLAMICATE SEAS

Legends of the ocean from the Islamicate world will be familiar to Westerners through the Orientalist confection arising from the popular translations of the Seven Voyages of Sindbad the Sailor, found within the Arabian Nights. These tales are framed as an episodic attempt by a wealthy citizen of Baghdad seeking to recover his squandered wealth through adventure and are made up of a mélange of tales thought to have been translated into Arabic in the ninth century. Its earliest constituent tales originate in Persia and India, and yet the text is a composite spanning many centuries (Shafiq 2013: 30–1) famously curated in a series of European translations between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As we move toward the Islamicate world, we once again see the circuits in the medieval world system at work—the accounts of medieval navigators sailing from the ports of the Gulf and Red Sea span the length of the Indian Ocean from East Africa to the western Pacific fringe.

The pool of stories beyond European nautical travel was vast and can never be judged in contradistinction. Late medieval and early modern efforts to instrumentalize ocean knowledges and spatialize the imaginary seascape during the so-called age of exploration discovered only hubs and proto-empire. Islamic Qur’anic literature and poetry contained a rich collection of water symbolism and imagery that informed a rich intellectual and literary culture spanning the pre-Islamic jahiliyyah (period of ignorance) and the centuries following the life of the Prophet Muhammad (Alardawe 2016; Hassan 2014; Zargar 2014). The sea was abundance, opulence, growth, and generosity. The tropical climates and deserts of most Arab countries guaranteed its valorization, much like the desert mentality of Christianity and its Israelite roots (Hassan 2014: 133). The sea underscored divine providence.

In the medieval Arab world, we encounter ‘ajā’ib (singular, ‘ajāb), the curiosities, marvels and wonders of nature. Whether these wonders were in the realm of scientific understanding or beyond it, they belonged in the collected wonders of God’s creation (Shafiq 2011: 15). Many of the most vivid medieval marvels appear in the tenth-century Kitāb ‘ajā’ib al-hind (Book of the Wonders of India) (140). In this text, we encounter a catalog of classical and medieval marvels that sketch out a rich Indian ocean world stretching across seven seas, a world that drew people of many cultures and faiths together in cohabitation and harmony in a rich and changing network (163). This world stretched from the South China Sea to the heads of the Red Sea and the Gulf, a string of ports and voyages enabling a flow of goods, stories, and ideas. The imaginative responses such places elicited are beautifully evident in the illustration to a shipwreck tale from the twelfth-century collection of stories the Maqāmāt (Assemblies) of al-Hariri illustrates (Figure 8.5). The illustrator of this particular copy, who worked in southern Iraq in the first half of the thirteenth century—and signed himself as al-Wasiti, that is originally from Wasit near Basra—chose to populate his island with exotic creatures such as parrots and monkeys as well as a harpy and a human-headed and winged feline, two motifs commonly used in metalwork and other decorative arts.

Nevertheless, as art historian Persis Berlekamp has proposed (2011: 10), it would be a mistake to understand wondrous tales using the models established for European texts such as the thirteenth-century pseudo-biographical travels of Sir John Mandeville. The European model of marvel explores the boundaries of familiarity and experience, the strangeness that lay beyond the familiar. Islamicate literature with superficially similar content read in this way would lack its full possible nuance: marvels should instead be seen as a systematic attempt to “induce wonder at God’s creation and its order” (14). They are a sense-making and iterative explanation of order and cosmology, even more so after the world-changing upheavals of thirteenth-century Mongol invasions and their reordering of once-solid power structures. The genre of ‘ajā’ib literature entrenches what is known rather than marveling at what is not.

The compendium of descriptions within the Kitāb ‘Ajā’ib al-Hind and its fellows catalogs and marvels at the world in equal measure (Duclère 2018: 268; Shafiq 2013: 164). Seafaring beasts such as whales and giant fish make an appearance, playing with or attacking ships. In one account, three whales surround a reef-grounded ship. The only way for the crew to survive is to spend the entire night banging pieces of wood against each other and ringing bells (Shafiq 2013: 77–8). Elsewhere, there are flying fish capable of generating a
destructive hurricane (Ducène 2018: 269). In another tale giant lobsters appear, so large that their horns resemble two mountains in the sea and wreaking havoc with navigation by playing with anchors. The lobsters are rumored to turn to stone when reaching an island in the South China Sea, and their eyes are a sought-after medical remedy (Shafiq 2013: 79). In the isles of Waq-waq there were said to be trees bearing fruit the shape of small humans or human heads that exclaimed “waq-waq!” in alarming voices (Ducène 2018: 270).

As Berlekmamp has argued, “the earliest illustrated wonders-of-creation manuscripts maintained a clear visual distinction between divinely created wonders, on the one hand, and notable features of geographical regions, on the

ELUSIVE INSULARITY IN THE EUROPEAN WEST

At the end of our journey, we return to better traveled and more familiar—and more culturally dominant—waters. Europe had a unique genre of imaginaries beyond its extremities. “Out there” to the east lay a land of dog-headed men, giants, and cannibals, the torrid south beyond North Africa was thought to be an impassable equatorial inferno. For historians of science Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, European wonders “enlarged their readers’ sense of possibility, allowing them to fantasize about alternative worlds of barely imaginable wealth, flexible gender roles, fabulous strangeness and beauty” (2008: 60). To the west, mediated by water, lay a sprinkling of islands, monsters, biblical marvels, and fantasies. Scholars such as medievalists Sylvie Bazine-Tacchella and Albrecht Classen have given excellent accounts of the sheer breadth of these marvels (Bazine-Tacchella 2002: annex 1, 99–120; Classen 2018: chs. 2–3, 53–88).

The seas of medieval Europe beyond the comforting encirclement of the Mediterranean were a topos of the unknown, an uncannily familiar stranger. They were beyond the land and beyond the world, existing in a space of wonders and mysteries (Adão da Fonseca 2018: 129–30). It is for this reason that Hau’ofa’s (2008) observation that the European sea is not home becomes apt. The reason that we expect otherworlds and imaginary worlds within the medieval ocean is because medieval knowledge of the oceanic realm primed observers to expect their existence. Medievalist Sebastian Sobecki proposes that the “antithesis of land and sea permeates [European] civilization, ranging
from the basic, elemental dichotomy to more sophisticated literary contexts" (2008: 10). In the context of Britain, this means that, for example, the "liminal position of Britain and, therefore, of England, would contribute to narratives of Englishness that are inseparable from the sea" (10). The result was stories in rich profusion that cemented identity but also estranged the imagination.

The words used by Europeans to describe the lands beyond Europe are telling. Medieval historians Nikolai Jaspert and Sebastian Kolditz discuss the distinction in geographic thought of the Middle Ages between the entre mer, lands like Egypt “between” the Indian Ocean and Gulf on one side and the Mediterranean on the other, and the autre-mer, the lands “beyond the sea” such as Jerusalem and Palestine—the latter became the informal Norman name for the Crusader states (2018: 8). These naming strategies reveal that it is “the sea itself which forms the hinge holding lands isolated from each other together” (9). As Emmanuelle Vagnon discusses in her chapter on “Representations” in this volume, classical geography held that the Indian Ocean was in fact a vast inland sea, bounded on all sides (Adão da Fonseca 2018: 129), peripheral to European concerns but scintillating to its imagination. The reverse perspective flipped the picture, with al-Idrisi’s twelfth-century Kitâb mubârat al-mushârak fî iktirâr al-‘afâq (Book of Pleasant Journeys into Faraway Lands) describing the British Isles as distant and liminal land embraced by a “sea of darkness,” the premodern Arabic name for the Atlantic (Chisun 2016: 500).

Europe’s imaginary worlds have attracted some of the spark and excitement of cultural Romanticism. There are many contenders for the most influential tradition: Mandeville, the Voyages of Brendan, or Marco Polo. Any of these bodies of textual material could form the focus of this section, and I have spent time discussing them in the past (Smith 2016). Irish culture has found itself from and center of this phenomenon. In the broader understanding of imaginary or other worlds within the ocean, imaginary islands emerge from the waters. Genres such as the Irish echorri (pre-Christian heroic journeys) and immrama (Christian voyages) were staples of Irish and European myth (Westropp 1912). Journeys to places such as Tir na nOg, the Land of the Young—and interactions with the supernatural and divine Tuatha Dé Danann, the People of the Goddess Danu, who call it home—evokes the wonder and mystery of the genre but are far from the entire story. The Norse, too, had their own “Islands in the West,” including Vinland (Wine- or Vine-land), Heilrammannaland (the Land of White Men), Glaesewellir (the Shining Fields), and Óðlinskar (the Fields of Immortality) (Egeler 2017: 1–2). Large and taxonomic studies have long been devoted to studying the imaginary islands of the North Atlantic, typified by writer and poet William Henry Babcock’s extensive 1922 study Legendary Islands of the Atlantic; a Study in Medieval Geography. They merge geography, cartography, and European mythmaking, shaped by modern fantasies of origin, and experienced a surprisingly long afterlife as a caption from the
their vicarious love—into ethno-national mythmaking. The result is a coalescing of Irishness, a bundling of shared experience by the imaginer in their role as curator of national identity.

This phenomenon can be extended to countless other European manifestations. When Columbus set off on his voyages to the Americas in the 1490s, his imaginary worlds came with him. As medieval intellectual historian Valerie Flint notably proposed, the Christian mythmaking of the New World drew on the energies previously held by faraway countries, “patterned with geographical pictures and descriptions as strange as they were elaborate, some drawn from the Bible, some from stories about Christian seafarers and pilgrims” (1992: xiii). As I have discussed in the past (Smith 2016: 534–5), Columbus encountered the legacy of imaginary worlds when he sailed to the West, populating the oceans with wild cartographic and mythological fantasies. When elements from different cultural traditions, they create what Egorov terms resonances (2017: 291), leading to a composite cultural element that is changed but also strengthened. For example, the combination of the Christian Earthly Paradise, the Irish Otherworld islands and the Roman Blessed Isles merged to create Saint Brendan’s Island, a composite with the cultural power to reach out through the centuries. Columbus believed it was “out there,” part of an archipelago of imaginary loci formed from the constituent parts of their antecedents. As medieval literature and cartography scholar Alfred Hatt (2016: 513) has argued, the European Middle Ages contained within it many competing and evolving notions of insular space, and these notions continued to morph and change beyond 1492, the medieval mingling with the modern.

CONCLUSION

As Abu-Lughod famously described the global interactions of cultures, “in a system, it is the connections between the parts that must be studied,” for “when these strengthen and reticulate, the system may be said to ‘rise;’ when they fray, the system declines” (1989: 368, emphasis in original). Thus, historical change and social connectivity catalyze the waxing and waning of the links that shape the regional, and even global, Middle Ages (Davis and Puett 2016). The Middle Ages permeates the insular knowledges of the world for one simple reason: European premmodernity was the lens through which all other stories were judged, and thus our reception of their meaning has been distorted into European forms.

By expanding our perspectives on the cultural history of the sea through comparative studies and a renewed appreciation of mutable plurality and diversity, we can arrive at new possibilities for interdisciplinary and collaborative research. By looking for resonances across cultures, spaces, and temporalities, new histories are possible. Together, imaginary worlds are a shared consciousness of the ocean and an archipelago of human experience.