THE ISLAND AS CHORA

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This essay positions the island as a chora, in Kristevian terms. The paradigm of the choric island is established through readings of texts from different mediums: José Saramago’s The Tale of the Unknown Island, Michel Tournier’s Friday, Marguerite Duras’ India Song, Frida Kahlo’s What the Water Gave Me, and Alexandre Dumas’ The Count of Monte Cristo. In each of these island narratives, it is argued, the chora suggests itself as an illuminating model for understanding the multiple and manifold interactions between the subject and the island. By combining insights from psychoanalytic and postmodern theories with close readings of selected texts, the essay explores the paradigm of the self-island as a chora of “multiplicity” and “infinite renewal”.

Why the chora?
The island is often conceived of as a place that kindles the subject’s imagination and desire. As an imaginary space full of promise, the island functions as that which is directly opposed to the real: “the romantic dream is still the individualized form of Utopia, … [and because] the dissociation from the real world is maximized, the island of Utopia stands opposed to the continent of the real”.\(^1\) In this sense, the island also enables the subject to fulfil alternative desires and explore other selves that are not “permitted” in the “real world”. In psychoanalytic terms, this “disassociation from the real world” prompts the subject’s return to the Real, within the Lacanian/Žižekian model, or to the chora,\(^2\) within the Kristevian/Derridean model. Žižek defines the Real as that “which threatens to draw us into its vortex of

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\(^2\) We use the generic spelling of “chora” throughout the article, but retain the original spelling (“Khōra”, “chōra”) when quoting from Plato’s and Derrida’s writings on the concept.
jouissance”; Kristeva similarly describes the chora as a “movement towards jouissance” and

… a multiplicity of expulsions ensuring its infinite renewal. Expulsion rejects the discordance between the signifier and signified to the extent of the dissolution of the subject as signifying subject. But it also rejects the partitions in which the subject must shelter in order to constitute itself.

The island provides precisely this jouissance and “multiplicity of expulsions”, ensuring the subject’s “infinite renewal”. In every island narrative or image explored in this paper, the island disrupts the “subject as signifying subject” and positions it as an “insular” self. In the absence of physical and symbolic shelter or partition, the subject becomes exposed to its own multiple possibilities. In this sense, the island becomes a temporary shelter without partitions, a “mobile-receptacle site of the process” – a chora, in geographical, symbolic, and psychic terms.

In Michel Tournier’s Friday, for example, the narrator describes the “shedding of context” that takes place on his desert island, Speranza, where “there is only one viewpoint, [his] own, deprived of all context”. Though initially “charted by a network of interpellations and extrapolations”, the island – and hence, the subject – “expels” its partitions and becomes simply what is sensually perceived. “My vision of the island”, he concludes, “is reduced to that of my own eyes, and what I do not see of it is to me a total unknown. Everywhere I am not, total darkness reigns.”

Thus, a correlation is established between the subject’s sensual experience, the body, and the island. The subject and the island produce each other through choric (ex)pulsion.

It is on these terms that this comparative study will explore the island in selected texts from different mediums: José Saramago’s O Conto da Ilha Desconhecida (1997; The Tale of the Unknown Island), Michel Tournier’s Vendredi ou les Limbes du Pacifique (1967; 3

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5 Ibid., 55.