



# Seasteads and Aquapelagos: Introducing Nissology to Speculative-Fiction Studies

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*Abstract:* Examining fictional seasteading through the lens of the “aquapelago” acts as a bridge between the fields of island studies and speculative-fiction studies. Island studies as an interdisciplinary field of scholarly inquiry has drawn attention to the complex interactions between the maritime, terrestrial, and human aspects of island societies, moving away from “land-biased” research. The “aquapelago” has been devised to better understand islands as assemblages that may wax, wane, and change over time. Examples of seasteading within speculative fiction reveal that such floating settlements are not necessarily aquapelagic societies; some are more representative of ocean-skimming cruise liners. Such fictive examples frequently represent seasteading as floating refuges borne of necessity in a dystopian world affected by environmental or societal catastrophe rather than as planned utopias.

*Keywords:* aquapelago, seasteading, utopia, climate change, island studies, speculative fiction

## 1. Islands of the Mind

Islands have been an enduring motif in Western literature from Classical-era adventures like Homer’s *Odyssey*, Plato’s tale of Atlantis in *Timaeus*, and early Christian works like the *Voyage of Saint Brendan the Abbot* (900 AD) and his legendary search for the Isle of the Blessed to Renaissance works like Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), colonial-era works like Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1883), as well as more modern fiction such as Ursula K. Le Guin’s tales set in the Earthsea universe (1964–2018), Michael

Crichton's *Jurassic Park* (1990), and *The Islanders* by Christopher Priest (2014). Islands have also featured as a useful backdrop or plot device to isolate and contain potential suspects in the mystery and crime genres, such as those of Agatha Christie. They are also a persisting feature within other forms of Western media, such as the films *Mysterious Island* (1961), *Six Days, Seven Nights* (1998), and *Castaway* (2000), plus television shows such as *Thunderbirds* (1965–1968), *Lost* (2004–2010), the Irish comedy *Father Ted* (1995–1998), and the currently airing BBC detective show filmed in Guadeloupe, *Death in Paradise* (2011–present).

Islands are such a pervasive motif that the cultural history of the Occident has been described as an island story (Gillis, *Islands of the Mind*; Baldacchino, “Introducing” 16). Islands feature in such profusion that some island scholars claim the West suffers from a phenomenon termed “islomania”: an obsession with islands (Gillis, “Island Sojourns” 247). Islomania is said to result from “islandness”, or the “metaphysical sensation that derives from the heightened experiences that accompany the physical isolation of island life” (Conkling 200). Island scholar Godfrey Baldacchino has explicated islandness as encompassing the geographical particularities of islands such as geographical precision, comprehensible scale, and separation from elsewhere (“Islands” 35). These characteristics result in islandness constituting a special sense of place not replicable in continental regions, and this sense of place can produce particularly strong emotional geographies (“Editorial” 374).

Usually the smaller and more remote the island, the stronger is “outsiders” attraction to it: to write about it, to visit it, to dream about it. As Baldacchino explains, “They find themselves presented as locales of desire, as platforms of paradise, as habitual sites of fascination” (“Editorial” 373–74). Mediatization of islands has transmitted, transformed, amplified, and mythologised islandness to the point where islomania is often based on a mythscape rather than an appreciation of the day-to-day realities and mundanties of island life (see MacKinnon and Hannan for the mythscape of the Scottish island of St. Kilda). For Baldacchino, there are five principal ways that media as well as the populations and governments of islands themselves have reified islomania: portraying islands as “special” and different from continental cultural and political norms; as sites of exocitism, particularly in relation to indigenous peoples; as a background for male exploration and domination, as in a Robinsonade; as a locus for the rise of tourism for relaxation and adventure; and, through the use of branding and marketing, as a route to development (“Getting wet” 55–56). This holds true not only for warm-water islands that promise paradise, exocitism, and relaxation. People are also attracted to cold-water islands that offer a different form of islomania based on exploration, emptiness, and perceived remoteness (Baldacchino, *Extreme tourism*; see also Petridou, Olausson, and Ioannides for a discussion of Greenland’s tourism industry).

## 2. Island Studies (Nissology)

Island studies as a distinct field of scholarly research is a relatively recent interdisciplinary development, dating from around the year 2000 (see Grydehøj for a comprehensive history of the field). The *raison d’être* of island

studies is to “understand islands on their own terms” (McCall 3) through “sharing, advancing and challenging existing theorization on islands ... while avoiding, delimiting or debunking false or partial interpretations of the island condition” (Baldacchino, “Introducing” 16). Despite its being a relatively young field, scholars have made significant progress in researching and sharing knowledge about island governance (Baldacchino, “Editorial”), music (Johnson and Kuwahara), culture (Pungetti), and games and sports (Ronström), as well as the aforementioned implications of “islandness”; for example, on economic practices (Royle, *Geography*), and in power dynamics between islands and between mainlands and islands (Pöllath). Island scholars have also begun to consider the representations of islandness within media; these include, for example, Graziadei et al.’s discussion of Michael Bay’s film *The Island* (2017), Lucchitti’s (2013) discussion of the Blasket Islands in Irish literature, and Kinane’s (2018) *Theorising Literary Islands – The Island Trope in Contemporary Robinsonade Narratives*. Similarly, Crane and Fletcher’s *Island Genres, Genre Islands* discusses islands in popular fiction.

Island scholars have also examined islands within climate-change narratives (Kelman, 2018). Many islands have risen to international attention for their somewhat unfortunate position as “miners’ canaries”, revealing the effects of climate change long before larger landmasses do (Royle, “Lessons” 250; Nunn 144). Nations in the Pacific Ocean are already facing the impacts of rising sea levels; these include Tuvalu (Farbotko 48) and the Marshall Islands, the government of which is making plans for relocation under a schema called “Migration with Dignity” (McClain et al. 3). Some Pacific islands are going as far as planning to construct islands using land-reclamation techniques (Lister and Muk-Pavic 79). However, several island scholars have warned against glossing over all Pacific islands as “sinking” or “titanic” societies (Barnett 207; Barnett and Campbell 2). Some have also highlighted the under-researched maritime aspects of islands in reaction to accusations of a “land bias” in nissological research (Baldacchino, “Getting Wet” 22), despite the immutability of land and water boundaries that often results in islands being defined by their coastlines, which determine their natural edges (Farran 55). This is largely a result of land being “perceived as solid, boundable, controllable – the space of civilization .... Water, by contrast ... either threatens or is used ... but that is fundamentally external to society” (Steinberg 2113). At a basic level, seas are frequently represented in atlases as “huge, monochromatic and isotropic space(s) ... where nothing seems to happen except for the activity of fishermen” (Fleury 1–2). This is despite a wider recognition that historically the sea “binds particular modes of civilisation together” (Maxwell 22), particularly within archipelagos where island relations are built on connection, assemblage, mobility, and multiplicity (Stratford 3), as with some Pacific nations (see Matsuda 31). The recent growing concern about the implications of climate change has drawn attention to aquatic surroundings as well as producing a global discourse that is “interconnected through the rising of a world ocean” (DeLoughery, “Submarine” 34).

In recent years conventional notions of archipelagos have been critiqued for their lack of consideration of the extent to which human communities create integrated terrestrial and marine spaces through their livelihood activities in particular locations at particular times. Such integrated spaces were characterised as “aquapelagos” by Hayward (“Aquapelagos” 3), using a

neologism that has persisted, and it extends to a variety of contexts that include speculative-fiction locales such as the techno-city represented in the TV series *Stargate Atlantis* (MacKinnon 42). One key aspect of the aquapelago emphasised in Hayward's first essay on the topic and his subsequent theorisation of the aquapelagism and de-aquapelagism of Manhattan during the 18<sup>th</sup> to early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries is its temporality. In this context, aquapelagos are perceived to "wax and wane" in response to changes in such factors as population patterns, climate and weather events, over-aggressive extractivism, and pollution. In an historical context, the thawing that followed the late Glacial Period around 12,000 years ago was instrumental in changing land and sea boundaries in manners that stimulated aquapelagic activity, just as the more recent impacts of the Anthropocene have both disrupted existing aquapelagic systems (such as Manhattan) and opened up new reactive and opportunistic systems.

In contrast to aquapelagos, island scholars have shown that cruise liners merely skim the surface of the ocean, rather than coexist with it (Cashman, "Skimming"). Cruise ships are "spaces of containment" that are a destination in and of themselves where tourists spend their time and their money (Weaver 165). Tourists are focused inwards towards the ship and its aquatic entertainment, such as hot tubs and artificial wave machines; it becomes impossible for them to interact with the sea around them (Cashman, "Skimming" 1). The sea is an "unnatural place for humans ... fraught with danger" (Cashman, "King Neptune" 91). In fact, on many cruise ships a large number of cabins face inward for the pleasure and distractions of the central concourse rather than out to sea (Fleury 2). This containment is often extended ashore as cruise-ship companies have been known to rent or purchase entire islands and beaches in the Caribbean to act as destinations for tourists (Weaver 166). This creates a "tourist bubble" where time as well as space is contained through tight onshore schedules that shield tourists from local environments and cultures (Gutberlet 520). When cruise ships interact with the depths of the ocean, it is often with deleterious effect in the form of disposing of solid waste, grey water, and bilge water that can harm human health and the environment (see Panko and Henthorn 15). What follows is a discussion of seasteading within speculative fiction to determine to what degree seasteads resemble ocean-skimming cruise ships or integrated aquatic-terrestrial-human spaces.

### 3. Seasteading

Seasteading, a portmanteau of "sea" and "homesteading", is the idea of constructing permanent floating dwellings called "seasteads". Seasteads can take various forms: platforms fixed to the ocean floor, floating cities, or large ships with a resident population. In the 1960s planners and architects such as Japanese Metabolist architect Kiyonori Kikutake and American architect and designer R. Buckminster Fuller began to consider the possibilities of people living permanently on seasteads. Kikutake designed a free-floating, politically independent city for a Japanese architecture magazine in April 1960: "Ocean City" would have the capacity for 500,000 people and would sink upon reaching the end of its lifespan. In 1967 Fuller designed a plan for a "tetrahedral" floating city called "Triton City" for the US Department of Housing and Urban

Development. Although neither of these cities was built, they serve as examples of architectural retro-futurism.

It was also in the 1960s that the first attempts of people to construct and inhabit offshore platforms were made. In 1967 Italian engineer Giorgio Rosa funded the construction of Respubliko de la Insulo de la Rozoj in the Adriatic Sea, 11 km off the Rimini coast in Italy. In 1968 Rosa declared himself president of the newly independent state, with Esperanto as its official language (Hayward, “Aquapelagos” 2). The Italian government destroyed Rose Island in 1969, believing it was being used for tax-avoidance purposes. Also in 1967, the first floating settlement was created using a retrofitted ship. According to the website for the Church of Scientology purchased British naval ship *HMS Royal Scotsman*, renaming her *Apollo*, in order to “assist L. Ron Hubbard with advanced research operations and supervise Church organizations around the world”. The Church of Scientology describes its Sea Organization, or Sea Org, as a “fraternal religious order ... [that] is composed of the singularly most dedicated Scientologists – individuals who have committed their lives to the volunteer service of their religion”. The ship was retired from service in 1975 when the Sea Org’s administrative organisation moved to Florida, although there continue to be other Sea Org vessels.

Since 2008, the Seasteading Institute, a California-based independent think tank funded by wealthy patrons, many of whom share a libertarian political bent, has promoted seasteading as a means of creating communities outside of established nation-states, their tax regimes, and alleged “deep-state” bureaucratic cultures (for a discussion of the politics of seasteading, see Steinberg, Nyman, and Caraccioli 1536). This libertarian philosophy and sense of “otherness” differentiates seasteads from constructed islands like The Palms in Dubai, Flevopolder in the Netherlands, and Chinese artificial islands in the South China Sea that do not exist to challenge the state but to support and reify it. However, the Seasteading Institute has promoted a “floating city” concept since 2016, and in early 2017 announced an agreement with the government of French Polynesia to moor a floating city in sheltered waters off the archipelago, to get the project off paper and into reality. Despite considerable publicity and media coverage, the Seasteading Institute’s venture collapsed when the government withdrew support in early 2018. To date neither the Seasteading Institute nor any other entity, such as *Freedomship*, has succeeded in establishing a free-floating autonomous micro-state in international waters, but libertarians’ considerable and ongoing interest in the project suggests that they will pursue further ventures in future.

#### 4. Seasteading in Speculative Fiction

While the term “seasteading” did not enter usage until the 1980s with Ken Neumeyer’s book *Sailing the Farm* (1981), the concept of floating dwellings has existed within speculative fiction for much longer. Jules Verne’s *Une ville flottante* depicts a steam-powered ship so massive and complex that it is described as “more than a vessel, a floating city, part of English soil” (5). In 1895 Verne also published *L’île à hélice*, translated as both *Propeller Island* and *The Floating Island*. Philip E. High’s *These Savage Futurians* (1967) features a charismatic and authoritarian leader, Arnold Magellan, who establishes a

refuge for the world's greatest scientists and thinkers on an artificial island in the mid-Atlantic. As the island grows, the rest of the world suffers from famine, disease, and chaos. Magellan's islanders began conducting genetic experiments on the children of survivors to produce a more advanced and stable society.

What follows is a more in-depth discussion of seasteading in speculative fiction between 1990 and 2019, not as an exhaustive list, but as an introduction to examining the interaction between people and their terrestrial and aquatic environments and as a nexus between the fields of island studies and speculative-fiction studies.

#### **4.1 *Waterworld***

Many speculative fiction works of the 1990s suggested that seasteading would become an inevitable response to global catastrophes such as climate change or social breakdown. Perhaps the most famous of these is the 1995 post-apocalyptic SF film directed by Kevin Reynolds, *Waterworld*. The film is set in the distant future after the polar ice caps have melted and sea-level rise has submerged virtually all the land on Earth. The film follows a character, "The Mariner," who trades in the rarest of all goods in this watery dystopia: dirt. The Mariner lives on his trimaran and uses his mutations of gills and webbed toes to dive to now-submerged towns to salvage items for trade. *Waterworld* features several forms of seasteading: man-made atolls, trading platforms, and settlements onboard oil tankers.

The humans in *Waterworld* live together in groups on artificial atolls: rings of ramshackle, shanty-style buildings around an interior lagoon that harbours small boats and rafts. Only one atoll is seen on-screen, and it is shown to be limited in facilities and comfort: the single store sells only fresh-water rations and a single tomato plant. The exterior of the atoll is thinly fortified with sheets of corrugated metal that prove instantly ineffective against Smoker (pirate) attack, and the island is overrun. The emotional geography of the *Waterworld* atoll therefore reflects that of a cruise ship: it is an inward-looking place that protects residents from the dangers of the surrounding ocean. The limited interaction between the people of the atoll and the ocean is emphasised when the Mariner throws a child off a boat and she panics while her carer shouts, "She can't swim!"

After the atoll is attacked, the Mariner and his rescued companions spend several days at sea when they see a small barter outpost that appears to be anchored to the ocean floor. The multi-level platform appears too small for permanent habitation, with little in the way of shelter or home comforts. The platform is used as a trap by Smokers, some of whom hide by being anchored to the ocean floor on submersible jet skis. The Smokers live aboard the rusty hulk of the infamous *Exxon Valdez* oil tanker. The antagonist of the movie and leader of the Smokers, the Deacon, stands on the bridge and preaches his messianic message of finding dry land to the Smoker hordes below. Mobility is a key feature of both cruise liners and aquapelagos, but this mobility takes different forms. While cruise liners themselves navigate the ocean the people onboard are generally restricted in their movements to 'guest areas' and designated routes ashore. Within aquapelagos, however, it is the people who are mobile, moving through, within and beyond the terrestrial and aquatic

spaces. It could be argued that the Smokers and the Mariner of *Waterworld* represent an aquapelagic existence. While the Smokers stalk the ocean in their oil tanker, they also utilize its depths for camouflage and for surprise submersible attacks. The Mariner himself scavenges from the depths of a long-gone civilization and uses his physical mutations of gills to swim for much longer than other humans.

Phillip Hayward writes that one of strongest examples of aquapelagity is the immersion of humans in aquatic spaces for livelihood activities such as freediving for food or resources, giving the example of freedivers in Japan and Korea, whose diving technique is similar to that of the Mariner (“Sounding”). Other examples of humans existing within ocean spaces include Alexander Beliaev’s *Amphibian Man* (1928) and Peter Benchley’s *White Shark* (1994), both of which feature humans anatomically altered to breathe through gills as does the Mariner, and works such as James Cameron’s film *The Abyss* (1989) or Greg van Eekhout’s novel *California Bones* (2014); the latter novel features humans “breathing” oxygenated fluids in their lungs that enables them to operate underwater without air tanks. Therefore, there is scope outside seasteading to investigate the presence of aquapelagos within speculative fiction that features humans spending prolonged periods of time submerged through adaptation or technology.

## 4.2 Distress

The plot of *Distress* (1995), a SF novel by Greg Egan, centres around an investigative science journalist, Andrew Worth, who is attending a physics conference to report on a purported Theory of Everything. The conference is being held on Stateless, a constructed living island that is anchored to a guyot on an underwater mountain 4,000 km from Australia’s east coast. The island was formed after six employees of a Californian biotech company stole the seed material and information needed to grow an artificial bio-island in 2025. The protagonist describes the landscape of Stateless as being

like a pale stranded Starfish. Six arms sloped gently down from a central plateau; along their sides, grey rock gave way to banks of coral, which thinned from a mass of solid outcrops to a lacelike presence barely breaking the surface of the water .... Inland a sprinkling of lights hinted at the city’s orderly grid .... Stateless was as beautiful as any atoll, as spectacular as any ocean liner ... with none of the reassuring qualities of either. (106)

Each arm is over 40km long, and if constructed from a traditional material like limestone would snap at the edge of the guyot (157); however, the fine “mineralised foam” that is forever dissolving, releasing gases, and self-repairing means that Stateless continues to float (162). One million people live on Stateless, and almost two-thirds of the population are Pasifika, essentially climate-change refugees, waiting for their home nations, including Fiji and Samoa, to grow their own new (and legal) artificial islands. As the protagonist laments, the “Greenhouse Storms have claimed so many people” (325). The political situation on Stateless is described as anarchy: there is no ruler, but not an absence of laws (143). Stateless struggles to have any industry of note and cannot exploit any natural resources; it thus relies on tourism and income

related to cultural activities. However, because Stateless is boycotted by UN countries due to its rogue status, travel from anywhere is long and complicated. The island is further ostracised because of its communal approach to ownership and distribution of resources. While in the rest of the world private land ownership is the norm and every food crop is licensed, on Stateless nobody owns land and no one goes hungry. For this reason Stateless represents the “Otherness” of a seastead: life outside the global capitalist agenda. This form of anarcho-communism is quite an interesting alternative to many contemporary conceptions of seasteading that view such endeavours as a source of “individualist escape” (Steinberg, Nyman, and Caraccioli 1534).

New residents, and even visitors, to Stateless are encouraged to take a trip to the underside of the island to see its inner workings as a rite of passage. This involves using scuba gear while being lowered through a narrow duct and emerging beneath one of the piers. After their initial submergence, Stateless residents appear to have little interaction with the Pacific; there is no mention of fishing, and travel, despite the boycott, is by air. This suggests that Stateless is not a truly aquapelagic society; rather, it is firmly territorially focused, or “land-biased”, where humans’ interaction with their oceanic surroundings is minimised to a fleeting encounter.

The snowflake shape of Stateless is similar to the landscape of Atlantis within the Stargate franchise. Additionally, both cities also use the ocean for protection. The finale of *Distress* involves Stateless residents submerging their core downtown to drown an invading force; in contrast, Atlantis is submerged for many years to hide it from scanners and to attenuate any laser weapons. Atlantis is a mobile city-ship that has been “submerged, afloat, and travelled through space several times” (MacKinnon 45), and its islandness is more representative of the “performed entity” of an aquapelago than the static boundness of Stateless.

Greg Egan revisits seasteading in his 2019 novella *Perihelion Summer*, in which a binary black hole system enters the solar system and alters the Earth’s orbit. Subsequently, large swathes of the Earth become uninhabitable for most of the year as the climate becomes more extreme. The protagonist, Matt, has designed and built a torus-shaped floating habitat, called *Mandjet*. The plan is to sail south from the west coast of Australia to spend the summer in Antarctica, then sail back to Australia in wintertime. *Mandjet* is arguably more aquapelagic than Stateless for several reasons. First, Matt spends significant amounts of time underwater welding new boats to its side and hiding from pirates. Second, he uses various vessels to move back and forth between *Mandjet*, other ships they encounter, and Australia. Thirdly, he suspends and submerges a net in the central oculus of *Mandjet* to provide a mobile aquaculture rig. Therefore, *Mandjet* is not simply skimming the surface of the Indian Ocean; instead, its population is navigating beyond the seastead’s boundaries and using and engaging with its depths on a continual basis. Furthermore, due to its seasonal habitation, *Mandjet*’s aquapelago can be said to wax and wane annually.



### 4.3 Snow Crash

*Snow Crash* (1992) by Neal Stephenson is a SF novel set in 21<sup>st</sup>-century North America after an economic collapse. The plot of the book centres around a virus being transferred, via drugs or injections or from the Metaverse (similar to an online virtual-reality computer simulation), into the body and attacking the neuro-linguistic part of the brain. The virus is designed to undo the “partitioned logic of natural language that resulted from the fall ... of the tower of Babel” (Swanstrom 70). The key to stopping the spread of the virus is aboard the *Raft*, a floating conglomeration of makeshift boats lashed to the sides of a former US aircraft carrier, *Enterprise*.

After purchasing *Enterprise*, charismatic preacher L. Bob Rife used the ship to rescue Bangladeshis when their country was submerged due to deforestation in the Ganges basin (this was probably not an entirely charitable act, as Rife was the architect of the virus and the Bangladeshis were probably the first carriers). The nuclear-powered engine is no longer operational, and the *Raft* floats clockwise around the Pacific Ocean at the whim of ocean and wind currents (254). Over time the *Raft* has grown in area and population, becoming a hub for Eurasian refugees (called Refus) fleeing economic strife in their home countries. The Refus that make it aboard are made of hardy stuff, as the *Raft* stays a minimum of 100 miles offshore (340), and the journey usually occurs in makeshift boats in tumultuous waters; moreover, arriving Refus must avoid being killed by the ones already there.

Some Refus detach from the *Raft* to paddle to shore in search of a better life. Such is the reputation of the *Raft*'s population that Californian beachfront property owners hire personal security defenses and subscribe to a rolling *Raft* news report for fear a group of Refus will come ashore. The reputation of the *Raft* is made even more dramatic by the fact that it is only accessible to visiting outsiders with the aid of a local guide (359), both for safety and because the ad-hoc nature of the construction means that getting from one point to another can form a labyrinth that forces one to walk through the *Raft*'s residential areas (323). Therefore, the *Raft* is regarded as a threat to the mainlanders' way of life, acting both as a metaphor for fear of the “Other” that is frequently present in discussions of immigration, and as a real threat in the novel due to its central role in disseminating the linguistic virus. The fear of climate refugees is a continuing theme within cli-fi literature such as John Lanchester's *The Wall* and Omar El Akkad's *American War*.

Like the *Raft*, Armada, the piratical city-state flotilla in China Miéville's *The Scar* (2011), is a seastead to be feared. It grows in wealth and population by looting and kidnapping. What further distinguishes Armada as “Other” within the Bas-Lag world is that all races aboard are equal. In particular, the Remade, victims of the criminal justice system that mutilates their bodies with machinery or strange appendages, who are normally destined for slave-like conditions, are free citizens on Armada. The Cray, an aquatic race who live on the underside of Armada in coral-like structures are humanoid from the waist up and lobster-like from the waist down. Therefore, Armada is unique among these examples of seasteading in that spaces both above and below the waterline are inhabited; it therefore provides the strongest example of a truly aquapelagic society. In Hayward's conception of the aquapelago, he admits that while humans are “essential to the aquapelago, humans are only one of a series

of actants without which the aquapelago cannot be performatively constituted” (“Constitution” 3).

## 5. Discussion

This paper has found that seasteads within SF generally fall into two categories. The first is the somewhat ramshackle flotilla-type seastead that has grown and altered as boats (read: landmass) are either added or jettisoned, such as the *Raft*, *Armada*, and the atolls of *Waterworld*. The other type relies on advanced technology, like *Stateless* or *Atlantis*, to create a more planned terrestrial space that resembles high-density urban centres like San Francisco or Tokyo. The impetus for constructing both types of seastead has often been climatic disaster or societal breakdown, rather than the desire to construct fanciful projects with utopian aims.

Seasteading offers an opportunity for survival and sanctuary. The *Raft*'s origins began as a refuge for drowning Bangladeshis, *Stateless* for Pasifika, the *Mandjet* for Australian and Timorese refugees, and the atoll of *Waterworld* for humanity's remaining climate-change survivors. Therefore, rather than serving as “locales of desire” and “platforms of paradise” – utopian playgrounds for inhabitants or the onlooker gaze – the majority of the seasteads featured in this paper are utilitarian life rafts, born of necessity. The role of seasteading in housing climate refugees and anarchists makes them politically transgressive places that can pose a threat to the continental way of life. Also, the very act of inhabiting the ocean marks seasteads as “outside” places. As Elizabeth DeLoughery claims, oceanic spaces represent either the “utopian space of biocapital or the dystopian futurity of climate change, marine spaces [are] profoundly exceptional to human experience” (“Ordinary” 356–57). This is illustrated by the people of *Waterworld*, who have known only life at sea, and the people onboard *Mandjet*; both feel relief at reaching landmasses. This is perhaps why there has been such slow development of the Seasteading Institute.

As Hayward asserts, aquapelagoes are not fixed geographic descriptions but performed entities that “wax and wane as climate patterns alter and as human socio-economic organisations, technologies, and/or the resources and trade systems they rely on, change and develop” (“Aquapelagos” 27). There are several examples of such performed entities, such as the *Mariner* and *Smokers* in *Waterworld*, the *Armada*, and the *Mandjet*, which not only navigate the ocean surface but also use its depths for food, trade, and even habitation in the case of the *Cray*; the *Mandjet* is the most obvious example of a seastead altering its aquapelagism along with climate patterns.

In contrast, various examples within this paper, such as the atolls of *Waterworld*, *Stateless*, the *Raft*, and *Atlantis* are terrestrially based societies where oceanic interaction is minimised and any submersive experiences are the exception rather than the norm. These examples retain a strongly terrestrial imagination of future humanity, rather than exploring the potential for humans to more easily inhabit aquatic spaces and/or exist simultaneously in both. Seasteading, in these regards, can be seen as something of a fantasy displacement of terrestrial structures and behaviours onto offshore platforms without the next level of immersion and transformation. They are still

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principally laminar, thin platforms rather than points of transition between oceanic depths and the above-water world and its atmosphere. Therefore, these examples are more akin to ocean-skimming cruise liners than aquapelagic societies.

## 6. Conclusion

Island Studies is still a relatively new field of research that has just begun to engage with media and literature on – or about – islands. There is much work to be done on planets as islands, cities that “float” in the sky, underwater settlements, and extra-terrestrial islands. It is hoped that this paper will instigate more discussion between scholars of islands and speculative fiction about the interaction of sentient beings with their aquatic and terrestrial surroundings.

As a tentative step in this direction, this paper has shown that fictive examples of seasteading often originate as reactive adaptations to catastrophic events rather than an attempt to purposefully design and attain a form of utopia. Seasteading does not inherently equate to the construction of an aquapelagic society. Life onboard a seastead can be terrestrially focused and contained by the seastead’s edges, much like the emotional geography of a cruise liner. There are examples of aquapelagic seasteads, such as those found in *Perihelion Summer*, *The Scar* and the Stargate franchise, where inhabitants interact with their aquatic environment to a greater or lesser extent, making aquapelagity not a fixed characteristic but an assemblage that is performed in space and time.

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