Isola rasa: Reimagining Mallorca and Ibiza as a Blank Canvas for Tourism in Travel Fiction

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This article looks at how travel writing, travel fiction, and the capitalist stage of tourism have together reimagined Mallorca and Ibiza as isolae rasae*, or blank geographies. The notion of* isola rasa *grasps the commodification of these islands as idyllic, timeless spaces, devoid of any complex history and local community, and serving as backdrops for fantasies of Northern European tourists. This transformation, evident in literature, positions such Mediterranean islands as Mallorca and Ibiza as escape zones for travelers seeking a sensual remedy to the alienation they experience in their own societies. The article discusses the ways in which contemporary literary works both reuse and complicate these tropes. By examining works such as Luke Rhinehart's novel* Naked Before the World *and Matt Haig's novel* The Life Impossible*, the article argues that these works, by narrating the homogenized tourist experience that prioritizes visitors' fantasies over local dynamics, provide a critical platform that enables a productive discussion of the environmental, social, and cultural costs of mass tourism.*

Keywords: travelogues / travel fiction / tourism / imagology / Balearic Islands / *isola rasa* / exoticism

Introduction

Aristotle introduces the category of *tabula rasa* in *On the Soul* to draw a parallel between the mind and an unwritten tablet, suggesting that the mind is initially blank and takes shape only through experience and thought: "Haven't we already disposed of the difficulty about interaction involving a common element, when we said that mind is in a sense potentially whatever is thinkable, though actually it is nothing until it has thought? What it thinks must be in it just as characters may be said to be on a writing tablet on which as yet nothing stands written:

this is exactly what happens with mind" (429b29–430a1). This metaphor can be applied to the way in which nineteenth- and twentieth-century travelers from Europe viewed Mediterranean islands like Mallorca and Ibiza as so many *isolae rasae*—blank slates at the service of the travelers' imagination. These islands became geographic spaces onto which visitors could project their desires and fantasies, shaped by the alienation they felt in their industrialized homelands. Just as Aristotle's mind acquires form through external input, so these islands were perceived as empty and available for the travelers' imaginative and sensual experiences, without regard for their respective histories or ongoing struggles.

This dynamic invites a second category, that of Mary Louise Pratt's colonial gaze (see Pratt), as the travelers' own loss of spiritual or emotional fulfilment—due in part to the dehumanizing effects of industrialization (see Porter; Pemble)—leads them to seek out places they could imagine as pristine and untouched. In their minds, the islands are malleable utopias of compensation, ready to be filled with meaning that suits their personal fantasies, just as Aristotle's writing tablet awaits the impressions of thought. Both categories emphasize the role of perception in shaping reality, highlighting the way in which these islands were stripped of their true identities and transformed into playgrounds for the travelers' imagination.

This article draws upon theoretical frameworks of cultural geography, travel literature studies, and imagology to explore the commodification of Mallorca and Ibiza in contemporary fiction. It begins with a discussion of the notion of *isola rasa*, examining its implicit emergence in the imagery of Romantic poetry, where the Mediterranean is idealized as a space of escapism and sensuality whose inhabitants appear to be voiceless. This enables the article to examine the ways in which twentieth-century travel literature perpetuates rigid images of Mallorca and Ibiza, depicting them as geographies devoted to leisure and pleasure, and their inhabitants as mere incidental characters with limited agency. Finally, the article shows how contemporary novels such as Luke Rhinehart's novel *Naked Before the World* (2008) and Matt Haig's novel *The Life Impossible* (2024) follow the tropes established in previous travel literature in order to attempt a critique. These novels are discussed in the context of amenity literature, understood as "products for the consumption of tourists and migrants belonging to the authors' culture, readers who are ready to travel to or already living in the island and seek additional information that will make their experience more enjoyable, while also craving the pleasure and entertainment of reading fiction" (Bastida Rodríguez and Bosch Roig 10).

The Romantic birth of the Mediterranean island in English literature and its consolidation as a "paradise"

Islands have not only been read as "places out of time" (Edmond and Smith 8) but, precisely because of their isolation, they have also emerged as the ideal field of experimentation for the traveler (see Moser 410). Indeed, it is easy to describe the island as a realm free of imposed rules where individuals can confront themselves, society, and its norms, and which often results in the evasion of these things (see Cohen and Taylor). Islands, and in this case Mallorca and Ibiza, found their place in the cartography of modernity through travel and travel literature (see McMahon), where they were seen as both (geographical) peripheries and centers (of the travelers' wishes).

If the tourist industry has conventionally designed and promoted travel destinations around the appeal of the exotic (see Ward; Dinnie), Mallorca and Ibiza appear at the apex of the exotic discourse in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (see Blázquez Salom and Murray Mas; Moyà). In the nineteenth century, however, only a few travelers knew about their existence (see Fiol Guiscafré). The islands' marginal appeal originated with the Romantic travelers and developed through their compilations in the early decades of the twentieth century. These sources, travel accounts, and guidebooks provided markers that would label the experience of the Balearic Islands as "an escape from civilization and progress towards the investigation of a world of pleasure" (Turner and Ash 87). This trope has been used to describe Mallorca and Ibiza ever since, whether in fiction, music (see Vicens Vidal), or film (see Brotons Capó et al.), often following the formula of the cult of the Sun (see Littlewood). This formula, I propose here, may have had its literary birth in stanza 63 of Lord Byron's *Don Juan*:

> 'Tis a sad thing, I cannot choose but say,
> And all the fault of that indecent sun,
> Who cannot leave alone our helpless clay,
> But will keep baking, broiling, burning on,
> That howsoever people fast and pray,
> The flesh is frail, and so the soul undone:
> What men call gallantry, and gods adultery,
> Is much more common where the climate's sultry. (Byron 61)

Indeed, Byron seems to suggest through his hero that the southern latitude and exposure to a sun that is sultrier than that of the North are the sources of a more relaxed sexual morality in a place where the flesh is

"frail" and where the soul is "undone." This "gallantry" or "adultery" is the result of a metonymic process on the part of the poet (and the readers). In this process, one term is identified with another not because they are similar, but because of conceptual proximity. Thus, the "suffocating sun" is related to a "warm morality" and, by extension, prone to breaking the rules of repression. Sun, by contiguity, is gallantry and adultery. These practices, according to the poetic voice of Don Juan, are more common in the South. This is just one example of the articulation of a ero-zone—a site of liberated morality, sensual warmth, and natural vitality—within the literary construction of the Mediterranean as a sensual space.

The shaping of a romantic destination liberated from the strict puritanical morals of the era follows these premises: firstly, feelings and sensations are celebrated over practical reason; secondly, the allure of the exotic and peripheral triumphs over the monotony of industrial uniformity; and finally, the exploration of personal individuality and the aspiration to attain it beyond the constraints of a dehumanized society take central stage.

The monotony of urban oppression against which the exotic destination is contrasted is captured by William Blake in his 1794 poem "London," where the lack of freedom and signs of pain on the faces of the citizens of the modern metropolis are evoked. In Blake's poem, the modern city embodies the harsh forces of progress, trapping its inhabitants in a cycle of misery and dehumanization. Blake's phrase "the mind-forged manacles" speaks powerfully to the invisible and self-imposed chains created by a society built on economic constraints. The "chartered street" and "chartered Thames" (Blake 76) suggest that even natural and public spaces are commodified in London. The preindustrial appears here as an alternative destination for sensual travelers (see Torgovnick). Their mental manacles will be released in more southerly latitudes far from modern urban constrictions.

John Keats is instrumental in marking this differentiation by proposing idyllic visions of the South. His "Ode to a Nightingale" reflects a yearning for escapism that resonates deeply with the industrialized, polluted reality of nineteenth-century England. The poem juxtaposes the dreariness of a mechanized world with the idealized warmth and sensuality of the Mediterranean, portraying the latter as a space of vitality, natural beauty, and culture. The contrast between the speaker's industrialized surroundings and an imagined Mediterranean allows Keats to explore the themes of exile, longing, and the power of poetic imagination.

The speaker's despair is evident from the opening lines on: "My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk" (Keats 349). The imagery of toxicity and lethargy evokes the unhealthiness of urban, industrialized England, a place where life feels oppressive and disconnected from nature. This malaise drives the speaker to envy the nightingale, a "light-winged Dryad of the trees," whose song embodies an unspoiled, pastoral existence. The nightingale's melody becomes a symbol of freedom and harmony with nature, contrasting sharply with the alienation of industrial life. Keats' yearning for escape is crystallized in the lines: "O for a beaker full of the warm South, / Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene" (349). The "warm South" invokes the Mediterranean, a land of sun, wine, and carefree mirth. The mention of "Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth" further enhances this vision of Southern Europe as a place of cultural exuberance, a sharp departure from the rigid industrial world. The imagery of wine—symbolizing sensuality and liberation—acts as a vehicle for transcendence, offering the speaker a means to "leave the world unseen" and merge with the natural splendor embodied by the nightingale.

In this imagined Mediterranean escape, the poetic voice dreams of dissolving the burdens of memory and the decay of the present: "Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget" (Keats 350). This verse underscores the seductive allure of an idealized South where life is simpler, freer, and more attuned to the rhythms of nature. This vision of the Mediterranean provides an antidote to the industrialized North, offering not only physical relief but also spiritual and artistic renewal.

Keats' portrayal of the Mediterranean South transcends mere escapism; it embodies an idealized world of beauty and sensory fulfillment, contrasting with the alienation of England's industrial landscape. The vivid imagery of wine, music, and pastoral harmony reflects a longing for a more connected and authentic existence, highlighting the enduring human desire to seek refuge in places of natural and cultural vitality.

The exoticism of the former lines and the longing for new horizons in the South is also expressed in the poem "Happy is England"; there the poetic voice, while praising the simple loveliness of English women, burns to see "Beauties of deeper glance, and hear their singing, / And float with them about the summer waters" (Keats 73). The waters in particular work as a soothing compensation for the strains of the senses of the civilized worker in a modern world. In the sonnet *"On the Sea,"* the poet urges the weary reader to seek refuge by the sea, leaving behind the clamor of modern life and its tiresome duties, in order to listen to the enchanting songs of the sea nymphs: "Oh ye! who have your

eye-balls vex'd and tir'd, / Feast them upon the wideness of the Sea; / Oh ye! whose ears are dinn'd with uproar rude, / Or fed too much with cloying melody¾ / Sit ye near some old Cavern's Mouth, and brood / Until ye start, as if the sea-nymphs quir'd!" (Keats 80).

In the same spirit, Keats' poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn" evokes images of a classical Mediterranean that have been captured in an urn and suggest an infinite pleasure, a wild joy, a mad search for the beauty of the old classical days: "What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? / What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?" (Keats 352). Musical instruments and the celebration of lovers and musicians have been represented forever in the clay pot. The poet cannot hear the music of the instruments but is able to feel it through his imagination: "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter" (353). This makes the imagined songs much more sensual and sweeter than those that are heard. Mallorca and Ibiza were cast by this spell. Practically unknown by the tourist industry until the early twentieth century (see Alcover; Amengual; Cirer Costa), they will become a "more sensual and sweeter" song—an empty beaker to be filled with the desires of the traveler.

For Archduke Ludwig Salvator of Austria, Mallorca was nothing short of a romantic paradise, a place where nature and simplicity combined to create an idyllic refuge from the world. In his seminal work, *Die Balearen geschildert in Wort und Bild* (The Balearic Islands Described in Words and Pictures, 1869–1891), he sings the island's lush landscapes, rich cultural tapestry, and gentle pace of life, celebrating its unspoiled beauty and authenticity. The Archduke's detailed yet biased exoticizing observations (see Vives Riera) reflect his profound admiration of and personal connection to Mallorca, which he describes as possessing "a charm and solitude untouched by the hands of time" (Salvator 18). The island of Ibiza is also permeated by a spell of magic in the eyes of the Archduke; the island is reflected in "the clear mirror of a deep blue sea that makes objects located at an imprecise distance seem at times far away, at times close by. … An inexpressible charm draws the traveler to the sea with the eagerness to throw himself into the waves to perceive … the unexplorable fascination" (18; my trans.). His work stands out as both a personal love letter and a tribute to Mallorca's and Ibiza's unique allure as a timeless sanctuary.

George Sand is another renowned Romantic traveler to Mallorca. Despite her occasional harsh portrayals of the island's local community, she depicts the landscape with a sense of sublime beauty. In her 1842 book *Winter in Majorca* (*Un hiver à Majorque*), she writes: "[E]verything around me is paradise … mountain shapes of wonderful boldness,

and the sky that seems to be painted by Raphael" (Sand 82). Needless to say, visitors to the island were quick to reproduce this idyllic scenario.

In brief, the literary imagination surrounding islands such as Mallorca and Ibiza reflects a longstanding tension between their geographical marginality and their symbolic centrality as spaces of escape, sensuality, and self-discovery. Romantic travelers from Lord Byron to Archduke Ludwig Salvator constructed these geographies as idyllic refuges, contrasting them with the constraints of industrialized and dehumanized societies. Developed into a ero-zone, the recurring motif of *isola rasa* in the Mediterranean reinforced the islands' allure within the travel and tourism discourses of the twentieth century. Through literature, guidebooks, and cultural narratives, spaces such as Mallorca and Ibiza were transformed into so many canvases for travelers' desires, embodying both the exotic and the familiar following the Romantic pursuit of beauty beyond the modern urban confines.

Commodifying the dream on the empty island: Twentieth- and twenty-first-century travel literature

Following the argument I developed elsewhere (see Moyà), I want to suggest that in the early twentieth century, British travelers encountered the Balearic Islands as they began to embrace tourism, which at the time was increasingly supported by the construction of the first hotels and a growing awareness of the economic potential of the travel industry. These visitors, however, saw themselves as descendants of an authentic and artistic tradition of travelers, not tourists. Their travel accounts, influenced by previous Romantic narratives, emphasized the preservation of what they saw as the fading quasi-authentic Balearics, represented by the picturesque Orientalist imagery that characterized the islands as quaint, exotic, and untouched by modernity. Their writings often adhered to existing stereotypes, focusing on elements like the Mediterranean sun, vibrant colors, and olive trees, which reinforced the exotic appeal of the islands. Any landscape or cultural feature that deviated from this quaint ideal was rejected, as evidenced in their portrayals of Minorca as less picturesque and too British, or of Barcelona as overly industrialized (see Boyd; Flitch).

These travel accounts not only depicted the islands through an ideological lens but also imposed restrictive idealized images on the locals, portraying Majorcans as charming peasants: "In the *plaza* ancient men follow the sun in its daily revolution round the square, warming

their bones against the sunbaked walls, … dazed and torpid, like flies at the end of autumn" (Flitch 84). Alternatively, Ibizans were represented as wild and passionate people: "In Ibiza passions are hot, and women—since they are greatly in minority—at a premium. … The Ibizans are hot blooded, revolvers are plentiful, and the police find it wiser not to investigate *crimes passionels*" (Goldring 71–72). This idealized perspective effectively infantilized the locals, casting them as either static or savage and primitive figures, in contrast to the supposedly modern British visitors. These portrayals unknowingly laid a foundation for future representations that would perpetuate this rigid, idyllic image of the islands in subsequent narratives of tourism.

Interwar travelers criticized the rise of tourism for fostering consumerist behavior, superficial engagement with local culture, and a desire for stereotypical "tourist markers" (MacCannell 110). However, most failed to offer a meaningful alternative, as their accounts often lacked genuine dialogue with locals and depicted the islands through exotic, rigidly idealized images. What is more, travel literature in the 1930s in the Balearics was characterized by both a skepticism toward traditional values and a lighthearted, almost hedonistic attitude toward the war that loomed on the horizon. Francis Caron's *Majorca: The Diary of a Painter* (1939) encapsulates a broader generational disillusionment, portraying the Balearics as a rite-of-passage setting for expatriates, who find the islands to be a permissive, pleasure-driven space. One of Caron's characters, Jeanne, gives her perspective on the island and the reasons for her to visit: "Majorca, where there are no troubles and everything is simple and beautiful, where people who come for a month stay for years, where time passes quickly in the sleepy, damp, warm atmosphere, where nearly everybody does nothing, and where there are painters and poets" (Caron 29). Caron's narrative contrasts a sunny, lethargic daytime landscape with a vibrant, bohemian, and permissive nightlife, depicting the Balearic Islands as sites of escapist indulgence rather than traditional exploration.

Caron's accounts rely on caricatures and stereotypical Sunny South imagery, such as turquoise seas and radiant sun, which serve more as colorful props than meaningful elements of place. This approach distances them from earlier travel writers such as Mary Stuart Boyd and J. E. Crawford Flitch, who saw the Balearics as a place of quiet fulfillment or of a vanishing authentic life. By contrast, interwar travelers portray the islands as zones of sensory pleasure where their own actions become the focal point, rather than any engagement with local life. This shift toward fictionalized narratives reflects a longer tradition of

foreign romanticization, now intensified into a setting for transgressive indulgence in an imagined Spanish passion.

In the contemporary genres of travel fiction, the escapism and pleasure of the previous century gain full strength. Mallorca often becomes a place of exotic retreat—a compensating space that counterbalances the overstimulation of modern life in the authors' home countries. Anna Nicholas' travel memoirs, for example, represent Mallorca as an ideal escape where one can rediscover simplicity and tradition in a rural setting far removed from the relentless pace of urban life. Initially skeptical, Nicholas finds herself drawn to the island's charm and beauty, ultimately deciding to purchase a farmhouse and split her time between her high-stress London PR career and the tranquil Mallorcan countryside. In works such as *Cat on a Hot Tiled Roof* (2008) and *Donkeys on My Doorstep* (2010), Nicholas chronicles her integration into Mallorcan rural life, describing her involvement in farming, almond harvesting, and other local traditions. Through her narrative arc, she portrays Mallorca as a space where expatriates can leave behind the grey lifestyle of industrialized society and embrace an idealized existence surrounded by a "myriad of brightly coloured Mediterranean flowers" (Nicholas 320). In her eyes, Mallorca becomes a timeless sanctuary where she can truly live "light-years away from my flat in central London … and the constant judder of coaches and lorries as they thunder by" (13). Similarly, best-selling author Peter Kerr's memoir series, beginning with *Snowball Oranges* (2000), depicts Mallorca as a pastoral retreat for expatriates seeking relief from modern pressures. Kerr's humorous accounts—spanning from *Mañana, Mañana* (2001) to *From Paella to Porridge* (2006)—center, once more, on the joys of the ongoing Mallorcan adventure of adapting to a simpler life on the island. This streak of expatriate amenity literature suggests a recurring narrative: Mallorca as an exotic alternative to the authors' native environments, where the island's natural beauty and slow pace of life serve as a corrective to a too-modern world: "Fate had provided us with an opportunity to farm in the most entrancing settings on a beautiful Mediterranean island, it was an opportunity that we were not determined to miss" (Kerr 14). Through lighthearted anecdotes and vivid depictions of island life, authors like Nicholas and Kerr reinforce Mallorca's allure as an idyllic retreat—a place where one can reconnect with nature, community, and oneself, sheltered from the demands of modernity.

Ibiza, as depicted in various literary works, also emerges as a canvas for personal reinvention, erotic liberation, and the pursuit of empowerment, particularly through the lens of outsiders who project their fantasies onto the island. These narratives often prioritize themes of self-discovery

and indulgence, reducing Ibiza to a mythical backdrop rather than a lived space with its own cultural and historical depth. In *Hits Different* (2024) by Tasha Ghouri and Lizzie Huxley-Jones, the protagonist, Cassie, embodies this transformative journey. The authors, publicizing their novel, describe the protagonist's experience in Ibiza as an opportunity to pursue her passion for dance and leave behind her mundane existence, describing the island as a "hot summer" haven where her dreams feel "closer than ever." This framing aligns with the trope of Ibiza as a space for personal rebirth, where its physical and social environment catalyzes self-discovery.

Eroticism and romance frequently define literary representations of Ibiza, positioning it as a site of sensual exploration. Kitty French's *Knight & Day* (2013) exemplifies this theme, leveraging the island's relaxed Mediterranean atmosphere as a backdrop for romantic and erotic escapades surrounded by "[d]azzling turquoise water fringed by sugar-white sands"; the protagonists navigate a narrative of "sun-soaked bliss" (French 1) where the island becomes synonymous with passion and freedom: "Ibiza. Sunshine. Sand. Sea. Sexy girls in cowboy boots" (165). This portrayal perpetuates again the romanticized Mediterranean ideal, casting Ibiza as an exoticized space where Northern European protagonists experience uninhibited desires. The focus on adult clubs, secrecy, and indulgence underscores the island as a site for erotic performance, yet it neglects the local cultural dynamics, treating the island more as a stage than as an authentic setting.

Ibiza, a capital of hedonism as described by Stephen Armstrong in *The White Island* (2005), thus becomes a mythical landscape of perpetual indulgence and possibility. Armstrong's chronicle of Ibiza as a fantasy island, perpetually bathed in a golden summer signifying "the Balearic vortex of charm" (Armstrong 2), elevates the island to a space of limitless self-empowerment. This pseudo-historical study of Ibiza often overshadows its historical and cultural reality, positioning it as a vessel for external desires rather than a place with its own agency.

These representations suggest an ongoing pervasive trend: rather than engaging with the islands' polyhedric identity, these texts position them as fantasy islands where foreign characters can freely engage in activities they would not pursue in their home countries. Such narratives project a couleur-de-rose version of the islands that fulfill the protagonists' desires, ultimately positioning both Mallorca and Ibiza as escapist constructs. This literary framing sides with a colonial gaze that reduces so-called exotic locations to playgrounds for the emotional and erotic exploration of outsiders.

Beyond the surface: Unveiling tourism's blind spots in island narratives

Luke Rhinehart's novel *Naked Before the World* (2008) and Matt Haig's novel *The Life Impossible* (2024) mark a turning point in the tradition of tourist fiction. While they inherit many tropes from earlier works—glorified landscapes, transformative journeys, and the sensual quests of the visitors—they stand out as the first novels to deliver a pointed critique of tourism itself. Both novels challenge the commodification of idyllic destinations, exposing the environmental, cultural, and existential costs of a global industry that turns paradise (imagined or not) into a product. In doing so, they reframe tourist fiction as a vehicle for resistance rather than escapism.

Naked Before the World offers a satirical critique of the bohemian expatriate culture and tourism in Mallorca by exposing the commodification of paradise and the hollow ideals that underlie the pseudo-artistic expatriate community of the 1960s. Set in Maya, a fictionalized version of Deià—a town in Mallorca's northern coast described by a *Lonely Planet* guide as "the holy grail when it comes to idyllic views," a village boasting "a rich literary history" (Govan)—the novel draws on familiar tropes in travel literature, only to subvert them and reveal the underlying self-indulgent consumerist dynamics of the expatriate community. In the novel, the very people who disparage mass tourism are themselves deeply entangled in a performative, exploitative relationship with the island and its local culture, reducing it to a mere backdrop for their own quests for self-reinvention, sensuality, and artistic expression.

The protagonist, a young art student named Katya, is rather predictably drawn to the island in search of an escape from the "phony layers" (Rhinehart 9) of her former middle-class American life. Ultimately, according to the narrator, "[s]he knew she wanted to experiment with her sexuality" (48), and the Mallorcan scenario was propitious to it. The Mediterranean landscape is described in hyper-romanticized terms, heightening the sense of Mallorca as an exotic blank canvas: "The Mediterranean had been only a tiny wash of blue beyond the lowest layer of olives, … the mid-afternoon view made her gasp: the world had become blue—sea and sky expanded in front of her in the bright summer sunlight as if part of some triumphant Technicolor film" (3). In the words of another character: "This island is a paradise. And Maya is the Garden of Eden" (68). Despite this intoxicating scenery, some characters soon realize that the allure of Maya is not untouched by commercialism and the pressures of idealization. Where some saw a

paradise, others saw otherwise: "We seem to be back to the Garden of Eden. 'Garden of Eden!' Dr. Toom sputtered. 'I see sagging tits!'" (302). The idyllic setting, seductive or not, has already been reimagined and repurposed by foreigners, effectively transforming it into a geography tailored to serve expatriate fantasies.

Throughout, the novel critiques the dissonance between the ideals of the expatriate artists and the reality of their actions. Katya joins a community that outwardly claims to resist "the invasion of the … barbarians" (Rhinehart 21), a reference to the tourists, yet this community paradoxically mirrors the exploitative behaviors they claim to reject. Despite their apparent disdain for tourism, the expatriates in Maya are, in fact, engaging in their own brand of tourism, one that commodifies the island and its people as props in a self-centered quest for personal fulfillment. Katya's arrival is marked by her desire to shed her American identity and "stand at last naked before the world" (9), a sentiment that idealizes the Mediterranean as a transformative space capable of granting spiritual and sensual rebirth. Yet her journey reveals that such a transformation is superficial, as her quest for authenticity is constrained by the same forces that drive conventional tourism.

Rhinehart uses the interactions between characters to underscore the lack of genuine engagement with the island's local culture, often reducing the expatriates' romantic ideals to mere objectification and hedonism. Katya herself is commodified within this social setting, as illustrated by the director of the Arts Institute's dismissive comment: "'Any brains?' Dr. Toom exhaled slowly and with dignity. 'I doubt it,' he said. 'Not with those tits.'" (Rhinehart 59). This reduction of her worth exemplifies how even the supposed intellectuals and artists fall into patterns of exploitation. Similarly, Diane's crude forecast for Katya's summer—"You are a beautiful wench doomed this summer to get her ass fucked off by every stiff prick in the village" (180)—further highlights the sexualized gaze imposed upon women in this expatriate enclave.

The expatriate community, with its hedonistic pursuits and thinly veiled contempt for traditional Mallorcan life, becomes a mirror image of the mass tourism it despises. The novel's portrayal of Katya's experience ultimately undermines the romanticized narrative of the Mediterranean as a paradise. By the novel's climax, Katya's search for personal liberation has devolved into a nightmarish ordeal, culminating in a Dionysian scene where she is nearly raped by the very expatriate artists who claimed to seek freedom and authenticity. The irony becomes clear: the utopia that promised creative renewal and sensual awakening instead exposes the protagonist to exploitation, and it is

only Franz, a character aligned with the local community, who ultimately rescues her.

In *Naked Before the World*, Rhinehart critiques the expatriate community's self-perception as a community of noble and authentic seekers, revealing instead their complicity in the ongoing commodification of paradise. The novel's closing sentiment, expressed in Franz's ironic welcome— "Welcome, wench, to Maya" (Rhinehart 309)—serves as a disillusioned farewell to the myth of the island as an untouched haven for personal discovery. Rhinehart's exaggerated portrayal thus underscores a broader commentary on tourism itself, suggesting that tourism is hardly ever an innocent activity, as it is inevitably tainted by the projections and desires of outsiders who consume paradise without fully understanding or respecting its reality.

In *The Life Impossible*, Matt Haig reimagines Ibiza not as an archetypal haven for youthful revelry but as a complex site of mourning, reflection, and potential rebirth. For the protagonist, a 72-year-old retired mathematics teacher named Grace Winters, the island serves as an unanticipated salve for an unbearable loss: the death of her son in a traffic accident. While tradition casts Ibiza as a place where individuals seek compensation for intangible losses—whether alienation or disillusionment in their home countries—Haig's narrative deepens this trope by deploying devices of magic realism and science-fiction and framing Ibiza as a repository of primeval happiness that engages in the preservation of the island menaced by the threats of capitalist tourism.

From the outset, Grace is portrayed as a figure steeped in despair and unable to see value in life after her son's death. Her internal monologue reveals a pervasive nihilism: "I look at what is happening to the world, and I see that our whole species is on a path to destruction. … And I just get fed up with being a human" (Haig 2). Ibiza, in this context, represents a rupture from her mundane reality. Initially, however, the island's vibrant and hedonistic image feels incompatible with her grief: "Ibiza, I imagined, was the loud younger mischievous one who went off the rails. … [A] place of parties for young people with reasons to celebrate … [t]he opposite of me" (20). This juxtaposition underscores the protagonist's initial rejection of the island's mythos, as she views herself as "old and stiff" with "no reason to celebrate" (20). Her decision to travel to the island reflects not a desire for escape but an unavowed recognition of the island's mythical potential of restoring what has been lost. Once on Ibiza, the protagonist begins to unravel her preconceptions.

Haig begins to explore Grace's complex relationship with Ibiza through her encounters with local perspectives. The taxi driver's critique

of the island's invasion by hippies, ravers, and celebrities reflects a nuanced understanding of Ibiza as a site of both exploitation and enchantment (Haig 31). This duality resonates with Grace, who simultaneously critiques and surrenders to the island's myth: "I had never been to a place where pleasure was more expected than this Spanish island" (74). Her eventual embrace of Ibiza's ethos of pleasure suggests a tentative reconciliation with life, albeit through a lens still shaded by her grief. Ibiza fulfills its traditional role as a space of compensation, but not without complication. Rather than offering a simplistic return to happiness, the island challenges the protagonist to confront her loss while acknowledging the potential for fleeting moments of joy: "Happiness in June was as common as equations in algebra" (72). This ambivalence underscores the novel's broader commentary on the human condition—where even in the face of profound grief, spaces like Ibiza offer a glimmer of the vitality and connection that grief threatens to extinguish.

It is precisely this vitality that will inspire Grace to dismantle the commodified results of Ibiza's myth in the second part of the narrative. Once she has fallen for the island, it is time for her to defend it and save it from the hungry capitalist market of tourist development. This is when she starts her journey with Alberto Ribas, a free-spirited elderly biologist who takes her to a magic world that advocates nature, ecology, and local life. The narrative echoes the news by revealing that Ibiza has become a battleground on which forces of capitalist exploitation confront advocates of environmental preservation. This tension is exemplified through the conflicting ideologies represented by Art Butler, an international developer, and the collaborative efforts of Grace and the local biologist, who advocate sustainable living and ecological respect. While the image of Ibiza as a tourist product has driven its global popularity, it also raises critical questions about the consequences of such commodification for the island's identity and environment.

Butler epitomizes the capitalist view of Ibiza, seeing it as a resource to be commodified: "Take paradise, package it, and make people rich" (Haig 318). The development of tourist infrastructure—discos, beach clubs, agrotourism, wellness retreats—is portrayed as an endless cycle of cloning what is unique to Ibiza, stripping it of its essence: "What works here becomes cloned everywhere, taking the heart out of it" (218). For Butler, Ibiza is less a living ecosystem than a malleable product, ready to be shaped for financial gain. This perspective, however, alienates the real Ibiza, as pointed out by a local politician: "The Ibiza you are talking about has only been a perception" (232). The capitalist

focus overlooks pressing local issues such as homelessness near the marina and unregulated parking at Platja d'en Bossa (232), reflecting the disconnect between glossy tourist imagery and lived realities. In stark contrast, Grace and Alberto channel the ethos of preservation and local respect.

Grace's journey captures this transformation from consumer to protector of Ibiza. Initially captivated by the island's aesthetic wonders—"Everything ached with beauty" (Haig 139)—her perspective deepens as she begins to see Ibiza as more than just a destination. Inspired by Alberto's guidance, she embraces an environmentalist stance, declaring that "Ibiza is not for sale" and advocating for the protection of Posidonia seagrass (238). The recognition that "there are no islands"—"If you go far enough down, everything is connected" (226)—underscores the broader environmental message: Ibiza's fate is intrinsically linked to global ecological health.

The struggle over Ibiza's identity reflects deeper social issues. The contrast between those who benefit from tourism and those left behind mirrors broader inequalities: "The difference between a gift and a curse was sometimes a question of perspective" (Haig 226). Alberto recalls a time when life on the island required adaptation to its natural rhythms, fostering a sense of unity with the land that is increasingly eroded by modernization. This loss of connection is poignantly reflected in his lament: "You had to respect the shape of the land. The hills. The pines and the soil" (292). At the heart of the narrative lies a call to action: to resist the homogenization and exploitation of Ibiza by recognizing and preserving its unique identity. In Grace's words: "You will find yourself protecting life, protecting nature, protecting this beautiful island" (193).

The tension between exploitation and preservation in Ibiza serves as a microcosm of broader environmental and cultural conflicts in the modern world. Prioritizing profit over preservation, Art Butler's vision represents the global capitalist approach to tourism. In contrast, Grace Winters and Alberto Ribas champion a more sustainable and respectful relationship with the island, arguing that its true value lies not in its marketability but in its natural and cultural integrity. As the narrative poignantly illustrates, protecting Ibiza entails not only saving a physical place, but also preserving the soul of a community and an ecosystem in its relation to the world.

Luke Rhinehart's *Naked Before the World* and Matt Haig's *The Life Impossible* infuse amenity and leisure literature with a fresh critical perspective. By intertwining social and environmental commentary, they transform the act of travel and turn mere escapism into an opportunity

for local awareness and ecological engagement. They challenge readers to reconsider the ethics of tourism and embrace a more responsible connection to the destinations they explore, redefining leisure as an act of mindful stewardship.

Conclusion

The enduring allure of Mallorca and Ibiza as idyllic tourist destinations reflects a profound tension between their symbolic representations and the realities of their cultural, environmental, and social landscapes. From the early Romantic imaginings of Mediterranean islands as paradisiacal escapes to contemporary narratives that critique the commodification of these spaces, the notion of *isola rasa* encapsulates a persistent dynamic: the reduction of these islands to empty canvases upon which external fantasies are projected. In this article, I have traced the evolution of this phenomenon, illustrating how literary, cultural, and economic forces have coalesced to construct, perpetuate, and challenge the myth of the Balearics as an escape zone devoid of intrinsic identity.

The Mediterranean coast has been romanticized as an exotic sanctuary offering an escape from industrialized life, with early depictions by poets such as Byron and Keats emphasizing sensuality and vitality. This vision persisted in twentieth-century travel literature and its portrayals of the Mediterranean as a space of simple, unspoiled retreat. Catering to Northern European fantasies, these narratives have facilitated the islands' commodification for mass tourism. The resulting environmental harm, cultural homogenization, and loss of local agency have in turn become objects of critique in contemporary fiction. In this respect, the novels by Rhinehart and Haig exemplify a critical shift in amenity literature, exposing the dissonance between the utopian promises of tourism and the realities of ecological and social exploitation.

By juxtaposing idyllic imagery with satirical and critical commentary, these contemporary works reveal the fragility of the constructed identities of the Balearics. They challenge readers to reconsider the ethics of tourism. Rhinehart's *Naked Before the World* deconstructs the expatriate romanticism of Mallorca and exposes the superficiality and exploitation underlying the artistic and hedonistic enclaves. Similarly, Haig's *The Life Impossible* reimagines Ibiza not merely as a playground for indulgence but as a battleground, reflecting broader tensions between commodification and preservation in global tourism.

Ultimately, the commodification of Mallorca and Ibiza is part of a larger pattern in which local particularities are erased in order to satisfy global desires, a phenomenon deeply embedded in the tourism and travel literature industries. Yet, as contemporary critiques demonstrate, there is an opportunity to reimagine these islands not as blank canvases but as vibrant, interconnected spaces deserving of respect and preservation. These narratives can help us foster a more ethical and nuanced approach to tourism, both in literature and practice, and thus challenge the legacy of *isola rasa* and dignify the complexity of these Mediterranean landscapes.

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Isola rasa: Majorka in Ibiza kot prazno platno turizma v potopisnem leposlovju

Ključne besede: potopisi / potopisno leposlovje / turizem / imagologija / Balearski otoki / *isola rasa* / eksoticizem

Članek pokaže, kako potopisi, potopisno leposlovje in kapitalistični stadij turizma predstavljajo Majorko in Ibizo kot *isolae rasae* oziroma prazni geografiji. *Isola rasa* pojmovno zajema poblagovljenje teh otokov kot nekakšnih večnih idiličnih krajev brez zgodovine ali lokalne skupnosti, krajev, ki ponujata zaslon za fantazme severnoevropskega turista. Zaradi te transformacije, ki jo lahko spremljamo v literaturi, sredozemski otoki, med katerimi sta Majorka in Ibiza, postajajo eskapistične cone, namenjene popotnikom, ki iščejo čutno zdravilo za odtujenost, ki jo občutijo v svojih lastnih družbah. Članek zastavlja vprašanje, kako sodobno pripovedništvo reproducira in obenem problematizira te obče kraje. Ob branju romanov, kot sta *Naked Before the World* Luka Rineharta in *The Life Impossible* Matta Haiga, se izkaže, da tovrstna literatura homogenizirano turistovo izkušnjo, ki daje obiskovalčevim fantazmam prednost pred lokalnimi problemi, upoveduje na način, ki ponuja kritično obzorje, v katerem lahko načnemo razpravo o okoljski, družbeni in kulturni ceni množičnega turizma.

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