

**MARE NOSTRUM INTERVIEW: JONATHAN PUGH –
THE POWER OF THINKING WITH ISLANDS ¹**

Mare Nostrum (Lilian Laky): Today we are interviewing Professor Jonathan Pugh from the Department of Geography at Newcastle University, who is one of the leading theorists on insularity. I find it particularly stimulating to discuss islands, one of my favourite topics, with Professor Pugh. He has produced more than seventy publications on various aspects of island studies, held a number of visiting fellowships, delivered international keynote speeches, and been invited to speak at universities in several places around the world including Princeton, Harvard, Virginia Tech, Cornell, London, Zurich, Dublin, California Western, and Taiwan. Jonathan's recent work examines the increasingly prominent role that the study of islands is playing in approaches to critical thinking (see Pugh and Chandler, 2021). We invited Jon to explain to us the relevance of his research and publications. So, please, Jon, let's start with an explanation of what the Anthropocene is.

Jonathan Pugh: It is my pleasure to talk with you, Lilian and Erica. What is so interesting about islands and the scholarship relating to them is the involvement of people from very different backgrounds. I personally know nothing about the archaeology of islands, the Greek Mediterranean, or Croatia. I really hope that I can learn as much from you as you can learn from the work that I am doing in more contemporary contexts.

In particular, my work focuses on how people think about islands today, how islands became generative for broader critical trends in contemporary culture, and, in the past five years, thinking about the Anthropocene. I have observed in recent publications that archaeologists are increasingly engaging with the concept of the Anthropocene. In the broader context of contemporary social sciences and humanities, however, the Anthropocene represents a huge field of study. In my latest book, written with David Chandler from the University of Westminster, I made the argument that islands are absolutely crucial for the Anthropocene (see Pugh and Chandler, 2021).

Mare Nostrum (Erica Angliker): Just a quick question, Jon, regarding your statement that you work on contemporary islands. Do you work only on inhabited islands?

¹ <https://youtu.be/Fv8mX6Y-r3E>.

For example, Despotiki, the island where I conduct my archaeological research—under the direction of Yannis Kourayos, archaeologist of the Ephorate of the Antiquities of the Cyclades, which is part of the Greek Ministry of Culture and Sports—has been uninhabited for 200 years.

Pugh: Well, I have a very different background, as I started my studies in the Caribbean. In my work, I am interested in how islands or “islandness” can help generally in understanding what the Anthropocene is—which brings me back to your first question. For a lot of people, the Anthropocene means a new epoch in history characterized by climate change, global warming, intensifying hurricanes, ocean acidification, the loss of Indigenous Peoples, islands sinking under rising seas, continued colonial exploitation, and so forth. So, the Anthropocene is this kind of profound shift that merits classification as a new geological era—i.e., a shift from the Holocene to the Anthropocene—because humans have affected and transformed planetary conditions so greatly. I think of the Anthropocene as much more of a *shift in mindset* in which the key change is that we are no longer satisfied with the current framework for reasoning. I refer to the mode of reasoning that splits the world into dichotomies between humans and nature, and the mind and the body, that humans exploit to command and control nature. That mindset is now clearly under attack because it led humans to screw up the planet.

Now, this reasoning leads further to a key trope that is rising to the surface of contemporary debates once the current framework for reasoning comes under attack. The dominant trope in the Anthropocene thinking in which I personally engage is **relational entanglement** between humans and nonhumans. Islands relate very strongly to this trope because, in a sense, they have always been thought of as relationally entangled with humans, though, in the past, this trope was largely driven by the modern colonial attitude towards nature, which focuses on controlling it. In the Anthropocene, as relational entanglement becomes a dominant concern, it is inevitable that Anthropocene scholars and scientists will take an interest in geographies and geographical forms that *enable* them to think relationally about humans and nonhumans. My more recent work has been looking at why islands, which were the peripheral geographies of modernity – such as tiny islands in the middle of the Pacific, the Maldives, and the Caribbean islands – have become so important in contemporary debates about the Anthropocene, which are concerned with the relational entanglements between humans and nature. Islands were liminal, peripheral topics in modern thought, but not so in Anthropocene thinking. In the Anthropocene, islands have become a topic of considerable interest, and not just because

they are powerful symbols of global warming (obviously, phenomena such as the intensifying hurricanes or rising sea levels, to which many islands are subject, reflects the extent to which humans have screwed up the planet). Rather, my focus is upon how islands have attracted interest lately because the West has become interested in developing *relational* ways of thinking about being and knowing. There is this Western crisis of faith in modernity, and here islands and island cultures are increasingly engaged in both mainstream policy making *and* critical theory and activism in order to challenge modern reasoning – that is, to challenge human/nature, mind/body, subject/object divides, and the command and control approaches of modernity. So, because Anthropocene thinking is interested in relational entanglements between humans and nature (i.e. working through and beyond the divides of modernity), and developing relational and non-modern ways of thinking, islands and islanders have moved from the periphery to the centre of much debate.

Mare Nostrum (Angliker): Very interesting. If I can relate what you just said to my field of research, in ancient history, the Cycladic islands were always thought of as isolated and peripheral. This discourse was, not coincidentally, constructed by an empire, specifically, the one controlled by Athens, that dominated these islands. On the other hand, from the perspective of the relationship between humans and nature, in ancient religion, there is a kind of respect towards nature and all natural elements. Just looking at the Cyclades, this attitude is archaeologically materialized in such features as peak sanctuaries and altars on mountaintops as well as offerings to Zeus or Apollo to propitiate these gods and ensure good weather and safe travel by sea. From this evidence, we infer a greater awareness of nature's power and of humans' status as a part of nature, rather than the will to dominate it, in the ancient Cycladic islanders. The culturally-encoded respect for nature that we perceive in them represents, in a way, an alternative to modern colonial thinking, too.

Pugh: Absolutely—and that is why I am so interested in learning how islands were thought of in antiquity. Islands have always been sites of relational entanglement. Consider Darwin's research: he discovered a whole new idea of life itself, one that is relationally entangled rather than linear. Since then, in disciplines like biology, relational entanglement, species differentiation and adaptation has been said to be amplified, made more visible, on islands. I refer to this example to make the point that Darwin's way of thinking was affected by *islandness* as he became increasingly interested in a relational

approach to biology. Although obviously in different ways, the kinds of geographical forms and cultures that you are talking about had a sort of relational thinking as well.

In the past few decades, writers about islands such as Hau‘ofa (2008) on the Pacific and Glissant (1997) on the Caribbean have become remarkably prominent in the broader social sciences and humanities. They were always good writers; it is we, in the West, who have changed recently and become increasingly interested in relational modes of thinking and, at the same time, sceptical of empires. This must be a perennial question among historians—how to understand historical changes in relation to the topics and figures that garner broad interest as cultures evolve.

***Mare Nostrum* (Laky): Thank you for clarifying the overall concept of Anthropocene, which is all the more important to us since, in classical studies, topics such as the environment and interactions between humans and nature still represent a niche in the scholarship. It is, then, crucial for us to review the ancient testimony so as to engage classicists in this debate.**

Pugh: Indeed, and I think it necessary to stress once more that shifting patterns of thought and culture evolve from —and are entangled with—geographical forms and figures such as islands. Islands were peripheral under modern reasoning, the ‘outside’ of continental dominance. But today islands have become central to the international debate about the Anthropocene, and, as I said, not only because they are symbols of the human abuse of nature. Work with islands has also become important because today islands are widely understood to be generative and productive of new modes of thinking that challenge modern reasoning. As an example, consider the concept of *resilience*, an adaptive and heuristic analytical tool that we (in the West at least) all now use very much today. Though not being confined to islands (my children, for example, are given ‘resilience lessons’ as part of their school education), much of the earliest research on resilience was, in fact, carried on in insular contexts precisely because of the Darwin-inspired thought of islands as emblematic sites of adaptive relations. That is why I use islands to foreground my argument regarding the shift from modern to Anthropocene thinking.

Regarding whether the concept of an island may be applicable to areas constrained by entities other than bodies of water—for example, a lockdown during a pandemic that confines people to certain places—the answer is absolutely yes. The book *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds* (Pugh and Chandler, 2021) is more concerned with the

concept of *islandness* than with the traditional definition of islands as entities surrounded by water. For example, a national park in the middle of the U.S. state of Texas can be thought of as an island. In general, conceptually speaking, ‘islands’ can be understood as localized sites of relational entanglement, so the concept is applicable as well to forests, nature preserves, some contemporary approaches to gardening, and so forth. What we are really talking about then is *islandness*, which has become a highly productive concept, or analytical device, in the context of the waning faith in modern reasoning – for ‘islandness-thinking’ paves the way for more relational approaches to understanding notions such as being, knowing, and developing. Accordingly, islandness is characteristic of anything today, be it a city, a car, or a person, locked down in the middle of the pandemic.

Mare Nostrum (Laky): Why did islands become so important for the contemporary debate and, in particular, for Anthropocene studies?

Pugh: I think that I have partially answered that question. Islands, at least if we consider the traditional definition of “island” as land separate from the mainland, were the liminal or transgressive spaces of modernity. In Darwin, or Margaret Mead, or even Robinson Crusoe, at the foundation of the modern Western disciplines of biology, anthropology and literature, islands were already considered sites of relational entanglement. But modernity and colonialism sought to ‘rise above’ this, command and control nature and islands. Consider Robinson Crusoe: he wants only to *command and control* the island where he is shipwrecked, in order to ensure his survival, in the manner of a typical ‘modern man’. That said, I think it is a mistake to think of islands as blank spaces in Western imagery since they have often been understood as spaces of complex relational entanglement, even if only for the purpose of control. It is in the context of Anthropocene thinking, where modern, command and control approaches are waning, in which the interest in human-nonhuman entanglement comes to the fore, that the concepts of island and islandness become interesting.

Mare Nostrum (Angliker): Again, it is interesting to apply these notions to Greek antiquity. With respect to the ancient Cyclades, there were also narratives describing these islands as “blank spaces” or an area of transition between the East and West and, hence, from the perspective of various empires, an area to be controlled.

Pugh: Absolutely—islands can be and were considered sites of relational entanglement in the past too. But under modernity, the aim was to rise above and to ‘command’ all this. It is only recently, though, that Anthropocene thinking has become concerned with digging deeper into the history of islands as relationally entangled sites. Anthropocene thinking is interested in islands as emblematic sites of relational entanglements in order to develop alternative, less modern, ways of thinking about being and knowing, such as ‘resilience-thinking’ we talked about earlier. Personally, I never felt comfortable with the notion of islands as blank spaces because no space can be literally blank. Islands exist in the imagination and culture, and, throughout history, various meanings and aspects of them have captured the public interest and fostered scientific and cultural debate.

***Mare Nostrum* (Angliker):** I am not comfortable with the concept of ‘blank spaces’ either. Thus, when visiting various of the Cyclades, I did not focus on their history and archaeology only but was able to appreciate various aspects of the contemporary lifestyle. This perspective caused me to reflect on the fact that these concepts of ‘blank’ and ‘isolated spaces’ exist much more in the culturally-constructed labels that we put on things than in reality. Indeed, though, islands exist and function in ways quite different from those on mainland, for all aspects of life and culture are entangled.

Pugh: Islanders and islands, as you say, have always been involved in complex relational entanglements. People like Derek Walcott, who won the Nobel prize for literature for his poetry [in 1992], or Kamau Brathwaite from Barbados, who wrote in the fifties and sixties—they were peripheral, whereas now they are becoming central, and we need to ask ourselves: ‘why?’. Our interests are obviously shifting, and I believe that the concepts of island and islandness are playing a major role in setting the agenda for Anthropocene thinking, to the point that, to me, Anthropocene thinking *is* islandness thinking.

***Mare Nostrum* (Laky):** Why are islands more appropriate for the study of the Anthropocene than other geographical forms, such as valleys, mountains, and deserts? More generally, what distinguishes islands from mainland areas in terms of studies of the Anthropocene?

Pugh: We have already mentioned the generative power of islands. Perhaps another way to answer your question is to consider the power of islandness thinking to transform everything into an island in the Anthropocene—a snowflake, a person, a city, a car—and how these things are entangled with other relationships. The concept of ‘islandness’ represents privileged access to thinking about how things as relationally entangled with other things. This is why many of the contemporary modes of thinking draw on relationally-entangled notions, for instance resilience, as we mentioned earlier. Anything or anyone that we classify as ‘resilient’ possesses that quality in relation to something else. We can then think of this concept, resilience, as an island because it calls into action all of its simultaneous relations with other things. Thus, as we examine in great detail in the book, islandness has become a generator of, and a framework for, Anthropocene thinking. To take another example, islands are often referred to as the proverbial “canary in a coal mine.” The Maldives can be thought of as the canary in the coal mine for global warming or, in other words, the front line of planetary change. For these islands are suffering from intensifying hurricanes and bearing witness to all sorts of signals about what is to come. But what we underscore in the book is that this is also a *mode of logic*, a *particular* way of thinking. It is a shift in thought towards the logic of what in the book we call ‘correlation’ – a shift in thought such that humans have become interested in ways of constantly ‘sensing’ shifting relations. Think of the rise of sensors in everyday life more generally, which reflects that logic. In Anthropocene thinking, then, islands are the canaries in the coal mine because they also reflect our significant contemporary interest in sensing relations; whether by tracking the evolutionary pathways of an island’s species, or the digital sensing devices referred to as “smart island technology.” All of these themes fit into a key trope of our times – sensing as a mode of governing in our contemporary era.

Overall, to me, the question “What can others learn from islands?” can be misleading, for we are all islands. To quote the philosopher Jacques Derrida (2011: 9), “there are only islands at the end of the world.” What he means is that there are only islands after the end of the world of modern reasoning, and we find ourselves now in that place.

Mare Nostrum (Angliker): I really appreciate the concept of entanglement. When I first started studying ancient islands, I made much use of the concept of networks, which is indeed important, but, as I realize now, entanglement is more

inclusive. For example, the concept of networks does not take into account the agency of nature.

Pugh: Concepts such as networks and adaptive relations reflect, after all, various ways of thinking about inter-relations and the shifting complexity of life nowadays. In the context of ancient history, it must be really difficult for an historian not to project his or her contemporary concepts into the past.

***Mare Nostrum* (Angliker):** I guess that it is impossible. That is why, as a historian and archaeologist, you can rethink the same site over and over. Turning again to the Cyclades as an example, Delos was one of the most important islands in the Aegean as home to a Panhellenic sanctuary of Apollo. For several decades, scholars have been discussing the various cities and empires that struggled for control of the island and its history, but only recently have we begun to consider how it was even possible for people to live on an island with a semi-arid climate. So, even in archaeology, only recently has the interest in natural resources led to the discovery that rock formations such as those on Delos can store a great deal of water and render islands inhabitable despite a difficult climate.

***Mare Nostrum* (Laky):** Your book investigates how islands went from being imagined as isolated and backward to a prominent position in discussions of the Anthropocene. Would you please say a few more words about this shift?

Pugh: I think that the key consideration in this regard is that island scholarship, and scholarship more generally, often fails to explain sufficiently what is meant by ‘isolation’. Isolation is not the opposite of relation and movement. As a matter of fact, nothing is literally devoid of relationships, and, in reality, we see quite the opposite, that everything is relationally connected to something else. Considering once more Margaret Mead as well as more recent work, such as that of Glissant (1997) and Christina Sharpe (2016), islands have for long time been considered as localized spaces for the complex coming together of relations. Even more so in the current Western imagery, in which islands serve as exemplary sites of relational entanglement—such as a coal power station in North America that can have a negative impact on an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. In the Anthropocene there is no ‘away’, everything is entangled because, ultimately, there exists no way out of such a phenomenon as global warming. Islands have never been isolated. The evolution of species in the Galapagos was the product of relationships that were amplified compared with those on the mainland, and, therefore, more recognizable

for Darwin than relationships on the mainland. And yet, the relationships that Darwin observed there were part of a broader web. It follows that islands are so important in the Anthropocene because they embody and show clearly the relational entanglements that we are dealing with broadly.

To be honest, this increasing interest in islands may generate cultural side effects, such as the risk of fetishizing islands and Indigenous island cultures to which they have been home—but that is, perhaps, another question. I am just describing a general shift in thought that is placing islands at the centre of our cultural agenda, of Anthropocene thinking, whether we think of islands literally as spaces surrounded by water or, more conceptually, we deal with the broader concept of *islandness*.

***Mare Nostrum* (Angliker): Your comments in this regard are relevant to the current state of island research in classical archaeology and history. Though archaeologists excavated Greek islands for centuries, the scholarship has privileged the investigation of the Athenian empire and the Greek mainland as a kind of paradigmatic case study for the rest of Greece. Only recently has there developed a more widespread interest in the dynamics, history, and material culture of islands. In a way, we can then say that classical archaeology mirrors the general cultural dynamics that you just described.**

Pugh: This is an exciting observation, and it makes me think that there must be a book or a body of published research on the concept of islandness in Greek myth and history.

***Mare Nostrum* (Angliker): Indeed, there has been research on this topic, and more is expected with the publication of our dossier on islands for the journal *Mare Nostrum*.**

But let's move on to another question, specifically, whether the concept of islandness and networks is always utopian, or whether it can be applied to scenarios characterized by conflict. For example, in the context of the pandemic, humans are under attack by viruses.

Pugh: I think that the answer to your question depends on the stakes of your research. In my work, I try to track shifts in thinking, particularly about the concept of islandness in Anthropocene thinking. From this perspective, the distinction between realistic and utopian is blurry: all kinds of thought, be they realistic, idealistic, or utopian,

shape our reality because they arise from a specific historical and culturally-determined society. The content of Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, for example, may seem utopian, but, to really appreciate its impact, we should read it in the context of the time in which it was written and track the connections between the ideas presented and concrete historical events. After all, from the point of view of Anthropocene thinking, utopias are as concrete as other ideas because they describe what we think it means to be human at a given moment. Concepts such as utopia, resilience, adaptation, and islandness evolve as our culture and thought evolve. At the same time, their cultural relevance and meaning in a given moment are generative of the material possibilities of change at that moment. The fact that we are now dealing with Darwin's research and with the concepts of islandness and resilience determines the span of our possible outcomes, which obviously will change in the future along with the ways in which people think.

***Mare Nostrum* (Angliker): Would you give us an overview of your book *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds* (Pugh and Chandler, 2021)?**

Pugh: In the book—which I wrote with David Chandler and that is available free for anyone to download—the aim is to clarify and conceptually draw out, for the first time in the literature, what we see as the key shift to working with islands and islandness in a broad range of contemporary Anthropocene thinking and related practices. We first provide an overview of the multiple ways of thinking about islands and various perspectives on them in the Anthropocene and their role in the development of ways of thinking about being—that is, relational ontologies—and knowing—that is, relational epistemology. In doing so, we elaborate four tendencies or analytics that position the figure of the island centrally within broader debates about the Anthropocene. In the rest of the first half of the book, we discuss *Resilience* in Chapter 2 and *Patchworks* in Chapter 3, which are different ways of thinking about islands and islandness in relation to the Anthropocene. The concept of *Resilience* has a kind of modern legacy, while that of *Patchworks* is increasingly losing that legacy. In the second half of the book, we examine two other analytics—*Correlation* in Chapter 4 (which we discussed earlier, when talking about the contemporary interest in islands as *sensing* devices of the Anthropocene) and *Storiation* in Chapter 5—that reflect the same shift from modern to Anthropocene legacies that we detected in the concepts of *Resilience* and *Patchworks*.

The book as a whole looks at the ways in which islands and islandness have become generative of various attempts to question modern, colonial thinking and of alternative

ways of imagining possibilities for being and knowing apart from the constraints of the modern framework of reasoning. There is one thing that, I think, needs to be restated: the Anthropocene in contemporary thought does not exist in people's heads. In other words, you cannot develop a discourse about how you think about the world without thinking about the world. As a geographer, I am interested in how certain geographies, more than others, rise to the surface for the development of thought in the world. Thus, I am interested in islands and islandness because these have, as discussed, shifted from the periphery to the centre of a debate about the Anthropocene involving international policy-makers, critical theorists, artists, and poets. The second aim of the book is, then, to connect to a broad network of people and draw out these kinds of concerns. The book is just a start, seeking to set an initial agenda for a wider research network which examines why and how islands are being engaged for the broader development of contemporary critical thinking.

***Mare Nostrum* (Angliker): It took me years to think about the islands that I work on as a *Patchwork*, and, when I finally did, I was at last able to make sense of the web of relations in which islands engage with the surrounding environment and cultures. I think that the concept of *Patchworks* is so useful for the study of ancient islands because of its non-linear approach that it suggests to the aforementioned multiple relations.**

Pugh: I am noticing that the concept of *Patchworks* seems to be particularly generative of new approaches for historians. Indeed, the *Patchworks* approach challenges the more linear understanding of island dynamics that incorporates resilience thinking and opens up the possibilities of a broader spatial ontology that considers the complexity of both the spatial and the temporal becoming of things. For this reason, I would say that the *Patchworks* approach is much less “solutionist” than resilience ontology.

In general, the manner in which particular aspects of Anthropocene thinking are emerging in the work of historians and archaeologists as well proves to me that we find ourselves in the most exciting time to work in island studies. I do not make this statement just because of the growing empirical set of data that we are collecting from various branches of scholarship—archaeology, history, anthropology, and critical Black studies, just to mention a few—but especially because the concept of *islandness* itself seems to plug into our contemporary concerns. In Derrida's (2011: 9), statement that “there are only islands after the end of the world” lies a profound realization. Once the human/nature

dichotomy is challenged, once modern frameworks of reasoning are undermined, we first of all recognize that, in reality, this culturally-determined duality never involved all humans but always concerned specifically ‘White colonialist Man’ trying to control nature. It is this critical turn that has allowed relational thinking, and islands as exemplary sites of relational entanglements, to come to the fore in public debate.

***Mare Nostrum* (Laky): What is your critical agenda for island studies in the Anthropocene?**

Pugh: It’s been incredibly exciting to see the book and the wider project take off in the way that it has over the past year—built as it is around the rather straightforward notion that *thought develops in the world, that geographical forms and cultures (like islands) matter to and for the development of wider thought*. Thus, islands and the conceptual power of islandness do “work” for the development of wider contemporary thinking concerned with critiquing modern reasoning. As I said, the book just seeks to open up this agenda, and it is being developed in a lot of ways by a lot of people, as can be seen on the website anthropoceneislands.online. Among the initiatives currently ongoing, we have a monthly reading group, which I run with Kasia Mika, in which we discuss works dealing with islands, *islandness*, and relational entanglement. We also have a monthly early-career group, which I lead with Maggie Henry, intended to provide a safe space in which early-career researchers are free to discuss, develop, and test their ideas. We also have a permanent *Anthropocene Islands* section in the *Island Studies Journal*—and we thank Adam Grydehøj and the editorial team for their support—and specifically designated *Anthropocene Islands* themes at conferences such as the Islands of the World conference in Croatia in June 2022.

In short, all of our initiatives seek to create spaces for people of all backgrounds and at all stages in their careers. We want to share practices and thoughts about how *islands* and *islandness* are being put to work to generate critiques of the modern framework of thought.

***Mare Nostrum* (Angliker):** Thank you very much for all of your insights on islands and islandness, Jon. We hope that this exciting discussion on the generative power of these concepts for expanding the boundaries of Anthropocene thinking will proceed and increasingly include more classics scholars.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

Derrida J. (2011) *The Beast and the Sovereign* (Vol. 2). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Glissant, E. (1997). *Poetics of Relation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Hau'ofa E. (2008) *We Are the Ocean*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.

Pugh, J. and Chandler, D. (2021). *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds*. London: Westminster University Press.

Sharpe, C. (2016). *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.