

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion: A Critical Agenda for the Anthropocene

Introduction

Islands have become one of the most emblematic figures of the Anthropocene. In responding to the lack of consideration of why islands have come to the fore in analytic approaches associated with the Anthropocene we wanted to move beyond islands as merely becoming endangered or threatened – symbolising the impacts of global warming, nuclear fallout, colonialism, rising sea levels, the displacement of peoples, intensified hurricanes, coral reef degradation and other forces associated with planetary changes. We wanted to do more than write *about* islands in the Anthropocene and to instead examine how islands have themselves been productive of our understanding of the Anthropocene condition. A condition in which it is understood that our modernist assumptions of scientific progress and capacities to know and shape our external world have been fundamentally questioned by climate change and environmental unpredictability.

Our project has been concerned with examining how major themes of Anthropocene thinking engage islands and islanders, and

How to cite this book chapter:

Pugh, J. and Chandler, D. 2021. *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds*. Pp. 179–192. London: Ubiquity Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book52.f>. License: CC-BY 4.0

work with island imaginaries, in the development of methods and approaches to the world that move us beyond the modernist episteme. As we have argued, the liminal positionality of islands within modernity – as part of the world but excluded from linear and universalist imaginaries of progress and civilisation – gave the island powers and affordances which have come to play a significant role today. Islands are often worked with and drawn upon to illustrate the world in real and vital ways, which go beyond the constraints of a modernist imaginary. Islands have thus come to symbolise strengths and capacities that modernist abstract and reductionist understandings cannot grasp. Islands have become saving figures in the Anthropocene. Saving connections, dependencies, knowledge practices and relations that have been lost in modernity and now need recovering.

The Anthropocene has put the island to work and works *with* islands in what we think are often fascinating and spectacular ways. Never has there been a more exciting time to be an island scholar. After the end of the world of modernity, after the end of the taken-for-grantedness of the modernist assumptions underpinning Western social and natural sciences, islands are helping to reconstitute possibilities of other worlds. Thus this book has focused upon how Anthropocene thinking works with and engages islands and island imaginaries in the development of non-modernist ontologies and onto-epistemologies; widely held as key to thinking beyond the limits of the modernist, mainland, world. In the following section of this chapter we provide a general framework which allows us to reach the main conclusions of this book. In the closing section, we seek to sketch out a critical agenda for island studies and some of the key questions and issues at stake.

After the End of the World, the Age of Islands

In this section we situate this book's analysis of islands as key sites of relational entanglements, awareness and feedbacks within a broader paradigm shift which is presently taking place in

contemporary thinking associated with the desire to move critical thought beyond the limits of the modern episteme. As the Caribbean island scholar Sylvia Wynter (2003) observed, leading Western traditions of social and political thought have projected power and rationalised coloniality through imposing the hierarchical idea of a human/nature divide, overrepresenting 'Man' at the centre of the world. Today, the hold of the human-centred or modernist episteme is being questioned, no more so than in relation to the Anthropocene. Today, attempts to go beyond the constraints of Western, Eurocentric or modernist conceptions of the world are oriented towards questions of relational entanglements, awareness and feedbacks. Islands have thereby moved from the periphery to become more important in broader contemporary thought, precisely because they are widely understood to be productive for these alternative approaches. In heuristically presenting the analytics of Resilience, Patchworks, Correlation and Storiation, we reach conclusions concerning how and why drawing upon islands works to enable and create new possibilities for thought, generative for Anthropocene thinking.

As we have discussed in the previous chapters, the need to think beyond the modernist human/nature divide is perhaps the key driver of Anthropocene thinking. Novel and alternative approaches to modern reasoning, such as the ontologies and onto-epistemologies we have discussed in this book, develop from this starting point. Here Wynter (2015) stands out as a scholar who has devoted much of her career to explaining how dominant theoretical frameworks of Western or 'mainland' thought have long grappled with the problem of 'Man' as separated from 'nature'. Indeed, for Wynter, one way in which this problem was addressed was through the construction of 'man' as a 'natural organism', like and also unlike any other. She highlights that it was Darwin, writing in the 1800s, who sealed the overturning of the Latin-Christian tradition, initially questioned by Copernicus a few centuries earlier, where 'man' was posited as separate from or above nature. This is why, as we have noted, contemporary authors such as Stacy

Alaimo (2010; 2016), Cary Wolfe (2017) and Timothy Morton (2017) call Darwin the first posthuman thinker.

What Wynter (2015) calls ‘Man 2’ is the subject of a particularly powerful story – what she calls, following Frantz Fanon, a ‘mythoi’ – based on the ‘premise that the human is ... defined biocentrically and therefore exists, as such, in a relationship of pure continuity with all other living beings (rather than in one of both continuity and discontinuity)’ (Wynter, 2015: 16–17). Thus ‘Man 2’ historically differentiates itself through a ‘normally, *imperatively self-correcting* ... order of knowledge’ (Wynter, 2015: 16, emphasis in original). Man 2 is not an exception, existing collectively as a species distinct or apart from nature, but at the apex of a purely biological framing of being, understood to be self-adaptive and self-correcting:

This is the version in whose terms the human has now been redefined, since the nineteenth century, on the *natural scientific model* of a *natural* organism. This is a model that *supposedly* pre-exists – rather than *coexists* with – all the models of other human societies *and* their religions/ cultures. That is, all human societies have their ostensibly natural scientific organic basis, with their religions/cultures being merely superstructural. All the peoples of the world, whatever their religions/cultures, are drawn into the homogenizing global structures that are based on the-model-of-a-natural-organism world-systemic order. (Wynter, 2015: 21, emphasis in original)¹

Anthropocene analytics can be read as building upon but also moving beyond Wynter’s historical understanding (particularly the analytics of Patchworks and Storiatio, furthest from the modernist framework). Most Anthropocene thinking today accepts that humans are not separate from the world. Indeed, the overarching problematic of Anthropocene thinking is that of relational entanglement, from which new questions, approaches and analytics, such as those examined in this book, emerge. As Eva Giraud states (2019: 1), today the consensus seems to be that ‘the human is only realised by and through its relations with other

entities ... [and that this is widely seen as offering] a source of ethical and political potential.' Likewise, Claire Colebrook and Jami Weinstein (2017: xxi) argue that '[o]nly once the problem has yielded a certain stability can questions emerge.'² Thus, in different ways, the four analytical framings which we have presented here are illustrative of how working with islands as figures of relational entanglement drives thought beyond modernist, human-centred, constraints. This is why we believe the liminal figure of the island has become important as a resource to work with for drawing out relational approaches to being (ontologies) and knowing (onto-epistemologies) in the Anthropocene.

In this book, we have presented relational ontology as a continuum, as legacies of modernist assumptions are peeled away. Some approaches, such as Resilience, more straightforwardly build upon and work with the metanarrative of Wynter's Darwinian Man 2 who adapts to transforming planetary conditions (even if today it is the Indigenous islander who is often heralded as more adaptive or resilient than the mainland Westerner or European). As we examined (in Chapter 2), Resilience is the art of adaptive change in relation to changing circumstances. Here, drawing upon certain imaginaries of island life is understood to be particularly productive for Resilience thinking; because islands are held to exemplify the powers of creative and productive differentiation and individuation. In contrast to the homogenising, modern notion of a human/nature divide, islands are seen to exemplify the powers of immanent, inter-dependent life which – as Darwin worked to reveal through his influential research on islands – works in more adaptive and dynamic ways.

In Chapter 3 we turned to the more fluid relational ontology of what we called Patchworks. This both develops and disrupts the ontology of Resilience thinking. In Patchworks, the Resilience imaginary of islands existing in a flat, two-dimensional space, side-by-side, is replaced with a more open island ontology of spatial and temporal becoming. In Patchworks, the world dissipates into *patchworks* of novel and often partial interconnections. This destabilises the 'solutionist' or instrumentalising aspects of

Resilience, making Patchwork approaches less governmentalising and human-centred. Patchworks is about opening ourselves to the relational affects and knots of co-relational entanglements. We make, explore and journey in Patchwork ontologies, rather than merely reflecting upon and becoming more aware of our relational interconnections so as to become resilient. Here we explored how island ontology becomes the ontology of the world and thinking with islands becomes a 'verb' and a practice of 'world-making' (Teaiwa, 2007: 514). Thus, Patchwork ontologies align with broader trends in Anthropocene thinking which emphasise the importance of 'staying with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016), as life becomes less predictable, confineable and graspable. The focus is upon 'giving-on-and-with' (Glissant, 1997: 142) the power of disturbances and emergent effects, where island ontology becomes a key resource for stimulating thinking about how relationality is radically *open* and contains potentialities or possibilities which are beyond our capacities to predict or to control.

After examining these relational ontologies, we turned to how islands have been put to work in rethinking how we know after the world of modernity. Again, presenting an onto-epistemological continuum as the reality of the world was conjured to enable a move beyond the Kantian prison of representation. Two productive approaches to onto-epistemology were put in relation, both crucial to informing and generating thought in the Anthropocene; these we labelled as Correlation and Storiatio. Both also centre upon the importance of relational entanglements and affordances as a way of generating knowledge about the Anthropocene, and both therefore often also engage islands as important sites for generating such understanding. Where they differ is in how they register or 'read' relational entanglements and affordances. Correlational analytics focus upon how inter-relations or 'actants' have particular capacities or affordances which enable human knowledge of changing environmental conditions. Entities do not therefore have a core essence or meaning in themselves, as they do in modern frameworks of reasoning. Rather, knowledge is established inter-relationally by undertaking correlational practices

through discovering how communicative interaction organically worlds the living world and thinking through how this can be replicated through high-tech interventions, such as Big Data and the Internet of Things. Here, drawing upon and engaging island life has been significant for the development and proliferation of Correlational approaches in Anthropocene thinking, as islands are widely held to be the emblematic correlational registers – the ‘canary in the coalmine’ of climate change – enabling humans to materially register otherwise unseen planetary forces.

At the other end of the onto-epistemological continuum, we examined how Storiatio draws upon islands as sites of relational entanglement in ways that enable relations to sustain or hold the world beyond representational understandings of fixed grids of time and space. Here we examined how the notion of intra-action, rather than inter-action, captures this shift; registering and holding together that which modernity tears apart. This disrupting of linear framings of space and time and of separations between subjects and objects has been put to a range of uses. Work in this area has been important in opening up new possibilities for rethinking colonial legacies and environmental side-effects through understanding that care and accountability extend the present into both the past and future. The afterlives and ongoing effects of colonialism are still with us as much as our actions today will reverberate through the ecosystems of the future in ways which stretch beyond our capacities to calculate or to imagine. Holding temporal, spatial and agential divides together, this onto-epistemology rejects the notion that humans can distance themselves from the ongoing effects of such forces as colonialism, global warming, nuclear radiation and waste production which unfold in time and space in ‘weird’, ‘quantum’ or ‘haunting’ ways.

In different ways then, Anthropocene analytics are based on the premise that humanity is living after the end of the world (that is, after the modernist construction of the world on the basis of the human/nature divide, which structured scientific, social and political thought). The problem of the human/nature divide has been ‘resolved’ and moved beyond via approaches which focus

upon relational entanglement, feedbacks and surprising connections. From this open space of possibility, new questions have emerged, driving debate forward, and engendering new approaches. Throughout this book, we have sought to document this schematic shift through a close examination of how islands have emerged as increasingly important sites in Anthropocene thinking. Together, as authors, we have been interested in pursuing how the figure of the island has become understood to be so productive and generative for challenging and moving beyond the constraints of modernist forms of thought.

One of our main contentions is islands and island cultures are seen to be highly useful or generative for such debates precisely because islands and the islander have long been imagined as liminal figures, marginalised as lacking key rationalist attributes of modernity and labouring under relational ties and dependencies. A minor tradition that sought to utilise and to value these capacities and dependencies that modernity sought to reject – from Darwin to Strathern, Glissant and Brathwaite – thus was already available as a resource to be drawn upon. Whilst, as we have explored in the preceding chapters, these approaches are of course different from each other, they nevertheless all seek to move beyond and to challenge the key assumptions of modernist thought, opening up ways of thinking that do not assume that there is a separate human subject (disentangled from the world) or a world (as a coherent object of knowledge). In these ways it could be argued that the rise to prominence or the centring of islands to contemporary thought is in many ways overdetermined. It had to be. As Derrida (2011) astutely brought to our attention many years ago, once we finally realise the end of the ‘world’ as a coherent concept, we come to realise that there are only islands. Contemporary debate is really a coda or a footnote to this insight: What sort of islands? What is at stake in a world of island-becoming or becoming-island? Anthropocene thinking is essentially a question of what it might mean to work and think with islands and island imaginaries. The liminal figure of the island appears to assert its power and authority upon the Anthropocene as a new world of relational

entanglements, feedbacks and weird reworkings of relations across time and space.

The Power of Thinking with Islands: A Critical Agenda for Island Studies in the Anthropocene

We now turn to what a critical agenda for island studies in the Anthropocene might look like going forward. The purpose of this would be to expand the analysis developed in this book of why and how islands are being drawn upon in Anthropocene thinking. Whilst we hope that readers will see this book as a useful starting point for sparking discussion, there will no doubt be many other ways of working through this question as well; not all of which will necessarily be associated with the problematic of relational entanglements, feedbacks, or the broader shift towards speculative forms of thought, which we have analysed across the previous chapters. These are just the main reasons why we think Anthropocene thinking draws so heavily upon islands and island imaginaries. We are keen to hear about others. We want to encourage an open-ended, convivial approach, asking readers to consider our overarching argument and four heuristics, but to also reflect upon and suggest other analytics or approaches which may be applied to understand why and how working with and upon the figure of the island is so generative for Anthropocene scholarship and related practices.

At their best, island studies are of course always critically and productively reflective of how the figure of the island has been written about and worked with throughout history. So why insert the word 'critical' at this current juncture and, specifically, with regards to debates about the Anthropocene? Is this really necessary? We decided that, given the generative role of islands and the variety of ways in which they are (re)worked in key Anthropocene discussions, using the term *critical*, for us, is about injecting a certain sense of urgency into these debates. Whilst the term 'critical' might immediately imply to some readers some reworking or extension of Western critical theory, for us it does not. A critical

agenda for islands studies in the Anthropocene is about mapping how Anthropocene thinking draws upon and thinks with islands, however and wherever this is taking place. For example, in this book we have focused upon the intersections between Anthropocene scholarship, essentially in the Western academy, and island scholarship more broadly, but it would also be extremely useful to examine how writers, artists and activists from other spaces and locations – such as mainland China or India – engage with islands within the contexts of debates about transformative planetary changes as well.

Without being prescriptive of how such a critical agenda could unfold, we do however believe that any such agenda will need to keep one central concern or operating logic in mind: if we are to examine the power or force of islands in Anthropocene thinking (that is, why and how islands ingress so deeply and productively), then we cannot separate out island imaginaries and broader trends in social and political thought from the material characteristics of islands as geographical forms which are doing important ‘work’ in such debates. For research and scholarship to more completely understand how and why work with islands has become generative, there is a need to orient around a purposefully interdisciplinary research agenda that engages the material and physical world as existing *simultaneously* with island imaginaries and contemporary developments in social and political thought. It is only by taking this point seriously – that there is something about islands (existing simultaneously in material form and thought) – that we can examine how and why they enter into and are put to work in Anthropocene thinking.³

There are many different ways of getting this key point across. For us, Alfred North Whitehead and Frantz Fanon do so particularly effectively, but readers will no doubt be aware of many other ways to focus upon the importance of developing situated knowledges which do not separate out the material world from how it is thought. As Whitehead (1985, 1968, 1967) said, thought should be understood as *in* the world, rather than as *about* the world. This is a profound statement. The subject and thought itself are

neither primary (as a Kantian starting point) nor secondary (as in the privileging of ontology) but are always already in the process of world-making. The Anthropocene or islands do not exist 'out there' or 'in our heads'; rather, ontological statements made from working with them – such as the relational ontologies or onto-epistemologies examined in this book – should be understood as objective facets of the given world itself (existing simultaneously in materiality and in thought). For Whitehead (1985: 4), '[o]ur datum is the actual world, including ourselves; and this actual world spreads itself for observation in the guise of the topic of our immediate experience.'

Thus, how islands are thought, how and why they appear and the powers they have in Anthropocene thinking, tells us *simultaneously* about islands, the Anthropocene, ourselves, and our own shifting preoccupations. For Whitehead, there could be simply no separation; how humans think about islands and the Anthropocene is simultaneously *both product of the world and its producer*. It is this fact that permits us to conclude, from our own research presented here, that Anthropocene thinking draws upon islands because the Anthropocene and islands both work to foreground a world of relational entanglements (in the materiality of the world *and* in thought). The dominance of this particular problematic means that only certain questions get raised, rather than others, and it is why certain analytics, particular geographical forms like islands, relational ontologies and onto-epistemologies, such as the ones examined in this book, are understood to be more generative for current debates.

Here we therefore agree with Isabelle Stengers' (2008; 2014) approach when she says that Whitehead's crucial insight enables a move beyond merely dismissing or destabilising the grounds for truth claims; instead, productively stressing the importance of taking these claims seriously for the development of thought in the world: 'Whatever we call a cause, even a physical interaction, has no power to cause independently of the way in which it will be grasped in a subjective process of self-production' (Stengers, 2008: 103). For us, then, what is central for any critical research agenda

is not that some objective truth about islands or the Anthropocene is revealed, but how the claims which are made (and the way in which they are presented) speak to us about our contemporary Anthropocene condition (see also Chandler and Pugh, forthcoming a; forthcoming b). This is why we take a particular interest in schematic and analytical shifts in thought as taking place *in* the world, such as those presented in this book. The emphasis is upon how our concrete experiential or worldly consciousness appropriates or receives islands and the Anthropocene.

For Whitehead, as Stengers (2008: 98) states, to underplay the importance of this would result in the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness', where we imagine that we are merely observers reflecting, meditating or speculating upon the world, rather than being ourselves its products and producers (Whitehead, 1967). As Vicky Kirby (2011: 133) also highlights, drawing upon Karen Barad, there is no thought without intentionality, the 'desire to know, is implicated in the very ontology of what [the researcher] is looking at' (see also Stengers, 2008). This is the crucial point we take from Whitehead; one that has long featured in social sciences and humanities' concerns of positionality and the importance ascribed to situated knowledges rather than abstract understandings. Reading Whitehead in particular, for us, sharpens this need to see thought – such as thinking about islands in the Anthropocene – as an agential product of our being-in-the-world.

But perhaps Frantz Fanon (1967) enables us most effectively to get this point across about how the material world and thought exist simultaneously. As Fanon famously said, whether certain ways of thinking about being – certain ontologies or onto-epistemologies – become more alluring and influential in debates tells us what *we* think it means to engage with the world. Fanon (1967: 176) criticised those engaged in anti-colonial struggles who only focused upon one side of being or ontology, for retreating into a 'universal standpoint', without addressing how the world, in thought and materiality, had given rise to these understandings in the first place (see also Wynter, 2015). Thus, we can similarly say that, in the Anthropocene, what certain ontologies and

onto-epistemologies foreground, or downgrade, not only makes us aware of new things about islands and islanders and the work they do for contemporary imaginaries. It also tells us important things about ourselves as scholars engaging the Anthropocene – about our own preoccupations and how these are changing, opening up, or limiting possibilities in new ways. As Fanon (1967) recurrently argued in *The Wretched of the Earth*, how we understand ontology and being is vitally important, but this understanding is also the product of work, struggle and labour; and, therefore, reveals things about ourselves, how we direct our efforts, and how we seek to frame the stakes for engagement as well.

From this we can suggest that, in addition to understanding the material world and thought as existing simultaneously, a critical agenda for island studies in the Anthropocene could ask such questions, in no particular order, as: How and why do islands become appropriated in Anthropocene thinking? How does the liminality of the island for modernist thought endow the island figure with certain powers and affordances? What makes particular aspects of islands attractive for such thinking? How do approaches cohere around certain analytics or heuristics, rather than others? What are the various modes of affect and what capacities for becoming affected are being engendered? How are relational effects understood and put to work? What makes the island more ‘real’ than the mainland? How does drawing upon island and islander life in Anthropocene thinking show us the world, or enable us to enter the world? How does the figure of the island enable us to think in terms of immanence as product and producer of the world? What does it mean to make claims to nonhuman or to speculative knowledge? How do certain ways of drawing upon islands and island imaginaries stabilise, detour, or become disruptive in Anthropocene thinking? How does work with islands hold contradictions in creative tension? We believe that these kinds of questions are important to ask for opening up critical possibilities for island studies in the Anthropocene.

For us then, to repeat, the question is not whether any relational ontology or onto-epistemology that we have discussed in this book is necessarily right or wrong. Rather, it is about framing a critical

research agenda in terms of how the widespread development, appeal or lure of certain ontologies or onto-epistemologies reflects how the world and our purposes as researchers, scholars and activists are changing. Informed by Fanon's insistence that human understanding, thought and claim-making can only be understood as dynamic processes of work, struggle and labour, this is the question which concerns us most, going beyond the remit of this book. Examining why and how certain ontologies and onto-epistemologies have emerged, developed and have appeal becomes a way into the world – into understanding how the critical stakes of the Anthropocene and islands are being understood and engaged – rather than a way of abstracting and separating ourselves from them.

Notes

- ¹ For Wynter, it is the story of 'Man 2' which has enabled such forces as colonialism, racism and related oppressions, to flourish and become so deeply entrenched across the world: i.e. the myth that *some* humans (often understood as White, Western, male) are more exceptional than others at flourishing and adapting to environmental conditions. As Wynter (2015: 22) points out, the failures of the anti-colonial and civil rights struggles resulted in many others also buying into this 'mythoi' of Man 2: 'What other model was there?'
- ² In order to clarify what they mean here by the raising of a 'problem', Colebrook and Weinstein (2017: xxi) employ such everyday examples where, 'Questions – such as whether drugs should be legalized or whether there should be international intervention in human rights violations – are only possible if *problems* are not composed. What might it be to question the very being of drugs and the notion of the proper human body and its external supplements? What might it be to ask how it is that something like a human right could act as a weapon in international war or politics? Questions that seem to have ready answers – yes or no, pro- or anti- – are only possible because of previous problems that have now lost their tension.'
- ³ We recently explored this agenda in *Dialogues in Human Geography* (see Grove, forthcoming; Wakefield, forthcoming; Sheller, forthcoming; Davis, forthcoming; Colebrook, forthcoming; Perez, forthcoming; Burgos Martínez, forthcoming; Chandler and Pugh, forthcoming a, forthcoming b).