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Introduction

Milica Prokić and Pavla Šimková

Nobody can leave an island. An island is a cosmos in a nutshell, where the stars slumber in the grass beneath the snow.¹

Barrøy, this ‘cosmos in a nutshell’, is a fictional island off Norway’s coast and the setting of Roy Jacobsen’s tetralogy of novels. It is also an unassuming place of wonder. It is large enough to sustain a family that grows and shrinks as the story progresses, but not large enough to justify the presence of a horse. For mainlanders who occasionally come to visit, it offers a baffling new perspective on their homes, suddenly small and insignificant when seen from the margins. For stranded creatures and people, it is a safe haven, the difference between life and death in the freezing water. For the Barrøy islanders, their tiny island represents their fate, a fact of life that cannot be abandoned. At one time or another, each of them tries to leave, only to eventually come back. The ultimate periphery for most, Barrøy is the whole world to the people who call it home.

An island is, in the famous words of John Donne, ‘entire of itself’. In contrast to ‘man’, who belongs to the larger whole of humanity and is always ‘a part of the main’, an island is a self-contained, self-sufficient body outlined by the waves of the world ocean. Despite their professed difference, the comparison between islands and humans is telling: islands have contours that tempt us to read them as bodies or at least objects.² The biologists Robert MacArthur and Edward O. Wilson noted in 1967: ‘An island is ... simpler than a continent or an ocean, a visibly discrete object that can be labelled with a name and its resident populations identified thereby.’³ Through their distinctiveness, so reminiscent of the human body, islands tickle the imagination. Through their

1 Roy Jacobsen, *The Unseen* (London: MacLehose Press, 2017), p. 22.

2 Peter Conrad, *Islands: A Trip through Time and Space* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), p. 7.

3 Robert H. MacArthur and Edward O. Wilson, *The Theory of Island Biogeography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 3.

boundedness, they seem like worlds in miniature, downscaled, controllable models of the universe that can tell us more about how life on Earth has evolved, how we as humans have interacted with more-than-human environment, and about our own nature. As the biologist and historian of science Merlin Sheldrake has argued, ‘what is and isn’t an island is fundamental to the studies of ecology and evolution’. Islands – ranging from metaphorical to physical, from tiny specks of land to the idea of entire planets as islands, distinct bodies hurtling through space – have proven both intriguing and fruitful to think with.⁴

In a world dominated by continental cultures, islands are the exception to the rule. At the same time, they are *heterotopias*: Michel Foucault’s ‘other places’ that simultaneously represent, contest, and invert the standard, ‘real’ spaces of a society.⁵ In this way, islands reflect the world of the mainland and can shed better light on it through their otherness. This way of thinking can lead to regarding islands as clean slates, capable of absorbing contradictory visions of the world and human nature and society. Islands, as places apart, provide an equally easy home to earthly reflections of paradise and to visions of hell. Thomas More’s *Utopia* is an island; so is the setting of William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*. Neither is a coincidence: both have their real-life counterparts. The German author Judith Schalansky has, in her 2009 book *Atlas of Remote Islands*, collected fifty bizarre island stories that involve both utopian communities and hellscapes of oppression and murder (which, more often than not, tend to overlap).⁶ However, whether as visions of a perfect world or as bleak, isolated places that allow human nature to unfold in all its horror, in this way of thinking islands are no more than mirrors reflecting other places: no more than, as Schalansky writes, ‘footnotes to the mainland’.⁷

In the past several decades, scholars from various disciplines, united in their interest in island lore, have worked towards problematising this familiar stereotype. The loose interdisciplinary field of island studies, or *nissology*, has proposed to study islands ‘on their own terms’, not as tiny continents and

4 Merlin Sheldrake, *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds, and Shape Our Futures* (London: Bodley Head, 2020), p. 86; David Lowenthal, ‘Islands, Lovers, and Others’, *Geographical Review* 97 (2) (2007): 202–29.

5 Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias’, *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* (Oct. 1984): 3.

6 Judith Schalansky, *Atlas of Remote Islands: Fifty Islands I Have Never Set Foot on and Never Will* (London: Penguin Books, 2010).

7 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

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abstract representations of all humanity, but as specific places with specific conditions and specific histories.⁸ Anthropology has identified islands as laboratories of both natural and societal processes and as sites fostering cultural peculiarities. Biology and ecology have studied them as breeding grounds of endemism and as living museums of evolution.⁹ Literary scholars have mapped out islands' importance for human cultural imagination.¹⁰ Recently, they have become key figures and indicators of the Anthropocene.¹¹

The discipline of history has also been part of this uptick in island studies. Global historians, such as Daniel Immerwahr in his study of the American empire and its island territories, have shown that islands have played a crucial role in imperial expansions throughout history: as bases from which power could be exercised, as expendable grounds where new weapons could be tested, as sites of resource extraction.¹² Historians of political violence have exposed islands' role as 'natural' prisons and sites of exile, punishment, and internment.¹³ Cultural historians have explored the past and present of

- 8 Godfrey Baldacchino, 'The Lure of the Island: A Spatial Analysis of Power Relations', *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* 1 (2) (2012): 55–62; Grant McCall, 'Nissology: A Proposal for Consideration', *Journal of the Pacific Society* 17 (63–64) (1994): 1–14; James Randall, *An Introduction to Island Studies* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020); Godfrey Baldacchino (ed.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Island Studies: A World of Islands* (London: Routledge, 2018).
- 9 MacArthur and Wilson, *The Theory of Island Biogeography*, p. 3.
- 10 Diana Loxley, *Problematic Shores: The Literature of Islands* (London: Macmillan, 1990); Johannes Riquet, *The Aesthetics of Island Space: Perception, Ideology, Geopoetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).
- 11 Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler, *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2021); Alastair Bonnett, *Elsewhere: A Journey into Our Age of Islands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).
- 12 Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019); for African examples, see Toyin Falola, Joseph R. Parrott and Danielle Porter Sanchez (eds), *African Islands: Leading Edges of Empire and Globalization* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2019).
- 13 Michael R. Ebner, *Ordinary Violence in Mussolini's Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 1–23; Joseph Pugliese, 'Transnational Carceral Archipelagos: Lampedusa and Christmas Island', in *Transmediterranean: Diasporas, Histories, Geopolitical Spaces*, ed. by Joseph Pugliese (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 105–25; Milica Prokić, 'Contrasting the Sunny Side: Goli otok and the Islandness of the Political Prison in Croatian Adriatic', in *Environmentalism in Central and Southeastern Europe*, ed. by Hrvoje Petrić and Ivana Žebec Šilj (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), pp. 197–222.

Western culture's fascination with islands and their role as indispensable metaphors which help us make sense of the world we live in.¹⁴ Together, they have shown islands as very far from the ahistorical places they are sometimes perceived as.

Environmental history of islands

This volume is dedicated to a crucial dimension of island history that has so far often been missing from these accounts: their natural environment. The work of anthropologists, literary scholars and cultural historians has taught us a lot about how islands have been imagined, lived on and represented by different cultures at different times. In this volume, we ask what role the islands' environment, and human interactions with and perceptions of this environment, have played in their history. We argue that to understand why an island became a penal colony, an atomic test site, a sugarcane plantation or a tourist destination we must take a close look at its geology, its topography, its climate and ecology, and its position vis-à-vis other places. We also cannot understand an island's place in history without considering the changing ways in which its materiality has been perceived, used, valued or dismissed, protected or mistreated over time.

Entire of Itself? Towards an Environmental History of Islands argues for islands as a distinct category of environmental history analysis. The – surprisingly few – existing studies on the environmental history of islands have shown them as entities whose geographical characteristics make them the perfect sites to study phenomena present elsewhere, but not in such distinctiveness or concentration. The discreteness of their shape, their idiosyncratic nature and their very resemblance to the human body has even invited a way of thinking about islands' history in terms of 'biography'. Peter Coates has offered what he calls a 'bio-biography' of the North American island of Amchitka, arguing that islands in their distinctiveness lend themselves particularly well to an analysis of Braudelian 'deep time in a single place'.¹⁵ Richard H. Grove in his classic study of colonialism and early conserva-

14 John R. Gillis, *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith (eds), *Islands in History and Representation* (London: Routledge, 2003).

15 Peter Coates, 'Amchitka, Alaska: Toward the Bio-Biography of an Island', *Environmental History* 1 (4) (1996): 23.

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tion efforts identified tropical oceanic islands as critical sites where a new conservationist consciousness was born: precisely because the islands were so easily conceived of as an ‘allegory of a whole world’.¹⁶ Stefan Dorondel and his team have been divining the active role that islands in the Lower Danube have played in the lives of riparian communities and in the histories of Romania, Bulgaria and Ukraine.¹⁷ Uwe Lübken and Rebecca Hofmann have shown small islands as places particularly susceptible to natural forces and thus representative of the environmental challenges facing today’s world.¹⁸ Finally, a recent special issue of the journal *Coastal Studies and Society* has made a case for strengthening the ties between environmental history and island studies and for studying islands as places in their own right, while pointing towards the fundamental ambiguity of some of their defining traits: their limits, their isolation and their vulnerability.¹⁹

This volume’s understanding of the importance of islands’ environmental history builds on these approaches: we regard islands as concentrative samples of environments, societies and their entanglements; as ‘hotspots’ where different – and often contradictory – ways of human interaction with the environment converge and crystallise. Island history is a history of vigorous conservation efforts as well as large-scale experimentation and ruthless exploitation. Out of the fifteen islands and island groups included in this volume, more than half currently enjoy some form of nature protection; eight are UNESCO World Heritage or national park sites, or both. Almost all of them are renowned as places of natural beauty and sought-after tourist destinations. At the same time, most of their histories include extreme forms of extraction and environmental transformation. They are places that have been summarily made over to accommodate certain uses; places that

16 Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 9.

17 Stefan Dorondel et al., ‘State, Communities and Nature of the Lower Danube Islands: An Environmental History (1830–2020)’: <https://danislandsproject.wordpress.com/about/> (accessed 15 Feb. 2024).

18 Rebecca Hofmann and Uwe Lübken, ‘Shrinking, Sinking, Resurfacing: Small Islands and Natural Hazards in Historical and Current Perspective’, *Global Environment* 8 (2015): 4–15.

19 Romain Grancher, ‘Hybrid Islands: Some Reflections on the Intersection between Island Studies and Environmental History’, *Coastal Studies and Society* 2 (2) (2023): 155–70.

have been violently split open to yield valuable resources; and places where new ways of relating to and managing the environment have been tried out, sometimes with disastrous results. The way these extreme forms of interacting with the environment tend to converge on islands makes them a particularly rewarding category of places for environmental history to study.

For all their distinctiveness, it is hard to find a single answer to the crucial question of what makes islands a source of endless fascination. Biology sees in islands downscaled models of the world, nature-made laboratories of evolution. Anthropology and cultural history cite the influence of centuries of European cultural imagination that has seen islands as 'the other'. Literature has long constructed them as 'locales of desire'.²⁰ But, wherever they come from, these answers always sound somehow insufficient. It is equally hard to pinpoint islands' defining traits. They come in all shapes and sizes, in colours ranging from tropical-forest green to volcanic-rock black, in the flocks of archipelagos and as lone outposts in the sea. However, an island is always first and foremost characterised in terms of its relation to other places. Defining an island means making sense of the space surrounding us: interrogating the (supposed) dichotomies of centre and periphery, connection and isolation, boundaries and continuity. The chapters of this volume can be read along the lines of these spatial categories, since all of them, so often applied in the study of islands, are of eminent interest to environmental historians.

Islands have been often seen as the ultimate periphery. The literary scholar Peter Conrad, himself born in Tasmania, has observed that an island location 'is by definition eccentric, because it acknowledges that there is a centre elsewhere'.²¹ Mainland cultures have regarded islands as places that, through their very distance from what is considered central, are well suited for uses undesirable in more exposed locations: waste dumps, weapons-testing sites, prison camps.²² Alternatively, their seclusion has been interpreted as guardian of pristine conditions, superimposing on islands a vision of would-be Edens. If we flip the angle, however, and put islands front and centre, if we view history from the island, we see the familiar through different eyes. Periphery, after all, is solely a matter of perspective. Island dwellers themselves have hardly ever regarded their homes as a fringe of other places: to

20 Baldacchino, 'The Lure of the Island', 55.

21 Conrad, *Islands*, p. 6.

22 For concrete examples, see the chapters by Pavla Šimková, Todd A. Hanson, Gitte Westergaard and Milica Prokić in this volume.

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them, they have been the centre of their world. By critically examining the centre-periphery relationship between island and mainland, we can gain new insights about which environments different cultures have seen as marginal, peripheral and ultimately expendable over time, and why.

The push and pull of isolation and connection to which island places have historically been subjected is one of the most prominent topics of island studies. In Western culture, islands have long been universally accepted symbols of isolation and remoteness; however, this perspective, too, can be overturned, as the anthropologist Epeli Hau'ofa famously did for Oceania, seeing a 'sea of islands' connected to each other instead of a cluster of small, isolated pieces of land floating in the sea.²³ Not a few islands are characterised as much by their connection to the nearest mainland and to each other as by their separation from the larger landmass. Oscillating between remoteness and accessibility, and the inherent ambiguity and overlapping of these categories has been one of the major forces shaping island 'ecobiographies'. Islands' position vis-à-vis other places and the perceptions of this position have influenced human interactions with their environment in multiple ways. Their human uses have often been based on their perceived or actual distance from the part of the world that 'really mattered'²⁴ and on the difficulties of getting to them, as well as of getting away. Such remoteness-based interactions bafflingly often overlapped with uses governed by islands' accessibility and controllability. By delving into the ambiguous relationship between isolation and connection, we can explore various roles that islands' geographical situation has played for the history of their environment.

Having a shape and clear boundaries seems the most readily discernible trait of islands. Unlike mainland places, the contours of islands, the lines determining what is island and what is not, seem unambiguous. However, if we employ a geological, ecological or archaeological perspective, island boundaries get more permeable, porous and blurry. Islands have emerged and submerged within geological and sometimes even historical time; their shapes and sizes change with the tides; and some of them wander along with

23 Epeli Hau'ofa, 'Our Sea of Islands', *Contemporary Pacific* 6 (1) (Spring 1994): 148–61.

24 The distinction between the part of the world that 'really mattered' and the rest was famously made by the Massachusetts historian Walter Muir Whitehill in reference to colonial Boston's spatial orientation toward the sea and, hence, England. Walter Muir Whitehill and Lawrence W. Kennedy, *Boston: A Topographical History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 21.

the river current.²⁵ ‘Island’ may then emerge as mere visual construct that fails to take into account the temporal dimension of things as well as the fluid division between water and land.²⁶ Are we imagining clear separation where there is in fact continuity? Would it be more accurate to think of islands as ‘islandscapes’, including what is submerged? Or would, conversely, ignoring these divisions mean disregarding a defining aspect of islands, their boundedness? This volume sets out to study a range of island boundaries and continuities and the role these divisions, or lack of them, have played for the way humans have interacted with island environments. The question of island boundaries also has another, internal, dimension: as Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler note, islands can be seen as ‘entangled worlds’ that break down the ‘human/nature divide of modernity’ – a concept key to environmental history scholarship.²⁷ Islands are entities that can at once embody isolation and the dense entanglements between the human and the non-human as well as those between island and mainland. Studying them allows us to think with their simultaneous state of being isolated and interconnected, human and more than human, materially present and imagined.

Structure of the volume

Islands seem to almost actively resist classification through their immense diversity. The fourteen chapters that form *Entire of Itself?* include islands that range from oceanic to coastal to riverine; islands distributed across the Pacific, Indian and Atlantic Oceans, with several sojourns into the Mediterranean Sea; and island histories that span time periods from the second century CE, when the harbour islands of ancient Ephesus were threatened by siltation, to January 2022 when a volcanic eruption destroyed the infant island of Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha’apai. Alongside historians, this volume includes contributions by anthropologists, geographers, archaeologists and political ecologists, all of whom undertook the task of engaging with ‘their’ islands in an environ-

- 25 Stefan Dorondel, Stelu Serban and Daniel Cain, ‘The Play of Islands: Emerging Borders and Danube Dynamics in Modern Southeast Europe (1830–1900)’, *Environment and History* 25 (2019): 521–47; Jenia Mukherjee, Raktima Ghosh and Pritwinath Ghosh in this volume.
- 26 Cyprian Broodbank, *An Island Archaeology of the Early Cyclades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Todd A. Hanson in this volume.
- 27 Pugh and Chandler, *Anthropocene Islands*, p. x.

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mental history context, while bringing with them the conceptual frameworks of their own fields to reflect the islands' multifaceted nature. The volume's aim is not to try and tame the booming interdisciplinary field of island studies, but rather to bring islands into environmental history as a distinct category of analysis, and from there to establish and proliferate further connections.

This volume is organised into sections according to three prominent categories of human engagement with islands over time: conservation, exploitation and experimentation. The choice of these resoundingly anthropocentric categories is deliberate. The chapters in each section, on the one hand, speak of human ideas, actions or intentions: to protect, harness, extract from or experiment with island environments. On the other, the stories told in each of the chapters show that these unique and peculiar environments routinely thwart human expectations. The eloquent words of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen about stone apply here, too: 'The lithic is likely to rebuke the arrogance of expecting the nonhuman to be like us and for us.'²⁸ The chapters in each category thus stress the active role the islands' environments have played in their histories: shaping, as much as being shaped by, the interactions with humans in unexpected ways. As with all attempts to lace dynamic, multispecies, multilateral and multifaceted interrelations into the corset of a formal framework, these categories tend to overlap and spill into one another, and may seem altogether too loose or too tight in places, but they nonetheless capture some of the most conspicuous human-island entanglements throughout history.

Section I, 'Islands of Conservation', focuses on the ideas and practices that divided island environments into the valuable and worthy of preserving on the one hand, and those which enjoy no human attention or protection on the other. It explores the diverse reasons why islands have been valued by humanity over the course of history, islands as landscapes of prestige and power, as well as islands' role in conflicts over what has or has not been worth conserving in different societies at different points in time.

The section opens with a look at three islands that have long disappeared under layers of silt, and turned into a 'part of the main'. The harbour islands of late-ancient Ephesus, as Travis W. Proctor argues in his chapter, can serve as indicators of the city's environmental and religious transformations, as

28 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Geophilia, or the Love of Stone', *Continent* 4(5) (2015): <https://continentcontinent.cc/archives/issues/issue-4-2-2015/geophilia-or-the-love-of-stone> (accessed 15 Feb. 2024).

well as their active shapers. Over the space of several centuries, the islands' fate was interwoven with the protection of Ephesus's all-important shipping trade: while the gradual landlocking of the harbour island of Syrie signalled the imminent demise of the city's deepwater harbour, artificial islands were built at the harbour's mouth in the second century CE to help retain Ephesus's port capability. In the early Christian era, an outer-harbour island gained significance as an entry point to the city's complex of religious sites. The islands thus mirrored both Ephesus's changing environment and its shifting religious identity and values.

Brijuni islands in the Northern Adriatic may be among the most conspicuous examples of island exceptionality. Valued for their natural beauty since antiquity, over the course of the twentieth century the islands went through several incarnations as an exclusive resort, from the crown jewel of the 'Austrian Riviera' to the favoured playground of the Italian fascist elite and the extravagant summer residence of Yugoslav president Tito, each time bound with fascinating changes of their flora, fauna and human-made infrastructure. Milica Prokić and Hrvoje Petrić map out the curious ways in which Brijuni's exceptional natural beauty and their human history converged in transforming their islandscape into a concentrate of prestige and power.

Some 170 kilometres down the Croatian coast as the boat sails lies an archipelago suspended between protection and exploitation – valued for its idiosyncratic islandscape and the locals' traditional way of life on the one hand, and for its tourist potential on the other. In his chapter about the conflicts surrounding the establishment of the Kornati National Park, Josef Djordjevski looks at the way the Kornati archipelago has been simultaneously slated for protection and viewed as a source of revenue by the government of socialist Yugoslavia. Linking the transformation of the islands' identity to that of the national park and the efforts to conserve its biophysical environment and juxtaposing them with the lure of profit from elite international (yet environmentally detrimental) nautical tourism, the chapter also showcases the general trend of regarding islands as unique and worthy of protection while trying to capitalise on this very uniqueness.

Island exceptionality and nature protection competing with other, more exploitative, uses is also the topic of Gitte Westergaard's study of the Caribbean island of Culebra. Culebra, a small island near Puerto Rico, has been assumed to be the home of *Anolis roosevelti*, a giant lizard species not seen in the wild since the 1930s. The lizard's hypothetical presence has been the reason for establishing a protected area on Culebra, a place formerly used by

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the US military for bombing practice. The chapter opens themes of island endemism, island species extinction and the strange coexistence of perceptions of islands as valuable habitats and expendable periphery. Moreover, it brings in the important notion that conservation attempts on islandscapes are often preceded by the transformation of their identity.

The many ways in which island environments can be valued, dismissed, or just plain ignored, are explored in the section's last chapter on Nirmal Char, a Ganga river island in Indian West Bengal. Jenia Mukherjee, Raktima Ghosh and Pritwinath Ghosh regard the fluid islandscape of Nirmal from historical, geographical and anthropological perspectives, offering a complex reading of the island's existence in the ever-changing riverine environment and its relative value (or lack thereof) for colonial administrators, the Indian nation-state and the *choruas*, river islanders who depend on it for their livelihoods – perhaps the only people to whom the island really matters.

Section II zeroes in on another phenomenon that came to define human interactions with island environments: resource extraction and exploitation. Thematising notions of islands as no man's land and extractive periphery, the chapters in this section tackle the various ways in which island environments have been appropriated and exploited, often by 'outlanders': conquerors, colonisers, merchants and venturers. The section also explores the significance of islands' spatial situation – their remoteness and isolation, or else accessibility and connectedness – for their environmental history.

'Exploitation' may be an exaggerated way of describing how pirates and buccaneers operating in the Pacific Ocean in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries relied on the islands of Isabela in the Galápagos archipelago and Más a Tierra, today's Robinson Crusoe Island, off the coast of Chile. The sea robbers used the islands as hideaways and as sources of food and fresh water that allowed them to prowl the waters of the Pacific for months and even years on end. Wim De Winter reconstructs the ways in which these temporary guests perceived the islands' environments, exploited their remoteness and inaccessibility, and employed them for their own ends; conversely, he teases out how the island environments enabled the buccaneers' long-term survival on the inhospitable ocean.

Remoteness and isolation have played a prominent role in the history of Japan's Amami islands, albeit in a very different way. From the seventeenth until the nineteenth century, the islands were ruled by a powerful outside domain and transformed into a sugar colony. This transformation hinged on an enforced sugarcane monoculture and on often brutal repression of the lo-

cal population. The islands' remoteness served primarily to keep people from leaving. In his chapter, Thomas Monaghan shows the direct links between isolation and exploitation and the way the interplay between them resulted in a complete makeover of the island environment.

Perhaps the most extreme case of exploiting an island's isolation is the twentieth-century history of Enewetak Atoll in the Marshall Islands. As Todd A. Hanson explains in his chapter, the island's attributes of isolation, seclusion and relative accessibility, as well as the tractability of its inhabitants, made it, in the eyes of the US defence establishment, an ideal site for nuclear-weapons testing. Taken over by military and scientific infrastructure and subjected to 43 nuclear tests over the space of ten years, the originally idyllic atoll became the ultimate example of an environment treated as expendable – and transformed and contaminated irreversibly as a result.

While the environmental history of many islands has been shaped by their remoteness, in the case of Gallops Island in Boston Harbor, the decisive factor has been its proximity to the city of Boston. Pavla Šimková traces in her chapter the multiple ways in which Bostonians have made use of the island, its resources and its position in the middle of their harbour, extracting stone and gravel and exploiting its ambivalent position vis-à-vis the city: separate yet accessible, relatively remote yet close enough, the interpretation of its position changing according to the city's current needs and values.

A common feature of island histories is treating islands as *terra nullius*, no man's land that can be appropriated for purposes deemed desirable by the current overlord. This was the case with Neil Island in the Andaman archipelago, settled in the late 1960s in the course of an Indian state-building project. Raka Banerjee follows in her chapter the ways in which the mainland Indian settlers strived to make sense of their new environment. Employing oral history methods, she juxtaposes the settlers' mental geographies, dominated by a vision of the island as a landscape of labour which it had been their mission to develop and make profitable, with its current parallel identity as a domestic and international tourist destination, its environment exploited to support both of these readings.

Section III, 'Islands of Experimentation', takes on the familiar concept of islands as laboratories. Due to their widespread perception as worlds in miniature, islands have seemed well suited for all kinds of experiments, be these ecological, economic or social. Their exposed position on the frontlines of the Anthropocene (complete with the increasing baggage of the term, reflected particularly on the island and coastal communities of the Global

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South), makes them into environments where we can most readily observe the impacts of anthropogenic changes.²⁹ The chapters in this section focus on the environmental aspect of island laboratories: on how island environments have been used as bases for experiments, have been transformed by them, have resisted them and have themselves been an (unintended) result of experimentation.

The history of the island of Réunion evinces the character of both an economic and a social experiment. Claimed by the French *Compagnie de l'Orient* in the early seventeenth century, the previously uninhabited island subsequently came to be almost completely dominated by a plantation economy. The plantations relied on the labour of imported slaves and indentured workers and caused a dramatic transformation of the island ecosystem, culminating in the nineteenth century in a sugarcane monoculture. Philippe Holstein, Jehanne-Emmanuelle Monnier and Pablo Corral-Broto trace the environmental repercussions of subjecting the whole island to a single economic imperative: an experiment resulting in sinking agricultural productivity, food vulnerability and spread of epidemics.

On other islands, the project of achieving economic efficiency did not take root so thoroughly. Joshua Meeks recounts in his chapter the Corsican people and environment's stubborn resistance to the French state's 'civilising mission' in the eighteenth century. Over the course of some fifty years, various private individuals, often acting with the support of the French state, put forward plans to make Corsica profitable, with mixed success at best. Despite seeming fit to be modernised, both Corsicans and their island's environment long withstood what Meeks calls the 'tyranny of connectivity'. He argues that the local population's very relationship to the land played an important part in this resistance and, in so doing, discusses the layered notion of the island's agency in its own history, a theme that threads through several other chapters in the volume.

The mid-twentieth-century history of the Goli otok island in today's Croatia, as told by Milica Prokić, can be read as a sinister socio-environmental experiment. From 1949 until 1956, the Yugoslav secret police ran a prison camp for alleged political opponents on the island, where they were sent to

29 See, for example, S Faizi, 'Climate Change is not Man-made — the West and its Capitalism are Largely Culprits', *The Indian Express*, 29 July 2023: <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/climate-change-west-capitalism-culprits-8865331/>; Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web Of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London & New York: Verso, 2015).

‘revise their political stance’ by hard labour. Soon, the exceptionally harsh environmental conditions of the island and the brutality of the camp regime began reinforcing each other, creating a unique – and extreme – environment of violence.

The last chapter of the volume introduces the readers to an island that can be conceived of as a laboratory of the future. Jeff Wescott looks at what is perhaps the ultimate Anthropocene island: Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha’apai in the Pacific Kingdom of Tonga has lived its life fully in the era shaped by humans. Surfacing in 2014 as a result of volcanic activity, it was largely destroyed again in January 2022 following another eruption of a submerged volcano. A scientific expedition which the author took part in found the supposedly pristine new landmass to consist of a bewildering assemblage of natural materials and human artefacts, most prominently ocean plastic. The chapter conceptualises the island as a site to explore the impacts of the Anthropocene, challenges our comprehension of the division between the natural and the cultural, and invites us to engage with the ‘patchwork ontologies’ that will likely govern the environments of the Earth’s new geological epoch.

More than other places, islands capture the imagination, invite identification and inspire humans to form close relationships to them. The authors of this volume are no exception: while working on our chapters, we caught ourselves more than once referring to the objects of our writing as ‘our’ islands – although none of us hail from ‘their’ islands and some of us have never even set foot on them. The small features preceding each chapter express this extraordinary degree of identification. They are reflections on the authors’ personal relationships to the islands they write about: variations on a sentiment succinctly summed up by the Tasmanian-born Peter Conrad: ‘Everyone who was not allotted an island of their own at birth seems to have adopted or acquired one.’ These personal accounts tackle the theme of human-island interaction on the individual level, bringing home the idea of humanity’s special kinship with islands.

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