

The Anthropocene Islands agenda

David Chandler

University of Westminster, UK

Jonathan Pugh

Newcastle University, UK

Dialogues in Human Geography
2021, Vol. 11(3) 448–452

© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/20438206211017457

journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg



Abstract

We respond to the generous and constructive commentaries on our article, ‘Anthropocene Islands: There Are Only Islands After the End of the World’. In particular, we engage and think with the contributions as part of the process of forming a critical research agenda using the initial article as a springboard or platform for discussion – rather than as a set of research conclusions or a polemical statement. The contributions, to our minds, work in critical relation to the field and develop it in significant ways.

Keywords

Anthropocene, correlation, islands, patchworks, relational, resilience, storiation

We are humbled by the generosity with which our interlocutors constructively engaged with our Anthropocene Islands agenda (Chandler and Pugh, 2021, see also Pugh and Chandler, 2021). This formative agenda seeks to explore the ways in which Anthropocene thinking engages islands as generative for alternative approaches to being (ontologies) and knowing (epistemologies). For us, the agenda is foremost an analytical one, as we state: ‘less one of advocating what island thinking and practices should be, and more about heuristically drawing out and analysing the ways in which these conceptualisations are today being developed’ (Chandler and Pugh, 2021). The commentators generously engaged our paper as a platform for discussion, in which the field is heuristically constructed as one in which relational as opposed to modernist approaches to being and knowing are increasingly the norm.

In constructing relational ontologies and epistemologies as objects for analysis rather than for normative advocacy, Anthropocene Islands foregrounds how the *geographies* being engaged for the development of Anthropocene thinking *matter*. The Anthropocene does not exist ‘inside’ people’s heads or ‘out there’ in the physical world – thought is produced *in* the world. Islands, oceans, rainforests, and so forth, which Anthropocene work regularly turns to, are therefore not ‘blank spaces’ or mere ‘backdrops’ but implicated in the development of thought. Not deterministically, of course; and one way of highlighting this, as we have done, is to draw out how

Corresponding author:

Jonathan Pugh, Department of Geography, Politics and Sociology,
Newcastle University, Newcastle NE1 7RU, UK.

Email: jonathan.pugh@newcastle.ac.uk

different analytical strands of Anthropocene thinking shape and are shaped by different ways of engaging islands. Central to this is how, as Davis (2021) says, with the ‘breakdown in universal modernist frameworks’, ‘analyses of dynamic patterns of relational entanglements in island environments are particularly detrimental to modern fantasies’. Here, Colebrook (2021) generously reinforces, what for us are, the key stakes of the Anthropocene Islands agenda: ‘This is where the deeper import of Chandler and Pugh’s contribution lies, not in adding islands to the Anthropocene or vice versa, but enabling each of those terms to disturb the relationality of “man” as sympathetic purveyor of the globe’.

On a straightforward level, it is therefore important to highlight that most commentaries explicitly acknowledge that islands, like other geographies, matter for the development of Anthropocene thinking, even when only apparently appearing ‘in the background’ of work. Sheller (2021) stands a little apart by invoking Tsing et al.’s (2019) collection on ‘patchy’ approaches to suggest islands may be less important for what we call patchworks. Yet, islands are actually the most prevalent geographies engaged in Tsing et al.’s (2019) special issue (a third of the papers). Other contributors in that issue engage other liminal, dynamic, and interstitial spaces, including rivers, deltas, and marshes, further working through concrete system interactions and interdependencies, reinforcing the links we emphasise between geographic forms and the grasping of relational entanglements in the Anthropocene. Island poet, Santos Perez (2021), for example, importantly highlights the ‘hyper-visibility’ of islands in critical Anthropocene scholarship; foregrounding Donna Haraway’s (Hadfield and Haraway, 2019) Hawai‘ian ‘Tree Snail Manifesto’ (in the edited collection Sheller mentions), and the work of Tsing and Timothy Morton, who regularly engage islands.

Sheller (2021) suggests that islands are (or should be) less central than a focus upon African Diaspora, Black aesthetic, and spiritual practices. While not denying the contemporary salience and proliferation of the patchwork analytic itself, the role of islands per se is downplayed. We are not so sure this necessarily follows. We certainly agree with her stress on the importance of examining how African Diaspora,

Black aesthetic, and spiritual practices are engaged and/or appropriated to disrupt modern reasoning (Sheller, 2021). However, if these practices are by islanders and on islands, it is not clear why it should be thought necessary to downgrade *islands* and *islanders*. For our analytical project, the strands of relational ontology we draw out, such as patchworks, do not tend towards a subtractive approach which downplays how (island and islander) geographies matter for the generation of thought in the world. For patchworks, in particular, they foreground how modern reasoning is disrupted by attuning to a more expansive range of island and islander relations.

On this point, we briefly pick up on two aspects that may be misconstrued from Sheller’s (2021) comments. Firstly, we do not seek to conflate various relational ontologies and onto-epistemologies together but precisely to draw out and emphasise *differences* – the paper is structured according to the *different* analytics of resilience, patchworks, correlation and storiation. Secondly, we do not argue that any particular analytic comes ‘first’ or should be subsumed under a single or literal island ontology. Rather, our overriding point is that these are *contemporary* analytics, deploying different ways of working with island powers and imaginaries. To explore this sometimes involves engaging with how authors literally think with the island as a geographical form, such as Darwin’s work playing through into resilience analytics. Other times it requires thinking through how contemporary authors, like King (2019) or Sharpe (2016), make particular readings of older island poets, like Brathwaite, engaging specific aspects, while downgrading others, to address the contemporary stakes as they see them.

Here, as Grove (2021) explains, if we stay attuned to our own articulation of ‘patchworks’ (drawn out from Glissant, 1997, where islanding becomes a ‘worlding’ practice), then we cannot break down island life into coherent categories or practices such as ‘spiritual life’, ‘Black Diaspora’ or ‘radical philosophy’. The radical purchase of Glissant’s understanding of Relation is precisely the problematisation of such *modern* divisions of island life. As Grove (2021, emphasis in original) explains, Glissant’s anti-modern stance should not be underestimated: ‘Glissant’s sense of the world is

organised *through*, rather than about' the world. The 'island is the space of Relation – interacting forms of mobility, transaction, consumption, violence, and exchange, extending from the plantation to the contemporary era' (Grove, 2021). This would include islanders' spiritual practices, Black aesthetics, and radical philosophies, for sure, but Glissant's focus is more precisely upon the 'totality' of Relation coming into consciousness *through* the island, which is productive of being and knowing. Our point is that it is *this* approach, drawn out from Glissant and effectively foregrounded by Grove, that we highlight as particularly enticing for many today. It is this approach, this way of working, which we outline as a key characteristic of 'patchwork' ontologies – the widespread invocation in Anthropocene thinking to open ourselves up and attune to the 'totality', the knots of relational entanglements and effects, even as these could never be 'grasped'.

For Wakefield (2021) and Davis (2021), there are also good reasons to reflect upon why and how islands 'matter' for Anthropocene thinking, not least because any countermoves to dominant or hegemonic thought risk gaining less traction when not fully engaging with how thought is produced *in* the world. Thus, Davis (2021) illustrates the difference between islands understood in many 'Anthropocene' debates, and how islands could or should be positioned in the 'Chthulucene' – his point, we emphasise, is that the Anthropocene or Chthulucene does not exist in people's heads or as an abstract philosophical statement but attains meaning and purchase through imbrication within particular *geographies*. Wakefield also demonstrates this in articulating the island as a site of 'disentanglement' (a provocative countermove, she acknowledges, given dominant Anthropocene imaginaries of islands as key sites of 'relational entanglements'). Wakefield's (2021) insightful approach highlights that the production of thought gains purchase *in* the world, *with* geographies, and that this fundamentally matters for its reception. Thus, when Wakefield poses the rhetorical question, 'But are islands (understood as sites of relationality) actually alternatives to [dominant] mainland approaches?', she highlights the stakes of invoking alternative (political, philosophical, and geographical) modes of

island imaginary – for example, of disentanglement, rather than entanglement – against powerful mainstream approaches of cybernetics and resilience. This leads nicely to Colebrook's (2021) comments.

We are very grateful to Claire Colebrook (2021) for her commentary, which we feel brings added clarity to the stakes involved in articulating both geographical forms and relational ontologies and epistemologies as material for thought rather than just accepting them on their own terms: merely existing 'out there'. She usefully emphasises the importance of analytically tracking shifts in working with geographical forms, like islands, for the generation of relational approaches. Colebrook (2021) importantly moves further in carving a divergent trajectory from the debate – a shift which, as she explains, is highlighted well via engagement with the figure of the island. We will not repeat her arguments against dominant relational approaches associated with Anthropocene thought but take positively her 'moving on' point; that, if pushed further and intensified, relational approaches end up taking us down a non-relational pathway of withdrawal: 'if Anthropocene discourse intensifies relationality and intra-action to the point that one must take the distinction and singularity of the island seriously, I would suggest that pushed to its limit the island pulverizes imperial and Anthropocene relationality' (Colebrook, 2021). Thus, she asks, can we 'resist the comprehension of an ever-expansive relationality. Rather than think of Anthropocene discourse extending and enhancing its relationality or intra-action by considering the complexity, intensity, and multiplicity of islands, what might happen if the island were to take up and affirm the inhuman resistance of the island[?]' (Colebrook, 2021). In other words, if relational vibrancy is too rich, too intense – if the island becomes a world without cuts and distinctions, without anthropologists, critical scholars, or policymakers who are able to 'grasp', tell, or produce stories about islands and islanders – then we are left with the island of withdrawal and 'in-difference'. This is an important line of thought, one that we have begun to pay attention to elsewhere (see Pugh, 2020; Pugh and Chandler, 2021).

For us, the island form is no less central to imaginaries of withdrawal, grasped as the extended or

even logical outcome of the ‘end of the world’ of modernity, where being – the ontology of entities and essences – is as decentred as the modernist subject that was its master. This can be highlighted in the work of the relational thinker, Glissant.¹ In the *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant (1997: 208) talks of the solitary, indifferent, and withdrawn islander walking on the ‘Black Beach’ whose ‘withdrawal [is] absolute’ and who ‘is more resistant than we and more lasting than our endless palaver’ – the islander, who, in fact, provides the closing lesson of the book. Here we see a divergent line of thought concerned with the refusal of the islander (in Glissant) and island (in Colebrook, 2021 and also Morton, 2016) to be captured and represented. The islander and island are read as defiant of power, as disruptive of claims to knowledge – or, to be more precise, as refusing ontology. We believe that it is this liminality which enables islands to be so productively worked with as geographic forms for developing but also for opening up and potentially problematising Anthropocene thought. However, just to be clear, the particular project of Anthropocene Islands, as we outline it in the paper and book (Pugh and Chandler, 2021), is not a work of philosophy. Perhaps, if anything it could be seen as non-philosophy; there are no metaphysical claims, our concern is with how islands are worked philosophically. We are interested in how islands are put to work differently, different powers drawn from them, and different imaginaries worked and reworked as we explore contemporary shifts within and beyond ‘relational’ ontologies and onto-epistemologies.²

To illustrate, we felt that our heuristic approach was affirmed and assisted by Santos Perez’s (2021) valuable commentary. Perez draws out how the storiatic analytic could be informed by his own contemporary island poetry and writing, and how ‘much of’ the forthcoming anthology of Pacific ecological and climate change literature he is currently co-editing (with Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and Leora Kava) ‘expresses storiatic, or the afterlives and haunting legacies of imperialism in the Pacific’. As we argue in the paper, Anthropocene Islands is about how work engages islands, islanders, and/or readings of island scholars, poets, artists, and activists, and how this is reflective of different contemporary analytical strands of

thought. Like Perez, Burgos Martinez (2021) aligns her own approach to that outlined as storiatic and the work of Indigenous poets and scholars such as Jetñil-Kijiner. She extends these lines of research by further illustrating the range of different positions which exist *within* this analytic, some of which she sees as more productive than others. Thus, while Timothy Morton’s storiatic of islands existing within the vast multi-dimensions of global warming (hyperobjects) focus upon the afterlives and legacies of modernity, refusing the separations and cuts of linear time and space, for Burgos Martinez (2021), his particular approach is too abstract, thereby running the risk of creating indifference. By contrast, argues Burgos Martinez (2021), ‘Storiatic pathways grounded on island indigenous knowledge lead us away from hyperobjects, abstraction, and indifference, through more reflective understandings of today’s environmental crises and more representative analysis of daily encounters between ontologies, rationalities, imaginaries, and identities’.

These are precisely the kinds of discussions which we wanted to stimulate when we wrote our paper. We will continue to encourage them through the ongoing Anthropocene Islands project. In doing this, we seek to foreground the value of taking a meta-analytical approach. The Anthropocene Islands project examines the *cross-cutting* analytics and often shared heuristics of contemporary Anthropocene approaches, which – at the end of the world of modern reasoning – increasingly turn to particular geographical forms, like islands, for the development of alternative ways of thinking about being and knowing. As the commentaries in this *Dialogues in Human Geography* forum illustrate, an analytics of analytical approaches can be a useful springboard for stimulating fruitful debates about the geographies of the Anthropocene.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. We therefore wish to stress that our analytical approach is not about conflating the whole body of any scholar's work into a specific analytic. Thus, Brathwaite's cannot be reduced to storiation, nor Glissant's to patchworks. Rather, our approach seeks to draw out, heuristically, what we perceive to be broader patterns or strains of *contemporary* thought. Thus, as we illustrate in this commentary, and in much greater length in our book (Pugh and Chandler, 2021), Glissant's rich body of work is today being drawn upon in various ways, and not all of these ways fall within a singular analytic.
2. We are keen to hear from those who want to do likewise, and who would therefore perhaps like to engage in the Anthropocene Islands project; including a monthly reading group, 'Anthropocene Islands' section of *Island Studies Journal*, early career study spaces, workshops, and sessions at conferences (see <https://www.anthropoceneislands.online/>).

References

- Burgos Martinez E (2021) On storiation and what is washed ashore: the Anthropocene as big kahuna. *Dialogues in Human Geography*. DOI: 10.1177/20438206211017456.
- Chandler D and Pugh J (2021) Anthropocene islands: there are only islands after the end of the world. *Dialogues in Human Geography*. DOI: 10.1177/2043820621997018.
- Colebrook C (2021) No man is an island. *Dialogues in Human Geography*. DOI: 10.1177/20438206211017451.
- Davis S (2021) Islands, modernity and other worlds that never end. *Dialogues in Human Geography*. DOI: 10.1177/20438206211017441.
- Glissant É (1997) *Poetics of Relation*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Grove K (2021) Islands of (in)security in the Anthropocene. *Dialogues in Human Geography*. DOI: 10.1177/20438206211017454.
- Hadfield MG and Haraway DJ (2019) The tree snail manifesto. *Current Anthropology* 60(20): 209–235.
- King TL (2019) *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Morton T (2016) Molten entities. In: Daou D and Pérez-Ramos P (eds) *New Geographies 08: Island*. Cambridge, MA: Universal Wilde, pp. 72–76.
- Perez CS (2021) Thinking (and feeling) with Anthropocene (Pacific) islands. *Dialogues in Human Geography*. DOI: 10.1177/20438206211017453.
- Pugh J (2020) Review of Drabinski JE (2019) *Glissant and the Middle Passage: Philosophy, Beginning, Abyss*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press. *Postcolonial Studies*. Epub ahead of print 8 November 2020. DOI: 10.1080/13688790.2020.183221.
- Pugh J and Chandler D (2021) *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds*. London: University of Westminster Press.
- Sharpe C (2016) *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Sheller M (2021) Island ceremony and submerged worlds. *Dialogues in Human Geography*. DOI: 10.1177/20438206211017452.
- Tsing AL, Mathews AS and Bubandt N (2019) Patchy Anthropocene: landscape structure, multispecies history, and the retooling of anthropology: an introduction to supplement 20. *Current Anthropology* 60(20): S186–S197.
- Wakefield S (2021) The possibility of islands in the Anthropocene. *Dialogues in Human Geography*. DOI: 10.1177/20438206211017455.