Islands

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Ruminations on islands have been central to the theorisation of connectivity, for islands were key locales where people on the move, objects and commodities in transit, and forces of capital or imperialism converged. If so, as recent more disconnective work highlights, islands were also places of isolation, exile, and imprisonment. Accordingly, the island is now becoming more spectral and not an easily-defined or isolated entity of explanation. It is starting to fluctuate not only between connection and disconnection, but in symmetry, on the one hand, as an identifiable thing and, on the other hand, as an elusive and heterodox space. Indeed, is 'island' a noun or could it be a verb or even a state of consciousness or characteristic? What in other words is the relation between these terms which appear in scholarly literatures: 'island', 'islanding' and 'islandness'?

This line of interrogation represents where the global history of islands now stands. It is no longer viable to take the word 'island' to indicate a self-evident natural entity, a piece of land bordered on all sides by the sea. Perhaps this analytical fuzziness is in keeping with the climate emergency which unfolds around us: for island populations are departing to safer havens as never before; and island shores are being rocked by storms, currents, and sea-levels in unprecedented fashion. In as much as the physical terrain of islands is changing in an accelerated pattern, the concept 'island' itself is fluctuating in scholarly discourse. 'To island' (Teaiwa 2007) or to undertake 'islanding', is to try to carve out or partition, as I explained it once, a territory from its adjoining mainland, or from the sea that surrounds it, for purposes of governmental, ideological, intellectual and raced and gendered control and meaning-making (Sivasundaram 2013). To write of 'islandness', meanwhile, is to isolate a state of being on islands, an experiential consciousness which rests on exceptionality or boundedness (Schorch and Heidemann, forthcoming). This latter point is a recent addition to the conceptual cluster. This 'islandness' can become joined with longings of purity, utopia, naturalism, romanticism, geopolitical unity, and various other philosophies, which particularise the space of being, which is the territory which is characterised by 'islandness'.

The recovery of the 'island' as a vantage point from which to do global history arose in the first instance out of an enthusiastic embrace of connection as a mode of doing widescale historical writing (for instance, on the British Empire, see Hamilton and McAleer 2021; on particular island societies, such as Singapore, see, for instance, Frost and Balasingamchow 2009; or on Caribbean histories, see Mulich 2020). Islands were seen as engines of modernity. They were bases from which wider programmes of settlement, imperialism, capitalism (→ **Capital**), migration

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111600345-024

(→ **Postmigration/Migration**) and labour could unfold. Caribbean islands were sites of acclimatisation for early modern Iberian regimes as much as central nodes for the plantation complex with its attendant enslavement which followed; the island of Singapore was established as a colonial base for the transit of trade between different ends of Asia, but given its strategic location, it was also a site of settlement among Southeast Asian peoples prior to this British port-making; Mauritius was the headquarters of the French Indian ocean, but it was also the first site to which South Asian indentured labourers were sent by the British. All of this indicates the vitality of islands as locales at the intersection of networks (→ **Networks**) of merchants, imperialists, and people on the move (→ **Im/mobility**) under different structures of privilege and coercion.

Islands were also sites of the imagination and were crucial locations for travel writing, literary production, art, and object hunting. For this reason, a lot of interest in island societies among historians benefitted from conversations with literary scholars and cultural theorists (see, for instance Edmond and Smith 2003; DeLoughrey 2007; Gupta 2010) Also of relevance in explaining the origins of recent attention to island histories is the interface between environmental history (→ **Ecologies**) and global history (see, for instance, Cushman 2013; Beattie et al. 2023). For island societies were and are biodiverse, which partly explains their tragic situation in our contemporary climate crisis-ridden era. If so, they were crucial for botanists and foresters, meteorologists, and stargazers; simultaneously, it was argued that romantic and enlightened understandings of nature thrived in island contexts. Conservation may have been born in islands (Grove 1996). Another route to explain the burgeoning interest in islands as worthy candidates for historical study lies at the crossroads of anthropology and global history: for islands had long been sites at the centre of the ethnological technique. They presented allegedly isolated people, whose cultures and forms of life could be studied and theorised as functional wholes by budding anthropologists. This means that anthropologically-minded historians took to island states relatively well, as they continue to do, as subjects of study (Salmond 2010; Anderson et al. 2016).

In this last pathway of anthropological presumption, the problem of theorising islands through connection alone surfaces to view. Are islands more isolated than connected societies? This sort of query has very quickly become an urgent aspect of theory for island historians. Indeed, some writers have turned their attention to how the insular and the universal, the cosmopolitan and the parochial, the connected and the disconnected, act together and in concert in island contexts in highly illuminating ways. It is because intellectuals, communities, politicians, and governors, vacillate between the possibilities and realities of these polar prospects that much of island life comes to be. Additionally, as I have argued, the sites of dense connection, at the beach of islands, can be places not only of meeting and

encounter, but also where times of arrival or styles of arrival can generate inequality (Sivasundaram 2017). The density of island spaces means that it is possible to see the world's dynamics of power, hierarchy, and classification in sharper relief. Such a perspective picks up on pioneering work on island societies, which saw the beach as a violent line of transit; or which cast islands as replicas of ships or as prisons of a kind (Dening 1980; Anderson 2022). There is in other words a spatial heterodoxy about the status of the island. Though it seems simple, a land bordered on all sides by sea, the 'island' sits in a sequence of spatial relations: to the mainland, to the sea and to the Earth itself. It is because of that sequence that the 'island' takes on the garb of definitional simplicity, but that is a deceptive conceptual camouflage. In addition to the prison, the 'island' also draws in other sites with which it merges and co-exists, such as spaces of quarantine, contested sovereignty, exile (→ **Exile**) and so on. It can be paradisical as much as hellish in thought, policy, and experience. For all these reasons, the 'island' is spectral rather than easily drawn up on a map.

If so, I should illustrate this broader fluctuation. Take the substance of ambergris. It is still a luxury in our world, selling for around a thousand dollars a pound. It originates from sperm whales, who excrete it, and the mass of ambergris arises from a blockage in the intestines of the creature. One possible theory is that this lump emerges because of the enormous consumption of squid, which sperm whales find hard to digest (Kemp 2012). Regardless, through the longue duree, humans have been fascinated by the substance, using it, for instance, as a perfume, an aphrodisiac, a medicine, and for candle-making. Among many navigators and writers of the Indian ocean's islands, ambergris was one way to interrogate the geography of these waters. Arab navigational cultures spread word of ambergris, for instance to China. Take the account penned by Al Mas'udi, who was born in Baghdad in 890 CE and died in Egypt, from where he wrote, in 956 CE. He wrote that some of the best ambergris is found in the islands of 'Zabaj', which is today's Indonesia. He described the ambergris from this region:

> It is round, pale blue, and sometimes the size of an ostrich egg or smaller. Some pieces are swallowed by whales, of which we have already spoken. When the sea is rough, the whale vomits pieces of ambergris, sometimes the size of a piece of mountain, sometimes of the smaller size we have mentioned. Swallowing the ambergris kills the whale, and its corpse floats on the water. (Al Mas'udi 2007, 89–91)

Stretching his geography further still, he described the Laccadive and Maldive islands: 'Ambergris is found in these islands as well, thrown up on the shore by the sea; the lumps are the size of the largest rocks.' He noted a tale about the origin of ambergris told him by these islanders: 'ambergris grows in the depths of this sea', where it is 'formed like black and white mushrooms, truffles or other plants of the same type' (Al Mas'udi 2007).

In Chinese contexts, ambergris is described, for instance, in the text, *Yu-yang Tsa-tsu,* dating to around 860CE, and as coming from the coast of Africa (Wheatley 1959). It was often mentioned in the literature of the Song era with the name *lung-hsien hsiang*, meaning dragon's spittle, a term which appears from the mid-ninth century, indicating the idea that ambergris originated from dragons in the ocean (Yamada 1955). By the fourteenth century, the story evolved to include an island. The traveller Wang Dayuan described the island as uncultivable. When the weather was fine enough to chase the clouds away due to 'strong wind and high waves', 'people can see a group of dragons come on the shore to gamble and go away, leaving spittle on the island' (Yamada 1955, 10–11). By the early fifteenth century, the island was said to be off the western coast of Sumatra, and is mentioned in the context of the epic Zheng He expeditions. By the time of the arrival of early modern Europeans, the tale was that ambergris arose from 'the shore or the foot of an unaccessible precipice in an unknown island, and sea waves break it off in small pieces' (Yamada 1955, 18).

An ocean-facing land producing ambergris appeared in the compilation which over the long term became the *The Thousand and One Nights* and which drew inspiration from various tales, including from Persia and India. The fictional sailor Sinbad on his sixth voyage resolved to 'tempt his fortune' and travelled through the provinces of 'Persia and the Indies and arrived at a seaport.' He got on to a ship and set out on a long journey. A rapid current carried the ship along to an 'inaccessible mountain, where [the ship] struck and went to pieces' (Anonymous n.d.). This mountain was covered in wrecks, 'with a vast number of human bones' and many riches. 'Here is also a sort of fountain of pitch or bitumen, that runs into the sea, which the fish swallow, and evacuate soon afterward, turned into ambergris; and this the waves throw upon the beach in great quantities.' Sinbad survived all his companions and made a raft on which he placed 'chests of rubies, emeralds, ambergris, rock crystal and bales of rich stuff' (Anonymous n.d.). He eventually found himself on the island of 'Serendib', now taken as Sri Lanka, where he met the king who admired his booty, including the ambergris.

How might the concepts of 'island', 'islanding' and 'islandness' be applied here? On the one hand, there is a confluence of tales around a substance that is mysterious and yet deeply alluring to humans: these tales arise from east and west and from many directions, Asian, African and European. They get repeated and recycled over generations and centuries and between cultures. Yet despite the obvious connections that the tales illustrate, there are distinct traditions of island imagination, and narration more broadly, in each of them. Meanwhile, the island itself is never stable, it is a mutable space of thought and cartography which still nevertheless can be made to correspond to empirical maps, for instance of Southeast Asia or South Asia. The articulation of the imagined source of ambergris as an island draws on crucial moments in the history of exploration and empire. But such an

ambergris island is never only physical. Simultaneously, since these tales sit within watery geographies, the frontier of knowledge keeps moving, under the sea, into whale vomit, into inaccessible precipices. The place of the merging of water and land is a specific material context, which never allows stable meaning-making. This material context generates the possibility of human leaps of imagination, but is also the stage of both convergence and divergence, the known and the unknown, the connected and the disconnected. But programmes of trade and ideology seek to generate more precision in this haze of narrations, by fixing islands, or 'islanding', and by casting 'islandness', so that islands are, for example, places of refuge from danger as for Sinbad.

Islands have always appeared and disappeared in the long history of our planet. So the current concerns, for instance in Kiribati or the Maldives, about rising sea levels are not new. Yet it is clearly the case that the island's transience and transformation is a fault-line in the climate emergency and also in human senses and engagements with the global and the planetary. The 'island', the geographical entity which the schoolchild can easily identify, ends up in such a view as one of the most revealing spatialities and heterodoxies for historicist as well as futurist dreaming. It is a site and cluster of terms to focus on theorising what this volume refers to as dis:connection. Its relevance to debates about globality is likely to increase rather than decrease in the years ahead.

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