

[Forum]

Taking the Trouble

Philip Hayward*

A consideration of *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds*. By Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler. London: University of Westminster Press, 2021. 260 pages. \$22.95 (paperback).

I'll start with the headlines. *Anthropocene Islands* is an ambitious, sophisticated, timely, and downright inspirational book. It is by far the most stimulating volume to emerge from island studies over the last two decades and is also an essential read for anyone working in a host of adjacent disciplines (e.g., anthropology, cultural studies, cultural geography). That said, it is not an easy read, not due to any heavy-handedness in the authors' writing but rather due to their providing subtle clusters of ideas and approaches that build cumulatively in ways that require careful attention. As they state, their aim is to "slow down, to drill down further . . . in order to draw out how islands . . . have generated new or alternative approaches to being and knowing in the Anthropocene" (xi). The authors have carefully navigated their way through conceptual shoals, narrows, and whirlpools and through stormy seas of discourse in a manner that offers much to scholars, activists, and creative practitioners of various kinds.

Having lavished high praise, I will deliver an opening criticism before returning to comment on the book's components and overall thrust. While not denying that islands *have* been a crucial subject/lens for thinking about many aspects of the Anthropocene in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, there is a degree of over-emphasis in Pugh and Chandler's volume. While they note that they are not attempting to "deny the importance of other forms which are also being widely engaged in Anthropocene thinking" (x), their line of argument echoes the early days of island studies when its proponents over-argued the distinct nature of "classic," water-hemmed islands in order to give the emergent study area a distinct identity. There was some subsequent retreat from this position. The journal *Shima*, for instance, removed a subtitle that specifically referred to islands from volume 10, number 1 (2017) onwards¹ and expanded its frame of reference

* Adjunct professor, University of Technology, Sydney and editor of the journal *Shima*

beyond classic islands and operated with a more *biogeographical* concept (i.e., understanding islands as isolates of various kinds).² While Pugh and Chandler do not specify this orientation in the early stages of their volume, this broader focus comes into play as their volume progresses. Indeed, some of the most telling characterisations and quotations from other scholars concern terrestrial case studies, such as analyses of the Big Bend National Park on the north side of the Mexico/US border provided by Wolfe (2017). There’s absolutely no problem with this, but it would have been better to have clearly established this more expansive parameter at an early stage (and thereby avoid any critique of the authors having fetishized classic islands as uniquely insightful places).

Moving on, the main body of the volume comprises four chapters addressing what the authors contend are the key paradigms for understanding and critically engaging with the Anthropocene through islands: resilience, patchworks, correlation, and storiation. In what follows, I try to rise to the challenge presented by Pugh and Chandler by *thinking with* various island and non-island encounters and reflections and—at various points—by *thinking with* a particular object whose presence is densely storied. I will commence with an image of that object (fig. 1):

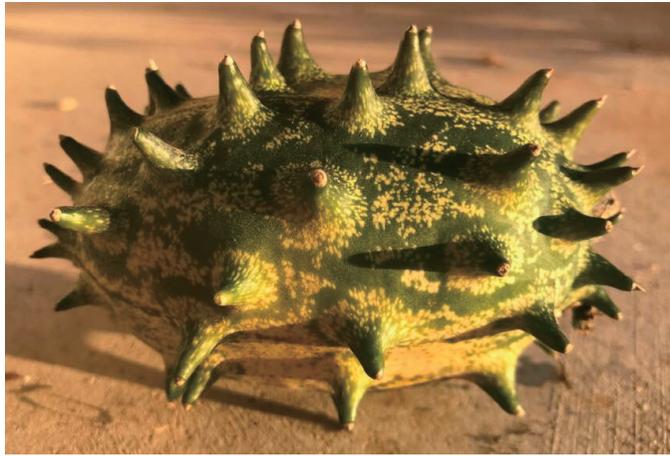


FIGURE 1. *Cucumis metuliferus* pod, May 2021 (author’s photo).

This prickly object is the seed pod of the *Cucumis metuliferus*. I first encountered the plant on Norfolk Island (NI) in the southwestern Pacific in 1999 while spending six months there researching local performance culture. On NI, as on many other islands—at least, in the modern era—local populations are substantially reliant on imported foodstuffs, particularly types of fruit and vegetables that many Westerners (including many islanders) are increasingly accustomed to having access to on a year-round basis. *Cucumis metuliferus* is *not* such a product. It is neither imported into Norfolk Island, nor—that I can ascertain—to and from any other international territory.³ Aside from its lack of fashionability (at least until some culinary influencer deems it as a prized “superfood” and

prompts a vogue for it), it is likely to remain a highly local and relatively low-value product. While it regularly featured on the vegetable rack in Foodies (NI's only supermarket) during my stay, its very prickliness militated against its easy handling. Fittingly, in the local (creolised Tahitian and English) language of Norfolk Island's Pitcairn descendent population, the pod is currently referred to—with charming functionality—as *bladi shaap* (literally, “bloody sharp”).⁴ Curious about the plant, I have talked with various NI gardeners about it over the years. All have identified it as non-native, and several had memories of it being cultivated for several decades on the island, but opinions varied as to how long it had been present there. As an island that has received the majority of its imported fruit and vegetables by ship since the earliest days of its settlement in the 1850s,⁵ (with frequent interruptions to the service), locally grown vegetables, such as *Ipomoea batatas* (known locally as *sweet taytes*), *Cucumis metuliferus* and others have been important as reliable local foods that do not require, for example, greenhousing or imported fertilisers to generate. As such, it is a resilient food source, and as many scholars have stressed, islands, particularly isolated ones such as Norfolk, require resilience of various kinds to maintain their human populations.

Resilience is a concept that Pugh and Chandler devote considerable space to and engage in considerable critique of. But it should be emphasised that rather than criticising resilience as a useful aspect of island communities, they are concerned to characterise its deployment as a framework in which:

the world is beyond our powers to command and control in the way of modern reasoning. Instead, the immanent potentialities and processual becomings of (island) life itself becomes [*sic*] a self-organising problem-solver, bringing about adaptation and order out of chaos. For Resilience ontologies, interactive (island) life is understood as becoming more efficient and harmonious, rather than entropic and disordered, thereby articulating an alternative or immanent telos of development and change. Here, islands and island cultures have become important symbols of hope in debates about the Anthropocene for the wider world to learn from, and to give Moderns a second chance to learn how to adapt to and even to gain from, the forces of planetary change. (41-2)

So far, so good. Pugh and Chandler see feedback effects as key to resilience in that they intensify “relations between relations: binding life together in a process of interactive development” (56). But they also note the manner in which much traditional thinking on island resilience (over-)emphasises isolated systems “where relations of interdependence and interactive feedback establish an internal set of immanent processes which shape or guide the direction of emergent causality” (59). The authors neatly critique and expand the system imagined in this way with regard to Laura Watts’ imaginative *Energy at the End of the World: An Orkney Islands Saga* (2018), a book in which Watts both “poses a direct challenge to modernist separations of human/nature and subject/object [and] seeks to go further[,] . . . understanding (island) life more as an open and contingent process of becoming than as a contained or bounded self-regulating system” (Pugh and Chandler 2021, 62).

One of the charms of Watts' book is the manner in which she conjures an Electric Nemesis which/who guides her through an understanding of the role of power in isolated island societies in a form of magic critical realism that gives a poetic character to her discussions. Re-engaging with her writing after reading *Anthropocene Islands*, I'm also reminded of the manner in which Guåhanese poet and academic Craig Santos Perez cites the traditional Chamoru principle of *inafa'maolek*, namely that that "all peoples, spirits, animals, plants, lands, and waters are interconnected, and thus we should act with respect, consent, and mutual care" (2019, 21). In his poem "Family Trees," he contrasts his father's instruction that he should seek permission from forest spirits before entering the undergrowth and then listen—*profoundly* listen—

*as the winds
exhale and billow the canopy, tremble
the understory, and conduct the wild orchestra
of all breathing things* (Santos Perez 2019, 26)

to the development of the US military complex on Guåhan that has depleted its native flora and fauna and alienated its indigenous people from much of their ancestral lands. If the US military could be imagined in Wattsonian terms, it would be as a deaf, insensitive cyber-Golem churning the landscape as it transformed it.

The relationship between global militarisation, conflict, and the Anthropocene is present in Pugh and Chandler's volume (if somewhat low in the mix). It is an aspect that winds through global islands in both dramatic ways that exemplify the most extreme Anthropocene events, such as the nuclear issues that they refer to, and more incidental ones. These incidental ones are not usually considered to be aspects of the Anthropocene but are, nevertheless, closely associated with it. Colonisation has been a major vector on the Anthropocene as capitalism has reconfigured the landscapes and very materiality of overseas territories, for instance, clearing forests, converting native landscapes to pastures, digging surface and open-cast mines, and constructing infrastructure to facilitate extraction in order to serve imperial interests. Conflicts over ownership of and access to land and resources have further disrupted societies and ecosystems. These conflicts have frequently involved young men pulled in from remote regions of the world to fight for imperial causes. To give but one example, the Second Boer War in South Africa from 1899–1902 between British imperial forces and predominantly Dutch descended Boers was fought over rights to control newly discovered mineral deposits (Henshaw 2001). At the time of the war's outbreak, Norfolk Island, the states of the future Australian federation, and New Zealand were separate British colonies whose populations had only the sketchiest and most jingoistic knowledge of their imperial "homeland." Despite this, a number of young men from these territories signed up to fight in the war and departed to southern Africa on lengthy sea voyages. While not commonly known in those southwestern Pacific communities that currently cultivate *Cucumis metuliferus*, seeds of the plant are thought to have first arrived in the region in the backpacks of soldiers returning from

the conflict (Bardsley 2011, 211).⁶ The plant was particularly useful for soldiers fighting in remote locations with limited water resources since it contains a moist, pulpy interior and a thick skin that enables its moisture to be retained over extended durations.

“Thinking with” the *bladi shaap* pod, and with the “trouble” of conflict arising from extractivist and military enterprises conducted on indigenous lands by colonial agencies (after Haraway 2016) gives a sense of global connectivity and of islands not as remote isolates but rather as peripheries of empires that can foster the “transperipheral networking” of particular commodities (Kuwahara, Ozaki, and Nishimura 2007) in various ways. The brief case study of the pod offered above modestly corroborates an aspect stressed by Pugh and Chandler whereby “the effects of entangled relation mean that engaging islands can provide valuable insights into the ‘afterlife’ of objects and events in ways which transform modern understandings of them as isolated or contained. The (island) future then becomes entangled with the past as the ‘afterlife’ of relational effects continue to reverberate across time and space” (29).

“Entanglement” is a key concept in *Anthropocene Islands*. On page ix, Pugh and Chandler characterise “relational entanglements, awareness and feedbacks” as “today’s overarching problematic” and, thereby, as one of “the key tropes” to their book (2). For them, these aspects are “too rich, vibrant and complex” to be readily comprehended by Western modernist rationality (xi) and are thereby “*the* problematic of contemporary thinking” (2). This is appealing, and the relationship between the *Cucumis metuliferus* vine growing in Norfolk Island gardens and British imperialist efforts to secure control over the gold-rich Witwatersrand scarp in central South Africa around the turn of the twentieth century is an appropriately entangled one.

Entanglements are a key aspect and focus of what the authors refer to as “patchwork approaches” that “develop and transform relational ontology,” foregrounding “how entanglements of relation are never fixed (14–15).” The authors contrast this to resilience approaches, which they characterise as “governmentalising and human-centred” enterprises that “seek to conserve modernity in the face of transformative planetary change,” and they applaud “patchwork ontologists” for foregrounding how “entanglements of relation are never fixed” (14). As one of the scholars identified as involved in such “patchwork” ontologies, I recognise the characterisation and welcome the clarity it gives to what otherwise usually feel like murky, *ad hoc* endeavours in which I struggle to make sense of various bizarrenesses (such as in my recent discussions of squashed crustaceans, illogical detention centres, and unappealing tourism options on Christmas Island, Indian Ocean [Hayward 2021]).

After having dwelt on relational ontology in the first part of their book, Pugh and Chandler turn to two particular onto-epistemological perspectives, which they characterise as “ongoing” processes of “embodied engagement and interaction” (109): 1) a correlational onto-epistemology that “relies heavily on patterns of repetition and stable relations of surface effect” (109), and 2) storiation, which they contend offers “a more speculative, disruptive and generative set of openings; problematising the modernist

assumptions of time and space which remain in place in Correlational approaches” (110). The authors’ characterisation of the latter is particularly astute and succinct:

Correlational analytics focus upon how entities or ‘actants’ have particular capacities or affordances which can be instrumentalised to enable human knowledge of changing environmental conditions. Correlational approaches thereby often rely upon the properties of correlational techniques and assemblages to measure or register effects (such as the widely held sensitive affordances of island ecological systems or cultures to register changing environments). Entities do not therefore have a core essence or meaning in themselves, as they do in modernist reductionist frameworks of reasoning; rather, knowledge is established co-relationally. (111)

For Pugh and Chandler, the principal shortcoming of correlation is that it is “still reliant upon an object of knowledge with reproducible and predictable properties and a knowing human subject who is capable of “standing outside,” doing the correlating, reading, and measuring of inter-relations” (111–112), with knowledge being “about building up increasing correlational efficiency over time, assuming a set of regularities of relation, which can be grasped” (112). This perceived shortcoming is an important check point. The reader may well argue as to which (human) critical analytical perspectives *do not* require such an external position. While there seems an implicit desire for sophisticated AI here, systems that might pursue correlational analytics so as to “reveal changes in intensities and distributions of entities that cannot be perceived directly and thus add to human capacities to know and act instrumentally in the world” (112), the authors’ discussions do not quite proceed towards that point, only touching on “smart islands” (132, 137) as explorations of that trajectory. Instead, they explore aspects such as the combination of resilience and correlational approaches in indigenous and indigenous-inspired critical thinking (120–123).

I’ll pause here. In weighing the arguments outlined above, I call up an image and sensation. I’m holding the *bladdi shaap* pod in my hand. It’s heavy with water, and I feel its weight through a few (possibly nine) spikes that press into my flesh. From these pressure points, I sense the totality of the pod and its interior. The sharper the spikes and the heavier their pressure on my palm, the fresher and healthier the pod is. From these sensations, I know that this year’s weather conditions have been suitable for its cultivation. If the spines make little impression on my palm, I sense a lack of moisture that, in the southwest Pacific at least, suggests that the El Niño climate oscillation has been in effect, causing a lowering in regional rainfall. Looming over this, I also sense the likely impact of climate change on the frequency and intensity of El Niño (and La Niña) events (McPhaden, Santoso, and Cai 2020). The weight of the pod in my hand is thereby weighty in more complex senses.

There’s a very solid reasonableness about the authors’ discussions of correlation and, consequently, a loosening of frameworks in their shift into paradigm 4: their discussion of storiation. The authors’ discussion of storiation takes us into a subtler, more allusive understanding of cause, effect, resonance, and repercussion. This involves a temporal

swirl that is at odds with the linear unfolding of the Anthropocene as represented by graphs of rising temperatures, CO₂ levels, sea levels, and other negative trends. Stori-ation, by contrast, poses islands (and other locales) “as partial amplifying sites which hold differences and relations often in tension or contradiction[;] thus, the traces, hauntings and spectres disrupt easy separations between pasts, presents and futures” (143). Stori-ation also concerns the “after lives” of functional things when they escape their original purpose and distribution channels and aggregate and/or decay in manners that have unin-tended consequences, plastics being an obvious example, whether in the central Pacific gyre or, more generally, as micro-particles spreading throughout the planet. As the authors acknowledge, Barad’s research on the former nuclear test sites of the Marshall Islands (2019) is an important contribution to such discussions that seeks to understand the topic through an imaginative lens.

As the authors also note, a number of Black scholars and artists have made notable contributions to this field. Examinations of topics such as the long-term reverberation of the trauma of Atlantic passage and Mid-Atlantic atrocities (Gaskins 2016), of the shoal as a figure that condenses Black diasporic experience (King 2019), and of the racialised nature of maritime trades and related population clusters (Guerin 2019) have opened up island/aquapelagic studies in important ways. Reflection on this work leads me to support the Pugh and Chandler characterisation of stori-ation as an approach/aesthetic in which:

the modernist distinctions, cuts and binaries which reductively grasped island life are erased in the work of Anthropocene thinking, and islands become worlds ‘in-difference’. By this we mean . . . that islands become figures whose relationalities are too vibrant to be cut into, or grasped, by modern forms of representation—such as regular relations or coherent boundar-ies. (165)

Drawing on this, and the substantial discussions that precede it, the authors move to a conclusion that returns to basics by characterising “Anthropocene thinking” about and with islands as “essentially a question of what it might mean to work and think with islands and island imaginaries” (187). With particular regard to the latter, they emphasise that “island imaginaries and broader trends in social and political thought” cannot be eas-ily separated out “from the material characteristics of islands as geographical forms which are doing important ‘work’ in such debates” (188). More particularly, they assert that:

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. (188)

While modestly and calmly expressed, this conclusion counters much of the early days of island studies, when representations and/or conceptualisations of island societies and islandness were viewed—particularly within ISISA and early issues of *Island Studies*

Journal—as *unnecessary* distractions from the (supposedly) *actual* pursuit of empirically-focussed island research. Here the wheel has turned, and an expansive version of island studies is tendered as integral to engagement with the Anthropocene. Anticipating a criticism of Pugh and Chandler’s book that might be forthcoming from more traditional island scholars, it might be argued that there is too much thinking *with*—rather than thinking *about*—islands in this volume. But this is to miss the point of this engaging and sophisticated work. Put simply there is no more pressing issue for islands, islanders, and island researchers and advocates than the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is a complex, shape-shifting phenomenon, and it requires ingenuity, flexibility, and guile to imagine its immensity, engage with its impacts, and envisage ways of both slowing and living with it. *Anthropocene Islands* provides important and timely points of purchase on the behemoth and, thereby, rays of hope for critical engagement and intervention. The book’s four main sections survey key perspectives and paradigms and provide resources for scholars, artists, and activists to create their own points of engagement with. Thankfully, no rigorous orthodoxy is proposed, no “one true path” through the “entanglements” of places, histories, things, and discourses. Nevertheless, this volume’s cumulative wisdom is going to be hard to overlook as island studies moves through the 2020s into an increasingly volatile future.

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Notes

1. Its first ten volumes were subtitled “the international journal of research into island cultures,” with the subtitle being retired from vol. 10, no.1 on.

2. See Hayward (2017) for discussion.

3. I may have missed some specialist enterprise somewhere that trades in them, but no evidence has come to light yet.

4. My qualification of “currently” reflects the fact that I did not hear that term on Norfolk Island in 1999. The term might have been in circulation then, but it definitely is now (Kath King and Louise Nobbs Taverner, personal communication August 21 and 22, 2021).

5. Prior to the settlement of the island by transported Pitcairn Islanders in 1856, the island had been home to British penal colonies for two periods in the early-mid 1800s. While there were some gardens on the island, the prison settlement was heavily reliant on external provisioning. The island was not populated when Europeans first encountered it in the late 1700s.

6. There is a possibility that such seeds arrived earlier, given that ships travelling between the United Kingdom and the South Pacific routinely called in at Cape Town (although the *Cucumis metuliferus* vine is more frequently grown further north [South African National Biodiversity Institute n.d.], in the areas where much of the Boer War conflict occurred).

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