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Understanding "Islandness"

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Islandness is a contested concept, not just between disciplines but also cultures, entangled with what islands, island studies, and island identity are understood to be. The purpose of this article is to explore some of these different meanings, without necessarily unifying or reconciling them, with the aim of keeping multiple understandings of islandness in creative tension. We begin by considering islandness as smallness, recognizing that though many entry points into island studies relate to size in some way, what constitutes small is dependent on both context and worldview. Next, we consider islandness as culture, and the concept of island identity, which is expressed in varied forms. Finally, we consider framings of islands as others, and the extent to which contemporary narratives linked to islands are really inherent to islands or not. Ultimately, we conclude that although there is much to be gained from appreciating differing understandings of islandness, these multiple meanings make it critical to reflect on context wherever the term is used, and exercise care in assigning attributes and outcomes to islandness. *Key Words: identity, islandness, islands, island studies, narratives.*

Many geographical concepts are subjectively defined, privileging the worldviews and biases of observers, not always those most intimate with particular places. An island has been a geographical notion, used for millennia to define a comparatively small landmass surrounded by water, but it is an imprecise term (Doumenge 1987; Nunn 1994; Jedrusik 2011). Why, for example, is Greenland often stated as being the world's largest island whereas conspicuously ocean-bounded Australia is invariably termed a continent? In classical times, it was common for coastal promontories to be identified as islands (Roller 2006), but recent discussions have examined *presqu'îles* or almost-islands (i.e., peninsulas not wholly, but mostly, surrounded by water), especially examining what "almost" means (Hayward 2016).

Such definitions are often woven with numerous challengeable overtones and presumptions. For instance, continents might imply power, whereas islands are often termed isolated or remote, with corresponding perceived limitations and challenges (Baldacchino 2020). These descriptors are worldview-dependent, though; a person living on a remote island and using the ocean daily for their livelihood may regard (the archipelago city of) New York as far away and unreachable. Similarly, Nimführ and Otto's (2021) work with asylum seekers in Malta suggested that their experience of the smallness of that island was rooted in their lack of mobility.

Islands can be seen as a geographical form that matters, or is made to matter by people, but does not have an independent existence. It becomes difficult in theory and practice to attribute unambiguously any

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specific trait or descriptor as defining islandness. Where different actors can come together and define their usage of such terms and how they inform their activities, we can arrive at complementary continuums of understanding for certain concepts. Terminological differences that are well-grounded in evidence and foreground islanders' views can be welcome and even kept in creative tension.

The purpose of this article is to explore some of these contested meanings, without passing judgment or seeking a right answer, so as to inspire readers to think broadly and explore boundaries. The article has its origins in an online conference that brought the coauthors together, with their different disciplinary lenses including social sciences, physical sciences, and arts and humanities, to debate ideas about islandness. Fruitful discussion questioned existing logics and made new connections. Here, we assemble these ideas thematically, acknowledging the many overlaps between concepts. First, we consider islandness as smallness, recognizing that what constitutes small is both context- and worldview-dependent. Second, we discuss islandness as a sociocultural phenomenon, exploring the construction of island identity and acknowledging the long legacy of erroneous characterizations and simplifications of culture as the epistemological foundations of coloniality (Said 1978; Kasbarian 1996). Finally, we question mainstream framings of islands as the other, with particular reference to current issues like climate change and COVID-19.

Islandness as Smallness

The Problem with Smallness

Although islandness is often used to imply smallness, the perception that islands are small places is not entirely accurate. Examples of measuring size include territory, population, economy, or military strength. The Small Island Developing States (SIDS) categorization used by the United Nations acknowledges some of these dimensions, yet there is considerable variation within this grouping. It is also just one of many definitions of the grouping developed by different organizations (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development 2018). Its constituent countries are not homogeneous and they have significant differences in territorial area, governance systems, economic development, and geographic characteristics (Thomas and Lindo 2019; O. I. Robinson 2020). Papua New Guinea includes one half of a huge island in the Pacific, has an estimated population of almost 10 million—higher than Denmark or New Zealand—and a land area of 452,860 km^2 (World Bank 2022). In contrast, Tuvalu, also in the Pacific, has a population of just over 11,000 and a land area of 26 km^2. Most Pacific SIDS are somewhere in between. In Caribbean SIDS, a similar pattern prevails. Although 65 million people live in the region, countries vary widely in demographic characteristics and physical size (S. Robinson and Wren 2020). Yet despite these variations and recent attempts to reconstitute these nations as large ocean states, whereby the island's boundary encompasses the 200-nautical mile exclusive economic zone around the land base (Chan 2018), the perception that islands are usually small places remains widespread.

The term *small islands* is a descriptor but also sometimes interpreted as a characterizer of vulnerability, helplessness, and even comparatively precarious futures (Nunn 2004; Nunn and Kumar 2018). Such interpretations help to embed a global narrative that island peoples consider themselves and their islands vulnerable, leading to anxiety and a loss of self-belief (J. Lewis 2009; Scott-Parker and Kumar 2018; Hermann 2020). Many islanders reject the idea that they live in small, isolated, or remote places and that they themselves are inherently vulnerable, pointing to the fact that they do not share the worldview that pictures ocean-as-barrier and land-as-security (Hau'ofa 1993). As history unequivocally shows, people have lived continuously on islands in the western Pacific for more than 3,500 years, having arrived there from the Philippines across at least 2,300 km of open ocean, and have in that time evolved ways of thriving that have generally been of little interest to globalists (McNeill 1994; Nunn 2007; Hung et al. 2011). Many other islands of equivalent size to the Pacific ones, including those in Indonesia and Norway, were inhabited for millennia before the Pacific crossings, their peoples adept at generating fulfilling and lucrative livelihoods from the connected land and sea places they inhabited.

Smallness by Disciplines

There is also considerable variation in the way social science disciplines approach smallness. For geographers, the smallness of small islands tends to

be interpreted alongside other spatial characteristics. Some geographers have employed concepts like isolation and insularity to explain the way distance apparently shapes a variety of social practices, including adjusting their lives and livelihoods to account for the impacts of climate change and other social, economic, or environmental influences (e.g., McNamara et al. 2019; Medina Hidalgo et al. 2021; Nunn et al. 2022). Others are interested in the distance between islands within archipelagos, between small islands and metropolitan states, and the implications for their position in the world system, aligning with sociological inquiries of power and hegemony (see, e.g., Pugh 2013; Baldacchino 2020; Chandler and Pugh 2020). Small islands can be viewed as sites where the impact of the physical environment on political and cultural practices (and vice versa) can be observed (Overton 1993; Grydehøj 2020). The theories and methods applied when studying islands have often been attuned to understanding the movement of people between places, including processes of urbanization, migration, and relocation in response to the impacts of climate change (e.g., Baldacchino 2006; Farbotko et al. 2018; Azfa et al. 2022), even if the reasons for such processes of mobility are not necessarily rooted in smallness.

With their emphasis on human societies and cultures and their development as well as on the human biological and physiological characteristics and their evolution, anthropologists have long viewed small islands as natural incubators of cultural evolution. Anthropologists often explore "the intricate and diverse connections between continental and marine culture from a perspective of 'viewing the world through the island'" (Ma 2020, 1), emphasizing the centrality of the ocean to small island lives and livelihoods. Some value the peripherality of small islands because it means that they are more likely to be "untouched" by the homogenizing forces of globalization. Many pioneering modern scientific studies in this field have been conducted in the Pacific (White and Tengan 2001). The claim, following the logic of their ethnographic method, was that small-scale units readily permit intense and immersive observations of specific, largely self-contained communities. More recently, the tendency within anthropology has been to seek to champion (and protect) these diverse ways of seeing and being in the world from the homogenizing forces of modernization and globalization, and the paternalism of mainlanders, in particular (e.g., Ma 2020). A key component of this engaged anthropology resists articulations of inferiority. Most famously described by Epeli Hau'ofa, a Tongan anthropologist (Hau'ofa 1994), island societies extend beyond their (small) land area, encompass the ocean, and have built wide networks of trade, exchange, and culture across the Pacific (Hunter-Anderson and Zan 1996; Esser 2011), which underpin a uniquely islander worldview (Nel et al. 2021).

For economists, small size is typically viewed as a challenge, at least in a globalized world, because it does not fully allow island economies to benefit from economies of scale; assumed inherent vulnerabilities make island economies more susceptible to so-called exogenous shocks (Briguglio et al. 2009; Pereira and Steenge 2022). In both the Caribbean and Pacific, an additional concern is that smallness accentuates neo-colonial dependency, and that SIDS will remain perpetual recipients of official development assistance, both because they have limited development potential and because they lack sufficient capacity to absorb significant amounts of these financial flows (McGillivray, Naude, and Santos-Paulino 2010; Nunn and Kumar 2019a). In recent decades, island countries have pursued open service-based economies and regional integration to achieve functional cooperation (P. Lewis 2002; S. Robinson and Gilfillan 2017). For many SIDS the development of a thriving tourism sector has generated high levels of economic growth (Jayaraman, Chen, and Bhatt 2014; Acevedo, LaFramboise, and Wong 2017). It has also left them heavily reliant on this single sector, however, one that is prone to hazards such as floods and hurricanes (Bernard and Cook 2015; Seraphin 2019), and global market fluctuations, as illustrated by the global financial crisis in 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic (Hickey and Unwin 2020; Y. Campbell and Connell 2021; Foley et al. 2022).

Political science and international relations scholars have had a mixed view of the normative implications of small size and islandness. A frequently encountered argument, when it comes to the role of government and governance, is that "small is beautiful" because it reduces the distance between rulers and ruled, creating a more authentic and representative government (e.g., Anckar 2008; Corbett 2015; Sanches et al. 2022). In this context and at the local

scale, smallness has been found to positively influence patron–client networks in the Caribbean and Pacific (Larmour 2012; Veenendaal and Corbett 2020). These networks are based on three key factors: "(1) the 'face-to-face' connections and overlapping role relations between citizens and politicians, (2) politicians' electoral dependence on a very small number of votes, and (3) enhanced opportunities for monitoring and controlling clientelistic exchanges" (Veenendaal and Corbett 2020, 61). This view can help explain why, statistically, some authors claim that small islands are much more likely to be liberal democracies than larger states (Anckar 2006, 2008). This idyllic interpretation needs to be nuanced with an appreciation of how smallness and islandness could also facilitate authoritarian leadership styles, if "homogenous" values and dominant cultural norms are mobilized against those in the minority or those who voice dissent (Baldacchino 2012). Smallness and islandness can result in a practice of executive or familial domination, cultures of compliance, and corruption (Corbett and Shiu 2014; S. Robinson 2018).

At the global scale, international relations scholarship tends to hold a pessimistic view of smallness. World-system theorists, for example, view SIDS as being outside the powerful "core" countries and belonging in the periphery. There and because of their smallness, they are subjected to exploitation and extraction, and left without the power to significantly influence interactions at a global scale (Vital 1971; Connell 2010). In recent years, activism on climate change and climate finance, particularly through the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), has led to a reevaluation of these assumptions—of whether smallness equates to powerlessness (Betzold, Castro, and Weiler 2012; S. Robinson and Dornan 2017; Ledderucci 2021). SIDS, through AOSIS, have been able to advance global climate policy in defining ways, for example, calling for clearer definitions and specific abatement timetables, and clear and permanent financing arrangements (Ashe, Lierop, and Cherian 1999; Ourbak and Magnan 2018; Schwebel 2018).

The smallness and boundedness of islands has contributed to their use as natural laboratories for epidemiological study (e.g., Cliff and Haggett 1984) despite dissenters from this construct (Greenhough 2006, 227). There is also a darker history of islands and islanders being experimented *on*, or islands' advantages when it comes to epidemiological study being mobilized as a form of social control. In the early twentieth century, Bernier and Dorre Islands off the coast of Australia were used to imprison Indigenous Australians, ostensibly to limit the spread of syphilis, although historical and oral records reveal that few of those incarcerated actually had this disease (Stingemore and Meyer 2009). In the mid-twentieth century, the Marshall Islands were used extensively by the U.S. military for testing nuclear weapons, and after Marshall Islanders were exposed to fallout, they were observed to study the health impacts of this exposure, without their informed consent (McElfish, Hallgren, and Yamada 2015).

Islands and islanders are not the only places and peoples to experience this trauma. Similar histories of experimentation on Indigenous peoples in Canada (Mosby and Swidrovich 2021) and on African American communities (Gamble 1997) are well-documented. The intersection of isolation, geographical control, and "otherness" is pronounced, however, for many island communities dealing with these issues. Puerto Rican environmental activist Juan E. Rosario (in Klein 2018) described how the combination of an island's isolation and a perception of its people as "expendable" underlay a litany of external experiments that continue today, with large agribusinesses using the island to trial genetically modified seeds.

Islands are also becoming central in work on what has been referred to as the Anthropocene, at least in part because islands have long been understood as key spaces for understanding relational sensitivities and entanglements (Chandler and Pugh 2021)—from Darwin (2010) and Mead (2001), through to Glissant (1997) and Hau'ofa (2008). Deleuze (2004) and Derrida (2011) employed the island as a figure that explicitly disrupts reductive frameworks of modernist and colonial mainland thinking. Contemporary Anthropocene work (e.g., Tsing 2015; Morton 2016) builds on this history, foregrounding how thinking with islands, islanders, and islandness offers alternatives to modernity's linear telos of progress and development, which is today widely held to be the cause of anthropogenic climate change and ecological degradation (Pugh and Chandler 2021).

Political Responses to Smallness

Beyond differences in disciplinary approaches, we can also discern different political responses to smallness and islandness. A major stratagem is that there is strength in numbers where complex negotiations are undertaken in international fora such as the UNFCCC. For instance, CARICOM and its Climate Change Center often act as a bridge between international agencies and nonstate environmental actors (S. Robinson and Gilfillan 2017; Scobie 2019). Correspondingly, Caribbean negotiators have been seen as being more successful than expected, with considerable success in attracting climate finance (S. Robinson and Dornan 2017). It has also been argued, though, that there is an advantage to accentuating vulnerability in such negotiations (Corbett, Xu, and Weller 2019). In parts of the Pacific and Indian Oceans, countries such as Kiribati, Palau, and Seychelles have resisted the small island trope and are instead gravitating toward large ocean states (Chan 2018).

Islands have sought to overcome resource limitations by banding together and pooling resources, particularly at the regional scale (Dornan and Newton-Cain 2014; Kelman 2016). Countries in the Caribbean, Indian Ocean, and Pacific have created several regional and subregional institutions and organizations that provide technical, financial, and other support for development actions at the subnational level. The University of the South Pacific, with campuses in twelve countries, has emerged as a major source of climate change information in that region (Scott-Parker et al. 2017). The University of the West Indies has campuses in four countries, and its Climate Studies Group has been instrumental in identifying atmospheric and oceanic climate influences in the region, and the relationship between climate change and crop yield and dengue outbreak (Stephenson, Chen, and Taylor 2008).

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that smallness can also be an advantage to decision-making (Y. Campbell and Connell 2021). Many small islands pivoted well in finding innovative solutions to the challenges faced by economic sectors highly affected by the virus. Some dependent on tourism devised new marketing strategies to attract "digital nomads." One example is Barbados's twelve-month Welcome Stamp Programme for visitors who wanted to live there while working remotely from their base country (Mulder 2020). Although countries like Vanuatu in the Pacific did not experience any confirmed COVID-19 cases in 2020, a rapid decline in the number of visitors forced the government to turn its attention to domestic tourism (Naupa et al. 2021). The responses represented a rebranding of each country's tourism product into one of a self-supporting haven relatively safe from COVID-19.

Islandness as a Sociocultural Phenomenon

Water as a Sociocultural Force

A fundamental question within island studies reemerges regarding whether an island is defined more by land, water, both equitably, or their combination (Hau'ofa 1993). Many perceived effects of islandness—such as insularity, isolation, and unique identity—are similar to those found within other bounded places like mountain heights or valleys (Tuan 1974). The geographical, psychological, and societal boundedness of these "metaphorical islands" does not come from being encircled by water, however.

Conkling (2007) defined islandness as "a metaphysical sensation that derives from the heightened experience that accompanies physical isolation," an isolation reinforced by "boundaries of often frightening and occasionally impassable bodies of water" (191). The coastal edge can be seen, then, as a threshold, requiring a conscious and physical effort to cross. Sea boundedness might be a factor in island peoples maintaining distinctive cultural assets against a tide of globalization, and islandness has been connected to a strong identification with sense of place (Hay 2006; Parker 2021). On an island, some authors describe, there is a literal, littoral boundary: "nature's emphatic and unambiguous way of telling Islanders that they are a separate and unique people … a geographic situation [that] dictate[s] both a sense of unity and separateness, of inclusion and exclusion" (Baglole and Weale 1973, 105–06), resulting in a palpable "island identity" (Royle and Brinklow 2018; Ronström 2021).

The sea is also perceived by many islanders, however, as connective, rather than divisive. For Hau'ofa (1994), "outsiders often conceive of islands as separated and confined as well as defined through their (national) borders, which often arose from colonial and decolonial dynamics thereby overlooking connectivity, heterogeneity, and complexity"

(152; cited in Nimführ and Otto 2021, 41). This has led to scholars increasingly emphasizing islands' relationalities. The sea can be seen as a road (Hau'ofa 1994), connecting the island through transportation and migratory pathways for all living things, human and nonhuman. There is a dynamism that comes from this apparent binary—the physical space of an island that is set apart by a medium that also connects. In such contexts, the concept of the "aquapelago" has been proposed to capture the holistic nature of the connections between land and sea in island realms (Hayward 2012).

The edge of the land meets the edge of the ocean, creating an ecotone (Gillis 2014) that is especially rich in life forms and movement, a tidal zone that is ever changing. Writing about the island of Ireland, Allen (2017) referred to the coast as "the permeable barrier through which a series of cultural exchanges, literary, historical, political, and environmental, take place" (63). The ocean is often characterized as a metaphor for creativity, and artists, in particular, find the edge inspiring. For example, award-winning Tasmanian painter Michaye Boulter was "the daughter of [a] seafarer" and became fascinated by the "interplay among the light and the water and the horizon" (Brinklow 2013, 47). Prince Edward Island writer David Weale (2007) saw the land's edge as a liminal space, a place of connection, a threshold to something spiritual—"a place of joining together; a powerful erogenous zone, where land and sea mate, and the eternal makes love to the temporal" (10).

Islandness is increasingly being perceived as "a state of mind" (Randall 2021, 100), a sense of identity connected to, yet not solely defined by, physical dimensions of island life like water-boundedness. "Blue mind" theory has been used to refer to "the somewhat meditative state people fall into when near water" (Conrad, Cleland, and Reyes 2021, 59). Research with coastal communities in the United Kingdom highlights how coastal spaces are experienced as therapeutic landscapes, symbolic of renewal but also rootedness, with different stretches of the coastline contributing in varied ways to people's well-being (Bell et al. 2015; Kelly 2018). In this way, being near the shore can be experienced at times as energizing and invigorating or soothing and meditative. Carson (1951) foresaw humanity making its way "back to the sea"; if humans cannot literally return to the ocean, she said we strive to "re-enter it mentally and imaginatively" (16).

The water-bound nature of islands is often argued as being central to island identity and island culture (Hay 2013), and some of the oft-cited definitions of islandness highlight geographic characteristics like sea-boundedness and remoteness (Fernandes and Pinho 2017). "Perfect insularity from the mainland," however, should not be the litmus test of islandness (Hong 2017). Urban islands, such as river delta cities, are often highly connected not only physically, but conceptually and administratively to wider regions and mainlands (Su and Grydehøj 2022). As Zhang and Grydehøj (2021) argued, in their study of Zhoushan Archipelago, a distinct place identity nevertheless emerges "because of (rather than despite) its connections with other places" (12).

Cultures of Kinship and Resourcefulness

Discussions of culture as a part of islandness are often bound together with concepts of kinship networks, resourcefulness, and skill sets that contrast with those of mainland communities (Pungetti 2012). The many case studies of strong cultural community bonds that have developed on islands (Vogiatzakis, Pungetti, and Mannion 2008; Donaldson 2018), particularly from anthropology (Keesing 1980; Hage and Harary 1996), suggest that island cultures are indeed informed by islandness. Portrayals of island communities as harmonious, tight-knit groups bound by island culture are common, such as in Fiji, where a shared identity, strong communal bond, and shared resources are assumed to exist (Nakamura and Kanemasu 2022). Island communities are often told that they need to draw on such rich community resources to survive (Pugh 2018), but the reality is often more complex, with conflict and divisions existing between and within island communities (e.g., Richmond 2011; Rantes, Nunn, and Addinsall 2022).

J. Campbell (2009) detailed kinship networks across Oceania that facilitated inter- and intracommunity cultural cooperation, exchanges, ceremonies, and consumption control as a coping mechanism during times of hardship. Yet cultural coping solutions might break down under pressure (Spillius 1957; Nunn 2007; Mar 2016) and, in many places, such cultural networks were either repressed, reconfigured, or lost as a result of colonialism, development, and globalization. The colonial control of islands can result in their culture and creativity

(in any form) being lost when "peripheralized" islanders become subject to the exertion of external culture and island resources (including cultural) are extracted to centers of influence (McCall 1994; McNeill 1994; Crocombe 2001).

This is not to say that development or globalization necessarily quashes all cultural resourcefulness on islands for, as Baldacchino (2000) noted, many small island societies possess a different or unique kind of resourcefulness that evolved from the absence of what other places might consider "traditional" natural-resource utilization such as agriculture, fisheries, forestry, or mining. In Gozo island (of the Maltese archipelago) cultural concepts (e.g., *Nirranġaw*—"putting things right") are directly related to the resourcefulness needed to survive and even to thrive under conditions of smallness (Azzopardi 2015). A comparable example from Fiji is the practice of *solesolevaki* or "collective work for communal benefit" (Movono and Becken 2018). This implies that islanders develop their own ways of operating successfully in spite, or because of, the singular challenges they face (Nunn et al. 2017), which refutes Western or global assumptions of what development should look like on islands (Kelman 2020; Korovulavula et al. 2020). The notion of cultural resourcefulness is a way to push back on discourses of islands as small or remote or islanders as victims (Farbotko 2005; Nunn and Kumar 2018). These discourses are not shared at local scales where concepts of local resourcefulness are a key component in discussions between islanders and shared concepts of interdependence (McNamara et al. 2020; Cauchi et al. 2021; Nel et al. 2021).

People living on small islands can also be portrayed as resilient because of their high levels of social bonding and connectedness (as critiqued by Baldacchino 2005; Kelman 2020). Yet caution is needed, as a focus on such assumed characteristics of islandness risks neglecting or overlooking the systemic "root" causes of situations and transferring the impetus for providing solutions to islanders, who might have little influence on the creation of contemporary challenges, from colonialism to climate change. Equally, Baldacchino (2005) argued these same cultural features that are portrayed as typical and beneficial in island communities are not necessarily conducive to democracy and equitable governance, again calling for nuance.

Cultures of Mobility and Immobility

This sense of connection between island communities frequently manifests in the invocation of solidarity, with "friendship" and "family" used to describe regional relations (Hermann and Kempf 2017). After several islands said they would accept evacuees from the La Soufrière volcanic eruption in St. Vincent in 2021, Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves acknowledged this, saying, "We are one Caribbean family" (Hodgson 2021). O. I. Robinson's (2020) study of public perceptions of the regional integration movement, however, finds that although it is associated with a sense of membership in the Caribbean family, antiregionalism sentiments can also be identified, driven by fears that increased mobility of people could lead to unemployment and crime in receiving countries. In the Pacific, Australia has been criticized for juxtaposing Pacific family rhetoric with inaction on climate change (O'Keefe 2019).

Although much migration within and between islands is currently not driven by climate change but by social factors (e.g., Mortreux and Barnett 2009; Connell 2013; Stojanov et al. 2017; Kelman et al. 2019), scholars are nevertheless increasingly discussing how issues of island statehood and sovereignty might be navigated as sea levels rise (e.g., Kelman 2006; Skillington 2016; Willcox 2017; Juvelier 2020). As islanders attempt to reconcile multilayered, place-based identities, the relationship between island culture and the island itself is tested and reformed. Tuvaluans have a long history of mobile identity, with migrants and mariners maintaining connections to the archipelago and their *fenua* or home place and identity across great distances (Stratford, Farbotko, and Lazrus 2013). Yet both recent cultural change coupled with constructed discourses about climate change have prompted a shift to rootedness, reformulating island identity as grounded in place and therefore at greater exposure to climate change (Farbotko, Stratford, and Lazrus 2016). This might stem from the manufactured sense of climate change migration as a forced relocation, rather than movement by choice. Drawing on the example of the Gilbertese people, resettled to the Solomon Islands under British colonial rule, Tabe (2019) articulated how this forced removal was experienced as "being uprooted," severing ties to the ancestral lands. Conversely, the Niuean experience illustrates that it is possible to maintain an island society *ex situ*; migration to New Zealand, facilitated

by free movement between the two, has resulted in a declining resident island population but a strong sense of transnational community being maintained, translating into wider support networks that benefit the remaining resident population (Barnett and McMichael 2018).

Some have posited that intangible cultural heritage is transferable rather than rooted in place and that such flexibility might support displaced communities, assuming that both relocating and host communities are open to building new traditions (e.g., Aktürk and Lerski 2021). Existing at-risk cultural landscapes comprise tangible and intangible heritage, cultural relationships, and societal benefits, aspects of which might be adapted and reconstituted into new cultural landscapes (Seekamp and Jo 2020). Experiences of disaster-displaced island communities reveal barriers to realizing this, however. Barbudans who relocated to Antigua after the passage of Hurricane Irma in 2017, for instance, reported that despite many similarities between cultures, differences in approaches to land tenure (all land in Barbuda was communally owned) and linked activities like food gathering contributed to a keenness to return home (Aktürk and Lerski 2021). The Barbuda Land Act was repealed in the aftermath of Irma, ostensibly to facilitate recovery, but, in practice, eroding agency, identity, and lifeways (Corbett 2020; Perdikaris et al. 2021). In the Pacific, the desire of many displaced islanders to return home is a recurrent and powerful theme that is of concern to planners (Petrou 2020) and features in Pacific literature (Wilson 2018). Such experiences highlight that it might be challenging to decouple culture and identity from place, despite long-standing cultures of island mobility.

Overturning the Island as the "Other"

The boundaries of the field of island studies are expanding to apply to aquapelagoes, island-like spaces, remoteness, and spaces not surrounded by water but by an "other." These raise questions of the extent to which contemporary narratives linked to islands and positioning the island as the other are aiming to separate, perhaps for marginalizing or perhaps for exceptionalizing, islands as their own category.

For the past three Assessment Reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2007, 2013–2014, 2022), there have been chapters on "Small Islands" for which much preliminary discussion focused on where the arbitrary cutoff between small islands and other islands might be. Should Honshu (Japan) and Hiva Oa (of French Polynesia and 700 times smaller in area) be treated under the same umbrella, or might we plead that the former is just too large to be considered in this way? It seems clear that the IPCC, like many other international organizations, sees small islands as "not continents," emphasizing the apparent exceptionality of islands, compared to many articulations of the absence of an objective differentiation between islands and continents (Nunn et al. 2016; Duvat et al. 2017; Baldacchino 2018b). Yet coastal regions of continents share many of the climate risks of islands, and inland areas on (larger) islands might be more similar to inland areas of continents than coastal regions. The politics at the climate change Conferences of the Parties mirrors this, where we see many slightly different coalitions—SIDS, Large Ocean States, Indigenous peoples—representing communities with distinct yet overlapping interests and concerns that are often subjectively compartmentalized.

Disasters, often seen incorrectly as extreme or unusual "events," especially in an island context (as critiqued by J. Lewis 1999), also highlight islandness as a social construct. In the archipelago that is New York City, self-organized boats and then buses at the landing points contributed immensely to evacuating lower Manhattan after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks (Kendra and Wachtendorf 2016). Similarly, in the aftermath of the Hunga Tonga Hunga Ha'apai eruption and subsequent tsunami, survivors on Mango Island reported that boats from neighboring islands came to check on them and bring food (Associated Press 2022). Do these situations represent:

1. Inherent island vulnerability in that people were allegedly "trapped" on "cutoff" islands.
2. Inherent island resilience in that people responded with the islandness resources available to overcome the vulnerability.
3. A typical human condition of local response and mutual support often seen during disasters, as well established in disaster research (Fritz and Mathewson 1957), in which the islandness of the context made no difference.

Given the controversies and divergences of viewpoints regarding definitions and interpretations of vulnerability and resilience—not to mention islandness, as discussed in this article—the easy default is the third option. That is, people on islands are people and are thus subject to the same human conditions as

everyone else. This conclusion might go too far in seeming to deny the physicality of islands, as well as the tangibility of needing to get away from a dangerous site in lower Manhattan and requiring food to survive on Mango Island. Because the three options are not mutually exclusive, it might be better to suggest that all three tend to exist in any given circumstance, although they appear in different proportions.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a reminder of the inequality in a globalized world between small states, including small islands, and large states. Some response strategies in small states have been stymied by vaccine inequality where countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and those in Europe bought and hoarded the bulk of the world's initial vaccine supply, resulting in chronic shortages elsewhere (Feinmann 2021). This situation was also exacerbated by transport, storage, and distribution challenges for numerous locations (Hotez and Narayan 2021). This is not the whole story, though, as vaccine allocation among countries is the result of a complex interplay of diplomacy, public health, public opinion, and economics, among other factors (Emanuel et al. 2020). China donated considerable stocks of vaccine, leading Seychelles and Bahrain to become world leaders in vaccination, followed by outbreaks that led to speculation about the efficacy of the Chinese vaccine (Vilches et al. 2021). Vaccination rates in small islands are highly variable (Ritchie et al. 2020; Mathieu et al. 2021). Vaccine hesitancy is high in some regions, like the Caribbean, with distrust of government and reliance on opinions drawn from social media, which could include misinformation, also influencing vaccine decisions (Maharaj, Dookeeram, and Franco 2021; Taylor 2022).

On some islands, sectors and economies have not fully reopened (see, e.g., McLeod 2021). As a result, recovery from the pandemic could be delayed for several years, given the uneven implications for business development and education, and the digital divide (Clarke 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic also shows the need, or expectation, for islands to become more autonomous (Nunn and Kumar 2019b; Farrell et al. 2020). Islander ways of thinking and living without continental dependence are suggested as being favored once again, representing their best chances at sustainability and resilience (McMillen, Ticktin, and Springer 2017; Nalau et al. 2018; Korovulavula et al. 2020).

The inability of many European explorers of the Pacific to free themselves of their worldviews and the prejudices that accompanied them made it impossible for them to analyze or understand the "new" worlds they saw and believed they "discovered." They concluded that islands had once been a continent and that their peoples were in fact as "primitive" as non-Europeans were assumed to be everywhere else (Hanlon 2009; Dotte-Sarout 2017). Owing solely to their subjugation and devaluation by many continental peoples, islands and island peoples have long been characterized in demeaning terms, but it is encouraging to see signs that this narrative is being challenged and reversed (Baldacchino 2018a; Nunn and Kumar 2019b; Nunn 2021). In fact, deconstructing and overturning the island as the "other" emerges in expressing islandness as a social construct across numerous fields and examples, from migrants in Malta (Bernardie-Tahir and Schmoll 2014) to local perceptions of Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland; Grydehøj 2018).

Conclusions

This article set out to explore some of the contested meanings of islandness, resisting judgment but offering broad, critiquing thoughts for exploring boundaries—most notably when islandness is constructed as a boundary that separates islands and islanders from those labeled as others.

Considering islands as small spaces requires us to critique how we measure small, and recognize subversions of smallness offered by sites like aquapelagos, which challenge the concept of smallness in area. There are both benefits and challenges of smallness politically and for decision-making, as well as potential for smallness to be used against islands, turning them into sites of experimentation.

Reflecting on islands as a sociocultural phenomenon requires us to further explore ideas of islands as special places, due to their water-boundedness that requires effort to traverse, or due to their remoteness leading to cultural resourcefulness. Urban islands challenge and subvert this concept, as they are usually very deeply connected, physically and administratively, within their region. Connection, then, rather than isolation, might be the key to understanding islandness, necessitating reflection on how cultures of mobility and immobility are being experienced.

Both the physicality and sociality of islandness, then, are commonly defined subjectively. The definer brings their biases and preconceived ideas to the definitions, privileging those who can and wish to discuss the topic such that English and top-down academic and policy discourses dominate (as elsewhere; e.g., Chmutina et al. 2020). This does not obviate islandness nor the characteristics that might define it, but acknowledges the imprecision and subjectivity that permeate the issue.

Islandness is an entangled concept, which requires us to grapple with seeming contradictions. Islands can be small places, but also continents. Islands might have small economies, constrained by remoteness from markets and limited natural resources, or might be global powerhouses, whose strategic position makes them a business hub, as in Singapore and Hong Kong. Smallness might lead to agility in decision-making, or it might lead to stagnation. Island cultures and islandness can emphasize mobility and movement while also remaining deeply connected to place. Global threats like anthropogenic climate change and COVID-19 draw speculation about how islands have responded, but the reality is that islands respond in a variety of ways to these issues, sometimes somehow informed by their islandness, and sometimes not.

We do not propose a framework for reconciling these contradictions, but instead posit that inclusive island studies, as well as decision-making and policy-making that concerns island communities, requires more open and candid recognition of these ontological differences, and the ways in which they can be mobilized to differentially frame island issues. Islandness is likely to remain contested, making it essential to reflect on the context in which it is used. Although some of the oft-cited definitions of islandness highlight characteristics like sea-boundedness and comparative remoteness, the sea can also be envisioned as a road to the rest of the world, and there are traditions of seeing the land and the sea together, not the sea as a barrier, which are all helpful for imagining islandness more inclusively.

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