

Introduction: Islands and (im)mobilities

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L'isola del rifiuto

L'isola del rifiuto è un'isola di spiagge, di battigie.

Prima, poco prima, del sorgere dell'alba,
ombre veloci sorgono dal mare e ripuliscono,
rapinano, accumulano, portano via, mettono da parte,
ghermiscono, graffiano, succhiano, ghignano, ridono.

A mezzogiorno tutto sembra immacolato e in ordine e senza cattivi odori.

(Ernesto Franco, *Isolario*, 1994, p. 60)

Over the past two decades, island studies have undergone a spatial and mobility turn, leading scholars to focus on the tracing of networks, multiple and interconnected relational mobilities, island assemblages, and movements – inviting us toward an «archipelagic thinking» (Pugh, 2013; Stratford *et al.*, 2011). In this context, as we move beyond the notion that places (and islands) are spatially fixed geographical containers for social processes (Sheller and Urry, 2006), islands are increasingly framed as relational spaces. This perspective problematises the idea of the island being necessarily static, isolated, dependent, or peripheral, as well as the assumption of islands as inherently 'natural' entities (Malatesta, 2021). In doing so, islands are recognised as fully embedded within the logics of globalisation and engaged in both human and non-human forms of mobility and immobility.

Only a few years ago, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, when – for a moment – it seemed as though everything had come to a halt, many of us wondered whether and how the globalized world would change. Yet, upon closer observation, beyond the fascination with a tourist-emptied Venice and its newly clear canals, the contradictions of our economic and social systems remained evident. While everyone was instructed to stay at home, the world continued to move – perhaps more slowly, but still moving nonetheless. The so-called 'essential workers', from hospital staff to factory employees, continued to operate, often at great personal

risk. As much as small islands (more so, small island states), being often heavily reliant on food imports and distant from global markets, had to struggle keeping connections to receive basic goods including food and water (Davila *et al.*, 2021).

In general, the pandemic severely impacted small island communities by disrupting tourism, shipping, and food supplies. Some islands coped better than others. For example, in the Falkland Islands, according to Matheson (2022) the island's context facilitated social control and community surveillance within the small population. This secured adherence to rules also due to social cohesion facilitated by effective support by government measures like providing quarantine accommodation. Other islands, such as O'ahu (Hawaii) never fully shut (even though access was strongly restricted), as by Borgnino (2020, p. 95) «Even nowadays, when people are invited not to visit the island to prevent the spread of COVID-19, hundreds of tourists visit O'ahu looking for the 'aloha experience', beautiful sunny beaches, warming local culture, perfumed flowered welcome garlands and crystal-clear waters».

This was also the period when some islands, by temporarily fortifying their borders and/or through mass vaccination, sought to become 'COVID-free islands'. In certain cases – such as Tonga in Polynesia – this was a matter of survival; in others, it was a strategy to prepare for the upcoming tourist season, as seen on many Greek and Italian islands¹. As stated by the Greek Deputy Minister of Health «We have so many smaller isles [...] Precisely because they're so difficult to get supplies to, we decided to vaccinate entire populations in one go with the aim that when they begin receiving tourists, permanent residents are fully vaccinated and protected» (Smith, 2021). At the same time, in certain Greek islands (such as Lesvos) the government implemented differential regimes of post-covid mobility. Indeed, refugees were forced to a longer confinement than any other person staying in Greece in the existing inhumane camps (Di Matteo and Daminelli, 2023). (Im)mobilities are thus variously deployed, allowed and forbidden according to a number of factors, regulated according to political decisions and goals.

¹ Here, we could argue that for many small islands and their inhabitants the possibility of working during the high tourist season was a matter of survival as well.

Nowadays, although the pandemic may seem distant, we find ourselves navigating a new era of interconnected crises. Climate change threatens human and non-human life alike on both islands and mainlands, while war and violence, including genocide, encroach upon the shores of the Mediterranean and beyond. Rather than dismantling barriers, artificial islands are constructed to segregate those deemed unworthy of residing in our democratic Europe. Global relations and connections are primarily harnessed to fuel a capitalist economy, benefiting the few at the expense of the many.

In this mobile world – where weapons travel freely and even a global crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic only partially and temporarily halted us – we cannot risk equating mobility straightforwardly with ‘freedom’. Therefore, while embracing the fertile possibilities opened by the spatial and mobility turn, it cannot be ignored that connectivities, space-time compression, and (im)mobilities can produce geographies of exclusion, disconnection, inequality, and forced (im)mobility (Massey, 1991).

Being fully immersed in the logics of globalization, islands and archipelagic thinking are not exempt from the risk of a romanticisation of mobility and connectivity. According to Federica Cavallo, an island is always the concrete incarnation of one possibility among many, and the concept of islandness itself is always relative and plural and depends on the historical and anthropogeographical characteristics as much as on the physical ones. Nonetheless, the relations with what is external to the island is important to the definition of the island identity, as: «a complex play of exchanges, material and immaterial flows mould it» (Cavallo, 2013, p. 183). Islands – with their rich, layered histories and multifaceted contemporary realities – emerge as distinctive yet deeply entangled products of global processes. They not only mirror the world but also condense its contradictions, serving as sites where global dynamics are (in)visibilised and, sometimes, reimaged.

Amid ongoing social, economic, and environmental transformations, islands offer a vantage point from which to examine the interplay between mobility and immobility – forces that shape everyday life, past, present, and future. This volume seeks to explore how these dynamics unfold across island contexts and invites contributors to reflect on the following questions: how do islands embody historical and contemporary landscapes of

mobility, encounter, dwelling, displacement, and contradiction? How might these dimensions inform our understanding of the future of islands and their (temporary or long-term) inhabitants? And what roles do time and space play in shaping these processes?

Islands have long functioned as spaces of exclusion and marginalization: sites of confinement for those – people or things – deemed ‘disposable’ or ‘dangerous’, whether as prisons, quarantine stations, zones of isolation or landfills. Simultaneously, histories of colonialism, imperialism, and militarization have positioned islands as crucial geopolitical and geo-economic nodes. Yet, beyond these histories of control and exploitation, islands and the sea surrounding them have also been vibrant spaces of exchange, commerce, and creativity, and in the contemporary era, they have become iconic destinations within global tourism circuits.

What can these diverse trajectories and populations reveal about island life and the broader dynamics of human (im)mobility? Conversely, how might islands themselves illuminate the mobilities and immobilities of non-human actors – of materials, infrastructures, stories, and ecosystems?

Human and non-human bodies, objects, knowledge, and infrastructures are integral to the making and remaking of islands. At the same time, the ways islands are inhabited, utilized, and transformed continually reshape what – and who – can traverse them. This book thus invites readers to consider islands not as static or peripheral spaces, but as dynamic environments where mobility, connection, and transformation are constantly negotiated. Moreover, drawing on the argument that islands must be studied ‘on their own terms’ (McCall, 1994; Depraetere, 2008; Baldacchino, 2008), this volume embraces the idea that «agency serves as a counterweight to vulnerability» (Malatesta and Gallia, 2026, p. 122) and follows what Malatesta and Gallia (2026) demonstrated about the importance of adopting place-sensitive perspectives in the analysis of small island geographies, emphasizing the proactive role of island communities in defining their own futures amid intersecting economic constraints, environmental issues, and governance challenges. In this sense, Cavallo and Visentin (2021) speak of the «right to the island as a public space [...] usually lived, claimed or conquered from a local or nissological matrix» (p. 213).

The content of the volume

This edited volume moves predominantly within the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea, which, as stated in the preface of the first edition of *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II: Volume I* by F. Braudel (1995):

is not even a single sea, it is a complex of seas; and these seas are broken up by islands, interrupted by peninsulas, ringed by intricate coastlines. Its life is linked to the land, its poetry more than half-rural, its sailors may turn peasant with the seasons; it is the sea of vineyards and olive trees just as much as the sea of the long-oared galleys and the roundships of merchants and its history can no more be separated from that of the lands surrounding it than the clay can be separated from the hands of the potter who shapes it.

The Mediterranean islands – their stories and their lives – are therefore as deeply entangled with the surrounding sea as they are with other islands and the mainlands that enclose it. The contributions that follow clearly delineate the Mediterranean’s aquapelago: «an assemblage of the marine and land spaces of a group of islands and their adjacent waters» (Hayward, 2012, p. 5), revealing connections that extend even beyond its coastal borders. This is evident, for instance, in Gallia’s work on the fishermen of Ponza and their mobile knowledge. This is evident, for instance, in Gallia’s work on the fishermen of Ponza and their mobile knowledge. Bonardi’s reflections on the ‘garbage islands’ bring us beyond the Mediterranean, as do Ruggieri’s engagement with climate change literature on Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in the Caribbean, Pacific, and Indian Ocean regions and Di Matteo’s analysis of migrant trajectories and the global use of ships and islands as devices of control.

Together, these contributions reinforce the idea that islands are not merely a backdrop or a container but rather a construct grounded in dynamically intertwined spatial relations (Pugh, 2018) – places of «cross-currents and connections» (Stratford *et al.*, 2011, p. 124) or, in Baldacchino’s (2007) words, where the dialectics between «openness and closure» and «paradise and prison» are constantly played out (p. 5). Indeed, «the geographies of mobilities are inseparable from particular materialities, whether of transport infrastructures, passports, human bodies, border fences, or

walking boots. What is more, when one travels, one does not simply travel across the landscape. Mobilities rework, shape, animate, and perform places and landscapes» (Merriman, 2009, p. 135).

The contributions, moving across different historical periods, disciplinary perspectives, and methodological approaches, collectively question the static imaginaries of insularity, revealing instead archipelagic networks of connection, circulation, and control.

Arturo Gallia opens the volume with a *longue-durée* reconstruction of the fishing community of Ponza, offering a socio-ecological history that destabilizes the view of islands as isolated ecosystems. By tracing how Ponza's fishermen expanded their activities across the Tyrrhenian through the creation of seasonal and later permanent outposts, Gallia illustrates the formation of a maritime 'archipelago' of mobility. The chapter not only documents the community's economic strategies and environmental adaptations between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries but also highlights the enduring imprint of this seaborne history on local identities and landscapes.

Building on contemporary concerns, Stefano Malatesta turns to the politics and temporalities of development in Italian small islands. Situating recent European and national policy frameworks that promote infrastructural connectivity, tourism, and circular economies, Malatesta critiques their limited attention to the lived rhythms of island life. Drawing inspiration from Lefebvre's theories of temporality and through fieldwork in the Aeolian archipelago, the essay proposes to rethink insular futures through an attentiveness to social time, everyday practices, and alternative forms of island *politics*.

The question of adaptation and (im)mobility under climate change is addressed by Beatrice Ruggieri, who situates Mediterranean Small Islands within global debates on climate-induced mobility. Reviewing lessons from other small island and SIDS contexts, Ruggieri underscores both the vulnerabilities and the policy blind spots that characterize MIS, calling for a more geographically inclusive approach to climate (im)mobility. The chapter identifies the Mediterranean as a critical yet underexplored arena for examining how environmental transformations shape, constrain, or reconfigure human mobility and adaptation.

In a conceptual and empirically rich intervention, Luca Bonardi ex-

plores the composite and often paradoxical relationship between islands and waste. Moving beyond conventional discussions of insular waste management, the chapter proposes a taxonomy of cases where islands – both literal and metaphorical – become sites for the deposition, containment, or symbolic representation of waste. Through examples of micro-islands and artificially created landmasses, Bonardi illuminates the physical, historical, and imaginative overlaps that bind insularity to processes of disposal and exclusion.

Several contributions turn to the political and humanitarian dimensions of contemporary Mediterranean border regimes. Giovanna Di Matteo analyses islands and ships as twin instruments of confinement within the EU's border apparatus. Focusing on the use of quarantine ships during the COVID-19 pandemic, the chapter explores their material and metaphorical convergences as bounded spaces of isolation, movement, and control. By tracing the overlapping spatial logics of islands and vessels, Di Matteo reveals how these infrastructures operate as mobile extensions of the border, reinforcing broader systems of exclusion and bio-political governance.

Complementing this, Alice Dalmasso, Luca Daminelli, Davide Marchesi, Arianna Tozzi Paviotti reconsider the island of Lesbos as a site of multiple and shifting encounters. While widely known for its role in the so-called 'European reception crisis', Lesbos has long been traversed by diverse flows of people and narratives. Through ethnographic observation and narrative analysis, the authors interrogate how different actors – refugees, volunteers, researchers, and locals – perceive and inhabit the island, revealing the coexistence and tensions of overlapping imaginaries of hospitality, crisis, and belonging.

The carceral dimension of Mediterranean insularity is further examined by Marco Nocente, who reconstructs the intertwined histories of Capraia and Asinara as spaces of punishment, deportation, and exclusion. Employing the lens of carceral geography, the chapter situates these islands within broader 'carceral archipelagos' shaped by colonial, military, and nation-building logics. Nocente demonstrates how such islands functioned as laboratories for experimenting with territorial control and state sovereignty, while also tracing their later transformations and reuses.

Finally, Francesca Golletti offers an ethnographically grounded ac-

count of the Kerkennah archipelago in Tunisia, foregrounding its position at the crossroads of ecology, borders, and migration. Through the lens of everyday practices and ecological relations – notably those linking inhabitants with the date palm – Golletti reflects on how border externalization and extractive economies reshape life in the islands. The chapter reframes Kerkennah as part of a ‘global archipelago’, oscillating between peripheralization and political centrality, and as a vantage point from which to re-think responsibility and interdependence in the Mediterranean.

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On the origin of the volume and acknowledgments

This volume originates from a symposium on islands and mobility held in 2024 at the University of Cambridge. However, its intellectual and affective genesis lies further in the past, in the classrooms of the former Venice slaughterhouse – the current San Giobbe Campus. It was there that I encountered Professor Federica Letizia Cavallo and her book, *Isole al bivio. Minorca tra balearizzazione e valore territoriale* (roughly translated as *Islands at Crossroads: Menorca between Balearicisation and Territorial Value*). This volume is dedicated to her cherished memory. Federica was an invaluable mentor to whom I owe my greatest thanks, for opening my ‘mountaineer’ eyes to the fascinating world of islands I was fortunate to delve into. She left us far too early, but the work she leaves behind is a crucial legacy for Mediterranean island studies.

Last year in Cambridge, we had the chance to honour this legacy. The symposium, already titled *Islands as crossroads: reimagining mobilities in the Mediterranean* was part of the CIRN Intesa Sanpaolo Visiting Fellowship. It provided an opportunity for discussion and exchange with researchers from different disciplines who engaged in dialogue on the themes central to this volume. The book aims to revisit and expand on some of the contributions gathered at that event, while also opening up to other voices and points of view.

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throughout this process. I am particularly honoured to have served as the editor of this inaugural issue, which marks the beginning of what I hope will be a vibrant and enduring series.