FERRIES, CONNECTIVITY AND MARITIME GEOGRAPHIES OF THE MIND

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ABSTRACT: In this article I consider the relationship between the dynamics of connectivity and attitudes to ferry travel using a brief comparison between experiences drawn from a large island example (Vancouver Island) and through a small islands lens (Ha'ano Island in the Ha'apai group of the Kingdom of Tonga). These exemplars are drawn from my personal experience of these geographies; the analysis is textured and contextualised in a reflective manner, as I consider the affects (i.e., inspirational impact) of these experiences on my intellectual growth and scholarly development. For the communities of small islands, ferries enable fundamental relations essential to the health of those communities; for people on large islands, ferries, while still essential, remind us that we are dependent on external relations – islands in fact – in ways that quotidian experiences may not. Here, I suggest, may lie a crucial insight in conceptualising an ontological difference (maybe a key difference) between the "geographies of mind" of residents of small islands and large ones. I suggest these geographies can inspire radically different perspectives, and that this is an ontological difference derived from small island experience with the marine and the other terrestrial spaces that make up the ecological histories of small island communities.

KEYWORDS: Island ontologies; ferry travel; community sustainability.

Introduction: I am an I(i)slander – I think.

I think I think like an islander, though I am often unsure of all that might mean. I have lived about half of my now 6+ decades on one island or another. I grew up on Vancouver Island – or 'The Island' as it is widely known in British Columbia – and frequently return to visit my natal family (all of whom still reside there, as if trapped there, goes the common jest, by the forcefield that surrounds the Island); I conducted almost two years of research on Ha'ano Island in the Ha'apai region of the Kingdom and Tonga in the 1990s and I have been privileged to live and work in Australia for several of the last 15 years.

I have certainly spent some time contemplating what is means to live on an island since moving to the city of Victoria on Vancouver Island as an adolescent. Maybe more importantly, experiences, insights, and attitudes garnered from one island have necessarily textured those that have taken place in the others; comparisons between life on a big island ('The Island') and living on a very small island (Ha'ano Island) have been particularly impactful. I am aware that the designations of island as either small or large has been a

contentious topic in Island Studies,[1] but in what follows I accept the characterisation produced by Falkland (1991) that defines small islands as those whose area "is not greater than 2,000 km^2 or where the width is not greater than 10 km" and "very small" islands as having an area "not greater than 100km^2 or a width not greater than 3km" (Falkland, 1991, 1).

As Sutton (2020, p.11) suggests, in the quotation that opens the Introduction to this issue:

> *If remembering, feeling, decision-making and other "psychological" processes are by nature animated or embodied processes, then the geography of embodiment also includes a geography of mind. And if, further, such cognitive and affective processes are distributed and ecological processes, in that they sometimes spread across brain, body, and world, then human minds are partly geographical or environmental in nature.*

My mind, and my approach to Island Studies have been profoundly shaped by my experiences on Vancouver Island as teenager and young adult, and the time living in the small island Pacific as a researcher and scholar. My understandings of the dynamics of connectivity (which I take to be embedded in the constitution of Islandness itself) took place as the unexamined assumptions and habits of mind of my youth have been rendered transparent by a lens provided – that is inspired – by my friends and neighbours on Ha'ano Island. This essay is a rather speculative tracing of my intellectual journey from coming to understand the small island (relational) thinking, to a more recent epiphany about what might be characterised as large Island thinking, and the ontological distinction between the two. Indeed, thinking through these dynamics for this essay has been a revelation, and resolved a long standing and nagging question about my own changing attitudes to ferries.

Ferries large and small

Large.

I want to start this discussion with some reflections on ferries, by which I mean a watercraft whose function is, at least some of the time, connecting islanders to others by means of transporting the islanders themselves. That is, boats that take islanders to and from the islands they live, and to and from the socio-political entities that they are, in some manner, connected to and embedded within. As one of the key mediators between islands/islanders and the geographies they inhabit, the mobilities that ferries shape can come to define the tenor of those relationships (see, for example, the Cresswell 2011 and 2012; Vannini, 2011, and especially, 2012); indeed, we understand pretty well in Island Studies that being able to get on and off islands (i.e. their levels of connectivity) is intrinsic to being able to live on an island over the *longue durée* (Irwin, 1992; Kirch, 2000). For many island communities this is in turn directly related to ferry service, with tenuous or undependable ferry services among the main stressors to the sustainability of island communities, and the disruption of such connections, a veritable death knell for a small island.

[1] Not least in the development of this journal, which initially sought a consensual definition of small islands in consultation with established Island Studies academics but abandoned any definitive characterisation due to an inability to resolve the issue and has proceeded pragmatically, with Greenland, for instance, considered as a (de facto) 'small island' due to its low population.

I have an ambivalent attitude to ferries – at age 10 while traveling to visit my grandmother I thought the Tsawwassen (Vancouver) to Schwartz Bay (Vancouver Island) ferries were magical platforms from which whales were occasionally sighted and on which 'pirate pak' meals could be had; the almost two-hour journey flew by. Over fifty years later, ferries and pirate paks (Figures 1 & 2) look very much as I recall from my childhood, though they excite me less now than in the past.



Figure 1 - Modern Coastal Class Ferry on the BC Coast (Wikimedia Commons).[2]



Figure 2 - A contemporary pirate pak (authors' photo, 2026).

As a jaded teenager, the ferry was a tolerable nuisance so long as the arcade games worked and the one, two, or three sailing wait typical in tourist season (Figure 3) was not involved.

[2] Photo by Kam Abbott - Cropped from File:Ferry MV Coastal Celebration arrival at Departure Bay.jpg, CC BY 2.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=11548060

Later, when my own children rushed aboard for the pirate pak and play area, I was grateful for the distractions; now, having made the journey maybe a hundred times, I have reverted to being mostly impatient, vaguely annoyed, and sometimes even petulant should I get stuck on the lower truck deck that requires I leave my car rather than try to get a nap in it.



Figure 3 - Waiting to load onto the *Coastal Celebration* at Schwartz Bay, Vancouver Island (author's photo, 2026).

When a young man working as an arborist in and around the southern tip of Vancouver Island, I was actively grateful for the size of the ferries on that route (really big that is), especially as opposed to the often much smaller "ferries" we occasionally used to travel to the smaller islands adjacent to the Island for work. These boats, sometimes no bigger than a four-seat runabout, terrified me far more than the tree topping and dangerous tree removals we were travelling to do. Although I lived on the Island, it's a big one, I didn't travel off it all that much, and my sea skills were seriously lacking. The frequent all-night drives from Victoria up to the north notwithstanding, my awareness of the place was terrestrial, not marine (i.e. continental not archipelagic *al la* Glissant 1990; cf. Hau'ofa 1993).

Small

My experience of the Tongan Islands was radically different. Arriving in 1991 to begin my PhD research, my stay there marked the beginning of a profound transition to a maritime sensibility. This started when colleagues from the then Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry kindly ferried us[3] from their Ha'apai base in the regional capital of Pangai to our new home in the village of Ha'ano on the island of the same name. From that point forward any movement beyond the 4 sq.km. of Ha'ano Island (aka Kauvai; kau = people, water= vai – something like "people over/of the water") required a boat.

[3] Throughout most of my time in Tonga I resided with my then partner (Heather Young-Leslie) and our infant daughter.

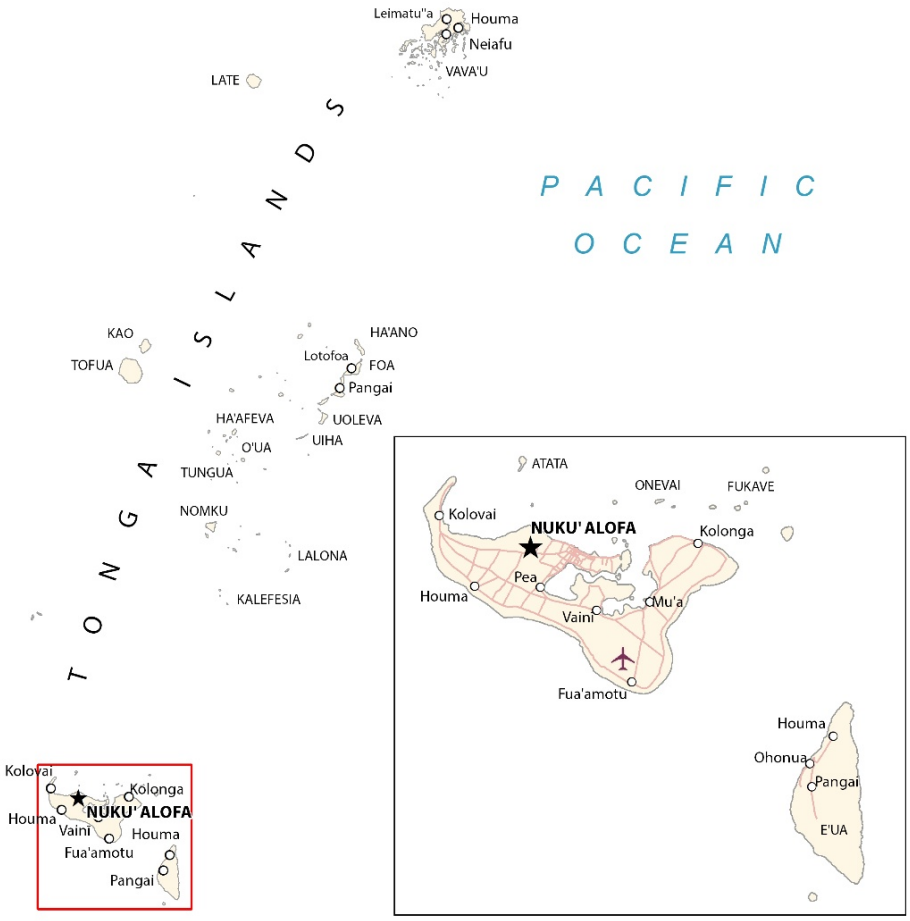

Figure 4 - Map of Tonga (GISGeography, 2015).[4]

I soon became quite accustom to rising before dawn to hop aboard one of the village's several small wooden 'whale boats' to the dock at Lotofoa village on Foa Island. From there it is a distance of about 10 km by vehicle to Pangai. These wood boats were built in Ha'apai and ranged between 7 and 9 metres long, with a planked floor and small cabin (Figure 4), and were powered by a 15-35 horse power outboard motor. Used for deep sea fishing as well as net fishing and transportation, when in the calmer waters of the lee side of the archipelago the boats could transport as many as a dozen people and their cargo, albeit with very little freeboard.

[4] Open Source Remote Sensing Software Packages, https://gisgeography.com/open-source-remote-sensing-software-packages/ (accessed July 30 2026).



Figure 4 - Building a boat, Muitoa Village, Ha/ano Island, 1992 (author's photo).

The journey from Ha'ano village to Lotofoa was, in most (though not all) circumstances unremarkable because of the wind and weather patterns, especially since gas powered engines had replaced earlier sailing craft. Often referred to as "water-taxis" in guidebooks (Figure 5), a small fee might be charged, especially to tourists seeking to visit Ha'ano Island. On more than one occasion we hosted such visitors who having caught a boat late in the day (i.e. a boat returning to Kauvai), got stuck on island for the evening. The boats and the vehicle transport into Pangai were not particularly reliable, and while sometimes on something resembling a schedule, making the journey required some luck, some knowledge, and good social relationships to work well. Tongan travellers generally took disruptions in stride (sometimes quite literally, by walking the 10 kms to Pangai) and with equanimity, and as the months passed, so did I.

That I had developed the patience of an islander became apparent to me through an incident one day at the landing in Lotofoa. By some good fortune we had connected with an American visitor who was looking to contract the weaving of funerary baskets for a project in Hawai'i[5] and, in turn, connected her to weavers on Kauvai. I travelled with our American friend as she made her way homeward with the last of the contracted weavings. A boat left Ha'ano village in good time that morning but, for some reason I no longer recall, there were no vehicles immediately available to get her and the baskets to Pangai for transshipment onward. What I recall most vividly though, was how angry this colleague became, and how my own reaction was one of calm resignation to the wait (open-ended as it was). I was actually quite surprised by the outburst, and for over 30 years I have pondered the event.

[5] These were to be used to move the remains of people disinterred by a construction project in Hawaii. This required baskets (called *ka'ai*) that were no longer produced in Hawai'i, so the contractor came to where the weavers were; the weavers of Ha'ano Island were easily able to create the baskets in the shapes required.



Figure 5 - Ferry from Ha'ano Village to Lotofoa Village, Ha'apai, Tonga – 1992 (photo by H. Young Leslie).

To be clear, I am not a particularly patient person, and I have already indicated that as a Vancouver Islander I have often chaffed at the transportation delays that frequently plague connections to the mainland. The incident triggered some deep thinking on my part about how I had adopted some of the Ha'apai Islanders attitudes about managing their connections (both geographical and sociological, as for certain the two are linked). Anger in this situation was not helpful, as outward signs of anger would a) be serious breach of decorum b) not speed up the arrival of transport and c) potentially damage the good will of those from whom one might seek assistance in future. This was an insight very much in line with the phenomena I was noting in my research and resonates highly with the basic conclusions of the PhD thesis and subsequent monograph (Evans 2001).

Islands small and large.

Ha'ano, Ha'apai, Tonga, the world.

I had arrived in Tonga and Ha'ano with the intention of focusing on the multi-facetted elements associated with the production of commodities in the outer islands. The basic understanding of such processes at the time was that such activity was to a greater of lesser extent, transformative of local social relations, and that processes at the 'periphery' were necessarily dependent on market forces controlled elsewhere. Contrary to that assumption, I found that in the early 1990s:

> *Market-oriented production and labour migration provide important material inputs in the village economy, but the way that material, money, and people flow into and out of the village is governed as much by the practice of the traditional gift exchange system as it is by global or regional markets. In both*

> *material and ideological terms, the ramifications of the gift economy on the lives of villagers are direct, immediate, and ubiquitous; the World System and the demands of commodity markets are, in the first instance at least, peripheral… Market structures have relatively little direct impact on the relationships between people within the village, and relatively little direct effect on the relationships between people located in the village and their kin living elsewhere in Tonga, or elsewhere in the world.*
>
> *Although gifts, not commodities, form the basis of exchange relationships between people, changes in the structure of Tonga's economy have transformed the context, meaning, and results of the gifts emanating from and filtering back to Ha'ano Island…. Tongan villagers are linked to the World System and capitalist development by their commitment to, and use of, a uniquely Tongan gift exchange system …. This commitment motivates and shapes the decisions villagers make about how and when they participate in the wider economy. The most telling means of integration into the regional economy today is through migration, but the action of migration and the values and intentions expressed in the decision to migrate are, once again, specifically Tongan.* (Evans, 2001, pp 4-5)

My PhD research established definitively that kin networks centered in Ha'apai provided robust pathways for people and resources flowing through a vast sociological network stretching across the Pacific in both directions. It is a highly empirical analysis of the fundamental intersections of geography and sociality documenting the development of the contemporary Tongan transnational system. As discussed in this volume's introduction, the 1990s was a time when thinking about small islands in the Pacific as isolates, isolated, or insular was under critical analysis, with growing attention to connectivity and long-term connection, and my dissertation and subsequent monograph contributed to that conversation. It also contributed to conversations that fundamentally critiqued approaches to sustainability that were circling around the notion of self-reliance in context of the post-colonial Pacific (see in particular Bertram and Walters, 1985).

My doctoral work subsequently inspired a collaboratively edited special issue of *Pacific Studies* entitled 'Sustainability in the Small Island States of the Pacific' (Stevens and Evans 1999) that aimed to open up a critical dialogue around the relationship between sustainability and self-reliance. My contribution (Evans 1999), 'Is Tonga's MIRAB economy sustainable? A view from the village and a view without it,' reiterates the centrality of the social relations that maintain affective/effective (pun intended) transnational ties. These insights were garnered from what people were actually doing, and long conversations with friends and neighbours in which they patiently explained why they were doing what they were doing in both cultural and practical terms. Many people overtly expressed this interplay between gifts and the maintenance of sociality, and their efforts to ensure access to resources meditated through non-commodified relationships. I was inspired then, by the histories and geographies of mind and practices that shaped these transnational systems.

Reflecting back on the Lotofoa incident while preparing this article, while I don't honestly recall the connection between the actual incident and the thesis, the zeitgeists were parallel. The incident in Lotofoa was just one, albeit highly interpretive and reflective, element of the empirical and ethnographic evidence that inspired my contribution to the emerging narrative at the time. While the original work did not engage assemblage theory, it clearly

resonates with the now extensive work on connectivity expressed through the concepts of archipelagos and aquapelagos (e.g. Stratford et al. 2011 and Hayward, 2012a, 2012b), and I have been quite open to incorporating assemblage theory into my thinking about maritime geographies more generally (see for example Evans and Harris, 2018)I do very much remember that I was emotionally cognisant of the transformation of my own relationship to ferries and transportation links, and my appreciation for the complexities of "mobilities". It was a moment of keen self-awareness and growth, and that growth directly connected to my development as an anthropologist and a person. Reflecting back has also triggered a new insight on the conundrum that has puzzled me for the many years I lived on Vancouver Island, and even more so over the last plus two decades, when I have lived just east of the Island in the Interior of British Columbia. That is - why is it so hard for Vancouver Islanders to get off-island in spite of having the great big ferries that they could use to do so?

In my experience, most long-term Vancouver Island residents do, in fact, find the ferry vaguely irritating at best. When I scoped out the literature by way of attempting to verify that my observation is accurate, I was unable to do so. Nonetheless I make this claim – reinforced just recently when speaking with a colleague who had himself lived a decade in Victoria about this point; I didn't even get to some of the nuance I've touched on here before he stated with all the confidence I am claiming, that Victoria people "hate the ferry". In my experience people on southern Vancouver Island not only "hate" the ferry, they are generally certain that other people on southern Vancouver Island "hate" the ferry too (so and so's Uncle Jim notwithstanding); not coincidentally I see no contra-indication (and some resonate materials – see below) for this claim in the only extensive substantive study (i.e. Vannini, 2012).

The BC Coast.

In 1987 I left Vancouver Island to attend graduate school at McMaster University in Hamilton Ontario. I left, and indeed I have stayed away, because I was not willing to bear the costs of the "sunshine tax".[6] I felt that far too many of my contemporaries made compromises in careers and expectations because they were unwilling to leave the island, and made a conscious decision not to follow suit. As a place I grew up, but have not lived since 1987, one might expect that the Island might have faded in significance for me, but it hasn't. I am the only member of natal family to escape the Island so far, and as my youngest sibling nears 60 it now seems almost certain that this is permanent. I have frequently travelled back to the Island over the years, and since moving to the Okanagan Valley (a mere 8-10 hour drive/ferry trip away), my family and I make that journey two or three times a year. Connecting with family via travel in the other direction – from the Island to the Okanagan - is considerably less frequent. In fact, I'd judge that by Ha'apai standards, there is a considerable reluctance to travel off the Island.

Vannini, in his excellent summary of the role of ferries for isolated coastal communities and small islands on the BC Coast in his 2012 monograph *Ferry Tales* and 2011 article length summary notes:

> *Islanders and coasters dwell in places where ferry mobility is constantly on the foreground of everyday life relationships – never too far from sensory*

[6] A colloquial expression for the higher cost of living on Vancouver Island and the continental coast that people tolerate in order to live in a temperate climate.

> *awareness, from being a preoccupation, a subject of political dispute, or a topic for common talk. The very modern history of these ferry dependent communities is deeply entrenched in the history of marine mobility, and the biographies of islanders and coasters point to the important role that separation and disconnection from 'the mainland' has played in their life decisions.* (2011, p. 67)

While eschewing simple stories of isolation and insularity, he nonetheless describes complex ones in which the dynamics of maritime (im)mobilities (ferries that is) play into relations through which islanders make themselves. He writes of islanders (and rural / coastal) peoples, that while the complex dynamics that generate varied experiences of ferry travel and relations between (people in) places large and small are significant, we must remain cognisant of the ways islanders and others "perform mobilities and relative immobilities in idiosyncratic ways in an attempt to cling on to, and thus produce, a place-specific way of life." (2012, p. 268).

The intense sociality that Vannini describes in his ethnography of ferry travel to/from island and coastal communities partly makes my point. For small communities, connection is fundamentally social – in practice/performance as well as consequence – and from his ethnography one gets a sense of celebration, not resentment. Vannini does not to ignore the problems and challenges that accompany a system that is run from Victoria but serves these small island/coastal communities, or the power dynamics at play, but it is clear that people's thinking about the ferries is sophisticated and engaged – certainly the phrase "vaguely irritated" would not be an appropriate descriptor. In the most general terms Vannini describes a "love/hate" relationship for the ferry on the party of ferry users in the small communities:

> *Living on real islands or defacto islands (such as coastal communities only accessible by boat) presents residents and visitors alike with unique constraints and possibilities … Ferry boats play a key role both in symbolizing and in actually making possible such insulation and isolation—and this is one of the reasons why so many people who depend on them say they have a "love/hate relationship" with them.* (Vannini, 2012, p. 71).

Southern Vancouver Island

When it comes to Vancouver Island, with its main urban centres and robust ferry connections, we might expect that the tensions and frustrations generated out of the more tenuous ferry linkages that characterise small islands (or coastal communities) will be much less, and thus rather less of a driver of the "multitude of practices, representations, and politics that originate conditions of insulation and isolation … two opposite sides of the same coin, as it were, the coin of islandness" (Vannini, 2012, p. 266) that he describes for the smaller islands off the Island. In this formulation, insularity is the positive attribute of safe, familiar, and accommodating social field; isolation negative attributes of islandness arising from their (experience of) marginalisation.

Getting on and off Vancouver Island is relatively easy, and indeed living in the urban centres on the Island is also easy as a result. Transportation and supply chains' links are robust, and disruptions minor; whatever additional costs the maritime segments of these chains generate are experienced whether one stays (and pays higher prices) or goes (and pays to do

so). One need not ever leave the Island, and for most intents and purposes the Island is in fact rather "continental" in Glissant's sense (1997), and thus somewhat different than Vannini's small and defacto islands in that the Island can be experienced as insular without being isolating. Indeed, Vannini notes that for him (and I agree) "Vancouver Island doesn't feel like an Island" (2012, p. 126).

Put another way, the island is the thing – that is it is ontologically closed in on itself – a thing in-in-itself, contemplatable as an object of study or a fully self-sustaining and singular entity. For the residents of Vancouver Island (most especially the southern urban dwellers) there is a very real sense in which the Island is all they need, and that ferry ride irritates because it reminds them that they do, indeed, live on an island, which comes with the occasional inconvenience of having to take a ferry to leave it.

This is a radically different situation to that faced by the inhabitants of the small islands and coastal communities that dominate Vannini's *Ferry Tales*. His account of ferry mobilities touches on the differences in the tenor of the interactions aboard boats to and from small places and those between Vancouver and the Island (2012, pp. 46-47). In one rather telling vignette he notes that on one small ferry journey he took, only one of 35 vehicle passengers stayed in their vehicle. In my experience (which is extensive), on the Vancouver Island – mainland routes many people (primarily residents I reckon) stay in their vehicles, avoiding any danger of the sociality typical of the smaller routes.

For residents of the outer islands of Tonga, inter-island mobility is highly valued and consciously maintained. Ferries are good things, vital things, and the things that bring their islands into relationship with others – into networks and webs of connectivity over water. In other words, there are ontological consequences here that actually render islands as more than that – that is, as archipelagos/aquapelagos – and as parts of interconnected ecologies/economies, histories, and sociologies that only make sense (i.e. can sustain communities) if you can cross over the sea and off the island. My implicit claim then is that small island ontologies are, actually, inherently much more expansive than large island or continental ones.

In 1992 I interviewed a *Motu'a Tauhi Fonua* (an old person responsible for caring for the land/island/place). Recounting a visit from the first king of Tonga and an associated place name he shared:

> George: *I used that landing to look down on the whole area of Ha'ano, and he recognized that it is a small island, and he said that the name for the place is* Ha'ano Si'i Fakalahi ki he Lotu mo e Ako. *That means Ha'ano is not a big island, but it can be enlarged by religion and education (literally small Ha'ano will be enlarged by Church and Education)* — Semisi Valeli Vake, January 1992.

Exactly So.

Conclusion: Exactly so.

While I contemplated this article, I spent some time surveying the literature on abandoned/evacuated islands – that is places that ferries no longer serve, where transportation links have become so attenuated, they have broken. While it seems clear that the processes of attenuation are complex, and processes of abandonment and degradation

of transportation links (whatever their causes) are iterative, it is likely there are several paths to island depopulation and desertion. Nonetheless it seems clear that in the loss of ferry service – that is to say when a small island is actually isolated – it is simply a matter of time before it is abandoned.[7] The residents of Ha'ano know this very well, as I suspect, do other inhabitants of the small islands of the Pacific and elsewhere.

Ferry travel may not be the only form of mobility that matters here, but ferries are crucial to the dynamic. The (my) comparison between the experience of ferries for inhabitants of Vancouver Island and the islands of Ha'apai suggests that there is an ontological shift towards relational thinking demanded of the latter, for whom ferries are a matter of existential import. Vancouver Island is, in common-sense terms, a large Island, and the while supply chains that link it to essential services and goods still travel over water but the immediate consequences are less apparent. Nonetheless, maritime mobilities matter in a much more immediate, intense, and obvious way for Island communities whose sustainability is dependent on the vitality of their connections to the wider geographies maintained through effective ferry travel.

That there are differences between small and large islands, albeit mostly ones where they are to be distinguish the dynamics entailed in size and the degree isolation (i.e., distance to nearest populated landform) has been well described. However, whether one is observing the biogeographical dynamics of isolated island spaces (MacArthur and Wilson 1967), the challenges of small islands and small island states in the developing Pacific (e.g., Bertram 1985), or the opportunities and resilience of small island polities in leveraging their sovereignty to capture new resources (e.g., Baldacchino, 2006; McElroy, 2006), these all reduce to matters of degree and/or some relative accounting of difference. I hope it is obvious that I take small island ontologies to be *fundamentally* archipelagic/aquapelagic. This position was inspired by my experiences in Tonga and the urgency of maritime mobilities there, albeit framed in comparison to the very much larger and densely connected communities of southern Vancouver Island. Somewhat ironically, the larger island here is the correspondingly more insular one.

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[7] There is compelling evidence that the successful settlement of the Pacific required sophisticated mobility related technologies (boats, navigation skills, and social relationships), and that the limits of successful colonisation were precisely predicated on the ongoing ability to maintain maritime connections between new islands and earlier ones. Such are the vicissitudes of Pacific Island ecologies that only sociological inter-island connections could mediate short-term stressors and ensure long-term sustainability (see Irwin, 1992).

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