

*Petrified Bodies, Humanised Stone: Embodied Environmental History of the Goli otok (Barren Island) Political Prison*

*RCC Thematic Group: Unmaking and Remaking "Nature"*

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This project looks into islands of human incarceration. When it comes to islands, exceptionality *is* the rule. Each island is peculiar- with their own environmental traits, communities, cultures and behaviours. In a perpetual dual state of isolation and interconnectedness, islands embody contradictions as well as dense entanglements- of bodies, matter, narrative and meaning. Various scholars from Darwin to postmodern nissologists, have called for understanding of islands as laboratories of both environmental and societal processes. Echoing those voices, this project posits that prison islands in particular are indispensable for the study of environmental humanities. For they fuse together the notion of islands- as discrete corpuscles of environment, and the notion of carceral communities- as insular units of society.

The core of the project is a case study of Goli otok. This island in the Croatian Adriatic was uninhabited until 1949, when its limestone terrain was commandeered as a political prison for people accused of siding with Stalin in the Tito-Stalin dispute. Upon release, they brought disturbing memories back to the mainland: stories of extreme violence raging among the imprisoned in the quarries of the sun- scorched, wind- whipped, barren island. Their hard, resoundingly corporeal experience of forced 'political re-education' through 'socially beneficial labour' became a symbol of human suffering in the former Yugoslavia. As part of this 're-education' program, the inmates were forced to build their own prison out of the island's stone, and to afforest some of its hostile terrain, thus triggering the irreversible changes to the island's biophysical environment. Today, Goli otok and its abandoned, decaying prison complex (now surrounded by forest patches), are subject to contrasting forces. On the one hand, there is erasure and oblivion. On the other- attempts to memorialise the disturbing human experience. In between are the various ideas to commodify Goli otok and its past- from turning it into an epicurean resort, to branding 'dark' adventure tourism in the crumbling 'Croatian Alcatraz'.

Moving away from the anthropocentric approach, this project brings the stony island into view as a dynamic and responsive entity that crucially shaped (as much as it was shaped by) the bodies and the fates of its prisoners. Goli otok's metamorphosis- from an uninhabited rock to the 'notorious' prisonscape- was put in motion by the exuberant human presence during its relatively short prison era in the 20th century. This dynamic and relatively recent unfolding makes Goli otok an ideal sample for studying factors and processes of making, remaking, and unmaking 'nature'. As such, Goli otok is also a pertinent point of departure towards studying the other island- representatives of the global carceral archipelago, as laboratories of socio- environmental processes, and shapers of human experiences.