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Contesting Global Landscapes Theme Project

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### **Liquidities: Oceans, Islands, and New Enclosures in the Wake of Decolonization**

Once upon a time (in 1972), a casino owner and Las Vegas millionaire set out to establish his own sovereign city-state. Choosing a reef approximately 200 miles west of the island nation of Tonga, Michael Oliver hired an Australian dredging firm to pile sand atop the reef, thereby creating a small island upon which he could build a stone platform. Once the dredging was completed, Oliver planted a flag, declared the birth of the Republic of Minerva, and departed, leaving the new state unoccupied. The King of Tonga was not impressed. He assembled an army composed largely of convicts from the island's prison and, with his four-piece brass band also in tow, descended upon Minerva where he promptly removed the flag and 'deposed' Oliver.

The republic of Minerva is not the stuff of fairy tales (although it does have a certain grim quality: in the process of deposing Oliver, one prisoner apparently murdered another, creating the strange circumstance in which, as George Pendle noted, a state's murder rate exceeded the size of its population.) It is one example of many of efforts by modern-day filibusterers and libertarians to establish an independent, sovereign state where one can rule all one sees and keep all one earns. In most cases, such schemes have involved oceans and their micro-islands. Such spaces have long been fodder for the imagination: *Utopia*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Treasure Island*, and *Lord of the Flies* (among many others) have all used remote islands as means to stage arguments about the market, exchange, and society. The ocean too: think of Verne's Captain Nemo who finds in the ocean his escape from the tyranny of continents; and Ayn Rand names her capitalist paradise *Atlantis*, despite its location high in the Rocky Mountains. Yet the Republic of Minerva, and what comes in its wake, is not the stuff of fiction. In recent decades a number of very wealthy investors, many from Silicon Valley, have sought to bring such visions to fruition with attempts at sea-steading and the creation of floating labs. These efforts seem to suggest that the common wisdom regarding the ocean, powerfully articulated by Lord Byron in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* ("Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean--roll!/ Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain;/ Man marks the earth with ruin--his control/ stops with the shore..."), may soon be un-common.

My book project takes up the question of enclosure and the 'open' ocean. Does humankind's "control stop with the shore?" Can it mark planet Ocean? Have oceans—and ocean spaces—been subject to the kinds of territorial and proprietorial assertions (primitive accumulations) that characterize terra firme? If so, how? And by whom? How do we make sense of "a sea of islands," traversed and intermittently occupied by ocean-going native societies—a "nation spreading itself so far over the Vast ocean," as Capt. James Cook wrote of Oceania? How has humankind, in other words, lived or sought to move off-shore? And what political projects have promoted, accompanied, and/or resulted from such moves? My project addresses these questions by examining the place—literal and figurative—of oceans and islands in the rise of neoliberal (and, increasingly, libertarian or anarcho-capitalist) practice and thought, as well as in alternative and anarchist visions of the planet and the future.