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Critical reflexivity and decolonial methodology in island studies: Interrogating the scholar within

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Abstract: Although the field of island studies has from the start regarded itself as a defender of islands and islander interests, it is entangled in coloniality. This editorial focuses on issues of power, knowledge, and position. Who wields power in island studies? Who knows about islands? Where is island studies located, and how does it position itself? The paper discusses problems such as tokenism and forced inclusions, denial and circumscription of expertise, and onto-epistemological discrimination and hegemony within island studies. Ultimately, the paper advances the need for critical reflexivity and decolonial methodology within island studies, for pluralistic approaches to inclusivity and recognition of epistemic differences.

Keywords: critical reflexivity, decoloniality, decolonial methodology, epistemology, islands.

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Taking a stand in island studies

This is a paper about power, knowledge, and position. Who wields power in island studies? Who knows about islands? Where is the field located, and how do we position ourselves? The globalised scholarly community is increasingly subject to unrest both from the margins and at the centre, prompted by critiques of structural epistemic power at the intersections of the West/non-West, decolonisation/coloniality, academic elitism/marginalisation, appropriation/reciprocity. How does island studies relate to this? How can it rise to the challenge?

Before we can discuss alternatives, we must understand the problems confronting island studies. This paper discusses problems such as tokenism and forced inclusions, denial and circumscription of expertise, and onto-epistemological discrimination and hegemony. These relate to wider societal difficulties when it comes to the legitimisation and institutionalisation of the non-West within Western and Westernised networks and organisations. But they also relate to island studies in distinct ways.

As scholars within the field and members of the *Island Studies Journal* editorial board, we witness how epistemic dominance and invisibility continue to limit island studies' potential to serve as a mode of understanding and producing knowledge about islands.

The field of island studies is usually presented as seeking to understand and explain the multifaceted nature of islands and island life, culture, politics, economies, and environments. Yet 'understanding' can never exist on its own. It always stands somewhere, in some context. The co-production of understandings must be positioned within legacies of epistemic dispossession and discrimination that legitimise knowledge and expertise (Bhambra, 2007) based on politicised identities. Contemporary scholarship seems at odds with the very Modernity that has contributed to its formation, struggling with practices and approaches aimed at exiting Modernity's paradigms of "the West and the rest" (Hall, 1993) and the hegemonic masculinity that is constitutive of its normativity (Griffin, 2018). We follow feminist standpoint theory in advocating a socially situated subject of knowledge and in seeking to theorise methodology itself (Harding, 2004).

In the words of Robert W. Cox (1981, p. 128), "theory is always for someone and for some purpose." Cox was writing with reference to international relations, a discipline that has struggled to acknowledge its Western biases and that often seems to be "simply an abstraction of Western history" (Buzan, 2016, p. 156). In contrast, island studies has always recognised the subjectivity of theory. Island studies has staked its identity as a field on being research *for* islanders. Yet island studies has not been equally attentive to determining where it stands. As Godfrey Baldacchino (2008, p. 37) cautions, island studies research *for* islanders is frequently a matter of non-islanders taking it upon themselves to do research on islanders' behalf. And even island studies research *by* or *with* islanders inevitably reflects the interests and situations of the specific islanders in question (Grydehøj, 2018b).

It is easy to slip into uncritical generalisations about islanders/mainlanders, the West/non-West, the coloniser/colonised. Yet despite the limitations of binary oppositions, there are times at which such distinctions are not just convenient but also vital for understanding where research stands. In this paper, we situate these binaries in their historical contexts of epistemic dispossession and discrimination rather than suggesting that they define identity, expertise, and experience. We can only reject these binaries if we first critically acknowledge their presence and constitutive essence in much of today's struggle with inclusivity and representation. Problematic binaries do not need quick replacement, which is likely to reproduce the very onto-epistemological discrimination they seek to counteract; they require restitution of knowledge through exercises of reflexivity and positionality.

The Western and the Non-Western: Attempting to seize diversity

No binary is ahistorical. Western development was and is enhanced through the exploitation of resources and knowledges elsewhere. These histories of knowledge appropriation and dispossession are at the core of today's intellectual legacies in academia, from conventions to practice. Through these processes, 'discourse' emerges as platform for constructing 'the (Western) self' and 'the Other' (Hall, 1993). Decolonising the coproduction of academic knowledge departs from "something recovered after transformation rather than something that precedes it [...] It derives from positions created by solutions to problems, rather than the positions that constitute the problems" (Bhambra, 2007, p. 9). In its attempt to seize diversity, Western institutions have sought to deliver quick fixes, contributing to a representation of the past in the present that sustains a problematic relation to the politics of knowledge (Wolf, 1987; Hall, 1993).

Most academic fields and disciplines are implicated in racial, ethnic, and linguistic exclusions. In the process, the experiences of colonised and otherwise-excluded peoples are converted into academic capital within Western professional and financial frameworks (Tilley & Kalina, 2021). These frameworks have themselves been reproduced around the world. Islander 'activists' and 'stakeholders' become resources for exploitation by the neoliberal university (Pugh & Grove, 2017). Scholars are both producers and consumers within the Western academic machine. In the present paper, we do not seek to argue against Western and European philosophies and epistemes but instead question how we can begin moving beyond the monocentricity of dominant discourses and knowledge production. We question how we can critically construct new epistemic foundations that are constitutive of the existing pluriverse of philosophies, knowledges, and epistemologies. How can island studies acknowledge the legitimacy of other standpoints?

This intellectual project encounters difficulties from the start: It is problematic to discuss 'non-Western' voices, networks, and organisations. The very act of aligning with and publishing into the dominant research culture represents embeddedness in the "global professional elite" (Kapoor, 2004), with underrepresented voices being filtered through dominant epistemic and lexical frameworks. Unprivileged individuals and institutions are not straightforwardly victimised by these processes; they often (unknowingly) become perpetrators of the very systems they seek to destabilise, especially if they find themselves unable to earnestly engage with their positionings in the matrix of knowledge production. We must be wary of homogenising the non-West as a singular disadvantaged group (or indeed as a singular group of any sort). The non-West as a category contains immense epistemic and ontological differences and is also complicit in coloniality, a process that has made victims of us all. Re-entrenchments of the West/non-West binary risk manufacturing diversity as a homogenised counter-paradigm, with little relation to people's experiences and life journeys.

There is a need to move beyond the Western/non-Western dichotomy. But such a move must be preceded by recognition as to why it remains possible to speak of this dichotomy at all, as to why it might be that scholars and islanders from such diverse backgrounds as continental and archipelagic Asia, the Caribbean, the Arctic, Africa, the Indian Ocean, and Oceania might possess certain shared experiences within island studies. The only thing these scholars and islanders have in common is their inclusion in the highly problematic

‘non-Western’ category. Before this category can be dismantled, it must be rendered meaningless and unnecessary.

Knowledge, power, and the rest

While knowledge can be liberating and emancipatory, it can also be oppressive and intimidating. The impacts of knowledge are always coloured by who is saying what, when, and for what reason. Interrogation of or engagement in epistemic processes such as ‘decolonisation’ can appear merely cosmetic when not accompanied by more fundamental transformations in attitudes and being. ‘Decolonising’ cannot be separated from epistemic humility and the need to decentre, to stand apart from one’s own intellectual authority. How can we develop conceptual tools for exposing the social situatedness of knowledge production and the different realities that are produced and experienced?

Our intention is not to single out individual scholars for criticism. The problems confronting our scholarship are precisely systemic, not personal (Louie & Chung, 2021). We thus hope that, if some readers feel they or their methods are under attack, they will take it as an opportunity for reflexive interrogation of where their being and knowledge are situated in relation to the political structures they are critically addressing. The authors of this article have subjected their own approaches to self-criticism (Grydehøj et al, 2021; Nadarajah, 2021; 2007; Burgos Martinez, 2020; Grydehøj, 2018b).

Decolonising island studies is a task we must all undertake together. As Claire Galien (2020, p. 40) reminds us:

The decolonial approach does not restrict itself to a critique of the colonial episteme and world order. It entails a recognition of one’s own positionality as scholar, critic, and speaker, recognizes the necessity to decenter and pluralize knowledge formations, and finally offers alternative ways to conceptualize and experience the world. Thus, decoloniality is best described as a gesture that de-normalizes the normative, problematizes default positions, debunks the a-perspectival, destabilizes the structure, and as a program to rehabilitate epistemic formations that continue to be repressed under coloniality.

Island studies has sought to critically reflect upon its usefulness and pertinence as an emerging field and upon its determinations of valid knowledge. Who is visible, dominant, inevitable? Who is left out, diminished, dismissed? We come to understand that the starting point should not be the result of the knowledge production but instead the process of producing knowledge.

With this paper, we seek to interrogate how a critical reflexive encounter with the state of island studies can inform island studies scholars (however interdisciplinary) in the decolonising of island studies knowledge praxis and enable us to share our standpoints as equals. This decolonising praxis requires that we reframe our ways of researching, teaching, and working. The inclusion of accounts from Indigenous, subaltern, intersectional, and other marginalised discourses and the embrace of insights from multifaceted historical, traditional, and contemporary lifeworlds can destabilise our field’s narrowly Eurocentric discursive

foundations. We seek to address and reposition island studies along a more critical and relevant trajectory, transcending Eurocentric and Thirdworldist fundamentalisms.

The present project is thus less about changing what island studies scholars see than it is about asking them to be aware of *how* they see. It is less about relitigating the old questions of ‘What is an island? Why do islands matter?’ than it is about asking ‘Who is seeing islands, and from where?’

Whose sea of islands?

The above discussion will strike many readers as abstract. It may be useful to consider a specific example of why it is important to think about for whom and from where island studies knowledge is being produced.

An instructive example is provided by the case of the Tongan-Fijian scholar Epeli Hau‘ofa (1939–2009). Even though Hau‘ofa never, to our knowledge, engaged directly with the field of island studies or expressed any support for the idea of studying islands *per se*, he has come to be regarded as among the most influential island studies theorists. It may, however, be necessary to reappraise the extent to which Hau‘ofa’s thinking has influenced island studies theory.

Hau‘ofa’s reputation in island studies rests largely upon his 1994 essay ‘Our sea of islands’, which has come to be seen as a seminal text and is frequently referenced within the field. In ‘Our sea of islands’, Hau‘ofa (1994, pp. 150–151) challenges the “belittling view [of Pacific islands as small, isolated, and dependent] that has been unwittingly propagated, mostly by social scientists who have sincere concern for the welfare of Pacific peoples”:

Some of our islands had become, in the words of one social scientist, ‘MIRAB societies’—pitiful microstates condemned forever to depend on migration, remittances, aid, and bureaucracy, and not on any real economic productivity. [...] I began noticing the reactions of my students when I described and explained our situation of dependence. Their faces crumbled visibly, they asked for solutions, I could offer none. [...] I began asking questions of myself. What kind of teaching is it to stand in front of young people from your own region, people you claim as your own, who have come to university with high hopes for the future, and you tell them that our countries are hopeless? Is this not what neocolonialism is all about? To make people believe that they have no choice but to depend?

Hau‘ofa identifies Pacific island research as connected to wider and older colonial processes of definition, circumscription, and assessment from outside. Neocolonialism does not require cackling villains and heartless bureaucrats; well-meaning social scientists can be quite enough. In fact, ‘Our sea of islands’ directs its criticism precisely at concepts and arguments that were formative for the then-emerging field of island studies itself, most prominently in the work Bertram and Watters (1986; Bertram, 2006, 1999). This early research on island politics and economy forms the bedrock underlying so much of island studies’ subsequent development, including key intellectual projects by major figures such as Bernard Poirine (1998); Godfrey Baldacchino (2020; 2010; 1993); and Adam Grydehøj (2020; 2018a). We might be justified

in asking: How would Hau‘ofa have responded to the ways in which island studies has developed in the 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s? Would he think differently of today’s island studies than of the nascent island studies with which he was familiar in the 1980s and 1990s?

There is nothing unusual about scholars’ work being used in unanticipated ways. Indeed, island studies’ adoption of Hau‘ofa could be interpreted as a correction of course, a recognition that early attempts at comparative island studies got something wrong and that Hau‘ofa’s criticisms have been taken on board.

And yet: Is it sufficient to have sensitivity to islanders’ concerns raised as a pillar of island studies? Is it enough to have Hau‘ofa’s name habitually dropped as evidence of how much the field is listening? After all, those same social scientists at whom Hau‘ofa directed his criticism did not feel their work contributed to neocolonialism; they thought they were helping. Perhaps those accused of contributing to neocolonialism are not ideally placed to serve as the final arbiters of whether their activities are neocolonial. Far from repudiating the positions that Hau‘ofa criticises in his essay, subsequent island studies scholarship has worked to make these positions deeper, richer, and more sophisticated. Much of the most influential and ‘mainstream’ island studies scholarship has made a point of addressing some of Hau‘ofa’s surface concerns (and thanking him for voicing them), without accepting the challenge of fundamentally rethinking how it approaches islands.

An exception here is Philip Hayward (2012), who rightly identifies that Hau‘ofa’s famous essay is not particularly interested in islands as such. Hayward (personal correspondence, 2021) argues that Hau‘ofa’s essay:

is so frequently mischaracterised as being about islands that it would appear to primarily circulate as a secondary source reference that can be traced back to Grant McCall’s (1994) use of it in his seminal ‘Nissology’ article. If anything, Hau‘ofa is calling for an aquapelagic—rather than archi-pelagic—perspective on the Pacific that reflects Pacific Islanders’ experience of their oceanic space and of their islands as constituents of this space. The frequent citation of his article by Island Studies’ scholars as an inspiration for a study of islands substantially extracted/isolated from oceanic spaces is thereby a misappropriation that has hung like a dead albatross around the neck of many disciplinary travellers and distorted their discourse.

Hau‘ofa (1994, p. 152) is most famous within island studies for his statement that “There is a world of difference between viewing the Pacific as ‘islands in a far sea’ and as ‘a sea of islands.’” He sets himself in opposition to the epistemic privilege of the West, which insists on understanding Pacific peoples in terms of islands, and he argues instead that Pacific peoples are fundamentally peoples of the sea. Yet that which the field of island studies has gleaned from this is precisely the opposite: ‘There cannot be islandness without the sea’. The sea is brought into the service of the island.

If island studies fails to recognise unfamiliar perspectives when looking at islands, what *does* it recognise? Hau‘ofa was concerned that the nascent field only saw numbers, that it was an exercise in quantification in which islanders always came up short. Should we be concerned that Hau‘ofa has been (unwillingly) enlisted into the ranks of island studies? How did Hau‘ofa

go from being a researcher and theorist in his own right to being either a mouthpiece for Indigenous cultural conceptions of islands or a purported supporter of island theories subsequently developed in the West? How did Hau'ofa's Sea of Islands come into the possession of the field of island studies to begin with? Is it not concerning that the 'our' in Hau'ofa's 'sea' has become a rallying cry for not just Pacific Islanders but also Western scholars? By what process did Western scholars gain intellectual possession over Pacific islands? How should island studies scholars interrogate their own positioning at the intersections of the colonality of knowledge, body, politics? How can we begin to interrogate the scholar within?

From decolonising island studies to pluralising island studies

Island studies risks producing knowledge that has little or no connection to how people living on or relating to islands experience their worlds—or that takes for granted a few distinct modes of island life and reproduces these in diverse contexts. It risks performing research that is irrelevant and (not always, but often) inaccessible, disconnected, and meaningless. Such island studies scholarship is likely to be nonreciprocal, abstracted; a piece of writing that turns on itself to seek its reviews and justifications. Confronted by the difficulties and internal contradictions inherent in simultaneously seeking to undertake meaningful research and to meet international publishing and institutional expectations, we often end up running back to established expertise in the field. One result is that scholars in the West are advantaged first in the research process, then in the peer review and publication process (Eun, 2020), and subsequently in the distribution of scholarly impact and citations (Mott & Cockayne, 2017).

Efforts to counter island studies' implication in Western disciplinary dominance and to invite a wide range of epistemic contributions have evolved over the past two decades, opening up discussions in both *Island Studies Journal* and *Shima* concerning how to decolonise island studies (Nadarajah & Grydehøj, 2016; Gómez-Barris & Joseph, 2019; Nimführ & Meloni, 2021). Nevertheless, scholarly practices and discourses that interrogate Western-dominated island studies theory often reproduce the same hierarchies and dominance in knowledge production. A person's individual relationship to power structures within knowledge production will profoundly shape what decolonisation entails: theoretically, practically, ethically.

The present paper arose out of our own conundrums about the location and relevance of our writing in this field. Does our writing—at its ideological, philosophical, methodological, and grounded levels—question the location of its episteme? Are we too part of the monochromic logic of Western epistemology? Where does our knowledge production rest in relation to other articulations of knowledge production? Who determines who has the authority and legitimacy to express their points of view? As Walter Mignolo (2003, p. 669) argues, “Science (knowledge and wisdom) cannot be detached from language; languages are not just ‘cultural’ phenomena in which people find their ‘identity’; they are also the location where knowledge is inscribed.”

It can be difficult to distinguish between ‘who represents’ and ‘why we represent’, as we are also part and parcel of the same discursive framing. Island studies has a habit of focusing on “what we already know” and using this as a consistent frame of analysis (Grydehøj, 2017, p. 8). Island studies is not particularly troubled by what it does not know. Much intellectual activity in the field has focused on questioning the extent to which this or that island meets

the field's expectations for what or how an island *ought* to be: Is the island sufficiently remote, sufficiently pristine, sufficiently independent or autonomous, sufficiently culturally authentic, sufficiently *different*? A distinctly Western understanding of universal truth hovers in the background even of attempts to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about islands.

It is in this light that we can understand Yaso Nadarajah and Adam Grydehøj's (2016, pp. 441–443) efforts to begin unravelling the differences between colonisation and coloniality, seeking deeper understandings of how and where colonised peoples might locate themselves in a decolonised world. In Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2007, p. 117) view, the decolonisation project in research operates across many platforms, striving "for reclamation of knowledge, language, and culture; and for the social transformation of the colonial relations between the native and the settler." Writing in an Australian context, Eileen Moreton-Robinson (2013, p. 344) uses "the verb post-colonising to signify the active, the current and the continuing nature of the colonising relationship that positions us as belonging but not belonging."

All too often, people's vocabulary of freedom and liberation is drawn from and dictated by the language of the coloniser. Even research approaches that consciously strive to take a stand in and produce knowledge from island societies may struggle to escape the entanglements of coloniality (Grydehøj et al, 2021; Farbotko et al, 2021). The potential freedoms that the field explores for islanders are, by and large, Western freedoms, framed by the intricacies of Westphalian statehood, liberal democracy, individualistic notions of welfare and wellbeing, ongoing debates in the West regarding sex and gender, and varying shades of capitalist ideology. All these discussions are worth having, but they are not the *only* discussions worth having. Other perspectives and potentials exist. Despite the great diversity of theoretical perspectives contained within island studies, the field offers relatively little insight into standpoints from outside the West and displays relatively little recognition that this might be a problem.

Standpoint is never a singularity that belongs to you or to me. Standpoints are plural and relational. Santiago Castro-Gómez (2007, p. 428) asks:

Is there only one world or are there various possible worlds? [...] Is it possible to share a world where different ways of knowing that world can coexist and complement each other? A world where epistemological plurality can be recognized and valued? How do we know where we can begin to understand this question?

Castro-Gómez's *wheres* are significant. *Where* do we need to be to see the world as worlds? Is it at all possible to achieve a perspective that grants us insight into the full multitude of standpoints? Or can we at best position ourselves in such a way that we can acknowledge the legitimacy of these standpoints' existence? If there are multiple island standpoints, there must also be multiple ways of knowing islands: We must open ourselves up to the possibility of pluralising island studies. We must also accept that there are surely some positions from which the figure of the island itself is unimportant or irrelevant.

Island studies has set itself the goal of speaking out *for* islands and increasingly of speaking out *from* islands. Yet islands are not unbiased, objective, universal truths of geography. The island-shaped categories and boxes into which islanders are frequently placed have proven effective as political tools for disempowering and removing agency, especially in societies that have experienced colonisation (Grydehøj, Nadarajah, & Markussen, 2020). The labels that

underlie so much research and governance are simultaneously means of understanding and means of control. Within Western scholarship and practice, islands are all too often used to define people, rather than the other way around. An island studies that is accepting of epistemic difference must be aware of its own epistemic location.

Problems of inclusion

When Adam Grydehøj became editor-in-chief of *Island Studies Journal* in 2017, he emphasised that the journal would need to better reflect upon island studies' role in coloniality and seek to remedy the exclusion of some regions of the world from the English-language island studies literature. Grydehøj (2017, pp. 6-7) was seeking to extend island studies' diversity of disciplinary perspectives, arguing that "it is a strength, not a weakness, of island studies that it encompasses diverse and possibly irreconcilable approaches, which interact with and inspire change in one another."

In the subsequent years, the question of inclusivity itself has become somewhat of a conundrum. Inclusive of what? Inclusive of whom? Inclusive for what purpose? For whom is *Island Studies Journal* publishing? Does it make a difference whether someone (or some island) has asked to be included in the island studies project? Who is entitled to do the including? The language of inclusion is not neutral; it is political, and it is intersectional. As Walter Mignolo (2011a, p. xv) writes:

[Western] knowledge-construction made it possible to eliminate or marginalize what did not fit into those principles that aspired to build a totality in which everybody would be included, but not everybody would also have the right to include. Inclusion is a one-way street and not a reciprocal right. In a world governed by the colonial matrix of power, he who includes and she who is welcomed to be included stand in codified power relations. The locus of enunciation from which inclusion is established is always a locus holding the control of knowledge and the power of decision across gender and racial lines, across political orientations and economic regulations.

Simple inclusions of 'local', 'islander', or 'insider' researchers do not guarantee that people outside the West are recognised as holding power and authority. After all, researchers are pushed to adapt to the standards and expectations of teaching, publishing, and other scholarly communication practices that have arisen in Westernised global academia.

Island studies' discourse of inclusivity conceals inequalities. We are concerned by the willingness of Western island studies scholars to adopt and claim as their own individuals who—like Epeli Hau'ofa—have researched islands but do not self-identify as island studies scholars or position their own research within island studies. This does not occur exclusively to non-Western scholars, but it is much more common for them. Thus, whereas both Western individuals from the past (e.g. Charles Darwin and Margaret Mead) and prominent Western theorists who today work with islands from outside island studies may be regarded as influential people who study islands, non-Western islanders who do not position themselves within island studies are much more likely to be described as situated within island studies *per se*—even as their research is less likely to be acknowledged on their own epistemic terms.

Non-Western islanders who are included (willingly or otherwise) within island studies frequently find themselves translated and transliterated into Western data models, quantifiable variables, and colonial indices or transformed into mouthpieces for Western theory.

This is, of course, a complex standpoint to write and enunciate. Writing through the interrogating of ‘What is the West?’ and ‘What is the non-West?’ doggedly retains the ‘us vs them’ duality. Who are the non-Western voices conventionally contributing to island studies? How are they positioned, culturally and epistemically? Non-Westerners are included in the research domain through gatekeepers, who are traditionally white and male. But what do non-Westerners knowingly or unknowingly sacrifice to enter such a domain? How do they look at themselves when positioned in this manner?

The authors of the present paper have all encountered non-Western island researchers who make clear they *do not* wish to be included in island studies. The power to position others within a particular scholarly niche or discipline is unevenly distributed. Some non-Western scholars who are forced into island studies may experience this as yet one more form of disciplinary violence. However well meaning, the willingness to rope in those outside the West in defence of Western intellectual projects is itself an expression of the persistence of coloniality (Yusoff, 2018). The desire to include non-Western scholars is a consequence of conscientious Western scholars pursuing diversity and inclusivity and seeking to better understand the ‘world of islands’. Yet it sometimes resembles a form of conquest: an annexation of fields of non-Western knowledge for what, in its globe-spanning scope and with its tendency to categorise and lapse into casual comparativeness, seems to be a colonial island studies project. It may sometimes be a form of virtue signalling or a ‘settler move to innocence’ (Tuck & Yang, 2012), in which inclusion stands in for more significant change. Citation, referencing, and engagement with the non-West are not enough (and are sometimes even problematic), with new methods still under development (MacCleod, 2021). It is worth asking: What does it mean to enact a progressive and even emancipatory inclusivity, given the inevitable difficulties involved in any serious attempt to reflect upon and analyse island studies from the inside-out, rather than from the outside-in?

Reflecting upon these processes in the wider scholarship, Tiara R. Na’puti (2020, p. 96) foregrounds rhetoric’s role in the maintenance of colonialism:

The US academy overwhelming organizes knowledge *about* the Pacific, framing the study as an empty space dotted by isolated, remote, tiny islands. Though it is the largest single geographic feature of our planet, we are discouraged from considering its Indigenous knowing *subjects*, and are taught so little about this vast region, while ongoing imperialism, militarism, and colonialism are disappeared. When the Pacific Islands and Pacific Islanders do figure into discussions—we are often seen as objects or subjects *on which* American, Asian, and European hegemonies are *enacted* and/or those *to be included* within the rubric of Asian America.

Inclusion alone is not enough; it can be worse than outright exclusion if it produces the illusion of a scholarship situated outside coloniality.

Efforts to create a more inclusive island studies, when not accompanied by the will for a *decolonial* island studies, encourages tokenism. Unless we are willing to interrogate our

relatedness and relationality to our own episteme, ontological beingness, and axiology, and the ways we have progressed through them in our own scholarship, practice, and methodology, then we will continue contributing to the tokenism of an 'inclusive' island studies. Non-Western scholars are often included in island studies due to *what* they are, rather than *how* they research. Paradoxically, tokenism encourages claims of colour blindness. As scholars from outside the West are deployed on Western terms and in pursuit of Western theories and priorities, it becomes easier for Western scholars to deny the need for further corrective action. Once the field is seen to be inclusive, and once it is clear that this inclusion has not disrupted Western paradigms, it is straightforward for Western researchers to say that race and ethnicity no longer matter, or that they should no longer matter. It is a form of "colonial unknowing," which "renders unintelligible the effects of colonial relations of power," marking "colonization and dispossession with a finality even though colonial violence is ongoing" (Mack & Na'puti, 2019, p. 348). This leads to research that concerns or even includes non-Western people but glosses over or ignores the power relationships of Modernity in which they are embedded. Modernity results from European efforts to centre itself and peripheralise the rest of the world (Dussel, 2002).

The processes described above might appear to amount to Westernisation, in which the non-Western researcher becomes a Western researcher. This is not the case. Although Western researchers in island studies are increasingly eager to assess non-Western scholars on Western terms, "the locus of enunciation" (Mignolo, 2011a, p. xv) remains a West that defines the non-West and keeps it in its place.

Circumscriptions of expertise and onto-epistemological discrimination

Island studies is receiving contributions from an ever-greater variety of scholars, yet a vast majority of prominent theorists who position themselves within the field are Western (primarily male) scholars. When non-Western scholars produce what they see as island studies theory, as something more than 'just' empirical work, the wider field tends to treat them as primary sources, rather than as individuals possessing the status of and expertise as researchers. Thus, for example, even Epeli Hau'ofa, who plays such a prominent role in island studies' self-narrative, is more often used within the field as a spokesperson for Pacific ways of knowing, as a communicator of Oceanic lifeways, than he is engaged with as a theorist who develops academic arguments.

Perhaps in part because of this failure to be ascribed professional authority within the social sciences in particular, many non-Western island researchers are inclined to position themselves as artists and activists, roles in which claims to expertise are more fluid. As David Welchman Gegeo (2001) notes though, the globalised academic system rewards certain kinds of research from certain kinds of positions, and non-Western scholars must often choose between being acknowledged as 'authentic' and being acknowledged as legitimate scholars. Frances Negrón-Muntaner (2006, p. 273) highlights how non-Western authors and scholars "suffer a double bind": Being situated in the West can make it easier to achieve commercial and scholarly success, but this risks them being viewed as illegitimate in their ostensible homelands as "they are racially marked yet branded as valuable by the 'imperial' academy." The non-West is tempted by Western promises of inclusion, yet these are premised upon the non-West remaining its own Other.

It is in any case true that many of the non-Western writers whose work is granted prominence in island studies research are scholars *and* poets (e.g. Kamau Brathwaite, Edouard Glissant, Epeli Hau'ofa, Konai Helu Thaman, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, Craig Santos Perez, Teresia Teaiwa, Derek Walcott). Western island studies theorists may find it simpler to take onboard thinking that can be categorised as belonging to a different genre and thus as not truly presenting a challenge to Western theoretical production. Some non-Western cultures lack the strict divisions between the humanities, social sciences, creative arts, and environmental sciences that structure Western scholarship. The West can judge non-Western poet-scholars on their poetry without compromising the terms of its science, but that is as far as it goes. This is about more than just different sites of academic production. Mahmood Mamdani (2012), for instance, shows how the British colonial project deployed a series of conceptual binaries to paint the 'native' and hence to justify the need for the civilising West/British Empire. One site of production imposes upon the other. This same onto-epistemic position is occupied by the Western scholar in island studies, who enjoys the privilege of theorising from an unacknowledged Western baseline, founded on what Castro-Gómez (2021) calls "zero-point hubris." The non-Western scholar cannot shift their standpoint and enter into this position; the position is already occupied, and the position is in a sense dependent upon the non-Western scholar remaining right where they are.

The denial of non-Western scholarly expertise is not absolute. Acknowledgment of expertise is often, however, accompanied by strict spatial or cultural circumscription. It is thus that Pacific islander scholars are likely to be seen as experts in certain aspects (usually cultural) of Pacific islands, mainland Chinese scholars may have their expertise recognised regarding China's near-shore islands, Caribbean islander scholars may be valued for their knowledge of local social and economic processes, African scholars are (occasionally) turned to for work regarding African islands, and the vast and deep tradition of Japanese island scholarship may be dipped into for research concerning Japanese islands. But in all these cases, assumptions and assessments of expertise tend to be confined to the author's own specific context.

In addition, whereas Western scholarship has generally accepted that Western researchers from the mainland can legitimately study island contexts, non-Western mainland researchers are asked to constantly justify and qualify their engagement with island research. Why should Chinese, Indian, or Nigerian scholars be writing about Oceania, the Arctic, or the Caribbean? Global academia is most comfortable granting authority to Western researchers. Non-Western perspectives are at special risk of being seen as niche, limited, biased, and non-scholarly, even when they concern non-Western island issues (Grydehøj et al, 2021).

What use are islands?

Non-Western scholars may sometimes be reluctant to position themselves within island studies simply because they do not regard islandness as a salient characteristic of the places in which they live or study. Not all people who Western scholars regard as 'islanders' truly see themselves as living on 'islands' or in 'archipelagos', geographical units that are conceptualised differently in different cultures, or sometimes are not even conceptualised at all (Hong, 2020; Grydehøj, Nadarajah, & Markussen, 2020; Grydehøj, 2018c). By the same token, concepts of islandness from outside the West sometimes fit poorly within Western conceptualisations

and are thus difficult to integrate into the field, for example, the study of densely urbanised islands in China (Zhang & Grydehøj, 2021; Su, 2017), floodplain islands (Lei, 2021), or *shima* 島 that are not surrounded by water in Japan (Suwa, 2007). When the Western gaze is especially prone to recognise islands as places that are remote, backward, and isolated, it causes alternative conceptualisations to be overlooked or defined out of existence.

This presents problems in relation to the core tenet of island studies: namely, that islandness (the quality of being a piece of land surrounded by water) *ought to be* a useful perspective from which to research certain kinds of spaces and societies. Early work in island studies as a distinct field sought to distance itself from the still-ongoing tradition of islands being used as test sites for research intended to provide knowledge for and about mainland (usually Western) society. The use of islands as laboratories for humanities, social science, and environmental science research has long been recognised as problematic (Greenhough, 2006). Islands may *appear* useful to researchers and policymakers as microcosmic laboratories without their being scientifically useful in reality, and with serious social, ethnic, economic, and environmental implications (Taitingfong, 2020; Anderson & Roque, 2018; DeLoughrey, 2013; Farbotko, 2010). In a recent special section of *Science as Culture*, guest editors Mascha Gugganig and Nina Klimburg-Witjes (2021, p. 3) explore how “island imaginaries manifest in taken-for-granted (Western) natural and social theories, and related experiments” and how “such imaginaries corroborate islands as technoscientific laboratories, exceptional spaces, or synecdoche of larger land masses.” The quantitative approaches that concerned Hau‘ofa in the 1990s still exist, but they are increasingly complemented by more nuanced and socially sensitive analyses. As we have noted, such inquiry often explicitly seeks to take islanders’ perspectives.

Island studies in economics and political science tend to present islands as outliers, as exceptions to wider rules. In contrast, elsewhere in the field, even if most researchers know better than to discuss islands as laboratories, non-Western island cases are frequently used as means of advancing Western theories. Islands are drawn into debates concerning hot theoretical and societal topics in Western academia (the Anthropocene, assemblage theory, climate change adaptation, conservation, feminism, human-non-human relationships, *etc.*), often without giving much attention to why precisely these approaches are helpful for understanding particular non-Western islanders’ lives. Or alternatively, why we might be tempted to use non-Western islanders’ lives to better understand life in the West. The point is not that these approaches are invalid or unimportant. The point is that researchers’ use of Western terminologies and academic traditions to conceptualise specific and diverse non-Western realities tells us more about the West than it does about other contexts. Why must Indian Ocean island gender inequalities be discussed within a North American feminist framework? Whose interests are pursued through the discursive positioning of islanders within geopolitical spheres of influence (Maggio, 2021; Davis, Munger, & Legacy, 2020)? Who really benefits from massaging Indigenous worldviews so that they play nice with Latour? What do we learn from interpreting non-Western island cultures through the prism of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (Hong, 2022)?

It could be argued that Western academic researchers are writing largely for other Western academic researchers and not for non-scholars, islanders or otherwise. After all, failure to understand the relevance of, say, Actor-Network Theory is not limited to fisherfolk

in Indonesia or hunters in Kalaallit Nunaat/Greenland; very few office workers in Hamburg understand it either. There is a fundamental difference here though: Unlike those Indonesian fisherfolk and Kalaallit hunters, office workers in Hamburg are not being used as fuel for theoretical production and academic careers by researchers who share an onto-epistemic background with the colonisers of the research subjects. Power ends up being held by “those who pose the questions over those who answer them; those who observe over those who are observed” (Nadarajah & Grydehøj, 2016, p. 440). Even ostensibly inclusive research can reproduce colonial dominance (Pugh, 2013).

The tendency for researchers from a metropole to study precisely that metropole’s former colonies is deeply problematic, as the researchers’ own epistemologies will have been historically constructed out of extraction and exploitation (human, biological, mineral, intellectual, economic) from these same former colonies. Islands with histories of colonisation and/or slavery should not be closed to researchers from their former colonisers, but such researchers should be exceptionally reflexive about their own positions within the colonial matrix of power and the implications of the academic onto-epistemologies they inhabit. British scholars studying the Anglophone Caribbean, French scholars studying the Francophone Pacific, Dutch scholars studying Indonesia, United States scholars studying Hawaii, Australian scholars studying Papua New Guinea, Danish scholars studying Kalaallit Nunaat: All should be wary of the allure of undertaking research that is ‘colour-blind’ or that uses the colonial subject as a resource for the colonisers’ self-actualisation. All should be wary of research that compares a colonised people with the non-human or that otherwise situates them in intimate relation with non-human actors, unless such research is strongly grounded in that people’s own epistemology.

There is a long history of Western researchers using the Native, the Indigene, the Savage, the Heathen to shed light on Western Modernity or Postmodernity. Sometimes, this light is critical; sometimes it is self-congratulatory. But in all cases, it is a matter of taking light from the non-West and bringing it to the West. It is a matter of reducing the non-West to a supporting role in the story of the West. There are difficult and complex concepts (abyssal thinking, border thinking, coloniality, the postcolony, subalterity, *etc.*) that have arisen out of or been substantially developed by decolonial work in the non-West and that have come to be deployed in Western academia (Mignolo, 2011b; Quijano, 2007; de Sousa Santos, 2007; Mbembe, 2001; Spivak, 1988). Theories are not automatically problematic just because they are difficult or rooted in particular onto-epistemological frameworks (all theory is rooted in some onto-epistemological framework).

Theories become problematic when they are used (intentionally or otherwise) as tools of epistemic violence. When theory is used to shroud or obfuscate colonial responsibility; when theory is used to abstract another people’s history of suffering into a marketable scholarly product; when theory is used to universalise traumas that are or were in fact inflicted upon specific genders, peoples, and places, so that the West too can share in the purifying catharsis: That is problematic.

A further problem is that, in order to be published or accepted in global academia, non-Western scholars often find themselves pushed to adopt Western terms or concepts as supplements to or even replacements of their own, culturally appropriate terminology. Nuances and cultural knowledge are thus lost, and misunderstandings result. It is vital to

recognise that both writings by non-Western authors and research into non-Western island communities are frequently used in support of altogether Western island studies theory. Within island studies, non-Western theory often just serves as grist to the mill of Western attempts at more-or-less comprehensive theory, on Western terms. As journal editors, the authors of the present paper have witnessed the tendency of peer reviewers to insist that non-Western authors perceive their own cultures through the prism of abstract, so-called universalist (unplaced, at the 'zero point') theory by Western scholars. As authors, we have seen our own work criticised by reviewers and editors for its failure to pay proper due to the white, male titans of our respective disciplines, even as we have explicitly attempted to write from alternative standpoints.

Thinking at the point of thought

Writers such as Tracey Banivanua-Mar (2016), Kamau Brathwaite (DeLoughrey, 2007; Ethan, 2017), Bentley James (2009; 2016), Tarcisius Kabutaulaka (2015), Ilan Kapoor (2004), Frances Negrón-Muntaner (2006), Yaqing Qin (2018), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1998; 1988), Khal Torabully (Carter & Torabully, 2002), Tiara R. Na'puti (2022, 2020), and David Welchman Gegeo (2001) foreground epistemic discourses that enable us to encounter, dialogue with, and facilitate the articulation of different questions, conceptualisations, and modes of writing, between orality and literacy, coexisting within modern sensibilities. They ask us to think about where thinking comes from. We do not seek to retrospectively 'claim' these or any other writers for island studies but instead ask how island studies can appropriately approach these perspectives and expand its own horizons without encroaching upon spaces where island studies is unwanted. We seek to challenge the rigid and exclusivist boundaries of what is deemed to be island studies, without sacrificing the agency of scholars outside the West.

The solution to a lack of Indigenous or local island scholarship cannot lie merely in 'developing' island research and researchers until they reproduce Western research. We must think at the point of thought. Where is our thinking located, and what does this standpoint tell us about why and how we think? As Yaso Nadarajah (2007, p. 126) suggests, "the culturally mediated and historically situated self [...] finds itself in a continuously changing world of meaning—a sort of a modified phenomenological process, in which hermeneutics itself is a bit of problem." For Eileen Moreton-Robinson (2013, p. 341), Goenpul woman of the Quandamooka peoples of Stradbroke Island in Queensland, Australia:

As an Indigenous woman, my ontological relation to country informs my epistemology. My coming to know and knowing is constituted through what I have termed relationality. One is connected by descent, country, place and shared experiences where one experiences the self as part of others and that others are part of the self; this is learnt through reciprocity, obligation, shared experiences, co-existence, co-operation and social memory. This is the anti-thesis of being a knower within the patriarchal confines of the academy, which privileges disconnection and the individualist pursuit of knowledge.

Knowledge always relates to one's position. Failure to recognise one's standpoint leads to problems. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988, pp. 272-274), for example, criticises the

tendency of ‘progressive’ Western intellectuals such as Foucault and Deleuze to engage in gross universalisations when speaking on behalf of the Third World “masses” or referring to “the workers’ struggle” in a way that ignores the international division of labour. As Spivak (1988, p. 297; qtd. in Kapoor, 2004, pp. 657–658) notes of British moves to end widow sacrifice in colonial India, colonial and ‘native’ representations are mutually constitutive and legitimising, yet “Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears.” In the case of island studies, there is a risk that islanders’ own lives, experiences, and desires may be lost in the discursive competition between traditional ‘mainland’ understandings of island isolation and peripherality on the one hand and island studies’ efforts to trouble these stereotypes through use of its own island tropes (usually of Western origin) on the other. Are the understandings of islands regularly promoted by island studies truly any closer to islanders’ lived realities than the stereotypes the research field wishes to challenge? Is it not worth reflecting upon just how much time island studies scholars spend (gently) suggesting to islanders that they have misunderstood the true meaning of their cultural, political, economic, social, or environmental system?

Critical reflexivity as a decolonising methodology

These issues of knowledge, representation, and standpoint sound so remote from the discussions we typically have concerning island studies. But they are not unprecedented. In recent years, Sarah Nimführ and Greca N. Meloni (2021) have offered critical perspectives on positionality and representations in island studies, further developing early work on decolonising island studies by Yaso Nadarajah and Adam Grydehøj (2016). A cross-cultural collective of researchers has sought to develop practices of decolonial political geography for the study of islander perspectives on neocolonialism and geopolitics (Grydehøj et al, 2021). Macarena Gómez-Barris and May Joseph (2019; Joseph, 2020) have insisted upon the importance of transoceanic decolonial perspectives in island studies. Adam Grydehøj and Ping Su (2021) have applied decolonial approaches developed in island studies to studying the production, communication, and reception of localised international relations scholarship, representing a rare attempt at extending island studies theory outward to other fields and disciplines.

Such work has made a start at repositioning island studies. Yet it remains largely stuck in a postcolonial/decolonising/decolonial/Indigenous studies pigeonhole, as the vast remainder of the field carries on, untroubled. Island studies, despite its best intentions, continues to represent a kind of scholarly colonisation of the island, spoken outside-in, grounded in what Barbara Applebaum (2010, p. 13) describes as an “epistemic assumption of a disembodied epistemology that informs the discipline’s claims to universals, ideals, abstraction and objectivity, while masking the sex, class, gender, ableness and race of its producers.” Articles like the present one risk serving as decolonial window dressing, as illusory proof of just how progressive island studies really is, even if we are speaking into the void, and island studies is speaking to itself. ‘Decolonisation’ becomes just another keyword used to label certain kinds of scholarly production.

For us, as authors and editors, the present paper has been an epistemic journey into our own writings and representations. We draw upon critical reflexivity as a methodological approach, driving the possibility of ‘decolonising’ island studies. This reflexive interrogation

of our own positionalities as island studies scholars is tied to the necessity of unlearning our own privilege and power as they relate to knowledge production. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (qtd. in Kapoor, 2004, p. 641) reminds us, “one cannot do ‘fieldwork’ without first doing one’s ‘homework’.” The itinerary toward representing the Other ‘over there’, requires scrutiny of the ‘here’.” Such a positioning provides us, as researchers, with an island studies methodology rooted in a critically reflexive study of the self and our own entanglements with the coloniality of knowledge/being—through which we become more capable of engaging in the study of islanders’ selves.

A reflexive deconstruction of positionality opens scholars (both Western and non-Western) to seeing the plurality of the self, through which they can recognise the plurality of the Other. As María Lugones (2006) argues, entrance into such spaces of intercultural liminality enables the formation of coalitions that transcend hegemonic dualism (us/them, Western/non-Western) as well as oppressive knowledge systems driven by frameworks of divide and rule. This reflexivity allows us to undertake situated engagement with the being of the islander.

By perceiving critical reflexivity as a decolonial methodology, we can counteract the tendency to regard decolonisation as just another keyword, as one of many potential topics for island studies research or for an island studies research article. Critical reflexivity instead becomes an activity in which researchers engage, a process that occurs before, during, and after their studies of islands.

Conclusion

We are living in an age of epistemic and systemic decolonisation. Yet while awareness of the colonial, epistemological, and ontological assumptions of Western scholarship has increased over time, we are still grappling with continuities between the colonial past and current global and racial hierarchies. This is perhaps especially evident in the ways in which publications such as *Island Studies Journal* contribute to the invisibility of coloniality today. It is vital to understand how carefully constructed and perpetuated canons, power structures, conventions, and normativities have shaped island studies and island research over the years and what has been excluded from island studies as a result. Even an island that is invisible can still be felt (Nadarajah, 2021).

How can we begin opening up more explicitly and systematically to the concepts and cognates of alternative knowledges, lifeworlds, and languages? It is necessary to interrogate how historical ideas, ideologies, and paradigms embodied in Western worldviews have alternatively acknowledged or been insufficiently reflexive regarding historical sentiments of superiority toward the Other and engaged with languages that have their own histories of resistance against dominant systems. The non-West is a problematic category, but it cannot be dismantled until the West itself has ceased to serve as an unacknowledged universal standpoint.

The process of critical reflexivity prevents us from confusing the need for greater appreciation of epistemic difference with the potential for pursuing a colour-blind island studies. It prevents island studies from uncritically prioritising equality and inclusivity without acknowledging the systemic injustices and entanglements of coloniality. Indeed, this is

precisely island studies' problem: Before island studies can think beyond the non-Western, it must acknowledge that the field is Western.

The result of such thinking is recognition of multiple ways of knowing, of multiple worlds, of multiple island studies. Writing from a Fijian perspective, Subramani (2001, p. 151) hopes for:

a shift in scholarship [that] would alter the grids of knowledge and power in the region, making Oceania not just an object of study but also allowing it to produce its own cultures of scholarship. Oceania would be able to break out of the distorting, deforming organization of Eurocentric historiography and modernist projects that view the west as their center.

Subramani envisions a fully interdisciplinary scholarly realm that can undertake critical investigations into all matters concerning Oceania. Western conceptualisations are transcended, not through “a naive retreat from conceptual work” but by “retheorizing the theory, and retextualizing the text” (Subramani, 2001, p. 152). We follow Subramani in calling for something other than uniform Western scholarship and uniform non-Western scholarship. This paper is not a rejection of Western scholarship; it is a recognition of the legitimacy of difference. There are as many ways of doing research as there are kinds of people, and so much powerful scholarship is currently being undertaken beyond or at the margins of Western globalised academia.

We are not there yet. The present paper is but one step in a long, difficult process. We still do not know how island studies might look from a perspective outside Europe or the West, much less from a critically positioned perspective. It remains unclear how we, as researchers, can work to destabilise the Western disciplinary vocabulary, to try to see through the illusion of academic English as a universal and objective language, given that this is part of an academic, institutional, and economic system that is so much larger than island studies itself. We still cannot say how alternative scholarships might develop out of engagement with new forms of writing, of visual expression, of unwriting—and as a consequence, how far a publication like *Island Studies Journal* is even capable of going.

There is so much we do not know. But hopefully, we are getting better at identifying the gaps in our knowledge—our habitual and culturally conditioned blind spots—and adapting or unravelling our field accordingly.

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