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Full Length Article

Containing the intertidal island: Negotiating island onto-epistemological visibility and plurality

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ABSTRACT

This article departs from the author's own critical ethnographic vignettes in Eastern Indonesian islands, suggesting that islands have not only often been constructed around colonial paradigms of smallness and remoteness but have been framed as 'islands' in an attempt to contain the powerful political agency of locales mastering mobility, multi-culturalism, and permeability.

Here, the tidalectics of (intertidal) islands is embodied by *bagian*: house streams, living matrices neither sea nor land. These island nerves are not just central and controversial features of aquaculture; they ultimately mirror kinship relations, as entanglements that regulate sociality and conviviality. This article explores islands as thriving nerve centres of relations and circulation. Local notions of 'being' and 'belonging' that generate specific conceptualisations of spaces as places are central to how islands are experienced: a complex and dynamic realm of relations that string out, instead of being a container encompassing fixed places and/or fixed movement patterns. This has consequences for how we study, describe, and theorise geopolitical and politico-ecological matters in marine and island environments. The belittlement of islands dominates in regional politics and environmental policymaking in Indonesia and elsewhere, where islands and sea-based societies are either considered marginal or not considered at all. Actual political and ecological relations and interdependencies of marine and island peoples, that link places but are not confined to places, can be overshadowed in the assumptions of socioenvironmental approaches to island environments. Daily circulations do not take place 'in the margins' but in a thriving mesh of movements and relations across and beyond the transboundary spaces of land-sea binaries.

1. Introduction

"In the Western imagination, reason has long belonged to terra firma. Island or continent, it repels water with a solid stubbornness: it only concedes its sand. As for unreason, it has been aquatic from the depths of time and that until fairly recently. And more precisely oceanic: infinite space, uncertain ... Madness is the flowing liquid exterior of rocky reason."

Michel Foucault (1994)

That which is intertidal cannot be contained; it contains you.

This article is not as much about islands as it is about the islands my research constructed, as reflective epicentres throughout the process of researching island identity and environment. This is also an auto-ethnography seeking to unpack the very rituals of belonging an ethnographer undergoes in the liminal spaces of intertidal islands. Usually, such reflective exercises would be granted a section of an article

or a short book section at best. Here, I will attempt to position myself as I journey through hospitality and to belonging.

This article feeds from more than ten years of ethnographic research in and around small islands. What started as a PhD project in environmental anthropology, turned into a longer engagement with the knowledges of islands. The empirical parts of this paper rely on data from 2013 to 2015, the reflective parts of the discussion also draw experiences from subsequent stays on the islands in 2019 and 2023.

At the beginning, a researcher's ability to understand islands and islanders is surrounded by a carefully crafted (multi)disciplinary atoll of concurrent biases, amongst which apocalyptic narratives of victimhood have gained popularity in socioenvironmental research about tropical islands (Farbotko, 2010; Kelman, 2018; Perumal, 2018). Rocky reason in the stubbornness of rigid paradigms of "accumulated catastrophism" (McBrien, 2016, pp. 119–121) and "disaster capitalism" (Bonilla, 2020, p. 102), which craft 'vulnerable communities' needing to become resilient through further (socioeconomic) dependency to the mainland,

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to the state, to their expensive technologies and their exonymic knowledge, with no space for self-determination, repair, reclamation (Marrero, 2021).

The tropical island comes to our attention in its dualism of doom and joy: a getaway, an exhausted space. Along the (research) way, the unseen and the untold are often fetishized by a constant commitment to acquainting oneself with the laws of invisibility and the relationships such laws regulate and reproduce: we want to see what we do not see, we want to rationalise what we cannot see through those paradigms of what is visible. But in the end, we often realise that our critical ethnographies (i.e., those which depart from deconstructing our own island biases) mostly tell tales of self-transmutation and the crossing of our own boundaries. The researcher is also external to the realms of rocky reason, forced in by the conventions and the search for legitimisation of our disciplines and fields. Research processes are place-and-self-making mechanisms, where the researcher travels from being to becoming, and right into different forms of belonging.

Yet, ethical research is far from a self-serving process of belonging and validation. Ethnographers like James Clifford (1983a, 1983b, pp. 121–155) have long discussed the power imbalances and (mis) representations of the anthropological encounter: knowledge co-production in anthropology tends to benefit the researcher who represents the privileges of mobility, resources and an ability to extract themselves from the field, vis-à-vis the research subject, at times confined to the knowledge spaces of the former, at times challenging the dominant narratives of that who writes. Ethnography has always fed from dialogue and a dialogic ethnography can tune itself to the plurality of voices that make the encounter. Thus, ethnography must enter in conversation with islands in an overdue act of sonic resistance to epistemic injustice: appropriation, absence, misrepresentation, where stories become theories and methodological stances (McKittrick, 2006, 2020; Wright et al., 2012), dialectic spaces where the researcher composes the researched and vice versa. As such, this article explores the possibilities of a tidalectics of intertidal being, becoming and belonging: negotiated by the (inter) subjectivities in the ethnographic encounter with the island. Here, the island is a method, if you will, to unpack access, acceptance, rejection, affirmation, negation. A method to read the self as transformed by the multiple relations that materialise in the ethnographic encounter. A reflective method where space becomes a text.

Rather than approaching islands as a space in between mainlands, seas, places, we near their tides as constitutive part of an island of many faces. Not an in-between location or a non-space defined by marginalization and displacement (Price-Chalita, 1994) or a margin in the linear conceptions of Eurocentric models and dominant terracentric frameworks (Winston, 2021), but as a hybrid space of many places. In this reflective journey through the island, we will not only re-read it in its own terms but read the world through its many dialectic frameworks. The conceptual framework of this paper is inspired by Brathwaite's notion of tidalectics (1973, 1994, 1999); an everyday place constantly transformed as its sounds, voices, rhythms disperse, reorganise, metamorphose (Wright et al., 2012). A place made visible and invisible through the tidalectics of intertidal being. A place of sounds, dance, stories, more-than-human kinship, food sharing and other embodied practices offering venues for resistance and decolonial action against the epistemic violence of climate coloniality (Sultana, 2022, p. 6). At the same time, an intertidal tidalectics of being also engages with the continuous, non-linear co-creation of knowledge based on an oceanic worldview, which deviates from the binary opposition and resolution in the Hegelian dialectic of thesis versus anti-thesis (Nwadike, 2020, p. 59), towards a situated thesis that is possible also in its invisibility and as encompassing it all. Thus, an intertidal tidalectics is a postcolonial reclaiming of the sea, writing alternative historiography and foregrounding alternative epistemologies to Euro-Anglo colonial models of knowledge (DeLoughrey, 2007; Manocha, 2013, p. 36). A tidalectics of in-betweenness and beyond land/sea binaries, in the continuous movement, change and interconnection in knowledge co-creation, providing

alternative epistemologies and geo-historical analysis (King, 2019) beyond the here, the now, the visible.

Throughout my research, as a qualitative researcher pursuing scientific rigour, I have found myself prioritising the role of the visible (Hall, 1996) as drivers of objective observation and understanding. Nonetheless, it was through the invisible (always guiding through the process of becoming an island guest) that realised I was being regulated, kept locked into the 'intertidal island': the island that was crafted for me, for my amusement, for my research. The collective agency of the islanders I lived with during my two years in the Bunaken Archipelago (North Sulawesi, Indonesia) was precisely what gently, and at times also abruptly, brought me through the many phases of research awareness and reflexivity.

The auto-ethnographic nature of this piece also functions as some sort of tribute to island agency beyond the environmental determinism and biocentrism of Malinowskian approaches (e.g., Malinowski, 1922) to Pacific islands and suggests that inward reflexivity helps us navigate the (island) systems we inhabit more coherently and fairly, thus (co) producing better contextualised conceptual frameworks and theory. It critically approaches relevant literature from Area Studies, Sociocultural Anthropology, Island Studies, Critical Geography and its intersections. And, above all, it seeks to engage with 'hospitality' as a defining aspect of island native theory. The social sciences (e.g., Geography and Anthropology) have theorised 'hospitality' (as theory and practice) as both a global cultural and an economic force of interaction, existing in the convergence between the local and the global. Ultimately, a force embedded in a politics of gender, class, race. Thus, a 'politics of hospitality' transcends the dualisms of the public and the private and becomes "an intimate, emotional and prolonged engagement with peoples and a place" (Dowler, 2013, p. 781). An engagement beyond the regulative properties of hospitality-as-otherness through what is available and possible at a particular time and in a particular context of hegemonically structured political identities (Barnett, 2006). Thus, instances of hospitality in the ethnographic encounter (e.g., feeding, washing clothes, introductions) are re-politicised by islanders to regulate the presence of the researcher and its impact. At the same time, a focus on island hospitality as a politics of the everyday allows space to acknowledge the invisibility processes (often taken for granted) which can help researchers situate their own figure as a character in a tidalectics of being, becoming and belonging. Here and there, invisibility and tidalectics are as much epistemological praxis as they are a methodological approach, exercised by the island and islanders: tidalectics of in-betweenness is the basis upon which everyday knowledge is re-negotiated, rather than co-produced, amongst islanders and researchers. It is also a new method of analysis to consider when conducting critical ethnography (that is, ethnographic research that at the earliest stages submits personal, professional, and institutional biases to examination).

2. I write, I-lands

Ethno-grapho: in the writing of people, represents a person who writes people. The writing of a collective in which the ethnographo in embedded can and must turn the eye to the writing and re-writing of the I (ethno) in the writing (grapho). the 'I' in the works of early ethnographers, during the late 19th and early 20th century, was shaped as a Eurocentric lens, which contributed to the reinforcement of colonial hierarchies and the legitimisation of domination through the crafting of 'the Other' across the world. In essence, the 'I' is as collective as 'the Other' it produces. The 'I' in the legacy of fields and disciplines engaging with ethnographic research was a collective project seeking to extract and appropriate knowledge across regions. When the 'I' writes, a mesh of (inter) disciplinary, institutional, professional, and personal perspectives, assumptions and experiences are activated, a mesh we call culture. The 'I' of ethnography never walks alone and it is culturally determined, also at the level of institutional culture. Understanding 'culture as a text' (Geertz, 1973) read by the ethnographer cannot

distance itself from the sentiment, affect, history beyond causality. Culture in ethnographic research is a text intertwined with the reader, a collective reading exercise in all directions: inwards, outwards, back, and forth. A quilted story of encounters, where the I-text emerges changed through the very exercise of reading a place, giving in to the many shapes of the I-land. A collective interpretation of each other's worlds, towards an ethics of being, becoming and belonging. An intimate and emotional transformation (Sharp, 2009) that require a more ethical approach to and observation of the everyday beyond the worlds of the researcher and in alliance with indigenous ontologies (Wright, 2015), disrupting the epistemic violence of systems of oppression (Derickson, 2022), beyond the worlds of the human.

The 'ethical turn' (Song, 2017) has increasingly driven ethnographers towards more collaborative approaches to the ethnographic encounter (Clifford, 1983b, pp. 121–155), an encounter where the ethnographer becomes a storyteller (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), needing to reflect about the constructed realities that emerge from their own interpretative choices, sociocultural representations and (mis)representations of bodies (Dowler & Sharp, 2001), and the inherent cultural and epistemic violence of such (mis) translations. We could argue that research is in itself a place, composed by a series of sense and self-making processes, a place not only regulated by the agency of those who design it but ultimately regulated by those who become research subjects: their knowledge and networks are the nervous system of what is often called 'the field'. The field is a place regulated by a constant movement of things (Appadurai, 1988), a flow of ideas, conversations, relations often materialising in shared meals, exchanged objects, creating a mesh of knowledge, feeding from co-creation. A place to engage in a 'moral turn' (Barnett & Land, 2007) to fulfil the ethical responsibilities of the researcher—not an act of generosity or altruism but of reckoning with overdue epistemic debts. One could also argue that the field is a story, a fieldwork is the art of storytelling: where researchers tell stories about society, its relations, its misrepresentations and injustices, and beyond (McKittrick, 2020). Thus, stories, narratives and dialogues compose a place called ethnography and when stories are recognised as research data (DeLoughrey, 2019) in their own right, they expand the methodological reach of ethnographic research beyond the (human) worlds of the researcher (Wright et al., 2012), while turning the ethnographic gaze inwards. A gaze that materialises and develops in that space in between the researcher and the researched (England, 1994). Such a gaze stares into the abyssal, defined by it, it resists ontological hegemony from a positionality of questioning normalised and dominant ontological assumptions and of rejecting ontological fixity (Pugh & Chandler, 2023, p. 5). The island stares back.

3. The island

The figure of the island serves as a hub of relations which not only transform the researcher and their inquiry but also shatters divides such as land/sea, human/nature, transforming what we understand as 'an island' through lived experiences and challenging representations of islands as 'isolated', 'small' (Chandler & Pugh, 2021; Nimführ & Meloni, 2021). Thus, the island presents an alternative to state-centric constructions of space and place, they are also at the core of decolonial theory, as they shatter conceptual colonial remnants such as the human/nature dichotomy by offering alternatives negotiated by islanders themselves, at the point of conceptual inception of a research project and beyond (Nadarajah et al., 2022).

Thus, this article's reflections and analysis are shaped by Bajo encounters and Bajo Island theory: this piece is not a dissection of Bajo cultures and lifeways for an exogenous audience but a tribute to the invisible and the intertidal nature of island knowledge, theory, and the spaces they produce and negotiate. Oftentimes, Bajo islands have been defined as 'isolated,' 'disconnected,' 'dependent,' 'marginal,' by the mainland, the nation, and its institutions. Such narratives are not grounded in objective approaches to the histories and lifeways of

islands, but they seek to reinforce existing dependencies (on political, economic systems) and to further legitimise the presence and power of more dominant actors, such as the capital and the nation. Islands often represent the chaos of the nation-state and its state-centric ways. Island spaces are often affected by the toxicity of today's waste industry, arms industry, and militarism (DeLoughrey, 2013), and biodiversity loss among other. Thus, the island is a method whereby one can analyse existing power relations across regions and their imbalances. A method visualising a rupture of our relation to the environment. The perceived smallness of islands and lack of acknowledgement of their own conceptions of land, sea, space, place is not coincidental, but it sits within long-lasting colonial legacies of our disciplines and fields, often disconnected from the meaning-making of islands themselves (Nimführ & Otto, 2020) and geopolitics of belittlement to legitimise the domination of powerful states (Hau'Ofa, 1994). Thus, the encounter with Bajo islands requires a decolonial ethics of being, grounded in anti-colonial principles of knowing, when approaching the very notion of island places.

Bajo islands and islanders figure prominently in sociocultural studies of Indonesia, especially in those focusing on maritime realms. They are not, however, so present in island research. The specificity of Bajo cultures across Southeast Asian seas challenges assumptions of homogeneity and biocentrism that identify all Bajo cultures as defined by the same time of environmental conditions and as dependent on environmental determination. Past research (for example, Sopher, 1965; Sather, 1997; Zacot et al., 2008) has approached, defined, and categorised Bajo communities across Southeast Asia by focusing on assumed experiences of disruption, isolation and fragmentation, no doubt inspired by terra-centric binaries, which often position the Bajo as an exotic alternative to land-based civilisation. Over the past two decades though, scholars focusing on maritime peoples and places have moved beyond the usual biocentrism and environmental determinism of maritime research to more coherent accounts of Bajo history (Gaynor, 2016), Bajo lifeways (Chou, 2003; Ivanoff, 2009; Nolde, 2009), Bajo mobility and hybridity (Pauwelussen & Verschoor, 2017; 2021) and heritage and oral traditions (Nuraini, 2012, 2016).

Indonesian islanders, and particularly the Bajo, are often defined by their warm hospitality in touristic brochures and media websites (see for example Neubauer, 2020). Here "hospitality" features as a one-off trademark feature of insular communities, otherwise subjected to the menace of their own environments. Such approaches to island collective identity (as defined and regulated by the production of certain foods, commodities, and performances for external consumption) lean too heavily on orientalist, market-oriented and colonial biases founded in biocentric perspectives defined through hypermasculine positivism (Sharp, 2009; Wynter, 2003). Thus, this is an anti-colonial stance aimed at mainstreamed approaches to island identity in (eastern) Indonesia-as we should approach (ritualistic) hospitality as more than an "insider--outsider" exchange, seeing it in terms of its own island onto-epistemological spaces rather than just those of the tourist industry. In this paper, the concept and practice of "hospitality" are treated as symptoms of a powerful vernacular system of circulation and exchange: ancient, fluid, and indicative of resilient local agency and power, creating and sustaining reciprocities (Mauss, 1990). These linkages become the nervous system of a place, a place in constant change, a place that swallows the researcher in a tidalectics of fluidity and (in) visibility opposing to colonialist temporalities (Fabian, 1983; Rosaldo, 1980). The tidalectics these systems enable is not temporary, it is an institution reaching far beyond the transitional or transactional, towards a repoliticising of memory (Trouillot, 1995), reclaiming the politics of intertidal memory.

The past eight years have witnessed an explosion of enthusiasm for the broad topic of "hospitality" as an area of theoretical development in disciplines like anthropology (Candea & Da Col, 2012) and political science (Boudou, 2012), calling for a return to the study of hospitality beyond tourism and as an everyday intimate practice. In subsequent

sections, this article will explore the relevance of everyday hospitality and performative invisibility for expanding notions of islandscape (Nimführ & Meloni, 2021) and for articulating positionality (Hall, 1996; Nimführ & Otto, 2020). This exploration will focus on how hospitality and performative invisibility are embodied by the researcher (by means of reflective analysis of island identity and place-making processes enabled and disabled through island research) and regulated by complex networks of local agency. What follows are illusions of containment as representative of my own research journey but, above all, of intertidal tidalectics.

4. Visibility: Being (in an island)

‘What is an island, where is the island? Where does an island begin and end? What contains the island?’

(Fieldnotes, 2013)

I wrote this during my first months of residence in and around the Celebes Sea. At the time, I was constantly preoccupied by the notions and experiences of “place” my field notes and narratives were articulating. Were they the right place? Have I yet achieved a coherent and ethical understanding of these islands and their inhabitants, whether Bajo or Siau (Nain Island is a multi-cultural island)? The island, as a physical space, seemed to always come first, with its inhabitants unconsciously relegated to my own environmental determinism: a determinism I had inherited through years of graduate and postgraduate studies in the social sciences, and by means of granting myself some institutional and disciplinary belonging along the way. I, too, had constructed my own identity as a researcher on the basis of concrete biases (whether topographical, regional, conceptual), biases existing in the historical legacies of the disciplines I was traveling through. Little did I know that residing in an island would not automatically grant me an entitlement to being, let alone understanding.

And like most island studies, mine had developed a tendency to start with a map. One I had carefully crafted for non-specialised audiences, so to speak. The following three maps exemplify various stages of a researcher’s awareness and the islandness these can produce.

This first map seeks to situate the reader geographically. Finding Nain Island (in the Bunaken Archipelago) requires some doing: it is not a touristic destination, as the resorts on the islands of Bunaken and Siladen do the touristic work for the archipelago. This map situates Nain Island as a “small island” in north-eastern Indonesia. Geopolitical discussions might be beyond the scope of this paper; however, Nain Island is as much a Pacific Island, an Indian Ocean Island, and a transnational island as many other islands across the world. It is essentially a transboundary entity with many hands and legs spanning across the globe (in its history, networks, socio-environmental metamorphoses and allowed annexation by the global market). This island entity is inherently intertidal as it cannot and should not be contained. Throughout history, daily events, experiences, and encounters have defined Bajo places beyond formalised geopolitics of the (small) nation-state. The everyday is defined by the intimate spaces of the body and the household, amongst others, which are interconnected to the national and the international. Little has been published on this matter beyond of scope of historiography (Gaynor, 2016). Contemporary histories of being an island that exists simultaneously across (geopolitical) space: in cities, harbours, neighbouring islands, etc., are grounded in the very encounters that enable and disable such flows. Thus, the encounters discussed in this article take place (and meaning) through the pluriverses of Nain Island’s daily encounters.

Nain Island, as we will subsequently discuss, moves and travels beyond units of administrative containment, such as districts and regencies, emotional messengers such as daily songs and more. Nain Island’s movement is regulated by both historical and daily encounters, and interactions. The administration of Wori District currently divides the island into four villages (*kampung*): Nain Bajo, Nain Satu, Tetampi

and Terente. Nain Island is a multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and multi-religious island, inhabited by the Muslim Bajo and the Christian Siau. Nain Bajo is the most populated village, with some 1500 inhabitants on the Bajo side of a 5km² island. The Muslim Bajo and the Christian Siau share the western side of the island. Due to the limitations of this article, I will not go into detailed discussion about the differences and continuities between what has been identified by island scholars in anthropology as differentiated cultures (for more detailed and traditional accounts of Nain Islands cultures see Zacot, 2009). Eastern Indonesian islands have long been multi-cultural, suggesting that different paradigms of islandness have coexisted for centuries.

Nain Island’s Bajo vernaculars soon challenged any preconceived classification of daily activities, such as fishing, harvesting, singing, teaching and seaweed cultivation, as routinary, mechanical, commodified and subjected to paradigms of production. Rather, they are hybrid forms of sociality; defining the unusual ways the island moved, shifted, and existed. While some might hasten to order daily activities into strict categories of relations to the sea or the mountain, Nain Island transcended such dichotomies and only coherently existed in the intersection and the continuum of the aquatic, terrestrial, the coastal and all things permeable, in the romance of sea and land, wherever Nain islanders went, whatever they said and did. Not only identity is renegotiated in interaction with socio-ecological others, such as trees, fish, rocks, but also it is through these daily encounters between all island inhabitants (including the wind, for example) that everything changes. Change (as metamorphosis) is organic and holds the island together through time and space, change is the most constant feature of islands like Nain. Thus, change should not be posed as a threat, an unfamiliar process, or an undesired feature in any portrayal of Bajo peoples and places: where the sea and the island are not at the service of each other but are each other (Hau’Ofa, 1994).

And so, I was often told that ‘Pulau’ (island in Bahasa Indonesia) and ‘Orang Pulau’ (islanders in Bahasa Indonesia) were the most adequate names to refer to Nain Island and Nain Bajo. And that the island could be made to disappear through invisibility. The generic aspects of ‘Pulau’ and ‘Orang Pulau’ allowed space for the organic aspects of everyday life and its movement, which are defining of Bajo identity. The exonym Bajo, however, had been turned into a static set of biocentric features and a term to further differentiate lifeways in ways that made Nain islanders feel uncomfortable: with histories of mobility, national and international influence, and agency, the exoticising of contemporary paradigms of victimhood (Wright, 2020) were not sympathetic towards the fluidity of island identity. What I, we, need to coherently understand is contexts, as the medium, the permanent through ever-changing, and not the occasional powers of performative visibility.

In my experience as an ethnographer, accessing island knowledge and daily life was more challenging than just arriving, settling, and residing. I was busy classifying, ordering, compiling, but little did I know that my journey through island epistemologies had begun even before my arrival to the island. First, if I really wanted to understand what an island means, I had to develop into a capable person (*orang mampu*), one able to metamorphose with the island.

5. Who contains the containment?

I was a researcher on an island, an island surrounded by corals, and, as such, I was still blinded by the rocky reason of environmental determinism. I was also a stranger in an island, guided into regulated interactions: first constrained by my own assumptions of island space, identity, and place, then by the careful supervision of those who accompanied me daily; those who invited me to their houses, who fed me, those with whom I conversed, with whom I stayed. A myriad of daily encounters had been crafted for me for as long as I were to exist on Nain Island. These encounters helped visualise the island in all its complexity while not seeing a thing. Just as “the island” increasingly became evident, so did I: morphed into new forms of being, as I became fluent in

Baon Sama (Bajo language, one of the four languages spoken on the island every day, together with Bahasa Indonesia, Manado Malay and Siau), skilled at seaweed cultivation and the art of making fun of myself. I was a researcher on an island and that island was opening up to me, rhythmically. Or, so I thought. While daily notetaking and recordings aimed to register the features that defined a Bajo Island as a “place,” rather than a geographical space, I still grappled with the temporality and permanency of all. What is changing, how is it changing, what is change, is it bad? I often found myself challenged by the fluid aspects of Bajo place-making narratives and experiences: often as contradictory as complementary, as transitory as permanent. For example, when speaking of ‘environmental change’ as understood by positivist approaches to the physical environment, many islanders sustained that there had been no change at all and that the island was not really affected by climate change so far. At the same time, when speaking of changes in wind patterns, many sustained that wind directions were

indeed changing, circulating (*putar-putar*), in unexpected ways at times but that it was quite normal, since a Bajo islander knows how to read days through water and the wind is not just the wind, as it just exists in its encounters with water and skin. Change, thus, is embedded in daily communication with socio-ecological inhabitants beyond the human. Nothing exists if not in its intersection with the rest. Change is normal, it happens in conversation. I, as a researcher on the island, had to learn to read change in its continuity. I had to prove that I could coherently navigate island vernaculars of sociality, knowledge, and capability to others and to myself. The island was starting to contain me through processes of metamorphosis.

Fig. 1 is a conventional map showing Indonesia, North Sulawesi and Nain Island. The second map (Fig. 2) takes a more critical stand by showing environmental synergies of more-than-human connectivity and coexistence, illustrating the daily rhythms of more-than-human flows. It zooms in to Nain Island as a place where social and environmental

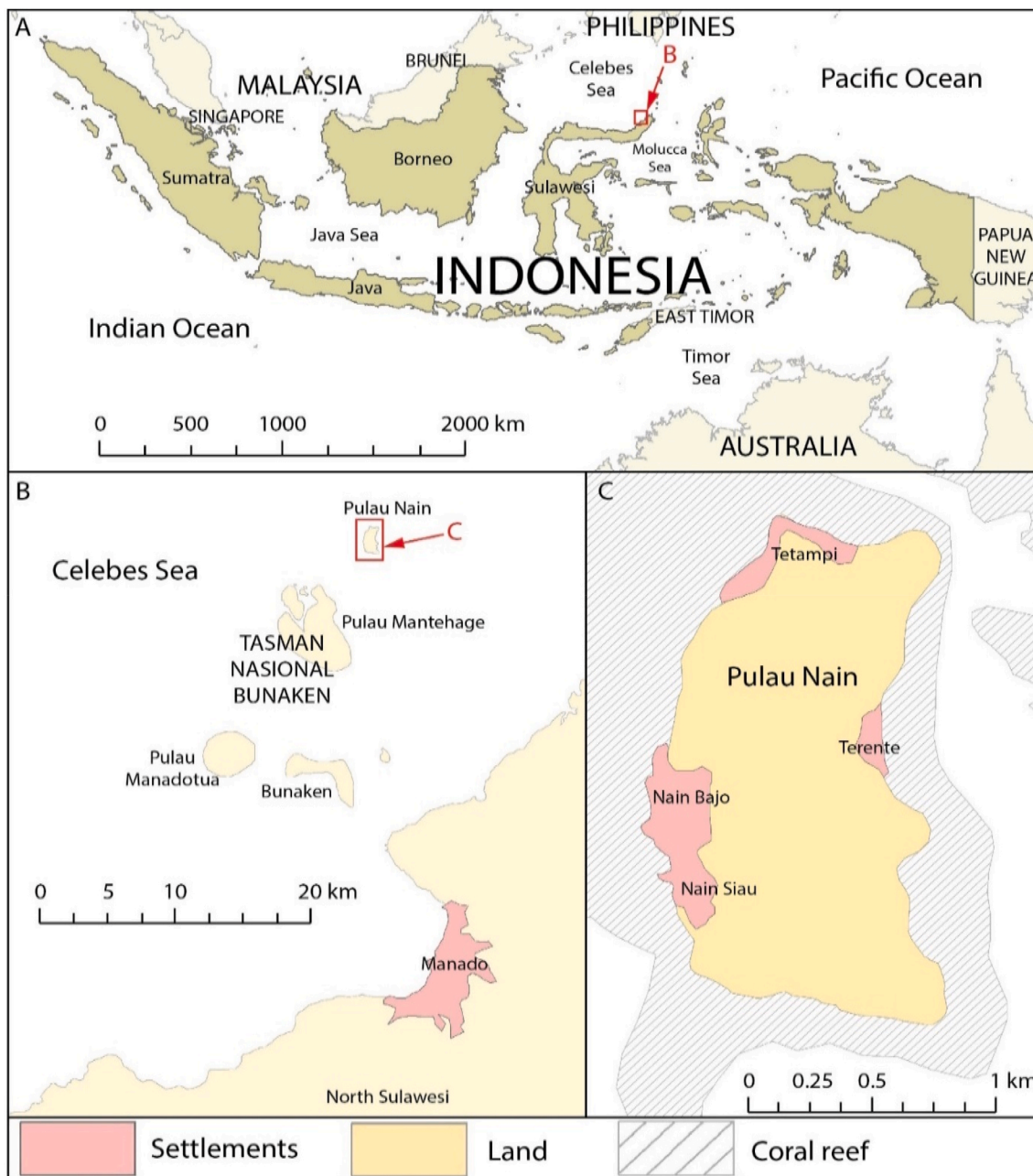


Fig. 1. Study area: A – Indonesia (background map: Natural Earth “Admin 0 – Countries” layer downloaded from <http://www.naturalearthdata.com/>); B – Manado area, North Sulawesi; C – Pulau Nain.

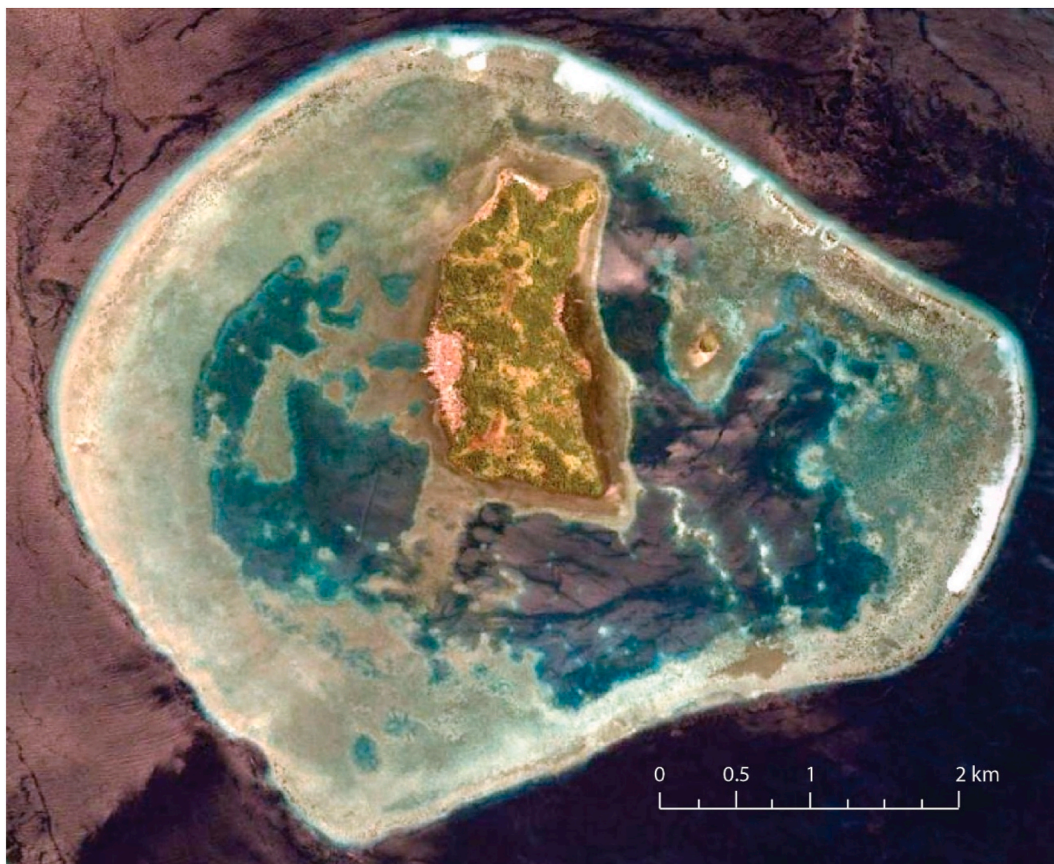


Fig. 2. Satellite image of Pulau Nain atoll (modified from GoogleEarth) with visually identifiable extent of coral reef, settlements, and vegetation.

movement are intertwined in the everyday. Mobility and movement are essentially socio-ecological, not confined to the dichotomised domain of the physical versus the social. After months of careful (participant) observations, adjusting my mode of inquiry and shattering its biases, I concluded that being (in a Bajo Island) can only be conceived through and as daily movement. I was indeed moving every day: around the distinct parts of Nain Island (as it will be discussed in the next section) and, more importantly, I was moving through and with others: through the *tompals* (houses on stilts) to *Mbo Tibe* (the well), *Jalan Raya* (the main

street) to the primary school up the hill. But, for as much as I had planned my daily participant observations and interviews, I was not the one in charge of my own research process. Rather, others were moving me in certain directions, not entirely arbitrarily.

Tsing's (1993) and Chou's (2003) understandings of "*ilmu*" (science in Bahasa Indonesia- "the science of travel" that "semi-nomadic communities" practice to re-negotiate power, heritage and knowledge across highlands and sea), fits well within what knowledge of the island and in the island becomes. Nonetheless, the notion and practice of daily *ilmu*

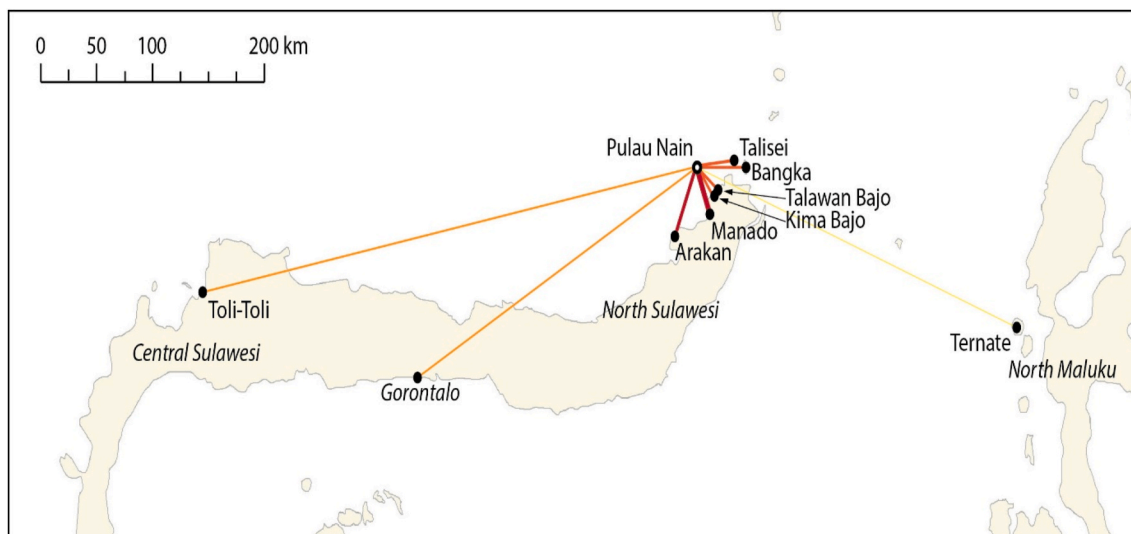


Fig. 3. Family links map (background map: Natural Earth "Admin 0 – Countries" layer downloaded from <http://www.naturalearthdata.com/>).

was not just a ‘science of travel,’ of movement, it was knowledge as movement, the essence of being (in an island). Nain Bajo *Ilmu* travelled as stories, as arguments, as gossip and as politics of the more-than-human worlds (Wright et al., 2012) composing the island across space and place. It travelled across parts of Eastern Indonesia, possibly further, to other islands, capitals and the continuum of island seas, coasts, and highlands. And in all these intertidal places, Nain Bajo existed.

A third map (Fig. 3) shows some of the places where Nain Bajo exists in the everyday exchanges, activities, and circulation of diverse knowledge. This map hints about particular forms of island relationality (not only to the capital of North Sulawesi, Manado, but also to other provinces and regions) as defined by Bajo notions of islandness and islandscapes, beyond biocentric and essentialist approaches to islands and towards a contextualised notion of ‘islandscapes’ (Nimführ & Otto, 2020). The concept of ‘scapes’ (Appadurai, 1988, 1996) suggests that spaces do not exist as isolated units but sit within complex global flows in the construction of hybrid identities and cultures. The intertidal scapes of hospitality, for example, transverse the mere circulation and exchange of objects, products, influence, as they are enabled through invisible processes of socio-ecological understanding and collaboration, regulating the different dimensions of the island: its politics, its formal and informal economies, its materiality and immateriality and the worlds that transcend the human. At the same time, the island is an analytical method that transcends the measuring of the nation-state and provides a scale blurring divides across bodies, the public and the private (Hyndman, 2001) and unearths relations beyond dualisms. Understanding islandness, thus, is an everyday more-than-human task; a thing of the intimate, a step towards becoming legible, becoming (in) visible (see Fig. 4).

6. Becoming visible and contained through hospitality

“... the romances between the sea and the mountain are what keep the heart from the dark.”

(Excerpt from Bajo song, subjected to my own translation.)

Nain Island exists in a myriad of places overlapping, defining each other, well beyond dichotomies of the physical and the social (see Fig. 5). The notion of islandscape is functions as a flow (Nimführ & Otto, 2020), one that is manifested through the relations hospitality unveiled but also one that existed at the very end of hospitality. Ritual hospitality is a place practice and concept: perhaps even an assemblage of relations (Pugh, 2018), visible through interactions crafted to help people navigate the surface of local systems of sociality and place-making processes. Thus, spaces and relations “are always in the process of being made” (Massey, 2005, p. 9). Meaning, here, is approached as produced by an entanglement between and among islands (Stratford et al., 2011) but also by the notion that “an island” can exist as an assemblage of island encounters (Schneider, 2020), sometimes regulated by the biases of researchers as they learn to navigate complex local networks and vernaculars.

Inner islandscapes are multi-layered: *Jalan Raya* (cemented high-street), *Jalan Yenkit* (the street closest to the hill) and *Jalan Pantai* (street closest to the sea, where houses on stilts are) connect and intersect through a stream of houses. These house-streams (*bagian*) represent the marriage of Nain Bajo spaces (mountain, sea) and exist in the context of complex Bajo kinship systems. A *bagian*, thus, functions as an island skeleton connecting island organisms in numerous ways. A system of relations based on much more than blood; based on history, reciprocity, and daily exchange. Like an island nervous system, houses, bridges, doors, shift, change, dissolve following more-than-human cycles (as spirits, ghosts, humans, and other island inhabitants interact, live, die). And as relationships are re-negotiated every day, doors change position, bridges and houses are demolished or refurbished. Therefore, reading the island (its relations and systems) requires more than just linguistic



Fig. 4. A view of Nain Bajo from the hill.



Fig. 5. Streams of houses (*bagian*, shared space in Bahasa Indonesia) expand as a place between hill and sea.

fluency; it requires semantic adaptability to the potential of the untold and unseen. Fortunately, the inductive spaces of research through ethnographic determinism (Sillitoe, 2016; Simpson, 2006) allow us semantic space to register the transmutation of understandings a researcher experiences while being regulated by the performed visibility of daily encounters and the invisibility of vernaculars of island knowledge and capability.

And so, I lived in all three streets during my two years on the island, and across Nain Island as it existed elsewhere. I interacted with a variety of people, with different backgrounds, jobs, ancestries, all identifying as Nain Bajo in that they had mastered the untold arts of the island (*mampu*). I, however, and in spite of all my inductivism, was still relegated to the role of observer participating only in what had been crafted as superficial events (e.g., weddings, Muslim celebrations such as *Tujuh Malam*, *Idul Fitri*, football matches). I could not yet fully understand what they entailed. I was allowed to participate in all major Bajo events on the island because I was always accompanied by somebody who kept me positioned right where the island wanted me: in a state of semi-consciousness, of permanent intertidal being. I was traveling island streets, not yet ready to travel *bagian* or seaweed fields, which hold the ultimate secrets of all relations.

My own conventions of accessibility, hospitality and informed consent were not at odds with those of the island. They were just accommodated in a formalised manner, away from the intimate, yet in balance. The more I could understand about the way houses, bridges and doors moved and changed every day, the less I was accompanied, followed, brought about. Various parts of *Jalan Pantai* represent diverse ways of being, belonging and becoming, all organs of the same island body (*kampung pulau*). Every day, I, together with others, navigated the island's three noticeably short streets (all walkable within 5–10 min) in the hope that I was going to get to know more about Nain's mechanisms of environmental knowledge production. And, every day, I was navigating the same relations (even when changing route, schedule, "place") via the same crafted narratives of island indigeneity (remote, peripheral, marginal). I was always accompanied (voluntarily or involuntarily) by

the same people: those the island had assigned as my "gatekeepers." Those whose status and influence was enough to keep me contented in my own delusion of knowing.

Here "mobility" functions as regulatory mechanism enabling absences and disabling presences: I was being moved around in ways that kept vernaculars concealed while "Bajo Island" was performed for me in ways I could recognise from prior literary derangements. But gradually, time after time, daily movement went beyond my own fixed locales to an intertidal zone of (dis)placement and de-territorialisation that shaped the identity of the hybridized subject (Strang, 2009; Pauwelussen & Verschoor, 2017) and the hybridising researcher as it comes to terms with different formulations of place beyond smallness and land/sea boundaries. Going beyond the idea of a topographically localised culture and moving away from the Malinowskian complex of a single-sited fieldwork and community (Malinowski, 1922), this ethnography has suggested that island spaces can also be understood as "places" exercised and performed differently by different Bajo of Nain Island and performed in specific ways to keep "outsiders" regulated and safely navigating vernaculars of knowledge and power while they stay on the island.

Navigating places as streets and streams of houses (*bagian*) through my own reflective transmutations (as detaching from mobility as disruption, of binaries of space and place, of land and sea as complementary) only became obvious at the end of hospitality: right when friends, research participants and acquaintances stopped providing for me, cooking for me, walking with me, translating, and defining for me. At the same time, daily references to "capability" as a feature that regulates Nain Bajo and to island powers that exist alongside Manado's assumptions about island marginality, started to make sense. Capability went beyond achieving status as a capable member of society; it meant knowing how to read the island, how to interact with the island and how to maintain networks which would grant the island its usual mobility. Island knowledge is determined by everyday encounters, based in ability to maintain connections, and create networks that are the basis of island power and agency. Numerous times, Bapak Haji Kasmin (an elder *Mbo* of

Nain Island, those who have achieved capability to know and ‘to make the island disappear; ’ become invisible) mentioned to me how becoming was a long and arduous process all islanders in Nain had to travel in order to be Bajo, in order to have (*menjadi, jadi dan memiliki*: “become, be and have”). In turn, he would often state that for every body on the island (any being), there comes a time when the island can be made to disappear (i.e., become invisible to others), but that it was a collective process. I had assumed that being a resident of an island for an extended period, actively walking it every day, actively engaging with its daily occurrences and actors was the first step to being. It was the other way around: I had to understand what being meant before I could meaningfully participate.

While granting me access to Muslim festivities, such as *Tujuh Malam*, was no doubt a friendly token of acceptance and consent, I was only permitted entry in the sense that I was accompanied by the external meaning-making my questions and comments sought, not the ones deemed relevant by the context. The transmutable aspects of my own position during fieldwork, and my research’s paradigms, helped me understand that navigating Bajo systems was a manifold process: one of stages I had to successfully travel inside and outside atolls, following the island as multi-sited and ever-changing.

7. Invisibility: Belonging and the end of hospitality

And right at the end of hospitality, I found myself facing a sophisticated network enacted by the capability to “borrow” material (for example, rice, squid) and non-material possessions (for example, detailed information, collaboration, influence). This type of “borrowing” implied non-immediate return and circulation rather than exchange. The *minta* system is a process of circulation, whereby possessions, alongside power, are embedded in Nain Bajo’s sense of individual collectivism. At the end of hospitality, I had entered a deeper and more challenging engagement with the island and those who inhabited it. Suddenly, during one of the many *Acara Harta* (‘wealth-display ceremonies’ held before marriage) I had attended, ‘the usual’ took on new meaning: it was a ceremony to convey much more than acceptance and formalise unions, it was a display of capability to obtain influence and consideration, a confirmation of power granted after coherently navigating existing island relations and the vernaculars of power and agency they produce. It situated, both groom and bride, as able Bajo and it reassured everyone attending (often the whole Nain Bajo) that power was still a Bajo notion and not an imported and commodified substitute, even though commodified approaches to materiality and power often co-existed. And best of all: it took place in motion, in between particular routes through the *bagian*. Such routes seemed counterintuitive and familiar, ever-changingly familiar.

Minta circulation exists alongside, albeit separated from, business dependencies to capitals, the market, external actors such as politicians and researchers, and, in essence, any newcomer. This system has long protected the island by having the capacity to render it invisible. Thus, *minta* feeds and develops through daily encounters operated under the spell of Bajo vernaculars of power and agency. Hospitality stops newcomers from accessing such a socio-economy of circulation before they are able to do so in a way that is minimally disruptive or controllable. Encounters, thus, are key elements of social cohesion and survival. Going hand-in-hand with contemporary critical approaches to ethnographic determinism, encounter determinism helps critically approach the ethnocentrism and eurocentrism that is still present throughout processes of research reflexivity and positionality: processes still situating imaginaries of tropical islands, identified as small, as environmentally regulated locales alone and subjugated to greater opposites. Such anthropocentric approaches to islands (Chandler & Pugh, 2021) are not only reductionist but also dismissive of the wholeness of island places, a wholeness negotiated across beings, entities. Islands are all and everything in between.

Thus, this ethnography suggests that the strategic essentialism of

articulated and performed indigeneity (Kohn, 2013; Lee, 2006; Li, 2000; Tsing, 1993, 2015) has not developed as a response to the overflow of international and local attention and narratives of “the indigenous” but as a product of a long history of dealing with and accommodating newcomers into vernaculars of power and agency, while keeping such systems concealed. The Bajo themselves are thereby situated as agents of change, rather than as subjected to “change” brought about by external environments, actors, and foreign systems. Hence, such strategic homogeneity, intended to protect existing pluralism, also ensures Nain Island’s Bajo can continue to peacefully coexist with neighbouring Siau and whoever visits the island. Their continuities, as part of “an island,” are more complex than the length of this article allows for. Their differences are no doubt received by the political acts of ritual and daily hospitality.

As I travelled through the Celebes and Moluccan seas, Bajo contexts seemed to all constitute constitutive organs of diverse island bodies, much wider than the constraints of topographic space, much more complex than the assumptions of marginality communicated by capitals and mainstreamed media, more sophisticated than the deductive eye can readily understand because before being in Nain Bajo (but well after arriving and settling), one is yet to prove one’s own worth.

8. Conclusion: A tidalectics of intertidal being

In this article, I have explored performed intertidal being, becoming and belonging through everyday hospitality as epistemological praxis and as reflective methodological framework by focusing on the (in) visibility it produces. Island research is in its essence a ritual of becoming, where the researcher travels the fluidity of island identity and agency not by own will, but through interactions and encounters that are regulated by complex systems of hospitality, preventing the researcher from fully becoming until they have metamorphosed. This compilation of literature, ethnographic vignettes and post-fieldwork reflective analysis has sought not only to highlight the importance of challenging definitions, classifications and conceptual binaries when aiming to understand vernacular notions of island “knowledge,” “agency” and “belonging,” but to depart from the researcher’s rites of passage.

Critical ethnography and the emerging of decolonisation efforts to centre more critical theory in island studies (Nadarajah et al., 2022; Nimführ & Meloni, 2021; Nimführ & Otto, 2020) and a long-standing call for encounter-determinism (Joseph, 2021; Mahajan, 2021; Nadarajah et al., 2022), rather than environmental or sociocultural determinism, as more-than-human approach allowing epistemological spaces to be plural and transformative. In the context of this research, Bajo places, as they are constantly renegotiated, exist as a pluriverse challenging topography, administrative regionalism, positivist notions of mobility and managerial approaches to “place” and “identity.” They exist in the tidalectics of being in between tides, which emanates and regulates, flows, and erases. It is through the determinism of encounters such as *Tujuh Malam*, *minta* systems and *mampu* (islander’s skills) that transitions are enabled and disabled. Island identity and knowledge are intertwined, whether through visibility, invisibility, or both.

Despite the vast amount of ethnographic research about the Bajo, very little attention has been given to the transformative power of island’s tidalectics. Visible hospitality helps protect vernaculars from the disruptive presence of exonymic actors and as their capacity to thrive through island exchanges and circulation (*mampu*) develops. We are not in power, and we have never been; while we learn, try to understand, and study (become), we are only negotiating our capability to safely participate (belong). The complexity and problematic nature of island representation and ethics in research call for the inclusion of paradigms of invisibility, intertidal being, e.g., a theorising of everyday hospitality as a relational system, notion, and practice, where island power and agency are situated at the forefront, epistemologically and practically.

It is time to acknowledge that validity can no longer be defined in

terms of objectivity constructed on the basis of what is present and visible (only to the researcher). Research validity, thus, needs to be redefined as seeking a more ethical approach to local agency and vernaculars of being and becoming. Disclosing our own powerless attempts to navigate the untold and unseen while being regulated by it can help position island epistemologies as a continuum of the researcher's journey through island articulation in practice. Thus, an awareness and acknowledgement of the tangential subjectivities rather than linear causality is, in its essence, objective.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Elena Burgos Martinez: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Software, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Best regards, Elena Burgos Martinez Leiden University.

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