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CONCEPTS, THEORIES, & INTRODUCTIONS

# If Islands Did Not Exist, It Would Be Necessary to Invent Them: Grappling With Divergent Ascriptions of Islandness in Island Studies

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Island studies has had much to say about why understanding perceptions of islandness matters for understanding the world, and it has often questioned what islandness is. Island studies has nevertheless often taken for granted that islandness ought to be perceived and has often seen islandness as something good that requires preservation. The act of studying islands per se introduces the risk that a researcher will look for and look at islands without considering whether the islands they are seeing really exist to everyone, and whether they exist for certain other people in the ways the scholar believes them to exist. In this paper, we argue that there can never be a universally or objectively correct understanding of islands, as these are socially constructed geographical phenomena. Building upon the authors' own personal engagements with questions of islandness in China, Kalaallit Nunaat/Greenland, and Fiji, we suggest it is important for scholars to think carefully about why and how islandness matters in particular places—or else to acknowledge what motivations and power relations drive them to ascribe island status.

## Introduction

It perhaps goes without saying that scholars who perform island studies believe in the value of researching islands. In common with other area studies, island studies engages in the production of its field as an object of research.

Nevertheless, there is no consensus among people in general concerning what islands are. Given that island studies scholars are themselves people, it is natural that they too take a diversity of perspectives when approaching islands (e.g., Fletcher, 2011; Foley et al., 2023; Hay, 2006; Hayward, 2016). In this paper, we question what happens when scholars' understandings of islands and islandness clash with those of people who live in the places being studied, specifically when scholarly ascriptions of islandness are rejected or ignored by those who are being treated as islanders. This question has

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previously been raised in passing (Nadarajah et al., 2022). It echoes in some respects island studies' long-running efforts to grapple with the concept of the archipelago (e.g., Stratford, 2013), including the recognition that archipelagic relations may push islands into conflict (Roitman & Veenendaal, 2023; Zhu & Grydehøj, 2023). Yet no serious attempt has been made to reflect upon island studies' own tendency to construct islands.

Although island studies has had much to say about why understanding perceptions of islandness matters for understanding the world, and although it has questioned what islandness is, we argue that it has often been taken for granted that islandness *ought to be* perceived. Island studies has moreover often seen islandness as something good that requires preservation. The act of studying islands *per se* introduces the risk that a researcher will look for and look at islands without considering whether the islands they are seeing really exist to everyone, and whether they exist for certain other people in the ways the scholar believes them to exist. Our argument is not that island studies scholars as a group are incorrect and that people who are studied as islanders are correct in their understandings of islands; it is very precisely that there can *never* be universally or objectively correct understandings of geographical phenomena that are, by their very nature, socially constructed (Nadarajah & Grydehøj, 2024).

Power relations are an inevitable part of any interactions between people and between people and space. Spatial practices and conceptualisations are never ideologically or politically neutral (Massey, 2009). This is true for the figure of the island, which is both influential for and reflective of colonial geography's imaginings of the world. It is thus necessary to question when and why islandness (defined here as the characteristics associated with island status) is a relevant lens for studying a particular people or place. It is also necessary to consider which viewpoints are privileged when certain places are labelled as 'islands' as well as to analyse how people receive, respond to, and adapt to projections of power. These include the imposition of conceptual schemes that structure relations between peoples, places, and nations. This is not to say that islandness is an inappropriate means of framing research or understanding the world, just that it is important to be aware of the role islandness plays in wider power structures.

We begin by first introducing the autoethnographic aspect of our methods and then offer reflections concerning our own personal engagements with questions of 'islandness'. We follow this with a conceptual history of islands within island studies to see how scholars in the field produce and reproduce islands and then with an analysis of our personal reflections and the island studies scholarship engagements in light of literature from both inside and outside the field.

## Autoethnographic methods

This paper has at its core a set of brief autoethnographic accounts of our own personal engagements with questions of islandness in China (Grydehøj & Su), Kalaallit Nunaat/Greenland (Markussen), and Fiji (Mausio). These

brief accounts were written individually by the relevant authors in response to the prompts of "Do you feel that the place you study is an island?" (Grydehøj & Su) and "Do you feel that you are an islander?" (Markussen, Mausio). The authors did not have access to one another's responses prior to writing, and the accounts were ultimately lightly edited by Grydehøj.

Autoethnography in its various forms has played an important role in island studies and has been influential in both producing the island as an object of research and reflecting upon this production (Boon et al., 2018; Brinklow, 2023; Farbotko et al., 2023; Hong, 2023; Stratford, Farbotko, et al., 2023; Stratford, Baldacchino, et al., 2023b). One benefit to autoethnography is its foregrounding of subjectivities and the influence of personal experience, undercutting the temptation to perceive scholarly research as universally valid (e.g., Baker, 2024; Frain, 2023; Grydehøj, 2024). The present paper was inspired by our own thinking and experiences as scholars who study islands (though not in all cases as researchers who self-identify as 'island studies scholars'). We have all had, in ways that are reflected in the three autoethnographic accounts provided below, different encounters with the concept of islandness. Our own perspectives are no more correct or internally coherent than anyone else's. Indeed, as our accounts illustrate, we too have been confronted by complex, messy, and sometimes conflicting relations between our research, our cultures, and the places and people we study.

In this paper, we are upfront about our own positionings as researchers. We follow here the approach of consciously coauthoring across difference that has become a cornerstone of the work within our wider research network (e.g., Grydehøj et al., 2020, 2021; Nadarajah et al., 2022). By articulating diversely positioned views on islandness, we can shed new light on island research. Following the presentation of our personal reflections, we review the island studies and related literature in light of them.

## Personal reflections

### Adam Grydehøj and Ping Su: China

We were born and raised in continental regions and have long histories in island studies. We are currently researching river islands in Guangzhou, a large city in South China.

Historical maps, texts, and placenames show that both locals and foreigners once regarded much of today's city as an expanse of mountain islands, rivers, sandbars, canals, wetlands, lakes, and shoals (Su & Grydehøj, 2022). Boats were a primary means of transport within the city (Lin & Su, 2024). Over the past centuries though, Guangzhou's water spaces have increasingly been replaced by terrestrial spaces due to land reclamation, drainage and infill, sedimentation, and road and bridge construction. Island and mainland have in many cases coalesced. We are interested in how islandness has affected Guangzhou's development.

In our interviews with residents of Nancun Village, on the (debatable) island of Panyu in the south of the city, we find that while villagers feel that water spaces are important for the city, they are reluctant to identify places in Guangzhou as islands. This is true even for places that are still surrounded by water. When pressed, they really only identify as islands 1) very small, uninhabited river islands and sandbars and 2) the few sites marketed as islands by local authorities. The villagers see bridges and transport infrastructure as preventing other places from being islands, and they do not romanticise the notion of islandness.

In the past, we have struggled to convince sceptical scholars that an island studies perspective is useful for researching 'island cities'. We have struggled with peer reviewers who have argued that places surrounded by water in Guangzhou are not islands because they are bridged, too densely urbanised, or lack what some scholars see as characteristics of island sociality. More recently, we have needed to ask how we might convince local people to recall that Guangzhou is an urban archipelago.

Only now do we ask why we *want* local people to feel they live on islands.

**Ulunnguaq Markussen: Kalaallit Nunaat**

I was born and raised in Kalaallit Nunaat/Greenland and have lived in different parts of the country.

When talking about our country, we never say it is an island. I have asked various other Inuit if they see it as an island, and the answer is always the same: "It's not something I think about." Only when we are abroad do we proudly tell people that "Greenland is the biggest island in the world."

When we talk about islands, we have an idea of islands as difficult to reach from outside but easily accessible at an internal level, with coherent infrastructure. For example, although Iceland is far from Europe, it is easy to drive around the island by car. We do not have this feeling in Kalaallit Nunaat. My family in the north feels so far away from me now in the west, but so too do people in the east and the south.

Our country is so huge, the distances between places so vast, and the terrain so difficult that it is impossible to drive from one town or settlement to another. The infrastructure outside the large towns in the west is very poor, and there are big differences in how people live around the country. There is simply limited contact between people in different places, creating ignorance, mistrust, and prejudice within our small population. For example, the eastern town of Tasiilaq, where I am now researching, is nearly 700 km from its municipal and national capital, and its needs are frequently neglected by policymakers.

Kalaallit Nunaat's history as a Danish colony has encouraged a nationbuilding project that emphasises national unity. The cultural identity, history, and language of the majority have become important markers of a unitary Inuit identity, concealing the heterogenous nature of Kalaallit Nunaat's peoples. One of my older informants in Tasiilaq explains that if

people in the east have not lived on the west coast in their youths, they will never learn the majority Kalaallisut language. This produces social exclusion, as the government administration operates in Kalaallisut and Danish.

Outsiders call Kalaallit Nunaat an island, but that is not how it feels to those who live here.

**Asinate Mausio: Fiji**

I feel like an islander. It is part of my identity as a member of the diaspora from the Lau archipelago living on Viti Levu, the Fiji mainland.

I am a Lauan islander first and a Fijian second. My parents are from a village on the island of Kabara, and although I was born and raised in urban Suva and Lautoka on Viti Levu, I always think of myself as a Lauan islander. It is the ocean that binds us to our roots, together with our totems. I do not have a sense of belonging to Viti Levu. My parents and grandparents made sure I know my totems, my tribe, and my clan back in Kabara. I truly see myself as a *kai wai*, which is the indigenous Fijian term for 'people of the sea'. This is how we see ourselves. The antonym of *kai wai* is *kai vanua*, meaning 'people of the land'. This connotes the original inhabitants who, in Fijian folklore, were already present in Fiji when seafaring immigrants arrived on our shores in prehistory, well before the first contact with Europeans and later the evangelisers.

There is a sense of belonging in this. At the regional level and beyond, we see ourselves as Pacific islanders. While ideas of islandness and what it is to be an islander may differ in other Pacific islands, it is important to find commonalities in perceptions across Pacific communities.

And yet this islander status and sense of belonging is not open to everyone. In Fiji, the indigenous concept of *vulagi* (visitor or outsider) refers to non-indigenous Fijians, including the Indo-Fijian community, who are descendants of indentured labourers. *Vulagi* are those who lack *yavutu* (tribal homes) or do not belong to a clan and tribe. *Vulagi* can never be *kai wai*, and from the perspective of some ethnonational indigenous Fijians, Indo-Fijians have their homeland across the ocean in India. This conception discriminates against second- and third-generation Indo-Fijians, who were born and raised in Fiji, ignoring that these communities also have a right to call Fiji home. This highlights the politics and complexities of islandness: How much of indigenous Fijian feelings of being islanders is a result of a quest for self-preservation as an ethnic group?

## Looking out to islands

The above personal reflections developed in light of our experiences involving pieces of land surrounded by water but also our experiences with the academic field of island studies. Our various, individually situated engagements with this field have interacted with our own ideas concerning islandness, which come to expression in our professional lives as researchers

and other aspects of our private lives. Below, we offer a partial conceptual history of islands within island studies, deepened by reference to our personal reflections.

Baldacchino (2004) published a paper, 'The coming of age of island studies', heralding the emergence of a new field. By tying together discrete, multidisciplinary strands of island research, he set an island studies research agenda that has remained in place for more than two decades—and that has influenced the work of all the authors of the present paper.

Baldacchino's early summary of why island-focused research makes sense remains vital: "At face value," an island "is a geographically finite, total, discrete, sharply precise physical entity which accentuates clear and holistic notions of location and identity ... and induces a more acute competition for more limited, and less diverse, resources" (Baldacchino, 2004, p. 272). That 'at face value' indicates a desire to transcend commonsense elements of islandness. Islands must not, Baldacchino writes, "be construed flippantly, anecdotally ... as pristine, exotic, manageably simple social microcosms or physical laboratories; and small islanders as simple, sensuous, savage natives of passive respondents" (Baldacchino, 2004, p. 278).

Baldacchino's article not only takes its title from Margaret Mead's classic (Mead, 1928) work of Pacific anthropology but also takes substantial inspiration from the previous decades' research into Pacific island societies. As Baldacchino (2004) himself notes, however, much of this research had not been undertaken by Pacific islanders but instead by people of European cultural origin who have been looking out to islands for inspiration, and much of it has been markedly ethnocentric. Island studies' island imagination is inseparable from a European culture that simultaneously champions island distinctiveness and reduces islandness to metaphor (Baldacchino, 2013).

In the intervening years, island studies has flourished. There are now at least four international peer-reviewed journals with a multidisciplinary island focus: *Island Studies Journal* (founded by Baldacchino in 2006), *Shima* (2007), *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* (2012), and *Okinawan Journal of Island Studies* (2020), all of which currently have their editorial offices in the Asia-Pacific region (China, Australia, South Korea, and Japan respectively). (There is also *Small States & Territories* (2018), which is based in Malta and devotes significant attention to island polities, though without an island focus.) Island studies scholarship continues, however, to be driven significantly by research concerning 'non-Western' islands that has been undertaken by researchers located outside the regions in question (Grydehøj et al., 2023). That is, island studies' understanding of islandness still depends in large part on island regions as envisioned by scholars of European cultural origin, even as Europe, North America, and Australia no longer have a monopoly on the production of island studies knowledge. In this paper, as elsewhere, we understand 'the West' and 'the non-West' not as places but as categories created out of European Modernity, with 'the West' encapsulating European culture and 'the non-West' forming a residual category into which

European culture could deposit all that which it regarded as deviant and wrong. Precisely because the West/non-West binary is deeply flawed, essentialising, and homogenising, it is important to grapple with the ways in which it continues to affect scholarly and other social practices (Nadarajah & Grydehøj, 2024).

Island studies has been intent on simultaneously pinning down and complicating the notion of 'islandness'. Ilan Kelman (2023) writes, "From the early days of island studies and from dictionaries across many languages, the baseline for the definition of 'island' is a small piece of land surrounded by water, hence focusing on tangibility and physicality" (p. 1). Yet an island is not just a fact of physical geography, and 'islandness' continues to defy straightforward definition—not just because no one can agree on what 'small' means (Kelman, 2023).

As Aideen Foley et al. (2023) suggest, "Islands can be seen as a geographical form that matters, or is made to matter by people, but does not have an independent existence. It becomes difficult ... to attribute unambiguously any specific trait or descriptor as defining islandness" (p. 1). The characteristics associated with islandness depend on who is doing the assessing. "The definer brings their biases and preconceived ideas to the definitions, privileging those who can and wish to discuss the topic such that English and top-down academic and policy discourses dominate" (Foley et al., 2023, p. 10).

The problem is not that people define islands or take an interest in islands as such. The problem is that people often take for granted their own conceptions concerning islands in a general sense. Since early on in the development of the field, factors such as smallness, remoteness, isolation, and inaccessibility have been regarded as having tangible results on island cultures, economies, politics, and societies (e.g., Baldacchino & Milne, 2000; Bertram, 2004; Briguglio, 1995). Practically oriented island studies has produced important results and revealed real-world impacts of certain kinds of island spatiality and island thinking. However, there is a risk of island studies approaching islands in a somewhat circular manner, with culturally specific factors such as smallness, remoteness, isolation, and/or inaccessibility being posited as characteristics of islandness; with islands being defined in accordance with these characteristics; and then with empirical research based on samples of islands thus defined proving that islands are indeed small, remote, isolated, and/or inaccessible. The same problems arise when researchers use official or legal definitions that are themselves rooted in culturally specific factors (Hobbs & Rothwell, 2024; Taglioni, 2011). The use of the Eurostat definition of islands within the European Union as a basis for research provides an example of how unreflective deployment of official definitions can continually reinforce limited definitions of islandness and thereby ultimately narrow the scope and imagination of researchers and policymakers (e.g., Gløersen et al., 2019; Santini et al., 2013). As Kelman (2023) notes, the typical and official approach to islandness that is grounded in "the island-mainland separation represents islands as being the minor

'other' to mainlands, especially in need of more help due to vulnerability, marginality, isolation, and remoteness" (p. 3), notwithstanding the constestability of these stereotypes and the fact that many other geographical contexts exhibit similar characteristics.

Grydehøj (2017) critiques this as an "insularity within island studies," a "focus on what we already know, on continually reiterating that small islands are exceptional because they are small and that they are small (and capable of being regarded as independent units of analysis) because they are exceptional" (p. 8). Although Grydehøj (2017) recommends remedying this by island studies expanding its outlook beyond Western perspectives, it is important to note that non-Western peoples have their own culturally specific and limited formal and informal definitions of islandness. In other words, it is not that European culture is wrong; it is that there is no objective, commonly agreed-upon understanding of islandness with worldwide applicability.

And so, the debate within island studies—as within wider popular and scholarly discourse (e.g., Davies & Lai, 2025)—has continued, with island studies theory accruing nuance over time. In a seminal paper on 'Studying islands: On whose terms?', Baldacchino (2008) urges caution when seeking to disentangle island and mainland perceptions, identities, and representations. Elaine Stratford, Baldacchino, et al. (2023a) highlight the challenge of identifying research methodologies that suit the wildly diverse ways of being an island and being an islander. There has been very considerable research into differences between insiders' and outsiders' perspectives on islands. John Gillis (2004) notes that visitors and incomers are more likely than locals to romanticise certain kinds of islandness. Zhikang Wang and Mia M. Bennett (2020), exploring the ways in which islandness does (and often does not) matter to different people, underscore the importance of "putting human encounters at the heart of how we understand islandness" (p. 206)—and thereby perhaps the necessity of distinguishing between popular, scholarly, island, mainland, and other perspectives (Vannini & Taggart, 2013). Through such research, we can reflect upon our own experiences of islandness as both people who live on islands and people who study people who live on islands, as 'outsiders within' (Nadarajah, 2007, 2021). Even literary and textual island imaginations can be constructed as ways of addressing wider societal tensions connected with colonialism and unequal power relations (Lin & Su, 2022; Su & Huang, 2022).

Many of these issues were raised early on by Françoise Péron (2004), who uses France's Isles of Ponant as a starting point for examining splits and overlaps between insider-outsider perceptions of islands. Yet despite recognising that islandness is subjective, Péron (2004) slips into an 'activist for islandness' register that would become common in island studies writing: "One is obliged to ask what should and can be done to ensure that, both as physical spaces and as communities, islands can continue to exist in the heart of the modern world in all their difference and their uniqueness" (p. 328).

*What should and can be done?* In asking how to save islands, Péron hints that islands might be lost. Yet because it is unclear what islandness is, it is similarly unclear what it means to *lose* islands. How, exactly, might the Isles of Ponant cease to be islands? How is their islandness threatened by 'the modern world'? Does 'island' here refer to a way of life, and if so, how does this one particular island way of life relate to the ways of life on other islands? How is it that island studies manages to deploy a common rhetoric of islandness for islands off the coast of France (Isles of Ponant), for river islands in East Asian megacities (Guangzhou), for islands of Oceania (Fiji), and for Arctic archipelagos (Kalaallit Nunaat)? In what sense does 'island' exist as a meaningful category?

Already in 2004, Baldacchino questions the inevitability of perceived islandness as an attribute of islands, noting that "The identification with, and assertion of, a specifically *island* identity ... is a matter of an at times deliberate, at times subconscious, juxtaposition" (Baldacchino, 2004, p. 273). That is, island identity is both a geographical and a political act, and people can live on pieces of land surrounded by water without conceiving of themselves as islanders.

In a study of relations involving the mainland and island areas of the South China city of Zhuhai, Gang Hong (2017) argues against easy binaries—not by rejecting binary thinking but by calling for thinking with more dialectical, relationally complex binaries that transcend "a mechanical spatial arrangement" (p. 23) between land and sea. Hong further develops this thought in more grounded case studies that complicate the notion of islands as 'enclaves' and symbolic and material resources for the mainland (Hong, 2020b, 2020a).

Ultimately, Hong pushes back at the assumption that islands in China *ought to* matter in the ways they matter in Western thought. Just as islands within fiction "can be reduced to sites of contestation for outside players in utopian fantasy" (Hong, 2022, p. 14), so too can islands outside the West be reduced to testing grounds for Western theory. Hong (2023) argues that Chinese island researchers can intentionally or by circumstance end up pursuing foreign ideas concerning islands. Grydehøj and Su recognise this in their own work, while also recognising how such pursuit of foreign ideas can meet with local resistance.

While island studies seems oriented toward Western perspectives and concerns, these perspectives and concerns—including the field's traditional and often laudable celebration of smallness (in the sense of small islands, a small field, and a small number of journals)—are increasingly being written about by scholars outside the West. As a reader of an earlier draft of this paper noted, many people *do* care greatly about islands, but there is also a degree of pragmatism among authors who have found that, by writing as though islands matter, they can improve their professional and material standings.

Similar choices will always be made by professional researchers, who must balance pursuit of their scholarly passions with the need to situate themselves within funding ecosystems and institutional structures.

Such is the power of the Western island imaginary, however, that it can drown out alternative conceptions. Sarah Nimführ, reflecting on her own trip to China's Zhoushan Archipelago (Nimführ & Meloni, 2021), contemplates how island studies scholars may not recognise as 'real' island places that fail to 'validate' their preexisting island conceptions. Locally relevant conceptions of islands that diverge from the isolated island stereotype are liable "to be overlooked or defined out of existence" (Nadarajah et al., 2022, p. 15) by island studies, with examples including floodplain islands, island cities, and densely networked islands at the urban-rural interface. Islands may furthermore be created by complex mythic or emotional resonances (Grydehøj, 2025; Hayward, 2022a, 2024; Johnson, 2024; Nadarajah, 2021) that are difficult to translate into a universalised island studies scholarship.

Some such places may be covered by Philip Hayward's (2012) influential concept of the 'aquapelago' (an "integrated land and aquatic space ... constituted by human (inter)activity" (p. 2)), while others may not. Hayward has been especially assiduous in tracing the boundaries of islandness and challenging the archetypal island as an isolated, discrete, and clearly bordered piece of land. In a series of fascinating articles, Hayward discusses places that are called 'islands' by locals despite not being surrounded by water. Such studies demonstrate the diversity of localised perceptions of islandness and islander identity as well as the scholarly impulse to seek definitional precision and at times to act as arbiter over conflicting notions of islandness.

As Hayward (2022b, 2022c, 2023) shows, pieces of land that are not surrounded by water are often perceived locally as islands. In some cases, these are pieces of land that have undergone what Hayward (2023) calls 'de-islanding' due to land reclamation. It is often taken within island studies as common sense that an island that has been joined to the mainland will lose some or all its social properties of islandness, yet this begs the question: Whose common sense? Whose definition of 'islandness'? The common sense of the professional scholar who writes about islands or of a resident of this or that particular island or mainland area might not be the common sense of everyone else—as is indeed illustrated by Hayward's (2022b, 2022c, 2023) examples of people who say that peninsulas of physical geography are in fact islands. By the same token, Grydehøj and Su are studying delta islands that have been joined with one another or with the mainland by land reclamation or bridging. Although they do not personally regard this as necessarily 'de-islanding', they have had to admit that people living in these places do not generally accept attributions of islandness. Although researchers need not agree with them, it is important to engage with and acknowledge local conceptions of islandness or lack of islandness.

## Islands of abstraction

As our above personal reflections and the introduction to the literature suggest, there is a degree of both scholarly and popular unease about what islands, islanders, and islandness truly are. For all that islands are commonly defined as 'small pieces of land surrounded by water', there has never been general consensus in either island studies or popular culture that all pieces of land surrounded by water are in fact islands or are in equal possession of islandness. Many people—especially coming from continental cultural backgrounds—associate islands with isolation, regarding islandness and accessibility/connectivity as existing in inverse proportion. Island stereotypes that both drive and are driven by Western research into 'primitive' island peoples contribute to limiting opportunities for understanding other forms of islandness, beyond "a jaundiced, mainland-driven impression" of inaccessibility (Baldacchino, 2004, p. 280).

Many islanders do feel that islandness is related to relative remoteness and inaccessibility, though research showing this has come almost exclusively from islands with majority culturally European populations (e.g., Baldacchino & Starc, 2021; Bates et al., 2019; Grydehøj & Hayward, 2011; Ronström, 2021). The association between islandness and inaccessibility is nevertheless usually taken for granted in island studies without being a focus of dedicated investigation. Research that has been undertaken on this question—often specifically regarding the relative impacts of ferries and fixed links (e.g., bridges, tunnels, causeways)—has produced mixed results (e.g., Baldacchino, 2007; Brinklow & Jennings, 2023; Gaini, 2024; Grydehøj & Zhang, 2020). Research with a strong ferry focus at times seems to suggest that people get a sense of islandness from the process of riding on (or waiting for) a ferry (e.g., Hayfield & Pristed Nielsen, 2022; Lau et al., 2024; Vannini, 2011), as opposed to from lacking easy access to the mainland as such. Scholars nevertheless often seem content to uncritically use their own locally derived ideas concerning islands as the basis for a universal understanding of islandness (Hay, 2006).

Grydehøj and Su's experiences in Guangzhou show a local inclination (at least within a few particular villages) to view bridged and densely urbanised places as insufficiently differentiated from their surroundings to be regarded as islands unless they are actively marketed as islands. Markussen's experiences in Kalaallit Nunaat, however, show something different: Although isolation and separation from the outside world are regarded as important aspects of islandness, so too is internal cohesion. Islandness, in this case, suggests a sense of unity that does not exist in what foreign researchers like to regard as the world's largest island. Mausio's experiences in Fiji locate islandness and islander status in terms of tribe, totem, and clan, allowing islandness to mark difference relative to a mainland, even if this is a mainland that many continental observers regard as yet another island. The tendency for some in island studies and other scholarship to treat societies like Fiji as 'island states', 'large ocean states', or other collective spatial concepts may overlook

internal difference, including differential ascriptions and identifications of what islandness and islander status mean in different contexts and for peoples with different (or no) totems.

Marliena Mela (2023) perceptively identifies islandness as a kind of heritage discourse: "Islandness as heritage is then the shared consciousness and memory of the island. This memory includes a particular set of relationships to other places, as produced through the consecutive and alternating configuration of maritime networks" (p. 5). Islandness here is less the state of being an island of physical geography than it is the social construction of place-based meaning that particular people associate with particular land-water assemblages. This conceptualisation helps explain narratives of loss of islandness: It is less that the island itself is perceived as vanishing than that situated memories of what the island means to particular sets of people are perceived as vanishing.

Difficulties arise when one attempts to take the islandness of a single, specific island or archipelago and extend it to other islands and archipelagos—that is, when islandness is conceived of as something shared among groups that do not in fact possess shared memories. Owe Ronström (2008) shows how, when specific elements of island culture are recognised and authorised as heritage with a social meaning that transcends the local community, it can hinder the practicing of island traditions: Once disconnected from a specific people and place, discourses of shared heritage tend to favour dominant social groups, regardless of whether these are composed of islanders. When "narratives of exploitation" that form part of local island heritage become widely adopted by outsiders as well, they may simplify "the various interests and agencies of islanders" (Mela, 2023, p. 15). In other words, it may be problematic even when external actors embrace a people's sense of islander identity.

This is among the issues considered by Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler (2021), in their 'Anthropocene islands' project: "Islands have become important liminal and transgressive spaces for work on the Anthropocene ... from which a great deal of Anthropocene thinking is drawing out and developing alternatives to hegemonic, modern, 'mainland' or 'one world' thinking" (p. 2). Chandler and Pugh (2021) are at pains to show that islanders' needs are not always at the forefront of this intellectual work, yet as Craig Santos Perez (2021) notes, when islands of representation take up so much scholarly space, there is a risk that the experience (or non-experience) of being an islander becomes an afterthought. As Philip Steinberg (2023) writes of attempts to 'think with' archipelagos "to undermine static ontologies that underpin statist power," "encounters between hegemonic actors (and hegemonic ideas) and their 'others'" frequently involve "alterity being orientalized, fetishized, commodified or treated as ethnographic 'data'" (pp. 324-325). The impulse to use the figure of the island to say something of relevance to the world as a whole is characteristic of scholarship originating in continental—rather than island—settings. This alone should give us pause.

The microcosmic imaginary often proves disempowering for islanders, valuing them for what they can teach those at the centre of economic, cultural, and political power rather than dwelling upon islanders' own needs and desires (Zhu & Grydehøj, 2023). Thus, while we are convinced of the value of comparative studies, we join others in resisting the production of islands as microcosms, laboratories, or models for the mainland (Greenhough, 2006; Gugganig, 2021; Taitingfong, 2020).

We are reminded of Sara Ahmed's (2004) warning in 'Declarations of whiteness': Emphasis on the problem itself (in this case, reductive and potentially damaging representations of islands) keeps attention focused on those who already hold power. Island studies is a field that has been increasingly 'critical', yet as Ahmed (2004) discusses concerning anti-racism scholarship and practice:

> The 'critical' often functions as a place where we deposit our anxieties. We might assume that if we are doing critical whiteness studies, rather than whiteness studies, that we can protect ourselves from doing—or even being seen to do—the wrong kind of whiteness studies. But the word 'critical' does not mean the elimination of risk, and nor should it become just a description of what we are doing over here, as opposed to them, over there.

That is, writing about the need for critical approaches, labelling one's own work as critical, and highlighting shortcomings in the field are not 'performative'; the utterance itself does not perform the action of anti-racism (Ahmed, 2004)—or decolonisation, or respect for local understandings of islandness/non-islandness. Every time a scholar uncritically imposes their own ideas about islands onto people who do not want them, it is an imposition—no matter how much a scholar may proclaim their criticality. Criticality becomes fetishised and, like islands themselves, becomes a tool for disciplining and professional advancement among scholars. Care should be taken when making 'declarations of islandness'.

## When an island is not an island

Only a tiny percentage of scholarship concerning islands occurs within the field of island studies. Most people who study particular islands have never heard of island studies. This is also the case for research undertaken by people who live on or have come from islands.

Yaso Nadarajah et al. (2022, p. 14) broach the subject of the relative lack of interest in island studies among non-Western scholars who live on 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.

What does it mean to say that 'islands' and 'archipelagos' may not exist in certain cultures? Boundedness (clearly demarcated spatial limits), smallness (small population, land area, or economic size), littorality (land-water interactions), and isolation and remoteness (separation from other land areas) are all commonly seen as characteristics of islands (i.e., as combining to form islandness) (Foley et al., 2023), yet all are also relational in nature, only have meaning with reference to other land areas. Even the most basic physical geography definition of 'island' implies the existence of other (related) pieces of land that are not surrounded by water and implies the notion of water as something that can 'surround' (border, restrict, join together) land.

To say that attributes of islandness only exist in relation is not to say that islands of physical geography and the people who dwell on or with them do not matter. It is to say that not everyone cares equally (or at all) about islandness as such. Research across a diversity of cultures and regions has shown that perceptions of islandness can emerge and submerge. A place can be regarded as an island at one time and not as an island later, and *vice versa*.

Peoples whose lifeworlds are composed primarily of island and water spaces frequently do not conceive of themselves as living on islands or within archipelagos (Grydehøj et al., 2020). The main island of Kalaallit Nunaat may be too large to be perceptible as an island, and its inhabitants' precolonial isolation from distant peoples meant that it was simply regarded as 'the land', as the place people called home. This enormous main island is, however, surrounded by various smaller islands, one of which is Qeqertarsuaq ('Huge Island'). This suggests a Kalaallit cultural understanding that positions 'islandness' offshore from the Kalaallit Nunaat mainland.

Pieces of land surrounded by water that are not enmeshed in culturally significant relations with other terrestrial geographies may not be perceived as islands. This may formerly have been the case for Pongso no Tao ('Land of the People'), which had very limited cultural connection with the large island of Taiwan in the precolonial period. Yet cultural histories do not limit future conceptualisations. As Tao author and scholar Syaman Rapongan tells us in personal correspondence, "My point is 'one island, one nation, one ocean'. It means each islander can choose how they want to explain their own vision, and for me, I always say 'we live on a different planet'." This is certainly an island vision, but it differs from the vision of intense interconnectivity that is celebrated by many other islanders and across much of island studies.

It may be possible to think of islands as objects of physical geography, but *islandness* is more than—or other than—that. Epeli Hau'ofa (1994) formulated his influential 'sea of islands' concept to envision an Oceania that escapes the "belittling" continental island imaginary, that resists the islanding of Oceania's peoples. Hau'ofa's criticism targets the nascent field of island studies, and his point is in part that islandness is *not* what matters most.

In a thought-provoking paper that has up to this point seemingly gone unnoticed by island studies *per se*, Vicente M. Diaz (2015) goes further than Hauʻofa, arguing with reference to indigenous Pacific seafaring traditions that Oceania's islands are not islands at all:

> No island was ever an island to begin with, or at least, they are necessary political fictions in the constructedness of ideas of continentalness. Products of continental thinking, islands can better be understood as instrumentalities in opposition to which continental thinking could imagine itself into being, and imagine this being to be epicenters of big, cosmopolitan, sophisticated, worldly things and peoples. ... To continue to treat [islands and 'Islanders'] as natural, unproblematic categories of existence and being is also to obfuscate the histories by which imperialism and colonialism in 'insular' places such as the Pacific 'island' region are shored up through narrativizations of that form of land that has come to be known as islands (Diaz, 2015, pp. 100–101).

The continent creates the island for its own purposes, confounding attempts to understand the island *as island*. If there is such thing as an island in Diaz's (2015) view of Oceanic thinking, it is a mobile, expanding, and contracting entity interwoven with sea creatures, cartography, the stars, and song.

While attempts are sometimes made to universalise Hauʻofa's theory, it is not the case that Hauʻofa's or Diaz's perspectives represent the 'truth' about islands; they instead represent the truth about islands for these particular authors at particular places and times. Other Pacific perspectives on islands, islanders, and islandness may differ. Any effort to uncover a universal understanding of islandness is bound to fail. Sense of place and identity are conditioned by history, culture, environment, and interethnic relations (Nadarajah & Grydehøj, 2024; Wang & Su, 2024). As Mausio's experiences of Fiji show, islander status can be significant not just for marking out internal difference but also for the most fundamental understandings of people's connections with the land and sea.

The strand of island research that Hauʻofa (1994) critiques would in time evolve into an island studies that describes and often advocates methods by which island societies can leverage the peculiar economic, political, and social advantages associated with islandness. From a perspective that rejects the objective existence of islands, such thinking within economic and political geography represents an acceptance of colonial premises and a relinquishing of indigenous potentials. As Kelman (2023) suggests, "definitional machinations" concerning islands "can be steeped in practical governance and geographies of governance" (p. 2). To label a place an island is to imbue it with certain culturally and socially specific values, attributes, and perhaps conditions for existence.

It matters very much who is performing the labelling. The definitional and disciplining power of the observer, especially in cases of islands that have experienced colonialism, should not be underestimated: For instance, even as some continental scholars use island studies to argue that island states and territories like Kalaallit Nunaat have every opportunity to succeed in today's interconnected world, other continental scholarly and political actors use ascriptions of islandness to imply that these places are helpless and require protection by and from outside powers (Grydehøj, 2020). The turning of a place into an island can have positive, negative, or mixed implications.

## Conclusion

In 1768, Voltaire wrote, "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him." The same seems to be true for islands. Where they do not exist, some people feel the impulse to create them.

Islandness is not an innate attribute of all pieces of land surrounded by water. Many people who live on such pieces of land do not regard the land/water as islands, do not regard themselves as islanders, or do not regard islandness as significant for their lives. In addition, ideas concerning what islandness implies differ across cultures, times, and places. Even many island studies scholars, who actively seek out islands and ascribe places island status, are liable to feel that certain forms of physical geography are more productive of islandness than others.

None of this is to deny that many people who live on islands do celebrate or feel the desire to defend islandness. Certain island histories, geographies, heritages, and networks of interethnic relation may be more likely to inspire such conceptualisations than others.

But this is precisely the point. The popular and scholarly effort to understand islands, islanders, and islandness suggests a universal island experience, even as so much of island studies insists (correctly, we believe) that individual islands are unique. It could be interesting to learn why certain people label their own places as islands, how they see islandness as something valuable and precious, and how they embrace an islander identity. To do so, however, requires researchers to not take islandness itself for granted, to not assume that 'small pieces of land surrounded by water' simply *are* islands. It is clear that some such places *are not* islands to the people whose opinions about them surely matter most (the purported 'islanders'), and it is clear that islanders' conceptions of 'island' may differ from those of outside observers.

We believe there is value in island studies. However, we believe it is important for scholars to think carefully about why and how islandness matters in particular places—or else to be honest with themselves about what professional, material, political, or sentimental motivations (any of which may well be justifiable) drive them to ascribe island status.

This means that island studies may truly be irrelevant for some people, and it raises the risk that some people will deem island studies to be illegitimate when it is applied to them. It is vital that island studies scholars consider

the power relations involved in ascriptions of islandness from outside and that, if necessary, research writing that imposes island status be positioned accordingly and with clarity.

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