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No future of island studies: Embracing island studies in plural

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Abstract: This editorial conclusion looks back on how *Island Studies Journal* has developed from its start in 2006, up through the beginning of the current editorship in 2017, and through to the start of a new editorship in mid-2023. Island studies has transformed from being a close-knit community centred on a few key scholars to being a field composed of numerous loosely connected movements. There is no longer a clearly identifiable 'mainstream' island studies and no longer a canon of crucial island studies researchers. Island studies journals and scholars are now coming from and writing from a great diversity of locations and positions. The plurality of island studies means there is room in the field for everyone.

Keywords: island studies, journals, publishing

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Introduction

I became editor-in-chief of *Island Studies Journal* at the start of 2017, taking over from Godfrey Baldacchino, who had served as the journal's editor since its founding in 2006. I knew what I was getting into, but my sense of what directions island studies should take and of how publications like *Island Studies Journal* should operate have changed over the years. As I prepare to step down as editor-in-chief in July 2023, I take this opportunity to reflect upon what island studies has (or have) become.

In my inaugural editorial introduction to *Island Studies Journal*, entitled 'A future of island studies' (Grydehøj, 2017, p. 3), I suggested it would be "intellectually dishonest" to

keep claiming that island studies was "an emerging field": "Island studies has come too far. It is imperfect. It is flawed. But it is here."

I would now like to revise that statement: Island studies, like all fields, is in a constant state of becoming. Island studies will never stop emerging—unless it someday simply *stops*.

My argument in 2017 was that island studies was intensely multidisciplinary, encompassing "diverse and possibly irreconcilable approaches, which interact with and inspire change in one another" (Grydehøj, 2017, pp. 6-7). I advocated for people engaged in island studies to better understand one another and to be more open to the diversity of islands around the world.

How has this project been going? *Island Studies Journal* itself has experienced substantial growth. In the 11 years of *Island Studies Journal*'s first editorship (2006-2016), it published 191 articles (around 17.4 papers per year). In the 6.5 years of journal's second editorship (2017-May 2023), it published 230 articles (around 35.4 papers per year). Over the past two years, the journal's editors have sought to raise quality, focus more on the journal's priority areas, and reduce the number of articles published per year to 25-30. This has caused the journal's acceptance rate to fall to around 30%.

Judging by developments within the pages of *Island Studies Journal*, the field has undergone substantial change. In its early years, nearly all the journal's authors were based at institutions in Europe, North America, Australia, and Aotearoa/New Zealand (Stratford, 2015). In contrast, between January 2017 and October 2021, these regions accounted for just two-thirds of authors, with a quarter of all authors coming from Asia. A closer look at the numbers reveals a diversification of European authors, a substantial drop in authors from North America, and a corresponding rise in authors from China, who now represent the journal's single largest author group at 17% (pre-2017, the journal had not published a single paper by an author at an institution based in the Chinese mainland) (Grydehøj et al., 2023).

Yet as a recent analysis of papers published within *Island Studies Journal* shows, there remain distinct differences in the ways in which authors from different regions write, engage, and are read (Grydehøj et al., 2023). Certain kinds of people write certain kinds of papers, and certain kinds of papers contribute to the wider scholarship when measured in terms of readers and citations. No matter how stunningly argued or innovative the paper, its 'contribution' depends on whether and how other people use it.

In 2017, I had imagined a field in which different perspectives fruitfully interacted, but I increasingly see a field that encompasses multiple perspectives that have little to do with one another.

Disconnected island studies

Maybe it was always like this. With the exception of a small number of central figures who strongly self-identified as island studies researchers (e.g., Godfrey Baldacchino, Laurie Brinklow, Philip Hayward, Stephen Royle), most people involved in the field in the 2000s were only involved in certain parts of it. People who studied island literature and people who studied island entrepreneurship gave little thought to one another; notwithstanding the broadly comparative focus of some island politics and economics researchers, people largely kept to their own regional specialisations; and most scholars were satisfied with generalising out from the particular islands with which they were most familiar. This final phenomenon has undoubtedly declined within island studies, but this is not necessarily because the average contributor to *Island Studies Journal* and other journals in the field has become more curious about more kinds of islands. It may instead be a case of more people realising there is no single field of island studies.

Island Studies Journal has, I feel, gone from strength to strength, steadily building upon its achievements since 2006. It has become an internationally respected journal with a truly diverse (though still not global) authorship. It is indexed in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) as well as Scopus, and it has achieved all this while being a non-fee charging open access (diamond open access) journal. Island studies has had an increasing impact on other fields and is no longer a neglected multidisciplinary corner of academia. There is now more island studies than ever before.

Or is there? I sometimes feel there is *less* island studies now than there was in 2017, certainly than when I first came into contact with the field back in 2007. As island studies has grown in scope and depth, as it has expanded into new disciplines and regions, it has become more difficult to identify what holds the field together. As is perhaps fitting for a field that in large part coalesced around conference series, early island studies was very much driven by the wide-ranging interests of a small number of dedicated individuals.

Non-canonical island studies

So much of what I personally regard as island studies' and *Island Studies Journal*'s inheritance can be traced directly to the boundary-shattering theorisations and immense intellectual labours of Godfrey Baldacchino (e.g., 2010, 2006b, 2004, 1993; Baldacchino & Milne, 2000). The status of today's island studies would be unimaginable without Baldacchino's work, and the breadth of his vision is such that he remains the key touchstone and most-cited source for those setting out to study islands *per se*.

I do not believe there will ever be another island studies scholar like Godfrey Baldacchino. The project he helped set in motion has become so successful that the notion

of a single person being able to encapsulate or represent the whole of it seems absurd. The early years of *Island Studies Journal* featured various articles written from an understanding that they were informing a growing field. Baldacchino's (2006a) own inaugural editorial introduction, Baldacchino's (2008) crucial paper two years later 'Studying islands: On whose terms?', Elaine Stratford et al.'s (2011) 'Envisioning the archipelago', Jonathan Pugh's (2013) 'Island movements', even Pete Hay's (2006) 'A phenomenology of islands' (which in a sense argues against the possibility of island studies)—all these, looking out upon the endless horizons of the field's beginnings—could imagine a reader who cared, first and foremost, at least at that very moment, about island studies.

And in the start, *journals* were actually read. *Island Studies Journal* was an online-only publication from the very beginning, but I have distinct memories from 15 years ago of sitting down and reading through articles on a webpage for one of the journal's issues. Though such webpages of issues still exist, they are now primarily carriers of metadata and files that get picked up by web crawlers, listed in indices, registered in databases. The average reader of an *Island Studies Journal* article today is probably unaware they are reading an article in something called *Island Studies Journal* unless they decide to cite it somewhere. Few people—I would imagine, even few *Island Studies Journal* associate editors and deputy editors—interact with the journal primarily through the medium of its own website.

By and large, *Island Studies Journal* no longer publishes papers that are imagined as appealing to all the journal's readers, quite simply because we have lost the capacity to imagine the journal's readers. Today, most of the journal's papers, including its most-cited and most-accessed papers, are narrow in either topical focus or theoretical focus. Topically focused papers (e.g., on climate change, literature, politics, transport, tourism) that rely less on island studies theory than on theory from another field or discipline have always been the 'bread and butter' of the journal but are now clearly dominant in terms of impact. Meanwhile, the kinds of theoretical papers the journal publishes are self-consciously situated in particular intellectual positions, and their authors are aware that they will never be more than a relatively niche interest even within island studies. Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler's Anthropocene islands papers (e.g., Chandler & Pugh, 2021; Pugh, 2018) and the work within decolonial island studies (e.g., Nadarajah & Grydehøj, 2016; Nimführ & Meloni, 2021) have indeed made an impact, but only on small segments of the field. And this is perhaps as it must be for a field that is so international and so multidisciplinary.

Of course, the early, influential grand presentations of island studies (and I fear I must count my 2017 editorial as a late addition to this category) were also situated in particular intellectual positions. All theory is inevitably situated (Acharya & Buzan, 2009).

But back then, in the early days, as the field formed around a small number of core authors and personalities, the audience for island studies was much more limited. Although the first issues of *Island Studies Journal* contained papers on a range of topics and concerning many different parts of the world, they were cut through with the Baldacchinian emphasis on governance, economy, and jurisdictional capacity, which itself drew from and interacted with the work of scholars such as Jerome McElroy (e.g., Oberst & McElroy, 2007; McElroy, 2006), Harvey W. Armstrong and Robert Read (e.g., Armstrong & Read, 2003, 2000), and Geoff Bertram and Ray Watters (Bertram, 1999; Bertram & Watters, 1985). The early *Island Studies Journal* took a distinctive interdisciplinary approach to its subject matter. To point this out is not to say this approach was wrong (it was, incidentally, the approach that drew me into island studies as well). It is simply to say there was a time when it was possible to speak of and from a position within a 'mainstream' island studies.

This is not possible today. Today's island studies and *Island Studies Journal* are composed of such a vast diversity of individuals (in terms of background, region, gender, discipline, topical interest) that not even I know what might constitute the mainstream. I have quite thorough knowledge of island studies on particular themes and in particular regions but relatively limited knowledge outside these realms. In my years as editor-in-chief, I have had authors, editors, and others in the field note to me that *Island Studies Journal* publishes too few papers within this or that discipline or this or that part of the world. Examples have included business studies, literature studies, climate change, architecture, history, anthropology, economics, archaeology, the Indian Ocean, the Baltic, the Caribbean, the Pacific, and the Mediterranean. One answer to such criticism is that it is asking a lot of a journal that has published 10-40 papers per year to provide constant and varied coverage of all potential disciplines and regions. In fact, 'island studies' no longer pays much attention to *any* particular issues—because there is no longer any one island studies. There are instead a multitude of island studies, which sometimes interact and intersect but are often content with ignoring one another.

Another answer is that the journal can only publish papers that it receives and that pass peer review, so if someone wishes to see more history articles in the journal, they should try encouraging more historians to submit papers. Yet this answer is more complex, for it begs the question of why island studies is needed. If most historians, Caribbeanists, urban planners, folklorists, and so on who study individual islands or archipelagos show little interest in taking an island perspective, there are a number of possible explanations. These include that such scholars incorrectly believe the field is not open to them, that the field is in fact not open to them, that the field and these scholars hold different priorities, and that the scholars simply have not heard of or know very little about the field. Or that they know very little about the field as it is today. A few times a

year, I will be contacted by someone who was involved in or interacted with island studies or *Island Studies Journal* in the 2000s and whose ideas about the field or the journal have not moved on since. It can be a struggle to explain how things have changed in the interim and why approaches that worked a decade and a half ago may not do so today.

I am among those who believe that certain kinds of scholars face genuine obstacles to being accepted and thriving within island studies (Nadarajah et al., 2022). But I also believe it is unhelpfully reductive when people (sometimes, myself included) identify those parts of this highly diverse field that they like least and decide to treat it as the mainstream, rather than just as a stream. It *is* possible to demonstrate systematic bias and inequalities in how island studies operates (Grydehøj et al., 2023), but if one island studies does not have place for someone, they can be sure there is another island studies that will be more welcoming of them. This does not excuse exclusionary behaviour, but it is an argument against feelings of hopelessness.

While some systemic biases and inequalities are so large they are outside island studies' control, it is at least partly out of habit that certain strands of island studies are still perceived as dominant. To anyone who believes it impossible to escape the island studies canon, I say: Most authors who appear in *Island Studies Journal* have never heard of Godfrey Baldacchino, Elaine Stratford, Philip Hayward, Lino Briguglio, Beate Ratter, Jonathan Pugh, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Ilan Kelman, Laurie Brinklow, Adam Grydehøj, or whoever else one might be tempted to canonise. Or perhaps they are familiar with one or two of these names (still most likely Baldacchino) but none of the others. And the opposite is true as well: Only a sliver of the journal's submissions come from authors who *I* have heard of. The 'old boys' network' in island studies was never particularly powerful (in part because island studies has never exactly been a hegemonic discipline), but it is in any event weakening by the day.

I must bear this in mind when fretting about what I perceive as a lack of interest in the work of some of my personal favourite island studies theorists, who have come to the field more recently, people like Gang Hong (e.g., 2023, 2022, 2020a, 2020c, 2020b, 2017), Yaso Nadarajah (e.g., Nadarajah, 2021; Nadarajah & Grydehøj, 2016), Ayano Ginoza (e.g., Ginoza, 2022, 2016), and incoming editors-in-chief Ping Su (e.g., Su & Grydehøj, 2022; Lin & Su, 2022; Su, 2017) and May Joseph (e.g., Sen & Joseph, 2022; Joseph, 2021, 2020, 2013). What do I expect? Island studies' growth, internationalisation, and success have broken down the old island studies canon. No new canon will arise in its place.

Who is part of island studies?

As editor-in-chief of *Island Studies Journal*, I regard myself as well positioned to ascertain who is and who is not active within the field. Nevertheless, people who are at the very

centre of major movements in island studies frequently tell me, "Well, I'm not really an island studies person" or "I'm not a real member of the field like all those other people are." It is a curious fact that although there are truly only a handful of scholars who self-identify first and foremost as island studies researchers, there are a large number of people who contribute to island studies but believe that many others are contributing more, or more intensely, or are more central to it. This perception of today's island studies as an intimate, cosy, and perhaps cliquish field is damaging in the sense that some people feel left out of an academic community that does not really exist.

Island studies has not splintered; it has expanded to encompass so much more. Island studies has not become less cohesive; it has become more inclusive. Part of this has been by design, as individuals involved in island studies have assiduously propagated the field around the world. Yet there has evidently also been something about island studies that has proven attractive in different contexts, to different peoples. For example, *Okinawan Journal of Island Studies* (edited by Ayano Ginoza and published since 2020) shows the undeniable influence of scholarship that has appeared in *Island Studies Journal* and *Shima* (an island culture journal edited by Philip Hayward and published in Australia since 2007). However, *Okinawan Journal of Island Studies* is utterly different in its major themes and approaches (e.g., indigeneity, anticolonialism, peace activism) than anything that would have been imaginable in the field in the 2000s. Similarly, Chinese researchers have added topics and approaches (e.g., spatial planning, ecosystem services, land use change) that were previously only rarely associated with island studies. May Joseph (based in archipelagic New York City) has been at the centre of work to make the environmental humanities (often with a South Asian touch) a prominent stream within island studies. Ping Su (based in archipelagic Guangzhou) has created a community of island scholars who are not just 'writing back' to the colonial centre but are fundamentally challenging imperial spatialities and old interregional connectivities.

And there has been so much else beside. Too much, in fact, for any one person to keep up with. The innovative theorists who I list here are naturally based on my own interests and preferences, which are no more valid than anyone else's. If an island studies scholar who focused on climate change, traditional music, or entrepreneurship were writing this editorial, their list would be very different.

Conclusion

Island studies is sufficiently plural to belong to everyone, so long as we can learn to accept that it will never be just one thing. Anyone should be able to be part of island studies if they want, and people who do not wish to be part of island studies should be able to opt out of it (Nadarajah et al., 2022).

I have no doubt that *Island Studies Journal* will continue flourishing under its new editorship and that the field of island studies will continue developing, including in unexpected directions. I can no longer envision 'a future of island studies', but many simultaneous 'futures of island studies' seem more likely now than ever.

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