

Thematic Section: Island Decolonization

Island studies as a decolonial project (Guest Editorial Introduction)

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ABSTRACT: The phenomenon of colonialism influenced the cultures, economies, and politics of the majority of the world's population. The subsequent decolonization process has likewise had profound affects on colonized societies. Island societies undergoing decolonization face many of the same pressures and challenges as do mainland societies, yet island spatiality and the history of island colonization itself has left former and present-day island colonies with distinctive colonial legacies. From the Caribbean to the Arctic to the Pacific to the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean, colonial and decolonial processes are creating tensions between maintenance of the culture of indigenous peoples, economic development, cultivation of cultural heritage, political modernization, status on the global stage, democratic governance, and educational achievement. We call for an island studies perspective on decolonization, emphasizing the importance of appropriately positioning expert knowledge relative to the needs of colonized and indigenous peoples and highlighting the pitfalls of neocolonialism. We thus lay the groundwork for island studies as a decolonial project.

Keywords: colonialism, decolonial project, decolonization, indigenous peoples, island studies, neocolonialism

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Introduction

I do not mean what people mean when they say glibly that there are two sides to every question. The difficulty with theories of essentialism and exclusiveness, or with barriers and sides, is that they give rise to polarizations that absolve and forgive ignorance and demagogy more than they enable knowledge – Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 31.

Colonialism has shaped our world. The various projections of imperial power that emanated from Europe from the 16th Century onwards were not the earliest instances of what we might

term ‘colonization’, but they would come to have profound effects on cultures, politics, economies, ecosystems, and populations around the globe.

In its 19th and early 20th Century heyday, as distinct waves of colonial control successively rose, broke and ebbed across the world map, the phenomenon of colonialism influenced countless aspects of the lives of the majority of the world’s population, not just in colonized lands but also in Europe itself. Even states such as China, Korea and Japan that escaped formal European colonization were exposed to colonial processes that fundamentally altered their cultures, economies and politics. From direct impacts such as the enslavement of local populations and the imposition of new forms of political control to indirect impacts such as the ‘demonstration effect’ prompted by colonists and the introduction of new elements of material culture, the effects of colonialism cannot be undone. There is no going back to pre-contact indigenous cultures, to precolonial political structures or economies.

Decolonization has shaped our world as well. The period following World War II saw a wave of decolonization efforts, both prompted by and prompting the United Nation’s ‘Declaration Regarding Non-Sovereign Territories’ (1945) and ‘Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples’ (1960). This ultimately led to a proliferation of new sovereign states (over 130 since World War II), including 33 small island states (McElroy & Parry, 2012). During this retreat of empire, island societies were subject to many of the same pressures and factors with regard to decolonization as were mainland colonies. Thus, for example, new island *and* mainland sovereign states were frequently ‘born’ into repudiated and maligned colonial borders, not so much hitting the ground running as hitting the ground tangled in a problematic spatial legacy.

However, already at this early stage, the islandness of island colonies made itself felt. In the case of the flurry of small island states created in the Caribbean, Indian Ocean, and the Pacific, ‘natural’ boundaries influenced new jurisdictional borders, and the newly established polities were circumscribed by sea. This, of course, reflected the fact that the colonies themselves had been defined in terms of their coastlines. In the case of relatively near-shore island colonies, island spatiality had represented a strategic benefit (Gillis, 2004, pp. 87-88; Grydehøj, 2015), and even in the case of colonies relatively distant from a mainland, island spatiality had encouraged the often artificial clustering and/or distinction of cultures and communities.

The post-War rush by many colonial powers to divest themselves of overseas possessions has slowed considerably in recent years: Since 1984, just two new island states (East Timor and Palau) have emerged (McElroy & Parry, 2012). This is in part because many of the larger (and perhaps most straightforwardly territorialized) islands and archipelagos were granted sovereignty early on in the process. One result is that many of the remaining non-sovereign islands are so small that most people do not consider independence to be an option (Royle, 2010) – though there are, of course, a number of small island states with extremely small populations and/or land areas, such as Tuvalu and Nauru. The stalling of the drive toward island independence may also in part be because of the evident and widely publicized difficulties that have been faced by those first movers on island independence: some islanders may be choosing the safety and benefits of non-sovereignty over uncertain independent futures (Baldacchino & Hepburn, 2012). Today, many dozens of islands or archipelagos remain as substantially autonomous non-sovereign territories, in addition to the countless island territories that possess no special jurisdictional capacity relative to the metropolitan power with which they are associated (Stuart, 2008).

Although it is no longer fashionable for metropolitan powers to label their far-flung territories as ‘colonies’, in some (though not all) of these territories, it is popularly felt that the colonial status persists long after the island has been granted substantial autonomy and/or formally integrated into and theoretically made an equal part of its parent state. These feelings of continued colonial status are also prevalent in many sovereign small island states, suggesting that the association between sovereignty and genuine decolonization is not a direct one. Islandness and sovereignty may be connected in the popular mind (Grydehøj, 2016a), but the creation of sovereign small island states has not proved clear cut, either in the sense of islanders achieving genuine ‘independence’ (whatever this may mean) or in the sense of regional and global geopolitics becoming more straightforward. Indeed, island decolonization has created “grounds for complex and unusual forms of jurisdiction and citizenship” across oceans and national borders (Mountz, 2015, p. 637).

This special thematic section of *Island Studies Journal* considers ‘Island Decolonization’ from a variety of perspectives, seeking a better understanding of how further decolonization can be achieved and how indigenous cultures and knowledges can be supported as well as seeking to understand which solutions do *not* work. We strive to problematize the decolonization process from an explicitly island standpoint.

Figure 1: Qoornoq, Greenland: A colonial-era fishing village, depopulated during the decolonization process.



Source: © 2016 Adam Grydehøj.

The decolonial turn

The transfer of authority from the colonizer to the colonized people is often regarded as the end point of a process that began with imperial expansion and colonization. Since the very inception of the modern form of colonization, resistance through decolonial thinking has occasioned much angst and debate. Nevertheless, a profound shift away from modernity and towards decoloniality began in the 20th Century. In his essay on ‘Thinking through the Decolonial Turn’, Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2011) points out that the ‘decolonial turn’ was substantially led by W.E.B Du Bois, who was followed up by contributions from Aimée Césaire and Frantz Fanon in the mid-20th Century and, later, by Sylvia Wynter, Enrique Dussel, Gloria Anzaldúa, Lewis Gordon, Chela Sandoval, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, among others. Maldonado-Torres (2011, p. 1) adds that such discourses and reactions were most at home among those engaged in,

ethnic studies as well as in indigenous studies, decolonial activists, independent scholars and artists across the entire spectrum of the Global South, including the south in the north.

There are, of course, differences and tensions among figures and movements that advance the decolonial turn, pointing to a diversely interpreted set of positions. These positions, however, share a view of coloniality as a fundamental problem in the modern (as well as postmodern and information) age. The task of decolonization remains unfinished, and is perhaps unfinishable.

The difficulties inherent in this process are perhaps nowhere as evident as in attempts to balance the competing demands of a Western-oriented ‘modernity’ – of fitting into the globalized world – and the desire to maintain and revitalize indigenous, non-Western traditions. Thus, for example, the urgent need for intellectual decolonization can come into conflict with struggles to create an autonomous intelligentsia in former colonies. The creation of a Westernised indigenous elite and the further undervaluation of indigenous knowledge are frequently and problematically coupled with colonized people’s efforts to achieve self-determination and stand as equals among other nations. Knowledge in the West is often conceived of as separate from the sociality and intimacy in which it is embedded. It is often defined as acquiring a certain control, which inevitably leads to the authority of those who pose the questions over those who answer them; those who observe over those who are observed. In this cycle of hegemony, coloniality lurks, ever present. As Androus and Greymorning (2016) warn, even the project in which we are now engaged – the advancing of an island studies perspective on decolonization – risks reinforcing colonial values.

We ask: to what extent have a people become free if the terms of their freedom are dictated by, and often worded in the language of, colonization? What challenges impede cultural transition away from colonial domination? What political compromises are made to balance desires for self-determination with economic vitality? Can decolonizing island societies compete in the global economy without losing their identity? Are there possibilities for former colonies and former colonizers to build mutually beneficial and equal partnerships? An island perspective on decolonization can, we hope, help provide some answers.

Island studies as a decolonial project

Walter D. Mignolo (2011), a central figure in debates on coloniality around the world, discusses the development of thinking within the frame of the 'decolonial option'. He emphasizes that decolonial work involves getting entangled in the complex web of contemporary political and cultural studies and competing with divergent epistemologies and conceptions of creation and sensory experience. Mignolo asserts that indigenous practices can play a central role in how we deal with the colonial wound, through decolonial healing. Decoloniality connects numerous projects around the world.

While indigenous decolonial projects are certainly among them, island studies is itself an important decolonial venture. This is a timely project because, within the discussions of the effects of colonization, much work remains to be done to disentangle the difference between colonization and coloniality and to determine how (and where) colonized peoples might find themselves in a decolonized world. Island studies offers an opportunity to deepen this discourse. More critically, this work is required at a deeper ontological and epistemological level. This special thematic section represents a step in the direction of island studies as a decolonial project and a vital contribution to understanding how decolonization might be understood and, as a result, recognizing the myriad ways of breaking with the colonial trappings still present in the 21st Century.

With small populations and limited habitable land areas, decolonization influences island communities in special ways. It is perhaps on islands that confrontations and co-participations inherent in decolonization processes are having the greatest impact in our age of digital communication, rapid transport, and (significantly) globalized indigeneity and anticolonial activism (Davis, 2016).

Many small islands were thrust into a postcolonial political reality without a precolonial political tradition upon which to draw, either because colonialism had comprehensively altered the composition of the island's population or introduced a population to hitherto-uninhabited islands (Barbados, Falkland, Mauritius, Singapore, *etc.*) or because decolonization sought to form a modern nation-state out of distinct, and often widely dispersed, cultures and ethnicities (Cyprus, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, *etc.*). Some island societies (Greenland, Guam, Hawai'i, Macau, Mayotte, Montserrat, Orchid Island, Saint-Martin/ Sint Maarten, Tokelau, *etc.*) also maintain dependent relationships with larger states (not always their former colonial powers) and survive as subnational island jurisdictions.

Decolonization is not an event but a process. Colonialism introduced global economics, politics and culture to many island societies. Even after the colonial power has withdrawn or been expelled, the window to the world persists. The peoples left behind often face limitations to sovereignty, human resources and economic capacity that exacerbate the challenges associated with island societies in general. The experience of colonial administration can provide a model for postcolonial government and development, yet the reproduction of metropolitan political systems and maintenance of colonial administrative apparatuses can also conceal deeply problematic governance practices (Baker, 1992; Grydehøj, 2016b; Veenendaal, 2015). Meanwhile, although the causality is uncertain (Bertram, 2015), experience of colonialism and persisting non-sovereignty may be correlated with political and economic success, with quantitative measures of social and economic well-being consistently showing autonomous non-sovereign island territories outperforming small island states (Armstrong & Read, 2000; Bertram, 2004; McElroy & Pearce, 2006).

Notwithstanding possible material benefits, anticolonial sentiment and an associated desire to follow one's own path can exert cultural pressure to reject colonial models and can

present obstacles to Western-style engagement in Western-dominated global political and economic systems. In addition, resilient ethnic, social, and economic tensions and inequalities can take on added complexities when they have originated in long, intimate and deeply rooted island colonialism. Although islands that are former colonies do not necessarily face *more* problems than do islands with no colonial history, the decolonization process produces special kinds of challenges for island communities.

For example, even a minimal argument about the incompleteness of decolonization points to the continuing saga of negotiations over the status of New Caledonia, currently a territory of France. Those charged with steering New Caledonia into its next stage of governance have struggled to resolve sensitive political issues, demonstrating just how deep divisions run regarding the possibility of independence (Fisher, 2016). At the same time, France's other negotiations over territories in Polynesia (Wallis and Futuna) underpin the curious arrangements of both colonization and local power strategies. As Grydehøj (2016a) has shown with the case of Greenland's relationship with Denmark, experience of relatively non-exploitive colonialism can produce special challenges for an indigenous society seeking to simultaneously come to terms with its history and set the terms for its future relationship with its colonizer. Pugh (2013), meanwhile, has argued that colonialism has abiding effects on the very discourses used to frame development in Barbados.

Indeed, notwithstanding formal independence or non-sovereignty, the institutional and ideological interference of the colonial period directly or indirectly, subtly or overtly, continues to influence political thought and economic agendas – with profound consequences even for those born long after independence. In his work on the Solomon Islands, Tarcisius Kabataulaka (1997) highlights the urgent need for intellectual decolonization, citing educational institutions such as schools and universities as important grounds for such work. Such change, however, comes slowly, and the administrative structures and urban lifestyles that support such modernizing decolonization efforts may themselves be viewed with suspicion and regarded as colonial impositions (Grydehøj, 2014).

The islanding of colonized peoples

In his well-traversed discussion of 'Our Sea of Islands', Epli Hau'ofa (1994, p. 150) highlights how the discourse concerning developmental challenges confronting resource-poor Pacific islanders is rooted in part in a Western instance on reducing the scope of indigenous activity, on conceptually confining Pacific peoples to 'islands in the sea' rather than granting them their (traditional) agency in a 'sea of islands'. Hau'ofa challenges the idea that the Pacific's small island states and territories are *microstates*, dependent on remittances and aid to survive. He challenges the narrow and geographic-economistic deterministic view, which indulges in the "attraction of bounded island space" (Grydehøj & Kelman, 2016, p. 5) to reaffirm colonially drawn lines across the sea. Such reframing of insular/oceanic lives can play a key role in islanders' efforts to chart new relationships in and with the world. Indeed, recent work within island studies to refocus attention on nuanced archipelagic and land-sea relationships (Stratford, 2011; Hayward, 2012; Pugh, 2016; Alexander, 2016) is pushing to privilege islanders' perspectives over mainland-centric dreams of ideal islands (Baldacchino, 2012; Gillis, 2007). Postcolonial 'islanded identities' (McCusker & Soares, 2011) can reclaim and reassert their agency and autonomous status.

Yet, as the papers in this special thematic section demonstrate, tensions remain in the attempts to create an island studies perspective on decolonization that not only serves the

needs of colonized island peoples but that also serves them ‘on their own terms’ (Baldacchino, 2008; McCall, 1994). What some may regard as island empowerment, others may regard as the reaffirmation of colonial expectations and reinsertion of colonial influence. Strategies to ‘sell’ sovereignty (Overton & Murray, 2014), exploit gaps in the jurisdictional market (Baldacchino, 2010), or receive payment for ‘strategic services’ (Grydehøj, 2016a) may in fact serve as unintentional cover for a different kind of recolonization, especially on islands with vast extractive resources. Firth (1997) argued early on that the point of exit for colonialism was being rapidly replaced by a more complex arrangement, now known as neo-colonialism. This heralds the new prominence of colonial power through the agendas of aid donors and multilateral agencies and organizations. New forms of colonization are developing, and old forms of colonization are taking on new guises and justifications as, for example, military colonialism in the Pacific pivots toward a rhetoric of emerging threats (Davis, 2015), and fading colonial mastery is reinforced through “the rhetoric of ocean conservation, or ‘blue-washing’” (Perez, 2015).

The challenge for island studies is to address the full range of island perspectives, to approach island decolonization in a manner that is both progressive and reflexive.

Content review

This special thematic section represents a first step in this direction. It arises out of a conference organized by Island Dynamics and hosted by Ilisimatusarfik/ University of Greenland in Nuuk, Greenland in September-October 2015. The conference, entitled ‘Indigenous Resources: Decolonization and Development’, brought together over 30 indigenous scholars and indigeneity researchers from around the globe and sought to erect an internationally comparative framework for considering island decolonization efforts.

The six papers presented in this special thematic section consider a diverse mix of cases and contexts for decolonization. Androus and Greymorning (2016) launch a broadside at island studies theory, arguing that scholarly advocacy for island non-sovereignty fails to take into account essential indigenous rights and nationality. Using the cases of Hawai’i (USA) and Corsica (France), these researchers propose a fundamental reframing of questions of island independence and dependence; of island empowerment and disempowerment. Connell (2016), meanwhile, takes a fruitful comparative approach, considering how experiences from the sovereign small island states of the Pacific can inform decolonization and policy choices in non-sovereign Greenland. Pyndiah (2016) takes up the question of linguistic contestations regarding the creole language of the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius to show how creative use of language can perform decolonial aesthetics in a multiethnic and multilingual society with strong rural-urban divisions. Li (2016) investigates the political culture of Macau, an island city caught in a complex web of Portuguese and Chinese colonial and postcolonial practice. Rodd (2016) compares postcolonial developments in the political structures of the Pacific states of Fiji and the Solomon Islands, pinpointing challenges involved in particular approaches to adapting British colonial institutions to sovereign island realities. Finally, Buijs (2016) reports on a collaborative venture between Dutch museums and an East Greenlandic community to encourage the decolonization process and foster new local and metropolitan understandings of indigenous heritage and history.

These papers merely represent the beginning. Island studies has the potential to contribute significantly to decolonization theory and practice, but if it is to do so, it is

necessary for it to maintain explicit awareness of the problematic issues surrounding decolonization and indigeneity *per se*.

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