

‘Why is there no non-Western island studies theory?’, a special section of *Island Studies Journal*, 17(2), November 2022

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Background

In his essay ‘Our sea of islands’, the Tongan-Fijian scholar Epeli Hau‘ofa (1994) writes of the “belittling view [of small, isolated, dependent Pacific island societies] that has been unwittingly propagated, mostly by social scientists who have sincere concern for the welfare of Pacific peoples.” Although Hau‘ofa’s criticism is in significant part targeted at the then-emerging field of island studies, his essay has come to be seen as a seminal text within this field. Yet like so many other non-Western scholars, Hau‘ofa is today as likely to be treated as a primary source for non-Western conceptions regarding islands as he is to be treated as an expert and authoritative researcher.

From its very inception as a distinct field, island studies has positioned itself as a challenge to taken-for-granted and outsider-dominated narratives of islandness. Island studies has nevertheless struggled when it comes to the inclusion of non-Western scholars, both islanders and mainlanders (bearing in mind the problematic and artificial nature of both the Western/non-Western and islander/mainlander dichotomies). Like many other fields, island studies is implicated in the process by which the experiences of non-Western and colonised peoples are converted into academic capital within Western professional and financial frameworks.

Even as increasing numbers of non-Western scholars have begun contributing to island studies, a vast majority of prominent theorists who position themselves within the field are Western (primarily male) scholars. Many non-Western scholars from both island and mainland contexts find their scope of recognised research circumscribed. Assumptions and assessments of expertise tend to be regionally confined, and non-Western islanders in particular may struggle when seeking to move beyond the arts and humanities and into the more strictly gatekept realms of the social sciences and environmental sciences. In addition, whereas Western scholarship has generally accepted that Western researchers from the mainland can legitimately study island contexts, many non-Western mainland scholars are asked to constantly justify and qualify their engagement with island research. Similarly, the globalised academic system frequently forces non-Western islander researchers to choose between either being acknowledged as legitimate scholars or being acknowledged as legitimate islanders (Gegeo, 2001). As a consequence, non-Western perspectives are at special risk of being seen as niche, limited, and biased (Grydehøj et al, 2021), and much non-Western research and theoretical inquiry has its status downgraded to that of anecdote or deacademicised to that of artwork. Tokenism is widespread, itself inspiring an equally problematic desire for a race-blind island studies that overlooks systemic injustices rooted in coloniality.

This special section

Taking its inspiration from Acharya and Buzan’s (2007) important work on ‘Why is there no non-Western international relations theory?’, this special section of *Island Studies Journal* questions

why island studies has struggled to genuinely engage with non-Western theoretical approaches and considers what impacts this has had on both the research field and on island communities.

Further developing Nadarajah and Grydehøj's (2016) call for a 'decolonial island studies' and Gómez-Barris and Joseph's (2019) emphasising of 'coloniality and islands', we ask how island studies can more effectively, more respectfully, and more openly approach non-Western perspectives, challenging rigid and exclusivist boundaries of island studies. The special section will include papers considering (among other topics):

- How have various national or cultural traditions of researching islands developed in non-Western contexts? (i.e. histories of island research in Japan, Chile, India, *etc.*)
- How do writers and researchers from outside the West engage (and not engage) in island studies?
- Why might island studies have difficulty appealing to non-Western scholars?
- What can non-Western theorisations of islands and archipelagos tell us about islandness?
- How could island studies become more epistemologically diverse?
- How do academia in general and academic publishing in particular condition opportunities for pursuing non-Western island studies theory?

How to publish in the special section

This special section will be published in November 2022 in *Island Studies Journal (ISJ)*, but individual papers will be published online ahead of print as and when they complete the peer review and the editorial process.

For further information, or if you are interested in submitting a paper, contact: Adam Grydehøj (agrydehoj@islanddynamics.org) or another special section coeditor. The deadline for final submission is 31 December 2021. All papers are subject to peer review. Manuscripts should be between 5,000 and 10,000 words and be prepared in line with the submission guidelines: https://www.islandstudies.ca/guidelines_instructions.html.

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