

# Hearing voices: colonialism, outsider perspectives, island and Indigenous issues, and publishing ethics

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**ABSTRACT:** This editorial introduction delves into problematic aspects of positionality and publishing ethics related to island and Indigenous issues. Taking its point of departure in Gilley’s paper on ‘The case for colonialism’ and Pöllath’s paper ‘Revisiting island decolonization’, the present paper questions: Whose voices should we listen to when considering island and Indigenous issues? If some voices should be excluded from the debate, how should we determine which voices are excluded? Ultimately, the paper criticizes exclusionary approaches and argues that *Island Studies Journal* should be open to publishing articles from metropolitan and outsider perspectives as well as from islander and Indigenous perspectives—but that it is necessary for authors and readers to be aware of their own positions within the colonial matrix of power.

*Keywords:* colonialism, colonial matrix of power, Indigenous issues, islands, outsider perspectives, publishing ethics.

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## Introduction

‘The study of islands on their own terms’. This statement of purpose for island studies, launched by McCall (1994), helped guide the field for over a decade.

It now exists in a theoretical twilight, lives on in that curious scholarly afterlife accorded to perspectives that are mainly used to emphasize their own inadequacy. Today, those who are deeply involved in island studies primarily cite ‘the study of islands on their own terms’ as a springboard for introspective critique—a noble tradition begun in 2008 by my predecessor as executive editor of *Island Studies Journal*, Godfrey Baldacchino. (Though I find, to my chagrin, that ‘The study of islands on their own terms’ remains *Island Studies Journal*’s motto, prominently displayed on the journal’s website. It is not just that ‘zombie theories’ (Ritzer & Yagatich, 2012, pp. 105–106) are difficult to kill but also that we sometimes find it useful to keep them alive.)

As our field grows in strength, size, and nuance, its list of ‘essential reading’ risks becoming unwieldy and unrealistic. Yet Baldacchino’s (2008) paper ‘Studying islands: on whose terms?’ remains both critical and necessary. I will not restate Baldacchino’s argument here. My own argument will follow somewhat different lines, inspired by particular challenges that we face today. Nevertheless, if you can only read one island studies paper, set the present one aside and read its precursor instead.

The immediate inspiration for the present editorial comment is another paper that has been published in *Island Studies Journal*, 13(1): Moritz Pöllath’s (2018) ‘Revisiting island decolonization: the pursuit of self-government in Pacific island polities under US hegemony’.

Pöllath's paper was submitted to *Island Studies Journal* in January 2017 and over the course of the next three months was assessed by three peer reviewers in a double-blinded process. All three reviewers are experts on government and decolonization in the Pacific, and one of the reviewers has a Pacific Indigenous background. Each of the three reviewers offered substantial but constructive criticism, and each encouraged the author to revise and resubmit his paper. Pöllath subsequently undertook to revise his paper on the basis of the peer reviewer reports as well as my own editorial comments, striving diligently to address all concerns.

And in the meantime, something happened that shook a portion of the world of scholarly publishing. In September 2017, the hitherto-respected journal *Third World Quarterly* published an article by the American political scientist Bruce Gilley titled 'The case for colonialism'. Gilley's piece came under immediate—and to my mind, justified—attack for being academically weak, and it prompted a public debate that led to mass resignations from the journal's editorial board, petitions in support of and opposed to the journal, and eventual retraction of the article by the publisher Taylor & Francis at the editor's and author's request (Lusher, 2017). Among the interesting aspects of this case is precisely that the paper was published in the journal's Viewpoints section, that is, more or less explicitly as a controversial opinion piece—and that this positioning by the editor, this method of placing editorial 'scare quotes' around the paper, did *not* stave off criticism of *Third World Quarterly*. In other words, those who protested against *Third World Quarterly* deemed Gilley's arguments sufficiently offensive and dangerous as to mandate that they not be published in any form.

I suspect that it is actually impossible to write a closely argued article in defense of colonialism from the perspective of the colonized people, i.e., an article that does not merely highlight positive aspects or outcomes of colonialism but that argues, as Gilley does, that decolonization ought never to have occurred and that colonized peoples are better off for having been colonized. It is possible that Gilley is correct that colonized peoples are better off in *per capita* terms (as also documented in part by Bertram (2007) and Armstrong and Read (2002)), yet as Malik (2018) notes, this only applies to the colonized peoples who escaped being massacred, enslaved, and in some cases subjected to total genocide.

The main issue, however, with Gilley's paper was not its poor scholarship. After all, there is a lot of poor scholarship out there, and most of it receives little comment. The reason Gilley's paper attracted the attention it did was that it made an argument that many people in certain sections of academia regard as unjustifiable under any circumstances and in any terms.

### **Outsider perspectives and exclusionary approaches**

We thus return to Pöllath's (2018) 'Revisiting island decolonization'. To avoid any ambiguity, I wish to make clear that Pöllath's paper is very different from that of Gilley. Pöllath does not seek to defend the colonization process or argue that colonialism was or is a good thing. He instead seeks to differentiate "between decolonization in terms of process and self-government in terms of the end result" (Pöllath, 2018, p. 235), in light of the negotiated forms of continued nonsovereignty and free association across the USA-affiliated territories in the Pacific. So far, this is in line with much of the current island studies scholarship (e.g., Baldacchino, 2010a; Grydehøj, 2016a; Hepburn & Baldacchino, 2016; Pugh, 2017; Veenendaal, 2015). Over the course of the paper, Pöllath (2018, p. 247) goes on to argue that, from the legal and constitutional perspectives of 'high politics', "decolonization has above all become a historical term and unfitting for the new relationships that have emerged in the Pacific since the 1970s."

Pöllath's argument appears reasonable enough when taken on its own terms, and it seems churlish to insist on taking his argument on other terms than were intended. Pöllath (2018, p. 247) even recognizes the legitimacy of protests against the narrow scope of his analysis, given that an approach "based on constitutional and political dimensions [can be]

criticized for its focus on decisions made in the metropolitan power.” Unlike Gilley, Pöllath does not speak of what was right and what was wrong, and he does not seek to convince colonized peoples that they have been bamboozled by their Indigenous political elite. All Pöllath does is contest the continued applicability of ‘decolonization’ as a concept from the perspective of constitutional law developed in the metropole.

As long as we are clear about the terms of the debate, why should this approach be problematic? Island studies may have emerged as a field by seeking to ‘study islands on their own terms’, but that is not really an argument against someone else studying islands on other terms. Indeed, as Pöllath’s paper shows, the complexity of island histories is such that, quite often, no clear distinction can be made between the terms of the mainland and those of the island. Islands have for so long and so thoroughly been dreamed of, desired, and rendered symbolic by mainlanders (and, indeed, islanders living elsewhere) that it is impossible to untangle island epistemologies from mainland ones (Baldacchino, 2008). Moreover, dreams of ideal islandness that originated on the mainland may be localized, embraced, and reproduced, ultimately clashing with alternative local visions of islandness (Lee et al., 2017).

What, then, can be meant by the call for a ‘decolonial island studies’, which has become an editorial cornerstone of *Island Studies Journal*? When introducing this call, Nadarajah and Grydehøj (2016, p. 240) state, a little unhelpfully, that “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. [...] 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.

Bearing this in mind, might not all perspectives be equally valid and worth hearing?

Within island studies, it has been argued that some voices should not be heard at all. Most prominently, *Island Studies Journal* 11(2) included Androus and Greymorning’s (2016) trenchant critique of those who seek to use the colonizer’s administrative apparatus to achieve Indigenous goals, a paper that is at once incisive and self-defeating. These authors argue that the empowerment provided by the kinds of creative practice of nonsovereignty advocated by some in island studies (Baldacchino, 2010a, 2010b, 2006; Grydehøj, 2018, 2016b; Overton & Murray, 2014; Prinsen et al., 2017) is illusory because any submission to metropolitan power structures denies an inalienable Indigenous sovereignty that demands political independence.

Although asserting an important point, Androus and Greymorning’s (2016) perspective ultimately narrows the scope for legitimate exercise of Indigenous sovereignty, with the argument boiling down to an insistence that Indigenous islanders are free to make any choices they want—just so long as their choices are the right ones. If, as I would argue, non-Indigenous peoples possess the power to make strategic compromises regarding their sovereignty, then why should Indigenous peoples be any less empowered? Androus and Greymorning’s approach represents an attempt to cope with the “competing demands” highlighted by Nadarajah and Grydehøj (2016) simply by defining some of these demands into oblivion: If the choice to remain nonsovereign can never be a choice at all but is instead inevitably a machination of colonial coercion, then it becomes quite easy to determine which demands are worth

considering. Then it does not matter how many or how few descendants of colonized peoples on any individual island desire political independence: The claim of sovereignty is absolute. This is one Indigenous proposition for how to ‘finish’ decolonization. It is the polar opposite of Pöllath’s metropolitan conclusion that the USA’s decolonization in the Pacific is done and dusted simply because the USA’s own definition of ‘colonialism’ no longer fits.

Both conclusions are intentionally limited in perspective, yet, because one is self-consciously an island and Indigenous perspective (Androus & Greymorning, 2016) and the other is self-consciously a mainland and metropolitan perspective (Pöllath, 2018), many island studies scholars will find themselves erring on the side of the former. After all, it is appealing to see ourselves as part of the process of righting the wrongs of the colonial writing of history, even if “uncritical reference to imposed violence may be just as mythical and totalizing as the imperial narrative it has sought to replace” (Baldacchino, 2010b, p. 189). In the end, although I feel that Androus and Greymorning get it wrong on a very important point, I also feel that this is probably outweighed by what they get right.



**Figure 1:** Sermitsiaq, seen from Nuuk, Kalaallit Nunaat. (© Adam Grydehøj)

### **Some introspection**

One year ago, sitting as I am now in an office at Ilisimatusarfik, the university of Kalaallit Nunaat (in English, Greenland), I was pondering these same seemingly intractable problems with regard to this highly autonomous subnational island jurisdiction of Denmark. And I wrote:

There are so many visions, so many possible futures [...] What is progress, and what is regression? What is development, and what is decline? Whose voice do you hear when you listen? (Grydehøj, 2017, p. 12)

One thing is to hear voices; another is to know which ones are worth listening to. What I had in mind at the time was that, in the context of Kalaallit Nunaat, we ought to be listening to the Kalaallit (Greenlandic Inuit) rather than to well-meaning foreigners. Yet here, today,

I choose to listen to myself, another well-meaning foreigner. Why should my voice matter? My voice is not a Kalaallit voice but a metropolitan one. Why should anyone listen to me? And should I actually just shut up and let other people speak?

I cannot answer that. In Kalaallit Nunaat, there are some people who wish me to speak, perhaps precisely because my voice is neither Kalaallit nor Danish. I come (it may be supposed) without prejudice. My voice cannot so easily be dismissed as a product of bitterness and regressive ethnonationalism.

Yet this is a matter of political strategy. It is not a moral argument. The fact that some (not all) Kalaallit regard my voice as convenient has no bearing on whether it *should* be part of Kalaallit Nunaat's political discourse. Might my voice in fact be especially pernicious, given that it valorizes a particular global scholarly ideal? As Jonathan Pugh (2013) has shown, efforts to give islanders 'voice' all too often amount to representatives of the metropole trying to convince islanders to speak in a metropolitan voice because this would make it easier for the metropole to hear them. Navigating the tensions of using metropolitan methods to promote Indigenous methodologies, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2013 [1999]) argues that the very foundations of research and scholarship are inextricably rooted in colonialism and the West—and she inspires a new generation of Indigenous scholars while garnering respect from the wider scholarly community. Seeking an Indigenous scholarly voice, Manulani Aluli Meyer (2003) rebels against the constraints of Western ways of knowing and expressing knowledge—and her voice risks being regarded as a primary source, as evidence of a way of Indigenous thinking, rather than as an academic commentary upon the relationship between Western and Indigenous epistemologies. Pursuing improvements in practice, Karla Jessen Williamson (1992) advocates integrating Indigenous worldviews into childhood education in Indigenous communities—yet she too must justify herself within the very epistemological framework that she deems insufficient or inappropriate.

If my voice is used to transmit (some) Kalaallit voices that currently go unheard, then it might be doing some good. If (selected) Kalaallit voices come to be interpreted within the framework of my Western, metropolitan mindset, then I am uncertain that my effect is a positive one. Whether certain Kalaallit find my voice useful is beside the point. All voices may not be equally valid in all contexts.

There are no easy answers. Even in a land such as Kalaallit Nunaat, which was never subject to settler colonialism, it is unclear who should be regarded as Kalaallit. Now that the nation-building process is well under way, divisions in society are becoming increasingly clear. Some argue that children of mixed Danish-Kalaallit unions do not truly hold a stake in the nation. Some make language the defining characteristic: If you speak Kalaallit, you are in; if you do not speak it, you are out. For others, the privilege of having been born into a family that was or has become part of Kalaallit Nunaat's political and economic elite should bar one from having voice. For others still, educational qualifications and professional expertise may grant rights to a public hearing that trump rights accrued on account of Kalaallit ethnicity.

Cases of interethnic conflict in the Solomon Islands (which has suffered from colonial archipelago-building processes) and Fiji (where the importation of colonized labour has prompted interethnic strife) highlight the difficulties that can be involved in determining who deserves a voice, long after the colonizer has departed. Indigenous opinions, policies, and solutions are not automatically 'right' by virtue of their being indigenous. There must be an opportunity to challenge Indigenous actions if they are aggressive, unfair, or even simply ill-advised. Whatever the answer is, it does not involve shutting down debate.

What, then, is the problem with Pöllath's paper or even that of Gilley? Is the only difference between them and me that I seek refuge in a different ivory tower than they do by presuming to give voice to islanders and Indigenous peoples? Is it simply a case of me being less intellectually honest with myself concerning my own culturally conditioned limitations? Pöllath (2018) acknowledges the limitations to his perspective. In my academic writing, I generally do not.

## The importance of positionality

The key lies in understanding where one is positioned within the ‘colonial matrix of power’ (Mignolo, 2011). Reflecting upon fieldwork in a squatter settlement community in Malaysia, Nadarajah (2007, pp. 128–129) remarks:

For most of us, some semblance of an ‘insider’ can be achieved after a considerable amount of time and extended periods of visits and a deepening of that which is initially unfamiliar. Yet there is always a field of ambiguity—of moving between being an insider and also an outsider, or partial insiders—positions invoked and orchestrated too by the very participants in the research study. [...] The porousness of places and communities, and more importantly the fact that they evolve and take shape through multiple interrelationships with myriad differently positioned others (which includes the fieldworker) are by definition, constitutive of contemporary social life.

Such an analysis is not limited to the realm of ethnographic research. After all, the economist (working with data sets supplied by a state statistics authority), the legal scholar (interpreting laws that were formulated through a lengthy historical process of negotiation between parties, peoples, and countries), and the literary scholar (undertaking close readings of texts that arose from particular social contexts) are equally engaged in constructing their fields. And if they maintain their focus for long enough, they too may begin to feel like ‘insiders’ in a sense. The difference, perhaps, is simply that Nadarajah’s (2007) ‘outsider within’ fieldworker is more directly confronted by her ambiguous, ambivalent, and ‘in-between’ status. For there will ultimately come times when the fieldworker’s objects of study resist the globalizing tendencies inherent in the globalized academic endeavour—when people in the field push back to remind the researcher that, while her voice is (one might hope) pleasant, welcome, and perhaps even useful, it is not and can never be the voice of an unalloyed ‘insider’. The very act of researching distances the fieldworker from the field-as-lived-experience. The very act of determining whose voices are worth hearing from a research perspective constructs the field in one’s own image. This is true whether one studies one’s home town, a city on the East Coast of the USA, or a village on a ‘remote’ Pacific atoll. The impulse to move from the outside to the inside is a positive one even if it is—like genuine decolonization—unachievable. The researcher cannot seek to remove bias one way or another, can never succeed in dissolving power relationships. Nevertheless, by being aware of her position, she can perhaps come to understand the limits to her voice.

It is important to know one’s own position as a researcher and to determine what rights and restrictions accompany (or ought to accompany) this position. Yet such determinations will inevitably vary on a personal level. Willingness to ‘act’ the insider is not always indicative of insufficient reflexivity, just as an insistence on taking an outsider’s perspective is no guarantee of sufficient reflexivity.

We, as readers of academic research, are free to choose which voices we deem worth listening to, which positions are relevant in any given context. When considering island and Indigenous issues, it is, to my mind, no more reasonable to seek to exclude all non-island and non-Indigenous voices than it would be to seek to exclude all island and Indigenous voices. It is perfectly possible for social, political, cultural, economic, and environmental processes that occur in one place to be of interest to individuals in another place and for those outsiders to have legitimate reasons for seeking to make their voices heard. The USA *does* have strategic interests in the Pacific region, and even if some may feel that these metropolitan interests only incompletely coincide with the interests of Pacific islanders, it makes sense for the interests of the USA to play a role in discussions concerning the Pacific region. Similarly, French

perspectives on Pacific islands may be simultaneously problematic and relevant to island lives (Favole & Giordana, 2018). If, for example, we accept the concept of ‘world heritage’, then we must admit that sometimes we will care deeply about things (species, buildings, landscapes, intangible culture) that concern others more directly than they concern us.

The present issue of *Island Studies Journal* provides another illustration of the impossibility of making absolute determinations regarding which voices are worth hearing in any given context. Helen Kapstein’s (2018, pp. 305–306) review of the edited volume *Tourist utopias* (Simpson, 2017) concludes by highlighting the book’s dependence on funding by the casino industry in Macau, including “mega-billionaire, mega-casino owner, mega-donor Sheldon Adelson (lately with a heavy hand in U.S. G.O.P. electioneering and underwriter of the proposed relocation of the American embassy in Israel).” Kapstein asks: “What does it mean to theorize the tourism industry from the inside?” This question is worth asking, but Kapstein’s approach suggests positional difficulties of its own. Sheldon Adelson is an American who owns businesses in Macau and is thus an outsider, yet it is generally understood that the people of Macau have benefited significantly from the territory’s gaming industry. If Macau, a special administrative region of China, can be studied as an island city (e.g., Kwong & Wong, 2017; Sheng, 2016; Sheng et al., 2017), and if island studies ought to advocate islanders’ interests, then might it not in itself be problematic to ask researchers to prioritize the needs of Americans and Palestinians over those of the people of Macau? The people of Macau vanish in Kapstein’s brief critique, just as surely as Pacific islanders vanish in all too many discussions of military strategy and geopolitics. Whose voice do you hear when you listen to Macau? This is not intended as an attack on Kapstein, who is an astute scholar and has written extensively on postcolonialism and islands (Kapstein, 2017). The point is instead that finding the right position in the process of ‘centring’ islands is difficult even for the experts.



**Figure 2:** Hotel Grand Lisboa, between residential housing blocks, Macau. (© Adam Grydehøj)

## Toward an editorial policy

No one needs to privilege metropolitan voices over island and Indigenous voices. From the perspective of island studies as a research field, there is justified reluctance to listen to exclusionary voices from the metropole—to voices like that of Gilley, metropolitan voices that seek to bar islanders and Indigenous peoples from having their own voices. I thus think it unlikely that *Island Studies Journal* will ever publish a paper resembling Gilley's defence of colonialism. Most cases are not so clear-cut, however.

Substantial discussion within *Island Studies Journal's* editorial board reached the consensus that Pöllath's (2018) paper was not problematic in the manner of Gilley's paper; while Pöllath takes a metropolitan perspective, he does not seek to delegitimize island and Indigenous perspectives. Some editorial members did not find Pöllath's paper useful or relevant, but if a journal introduces the editorial policy of only publishing pieces that everyone finds useful and relevant, it will quickly find itself with nothing to publish. It was ultimately decided that Pöllath's research is reasonable when taken on its own terms and that these terms are not so antithetical to the aims of *Island Studies Journal* as to prevent the article from appearing in the journal. We can take a firm editorial stance against exclusionary practices emanating from the metropole but not against metropolitan perspectives as a whole—especially given that a great many researchers in island studies embody these metropolitan perspectives, even as they resist them.

If we are willing to grant a degree of editorial leeway to authors such as Androus and Greymorning (2016), who pursue their own form of exclusionary discourse, it is because we can recognize their approach as 'punching up', as seeking to disrupt reigning and problematic power structures. Again, no one is forced to agree with Androus and Greymorning, and it may make sense to highlight—however belatedly—aspects of their analysis that ought to give us pause. Yet bearing in mind the complexity of identifying what, precisely, islands' 'own terms' are, there can be no doubt that Androus and Greymorning are seeking to engage with islands on these terms whereas authors such as Gilley are not. Androus and Greymorning furthermore do so in a reasonable manner.

It is important that *Island Studies Journal* remains a forum that is open to reasonable and fair research from all perspectives, including from perspectives to which many of the journal's readers are opposed (e.g., Pöllath, 2018). It does no one any good for the journal to become a mere echo chamber of self-anointed island and Indigenous voices. There may be circumstances in which the gravity of the conditions being discussed and the novelty of the approach justify the journal also providing a platform for reasonable but *unfair* research (e.g., Androus & Greymorning, 2016)—just so long as this research is positioned in such a manner as to potentially make a productive contribution to island perspectives, in spite of its flaws.

Due precisely to the complexities of positionality, *Island Studies Journal's* editorial board furthermore established the following policy in 2017: "Papers that focus on one or more Indigenous communities are subject to an enhanced review process: Either one or more of the double-blind peer reviews will be undertaken by a member of an Indigenous community or an additional, nonscholarly review will be undertaken by a member of an Indigenous community." This policy cannot, of course, guarantee that all the articles we publish regarding Indigenous communities will make all members of Indigenous communities happy. There is no such thing as perfection in scholarship.

Inasmuch as the above thoughts represent a wider editorial policy, it is an emerging one, and it will be subject to continued discussion within *Island Studies Journal's* editorial board. There will always be a variety of opinions and positions within this editorial board as well, which is healthy for the journal and for the field of island studies as a whole.

None of us will ever achieve the ideally situated 'voice' in research. The best we can do is hear our own voices with a critical ear.

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