



# Island landscapes and European culture: An ‘island studies’ perspective

Godfrey Baldacchino

Professor and Canada Research Chair (Island Studies), University of Prince Edward Island, 550 University Avenue, Charlottetown, PE, Canada C1A 4P3  
Visiting Professor of Sociology, University of Malta, Msida MSD 2080, Malta  
Vice-President, International Small Island Studies Association (ISIS)

Received 21 February 2013; accepted 9 April 2013

Available online 18 May 2013

## KEYWORDS

Culture;  
Europe;  
Focus;  
Islandness;  
Island studies;  
Locus;  
Landscape;  
Metaphor;  
Materiality;  
Natural laboratories

**Abstract** The active imagining of a European identity needs to engage with the geographical possibilities, visualisations and performativities of place. It is all too easy but superficial and naive to consider geophysical parameters as the silent backdrop or empty canvas on which cultural initiatives unfold. European islands, amongst other features – mountains, coasts, forests – are imbued with powerful (and often Western) myths and tropes of place: they combine materiality and metaphor, presenting spaces that at once appear open and closed, fixed yet fluid, complete and peripheral, vulnerable yet resilient. The geo-social constitution of their culture is also subject to the vantage point of the observer, him/herself caught in the liminality between being a visitor, being an islander, and various other uneasily defined categories in between.

Acknowledging the insights of the likes of Clifford Geertz, Ulf Hannerz, Anna-Maria Greverus and Owe Ronström, this paper proposes that a critical analysis and appreciation of European culture in island landscapes must be one that engages with the nature of islandness; the *locus* of study should also be the *focus* of study. This paper also suggests epistemologies to flesh out this approach, its merits, but also the dangers associated with essentialising island spaces and peoples.

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## Introduction: challenging immateriality

All events must “take place” (Hubbard et al., 2002: 239); they happen in space and time – meaning that they do not simply ensue and occur, unfolding in some kind of abstract or ethereal sequence or progression; but that they take place *in* a place, requiring some kind of material positioning or referent for them to unfold, as they do. It is the juxtaposition of event, people and place that is a defining signature of human and social life. Hay (2006: 33) describes this as the “dialogue between the physicality of place and the interaction of people within it”. As to the exact

E-mail address: [gbaldacchino@upei.ca](mailto:gbaldacchino@upei.ca)

Peer review under responsibility of Mokpo National University.



relationality between these concepts, that is the hard core of many ontological debates: be they driven by structuralism, economic determinism, phenomenology, structuration theory, the structure-agency dialectic, or the nature-nurture controversy; they date back to the problematic relationship between form and matter already posed by Aristotle.

What this suggests, in simple but still profound terms, is that humans are not insubstantial species; they engage with the world, with nature, with their physical and metaphysical environment, in order to change, to domesticate, to somehow make their world safer, nicer, better; to the extent that what they fashion – shall we call it ‘culture’? – in turn predisposes human actions and possibilities.

It seems quite important to make these statements, even though they may sound truisms. They are not. First of all, there is a recent fascination with the adoption of space as a generated construct of the human condition. The notion that space is an objective, stand alone ‘thing’, receptacle-like, a fixed reservoir that contains events, and that we therefore, as pop star diva Madonna reminds us, “live *in* a material world” (my emphasis) is largely *passé* in the social sciences. Instead, space is now increasingly seen as inexistent unto itself, but rather an outcome and product of interactions, ‘consequences of the ways in which bodies relate to one another’ (Latour, 1997: 176, emphasis in original). With this ontological switch, we are alerted to those processes whereby space is continually reinvented and re/presented through emergent human action and design (e.g. Bingham and Thrift, 2000: 288–289). The paradigms that are now in vogue conjure up the idea of a fluid, quasi-philosophical entity, untrammelled by the physicality of dross, material substance. People are invariably ‘on the move’ and ‘out of place’, creating space, rendering it through diverse senses, and ascribing it with meaning and history. Spaces are de-territorialised; they are actively embodied, being just socially produced. Space, Deleuze (2004: 12) argues emphatically, “is imaginary and not actual; mythological and not geographical”.

Of course, such postmodern approaches provide a welcome and overdue privileging of mobility and kinesis. They offer a powerful and relevant critique of reductionist, Euclidean geometry, Ptolemaic cartography and Newtonian (solid-state) physics, whereby space has long been construed as an absolute, an unproblematic and homogenous given. But: what these approaches also tend to do is to render the material world inexistent. “Endless change rather than enduring identities” is the signature of this postmodern fluidity (Hay, 2006: 28).

And yet, can one entertain memory and belonging without materiality? Is it not ‘things’ which become seeped in, and with, social memory in their production and consumption? Is it not also materials – *souvenirs* – along with and apart from thoughts – *pensées* – which perform the past by virtue of their enduring existence in the present? Connecting with our immediate surroundings, through tactile and other sensory means, is such a basic and constant constitution of life (e.g. Clark and Clark, 2009: 311). Perhaps it is no coincidence that our skin, the interface of the self with/in the world, is our largest organ (Montagu, 1971). Our societies punish criminals via imprisonment to restrict their material fields as much as their mobility horizons. Touch reduces stress levels, improves immunity and enhances attentiveness (Field, 2000); while touch deprivation is fatal to infants (Montagu, 1971). Meanwhile, capitalism urges

us to measure the quality of life by the material things we own and consume.

Perhaps it would be fairer to hypothesise a melding of the material and the contingent, whereby each becomes folded into, subsumed by, and imbricated in the agency of the other. Places would not just be attached to, or *rooted* in, spaces; but nor are they just *routed*, travelling and becoming with us. Places also travel with and become by means of the materials through which they are expressed and performed. Resources, objects and technologies, as well as spaces, are much more than the affects and effects of human intent and action; they constitute “situated knowledges” in time and space (Haraway, 1996; also Massey, 2005); they structure, define and configure interaction, even as they themselves are also outcomes of decisions, choices and interventions made by people. Places are captives of this “living in-between” (Game, 2001: 226), and are always unfinished (Heatherington, 1998: 187). “The things that people make, make people” (Miller, 2005: 38). It is an embodied engagement with materiality that constructs personal and social identity; as much as it is the other way round. And so, by way of example, within the Western imaginary, sand on a beach on a warm and sunny summer day conveys this dialectic co-production by ushering in a whole repertoire of “doing” (e.g. Butler, 1990) and of “body techniques” (Mauss, 1936/1979) which socialize and constitute us temporarily as pleasure-cum-tactile seeking subjects (Baldacchino, 2010a).

And so, the contemporary ‘givens’ of simulacra, fluidity and immateriality need to be challenged. The conjunction or intersection of the social and the material can still be understood without the former swallowing the latter. The proverbial baby should not be thrown out with the bathwater: and this expression is all the more useful since it conjures up a very material, even dramatic, event.

### **Things island: beyond myth and metaphor**

Among many other things, this means that we need to re-engage and re-energise our commitment and connection to our material base. And that includes a strategic retreat from the exclusive representation of ‘the island’ as metaphor, shorn of physicality or situatedness (e.g. Polack, 1998). “Certain natural environments have figured prominently in humanity’s dreams of the ideal world: they are the forest, the seashore, the valley and the island” (Tuan, 1990: 247). And, more recently, islands have become, unwittingly, the objects of what may be the most lavish, global and consistent branding exercise in human history. They find themselves presented as locales of desire, as platforms of paradise, as habitual sites of fascination, emotional offloading or religious pilgrimage (Baldacchino, 2010b: 374; Baldacchino, 2013). The metaphoric deployment of ‘island’, with the associated attributes of small physical size and warm water, is possibly *the* central gripping metaphor within Western discourse (Hay, 2006: 26, emphasis in original; also Connell, 2003). Stratford summarizes some of the rich harvest of island tropes thus presented:

“Islands … absolute entities … territories, territorial; relational spaces – archipelagos, (inter)dependent, identifiable; relative spaces – bounded but porous; isolated, connected, colonised, postcolonial; redolent of the performative

imaginary; vulnerable to linguistic, cultural, environmental change; robust and able to absorb and modify; ... utopian and dystopian, tourist meccas, ecological refugia ..." (Stratford, 2003: 495).

What is even more troubling, even distasteful, is that these constructions are often imposed on islands from the outside: they are colonialist and continentalist; they are applied by those who are not islanders, except perhaps for a few days of planned and wilful escape from the routines of (non-island) life. In this way, islands – and their inhabitants – come into view off the deck of a cruise ship, or from an airplane window, glide wistfully and temporarily on one’s consciousness for a few days, and then disappear again over the horizon of a receding cruise ship or a departing plane (e.g. Sheller, 2013). In this way, Lilliput – and its cardboard, uni-dimensional Lilliputians – only exists through the eyes, and texts, of a certain Lemuel Gulliver, who is just visiting; his interest in island affairs is fleeting and superficial (Baldacchino, 2008: 42). And, if this is a dream of a tourist paradise that must not come across as fake but as authentic, then the tourism marketing agencies disseminate these same, ingeniously crafted metaphors of island life. In this task, they are hopefully supported by their fellow island inhabitants, who go about their lives to ensure, via deep acting and a clear and savvy knowledge of the hallowed script, that the magic is not to be broken. For the sake of economic survival, islanders share in a continuous ritual in which they, and their island homes, are “aesthesicised, sanitised and anaesthetised” (Connell, 2003: 568).

These are some of the main reasons why the contemporary study of islands seeks to present islands “on their own terms” (Baldacchino, 2008). These ideas hopefully provide a rationale for why islanders may harbour a deep objection to, even as they understand and stoically tolerate, nuanced and stylised descriptions of their worlds, captured over and over again in such statements as the one that follows:

“Places of romance, excitement and adventure, or just escape from the pressures of busy lifestyles, islands worldwide have always held a particular fascination for people” (Vogiatzakis et al., 2008: 3–4).

This is a typical description of island life. This statement includes at least two inconvenient myths: the perfectly natural disposition of islands as tourist destinations; and the assumption that such a disposition, being natural, is millenary and timeless. Both suggestions are wrong or partial.

### **Islands and tourism, naturally?**

Let us start with the latter: tourism is a relatively young industry; until a 100 years ago or so, only the elite could afford to go on trips abroad, and even then the objective may have been strictly educational or therapeutic, rather than the contemporary meaning of a holiday, indulging in *dolce far niente* (Löfgren, 2002). The “strange division of human life into working life and leisure time” is a recent historical stance (Cameron, 1998: 128). Beaches have only recently become sites of pleasure fetishes (Baldacchino, 2010a). The mere thought of venturing away from the security and safety of one’s home would have been a dangerous and/or expensive proposition some decades ago; and this is still the case for many people around the world.

Secondly, islands and islanders and not ‘naturally’ predisposed to be more suitable tourist destinations than anywhere else. Indeed, a scientific scan would prove that the world’s largest concentration of islands is to be found between latitude 56° and 64° N, definitely not the location for tropical fantasies (Depraetere and Dahl, 2007). But then, we need to remind ourselves that islands have been branded as desirable sites long before the concept found its way into management schools and contemporary marketing discourse. Already in the 10th century, Eric the Red, an early settler on a large and remote island, is reported in the Icelandic sagas to have named that new territory *Greenland* in order to attract other settlers there. Five hundred years ago, it was claimed that one could harvest cod from waters off the island of Newfoundland simply by lowering a basket into the sea (Kurlansky, 1999). Perhaps we can consider islands as prototypes, targets for some of the earliest systematic attempts at branding: advancing, and romancing, a meaningful and desirable difference in a world crowded by competitive categories (Martin, 1989: 201). There is “little doubt”, we are told, that islands have a particular “lure” or “fascination” to visitors (Lockhart, 1997; King, 1993; Baum, 1997; Baum et al., 2000: 214).

Academic scholarship has been complicit in such branding attempts: it was initially keen to acknowledge traits of environmental determinism on human behaviour. To the extent that islanders were deemed to be easily typed, their features capable of listed and catalogued. For example, both philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1765) and geographer Eileen Churchill Semple (1911: 426) argued matter-of-factly that ethnic and cultural divergence is more marked amongst islanders than mainlanders. Island inhabitants are strongly communal, argued Semple. Islanders, “being less mixed, less blended with other peoples”, have a more marked character, professed Rousseau, a comment made with specific reference to Corsicans, but applied just as well to islanders all over. Even today, authors from various disciplines continue to engage in questions about the extent to which island(er)s are insular (e.g. Gosden and Pavlides, 1994; Olwig, 2007).

Various other writers, caught in a desperate frenzy of nation-building in newly independent states or autonomous territories, similarly offered pseudo ethno-scientific explanations for specific cultural traits that ‘naturally’ justified these places’ newly achieved political autonomy; an initiative that strangely mirrored the discovery and classification of endemic non-human species. And, in archipelagos, to be sure, different personality types would correspond to different island peoples. Consider this example from the Azorean archipelago, a Portuguese island autonomy:

The Azoreans are meant to be “... deeply religious, good-natured, submissive, indolent, sensitive, pacific, orderly, family-oriented, industrious, nostalgic and somewhat sad. That character is deeply endowed with a strong sense of family responsibility, one which transmits to children a worldview calling for adherence to a hard-work ethic and to well-disciplined obedience.” Moreover, the São Miguelan is “rough, industrious, sturdy and tenacious,” while the Azorean from the middle and western islands is “affable, somewhat cunning, fond of festivities, and indolent.” The people of Pico are a mixture, being “vigorous, wholesome, sometimes heroic, and always takes life seriously (Ribeiro, 1964: 17).

Such pseudo-scientific writings however quickly fell out of favour in academe since they tended to stereotype, essentialise and mythologise their subject matter. Not all islanders are the same. There is, and there can be, no such thing as ‘The Azorean’, any more than there is, or can be, some quintessential ‘American’. Islandness, just like mainlandness, does not, in itself, cause anything. But, in discarding what is now often readily understood as an absurd exercise, the roles of place and scale were also rendered suspect and subsequently summarily discarded as useful conceptual notions; while mainstream geography and social science generally rushed to embrace the tenets and promises of post-structuralist and phenomenological epistemologies. Hence the resulting irony: take Sweden, a country with some 250,000 islands; but where one still cannot speak of a “Swedish island ethnology” (Ronström, 2013).

Moreover, and much like the origins of geography itself, a slate of very place or region specific studies in most of the 19th and 20th centuries was exposed and condemned as largely driven by the strategic, economic and political need for knowledge and scholarship of, first, the (mainly European) imperial world and then the (mainly US-driven) Cold War world (e.g. Smith, 2010: 24). The subject matter emerged out of, and reflected, such “imperialist projects of classification, ordering and power” (Sidaway, 2012: 3). Consider the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London set up in 1916 (e.g. Abrahamsen, 2003); or, since the 1950s, the pursuit of Soviet studies at what became Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government (e.g. Bunce and Echols, 1979). Area studies has been described as “a mode of knowledge production [that is] military in origins” (Chow, 2006: 39).

In this way, place was removed from the focus of study, and even from being the locus of study. “The locus of study is not the object of study”, proclaimed Geertz (1973: 22), “Anthropologists do not study villages [or islands] . . . they study *in* villages [or *in* islands] (my emphasis)”. And why bother with physical places *at all*, when they were simply epiphenomenal ‘surfaces’ hiding and obfuscating deeper processes and meanings (Hannerz, 1982: 34)? Being “prototypical ethno-scapes” (Baldacchino, 2006: 4), material islands would be amongst the first victims of attention loss and drop quietly off the academic radar. The nature of islands – or islandness – becomes exchangeable to that of any other place, and merely as backdrop (*also* Greverus, 1997). Meanwhile, the metaphorical island rules OK: “so powerful is the metaphorical idea of the island that it can be deployed in the absence of even the slightest reference to the reality of islands” (Hay, 2006: 30). Islands are “natural laboratories” (Evans, 1973; Greenhough, 2006), and it can be surprising to note how much can be said about what goes on in a lab, without any reference to the nature of the lab itself.

### **Writing and righting islands**

But: considerations of ‘place’ are now coming back with a vengeance. The “epistemological crisis” in area studies (Goss and Wesley-Smith, 2010: ix) may have become a thing of the past. There is now a definitive ‘spatial turn’ in the geo-humanities, and a more relaxed reconnection with the material and the grounded; though problematic conceptual and methodological issues remain (see below).

First, in the suite of ‘area studies’ initiatives since the 1980s – whether as urban studies, regional studies, rural studies, gender studies – all of which have started to acknowledge the specificity of local cultures. The current slate of area studies is generally careful to avoid the accusation that it is merely promoting a fetishised interpretation of non-Western, non-mainstream knowledge and discourse (Said, 1979). Rather, area studies today consider issues of power, are more theoretically sophisticated, and make a timely, valid and critical foil to the often glib assumptions about the implied perversity of globalisation and free market neo-liberalism (Szanton, 2004: 5).

Second, by the inclusion of a ‘sense of place’ in the holistic understanding of quality of life. In this way, rural and otherwise small and peripheral locations develop a unique attraction to would be new residents, many of whom might be deliberate urban refugees, reacting to the global trend in favour of urbanisation (e.g. Baldacchino et al., 2009). Popular in the many business schools that have proliferated all over, marketing takes on board the conceptualisations and techniques of place branding in order to differentiate not just products, but the very places that produce them (e.g. Anholt, 2008; Baldacchino, 2010c).

Third, by the encouragement offered by the flourishing of post-colonial and sub-altern studies. This development – along with the democratisation of publishing ushered in by the world-wide-web – has generated an explosion of plurality; with so many new ways of framing difference and diversity, and in so many different languages and formats. It has given a badly needed voice and presence to even the world’s smallest jurisdictions and their hitherto invisible and/or silenced populations, including aboriginal peoples. With the Empire “writing back” (e.g. Ashcroft et al., 2002), the world’s many Lilliputians can now speak with their own voice, rather than have alien (even if well-meaning) Gullivers acting as their interlocutors and gatekeepers. We are now getting glimpses of islands, islanders and island lives; even if these are, for the moment, largely driven either by the lofty rhetoric of tourism marketing initiatives, or by considerations of economic and environmental vulnerability that reinforce victim and deficit paradigms (e.g. Farbotko, 2005).

Fourth, and more specifically to islands and low lying coastal regions, talk of such environmental vulnerability is often focussed on matters relating to global warming, sea level rise, and the threat of displaced populations. The significant number of small island developing states (SIDS) in the international community has made some impact on recent multilateral diplomacy by highlighting, through the lobbying of a cohesive coalition under the auspices of the Alliance of Small and Island States (AOSIS, 2012), the serious plight of small, fragile and very finite and material islands (e.g. Royle, 2010). Actual environmental disasters – such as the 2004 Boxing Day Indian Ocean tsunami, and the January 2010 Haiti earthquake – have led to considerable attention to climate change and disaster research and scholarship, with islands often at the forefront (e.g. Wisner et al., 2012). Can island research get more material than that?

### **Islands in Europe, islands of Europe**

How does this re/acknowledgement of place and islandness pan out in the context of Europe? Can we speak of European islands as a specific focus of cultural inquiry? Is there, and can there be, a specific European island landscape?

These are difficult questions to ponder, not least because the very notion of Europe is itself a problematic one that straddles both materiality and socio-political construction. We must remember that, had not Europeans been the ones that invented and classified the continents, it is very likely that Europe, at best a peninsula of Asia, would not have been a continent unto itself at all. Timothy Garton Ash (1990) calls Europe “one of the biggest and most continuous myths”. Interestingly, the mythological figure of Europa (*Ευρώπη*), after whom the continent is named, was not European but an immigrant. She was a Phoenician princess, allegedly born somewhere in modern day Lebanon. She came into the Hellenic world when she arrived in Crete, where she was allegedly seduced by the god Zeus in the form of a bull.

Indeed, islands are perhaps the sites where the ‘European project’ meets some of its most profound cultural and political challenges. Islands are “performative geographies” of some of the most tortuous of current European affairs (Fletcher, 2011); and again leading us away from island matters *per se* to what they do or can represent. Take Greenland, the only territory to exit the European Union, in 1985; take Malta, Lampedusa, Tenerife, and the Greek islands, tense arrival points for waves of undocumented migrants from Africa and Asia; take Cyprus with its recent euro crisis and its no small part in the strained relationship of Europe to Turkey; take the Greek islands and how they must now cope with a radical retrenchment of state financing in the throes of the euro crisis and their country’s recession; take the established French *départements d’outre mer* (DOMs) of Guadeloupe, Martinique and Réunion (along with continental French Guyana) that really stretch our geographical understanding of what Europe is (and is not); and consider how the addition of the 5th and latest DOM – the island of Mayotte, in the Indian Ocean, with its largely Muslim population – to France, and Europe, in 2011, challenges further our understanding of what is European other than some broad, vague and rhetorical reference to democratic values and human rights.

Meanwhile, other islands – like El Hierro in Spain or Samsø in Denmark – rush ahead with their embracing of a green energy agenda and a more promising and sustainable future (Jones, 2011; Turner, 2007). Other islands still speak to the invention of bucolic, desirable landscapes, captured initially in paintings that circulated among urban European elites, and now exported worldwide and enshrined *in toto*, and in an over-representative fashion, on such prestigious listings as that of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Think Suomenlinna, Visby, Vega, Surtsey, Reichenau, Mont Saint Michel, Skellig Michael, St Kilda, Grande Ile de Strasbourg, Pico, Isole Aeolie and Venice, amongst others (UNESCO, 2012). Perhaps the very idea of a landscape – as a form of visual gardening that imposes forms and frames of ideal scapes – is a quintessentially European idea (e.g. Cosgrove and Daniels, 1989; Picard, 2011: 142)?

The very idea of a European Union can also be said to owe its origins, at least partly, to island spaces. It was on the small Italian island prison of Ventotene, that a small group of Italian political prisoners, including Altiero Spinelli, hatched a manifesto that paved the way for a federalist European project (Mazower, 2012). Spinelli eventually became one of the EU’s “founding fathers”.

Far from being represented as economically dependent peripheries that must struggle with transportation logistics and diseconomies of scale, or exotic offshore paradises for stressed urbanites, European islands are crucibles of identity

and culture. The destiny of their inhabitants is to be savagely reminded that their livelihood will always depend on what is coming from, leaving to, or unfolding on mainlands beyond their physical horizon: imports/exports, invasions, in/out-migration, tourism, finance (e.g. Fog Olwig, 1993). This is the methodological quandary: their geographical specificity and determinacy is beguiling. Islands are not insular, and can never be properly understood as worlds, unto themselves. But such a realisation often translates into abstractions at best; and total oblivion at worst. For all the drama that may unfold on their shores and scapes, an island’s window of opportunity for capturing the world, or even continental Europe’s attention, is usually short and fleeting.

Here is a case in point. The day is Friday the 13th January 2011: during this night, the small Italian island of Giglio – 23 km<sup>2</sup> – was thrust onto the world’s attention, and not because it is “like a pearl in an oyster” or for its ‘mild climate, unspoilt nature and crystal clear, emerald coloured waters’, as its website declares (Island of Giglio, 2012). In this case, what arrived unexpectedly from beyond its horizon was a cruise ship. The *Costa Concordia* is wrecked on a reef off this small island. At least 30 people die. Most of the 4200 or so passengers and crew are rescued, taken to the island, and offered first aid, warmth, food and shelter by its 1400 inhabitants. The episode sparked a critical review of security measures on passenger cruise ships. The island was just the backdrop for the drama offshore; its inhabitants, heroes for one night (e.g. Alexander, 2012).

## Conclusion

It is as difficult to define and describe a European island as much as it is to describe and define Europe. It remains nevertheless a fairly common practice, even among scholars, to seek to distil and encapsulate the diversity of European islands into some kind of general propositional framework. For example, a recently completed ESPON Project (ESPON, 2011) considered “362 European islands each with a permanent population of more than 50 inhabitants” (*ibid.*: 9) and came up with a series of recommendations meant to mitigate the “low attractiveness” of most islands to both businesses and residents, which is seen to be “an obstacle to their economic and social sustainability” (*ibid.*: 34). Considering the locus of study as the focus of study – islandness – does help to acknowledge the role of place in social analysis; but the technique has to subject itself to strict quantitative variables to permit valid comparisons; and the island-specific case studies it commissioned were meant to flesh out these same variables, utilising standard survey instruments. But then, what is the plausible alternative? A rigid and atomistic phenomenology of an island life? Ronström (2012) advises that we may have to make a choice, or otherwise switch deliberately, between pursuing the realist and reified homogeneity of ‘the island’ on one hand, and the idealist and symbolic plurality of studying ‘islands’ on the other.

Henare et al. (2007: 1) pose a sobering reflection: how can the artefacts that inspire “ethnographic revelation” be appreciated for and engaged with “on their own terms”? Can one suspend, even if briefly, the urge to have such things “explained away”? This sounds uncannily similar to Grant McCall’s (1994) own appeal to have islands appreciated “on their own terms”. Over 10% of the world’s population, some 550 million people, live on islands (Baldacchino, 2006: 3); not all are small,

not all are fragile, and certainly not all are tropical. The sheer size and inherent diversity of our ‘sea of islands’ (Hau’ofa, 1993) is reason enough for it to command attention for what it is, and not just for what it could stand for. And yet, given the inherent permeability of island spaces, it is very difficult to make the locus of study, the focus of study. We just must continue to remind ourselves that, while *island matters* are important for what they suggest, *islands matter* too (Hils, 1996).

## Acknowledgements

My heartfelt thanks to Gloria Pungetti for the invitation to attend the ESLAND Conference in Sassari, Sardinia, Italy, in October 2012, where an earlier version of this paper was first presented. My sincere appreciation also to Owe Ronström (Gotland University, Sweden) for commenting on earlier drafts. The usual disclaimers apply.

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