

# INTRODUCTION: THE SPACE OF AQUAPELAGO

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JOSHUA NASH

University of New England <jnash7@une.edu.au>

Some academic discussions fizzle out, others continue. Two reasonable measures of the positive result of any debate might be the longevity of the discussion and the degree of scholarly engagement of and in the ensuing dialogues. Stratford, Baldacchino and McMahon et al.'s (2011) envisioning and initiation of the archipelago as a locale of methodological and theoretical exploration led to their call for 'Archipelago Studies'. This call to task was a rumination on and identification of several of the contradictions present in a critical moderation of the Island Studies field so far. Where land and sea and island and continent/mainland had been identified, the island and island connection had not. This gap was taken up with gusto by island researchers, especially those writing for *Shima*.

Hayward reflects on Stratford, Baldacchino and McMahon et al. that:

*Useful as this article was in reflecting on threads that had previously emerged (particularly in contributions to ISJ [Island Studies Journal]), its publication prompted a sustained response from researchers associated with Shima arguing for a greater recognition and analysis of the integrated terrestrial and marine environments of island aggregates and of human engagement with these. (2015: 114)*

This piece is a brief deliberation into the historical and theoretical background of this exchange. I believe the resulting discourse is one that can be equated to a healthy conversation revealing the respective takes on Island Studies by the field's two flagship journals: *ISJ's* largely socio-economic, policy and political focus, and *Shima's* broad focus on island cultures. Hayward continues:

*The term 'aquapelago' was coined in contradistinction to the established term 'archipelago' to refer to the integrated marine and terrestrial assemblages that are generated by human habitation and activity in island locales. (ibid)*

The debate around the concept of aquapelagos and aquapelagic assemblages in Island Studies was born in 2011, inspired by and in response to Stratford, Baldacchino and McMahon et al.'s contribution and continues to evolve. The

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research opportunity which the aquapelagos debate is intended to honour initiates island specific ontologies, epistemologies, methods, and research agendas that illuminate research into island spaces as inter-related, mutually constituted and co-constructed; islands within their own island and worlds. How do islands interact with and construct the(ir) very human, geographical, cultural, and even linguistic spaces?

It is worth remembering that the aquapelagic focus in this body of writing in the journal *Shima* is faithful to and actually extends the concept of *shima* itself made explicit in Suwa's (2007) contribution to the journal's first issue. That is, *shima* embodies a dual implication: islands as geographical features and islands as small-scale social groups where cultural interactions are densely intermeshed. My title 'The space of *aquapelago*' is an allusion to Suwa's 'The space of *shima*'.

Five years appears be a long time in Island Studies. Ideas are incubated, some prosper. As the papers in this section demonstrate, the aquapelagic turn in Island Studies - ie the study of some of the ways islands might be thought of in terms of their near neighbouring islands and aquatic spaces - has given rise to much worthwhile dialogue, exchange, and studies of empirical focus. Since the theoretical initiation there have been no fewer than 12 articles in *Shima* dealing explicitly with the topic using the neologisms 'aquapelago' and 'aquapelagic assemblages' (now collated as an anthology on this web site). Hayward has ably summarised the history and theoretical implications of the aquapelagic debate through emphasising aquapelagic assemblages "as *performed* entities that are premised on human presence in and utilization of the environment in particular historical contexts" (2015: 115).

The topics addressed in the aquapelagic corpus are broad and spacious; they offer room to move and the capacity for further deliberation. Studies of music, archaeology, island labour markets, intra-archipelagic fishing ground placenaming (toponymy), cruise liner tourism, philosophical takes on islandness, and re-imaginings of island places have all come under the aquapelagic assemblage microscope. Such takes have enabled those accepting the invitation to "get wet" (after Baldacchino 2012). That is, we need to jump in to the intellectual and possibly literal waters that separate and create the island environments and places within which we work. In response to Hayward's concept of aquapelagos, it is worth repeating Baldacchino's almost mantra-like premise against the landed and unwatered environments: land-based is land-biased (ibid: 22).

It is with anticipation of further productive discussion and dialogue within the Island Studies community that I present this anthology of articles focusing on the aquapelago debate.

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