

EDITORIAL / ANOMA PIERIS, JAYDE LIN ROBERTS, AND
CHARMAINE 'ILAIŪ TALEI

Archipelogs: Indo-Pacific indigeneities

INTERSTICES 26

This themed issue of *Interstices* invited scholars based in Asia and Oceania (Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, and the wider Pacific region) to interrogate how we might redress our framing of 'Indigenous' (First Nations) cultural contributions. We sought to see them as internally differentiated from continuing 'indigenous' presence, practices, worldviews, and questions of ethnicity of peoples whose migration to and habitation in places over millennia had blurred the distinctions between autochthonous and migrant groups. We also recognised that our understanding of Indigenous identification differed from those of settler colonial nations in which First Nations groups and settlers were racially and culturally divided along colour lines. Confusion regarding the different usages of these terms by scholars based in Asia, Australia, and Aotearoa New Zealand surfaced in conversations across these diverse geographies. The strong propensity for Asian scholarship to naturalise evolutionary histories of the nation and modernity has been challenged by scholars like Prasenjit Duara and *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*.¹ However, Asia still persists in much of these writings as a geopolitical construct within which Indigenous recognition is taken up unevenly due to internalised racial hierarchies. Internal colonisation of First Nations peoples has occurred in many of these geographies. Despite the co-mingling of Indigenous and settler populations—who in some instances may appear racially similar—and the cultural appropriation of Indigenous values and practices, discriminatory and exclusionary government policies and epistemes persist. Perceived civilisational hierarchies, whether dictated by endogenous imperialism or learned from colonialism and universalising religions, cast Indigenous communities as primitives. Although Indigenous built and unbuilt environments form the basis for regional vernacular architectures, these environments have been misinterpreted due to fundamental epistemic prejudices regarding their 'naive authenticity.' Prompted by these realisations, ours is a first attempt at developing an exploratory comparative framework for what is—to date—an under-researched area in built environment studies.

Significantly, this collection took shape in response to efforts at integrating previously neglected Indigenous knowledges in built environments curricula and the introduction of new professional competencies for both Australian and New Zealand architectural schools. These processes have implications for

scholarship on Asia and Pacific (non-Māori) architectures and for the many international students of Pacific and Asian descent whom we educate. Are we complicit in similar forms of cultural suppression? Are we neocolonial in our commitment to modernity? To what extent have the categories of ‘vernacular’ and ‘traditional’ architectures, of ‘regionalism,’ differentiated First Nations from other hegemonic cultural legacies? Modernity, democracy, institutionalisation, urbanisation—all of our professions’ foundational values are implicated in extreme legacies of cultural genocide. Whereas a generation of postcolonial scholars had critiqued dominant forms of colonialism through resource extraction and settlement, their revisionist narratives had naturalised statist models of national cultural sovereignty that in turn perpetuated these wrongs. Decolonial thinking arising from Indigenous social activism and politicisation challenged our revisionist positionality.

Architectural education’s Pacific turn has had a slow gestation in Australia, with notable exceptions, such as the work of Balwant Saini, and with inadequate recognition of the colonial violence that underpinned that encounter.² At New Zealand’s largest university in Auckland, it began much earlier, with non-Indigenous mavericks like Mike Austin, who began teaching in the 1960s, and then Mike Linzey from the 1980s; both conducted research and supervised their students’ learning about Pacific and Māori architecture.³ Prior to Indigenous scholars joining academia from the late twentieth century, studies about Pacific architecture were fixated on colonisation and Westernisation during the nineteenth century.⁴ From the early 2000s, the rise of Indigenous-led spatial concepts using Pacific and Māori languages began to emerge in architectural educational curriculum.⁵ Asian architectural scholars remain at the sidelines of these discourses. They do not identify as settler colonists and, because they share the sensibility of colonial victimisation and value decolonial cultural recovery, they claim a degree of affinity with First Nations perspectives. Some see Asia’s Indigenous peoples as ancestral groups. But few are willing to acknowledge their own culpability in perpetuating and benefitting from the many forms of structural discrimination that differentiate these groups and amplify their erasure. These omissions are most evident in the ways that Asian civilisations are elevated in architectural publications and curricula. This special journal issue responds to these provocations.

Conceptual framings of ocean and archipelago

The core ideas and many of the papers for this issue originated in a virtual symposium organised in early 2024 by built environment scholars moving between Asia and Oceania.

The work we do in sustaining both the diasporic networks from, and rooted connections to, our island origins is imaginatively expressed in the concept of “er-rantry” by the Antillean scholar Édouard Glissant.⁶ It gives our title “Archipelogs,” its rationale, as an architectural and place-based interpretation of archipelagic relationality. The subtitle “Indo-Pacific Indigeneities” engages with experiential understandings of lived realities. The positionality of the collection’s editors and authors is important for this orientation. The symposium was led by Tongan architectural scholar Charmaine ‘Ilaiū Talei, based at Waipapa Taumata Rau | University of Auckland, who works on the built environments of the Pacific region, in collaboration with Melbourne-based Sri Lankan-Australian scholar, Anoma Pieris,

who works on the Indo-Pacific more broadly, and Jayde Lin Roberts, a Taiwanese-American scholar who focuses on place and heritage in Southeast and East Asia. While we have identified the contributors in relation to their place of origin, and current domicile, these are not the sole criteria for identification, since our professional and academic careers have enabled horizontal relationships.

Our workshop participants were tasked with examining the spatial, material, and environmental mediation of settler and First Nations relationships. We invited scholars critical of hegemonic cultural framings and regional vernacular typologies that inhibit consideration of the socially complex, politically dynamic, and sometimes hostile intersections and elisions of Indigenous identities. Our objective was to explore research-led approaches that acknowledge and value Indigenous societies in Asia and to develop an intellectual and pedagogical framework for integrating Asian within global pan-Pacific and pan-Indigenous knowledge systems; encouraging regional Indigenous scholars to assume future leadership in the spatial disciplines. Our contributors include PhD researchers mentored through co-authorship. The contributions collectively enable a dialogue across the islands of the Indo-Pacific, including Fiji, Taiwan, Borneo, Sāmoa, Hawai‘i, Sri Lanka, and the Ryukyu Islands, with book reviews on recent collections that deal with Ādivāsi architecture in India and theorise changes to vernacular design across Asia and Oceania. Our intention, beyond elevating a neglected region, is to identify internal omissions and exciting new directions within these regional built environment studies.⁷

Our thematic focus was on the different approaches to integrating and building awareness of Indigenous (First Nations) knowledge in diverse—mainly island—geographies, inspired by two important concepts now familiar to scholars of Oceania and the Americas. Tongan writer and anthropologist, Epeli Hau‘ofa’s reframing of Oceania as a boundless “Sea of Islands” (1994) gives the myriad archipelagic clusters in the Pacific Ocean a greater territorial footprint.⁸ In this, now famous, seminal essay, he interprets colonial cartography as a structure of territorial confinement that failed to recognise the core reciprocity of oceanic cultures.⁹ Hau‘ofa argues that landmass-based conceptions that revert to nation-states (political bodies) as default categories misrepresent Oceania. Teasing apart nation-state-based representations of Indigenous cultures and building practices from place-specific particularities can help us work against hegemonic narratives. Building on this distinction can also help us knit together Glissant’s call for examining “relations between particularities” and their potential to create creolised practices rather than fixating on established “Histories.”¹⁰ Writing from his interpretation of the Caribbean’s creole cultures, this relationality is based not on the binaries of oppression and resistance, foundational to postcolonial theory, but through recognition of the differences through which subjectivity is constituted and continues to evolve. This approach is important because of the atavistic norms typically applied to Indigenous autochthony by nation-states, but often adopted by ethnic groups in asserting a place for themselves within them. Our aim is to interrogate the underlying logic of these archipelagic relationalities as a means for testing the assumptions and ideologies of our built environment disciplines.

This issue extends the oceanic territory imagined for the Pacific to encompass islands in the Asian region that also have a strong Indigenous footprint, believing this juxtaposition will expose disciplinary lacunas. In conceiving of a strategy

for achieving this aim, this collection assumes a fluid oceanic relation between Oceania and Asia, rooted in historical migrations. It builds on the surge of interest in liquid terrains that challenge nation-centric ideologies and narratives. This idea can be applied to connect the many Indigenous lifeworlds in the broader Indo-Pacific region including the Indian and southern oceans and the South China Sea. The sensibility of contiguity is most apparent in the pan-Indigenous politics inaugurated by the UN Declaration on Indigenous Peoples (2007) and the decades-long working groups that preceded it, which exposed contestations within nation-state formations that undergird that mandate.¹¹ Pan-Indigeneity presupposes a flat ontology of being and dwelling that can politicise the multivocality of First Nations presence. It empowers the possibility of a regional or global understanding of Indigeneity. The UN Declaration has provided the scaffolding for Indigenous rights activism and even militancy on issues of both social and environmental justice. The associated geocultural values exceed their territorial boundaries and have gained planetary relevance, thus demonstrating the power of Glissant's archipelagic metaphor. Our contributors reinterpret these cogent concepts for diverse and contemporary cultural phenomena that we will introduce as we elaborate on this introduction's themes. We cannot hope to match the ambitious scale of Glissant's 'whole world' treatise; we see these as more modest disciplinary steps.¹²

Some of the contributors engage directly with the core concepts. Hau'ofa's ideas about relational fluidity, Indigenous self-identification and determination are discussed in the contribution by Sāmoan scholar Karamia Müller. Müller's article, "Beyond the Fixed: Sāmoan Digital Spaces, Errantry, and Decolonising Architecture," applies Glissant's idea of errantry to widen an understanding of architecture beyond the tangible, fixed, and permanent to include digital mobilities and spatial production of *siapo*, Sāmoan *tapa* cloth. Moreover, Müller argues for the inclusion of digital *siapo* as a site for architecture that exceeds crafting but also involves making, dialogue, exchange, and iteration, which are all architectural processes. Malaysian-Chinese scholar Catherine Mei Min Woo and Anoma Pieris's "Archipelagic Memories at Lau King Howe Hospital Memorial Museum" focuses on how hospital museums represent Peninsular and East Malaysian cultural complexity without reducing patient populations to the inherited colonial categories that classified all Indigenous groups as Malays.

Glissant's distinction between 'archipelagic' and 'continental' thinking is useful for challenging the totalising 'civilisational' models that have become sedimented in Asian area studies.¹³ The "great" cultures of Asia—China and India—have a long history of believing themselves to be higher cultures capable of civilising others. In some parts of Asia, anticolonial processes of cultural recovery have produced knowledge systems that have systematically obscured the plurality of regional cultures and societies. These processes can be translated into our understanding of built environments where the vocabulary includes norms and forms pertaining to materiality, building elements, tectonics, spatial schema, compositions, and aesthetics, among other ways of expressing cultural specificity. By analysing the artwork housed in Kelaniya Royal Temple, located north of Colombo, Pieris traces how Buddhist *jātaka* stories, founding myths, and historical narratives from the Indian subcontinent entwine in constructing Sinhala political authority while marginalising knowledges of prior Indigenous inhabitants, the *vāddas*. Sovereignty is imagined and claimed through both oceanic and riverine geographies in what could be seen as settler colonial processes.

Pieris's questions on the internal colonisation of Indigenous groups in Asia are corroborated by the pejorative terms used for distancing Indigenous cultures. While Indigenous and First Nations have become preferred terms since the early 2000s, their lexical predecessors such as the English terms aboriginal, race, and ethnicity, and categories in other languages such as *iTaukei* in Fijian, *Kānaka Maoli* in Hawaiian, *minzu* and *yuanzhumin* in Chinese, *bumiputra* in Jawi, *pribumi* in Indonesian, *ādivāsi* in Hindi, and *vāddas* in Sinhala (discussed in this issue's articles) all cast long shadows that continue to affect the lifeworlds of these diverse peoples and influence how we understand them in research and architectural practice. Terms like *minzu* (often translated as ethnic nationalities) were created by a state-led classification project in the 1950s to render diverse non-Han groups in a new China more legible and claim national unity by subsuming difference. In the *minzu* classification project, the work of an amateur ethnologist and turn-of-the-century British military officer became the foundational logic for a taxonomic system that over-simplified and reified *minzu* identities, erasing self-identifications that were not included in the official lists.¹⁴ Writing on languages, Glissant, in his *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity*, advocates for another form of orality that is vibrant and creative and is appearing on the great stage of the world.¹⁵ He understands this relation as one language dominating another, and the need to resist universalisation. 'Archipelagic' knowledge is about listening to others, understanding them and accepting their truths. In his view, "it is the mission of the poet, the writer and the intellectual to reflect and to come up with proposals with regard to all these coordinates, all these relations, all these intertwinings of the question of languages."¹⁶

These ideas resonate strongly for the Pacific region. In Aotearoa New Zealand, on 6 February 1840, Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi), was established as a founding document for a bicultural nation. It was not until the twentieth-first century passing of the Treaty of Waitangi Act (1975) that there has been greater awareness and social politicisation of who are tangata whenua, or people of the land, and who are considered tangata Tiriti, or people of the Treaty of Waitangi. Indirectly, it contests the ancestral connections of Māori and Pacific peoples as an 'othering' within the bicultural nation-state. To counter this, several terms have been created, typically by Māori or Pacific peoples, to re-establish their ancestral ties, such as tangata moana, or Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa, and mana moana. 'Moana,' a Proto-Polynesian term for 'ocean' or 'deep sea,' shared by many languages (Māori, Hawaiian, Tahitian) centres Indigenous knowledge, deep connections, and collective belonging in ways comparable to Australian Aboriginal relations with 'Country' but with the moana, or Pacific Ocean, as a connective tissue.

In Australia, the multivocality of the kind imagined by Glissant occurs not through the 250 Indigenous languages and 800 dialects as identified by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) but through more nation-state bound identities, and resistance to anglophone hegemony. As settler-state countries, Australia and New Zealand converse, compete, and contest with each other within an oceanic continuum. New Zealand, increasingly known by its Māori name, Aotearoa, has seen a revival in te reo Māori, the Māori language, due to the strategic establishment of kōhanga reo in the early 1980s across the country. Kōhanga reo refers to kindergarten educational providers that deliver all learning and teaching in te reo Māori. The number of Māori who can speak their language has continued to grow since the 1980s,

making the programme an exemplar of language revitalisation. In addition, a noticeable number of non-Māori, in particular Pākehā (a person of European descent or a non-Māori white person), have chosen to learn te reo Māori to recognise Te Tiriti o Waitangi within a bicultural Aotearoa New Zealand. Furthermore, government, public and private organisations, and places have also adopted Māori names alongside English nomenclature.

Our collection sees the Indo-Pacific region as a culturally vibrant geographical continuum that is dialogically linked. We are committed to the multivocality of dynamic building traditions and seek to decentre the professional design solutions that have been privileged in architectural education and practice. We see Indigenous spatial practices, material cultures, and architectures as providing a critical vocabulary for decolonising architecture. This is how we interpret orality for the built environment.

Built environment approaches

To what extent is scholarship on Asian and Pacific built environments sensitised to these inclusive frameworks? Are our discussions and representations of civilisation, colonisation, and vernacular settlements cognisant of First Nations realities? Do we acknowledge Indigenous dispossession when we discuss our affective associations with land and property?

Recent scholarship by Paul Memmott in Australia and Marcel Vellinga, first in Southeast Asia then more globally, has shaped new directions for vernacular architecture studies and helped conceptualise architectural anthropology.¹⁷ Vellinga's work elevates the contemporary vernacular architecture of communities that challenges pre-existing examples that are fixated on past forms. Memmott et al.'s *Design and the Vernacular*, reviewed for this journal issue by Lorenza Lazatti, suggests that a generation of Indigenous professionals are problematising the perceived marginality of vernacular practices by formalising them both in design practice and in scholarship.¹⁸ The voices across the sixteen chapters of the anthology include "architects, designers and theorists" of Indigenous and settler backgrounds from Oceania's settler colonies and post-colonial Asian nations, and from both dominant and minority migrant groups. The book demonstrates how the meanings ascribed to, and production of, vernacular architecture are being transformed through the training of Indigenous professionals and modernisation of Indigenous communities. Whereas the "vernacular" has previously been employed as a catch-all category for all that is not monumental, the rising awareness of Indigeneity opens up an opportunity to scrutinise classifications/categorisations in architecture.

ʻIlaiū Talei's work contributes to this vein of vernacular architecture through research about Tongan peoples' concrete block houses and their reliance on architectural remittance from the diaspora and other topics.¹⁹ Her article, "*Bure: Spiritual Romance*," discusses early and contemporary *bure* forms of Fijian vernacular architecture. ʻIlaiū Talei argues that the tourist *bure*, as an orientalisising architecture, has overdetermined Fiji's contemporary architecture and suggests a deeper understanding about the spiritual values of early Fijian *bure* could present opportunities for culturally appropriate design innovation.

In their article, "A Place for Indigenous Articulation: A *Kacalisian* Slate House in the Pingtung County Library," Paiwan scholar, Zuzule Demalalade and Jayde Lin

Roberts reconsider Indigeneity by examining a slate house located in an institutional building in Southern Taiwan. By tracing the history and transformation of a traditional Paiwan/Rukai house in an urban and largely Han Chinese context, the authors argue that the materiality of the slate house can, and has, served as a site for retrieving and re-articulating Indigeneity. Awareness of, and respect for, Indigenous knowledge systems have challenged the various colonising and civilising narratives through which disciplinary content has been organised so far.

Indigenous Architecture in India, edited by Indian scholar Gauri Bharat, reviewed for this issue by Pieris, explores plural lifeworlds that intersect with, but are not dependent on, the built environment lens.²⁰ Her shift to socio-spatial practices over physical and material analyses demonstrates the relationality we advocate. Notable is her distinction between Ādivāsi, a term legitimised through constitutional recognition in India since 1950 (as Scheduled Tribes), and ‘indigenous,’ applied to other minoritised materialities and world views that fall outside architectural practice. These nascent efforts to recognise Indigenous lifeworlds within architectural thinking are yet to be theorised for Asia alongside a more robust engagement with the ethics of Indigenous acknowledgement and collaboration. Definitions of ‘Indigenous’ as ‘not being colonial’ are inadequate for understanding prior presence, autochthony, and the related legalities surrounding land rights, collective ownership, and generational inheritance, particularly with groups whose values are not necessarily tied to sedentary and individual conceptions of property. Much of the scholarship on Asia circles the tensions resulting from voluntary or forced transition from cultural and communal lifeworlds to those overdetermined by an increasingly globally integrated political economy whose hold on Asian societies was consolidated during colonial rule. But within these broader and more obvious transitions, and the resultant binaries of modernity and tradition that have consumed scholars of Asia in the past, is the troubling adaptation by postcolonial governments of settler colonial modalities. Indigenous peoples are discriminated against in many parts of Asia, and they experience similar forms of dehumanisation and cultural suppression to those historically practised and persisting in settler societies. In many parts of Asia, racial, linguistic, and cultural proximity as well as mutual cultural absorption blur the distinctions between a hegemonic civilisational culture and “cultural minorities,” often categorised by the state. Classification imposed through apparent similarities and differences in ‘culture’, religion, agricultural practices, collective or communal land tenure, and other attributes categorised minority groups despite the absence of clear distinctions. Focusing on architecture, vernacular houses attributed to Ādivāsis in India may approximate those of remote rural villagers, similarly, the Iban longhouses of Sarawak are sometimes reproduced as masonry structures. In short, these categories cannot be fixed.²¹ Recognising Indigenous peoples as living communities requires recognising and respecting their efforts at cultural recovery, and the pathways they choose for achieving this, whether through historical revision, environmental militancy, or minority politics. These in turn may translate into new spatial and material inventions, spatial occupation, monuments, and memorials that employ dominant discourses and languages to strive for recognition.

The politics of dispossession is more likely to surface when interrogating the slow structural violence of settler colonial property regimes. Kanaka ‘Ōiwi scholar, James Miller’s article, “*Hulihia*: Learning from the *Kauhale* in Times of

Transformation,” describes the disruption of *‘aina* in Hawai‘i when pursuit of privatised property disempowered Indigenous land sovereignty and relationality to land. Miller presents a comprehensive description of *kauhale* of Hawai‘i over three time periods, explaining the loss, transition, and hope for the future of contemporary housing of Indigenous Hawaiians. Miller’s article shows the variance of Indigenous land relationships after colonisation and the journey towards cultural revitalisation and resurgence. The desire for self-determination based on continuous or learned endogenous cultural practices is inevitably shaped by the many exogenous forces that impact and transform individuals and communities internally and through the violent and disruptive cultural and political processes that are integral to both imperialism and nation building. Patrick Wolfe famously highlighted the genocidal intent that differentiates settler colonialism from other forms of colonisation;²² more particularly, the impact of colonisation on First Nations and tribal peoples who lack the institutional and military infrastructures with which to counter colonial violence.

The language and politics of dispossession related to Indigenous belonging and denial of rights is an anglophone discourse that has naturalised nation-state sovereignty and its predicate of territorial boundaries without recognising how this language erases other ways of being and inhabiting. First Nations, Aboriginal, Ethnic Minorities, Indigenous, Ādivāsi, First Peoples as well as *minzu* and *yuanzhumin*, *bumiputra*, *pribumi*, and *vāddas* are relational descriptors that conjure the original inhabitation of a territory when compared with subsequent, dominant settlers or migrants as the ground for identification. State-produced classifications are not rigorously scientific and align with the mentality of the colonial period.

More critically, despite the emergence of pan-Indigenous solidarities and the UN Convention of 2007, these identifiers remain circumscribed by their respective nation-states. These ways of recognising Indigenous peoples are inherently flawed because their very existence challenges nation-state formations and their lands are not necessarily coterminous with nation-state boundaries. The earlier definitions of pre-industrial traditional societies are no longer valid for many due to exposure to, and integration with, or absorption into, national populations, dispersal, and migration that is not necessarily coercive, and modernisation of their communities. The difficulty it seems is in differentiating a particular community and practice as economically, culturally, and politically distinctive in a world that has encroached upon and forcibly transformed their lives.

Decolonisation and Indigenous recognition

The common political thread that binds these diverse geographies is decolonisation, a framing long excluded from architectural discourse because it politicises what was regarded as an apolitical pursuit. Only those who are entitled can afford to be apolitical, indeed that is the very nature of their politics. Decolonisation has different interpretations and meanings in Asia that stem from colonial metropolitan processes. However, many Indigenous peoples and territories of the Pacific were left out of these processes, for example (among many others), Indigenous peoples of Australia, New Zealand, New Caledonia, Hawai‘i, Tahiti, Micronesia, West Papua, and East Timor. They were part of the collateral of the global war between the region’s many colonisers, persistent reminders that Emily Kim analyses in her visual essay, “Beyond the View from Above: Re-reading the Pacific

Airfield.” She questions the colonial aerial logic of the wartime military airfields at Okinawa and Tinian that flattened the ecological and cultural complexity of these Pacific island sites. Extended through nuclear testing, the Cold War in the Pacific, in turn, ignited Indigenous rights activism around decolonising agendas and ecological recovery.

Tracey Banivanua Mar, in her influential book, *Decolonisation and the Pacific*, writes that the pivotal Pohnpei Charter of 1978 (conceived at the second Nuclear-Free Pacific Conference) used terms such as “fourth world” (as distinct from the third world used for many Asian states at that time).²³ The term, she notes, was coined in 1974 by George Manuel of the National Indian Brotherhood of Canada to describe decolonisation’s “forgotten people.”²⁴ This structural asymmetry in global processes that cast the Pacific peoples at the political periphery was countered through the formation of pan-Pacific and pan-Indigenous solidarities that gained dispersed and marginalised populations a larger political footprint from which to negotiate for collective rights. For small island territories, such solidarities remain critical for sustaining their autonomy against continental neighbours, and the ocean becomes the connector through which alternative alignments are sought. The resistant poetics of Glissant’s geographical metaphor envisions decolonisation as operating through this relational frame.

When extended to Asia, Indigenous rights activism demanded internal decolonisation of racialised hierarchies. Christian Erni, in *The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in Asia*, notes that this proved to be controversial.²⁵ Many Asian countries represented in the UN working groups leading up to the 2007 declaration called for a flexible, contextual, country-specific approach. Eleven countries abstained from voting for the declaration and four voted against it at that time—USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Australia endorsed it two years later in 2009, and New Zealand in 2010.²⁶ Intransigence was noted with regard to “the ‘s’ in ‘peoples,’ and closely connected to this, self-determination, the rights to land, territories and resources, or free and prior informed consent.”²⁷ Among the arguments raised, for example, by Bangladesh and Indonesia, was that their entire population was indigenous prior to British colonisation.²⁸ This would be similar to the invention of “Pacific peoples,” which avoids excluding minority non-Polynesian Pacific groups now living in New Zealand as recent migrants, and inadvertently supports the ancestral claim of kinship between Pacific Islanders and tangata whenua, or Māori. Racial hierarchies continue in Australia for both Māori and Pacific Islanders, where together they are reclassified as ‘Pasifika’.²⁹ Indigenous identification should not be confused with other subnational and minority groups in their respective countries.³⁰ The Chinese delegation declared that all of China’s ethnic groups had fought against foreign invaders, and there were no indigenous people in China. Erni observes that by 2008, only Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines had passed acts for Indigenous rights. Among the fears underlying these controversies was the problem of essentialising Indigenous identity and thereby encouraging fragmentation of fragile postcolonial nation-states in Asia and Africa, through Balkanisation.³¹ The two opposing groups favoured either self-identification (which a government may or may not recognise) or agreeing on a definition (and risking elimination based on that criteria). While “a definition of indigenous peoples is neither desirable nor necessary, the problem remains that the subjects, whom international or national legal instruments are supposed to apply to, need to be identified,” Erni notes.³²

Erni makes a distinction for countries without a large-scale inflow of settlers who ruled over native populations and from which colonisers left following political independence, similar to many Southeast Asian nations and small islands in the Pacific.³³ There were natives, Erni notes, who assimilated with colonial norms, becoming postcolonial political elites, and others who refused to assimilate or were too remote to be touched by these processes. Systemic racism and discrimination introduced by colonisers often persisted post-independence for the least assimilated populations, and, in many cases, they were the groups that identified as indigenous—maintaining precolonial cultures and economic and sociopolitical systems. Postcolonial governments found it hard to accept their unique status and associated rights. In response, “In the past 30 years they have self-identified as indigenous peoples, established their own movements and converged their national and regional movements into a global indigenous peoples’ movement.”³⁴ More importantly, these emerging solidarities broke through the forced insularity of the political dependencies imposed on these native peoples.

Concluding thoughts

In this issue, we employed Glissant’s ‘archipelagic thought’ to bring different Indigenous histories, spatialities, and practices together to ask how they might relate to each other, not to present a comprehensive comparison or propose a totalising explanation. Indeed, as scholars who seek to decolonise knowledge production, the risk of capitulating to existing hierarchies and classifications of peoples, values, and systems is ever-present, demanding particular attention to: 1) How we conduct our research: What are deemed to be proper sources or how we interact with our interlocutors be they human or more-than-human; 2) How we use language: How Indigenous terms and concepts are rendered into English and the limitations of translation; and 3) How we endeavour to present dynamic and subsumed or marginalised lifeworlds in our representations through words and images. Inspired by Glissant, we resist the universalising project of “continental” thinking and instead explore networked and decentred histories through the method and metaphor of archipelagos—configurations of islands that are interlinked through liquid passages and currents with no single centre that governs the whole.

Specifically, our exploration of Indigenous spatialities and architecture asks how existing classifications such as Aboriginal, race, and ethnicity function as taxonomies that render ‘minor’ and peripheral groups easier to manage while simultaneously minimising their histories through demands for ‘reproducible’ research that prioritises written records and unchanging materiality that adhere to Cartesian rationality. This epistemology can dismiss the water between islands as empty space rather than the connective tissue that weaves together a “sea of islands” which predates the colonial imposition of nation-state boundaries.³⁵ As argued by Hau’ofa, the myths, oral traditions, and cosmologies of the peoples of Oceania depict a lifeworld not only of land surfaces but also “the surrounding ocean... the underworld with fire-controlling and earth-shaking denizens, and the heavens above with... named stars and constellations that people could count on to guide their ways across the seas.”³⁶ This expansive conception is no less valid than the continental representation of the Pacific as small, isolated islands in need of external aid and development, and their source of knowledge based on less tangible evidence such as myths and oral traditions informs our explorations.

The apparent clarity and stability of ethnic or Indigenous categories, along with the seeming permanence of architecture, has clouded our vision, making it more difficult to detect traces that have not been continuously archived, burst forth in creole fragments, or become buried in construction processes.³⁷ As seen in the work of anthropologists such as Roxana Waterson and Erik Mueggler, Indigenous houses are not empty frames but living entities that require specific rituals, orientations, and relationships to support mutual wellbeing.³⁸ For the Lolopo people in Southwest China, dwelling was a continual negotiation wherein the “body, house, and universe all double, enfold, and invade one another,” leaving ghostly traces that must be placated or contended with to live without disease.³⁹ We pay attention to the discontinuous and ethereal to discern how Indigenous ways of living, building, and being might generate a less colonial framework for architectural scholarship.

The decolonising project is fraught with pitfalls. As Glissant stated, “[t]he theory of difference is invaluable [because] it has allowed us to struggle against reductive thought” but “difference itself can still contrive to reduce things to the Transparent.”⁴⁰ It can repeatedly reinstate “the different” in a hierarchy of judgement that makes the periphery legible and assimilable to the centre without demanding the same transparency or pliability of the normative system. Glissant calls for a “right to opacity” wherein the parties endeavouring to understand each other do not insist on origins or universals but focus on “the texture of the weave”—the lines of interactions and mutualities that constitute a dynamic relationship.⁴¹ As such, the articles in this issue attempt to weave threads of connections to existing scholarship without subjugating Indigenous knowledges to dominant discourses or Cartesian rationality. The inexplicability of ancestral spirits, life forces in rocks, trees, and water, and absences in “complete” historical narratives remain opaque to call what we consider to be knowledge into question.

NOTES

1. Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation* (University of Chicago Press, 1995); Beng Huat Chua and Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds), *The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Reader* (Taylor & Francis, 2015).
2. Balwant Saini, "An Investigation into Building and Planning Problems of the Tropical Regions of Australia and The Territory of Papua New Guinea," PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 1967; Jennifer Taylor and James Conner (eds), *Architecture in the South Pacific: The Ocean of Islands* (Didier Millet, 2014).
3. Charmaine 'Ilaiū Talei and Paul Memmott, "Mapping Trans-Indigeneity Across the Trans-Tasman: Architectural Practice, Research, and Education," *Fabrications: The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand* 33, no. 3 (2024): 1–27, 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10331867.2024.2369369>.
4. Charmaine 'Ilaiū Talei, "Ko hai? Ko au, Ko Moana: Whose Architectural History Is It?," in "Dialogues on the Global within and beyond Australasia," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 82, no. 3 (2023): 259–61, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jsah.2023.82.3.250>.
5. See, more recently, John H. Stubbs, William Chapman, Julia Gatley, and Ross King, *Architectural Conservation in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands: National Experiences and Practices* (Routledge, 2023); and Christoph Schnoor, "Samoa", 503–11 in the same volume.
6. Édouard Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 1997), 11–22.
7. Macarena de la Vega de Leon and Paul Walker, "Dialogues on the Global within and beyond Australasia," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 82, no. 3 (2023): 250–74.
8. Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994): 148–61.
9. Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," 157.
10. Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*.
11. *United Nations Declaration on Indigenous Peoples* (13 September 2007), https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenoustpeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf
12. Édouard Glissant, *Treatise on the Whole-World*, trans. Celia Britton (Liverpool University Press, 2020).
13. Édouard Glissant, *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity*, trans. Celia Britton (Liverpool University Press, 2020).
14. Thomas S. Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China* (University of California Press, 2011), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pnpt8>.
15. Glissant, *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity*, 23.
16. Glissant, *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity*, 26.
17. Paul Memmott, *Gunyah Goondie + Wurley: The Aboriginal architecture of Australia* (University of Queensland Press, 2022); Marcel Vellinga, *Atlas of Vernacular Architecture of the World* (Routledge, 2007).
18. Paul Memmott, John Ting, Tim O'Rourke, and Marcel Vellinga, *Design and the Vernacular: Interpretations for Contemporary Architectural Practice and Theory* (Bloomsbury, 2023).
19. Charmaine 'Ilaiū Talei, "The Twenty-First-Century Tongan Fale: The Emergence of Fale Puha, Fale 'Amelika and Fale Tufitufi," in *The Handbook of Contemporary Indigenous Architecture*, edited by Elizabeth Grant, Kelly Greenop, Albert Refiti, Daniel Glenn (Springer, 2018), 697–716.
20. Gauri Bharat (ed.), *Indigenous Architecture in India: Exploring Plural Life Worlds* (Routledge 2024); see also Bharat, *In Forest, Field, and Factory: Adivasi Habitations Through Twentieth-Century India* (SAGE-Yoda Press, 2019).
21. David Beynon, "The Contemporary Iban Longhouse," *The International Journal of Social Sustainability* 9, no. 1 (2013): 87–99.
22. Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409.
23. Tracey Banivanua Mar, *Decolonisation and the Pacific: Indigenous Globalisation and the Ends of Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 2.
24. Banivanua Mar, *Decolonisation and the Pacific*, 2; George Manuel, *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality* (Free Press, 1974).
25. Christian Erni, *The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in Asia* (International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2008).
26. Erni, *The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in Asia*, 14.
27. Erni, *The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in Asia*, 14.
28. Erni, *The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in Asia*, 15.
29. Dion Enari and Innez Haua, "A Māori and Pasifika Label: An Old History, New Context," *Genealogy* (Basel) 5, no. 3 (September 2021): 70, <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy5030070>.
30. Erni, *The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in Asia*, 39.
31. Erni, *The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in Asia*, 16.
32. Erni, *The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in Asia*, 18.
33. Erni, *The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in Asia*, 80.
34. Erni, *The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in Asia*, 80.
35. Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands."
36. Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," 152.
37. Édouard Glissant, "Creolisation and the Americas," *Caribbean Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2011): 11–20.
38. Roxana Waterson, *The Living House: An Anthropology of Architecture in South-East Asia* (Tuttle Publishing, 2012); Erik Mueggler, *The Age of Wild Ghosts: Memory, Violence, and Place in Southwest China* (University of California Press, 2001).
39. Mueggler, *The Age of Wild Ghosts*, 41.
40. Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*, 189.
41. Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*, 190.