

Curated Interview

The Island Feminisms Project: Imagined Through Social Justice and Praxis

Marina Karides and Noralis Rodríguez-Coss

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The following is a curated conversation between Marina Karides and Noralis Rodríguez-Coss, who together founded the [Island Feminisms Project](#) and continue to advance feminist, decolonial, and social justice approaches in island studies. With the publication of “Why Island Feminism?” (Karides 2017), conference sessions, and the establishment of the Island Feminisms Spring Series, begun in 2020, the co-founders suggest that the field of island studies was guided towards gender and women (see *Gender and Island Communities* 2020, edited by Gaini and Nielsen as an example). However, they argue that the field continues to struggle to incorporate feminist and intersectional frameworks analytically. Karides and Rodríguez-Coss explore the paucity of feminist grounding in island studies, which tends towards the approach of “add women and stir.” Their dialogue reveals grassroots island activism as the core of island feminisms, which they identify as a social justice project.

MK: Marina Karides

NR: Noralis Rodríguez-Coss

Origins

MK: So, when we first connected, it was you getting in touch with me?

NR: And we started thinking about this conversation of islands and feminisms.

MK: Today is exactly six years from the first email you sent me. What a nice coincidence!

NR: We connected so easily that we're still in collaboration six years later. At the time, I was trying to figure out a feminist framework for my dissertation work on Puerto Rico feminist activism and the space of protest embodied by Las Musas on the island (Rodríguez-Coss 2021). And so, in conversation with one of my advisors, I realized that it was an island feminism, or that I wanted to frame it around that concept. And I googled it, and it is your name, the first thing that shows up, and your course that you were teaching in Hawai‘i.

NR: The fact that it was just you, told me, there is something here that probably needs a lot of conversation, and there is work to do. And to me, the fact that I couldn't find a theoretical framework within the feminist theory that I was exposed to told me that there was need for more, whether that was from Puerto Rican feminism or Caribbean feminism. There is something about living in an island, being from an island theoretically, that changes things politically, socially, economically, and culturally.

MK: I think what's interesting is that both of us came to the concept of island feminisms through our own research. For me, it was in the middle of the Everglades [Florida], building a fire with my children when the phrase came to me. I was thinking about the next steps for my book *Sappho's Legacy* (Karides 2021), I am sure like many women in academia, while parenting and playing. Neither of us were aware of island studies as a field. Our training in post-colonialism, along with the feminist theory as a wide-ranging field of thought, is where we linked up—applying this to our research on islands is how we moved forward.

NR: There is a conversation across islands that still needs to happen. I know feminism elevates that conversation. I think what we both see and are firm on is islands as an intersectional axis, and I think that is part of what we bring, as a duet, to island studies.

MK: Yes, it's embedded in our training and basis in post-colonial feminism and intersectional feminism, Black Feminist thought, and the research by feminist and queer scholars of color—this is what has been missing analytically in the mainstream of island studies. I am especially delighted over our recently published themed section “Island Feminisms” (Karides and Rodríguez-Coss 2022) with authors offering queer and Indigenous perspectives on island diaspora, though I wish it was given more light and freedom.

Theorizing Islands Through a Feminist Lens

MK: I think part of what we do is continue to broaden our landscape of feminism. I think what we've struggled with is a sort of island studies patriarchy or patriarchs. Because it's that deeper understanding of feminisms and feminist theory, as an intellectual project and perspective, that seems to continue to elude island studies.

NR: I didn't know this field; you introduced it to me, and that expanded some of my understanding of islands. And I found myself loving the fact that this was being done, but I've always leaned more towards feminist studies. And the aspect of our island feminism that I'm always teaching is that of intersectional analysis. That is, we are not just talking about women and men but more complex critical theory, centering the rights of people and lives under different identities, and intersecting with larger processes of power and systems of inequality. This is the theorization of island feminism.

MK: I think what is key for me is to see more discussions that bridge both fields but always leaning on feminist intersectional analyses because that speaks to social justice issues. That is what is at stake, what are the issues happening on islands and to those historically marginalized on them, and the continued and influential rhythms of colonization.

NR: And if these issues are not taken into consideration as a whole right now in the analysis of what is happening in island and archipelagic spaces, then I think it's incomplete. I like how our understanding of island feminisms has always been as a social justice project. I wonder if that's also the terms of how you think about it?

MK: It's why our collaboration and our relationship works so well! It is that we've also both been activists, even before our current scholar-activism. In terms of organizing political events locally and globally or protests or participating in them and talking about the hard issues of race and racism, gender bias, sexual harassment, or violence, the control over women's bodies, and more precisely, the refusal to conform or appeal to or negotiate with patriarchal logics as they exist in island studies. Activism is definitely part of our training in feminisms including transnational work.

MK: Let's talk a little bit about our efforts, our work towards organizing an island feminism conference. I think our work to organize the first island feminisms conference, which was going to occur in Hilo, Hawai'i, in 2020 and was one of our first collaborations, demonstrates the strength of the feminist perspective we bring to island studies. Or better, that island feminisms exists and our conference was offering a venue for the conversations around it to occur. Remember, we were overwhelmed with the response of participants? It was exciting. We put so much energy into putting that together and then our second conference, planned for Puerto Rico, but that also was dashed by safety issues during the pandemic.

NR: We sure worked very hard and it was definitely exciting! Yes, in part, I think because a conference in a way signifies the concrete, right? The concrete, tangible effort or tangible manifestation of what island feminisms is and can become. And what we saw, the amount of interest, of people submitting their abstracts, having scholars and activists from different parts of the world, wanting to have this conversation, was in itself inspirational. I think, it showed the beginnings of a reformation of island thinking. It is incredibly sad that it couldn't happen, but at the same time it's still evidence.

MK: Yes. I am remembering that much of the planning of this event occurred during a road trip from Hilo to Kona, in the opposite direction of the one taken by Epeli Hau'ofa! It was after you presented and ran a workshop at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo. I invited you while serving as chair of sociology. I was collaborating with my colleague Yolisa Duley to build an island and indigenous sociology track. It was an example of our efforts to embrace a place-based approach.

MK: That first call for papers, “Island Feminisms: Place, Justice, Movement,” even our decision for the call to be tri-lingual (‘ōlelo Hawai‘i, Español, and English) was made during our conversations on our roadtrip from Puna through Hilo, Hāmākua, Kohala, and Kona—but we missed Ka‘ū! I do want to recognize that your presentation to my students and Yolisa’s class at UH Hilo, almost all who are from Hawai‘i Island, got such a terrific response from them. You immediately grounded yourself, located your family and where you grew up in in Puerto Rico. I remember it quite well and the captivation of the students. It was sort of a recognition of a similarity of experiences, even though we were in the Pacific, and you were describing life in the Caribbean.

NR: That was really a highlight. Yes, the experience was completely different to me as a person that teaches in the continental US in Washington State. It was as if I didn’t have to explain islands, because this was already our point of connection and that felt very familiar to me. It’s a different experience from when I teach about Puerto Rico on the US continent.

NR: I want to add that to learn about another island counters neoliberalism. Because neoliberalism works to separate spaces and it’s often in the connection among spaces, in seeing how much islands share together, that grounds our island feminisms. The experience in Hawai‘i and through island feminisms helped me realize how I think about the Caribbean. How little I, Puerto Ricans overall, and this is a generalization, think about other islands. When I mention island feminisms in conversation with friends, we realize how little we know about other islands, the activism on the ground on islands that are right next to us and even in municipalities right in Puerto Rico. And so, I think this is the neo-liberal fabric—don’t get interested in the politics in other islands or even interested in other islands at all. So that ideas of individualism and insularism work very successfully, especially in a colony like Puerto Rico. The experience of visiting Hawai‘i Island and meeting with colleagues, students, and community members was eye-opening in the sense that I could speak about Puerto Rico and there is a connection that I don’t have to explain because they completely understood. I could see it in their eyes, in their comments and questions, that they understand. That’s the space that I come to island feminisms.

NR: In considering the organizational work of our first conference, I want to highlight that in our process, those conversations that we had during the road trip, centralizing activism as part of island feminisms, and that is very intentional. It’s an intentional move (or feminist *movida*) and it’s strategic to how we think about island feminisms and how our theoretical work is centralized in activism.

NR: Another aspect that has been always present in our conversations is the connections between academia and activism. It has to be part of the island feminisms project. This conversation, to me, was lacking in the work that was being done in island studies. Activism has to be highlighted, because this is the work that transform island societies. Activists defend the natural environment,

denounce all forms of oppression, and work to eradicate it. This is what we center through island feminisms.

MK: What you are sharing makes me think about transnational feminism. Feminists have had their own reckoning in terms of academia and activists in tension. While some of the theorization is very exciting, island studies seems to lack connections with activist movements on the ground. It still seems to be governed by the approach that Epeli Hau'ofa outlines at the start of his essay, academic experts that have not contributed to the lives of islanders. Rather than prescribing, I think with island feminisms we seek to center research that moves from the level of ordinary people supporting grassroots-defined movements and goals.

Getting Organized

MK: I think some of our work may have prompted more social justice and feminist approaches we are seeing now in island studies. The first island feminisms event was in 2016 at the ISISA conference in Lesbos. I organized the session “Why Island Feminisms” that you, myself, Alexandra Bakalaki, and Venetia Kantsa presented. Without this session, there would be no gender, woman, or a feminist focus in the entire conference or of its intersections with race, ethnicity, class, and islandness. And I am certain that before that event, there was no feminist or intersectional sessions at island studies conferences. For me, the gap was especially problematic, especially on Lesbos, given my research on the island and the prominence of Sappho, Greek feminist scholarship like Kantsa, and the communities of women and lesbian history based on the island and recognized worldwide. Our event was full, with large attendance, almost seventy based on our sign-in sheet but strikingly, though not surprisingly, based on my headcount, no men attended, despite their representation at the conference. You then followed up with a session, “A Transnational Dialogue on Island Feminisms” at the 2017 [US] National Women Studies Association (NWSA) which was quite exciting which along with the two of us included Angela B. Ginorio, University of Washington; Manoucheka Celeste, University of Florida; Shariana Ferrer Nuñez, Purdue University; and Yi-Chun Tricia Lin, Southern Connecticut State University, and Vivien Ng, University of Albany as moderator. It brought island-thinking to the premier event of feminist scholars and activists creating a racially, ethically, and regionally diverse panel. The development of our island feminisms Spring Speaker Series in 2020, now in its third iteration(!), has been a great opportunity to build all sorts of connections across islanders, feminists, island regions, activists, and scholars. And also encouraging was the group of graduate students (many of who now have graduated): Makana Kushi, Tabitha Espina, Josephine Ong, and Demiliza Saramsing of Hawai'i and Guåhan who organized and participated in the session, “Toward Decolonial Oceanic Futures: (Re)mapping Settler Relations through Island/Indigenous Feminisms in Guåhan and Hawai'i” at the 2019 American Studies Association Conference in Honolulu, Hawai'i [relatedly see also “Bonds of Island Activism among CHamoru and Filipino Women on Guåhan” in this issue].

MK: One thing I have come to realize living and working in Hawai‘i is that in island communities, to not be a public intellectual is a choice. Because when an issue erupts, for example the attempt to continue to build a thirty-meter telescope on Mauna Kea, sacred to Native Hawaiians, historically and archeologically important, similar to Mt. Olympus in Greece, and also an environmentally essential watershed, or more recently the Red Hill water crisis, where the US military had known and continued to poison water that the public was drinking, island faculty, particularly Kanaka ‘Ōiwi, stepped up (KAHEA, 2016; ho‘omanawanui et al., 2019; Kahanamoku 2020). Taking action, getting involved, restructuring teaching, and not only in writing for the local media or posting on social media, but participating on the front lines, running civil disobedience trainings. It’s heartening and inspiring for the direction we seek in island feminisms, to be grounded in the work of social justice.

MK: All the speakers in our Spring Series took this approach. In the first series in Spring 2021, we had Eryn Lê Espiritu Gandhi (see Gandhi, 2022) from University of California Santa Cruz and Jane Chang Mi from Scripps College both speak to militarism in the Pacific from an island and Oceanic perspective. Pefi Kingi, a scholar activist from Niuē, spoke about her island activism and the influence of Black feminist scholarship on her work, and incredibly we were able to share a recording of the production “The Conversion of Ka‘ahumanu,” directed by Justina Matos, who, along with Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl, who wrote the play, and Desiree Moana Cruz, who acted as Queen Ka‘ahumanu, share their mana‘o with us and generously address the audience’s questions. Finally, Alma M. Ouanesisouk Trinidad from Portland State University in the US, who published in our recent themed section on island feminisms, shared her work on Pinay Scholar activism. In our second year, I made my book launch of *Sappho’s Legacy* (2021), with excellent commentary by Ayano Ginoza (co-editor of this issue) from the University of the Ryukyus and Laurie Brinklow from the University of Prince Edward Island, and then we had that fantastic presentation by Adrianna Gariga-Lopez on feminist farming in Puerto Rico. We finished the 2022 series with two more presentations by contributors to our themed section that focused on island diaspora, Māhealani Ahia and Kahala Johnson grounded in Hawai‘i and Aurelien Davennes, from University of Southern California, who focused on Guadeloupe’s queer diaspora. I hope their work gets the attention it deserves. We still have to process the behind the scenes censoring of our introduction to the section, but let’s leave that for another time.

MK: And I am so excited for the Spring 2023 series, which brings together research and activism on Hawai‘i including Laura Williams who presented a feminist political ecology perspective on agri-environmental activism and also two events one the Afro-Caribbean woman experience by Eva Silot Bravo, an independent Cuban scholar, and Bárbara Abadía-Rexach from San Francisco State University on Afro-feminisms in Puerto Rico.

NR: I wonder, though we have had some success, it has been really hard to find people doing work connecting scholarship and activism on islands. It's an organic process, where people are living and thinking about the needs of their island communities, on the island and in the diaspora. We need to create our own space to center this, praxis, and make it welcoming.

Island Feminist Futures

MK: Arriving to the end conversation, what do you think are some future goals for island feminisms? Now that we are closer to an environment where people seem to be gathering together again, and feeling comfortable and having fun, do you see the potential of a face-to-face conference?

NR: Yes, I think so. I think it is something that should happen. We should maintain our Island Feminisms Speaker series; the presenters are truly amazing. But they last only an hour or more, and we only have about three to four presenters each Spring. So I think that a gathering in the form of a conference can open many possibilities for the expansion of island feminisms. I think, having the time, the availability to be in person discussing what matters to islands, what matters to people in islands from a feminist perspective, can open many doors and can expand the field in different ways. And so, my hope is also to expand our network, and that we are able to explore, probably have many, thousands, of approaches that we have not even thought about that stem from feminisms, justice, and are place-based. I think a gathering is another way to maintain the field and keep the conversation alive.

NR: The island feminisms project itself is to gather different methods, different praxis that are happening. But it doesn't mean that because we don't have a lot published on it, it doesn't mean that it's not happening, that island feminisms is not happening or absent, because it is not being witnessed academically speaking, it is a challenge, but it's not necessarily a weakness. Many people prefer to gather, rather than write in isolation.

MK: There's so much activity happening on islands, but it's not present in academic circles, and as you say, it's not a weakness of island activism. I don't really have a solution but it's definitely something to think about. I think the other thing that has come up in our future plans is to extend an invitation to write a collective island feminist manifesto. Our experience in working with island studies editors has been a real struggle. In terms of having our position, our arguments, and our framing be modified or dismissed. We need a space for the kind of island activism frame that island feminisms seeks to uplift in both events and publications.

MK: Our island feminisms has also centered on artistic production. I think your research on the Musas in Puerto Rico showcases this fundamentally. And I was so pleased that our conference [program, Island Feminisms: Place, Justice, Movement](#), that never came to be in Hilo in 2020, held the arts up front. We were to travel to the other side of the island to the exhibit "Inundation,"

curated by Jaimie Farris from University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, and we also collaborated with Tagi Quovoulaki from Hawai‘i Community College and Adhan Iwashita to create a space for installations of Oceanic poetry focusing on queer and Indigenous voices. I think island feminisms transcends. It is non-disciplinary. It requires methods that are non-traditional academically. It depends on theoretical works but also activist positionalities.

NR: I think it is a different kind of research. For example, when we think about oral histories, when we think about how one, as a researcher, listens to people and the specific subjects they center, we don’t do it for the purpose of academic recognition, but to document their work and also open alternative spaces to hear their voices. This is scholar-activism, that is the kind of research that I want to do, and I want for island feminisms. I am more interested in the underlying message, and the forms of activism that do not receive any recognition. I am very interested in what we have discussed many times, having to do with how island activism works. It’s common in how people help each other, community driven. I will say that on most islands it’s almost a force or it’s forced to happen. I’m very curious about the certain ways of island solidarity. There’s a familiarity among islanders, I felt it in Hawai‘i but Lesvos too, and the South of Italy.

MK: Yes, island feminisms is a new groove to the study of islands that spotlights social justice pursuits, it’s a way of being critical and activist oriented but still savoring the island.

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