



Marianela Barrios Aquino, 'New Area Studies as an Epistemological Framework: Some Reflections of Knowledge Production and Positionality,' *New Area Studies* 4:3 (2024).

New Area Studies as an Epistemological Framework: Some Reflections of Knowledge Production and Positionality

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Abstract

New Area Studies can be seen as resulting from the debate in the Area Studies between the need for disciplinarity and the urgency of ethical research practices in the social sciences. As such, it is fertile ground for reflexions on methodology, knowledge production and the construction of epistemic communities that go beyond disciplinary silos. In this paper, I argue that New Area Studies is useful as a lens through which to engage with decolonial and postcolonial critiques of the social sciences and humanities. To present New Area Studies as an epistemological framework, in this theoretical intervention, I first engage with its origins in the field of Area Studies and the critiques aimed at it. Next, I propose that taking such critique seriously involves necessarily a discussion of knowledge production and research practice. Finally, I propose that New Area Studies can be understood as an epistemological framework useful to address contemporary challenges faced by all social sciences, not only Area Studies. This paper weaves together decolonial and feminist approaches to research, to argue for the relevance of New Area Studies scholarship.

Introduction

This theoretical intervention is meant to spark a conversation and a collective reflection with colleagues around the world about New Area Studies. More broadly, this is also a statement about the epistemological challenges that



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researchers in the social sciences and the humanities are faced with and ought to address with urgency. As such, this paper is not meant as a proclamation about what New Area Studies *is*, but of what some of us believe it could become.

New Area Studies has the opportunity to address some of the criticisms aimed at Area Studies but that can be relevant for more traditional disciplines, as they tend to reflect 'the fact that *both* the traditional disciplines *and* area studies often incorporate similar underlying assumptions about the nature of social space' (Morris-Suzuki, 2020, p. 18). Such assumptions have organised criticisms that led me to identify some relevant themes in reflections about New Area Studies, namely: the need for decolonial/postcolonial approaches, the dangers of Orientalism, the importance of positionality, and reflections on knowledge production. In this paper, I weave these thematic reflections together, along with some others present in more traditional approaches to Area Studies, such as place, space, temporalities, etc. The result is a call for considering New Area Studies as a lens through which to engage with our research endeavours, whatever our discipline within the Social Sciences and Humanities. It is a call for seriously considering research objects and our relationship to them (Macamo and Samour, 2024)

The ontological and epistemological principles of New Area Studies are thus based on the reflections of the researcher about why and for whom to do research. These, we would all agree, are not new and ought to be a staple in the minds of researchers (Macamo and Samour, 2024). However, reflecting on academic hegemony and proposing frames with which to challenge it is always a worthwhile endeavour (Saunders, 2002; Chilisa, 2017).

By basing this theoretical intervention on a reflective research praxis, my primary goal is to reject linear understandings of temporality that conceptualise New Area Studies as a new discipline that succeeds the death of Area Studies (Miyoshi, Harootunian and Chow, 2002). In contrast, I argue for considering New Area Studies as an epistemological lens that promotes an ongoing reflection on the academic imperialism of Area Studies and of more traditional disciplines in social sciences as a whole.



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Relatedly, Derichs (2017) argues that 'the debate on Area Studies is not an utterly recent one but has accompanied all the major "turns" in the social sciences that have become prominent in the last two or three decades (spatial turn, cultural turn, and mobility turn)' (p. 166). Therefore, it is now urgent to clarify and justify what is new about this debate. This theoretical intervention sets out to join the conversation about what New Area Studies could become.

I start with a brief outline of the longer histories of Area Studies, its critiques and the problems that remain. In the following section, I present the way in which New Area Studies can address the shortcomings identified by those critiques, with a specific mention of the new and old concepts to be problematised. Next, I offer a deeper reflection of the specific methodological implications of the epistemologies proposed by New Area Studies, namely a focus on knowledge production and positionality. I conclude the paper, with a proposal on how to move things forward, making a case for the relevance of engaging with New Area Studies as an epistemological framework.

Before starting, I want to make my voice explicit in this piece because in doing so I reject the idea of a zero point of comprehensive knowledge, from where any analysis is produced. This piece is the result of 'my' dialogue with literature that I considered relevant, informed by research and the help of my colleagues at University of Portsmouth.

1. The origins of Area Studies and its critiques

The origins of Area Studies tend to be situated in the aftermath of World War II, when scholars in the US and Europe were being trained 'in the languages of the enemy in order to serve as interrogators of Japanese initially, then Koreans, Chinese and Vietnamese' (Harootunian, 1999, p. 131; Morris-Suzuki, 2020). Other historical accounts place the first Area Studies centres in the US after the First World War (Milutinovic, 2019). Although the most common view on the origins of the field as we know it today seems to link it to the geopolitics of the Cold War period (Szanton, 2004; Khosrowjah, 2011; Jackson, 2019; Houben, 2020), there are also longer histories that contest this view. For example, Saskia Schäfer (2020, p. 138; 2020)



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traces its origins to the sixteenth century, when European research centres developed a notion of Oriental Studies

the Council of Vienne recommended language courses of Oriental languages at five European universities, emphasising the importance of the linguistic approach to Islam and laying the groundwork for later scholarship (Rudolph 1991: 68). The first European chair for Arab philology was established in 1539 at the Collège de France (Arkoun 1997: 33). In 1795, the École spéciale des langues orientales was founded in Paris; the University of Naples 'L'Orientale' was founded even earlier in Naples in 1732. The German Oriental Society (Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft) was established in 1845 in Leipzig and has regularly held conventions up to the present day (p. 138).

Similarly, Milutinovic (2019) goes back to the nineteenth century oriental research centres in Russia and France. In agreement with both, Asif (2020) places the origin of Area Studies in Europe and not in the US, referring to 'William Dwight Whitney (1827–1894), Johannes Hertel (1872–1955) and Paul Haupt (1858–1926) to Joseph Schacht (1902–1969) – [who] were all trained in Berlin and Leipzig' (p. 76). All of these accounts point to the orientalist origins of Area Studies (Alatas, 1993, 2001; Shohat, 2002; Schramm, 2008; Goh, 2011; Sadan, 2020).

The origins of Area Studies are unequivocally placed in the West, where with or without state involvement, scholars were conducting what many have interpreted to be 'cross-cultural translations' of contemporary cultures foreign to the researchers (Khosrowjah, 2011, p. 133). Although only some have acknowledged that the act of translating, whether a text or a culture, is never neutral (Young, 2001). There is always a political component in the act of translating, even in the desire or necessity to translate, which precede the translation. According to Khosrowjah, the 'cross-cultural translation that has taken place in area studies programs has been directly informed by the heritage of colonialism and readjusting former colonial interests of the Western powers for a series of succeeding world orders' (2011, p. 133). Similarly, Harootunian (1999) states that the publication of *Orientalism* by Edward Said (1979) was a key opportunity for Area Studies to engage with a critical reflection on its origins as a discipline, and to reflect on the ways in which knowledge that was meant



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to be 'about' the Other (the outsider), simultaneously constructed and sequestered the Other, based on the needs and desires of the Western World.

However, despite the accusation of orientalism that came in the late '70s, Area Studies had been in a steady decline for a few years already. According to Hodgett and James (2018) this was due mostly to the behavioural revolution taking place in the social sciences in the '60s, where qualitative research was losing ground. Others have pointed to the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union as contributing to the decline in state funding and restructuring of knowledge produced in Area Studies (Khosrowjah, 2011; Garalytė and Simonson, 2022; Ghodsee and Mrozik, 2023). The lack of interest in communist countries was, however, quickly overcome with a renewed interest in the Middle East, especially after 9/11 (Szanton, 2004). As such accusations of the 'national interest' meddling with the research agenda in Area Studies was pressing until recently. Furthermore, accusations of orientalism and Eurocentrism have not abandoned the arena and have obliged Area scholars to ask themselves whether the kind of complex knowledge they produce has become obsolete in a globalised world (Clowes, Bromberg and Allhouse, 2016).

Twenty first century Area Scholars thus inherit a conflicted discipline, that is either considered to be dying (Miyoshi, Harootunian and Chow, 2002) or refusing to die (Milutinovic, 2019). Milutinovic (2019) addresses some of the criticisms outlined here, pointing to important political and economic events to contextualise the crisis that affected Area Studies, but not only. Many other disciplines have faced cuts in funding and questionable relationships with governments in the past 50 years, he argues. However, most of his response remains a defence of the Area scholar rather than the discipline itself, which, in my opinion, needs to engage more meaningfully with the criticism it faces, whether this is true for all other disciplines or not. The question, I think, is not whether Area Studies exclusively was guilty of orientalism, but what to do today to overcome it.

From this context of critique and questioning, definitions of Area Studies tend to refer to the aim to capture a kaleidoscopic worldview to make sense of parts of the world for the Western (and Westernized) mind, as I mentioned before in terms of 'cross-cultural translation'. Its aim tends to be to 'understand' regions and inform 'policy



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makers' about unknown areas and their complexities (Szanton, 2004). However, without making explicit the interconnectedness and power relationships between notions of the knower/researcher and the object of curiosity/research, such research has constructed and perpetuated peripheries and power imbalances at a global scale (Escobar, 1995, 2007; Ocholla, 2007; Chilisa, 2017; Hofmänner and Macamo, 2021). Finally, colonial appropriation of cultures and lifeworlds are given legitimacy, if the geopolitics of knowledge production are not revised and questioned. Because in order to redress issues of the colonality of knowledge and knowledge production, we need to acknowledge that 'colonisation, imperialism, and its new form of globalisation continue to play in suppressing, marginalising, and silencing knowledge systems of formerly colonised, historically marginalised, and oppressed groups' (Chilisa, 2017, p. 814). Without such scrutiny, we cannot name and contest examples of epistemic injustice and become complicit with them. If the knowledge produced were context dependent, we would not rely on western-centric concepts and methodologies to making sense of it. Indigenous and Local Knowledges (ILK) would be at the centre of the discipline. Moreover, the idea of the possibility of translating a culture is disingenuous without a reflection on the power inequalities and forms of domination that have built not only those areas, but the areas where the researcher comes from (Young, 2001).

The knowledge produced as translation, fixes the outsider in the position of the other, the one that ought to (and can) be translated. However, the notion of outsider is deeply subjective and invites the question: outsider for whom? The outsider is both the one about whom the knowledge is being produced in the notion of translation, the one that needs to be translated. But it is also the one who translates, the one that is outsider to the translatable culture, and therefore considered 'objective'. We should always consider these two main spatial considerations: 1) about where/whom the knowledge is being produced and 2) by whom (Mielke and Hornidge, 2017).

We can further problematise the notion of who is the outsider by looking at the geographical locations of scholars, research centres and academic journals. Here the outsiders can be conceptualised in two further ways: those being left out of the knowledge production, or those who have a vantage point to understand and translate the phenomenon being studied. In the illustration below (Fig. 1), I provide a brief



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overview of the geographies of New Area Studies reproduced in this piece. The items on the map represent the geographical location of scholars used in this piece. The concentration in the global North is clearly visible, as is evidence of where the conversation about New Area Studies is taking place. This map could also represent the geographies of Area Studies, as things have not changed much in terms of knowledge production in these fields.



Figure 1: Geographies of New Area Studies Knowledge Production © 2024 by Marianela Barrios Aquino is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

The result is an uneven relation in academic knowledge production, where areas of study and areas of knowledge are defined in colonial terms (Bhambra, 2007; Macharia, 2016; Tilley, 2017; Chilisa, 2020; Mayblin and Turner, 2021). With a quick glance at the above map, we can clearly distinguish who was, and continues to be, 'translating' and for whom. The outsider that is left outside remains in the Global South, the outsider that 'observes' and produces knowledge, remains in the Global North. This reflection demonstrates the counterproductive concept of 'outsider', as it refers to two opposing realities. It is not enough to speak in terms of insider or outsider, as such binaries have long been undermined in social sciences (Carling, Erdal and Ezzati, 2014; Botterill, 2015; Nowicka and Ryan, 2015) even if we recognise moments of insiderness and outsidership (Moroşanu, 2015).



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Similarly, notions of 'here' and 'there' are essentialising and simplistic. In a position paper drafted by the Leiden University Institute for Area Studies in 2012, titled 'Where is here?' the notion of area is problematised, along with that of translation, both of which run the risk of perpetuating colonial and linear understandings of progress, that promote ideas of a 'single passage from backwardness to a modernity monopolized by, if not identical to, the Western experience' (Leiden University Institute for Area Studies (LIAS), 2012). This, I believe, represents an urgent call to action. Moreover, it is a problem that remains unresolved and that requires concrete methodological reflections to be addressed (Chilisa, 2017, 2020).

If the goal of Area Studies remains, as some scholars argued, to 'translate back to us the continuing diversities of the world' (Szanton, 2004, p. 3), then this is extremely problematic in two ways: first, a reference to translation and a situational 'us' assumes a zero point, an epistemic privilege from where to know and to translate into. Moreover, it gives a concrete geography to the 'here' as being referred to the place 'where we are' and 'back to' where the diversities of the world ought to be brought and decoded. The centres that codify and name the world have historically been considered to be in Europe and later in the US (Mignolo, 2005; Gamage, 2016). Second, the reference to diversities demonstrates that they are considered to be 'out there', implying the 'us' as a white and therefore a-racial, a-gendered and unnamed universal category and linguistics, into which the world needs to be translated in order to be converted into knowledge. If all this is true, then Area Studies can only be done 'from here' and about 'them', with all the orientalist implications this conceptualisation cannot escape.

However, area-based knowledge can also be 'rich, deeply embedded and locally-derived' (Chafer, Stoddard and Toltica, 2020) even when this has at times presented a problem for the discipline, which was accused of lack of rigour and producing unusable knowledge. Much of the critique was based on an idea that globalisation has rendered area knowledge obsolete, given globalisation's homogenising force (Basedau and Köllner, 2007, p. 107). Globalisation might indeed have helped to highlight the erosion of national containers of society and the power of borders to define cultures. However, this emphasised above all the complexity of areas and actors that are present and working in the face of modernity and capitalism.



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Thus, a renewed interest has surfaced in the recent past in Area Studies, with some government policies making funding available for the creation of research centres, as happened in the case of the Excellence Initiative in Germany (*Excellence Strategy – BMBF*, 2019; Fleschenberg and Baumann, 2020). Another way of defending the current relevance of Area Studies tends to be associated with the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the US, dangerously going back to the need of Western hegemonic powers to 'know their enemy'. Other more well-articulated calls for attention to Area Studies have emphasised the need to continue to understand the connection between local and global contexts and to complicate notions of area beyond territorial reductions (Goh, 2011; Ahmed Asif, 2020).

However, in my view, these calls for a renewed interest in Area Studies and more state funding directed at it are proof of the lack of engagement of the field with decades of criticisms. From the point of view of epistemic justice, disciplines such as Sociology, Politics or International Relations, Psychology, History, etc. could themselves be considered Area Studies and ought to respond to similar calls for accountability. That is, reinstating Area Studies to its disciplinary status because other social science disciplines retained it, while also being accused of similar wrongdoings, is but a step backwards. While it is true that work that we might consider canonical in Sociology for example, like some of Durkheim's and Weber's work, could be understood as nothing but Area Studies of two scholars researching (their) particular regions, namely France and Germany respectively (Derichs, Heryanto and Abraham, 2020, p. 47). It is the international division of intellectual labour that has given these scholars a Discipline and scholars in the Global South, an Area.

Another common critique linked to the origins of Area Studies refers to the concepts of Area/Region themselves. This critique says that area scholars define area in a simplistic, state-centric way, reducing it to territorial determinants. Nevertheless, much of the literature on Area Studies that I encountered engages critically with definitions of *area*, with the role of borders in the area, its linguistic, demographic, cultural, and historical constitutive elements. Still, a critical engagement with geographies of being and reflections on who is naming, defining, and theorising about



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an area, shows that Area Studies could do more to update its 'units' (Derichs, 2017, p. 151).

Thus, it seems to me that much of the critique of Area Studies is based not on the questioning of the existence of territorial understanding of interactions and phenomena, as some Area Scholars have taken the critique of the concept of area to be (Antweiler, 2020). But it is more on the unquestioning assumptions that have accompanied the discipline and its outputs. A critique as such could be addressed with a greater emphasis on reflexivity, positionality and methodological and theoretical decolonising that go beyond discourse (Cusicanqui, 2012; Chilisa, 2020). The discipline of Area Studies might not be able to tackle the challenge of addressing such critique methodologically, because it is constrained by an ever quest for recognition as a discipline in itself. However, New Area Studies could rise to the challenge, if understood as primarily a way of *doing* research and reflecting on the ethical and epistemological foundations of our work as researchers. This is what I propose New Area Studies could become: an ethical way of doing research in the Social Sciences and Humanities.

2. New Area Studies as epistemology

The critiques that were aimed at Area Studies over the past 50 or 60 years have slowly given rise to reflections on the discipline, which delves 'deep into self-examination as to why we must conduct area-oriented work, and what altered forms it may take in the future' (Hodgett and James, 2018, p. 5). I think that a true engagement with the critique can only result in a meaningful change in the way of *doing* research and in the aspirations of its scholars. Although the path lies open and 'the field remains under construction' (Hodgett, 2023), in this section I would like to outline what I consider to be the key features of New Area Studies as an epistemological framework. New Area Studies as a framework is born out of the criticisms of the discipline of Area Studies and aims to address issues related to private and state-driven interests, coloniality, orientalism and epistemicide in the social sciences and humanities by proposing a different way of doing research and deciding what is valid knowledge to be produced.



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There have been largely two perspectives on the role of New Area Studies in the twenty-first century, namely that it either needs to seek disciplinarity and be recognised as such at the institutional level (Houben, 2020); or that it ought to overcome its quest for disciplinarity and be understood as an epistemological framework, as argued by Macamo (2020). In this paper, I argue for the latter.

As has been discussed before, proponents of New Area Studies encourage us to recognise the importance of spatiality on a two-fold manner: first, we need to consider the locations from where research is being produced and distributed from (scholars, research centres, academic journals, etc.); and second, we need to pay attention to what or who is being studied (Macharia, 2016; Mielke and Hornidge, 2017) and with which methods (Saunders, 2002; Burawoy, 2005; Tilley, 2017; Chilisa, 2020). The spatialities we occupy and construct in our research are crucial to shaping ethical research.

Thus, I propose that what is *new* about New Area Studies is an authentic engagement with critique addressed at Area Studies that results in a different approach to doing research. This new approach encourages a critical (self)assessment of the research enterprise. Without an honest and authentic reflexion about space, of which researchers are an integral part, there would be nothing *new* about New Area Studies. That is why there is a clear mandate to be 'explicitly power-critical' and 'consider[s] any language of "regions" or "areas" as an anachronistic manifestation of the global North's hegemony' through distancing itself 'from the symbolic violence exercised in all unequivocal classification processes through and emphasis of transimperial, transregional, transnational and translocal dimensions' (Fleschenberg and Baumann, 2020, p. 10).

Each research endeavour ought to have: 1) a context-specific definition of space, 2) the researcher's place in it and 3) her relationship to it, a justification of why she gets to do this research, what is at stake. New Area Studies is a lens that ensures that all research in social sciences and the humanities ought to start by engaging with these 3 elements. As such, research becomes an act of transparency and a conscious effort to undermine epistemological inequalities and epistemic injustices (Collins, 2014).



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Baumann and Fleschenberg (2020) add three key characteristics of New Area Studies (p. 11), namely:

1. It incorporates transperspectives, moving beyond disciplinary silos and dogmas,
2. It encourages comparative approaches, especially those that turn any manifestations of epistemic hegemony on its head; and
3. It is supported through debates between disciplines.

Let me take this epistemological proposal onto a conceptual plain to discuss the ways in which New Area Studies engages with old concepts and proposes new solutions. Here, I will explore how the concepts of temporalities, place/space, and area can benefit from this epistemological lens.

Decolonial scholars tell us that when choosing concepts and sites of study, we need to pay attention to the temporalities that we ascribe to different sites (Cusicanqui, 1990, 2012; Macharia, 2016; Asher, 2017; Pacini-Ketchabaw, Vintimilla and Berry, 2021; Campbell, 2022). Paying attention to different but coexistent temporalities can be a complex task, because when not done properly, it runs the risk of overlooking key differences and perpetuating long histories of erasure of cultures, ways of being, languages, political subjectivities, forms of resistance, etc. Harootunian (1999) and Cusicanqui (2012) caution us to remember that temporalities can take on different representations to our eyes, but we all inhabit the present. This is to resist the temptation of imposing linear understandings of progress and modernity onto all lifeworlds, assuming that some are further ahead and some are behind in time.

New Area Studies proposes that in order to overcome the challenges old conceptualisations of place/space bring about, especially when located in specific geographical locations or within a community of peoples, there is a need to move researcher and researched onto the same temporal plane and observations need to reflect that coexistence. Although Area Studies has always considered temporality as key, New Area Studies pushes for a more critical engagement with it, including the researcher's temporalities. If we do not do this, we run the risk of imagining certain communities as *native* or *original*, relegating them to a past that needs to remain



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untouched or overcome, a past to be protected, and hence, a place that lacks agency and experiences of the same modernity we inhabit as researchers in the global north (Cusicanqui, 2012; Macharia, 2016).

Similarly, the concept of *area* ought to respond to a contextualised definition (Baumann *et al.*, 2020) and spatio-temporal embeddedness (Houben, 2020, p. 53). As such, we ought to overcome the discussion of whether an area exists or not, and construct *new* conceptualisations that help counter universalising aspirations of naming what is of the *real* world and what is not. New Area studies thus calls for new epistemological constructions that seek to understand regions of the world by acknowledging what are Northern/Western conceptualisations through reflections on both the researcher and researched. This means taking spatial-temporal embeddedness and context more seriously.

For example, some scholars have called for studying the Global South from a southern perspective (Meekosha, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Houben, 2020; Badawi, 2024) and to apply Global South perspectives everywhere, also in the Global North, as a form of decolonial practice (Derichs, Heryanto and Abraham, 2020, p. 53; Rehbein, Kamal and Asif, 2020). This could be a step toward epistemic justice, since it would mean that everyone could gain access to theorising, not only the social science powers (Alatas, 2006). Conceptual frameworks developed in the Global South have traditionally been considered specific to the *area* they were developed in unless they were developed in Europe or the US. Moreover, social scientists in the Global South tend to endorse the validity of European or 'Anglo-Saxon' theories, given that we have been trained to do so (Alatas, 2006; Cusicanqui, 2012; Gamage, 2016). By opening up the realm of theories and knowledge production, we can more honestly and meaningfully address questions such as 'when (if at all), why and how can and should be concepts applied' (Derichs, 2017, p. 162) as well as reflecting on the contexts within which such concepts were developed.

The new framework proposed by New Area Studies calls for a move away from universalising theories and a general move towards mid-level concepts, which retain both specificity and comparability (Houben, 2017; 2020; Chafer *et al.*, 2020) given that they 'are abstractions of any given snapshot of a social phenomenon' (Houben,



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2020, p. 54). This might not seem too new for social scientists, but the global inequalities in knowledge production and the ubiquity of Eurocentrism point to how incomplete the process is. Examples of mid-level concepts are plenty, such as 'theatre state, mandala state, geobody of the nation [...], imagined communities' (Houben, 2020, p. 54) among others. This means that we have been on a path towards more epistemic justice, even when this has not always been acknowledged or made visible in the canonical voices in each discipline. Moreover, some proponents of New Area Studies call for a fundamental shift to 'decolonise the academy, disciplines and epistemology' (Rehbein, Kamal and Asif, 2020, p. 74) and this is something that necessitates 'a shift to local and southern theorising' (ibid.).

Relatedly, Rehbein (2015, pp. 14-16) proposed the concept of kaleidoscopic dialectics, which could help overcome the simplistic binary between universalism and relativism through a focus on configurations of the ethics of understanding, learning and researching. A kaleidoscopic foundation to any philosophy of science will necessarily imply methodological adaptations to more complex realities, multi-layered experiences and definitions of place, space and temporalities. Such adaptations, according to Rehbein (ibid) cannot be made without becoming more reflexive. Taking in more aspects of a given phenomenon complicates the narrative and allows for more voices to take part in the storying and re-storying of social phenomena.

Narrative and storytelling are central to the construction of conceptual frames and the methodological decisions that follow them. Who *crafted* the story (through the research questions), who *tells* the story and who *is part* of it are key elements of any narrative. Thus, the researcher needs to be written into it. Even in collaborative, participatory or action research methodologies, where the focus might be on 'their' narratives, it is important to acknowledge the researcher's role in shaping it and giving it form (Marovah and Mutanga, 2023).

3. Positionality and reflections on knowledge production 'within areas'

Researchers are never absent from the story or research output. We might be more or less visible or invisibilised, depending on how 'scientific' (positivist) we might want



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to appear. However, the truth is that there are few researchers that will write themselves meaningfully into the narrative. Admitting authorship or co-authorship might be more or less problematic for some methodologies than for others. According to Odysseos (2017) the act of writing ourselves into our research endeavours can be painful, because when done meaningfully, it ought to take into account the histories of erasure at the hand of western academia and the ways in which it continues to epistemologically construct and downgrade the other (p. 470).

Nevertheless, New Area Studies needs to pay close attention to the histories of knowledge production and the place of the social scientist in the colonial efforts that continue to shape the world. This idea is not new to Area Scholars, some of whom have been paying attention to positionality already. Take for example, Harootunian's (1999) reflection on knowledge production within areas and the impact it can have on scholars:

France, Italy and England were countries where people went for study and research; Japan, Asia and Africa were simply fields that required first-hand observation, recording and, in some instances, intervention. Perhaps this sense of the field revealed the deeper relationship of these areas to a colonial unconscious, where they were still seen as spaces occupied by 'natives', which needed to be observed and thus represented (p. 136).

Nevertheless, 25 years on, Area Studies has not taken the task seriously, with scholars still calling for more attention to it (Garalytė and Simonson, 2022; Ghodsee and Mrozik, 2023). Using New Area Studies as a frame from which to reflect on knowledge production and what counts as valid knowledge, as well as looking for avenues to produce power-critical research, can help reverse this trend. Positionality is the first empirical step in that direction, where the researcher needs to reckon not only with who she is and why she is studying something, but also with the larger histories and structures of knowledge production that she contributes to. This reflection, to make a difference, ought to be ongoing, deep, transparent and humble. Otherwise, it runs the risk of perpetuating inequalities and privileges (Gani & Khan, 2024).



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A call for a stronger focus on positionality will be more challenging for some researchers than for others. For example, research with a strong focus on empirical research and policy-oriented projects tends to imply that it has no theoretical aspirations and that such reflections might be unnecessary for its practical goals and applications. However, this is but an obscuring of the reality of knowledge production in social sciences, where *all* research contributes to particular views and theories of society, whether we are explicit about it or not.

In this regard, feminist epistemologies are useful because they can contribute towards a more ethical research, where the recognition of always only attaining partial knowledge is further emphasised as part and parcel of any research endeavour in social sciences (Haraway, 1988; Rose, 1993, 1997; Jaggar, 2015). Currently, there are power inequalities implicated in the definition of what is area knowledge and what is universal. If you are Pakistani or Paraguayan, everything you write is likely to be considered in the realm of Area Studies and your knowledge is partial to you and your area. Whereas, if you are British or German, you have the choice of identifying (and being recognised) as a critical scholar, a sociologist or an area scholar (Macharia, 2016; Mayblin and Turner, 2021; Macamo and Samour, 2024).

As such, a feminist approach complements New Area Studies by pushing scholars 'to be more conscious of our potential complicity in the same forces of oppression that we often claim[ed] to be overturning' (Sadan, 2020, p. 193). The methodological opportunities that a framework like this offer are plenty and complement decolonial, feminist and power-critical research.

Conversations about an emerging epistemology ought to be radically new on some aspect or another. Schierenbeck (2015) says that if we are to engage in a new way of doing contextualised research, we cannot only focus on the local and lose sight of the larger structures within which it is constituted. Moreover, a methodologically sound focus on the local ought to 'incorporate the researcher as a tool in the actual process of conducting research' (ibid., p. 1029).

Assuming the possibility of removing ourselves from our research environments, especially those research environments that might *prima facie* construct us as outsiders



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(given our lack of language knowledge, different ethnicity, gender, sexuality, geographical and geopolitical locations, etc., etc.) is refusing the need to reflect on who we are and why we do the research we do. Creative methodologies are a great place to start examining new ways of doing research in the social sciences and humanities, incorporating self-awareness and decolonial approaches. For example, Prof Iokine Rodriguez-Fernandez (UEA) and her talking maps, as well as her toolbox (see website <https://pluriversodepazentolima.net/>) engage empirically with a creative way of conceptualising space and place as a figuration (related to people and their narratives). The research question that guided her collaborative research was 'what happens when communities investigate peace?'. Her results speak in different mediums and languages about the impact of her research on the community as well as the ways in which those communities can help us conceptualise space and place in more critical and complex ways.

Although these are but some of the current methodological proposals to take forward in New Area Studies, according to Macamo (2020) the mandate is a broader one, as we should see New Area Studies 'as a form of methodology of the social sciences and the humanities, for the epistemological framework it offers is one that challenges researchers to critically evaluate how they frame their object and how they are able to produce credible accounts of reality' (p. 63).

4. The way forward and a statement of relevance

New Area Studies constitutes a perspective in social sciences that 'acknowledge[s] the possibility of multiple coexisting modernities' and recognises 'that Southern modernity is not a derivative of Northern modernity' (Mérieau, 2020, p. 162). For Mérieau (ibid), rather than speaking about the 'death' of area studies, New Area Studies can emerge as a place from where to 'provincialize' the social science canon and theorise from the South (p. 164).

For this, does New Area Studies need to become a discipline? I think the answer is no. We ought to reckon with the devastating legacy of the Western Gaze (Houben, Guillermo and Macamo, 2020) and to do so, transform the discipline into a point of encounter and debate that undermines the disciplinary silos by not letting itself be



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defined in the same terms. New Area Studies could represent a good opportunity to aim for postdisciplinarity and a true undermining of traditional disciplines.

There are, however, other valid questions that are still to be answered: Why New Area Studies and not something else? It seems to me that renewing Area Studies might be an exercise in humility. We need to acknowledge the histories of social sciences and their complicity with colonial structures and efforts (Chafer and Majumdar, 2023). Here lies the importance of power-critical research, where the exercise of producing knowledge about the world accompanies social change and does not thwart it (Marovah, 2023). Academic research that just moves on, without acknowledging its problematic past has no chance of breaking with that past.

New Area Studies is a reminder of what Area Studies is guilty of and an effort to right some wrongs. That is why it ought to remain an epistemological frame that reminds us to critically engage in a reflexion about our relationship with our objects of study, and to write about it, to make it explicit (Frain, 2023).

In this paper, I have tried to argue that through feminist, decolonial approaches we can start listening to place (Back, 2007), rather than '*giving voice*', letting the stories travel through us. This opens up the place for creativity, for various modes of expression, including literature and poetry. Thus, espousing postdisciplinarity, that is, combining knowledges that originated in disciplines in humanities and social sciences, along with the social location of the researcher might be the seed that sprouts a New Area Scholarship. For this, I think, we ought to focus on positionality and the politics of knowledge production and abandon the quest for disciplinarity.



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