
Introduction

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When we launched the first issue of *New Area Studies* in 2020, we set out with a mission to create an interdisciplinary, open access space to foster a truly global scholarly conversation. It was coincidentally a moment of world-historical change: our inaugural issue went live a few days before the UK entered its second COVID19 lockdown. Through the spread of the novel virus, the intersections of the local and the global seemed more palpably intertwined than ever before. Contemplating a turbulent and uncertain global future, we wisely declined to predict what would come next, aside from economic insecurity, growing inequality, and cultural and political backlash. All bets were off, was our ambiguous conclusion. How judicious we were. Surveying the global scene, 2020 now seems like ancient history. The five years that followed and all that they contained—most prominently, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Donald Trump’s second term as US President, and conflicts in the middle east and elsewhere—have rewritten the geo-political map.

In another way, however, our future-forecasting was more precise. It was clear to us that scholars working across the spectrum of New Area Studies required an interdisciplinary space where they could bring together their place-based expertise and methodologies into conversation with scholars working on the same global challenges in different geographic spaces and from different perspectives. And we resolved that this journal would provide that space, testing and stretching the boundaries of the field by foregrounding interdisciplinary approaches and cross-disciplinary communication. Thanks to our colleagues and contributors, we have amply succeeded in those goals. Our archives now boast interdisciplinary issues devoted to groundbreaking and discipline-shaping explorations of Storytelling;



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Ukraine; Indigeneity, Community and Participatory Practice; Reproductive Care and Justice; and Environmental American Studies. By bringing these diverse topics into a particular New Area Studies (NAS) frame, each issue has helped us to push forward our ideas of what New Area Studies is and can be. It has challenged outdated stereotypes of Area Studies as brute post-war policy interests aligned with major powers and their security priorities. Instead, it has reimaged it as spanning the map and the disciplines, connecting the Global North and South, refocusing aims and objectives from the *personless*, structural and instrumental, to the ethics, values and impacts on everyday lives. Our issues, since 2020, illustrate where, and with whom, our concerns lie. Co-creating knowledge with local communities, reflecting priorities of those rarely consulted, demonstrating the powerful potential of NAS as it plays out in the everyday lives of both local people and researchers. In short, this journal prioritises *real world challenges* as much as what and how is written on the page.

This special 5th anniversary issue is no different. Our outstanding international cast of contributors continue that work of pushing New Area Studies into exciting new territories, literal and metaphorical, with their disparate, groundbreaking explorations of the interactions of people, place, space and culture. These essays and their authors span Africa, Asia, Latin America, North America and Europe. They are both profound contributions to the theoretical underpinnings of New Area Studies and an extraordinary testament to the power of New Area Studies when applied in the world.

To begin, Claudia Derichs and Wolfram Schaffar explore what they term the “emancipatory potential” of New Area Studies, arguing for a Fourth Wave of Area Studies grounded in concepts of “process geographies” and “topochrones” that resist the return to Cold War-era polarization and essentialism in the current geopolitical climate. Their framework treats areas as heuristic devices defined by interaction and motion rather than fixed boundaries, offering NAS a methodological foundation for studying contemporary global challenges while maintaining emancipatory potential. Yongemie Li, R. A. W. Rhodes and Susan Hodgett then follow, employing “unusual comparisons” and decentred governance theory to conduct ethnographic fieldwork on social care for people with learning disabilities in Southampton, England and Hangzhou, China, demonstrating that seemingly incomparable global contexts can

yield surprising insights. By challenging traditional Area Studies’ focus on single regions and political science’s dismissal of idiographic research, the article shows how bottom-up, comparative ethnography can reveal counterintuitive findings thereby producing “plausible conjectures” that speak to larger issues while centring the lived experiences of vulnerable populations.

Two articles that explore different dimensions of New Area Studies’s relationship to the field of International Relations come next. Carolina Zaccato argues that International Relations, particularly through the English School approach, must establish a deeper, more horizontal partnership with Area Studies to achieve the discipline’s goal of becoming truly global, plural, and decentred. By demonstrating how Area Studies can refine IR’s ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions, Zaccato shows how this partnership can move beyond treating Area Studies as merely a “basket of data” for testing grand theories toward genuine collaborative knowledge production that recognizes regions as active rule-makers rather than passive rule-takers. Eileen Doherty-Sil then demonstrates the value of New Area Studies methodologies by exploring the ways that they can enhance Global International Relations scholarship by providing deeper, context-sensitive engagement with area-specific knowledge and eliminating disciplinary silos, particularly in understanding international human rights. In this account, NAS has the potential to bridge the gap between universal human rights discourse and diverse local experiences through genuine interdisciplinary collaboration and inclusion of non-elite scholarly voices.

On that theme, Tafumanei Kusenwa, Pius Tangwe Tanga and William Shu Neba employ phenomenological qualitative research and resilience theory to examine how reintegrated female human trafficking survivors in Harare, Zimbabwe develop long-term psychosocial resilience. By highlighting their lived experiences and survival strategies through ethnographic methods—including guided walk interviews and focus groups—the study demonstrates how New Area Studies’s emphasis on local context, indigenous coping mechanisms, and bottom-up knowledge production can reveal culturally-specific resilience strategies that challenge universalizing psychological models and inform more effective trauma-informed interventions. Iokiñe Rodríguez and her co-authors then provide a concrete empirical example of

NAS principles in action, showing transformative research methodology at work in Colombian peacebuilding. They present Transformative Action Research as a methodology for territorial peacebuilding in post-conflict Colombia, demonstrating how transdisciplinary research can strengthen local agency and resignify peace, identity, and territory at the community level. This approach exemplifies NAS's potential to make visible how place is experienced and re-signified through the involvement of local actors as co-researchers rather than research subjects. Similarly, Roger Few and his co-authors employ flexible, qualitative methodologies with indigenous and campesino communities in Colombia and Peru to critically interrogate the meaning of “recovery” from the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing how pandemic experiences are inherently interconnected with ongoing risks associated with conflict, marginalization, poverty, and environmental degradation rather than constituting a discrete crisis event. By centring grassroots voices and lived experiences through responsive, trust-based ethnographic methods, the article demonstrates how communities’ conceptions of recovery emphasize collective processes, the resurgence of traditional knowledge and communal care, and confronting structural injustices, revealing capacities for resistance already embedded in historically marginalized communities.

Philip Wilson and Dave McLaughlin push the potential of NAS into very different directions, reconceptualising how we might understand the nexus of people, place and culture. McLaughlin brings literary-geographical theories to NAS to demonstrate how fiction actively creates space through reader-text encounters, analysing Paul Auster's *The Brooklyn Follies* and Kent Haruf's *Plainsong* as dynamic co-creators of relational spaces rather than static representations. This “reading for space” methodology offers NAS an innovative approach to understanding narratives not merely as objects of analysis but as co-actants that blur boundaries between textual and actual worlds. Wilson plays out some of those ideas in a shift to personal narrative and memory to mark the 150th anniversary of Custer’s Last Stand. His auto-ethnographic exploration of how the American general George Armstrong Custer shaped a boy's imagination in 1960s Yorkshire through board games, films, and comics, exemplifies how New Area Studies can examine cross-cultural myth-making



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and the imaginative construction of space and place as it plays out in intimate ways that confound and transcend geographical boundaries.

The volume closes with Vincent Houben’s stock-taking meditation on the theoretical foundations and historical trajectory of Area Studies. He leaves us with words of inspiration which will shape the next five years, and more, of the New Area Studies project: “In sum, New Area Studies have an important role to play in a novel understanding of what drove the world in the past, what happens now and how it will evolve in the future.” *New Area Studies*, based at the University of East Anglia’s profoundly interdisciplinary NAS Research Centre, will play a significant role in shaping these processes as we move through the twenty-first century and face its many complex challenges. Together, we will document the analyses, concepts, disciplines, methods, peoples, processes and places around the globe. Together, we will seek new inspirations, and new insights—aiming always to know more, better.