A CARTOGRAPHY OF RELATION

Exploring the Role of Island and Archipelago Metaphors in Fostering Relational Perspectives

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Abstract

In an era marked by a growing recognition of our interdependence as a species and with the planet, island studies scholars have advocated for an 'archipelagic' worldview that conveys this interdependence in more nuanced terms than those put forward by concurrent perspectives and metaphors such as the 'Global Village' or 'Spaceship Earth'. Such metaphors, I argue, collapse complex relational dynamics into amalgams incapable of representing the plurality and diversity at the core of relation. In this dissertation, I contend that island and archipelago metaphors, when conceived in nuanced terms, yield insights that can instruct a culture lacking relational sensitivity despite the cliches surrounding islands that proliferate in popular narratives. I begin by outlining the function of metaphor as a foundation for my argument, focusing on its instructive potential and ubiquitous influence. I then turn to the history of island studies, later expanding metaphorical notions of 'islandness' and 'archipelagicity'. Throughout my argument, paradox remains a core theme, informing issues of connection and separation, scale and form, identity and individuality, and plurality and porosity, all of which find their confluence at the central theme of relation. Drawing from time spent in the Hebrides, with a particular focus on the Isle of Gometra, I use visual experiments and metaphors to help illustrate my core argument - that island and archipelago metaphors and their associated paradoxes are heuristically rich in illuminating issues of human (and more-than-human) relation and interdependence.

Access the visual component of this dissertation here (I recommend reading the essay first):
hannahlclose.com/a-cartography-of-relation

As it becomes more evident to many that life is inherently, inextricably, and necessarily relational, policymakers, activists, NGOs and artists concerned with consensus narratives are seeking new and established metaphors that illustrate this phenomenon in order to more deeply establish this view in the social imaginary, thus influencing 'consumer' behaviour, as well as that of those in power. Reductionist, materialist, and dualist approaches to understanding the world and our place within it are faltering, their limitations highlighted within an increasingly complex web of interdependence. As biodiversity declines and geopolitical tensions rise, it becomes increasingly clear that many of our existing maps have been rendered obsolete and no longer serve the flourishing of life. Materialism has metastasised and our dominant metaphors have become malignant. Nevertheless, our cartographic impulses are not entirely misled, nor is the creation of new cartographies a misguided endeavour.

Humans make sense of the world using lines, language and metaphor; things which delineate, contain, express, and act as maps for meaning that help us understand the nature of reality and how to navigate it. These cartographic, conceptual, and creative tools provide a container, each word an island, each line a threshold, while metaphor constructs an archipelago of semantic links, affinities and alterities, embodying the relational essence of life in its very anatomy, which expresses connection at the core of its logic by fusing together seemingly disparate conceptual domains. Though metaphor is often misconceived as a purely abstract or rhetorical phenomenon by proponents of so-called rational worldviews, such as scientific materialists, it creates (somewhat ironically, given the emphasis on materiality) tangible material outcomes to the extent that, as the mythologist Joseph Campbell suggested, 'if you want to change the world, you have to change the metaphor' (Campbell, cited in Moyers 2009).

Quantum physicist Nils Bohr, representing a departure from the confines of scientism, noted that 'everything we call real is made of things that cannot be regarded as real' (Bohr, cited in Barad 2007: 254). Bohr's observation gestures towards the paradoxes at the heart of reality, and indeed at the heart of metaphor, which relies on a kind of nonsensical, contradictory logic that,

nonsense notwithstanding, helps us make sense of the world instead of adding to further confusion. The logic of metaphor states 'this is that', meanwhile those of us operating within the materialist paradigm are led to believe that 'this is this' and 'that is that' and that anything that falls outside of these categories simply cannot exist without dismantling the very foundations of Western thought, even though, ironically, science is full of metaphors. Consider, for example, a sound 'wave'. Metaphor expresses qualities of relativity and subjectivity in a supposedly objective world by conveying a different kind of logic, but logic nonetheless. This relational, imaginative logic depends on novel connections, contextually nuanced perspectives, and liminality, that is, the act of crossing between the domains of objective/subjective, material/immaterial, etc. (name your dichotomy). In this way, metaphor acts as an agent of 'betweenness', facilitating correspondences between different domains of perception and awareness. Etymologically, 'metaphor' means 'to carry over', 'to transfer', and 'after/with/across'. The conceptual and aesthetic relevance of this boundary-transcending movement will become clearer later in this essay.

Echoed by Kenneth White, the originator of the 'theory-practice' Geopoetics, which concerns our creative relationship with nature, metaphor involves 'the shaping of a mindscape in a landscape' (White 2006: 58). As Jan Zwicky writes, 'those who think metaphorically are enabled to think truly, because the shape of their thinking echoes the shape of the world' (Zwicky 2003: 5). Cultivating fertile, generative, and life-sustaining metaphors explicitly conveying relation is a crucial task of our times. Indeed, '[metaphors] are part of the body of the world. The world speaks itself' (Weber 2017: 88). Therefore, it is apt to pay attention to them at a time when so many perceive themselves as separate from nature. As the title of this essay suggests, one such part of this 'body' is the island.

In the following, I contend that islands and archipelagos (a group of islands) are vital places for understanding relationality and our connection to the biosphere, particularly within the context of the Anthropocene, where the effects of climate change, the influence of modernity on indigenous cultures, and the mutability of the ocean-bound landscape gesture towards a correlational enactment of life

as opposed to a purely causative one. In *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds*, David Chandler and Jonathan Pugh acknowledge islands as such:

> *The island has regularly been employed as a key figure which explicitly disrupts the grasp of modernist, linear and reductionist 'mainland' thinking. In island studies more generally, for many years now, a very broad range of island scholarship has understood islands as key 'relational spaces'* (Chandler and Pugh 2021: 5).

These geographies provide generative metaphors (and lived experiences) for relation that draw on the liminal quality of island spaces and several other features crucial to relation, such as the formation and interaction of identity, and navigating polarities, proximity and porosity, all of which I discuss in more depth in the following pages. In *The Aesthetics of Island Space*, Johannes Riquet notes that 'islands are particularly potent landforms for a reimagination of the earth and our relation to it' (Riquet 2019: 4), highlighting the potential role islands have to play in the creation of new metaphors for relation (in addition to the regeneration of established metaphors). Similarly, in *Islands of the Mind*, John Gillis indirectly acknowledges the generative attributes of island metaphors, stating that:

> *Mythical geographies serve us in the same ways they have always done, providing means and direction. Like the cardinal points of a compass, they tell us not only where we are but also who we are* (Gillis 2004: 7).

The question I am attempting to answer, or at least speak to in this essay, and in the adjoining visual component, is: how do island and archipelago metaphors foster relational perspectives? It goes without saying that islands are not *just* metaphors but real places with real beings in them (human and beyond). As Riquet points out, 'Western discourse has constructed islands as idealised and abstracted worlds dissociated from the physical world' (Riquet 2004: 20). 'As master symbols and metaphors for powerful mainland cultures, [islands'] own realities and consciousnesses have been more obscured than illuminated', notes

Gillis (2004: 4), highlighting the extent to which island metaphors have been abstracted from their lived realities.

In popular culture, islands are simultaneously conceived as sanctuaries and luxury escapes, plastered across the pages of glossy lifestyle magazines, and also as remote prisons, places of desolation, backwardness and entrapment. The term 'Robinsonade', coined by novelist Johann Gottfried Schnabel (1731), describes a fashionable literary genre of desert island escapades based on the novel *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe (1719), revealing just how far this trope has gone. Below is an example from Defoe's novel illustrating such a 'prison':

> *The anguish of my soul at my condition would break out upon me on a sudden, and my very heart would die within me, to think of [ ] how I was a prisoner, locked up with the eternal bars and bolts of the ocean, in an uninhabited wilderness, without redemption* (Defoe 1997).

As Gillis outlines below, island metaphors defy a single category despite the stereotypes that plague them. They also express seemingly contradictory qualities at the same time:

> *Like all master metaphors, [ ] islands are capable of representing a multitude of things. They can symbolise fragmentation and vulnerability but also wholeness and safety, [ ] they are figures for paradise and hell. Islands are where we quarantine the pestilential and exile the subversive, but they are also where we welcome the immigrant and the asylum seeker* (Gillis 2004: 3).

Islands are, in actuality, far more complex than these reductive stereotypes convey, though it is fair to say that they are full of contradictions. However, the contradictions arising from islands extend beyond the limitations of popular metaphors and dichotomies related to 'sanctuary' or 'prison', expressing, instead, myriad shades of meaning across a spectrum of possibilities, as Riquet acknowledges in the following:

> *They [islands] are invested with ideology, but they refuse to be absorbed by the fantasies and meanings they are encumbered with. They are living spaces, and they are lived in various ways. They offer vivid perceptual experiences, and are sites of spatial play and experimentation. Above all, they offer a geopoetic oscillation between the material energies of words and images, and the energies of the physical world* (Riquet 2019: 29).

In addition to stereotypes in popular culture, islands are also the (sometimes harmful) obsession of anthropologists, ecologists, and their academic peers; as Guoqing Ma notes, 'in recent years, [islands] have increasingly become a hot topic of academic research' (Ma 2020: 2). When I claim that islands evoke fertile metaphors, I want to add the caveat that their metaphorical role does not supersede their lived reality, though as previously highlighted, the line between these is tenuous and therefore worthy of attention. To some extent, humans will draw metaphors from *all* geographies simply because we rely on metaphor to make sense of the world at almost every level of cognition. However, as outlined above, islands are trendy in this domain of meaning-making; their popularity having led to an extreme level of abstraction in mainstream consciousness. Like other living things, metaphors can deteriorate, 'turn bad' or die, which is the case of many popular island metaphors, such as the aforementioned 'desert island' trope, which relies on inaccurate, exoticist, and sensationalist conceptions of remoteness and purity of culture and landscape. In light of this, island metaphors should be approached with sensitivity. My aim is *not* to extract metaphors purely for aesthetic consumption but to be in dialogue with islands so that any metaphors emerging from my correspondence with them are collaborative in spirit and rooted in place, as I will outline in my methodology in the following pages.

One question I would like to address before going further sounds straightforward yet remains unanswered: what is an island? This question is important because it foregrounds and complicates this research. There is no 'official' agreed-upon definition worldwide, though there is speculation. As Riquet notes, 'even a simple definition of what constitutes an island is fraught with countless difficulties and has been endlessly debated: if it is land

surrounded by water, what about continents?' (Riquet 2019: 13). According to conventional (but not consensus) definitions, Australia is a continent, yet anecdotally, I hear it referred to as an island by Australians. The UK is an archipelago named the British *Isles*, yet few living in mainland Britain seem to refer to themselves as islanders, whether online in public forums, on television/radio, or in any other cultural medium. Britain's 'mainland' status may render it at odds with the surrounding islands, implying that it is the 'main' land, which has implications regarding the hierarchy assigned to particular landforms and the effect this has on those deemed 'subordinate'. As Gillis notes, 'continents have a tendency to appropriate everything into their temporal and spatial domains' (Gillis 2004: 85). Brexit has highlighted Britain's geopolitical identity as an island nonetheless by positioning it outside of 'the continent', which is itself conceived as a kind of 'main' land through the lens of the modernist, continental, and colonial paradigm.

Perhaps Australia's distinct position within the Pacific Ocean imbues it with qualities typically associated with island stereotypes (isolated, contained, etc.), and perhaps it is the fact that many of us (I am British) say we live 'in' Britain and not 'on' it that obscures our island identity. Despite this, many islanders will highlight that the preposition and metaphor that states one is 'on' an island is thought to be harmful, as it suggests merely 'standing on top of' a place with little engagement with the environment (something which tourists are often accused of doing and which can lead to harmful outcomes for islands and islanders). In an article for *The National* newspaper, Hebridean islander Rhoda Meek writes: 'Our islands are living communities - you are in them, not on' (Meek 2023). In this sense, being 'in' an island implies active participation in the landscape and culture and challenges the hierarchical and detached position implied by 'on'. Though important, I do not have space to develop this point more thoroughly in this essay. I have not reached a conclusion on this issue myself, so I use the terms interchangeably. However, I think there is a case for each, depending on the level of perception you are operating from/within (something I will clarify below).

While there is no agreed-upon definition of an island, or indeed a lexicon on how to engage with them, others have searched for an essential quality of 'islandness', notably Philip Conkling, Founder of the Island Institute, who writes:

> *Islanders from different archipelagoes share a sense of islandness that transcends the particulars of local island culture. Islandness is a metaphysical sensation that derives from the heightened experience that accompanies physical isolation. Islandness is reinforced by boundaries of often frightening and occasionally impassable bodies of water that amplify a sense of a place that is closer to the natural world because you are in closer proximity to your neighbours* (Conkling 2007: 1).

Despite the existence of the term 'islandness', there is no defining essence that can be distilled from or applied to the world's islands. As Chandler and Pugh point out, 'just as we believe work with islands does matter for the development of contemporary thinking, we do not think that this is because of some sort of deterministic, essentialised or realist island ontology' (Chandler and Pugh 2021: xii). Nevertheless, 'islandness' is real to those who experience it, and though the world's islands differ considerably, there *is* a *je ne sais quoi* that connects them (according to many islanders worldwide with whom I have spoken personally). My somewhat limited perspective generally follows the logic of 'the smaller the island, the bigger the islandness' (which, in the case of the Australia anecdote, does not apply at all, highlighting the role of subjective experience in complicating this ongoing debate). While this does not explicitly answer the question 'what is an island?', it adds some context to my personal experience of islands as places where spatial metaphors relating to scale matter.

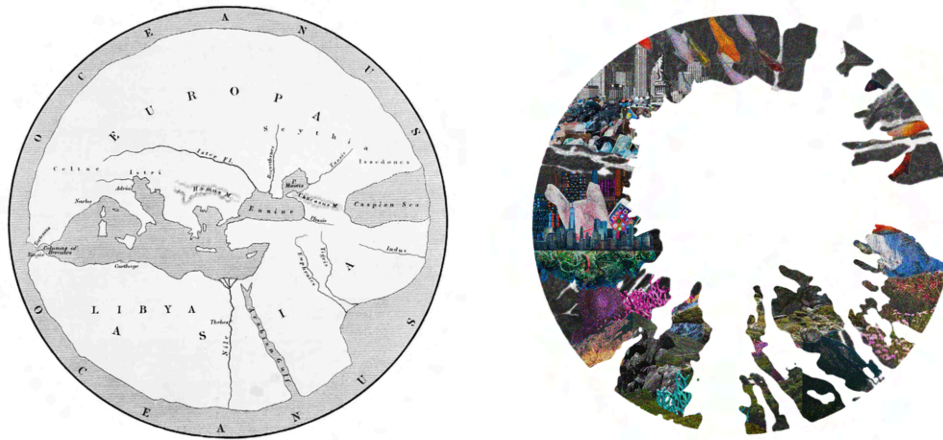
A core idea running throughout this research is the notion of the archipelago as an inherently relational form and, as such, one that yields metaphors that can instruct a culture lacking relational sensitivity. Numerous metaphors have been put forward to cultivate this sensitivity and inspire a sense of unity, such as the 'Global Village' (McLuhan 1962: 21), 'Spaceship Earth' (Fuller 1969: 1), and 'Earth

Island' (Gillis 2004: 6)[1]; however, each overlooks the essential role of difference, diversity and separation in relation. These metaphors flatten and homogenise the plural nature of the world into indistinguishable amalgams, resulting in a picture of oneness that does not accurately represent the fractal, entangled, and multiplicitous ways in which we are connected. Connection and relation are not synonymous with oneness or sameness (something which I will return to later). While these metaphors point to our precarious position within the cosmos in efforts to establish a sense of connection, vulnerability and interdependence, these metaphors, with the exception in some instances of the 'Global Village', do not sufficiently acknowledge the complex nature of our relations *within* planetary boundaries; it is here that our ongoing challenges lie.
Jacques Derrida went as far as to say, 'there is no world, there are only islands' (Derrida 2011: 32); however, my metaphor of choice is 'World as Archipelago'. This idea formed in my mind over several years spent in the Hebridean islands. It was later affirmed and expanded by the (already existing) work of Eduoard Glissant and Johannes Riquet, among many others, including Epeli Hau'ofa's 'Sea of Islands' (1994) and Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* series (1964). The metaphor 'World as Archipelago' imagines our planet as a giant archipelago, which, to some extent, it already is if you conceive of continents as large islands connected by ocean. This metaphor does not place continents at its centre, nor do 'mainlands' exist in its purview.

Below are two examples of this metaphor in action. To the left, the world as conceived by the Greek philosopher Hecataeus in 500 B.C. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed 18th October 2023). Here, the world is bounded by the ocean which forms its perimeter (according to this cross-sectional perspective, which cannot represent the planet's spherical nature). According to the official image description, the landmass is divided into three 'continents' which form an archipelago. In my view, the image depicts something reminiscent of the Triassic period supercontinent, Pangea, whereby all landmass is connected. Despite this, separate islands are still visible at the centre of the image. The image to the right depicts the metaphor from a different perspective. It is not

[1] I have attributed this reference to Gillis because it frequently appears in *Islands of the Mind* (2004), however the 'Earth Island' metaphor does not seem to originate with a single author, and is much older than this particular reference.

entirely accurate in terms of how I conceive of the metaphor now, however, it offers an interesting visual experiment whereby the continents of the world are decentralised and face inwards towards a centralised ocean. This image was a collaboration between myself and the artist Priya Subberwal as part of the *Kinship: World as Archipelago* course (2023) I designed for the transformative learning platform advaya.



As a constellation of islands simultaneously connected *and* separated by the ocean, the archipelago expresses the paradoxical and plural nature of relation geologically, geographically, ecologically, culturally, visually, metaphorically, and so on. The aim of this idea, and the subsequent metaphors arising from it, is to challenge rigid, oppositional, 'either/or' approaches to polarities, differences, and metaphorical frameworks related to scale, identity, and relation, such as 'individual vs. community', 'isolation vs. connection', and 'island vs. mainland/continent'. As Riquet outlines:

> *Implicit in this view is a shift from essentialising views of 'the island' towards an embrace of islands in their plurality and diversity, and a reimagination of the planet in archipelagic terms* (Riquet 2019: 10).

To perceive, experience, and participate in the world archipelagically subverts reductionist views of islands (and their concomitant metaphors, such as nation-states and individuals) as purely isolated places defined by a bounded

uniformity and instead encourages us to inhabit the porous, relational fabric of the world. Such a view acknowledges that while coastlines are, on the one hand, perimeters, borders, and boundaries, they are also thresholds and conduits for relation. With each rising tide, new species, objects, and weather patterns arrive in the island landscape, while others simultaneously depart on the wind and waves, soon to resurface at the shorelines of other isles. Below is an image I created using a cutout of a made-up island placed on top of seaweed on a beach on the Hebridean Isle of Gometra. The image represents this notion of extending outwith island boundaries, with part of the identity of the place, in this case, the seaweed, leaving the environment to form part of the identity of another place.

This view of islands as places of osmosis, hence relation, educates us in the art of paradox. Namely, island and archipelagic form show us that connection *and* separation (and what lies beyond or within that) can be harmoniously realised at once and that what separates us also, in the same breath, connects us. As Iain McGilchrist illustrates in the following, the presence of what he calls 'opposites' is part of what imbues islands with their character; their *islandness*:

> *Some philosophies tend to collapse into the monism that opposites are identical, others into the dualism that opposites remain irreconcilable...*

> *opposites not only exist, but give rise to and fulfil one another* (McGilchrist 2023: 36:56).

Similarly, Simone Weil recognised that 'every separation is a link' (Weil 2002: 145). In this way, the ocean that separates islands also connects them. From this, we can deduce that duality, when understood correctly in all its complexity and contradictions, and when applied at the relevant level of perception, gives *rise* to life as opposed to destroying it, as many have argued in progressive circles (that duality leads to destruction, that is. I am speaking anecdotally here). This is because duality, by its own logic, gives rise to non-duality. Herein, I believe, lies the paradox at the core of relation and of life's processes, and something which is expressed in island and archipelagic form. This dynamic oscillation between nearness and distance, a dance of proximity and contrast, is at the heart of island form and relation; as Eduoard Glissant acknowledged, 'distancings are necessary to Relation and depend on it' (Glissant 1997: 157). Gillis, referencing the sociologist Georg Simmel, also recognises this in the following:

> *Noting that human beings are 'connecting creatures who must always separate and cannot connect without separating,' Simmel wrote that bridging two things only underlines their distinctiveness. Insularity and connectedness are but two sides of the same coin, their meanings forever entangled* (Gillis 2004: 147).

Finally, I include below a similar sentiment from Goethe, whose 'eternal movement' is central to an archipelagic 'poetics of relation' (if I might use the title of Glissant's book to illustrate the point). I will return to these themes in more depth in the coming pages.

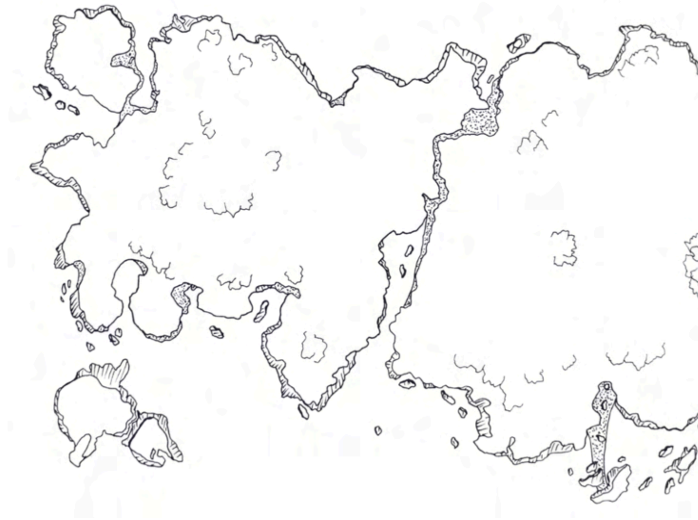
> *The operation of nature consists of splitting the united or uniting the divided; this is the eternal movement of systole and diastole of the heartbeat, the inhalation and exhalation of the world in which we live, act, and exist* (Goethe, cited in McGilchrist 2023: 1:00:03).

In addition to reviewing the literature on islands, islandness and the archipelago, my methodology for this research included immersive fieldwork while living in/on an island and spending time on neighbouring islands, as well as on the sea via sail. Working with the living island landscape, I made photographs, gathered maps, experimented with island form by creating hand-cut and digital collages, and made sketches illustrating various metaphors related to the themes discussed here.

For the duration of this research, I lived on the Isle of Gometra in the Inner Hebrides of Scotland, which sits within the Staffa archipelago. Gometra is 'three islands out' from mainland Britain (which is itself an island within an archipelago). The island is ensconced by the Isle of Mull and its peninsulas, yet perched right on the edge, surrounded by the Atlantic, and marginally protected by the scattered Treshnish Isles and the isles of Coll and Tiree. Gometra is currently home to four residents, though the number changes with the seasons. The island has no ferry and is off-grid, and is only accessible via boat or by a 3-hour walk or 1-hour quad-bike journey across the neighbouring Isle of Ulva. With its surrounding waters, it is also home to numerous species, such as the Sea Eagle, Red Deer, Common Seal, and Basking Shark. A richer picture of the island is painted in the adjoining visual component. I also spent time on the Isles of Lewis, Harris, Uist, Skye, Mull, Iona, Rona, Eigg, Rum, Staffa, and the Shiant Islands during this research period.

While 'islandness' and ‘archipelagicity’ (a term I am using to describe the qualities of an archipelago) cannot be distilled in the study of Gometra alone (or indeed at all), the island exhibits many of the qualities of each. Having spent time on the other islands, too, it has been illustrative to witness and experience the patterns and connections that operate in parallel in each of them. Every photograph, map, artwork, and so on included in this research emanates from the Gometra landscape, culture and ecology, and from that of its intimate neighbours. My hope is that these visual experiments will run alongside this essay in ways that help visualise some of the concepts and metaphors discussed. Below is a basic map (lacking ecological detail) hand-drawn by me as an experiment in memory (hence some errors). Gometra is to the west, Ulva to the

east, with Mâisgeir skerry southwest and Eilean Dioghlum, a tidal island connected to Gometra, northwest.



One of the central ideas contributing to an archipelagic 'poetics of relation' as I conceive it is something I have come to call the 'paradox of the individual', which, in this case, can also mean the 'paradox of the island'. I have touched on paradox already; however it is important to return to it in more detail because I believe it informs 'islandness' (and metaphor) to a considerable extent. The paradox of the individual posits that we are both individuals *and not* at the same time. We are alone *and* not alone at all times. Likewise, an island is a standalone island *and* part of an archipelago, irrespective of the extent of ocean between them (in the context of the 'World as Archipelago' metaphor). As Timothy Morton outlines in the following, conventional epistemology remains averse to such paradoxes:

> *Philosophy is hell-bent on an island logic consisting of the never formally proved Law of Noncontradiction and its niece, the Law of the Excluded Middle. According to the Law of Noncontradiction, either you are an island or you are not: you cannot be both at the same time. But there are plenty of logical circumstances in which it's perfectly reasonable to be true and false at the same time - moments at which trying to reduce the paradox this entails results in much more virulent paradoxes* (Morton 2016: 71).

Despite this, the individual and the island are typically metaphorical emblems of separateness that exist exclusively in one dimension, representing wholly bounded forms impenetrable to external forces. This is also how many conceive of identity in general. It is often represented as a distinct form within a domain of formlessness; for example, the island typically represents form, while the ocean represents formlessness. The island has an identity, the ocean does not. Nonetheless, it is untrue that the ocean does not have its own identity; it expresses a form entirely of its own, however, its form defies this logic of bounded absoluteness to which I refer. To transition to the 'other side' of this dynamic of opposites means extinguishing all possibility of expressing and relating to the other in the context of the dominant culture. It is to say that the ocean cannot have a distinct form if the island has a distinct form; that form only comes to be through formlessness, but what if we conceive of formlessness as a kind of form in and of itself? The Buddhist koan, 'form is emptiness, emptiness is form', comes to mind.

This tension arises when duality is conceived in absolute and not relative terms, as Gillis gestures at when he says that 'the modern tendency has been to essentialise and totalise space, turning relative differences into absolute ones' (Gillis 2004: 115). It is an inherently divisive logic, one that suppresses our intrinsic plurality in favour of what it deems 'rational', all while, ironically, giving rise to legitimately irrational outcomes, such as the human-caused destruction of the biosphere brought about, in part, from ignorance regarding the relational fundamentals of life. This impulse to divide the world into parts (and ultimately resist paradox) is particularly evident in our often misguided conception of islands, as Riquet illustrates:

> *Western thought has always preferred to assign meaning to neatly bounded, insulated things, regarding that which lies beyond as a void. We not only think of our individual selves as islands, but conceive of nations, communities, and families in the same insular fashion, ignoring that which connects in favour of that which separates and isolates* (Riquet 2019: 2).

The often incompletely quoted John Donne poem, ‘No man is an island’ comes to mind. See the full poem below:

> *No man is an island entire of itself; every man*
> *is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;*
> *if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe*
> *is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as*
> *well as any manner of thy friends or of thine*
> *own were; any man's death diminishes me,*
> *because I am involved in mankind.*
> *And therefore never send to know for whom*
> *the bell tolls; it tolls for thee* (Donne 1624).

As Morton notes, ‘despite the predominance of relationism, it is not true that in every case we should maintain that ‘No man is an island,’ following John Donne’ (Morton 2016: 71). In my view, the frequent use of this quote in its partial form is misleading. The line continues, ‘entire of itself’; this crucial context is often omitted. What Donne is saying is that no man is an island *on his own*, not no man is an island *at all.* McGilchrist gestures at this nuance when he says, ‘distinguishing is not synonymous with separation’ (McGilchrist 2023: 9:49). It is possible to distinguish an island from an archipelago, just as it is possible to distinguish an individual from a group *without* removing them from the context of relation in which they are embedded and ultimately engendered by. They are not mutually exclusive. The implications of this, I believe, extend beyond islands to inform broader philosophical, psychological, and societal issues, as Marc Shell outlines in his book *Islandology*:

> *Islandness, in this sense of identity confronting difference, informs primordial issues of philosophy: how, conceptually, we connect and disconnect parts and wholes, for example, and how we connect and disconnect one thing and another* (Shell 2014: 3).

Humans *are* islands, but they are, crucially, islands in an archipelago. They are separated and connected simultaneously, but nonetheless in continuous relation (whether aware of it as such or not). As Weber states: ‘They are connected

because they are divided. They are connected by the logic of a paradox' (Weber 2017: 94). Shell further challenges this misunderstanding in the context of the Donne poem*:*

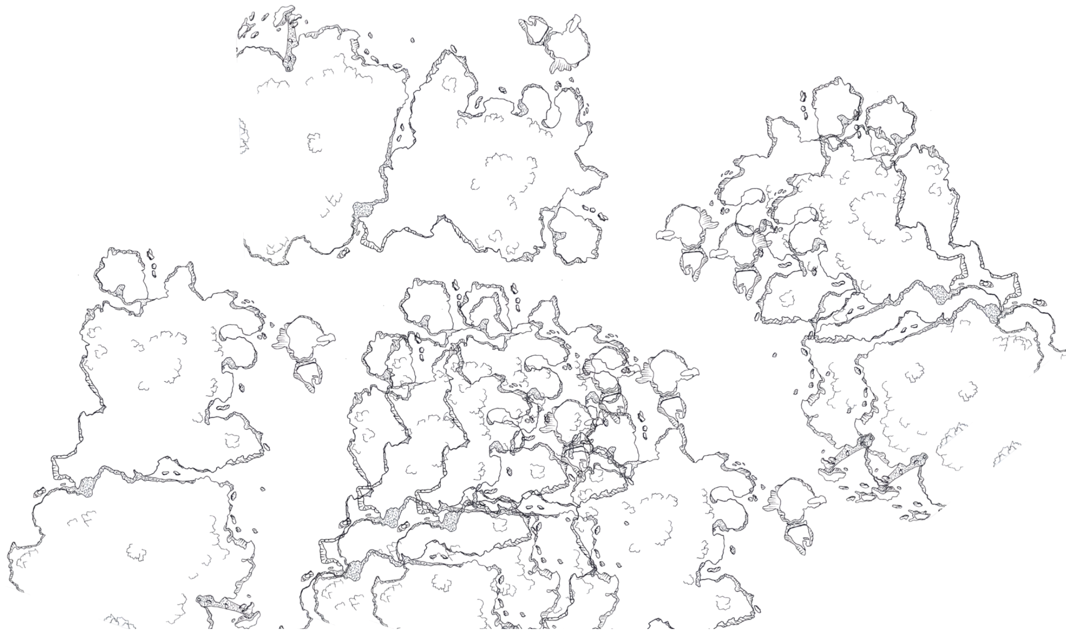
> *Consider the rationale of John Donne [ ] that 'no man is an island.' If Donne's meaning is that 'every man is part of the continent, a part of the main,' then the sentiment is puzzling, if not downright misleading. Almost no island is an island in the sense that Donne uses the term; all are part of the main insofar as they are of a piece with the solid submarine earth beneath the water* (Shell 2014: 35).

While the Donne line is often quoted to illustrate our interdependence, much like the 'Global Village' metaphor, it does little to acknowledge the broader context of our *necessary* individuality within a wider web of relations. If anything, it contributes to the ongoing pathologising of the individual within some progressive circles (I am speaking anecdotally here), whereby individuality is conflated with *individualism*, which has a meaning entirely different from individuality and is a worthy target of criticism given its track record for causing harm. Our individuality is necessary because this 'web of relations' to which I refer comprises a network of individuals that intersect and osmose with each other, 'mutually engendering' (Varela 1991) one another and, as a result, engendering a whole that cannot exist without its constituent parts. The whole and its parts are co-dependent and co-arising, just as the individual/island co-depends on the collective/archipelago for its identity. Suppose we abolish the individual in efforts to establish a more relational worldview. In that case, we may well find that life itself ceases to be because life arises by virtue of the relationships between things, not *nothings.* Gillis supports this point in the context of islands in the following:

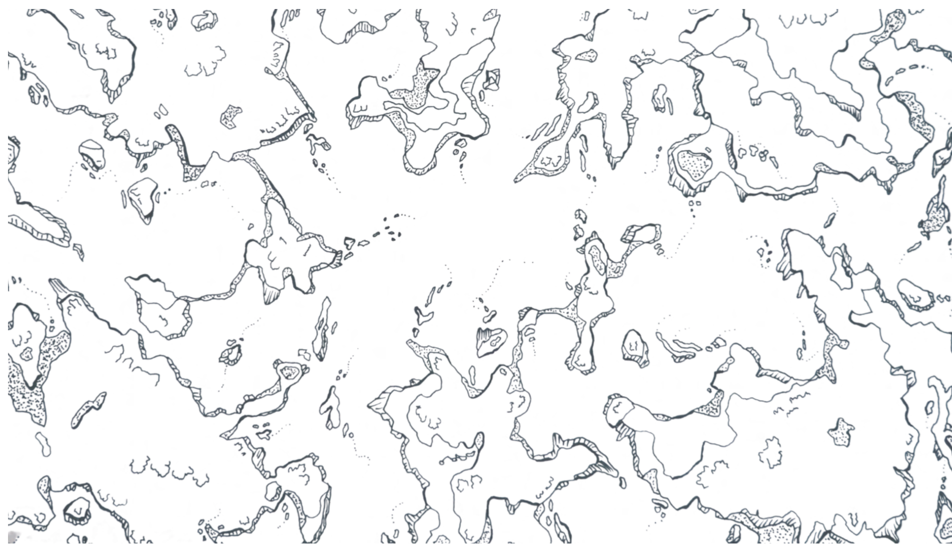
> *It is important to recognise that islands and continents are but names we give to different parts of one interconnected world. Islands and mainlands derive their meaning from their relationship to one another* (Gillis 2004: 2).

Returning to the web metaphor, we can see that a web comprises numerous points of contact, intersections where a thread of silk links to another thread

and reroutes to join another pathway repeatedly. These nexuses are distinct; they inhabit particular points in space and give rise to a discernible physical form, albeit decentralised. An archipelago can express itself similarly. Below is an image of my Gometra map digitally altered and layered to illustrate the decentralised multiplicity and points of contact to which I am referring.



The web or archipelago metaphors are momentarily disrupted if we instead imagine ourselves within a seemingly boundless gaseous cloud (or ocean) with no immediately discernable features; however, even then, the same logic applies, albeit on a different scale. We just have to zoom in to the atomic level to see that atoms, like islands, can be conceived as distinct units vibrating alongside each other to form a larger structure or 'collective body' that sits within a domain of apparent formlessness, which, in the context of this metaphor, is the void between atoms or some kind of dark matter (metaphorically contiguous with the ocean). Below is a sketch of an 'infinite archipelago' which, if replicated ad infinitum in a manner reminiscent of Penrose tiling, corresponds with this metaphor; that is, it represents decentralised forms contrasted with 'formlessness' in boundless space. Of course, I cannot visually represent boundless space. The sketch must necessarily have a boundary, so imagination must be invoked here to understand what I hope to convey.



Remaining on the scale of smallness, below are images of lichen and moss, as photographed on Gometra. The images represent island and archipelagic form *all the way down;* that is, island shapes are present inside the island itself, in the patterns of its flora and geology. This illustrates the somewhat fractal quality of islands and archipelagos.

Taking this metaphor even further, we can zoom out to the scale of the universe and recognise that the planet is but an atom among infinite atoms - it even looks

like an atom with its nucleus (core) and orbiting electrons (moon) surrounded by supposedly empty space; and likewise the solar system with its nuclear sun and orbiting planets. These metaphors also have affinities with the 'Earth Island' metaphor, whereby the planet represents a wholly contained unit adrift in the cosmos. Ironically, I am not advocating for an atomistic view of life in the sense that *atomism* proposes it, which leans more on the dominance of separation, but I am advocating for a view that recognises an atomistic *aspect* of life. It is an integrative view that makes space for both possibilities (and beyond) and acknowledges the fractality of existence. As McGilchrist points out, 'we need universality and particularity... [ ] Individuality is not set against the general, but is something through which we can see the general (McGilchrist 2023: 22:55 and 40:34).

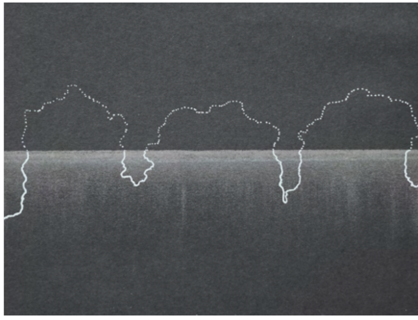
The issues of relation discussed in this essay are often matters of relativity (unsurprisingly) and scale. What is true in one spatial domain (which is also a matter of metaphor, something which relies on spatiotemporal factors) is not true in another, though I am tempted to replace the word 'true' here with 'accurate' because it concerns affinities rather than precise logical equivalence. However, that does not mean the 'truth' in one domain is illusory or false, just that truth is often, though not always, a matter of context. These things do not translate well across the frameworks the dominant culture prescribes and operates within because, as I have previously mentioned, these frameworks rely on 'either/or' structures that conceive paradox as a failure in logic.

Below is a sketch that depicts a 'porous archipelago'. The charcoal line represents the flow of water that connects each island while also forming a pathway or current that delineates a boundary upon its return to itself, forming an island shape (of sorts). At the same time, the water inhabits its own contained form (that is, its boundary or perimeter is delineated) while engendering the form of others (in this case, the others are the islands). The sketch plays with this idea that an island, identity, and individual (which remain synonymous with one another) can form at varying layers of interaction, perception and experience, and do so without eliminating its existence in other layers. This image means different things depending on how you look at it. What eliminates

our perception of an island at one layer and an archipelago at another is our perception, *not* the absence of the thing from living reality. Of course, we can only ever have a partial view of something; that is precisely what perspective is, but we can move from one partial view to another partial view, expanding our perspective and inhabiting different perspectives at different levels, thus oscillating between relative and absolute domains of awareness and, hopefully, exercising a more relational worldview.

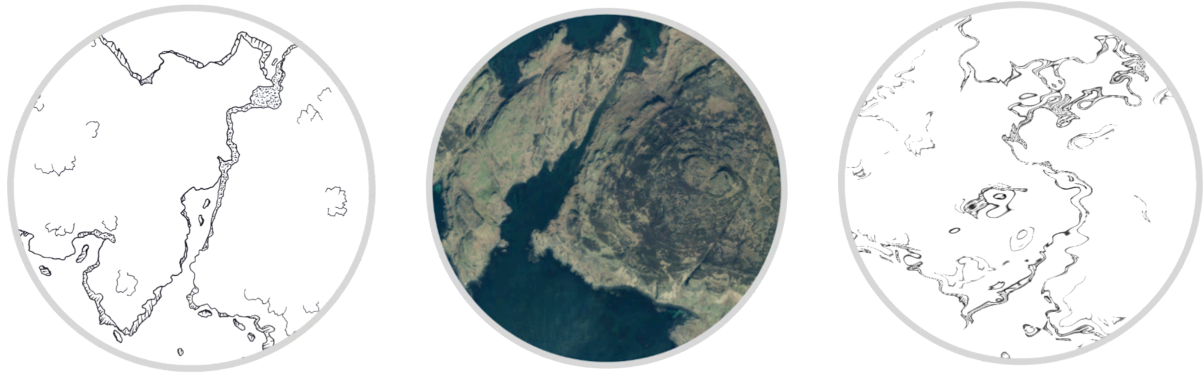
Individuals, cultures, nations, and continents, regardless of the unit of scale you refer to, metaphorically speaking, form a chain of islands, visually embodying togetherness in a side-by-side constellation. Going beyond this top-down view, our connections run deeper. Beneath the ocean's surface, *all* islands are joined at the seabed, and below that, if you count the core of the Earth's geological layers. Kathleen Dean Moore acknowledges this apparent contradiction in the following:

> *Again and again, I face an island's paradox: Not even an island is an island [ ] ... any geographer will tell you that an island is in fact only a high point in the continuous skin of the planet* (Moore, cited in Riquet 2019: 185).



The above sketches illustrate how islands are connected beneath the ocean's surface, loosely illustrating Moore's notion of the 'skin of the planet'. The sketch on the left uses dotted lines above the ocean's surface to represent the porosity of an island's boundary, while the complete line beneath the surface represents the solidity with which islands are connected at the seabed. The sketch on the right plays with the idea of 'roots' beneath the surface, with various roots branching out towards other island forms (not pictured), much as a mycelium network might weave together trees under the forest floor. Both images invite us to perceive a reality beneath the surface (quite literally) of what we think we might see.

Below are three representations of the point at which Gometra and its most intimate neighbour, Ulva, meet. The central satellite image (OS Maps, accessed 18th October 2023) illustrates the position of the water at high tide, where the islands appear to be separated (albeit marginally). The sketch to the left, using dots to represent sand, visualises how the islands are connected at the seabed at low tide. The image to the right, a variation of the original sketch, draws on the liquescent quality of water to illustrate a sense of mutability and osmosis between land and water and a sense of shifting boundaries. Each image illustrates separation and connection at the same time. Though they are separate islands, Gometra and Ulva are essentially the same landmass and remain tantalisingly close to one another despite the changing position of the water.



In summary, island and archipelago metaphors have much to teach us about relation in the context of the Anthropocene. Going beyond cliches, they can help us understand the dynamic, pluralistic, and sometimes paradoxical nature of relation, highlighting the nature of proximity, identity and change through their relation with the rising tides, among many other things. Islands and archipelagos show us that difference and separation, when considered with nuance, are generative to relation, not anathema to it. In many ways, they convey the 'macrocosm in the microcosm', yielding insights that can apply to broader contexts and processes, as Chandler and Pugh point out:

> *Life itself is seen to work in island ways; where differences make differences and life appears as the interactive power of difference-making, differentiation and individuation* (Chandler and Pugh 2021: 59).

Utilising nuanced island metaphors that convey plurality and contradiction, an archipelagic poetics is generative and conducive to life. In these challenging times, one of our critical tasks is to learn how to recognise, enact, and consciously participate in this 'post-dual', 'non-dual', and 'non-binary' (whatever term you choose) way of being, even though, as I have attempted to highlight, these terms each contain their opposites. Navigating paradox, not rejecting or denying it, is, I believe, crucial to our survival as a species. As metaphorical geographies, geopoetic forms, and locations of these real, lived-out tensions, islands and archipelagos can lead us towards greater flourishing by showing us

the paradoxical nature of relation writ large in the landscape. To end, in the words of Glissant:

> *We need archipelagic thinking, which is one that opens, one that conforms diversity - one that is not made to obtain unity, but rather a new kind of Relation. One that trembles - physically, geologically, mentally, spiritually - because it seeks the point, that utopian point, at which all the cultures of the world, all the imaginations of the world can meet and understand each other without being dispersed or lost* (Glissant 2021: 164).

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