

Oceans, Islands, Closets, and Smells: Decolonisation through Spatial Metaphors

Thinking with non-solid geographic forms to undermine the conceits and closures of the static, bounded territorial state is all the rage in decolonisation studies. The table of contents of the book *Territory Beyond Terra* – Earth, Air, Water, Fire, Mudflats, Floodplains, Cities, Ice, Bodies, Boats, Shores, Seabeds – suggests just some of the spatial forms that can be used to rethink the space of the sovereign state. Indeed, as the editors of that volume note, even that list could be stretched further, to cover mediated, manufactured, or extra-planetary spaces.¹

Paul Carter places *Decolonising Governance* squarely within this literature, identifying the book as “a contribution to the evolving field of island studies, ocean studies and, in general, the turn away from nation-state territorialisations of the Earth’s surface.”² In particular, he focuses on the decolonising potential of the archipelago, which a succession of critical island scholars has highlighted as a spatial form that, paraphrasing Stratford et al., is “topologically sophisticated, inscribes difference into the heart of communication and which models perhaps radically re-thought forms of federalism and cosmopolitanism....a creative region unlike the nation state, defined relationally around shared responsibility for the ocean, resisting the simple enclosure of the cartographic boundary, [and] reconceptualising the connections between islands.”³

Even as Carter lauds the archipelago’s potential to undermine static ontologies that underpin statist power he is critical of how these island scholars have *deployed* the concept. Part of the problem is simply empirical. Not all archipelagos are the same and, depending on their size, the relative equivalence of their islands, their contextual position in a world of states, one archipelago may suggest a very different liberatory (or non-liberatory) politics than another. Another problem is that recognising the ‘difference’ of an archipelago hardly guarantees that this ‘difference’ will be used to rethink the modes of understanding that conventionally guide social institutions and processes. A good example here, referenced by Carter, is Part IV of the United Nations Conventions on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which permits archipelagic states to designate the water between islands as ‘internal waters’, thereby reconfiguring a portion of ocean as within the bounds of state territory. This incorporation of the ocean as internal waters *does* force planners to reconsider assumed divisions between islands and oceans as well as the related privileging of the former (land, territory) as the domain of development and the latter (water, non-territory) as the external space of the in-between. Arguably, it also dislocates “static island tropes of particularity,” foregrounding “fluid inter-island inter-relations rather than the binaries of mainland/sea/island.”⁴ However, a closer look at UNCLOS’ mechanism for incorporating near-shore ocean within the archipelagic state reveals that it is really just an invitation for states to add (sea)water and stir. The state is reconstituted with a slightly wetter map, but

¹ Kimberley Peters, Philip Steinberg, and Elaine Stratford, eds., *Territory Beyond Terra* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2018).

² Paul Carter, *Decolonising Governance: Archipelagic Thinking* (Abingdon, UK, Routledge, 2019), 1.

³ Ibid., 18, 21. See also Elaine Stratford, Godfrey Baldacchino, Elizabeth McMahon, Carol Farbotko, and Andrew Harwood, “Envisioning the Archipelago,” *Island Studies Journal* 6, no. 2 (2011), 113-130.

⁴ Jonathan Pugh, “Island Movements: Thinking with the Archipelago,” *Island Studies Journal* 8, no. 1 (2013), 9-24, cited in Carter, *Decolonising Governance*, 21.

the archipelagic state sanctioned by UNCLOS still reproduces the essentialised relationship between a state and its people that lies at the heart of the modern state ideal, as well as the fundamental concepts of development, citizenship, and rootedness that guide and constrain approaches to planning. In the archipelagic state, the material underpinning of territory is broadened, but the fundamental nature of territory, as the static 'ground' that naturalises and fixes the society-state nexus as a bounded 'inside', is reproduced.

The problem here is not just a failure of non-continental spatial forms to realise their potential for subverting statist, landed ontologies. More perniciously, as Carter notes, efforts to incorporate these spatial forms (and the perspectives of their inhabitants) within participatory planning efforts can further colonising agendas, and often in ways more subtle than the crude legalisms of UNCLOS. Historic and contemporary accounts of encounters between hegemonic actors (and hegemonic ideas) and their 'others' are filled with stories of alterity being orientalist, fetishized, commodified, or treated as ethnographic 'data', in addition to instances where that alterity is simply ignored or destroyed, and this is as true for 'non-normative' spatial forms as it is for 'non-normative' peoples.

So how does one actually use an alternative spatial form like an archipelago – which Carter highlights as particularly productive for revealing “the is/is not condition of self/other relations, centrelessness, and illimitability”⁵ – to achieve this goal, and how can the lessons learned from the archipelago's alterity be brought to other spaces that are not, geographically, archipelagos? In our recent work on 'oceanic thinking', which has certain parallels with Carter's project on 'archipelagic thinking', Kimberley Peters and I trouble the tendency to blithely associate the concept of a 'wet ontology' with the paradigmatic fluvial space of the sea. We fear that by 'drowning' in the ocean's material properties one might actually undermine the ocean's power to generate disruptive concepts. Our concern here is that by marking off the ocean as a space of alterity one creates space for planning by an all-knowing, masculinist, terrestrial overseer that incorporates these distinctive features, thus serving to reproduce, rather than challenge, the static management of what is in fact a dynamic, multi-species space with permeable boundaries and a complex ecology. To avoid this slippage, we have sought to push the ocean beyond its limits: to points of excess where liquid water becomes ice or vapour, to the borderlands where maritime economies and ecologies transcend the boundaries of the coastline, to the liminal spaces that defy the modes of linear spatial thinking that, as Carter has demonstrated across his *oeuvre*, have been used to distinguish water from land, ocean from territory, and thereby construct colonial landscapes.⁶ The equivalent strategy for 'archipelagic thinking' might be to think of the world as an archipelago, thereby both working with the idea of the archipelagic spatial form and extending it to the point where it ceases to be recognisable. There will always be a point where the exercise breaks down, where the geographic referent (whether ocean or

⁵ Carter, *Decolonising Governance*, 109. Elsewhere he phrases these three characteristics as “edgelessness, innumerability, and the absence of islands” (p. 32).

⁶ Kimberley Peters and Philip Steinberg, “The Ocean in Excess: Towards a More-Than-Wet Wet Ontology,” *Dialogues in Human Geography* 9, no. 3 (2019), 293-307; Philip Steinberg, Berit Kristoffersen, and Kristen Shake, “Edges and Flows: Exploring Legal Materialities and Biophysical Politics of Sea Ice,” in *Blue Legalities*, eds. Irus Braverman and Elizabeth R. Johnson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020). See also Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987); Paul Carter, “Dark with Excess of Bright: Mapping the Coastlines of Knowledge,” in *Mappings*, ed. Denis Cosgrove (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

archipelago) loses its ontological character and *all* that's left is an epistemology. But the hope is that the exercise, the act of stretching a geographically grounded ontology to its limit and beyond, will precipitate new perspectives that open new ways of thinking about, and planning, space.

Carter similarly explores the spatial form to find its point of negation. But, rather than expand the spatial form geographically, to the point of excess where it no longer exists as an object, he reaches into its linguistic recesses to uncover the point at which what is, is not. Distinguishing himself from those who treat the archipelagic spatial form as an ideal-type, or a metonym, or a model, Carter argues that the archipelago (and, presumably, any other territory that we may be asked to 'think with' because of its edgelessness and its innumerability) should be deployed in decolonial thought as a *metaphor*. This is crucial for Carter because a metaphor is not simply a statement of being. Rather, referencing Paul Ricoeur, Carter notes that a metaphor is "'the copula of the verb to be,' when 'The metaphorical "is" at once signifies "is not" and "is like,"' a formula that also comprehends the archipelagic paradox of comparing incommensurables."⁷ Highlighting the archipelagic, then, is less important for its substantive transformation of our understanding of space (e.g. the relation between land and water, or the role of mobilities between comparable but distinct entities that exist within an unbounded whole) than for the ways that it highlights the imperative to think metaphorically.

This turn to metaphor, Carter notes, is challenging for those steeped in Western planning discourse: There is a large gap between, on the one hand, performative uses of language, where poetics are used to communicate understandings through metaphors that reference interconnections, relationalities, and similitudes, and, on the other hand, instrumental uses of language, where words are used to rationalise, simplify, and eliminate ambiguity, often through highlighting vectors of causality. Thinking archipelagically, then, means thinking metaphorically and, perhaps even more importantly, learning how to listen to those who think metaphorically. This lesson learned from thinking with (and in) the archipelago, ultimately exceeds the boundaries of the archipelago as a geographic space: "The archipelago is no longer a geo-political formation we wish to promote and defend: it is a configuration we wish to produce, one that may find its home in the 'metageographical concept' represented by physical archipelagos, but may be equally at home in any 'complex situation' characterised by continuous auto-poetic self-production."⁸

I suspect that some geographers would find sentences like this one off-putting. After all, if geographic signifiers do not refer to actual spatial forms but simply to modes of reasoning and systems of articulation, then what is left of geography? Geographers have decried the tendency of spatial metaphors to subsume the 'is/is not' property of the metaphor to a naturalised geographic 'reality', thereby detracting attention from the subjectivity of the interlocuter and from the broader political context of the geography's production.⁹ Has Carter swung too far in the other direction, reducing geography to an empty signifier?

⁷ Carter, *Decolonising Governance*, 101.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

⁹ Geraldine Pratt, "Spatial Metaphors and Speaking Positions," *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space* 10, no. 3 (1992), 241-244; Cindi Katz and Neil Smith, "Grounding Metaphor," in *Place and the Politics of Identity*, eds. Michael Keith and Stephen Pile (London: Routledge, 1993); Gillian Rose, "As if the Mirror has

Carter, however, avoids the trap of excessive dematerialisation because, although space may be mobilised in/as metaphor, space is not *itself* a metaphor. As Wolfgang Natter and John Paul Jones write with reference to the prevalence of spatial metaphors in literature, "Space...has been notable mostly for its absence, rather commensurate with its designation as mere metaphor. Space, however, is more than metaphorical, or put differently, 'metaphor' is itself spatial."¹⁰ For Michael Brown, the problem is not that space is all too often referenced as 'mere metaphor'. Rather, when spaces are deployed as metaphors, they are all too often referenced in ways that are fundamentally *a-spatial*, eliding the way that spaces are always under construction, assembled through continual processes of interpretation, navigation, and the assignment of meaning. Thus, critiquing Eve Sedgwick's work on the 'closet' as the metaphorical habitus of gay men, Brown notes that when truly understood as a *space* the closet becomes not simply a figure of oppression but an arena wherein gay men, in the course of both erecting and breaking barriers (some of which are not of their own choosing), reinscribe meaning as they enact their lives.¹¹

Brown's critique of Sedgwick's deployment of the closet metaphor has a striking parallel in Carter's critique of Stratford et al.'s deployment of the archipelago metaphor which, Carter claims, "skirts the challenge of metaphoricity itself or what we might call the is/is not nature of the archipelago."¹² To be clear, the two critiques differ in their conceptual (as well as empirical) foci. Brown critiques Sedgwick for inadequately accounting for the indeterminacy and relationality of *space*. Carter critiques Stratford et al. for inadequately accounting for the indeterminacy and relationality of the *metaphor*. However, the implications of the two critiques are much the same: Sedgwick and Stratford et al. both, according to Brown and Carter respectively, fail to adequately give voice to those who inhabit, make, and are made by the referenced space, in large part because they fail to listen to the relational language of metaphor through which inhabitants (islanders, gay men) narrate their referenced space (the archipelago, the closet).¹³

Carter's understanding of the spatial metaphor, as neither an abstraction nor as a grounding referent but as a means to portray the dialogic communication of individuals attempting to interpret, live in, and transform their spatial environment, is illustrated in his synopsis of David Howe's work on Onge smellscape:

Bled: Masculine Dwelling, Masculine Theory, and Feminist Masquerade," in *BodySpace*, ed. Nancy Duncan (London: Routledge, 1996).

¹⁰ Wolfgang Natter and John Paul Jones III, "Signposts Towards a Poststructuralist Geography," in *Postmodern Contentions: Epochs, Politics, Space*, ed. John Paul Jones III, Wolfgang Natter, and Theodore R. Schatzki (New York: Guilford, 1993), 198.

¹¹ Michael P. Brown, *Closet Space: Geographies of Metaphor from the Body to the Globe* (London: Routledge, 2000).

¹² Carter, *Decolonising Governance*, 32.

¹³ Of course the archipelago and closet differ as spatial metaphors in that while many islanders live on archipelagos very few (if any) gay men live in actual, geographically defined closets. The shared power of the two metaphors, however, as well as the parallels in the critiques articulated by Brown and Carter, further suggest that the power of the spatial metaphor lies as much in the force of space, as a concept deployed through/in metaphor, as in the actual material content of the specific, referenced space.

Writing about the cultural value that the Onge give to smell, David Howe explains that “space is conceived of by the Onge not as a static area within which things happen but as a dynamic environmental flow” and correspondingly, a “smellscape” is “not a fixed structure but a fluid pattern that can shift according to differing atmospheric conditions.” The way the wind blows shapes diurnal patterns – the same word, *kwayaye*, is used for “both the emission of odours and the ebb and flow of tides” – and seasonal cycles, a calendar of scents determining when they hunt in the forest and when they frequent the coast. The seabed, the tides, the winds – all are “elsewhere” in relation to the human subject, coming to him and her from all points of the compass.¹⁴

Whether or not the Onge are truly archipelagic is debatable: they reside in the Andaman archipelago, but primarily on just one island. But that is not the point. The Onge do not *represent* an archipelagic way of thinking any more than, within the Onge cosmology, the smells *represent* the tides, or, for that matter, the tides *represent* the smells. Nor is this a narrative of causation: the smells do not *cause* the tides and the tides do not *cause* the smells, nor indeed does being on an archipelago *cause* the Onge to see the world the way they do. Rather, Carter’s (and Howe’s) narration of Onge smellscape is a narrative of relational interconnectedness, powered by the metaphors that the Onge use to make sense of their environment and place themselves within its geophysical processes. By retaining the imperfect fit between language and space, Carter (and Howe) find meaning not in narrated similes (which would give the archipelago more explanatory power than it merits) but in metaphor itself.

In the end, the central lesson of *Decolonising Governance* may be less about the specific affordances of the archipelago than, more broadly, about the power of the spatial metaphor. Whether referencing an archipelago, or an ocean, or a closet, or a smellscape, or any of those twelve other ‘other’ spaces highlighted in *Territory Beyond Terra*, Carter’s message is that if we are to truly decolonise governance we need to listen to the voices, actions, and understandings of inhabitants as they navigate the bridges and barriers between land and water, between inside and outside, between the ‘is’ and ‘is not’, not through boundaries of differentiation but through cascading narratives of relation.

¹⁴ Carter, *Decolonising Governance*, 101.



Citation on deposit:

Steinberg, P. (2023). Oceans, islands, closets and smells: decolonization through spatial metaphors. *Postcolonial Studies*, 26(2), 323-328.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2021.1986945>

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