

# UC Santa Barbara

## Journal of Transnational American Studies

### Title

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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5v99h98b>

### Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 14(1)

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### Publication Date

2023

### DOI

10.5070/T814160727

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# Archipelagic Thinking: The Insular, the Archipelago, and the Borderwaters— A Conversation

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BRIAN RUSSELL ROBERTS, Brigham Young University  
MICHELLE ANN STEPHENS, Rutgers University

**Barbara Gföllner:** In this conversation between Michelle Ann Stephens and Brian Russell Roberts, two leading scholars in the field of Archipelagic American Studies, we discuss “Archipelagic Thinking,” the insular, the archipelago, and the borderwaters. Brian and Michelle talk about their own work as well as the intersections between mobility studies and archipelagic studies. In the course of the conversation, they also address the following questions: How can archipelagic epistemologies complicate binaries of mainland and island? To what extent do these knowledges challenge colonial discourses of static and self-contained islands and instead foreground mobilities and relational entanglements? What are the intersections between archipelagic studies and mobility studies? What is the place of literature and literary studies in the development and analysis of archipelagic epistemologies? How can “archipelagic thinking” or “thinking with the archipelago” shape knowledge production? And how can archipelagic thinking help uncover imperial and “minor” mobilities (e.g., the mobilities of Black or Indigenous peoples)? The conversation was part of the workshop “Archipelagic Imperial Spaces and Mobilities” that took place in Leipzig in July 2021 as a joint project of the Collaborative Research Center 1199 at Leipzig University and the research platform *Mobile Cultures and Societies* at the University of Vienna.

**Brian Russell Roberts:** I feel really fortunate to be with you today via Zoom and to have this conversation also with Michelle. We will start by talking about “Archipelagic American Studies”—how we arrived there. Then we will talk about our current projects and how they relate to the conference—the workshop theme—and then we are going to address some of the questions provided by the workshop organizers.

I will be starting out with this word—*archipelagic*—which I first read in 2007. I didn't know how to pronounce it at the time. Since then, I have learned from reputable English dictionaries that the “arch” at the beginning would rhyme with “snark” and the “pelagic” at the end would rhyme with “magic.” And I am not doctrinaire about it, I won't hold anybody to it, but that's what I learned from the dictionaries.

So, I didn't know how to pronounce it, but one of the things that immediately struck me when I read the word in 2007 was that it was a word capable of linking islands and linking concepts that people—observers, the public, scholars—would at first think of as disparate and distant from each other. It would be a word capable of finding what I was then maybe thinking of as subterranean connections, but now I would think of as subaqueous connections. It was a word that particularly struck me because I grew up in Hawai'i and Indonesia and Tennessee. These were archipelagic and continental spaces that I was trying to make sense of. And I was trying to make sense of my experiences. The term archipelagic seemed like it could help do that. It also seemed like it could help with something about American Studies. The question of islands in American Studies was something I became very interested in, and I was wondering about how to undertake the study of islands in American Studies. So, I went to a few different generations of Americanist scholars. When I approached the generation called the Myth and Symbol school, I looked into the work of R. W. B. Lewis, Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx. I saw that they were interested in studying the continent. *The Machine in the Garden*—the “Garden” being a continental “Garden”; the “American Adam” in the “Garden”—again, the “Garden” as a continent. They were all about the continent, they weren't interested in the islands. I then went to a subsequent generation of Americanists called the New Americanists. They were interested in the cultures of US imperialism, and I felt that this generation was my home base as I was finishing my PhD program in 2007. I read through their work. They were talking about islands: about Puerto Rico, often Cuba, sometimes the Philippines, sometimes Guam, sometimes Hawai'i. They were talking about these islands, but there was the refrain in their work, which was looking back at the Myth and Symbol school, an approach that was only concerned with the continent, as that old, “insular” American Studies. And of course, the word “insular” is an adjectival form of “island.” I started wondering: How could an American Studies that was so intent on using this term “insular” to disparage, be able to undertake a legitimate study of the islands related to the cultures of US imperialism? As I kept thinking about it, I realized that there was a long-running “continental exceptionalism” in American Studies. In a lot of ways this is not surprising in America. The United States is often thought of as a continental country, hence there would be a continental exceptionalism, a sense that the continent was the foundational geographical form.

Like many other scholars—especially so in the fields of Caribbean Studies and Pacific Island Studies—I came to the realization that the continent had an outsized place. I had already read a book called *Black Empire*, published in 2005 by Michelle Ann Stephens, that I very much admired. As I started thinking about the archipelagic in the

late 2000s, I realized that Michelle—in 2005—had been talking about the archipelagic. She had been talking about archipelagic migrations, archipelagic travels, archipelagic Americas. So, I asked Michelle to join with me for a session on archipelagos and archipelagic thought at the 2010 American Studies Association. After that session she and I talked about putting together a collection, and putting that collection together was an enormous learning experience. We worked with scholars who had ties to, or lived in Puerto Rico, Aotearoa (New Zealand), Japan, Hawai'i, Guam, Haiti, Kiribati, Jamaica, and various other locales. It was a real collaboration. As we wrote the introduction (in dialogue with our contributors' essays), we came face to face with what we realized was the central task: the “decontinentalization” of US Studies, the decontinentalization of broader American Studies, the decontinentalization of the idea of America. We defined decontinentalizing as a patient, resolute, and incisive skepticism regarding continental presumptions to uniquely *mainland* status, combined with a dedication to the project of reimagining insular, oceanic, and archipelagic spaces as *mainlands* and *mainwaters*, crucial spaces, participants, nodes, and networks within planetary history. As we were working through this notion of decontinentalization another heuristic came into view, which was what we talked about as the archipelagic Americas: The temporally shifting and spatially splayed set of islands, island chains, and island-ocean-continent relations, which have exceeded US-Americanism and have been affiliated with and indeed constitutive of competing notions of the Americas since at least 1492. That was Archipelagic American Studies. While we were in the process of editing the collection, one of our contributors, Craig Santos Perez, published an *American Quarterly* essay, in which he said: “[The] archipelagic turn offers a promising analytic to navigate the transnational, transatlantic, transpacific, trans-indigenous, and transhemispheric turns in the now discontinuous archipelago of American studies.”<sup>1</sup> One of the things that intrigued Michelle and me is the way that for Craig the archipelagic frame was not simply a geographical frame, but it was also a frame of mobility. It was a navigational frame. He was talking about it as helping to navigate among multiple geographies. He was talking about this navigational frame as something that was not simply geography, but metageography: how we think about the way we think about geography. Not what we know, but how we know what we know. Or how we think we know what we know.

Importantly for this workshop here: Talking about the archipelagic frame in terms of mobilities, and about this navigational way of thinking, reminds me of a poem by the Māori scholar Alice Te Punga Somerville. She prepared this poem and distributed it to students at the end of what she described as the first undergraduate course solely focused on Anglophone Pacific literature at any university in New Zealand. The portion of the poem goes like this: “constellations / newly charted / maps of maps / ... plumbing the gaps in between the holy trinity of knowledge: / forgotten, remembered and assumed.”<sup>2</sup> In our conversation today, and in the workshop more generally, we hope we can think with each other and with the group about how archipelagic thought

can offer this phrase: “maps of maps,” so that we can think about mobilities of mobilities. And with that I will turn it over to Michelle.

**Michelle Ann Stephens:** Thank you Brian and thank you to the organizers for inviting us to do this conversation. I am very happy to be here, and to get a chance to engage with Brian, who first—in a sense—brought me into the archipelagic studies discussion. When Brian first approached me about putting together conference panels and then later the collection on the archipelagic, I was working from the specific context of the Anglophone Caribbean. As he mentioned, in *Black Empire* I spent some time discussing the West Indies Federation, which was an attempt on the part of political thinkers and writers from the English-speaking Caribbean to reimagine Caribbean archipelagic space as politically federated. Ironically, the Trinidadian intellectual C. L. R. James described this as a form of continentalization, taking mid-twentieth century efforts at European federation as his contemporary model. But he also drew on the Greek city states as his ancient model, describing the Mediterranean network as the ideal spatio-cultural example for the Caribbean Islands, as they attempted to imagine a future, post-imperial, popular democratic state.<sup>3</sup> C. L. R. James also informed my notion of the metaphoric power of the archipelagic in his re-reading of the ship’s “motley crew” in Herman Melville’s 1851 novel *Moby-Dick*. It is a story about a captain’s relentless pursuit of a white whale, and James described the crew as confederated “isolatos.”<sup>4</sup> He argues that over the course of the novel, the crew’s only hope for survival is to federate as workers together on their mobile ship of state. For me the most important feature of all of these kinds of confederations that I have mentioned—Caribbean islands confederating politically, the Greek city states interacting and connecting culturally, and C. L. R. James’s metaphoric archipelagic crew of the ship—the *Pequod*—in *Moby Dick*—is their willingness or purposefulness to act in concert. This is the key frame Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel and I emphasize in our work *Contemporary Archipelagic Thinking*, borrowing a key insight from Stratford, Baldacchino, McMahon, Farbotko, and Harwood’s field-defining essay, “Envisioning the Archipelago.”<sup>5</sup> Archipelagos—as spaces—signify intentional clusters, acting with some degree of concerted intention. And—as is true also in the Caribbean—sometimes some of that intentional clustering is imperial in origin. In *Archipelagic American Studies*, Brian and I include an essay by Craig Santos Perez, who locates the territorializing power of empire on an island—“terripelago”—a word he coins to describe the island’s susceptibility to territoriality as the organization and exercise of power over defined blocks of space.<sup>6</sup> Lanny Thompson, who was also included in our anthology *Archipelagic American Studies*, describes the United States as an “Imperial Archipelago,” a phrase that captures the efforts to symbolize the far-flung islands under US rule at the beginning of the twentieth century for American audiences. Lanny Thompson argues that symbolic representations are a means to conceive, mobilize, and justify colonial rule.<sup>7</sup> Maps themselves serve as evidence of this “acting in concert.” This intentional clustering is

a form of modern imperial territorializing, as cartographic imagination turns geo-material island entities into something metaphoric, something conceptual.

In *Archipelagic American Studies*, Brian describes the coherence of groups of islands as a prime example of catachresis: the practice of adapting the nearest available term to describe something for which no actual term exists. And we then made the case together that we wanted to frame archipelago formation in terms of this trope of catachresis, whereby archipelago itself becomes a term deployed in the attempt to name connections. We also suggested that in order to imagine and name new archipelagic connections in the world, even of and within continental spaces, we would need new maps, not unlike the “Turnabout Map,” that by turning the American continent upside down aims to envision a new world of understanding by cartographically reimagining “north to south” to “south to north” relations.

How do we do this alternative mapping? Brian used Craig’s commentary to emphasize the archipelagic approach to American Studies as a type of *meta-geographical* approach. I also want to suggest and entail different epistemologies. Inspired by a comment by the poet Derek Walcott, who was characterizing the epistemological mindset of the *explorer*, in *Archipelagic American Studies* we called for an anti-explorer methodology. “The explorer,” we would suggest, “is a figure who, traditionally speaking, sallies forth with confidence that if the world is as yet unknown, then it at least may be surveyed and hence known via the Euclidean geometry of a latitudinal and longitudinal grid superimposed upon an idealized sphere. In the explorer’s world, space is mapped, before it is known, by a globe-enveloping set of bisecting lines that drive toward human efforts at discovering or knowing the portions of the grid that contain *terra incognita* and *mare incognitum*.”<sup>8</sup>

So we found a figure that we feel represented an alternative, anti-explorer methodology. And apropos of your conference theme, the figure is a figure in motion, the figure is the *beach walker*, referenced in both poetic and geometric terms by two seemingly dissimilar thinkers, both of whom were, nevertheless, engaging with the mysteries of island-settings, and how or whether one could ever fully map them. The two thinkers are a theorist of fractal geometry, Benoit Mandelbrot, and a theorist of Caribbean relationality, Édouard Glissant. As we also suggested, an anti-explorer method appears in the works of several Caribbean thinkers, who conceptualized the world not by means of the Euclidean set of lines that constitute the latitudinal and longitudinal grid, but rather by means of the post-Euclidean schemas of chaos and fractal geometry. You may know of the work of Antonio Benítez Rojo, who describes the meta-archipelago as referring to regularities that repeat themselves globally,<sup>9</sup> and Édouard Glissant, who famously theorized relation as fundamentally imbricated in chaos’s repeating regularities.<sup>10</sup> So these Caribbean gestures toward chaos theory constitute direct recourse to the pioneering mathematics of Benoit Mandelbrot. In a very classic, early essay of Mandelbrot’s, entitled “How Long is the Coast of Britain?,” he is talking through something about scale and how different scales of measurement reveal different levels of detail.<sup>11</sup> I am hoping that during the workshop we can deepen

with you this contrast between the explorer and the beach walker as suggestive of two different epistemological approaches, two different modes of mobility throughout archipelagic space.

Brian and I wanted to spend a couple of minutes talking about some of the experiences of working together on *Archipelagic American Studies*. Brian, what was inspiring to you about Derek Walcott's discussion of this anti-explorer way of thinking?

**Brian Russell Roberts:** Thank you for that question, Michelle. I think what was inspiring to me was the unexpected way that question emerged, almost like a shell—a mollusk shell—taking material from the water and growing by accretion. It was an illuminating process, where we started out with just the question of Walcott when he said that “my approach could be the opposite of the explorer’s.” We started thinking: “What is the explorer’s method? What does an explorer do?” We arrived at this latitudinal-longitudinal grid of empty space that the explorer has pre-mapped and is looking to fill with content, and then we saw that Benoit Mandelbrot, in his discussions of fractal geometry and the length of an island’s coastline, was doing something else. He was not going into pre-mapped space; he was going into smaller and smaller increments of space, imagining someone measuring the coast by walking its length. And then—as I have told you—my mind was kind of blown when you [Michelle] found this moment in Glissant where Glissant is talking about the beach walker that we knew had a correspondence with Mandelbrot’s beach walker. Mandelbrot says: Walk the beach. Walk the beach as a man, as a mouse, as an ant, and you will get different measurements.<sup>12</sup> And Glissant offered up a corresponding image of walking the beach. It just seemed like this stack of images came together as if they were always together. And yet we had not seen them before, which reminds me of the way archipelagic thought works: these things that seem so disparate, but they come together and have kind of an intentionality, like you and Yolanda [Martínez-San Miguel] talked about.<sup>13</sup>

I would ask you a question also, Michelle. What has looking at other archipelagos, over the past several years, done for you as you have continued looking at the Caribbean? How has that changed your understanding of the Anglophone Caribbean, the wider Caribbean?

**Michelle Ann Stephens:** There are two terms that I think helped us organize our thinking when we were working on *Archipelagic American Studies*: first, what does it mean to “decontinentalize?” and then, [second,] what does it mean to be insular? And then sometimes, these two are overlapping and sometimes they go into different directions. I think that insight, for me, represents what happened stepping back a bit from the Caribbean context and thinking comparatively and contrastingly about how archipelagos relate to each other, so the relationship to continents snapped into view more clearly as a repeating paradigm. That it was not just me—and I myself am from Jamaica—it was not just how we as Caribbeans feel in relationship to the North American continent, but that this island–continent relationship, that the islander

perspective might deconstruct something or have some kind of critical relationship to the continental perspective. I think that really opened up for me when we were thinking more comparatively about archipelagos, and then, similarly, as I will go into in my own current work, thinking now much more about the insular as its own state, as its own state of mind, state of being, epistemological state, ontological state, also opened up a bit from seeing analogies and connections between the poetry of a Walcott, of a Te Punga Somerville. These connections across archipelagos had some kind of framework for some poetics that might travel to different archipelagos that one might call insular. I think that might be a good segue for me to say a little bit more about my own current research.

In *Archipelagic American Studies*, we try to define the elements of what would be needed for, what we called, a “postcontinental insular imaginary.”<sup>14</sup> The first thing that got me thinking about this was the word “insular” itself, the genealogy of which Brian—full credit to him—traces very meticulously in our introduction to the volume. He traces the “insular” in the context of American Studies. Well, it turns out that the insular has suggestive and important connotations within western coloniality more broadly. Philip Steinberg, for example, has described how western discourses of the island have come to shape how we think about island ontologies more broadly.<sup>15</sup> In contrast with mainlands, islands are seen to be frozen in time, isolated, homogeneous and pristine, uniquely pure and isolated entities. John Gillis, discussing in *Islands of the Mind* western “islomania,”<sup>16</sup> describes how islands came to be master symbols and inexhaustible metaphors for so many different things in the Atlantic imagination. This included an epistemological “islanding” of reality according to Gillis; the sorting and organizing of objects and subjects into discrete and bounded units. So, what Brian and I reference as the explorer methodology toward islands and archipelagos, these understandings are encodings of the “insular” and represent and reflect more broadly a certain kind of colonial encounter with reality. I first encountered the term “the insular-real” in an essay entitled “Islands, Images, Imaginaries,” cowritten by Sean Metzger, Francisco-J. Hernández Adrián, and Michaeline Crichlow.<sup>17</sup> The authors assert islands as “spaces of the real”—the real spaces—of insular experience and use this notion of the “insular real” as a descriptor of island spaces that move from the realm of the fantastic—of images and imaginaries—to the ground of material location. They also define a notion of a “critical insularity,” one that refuses the romance of an idealized tropical isle. For me, this is what the anti-explorer beach walker represents. Both Benoit Mandelbrot, father of fractal geometry, and Édouard Glissant, the father of Caribbean relationality, were trying to establish a different relationship to the unknown and suggesting a contrast between the insular and the continental in this different relationship to the unknown. As Brian mentioned, Mandelbrot’s fractal geometry of nature has its genesis in a figure of a man or a woman walking along a rocky shore, and what one learns about that shore shifts whether you are a man walking, a mouse walking, or an ant walking. Finer, finer, finer details emerge depending on who is walking that shore, what entity is walking that shore. The anti-

explorer's method involves looking at the putatively known world and attesting to its final unknowability. At one point in *Archipelagic American Studies* we call this an "infinite island."<sup>18</sup> There is no measure small enough or large enough to ever fully know or encompass the complex corrugations of an island coastline. To borrow terminology from Glissant, the anti-explorer's method looks toward the seemingly easily graspable or minute to see the unknowable and infinite.

Glissant's notions of relationality became important to me for understanding two ways in which I am thinking about the insular-real and that I believe links a lot to what you are thinking about here, about space and mobility. First, I want to draw your attention to the cover of his work, *Poetics of Relation*, which also features a map, a portolan map of the Caribbean. Portolan maps were popular in the early modern period, used by European sailors primarily to navigate the Mediterranean archipelago. This map represents the Caribbean archipelago. I feel like the cover image serves as a very useful visual device for thinking about one-dimensional archipelagic relationality, which also happens to privilege mobilities. Glissant uses a slightly different term than yours of mobility here at the conference: he describes "spatio-temporal trajectories." Glissant describes the spatiotemporal trajectories that constitute relationality in the Caribbean as an archipelagic imperial space. The definition of these trajectories he describes as: trajectories that "link the places of the world into a whole made up of peripheries, which are listed in function of a Center."<sup>19</sup> He then goes on to list a few of these trajectories. The first trajectory, which one could describe as the European imperial trajectory, in relationship to the Caribbean, "led from the center toward the peripheries ... all those [Europeans] who, whether critical or possessed,"—this is quoting Glissant—"racist or idealist, frenzied or rational, have experienced passionately the call of Diversity [in the colonial world]."<sup>20</sup> But there were other trajectories that followed. A second trajectory then began to form "from the peripheries toward the Center. Poets who were born or lived in the elsewhere dream of the source of their imaginary constructs and, consciously or not, 'make the trip in the opposite direction.'"<sup>21</sup> Let us say the second trajectory represents a kind of postcolonial formation of mobilities. And then there is a third trajectory that at some level suggests the kind of movement towards globalization—that we started to see more in the nineties: "In a third stage the trajectory is abolished; the arrowlike projection becomes curved. The poet's word leads from periphery to periphery ... it makes every periphery into a center; [...] it abolishes the very notion of center and periphery."<sup>22</sup>

That is already interesting, thinking about these three trajectories. Glissant does not stop there. He adds one more, which I want to have you think about in relationship to the present. He says that is what relationality actually is. "[T]he time came, then," which is actually "now," "in which Relation was no longer a prophecy made by a series of trajectories, itineraries that followed or thwarted one another. By itself and in itself Relation exploded like a network inscribed with the sufficient totality of the world."<sup>23</sup> How do I think about that, as a reflective of the present? Well, this time of relationality, in this exploded totality, archipelagic space becomes both network and

palimpsest, insular space becomes both network and palimpsest. This is where my new project begins. I begin with an idea of the archipelagic insular-real as incorporating both the palimpsest of discourses about the island from the colonial past and the efforts by contemporary Caribbean writers and artists to wade through that exploded totality, while staying true to their own phenomenological encounters with insular reality. My current project, “Insular Encounters,” follows their attempts to express and symbolize their encounters with multiple insular realities. And so, very quickly, I am going to show you some slides of one artist, a photographer and poet named Deborah Jack [see <https://www.deborahjack.com/value-of-water-cdqp>]. I am going to show a particular series of photographs, but I will read through even just the beginning of the text accompanying the images, because you will hear that echo of the beach walker again. She says: “This is the journey of a young girl around an island. She is both ancestor and descendant.”<sup>24</sup> You are also going to be hearing the multiple trajectories. “Her journey begins inland, and she makes her way to shore only to return to the center. Her impulse is to perform this ritual as a form of re/membering what was lost/forgotten. She travels across visible and invisible boundaries until she comes to the shore. The shoreline literally represents the edges of the island, which represents the transitional space of departure and arrival.”<sup>25</sup> Here is a bit more now about the phenomenology: “It is a season of the bloom. Their presence is limited. The flowers are at once metaphors for the wounds of history combined and the beauty of regeneration. The roots dig deep, the tree is nurtured and blossoms erupt on hillsides, in valleys and flesh. Echoing the dichotomy of the Caribbean landscape, the vital foliage cloaks the soil that nurtures and buries our histories.”<sup>26</sup> I am going to pause there and transition over, but I am hoping that these evocative images of this young Caribbean beach walker walking the island, as her—as she calls it—“seasonal memorial”<sup>27</sup> to an archipelagic imperial space networked and inscribed like a palimpsest by multiple mobilities and trajectories across time and space, can be useful as we continue our discussion. So, to you, Brian.

**Brian Russell Roberts:** In the collection *Archipelagic American Studies*, we evoke what Michelle and I called the archipelagic Americas—a frame that extends over at least five centuries, since 1492. It is not circumscribed by US imperialism, nor by US territorial claims or US existence. Consequently, the essays in that volume interrogate the archipelagic Americas in space-times ranging from seventeenth-century Mexico to twenty-first century New Zealand and Canada, and from the great Pacific garbage patch to the francophone Caribbean.

Distinct from the edited collection in scope and purpose, my 2021 book *Borderwaters* speaks to a more focused set of coordinates in space and time, redescribing the United States in its planetary imbeddedments. With its focus on the United States some could call it US-centric. And this—in substantial ways—is accurate because the book is fundamentally concerned with the United States of the long twentieth century and with the natural, cultural prehistories of the country’s emergence as an ocean

nation. In other words, the purpose of the book is not to be transnational but is to turn the narrative of the United States inside out. In this way, it moves away from striving against a US-centric view, and toward striving for a US-eccentric vision of the US as an archipelagic—an oceanic—nation-state with interlapping natural and cultural lives that are also archipelagic and oceanic.

The standard story of the United States tells us that the United States is a continental country. We are familiar with the image of the United States intent on fulfilling its manifest destiny, crossing over a vast continent of prairies and mountains and deserts, extending as a continental landmass from sea to shining sea. We can trace this image of the US as a continent all the way back to Thomas Paine, who in 1776 said it was absurd for an island (that is, Imperial England) to perpetually govern a continent (that is, the nascent and settler-colonial United States).<sup>28</sup> In this conventional story of the United States's founding and East–West expansion, the continent is the nation's founding and foundational geographical form.

*Borderwaters* asks what would happen if instead of looking toward the continent we located the foundational US geography in the island-ocean form of the archipelago. For most readers, this would seem like a counterintuitive—and even counterfactual—proposition. But *Borderwaters* reminds us that, while it may feel counterintuitive, it is far from counterfactual. In fact, the United States claims more ocean space than it does land space, and more ocean space than perhaps any other country in the world. This is so by virtue of the many US claims to islands and archipelagos in the Pacific and Caribbean, and by virtue of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which in 1982 provided for a nation to claim a territorial sea twelve miles out from its shoreline, and then an exclusive economic zone 200 miles out from its territorial sea. This watery version of the United States is not a secret. It is posted on a current website of the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Titled “Maritime Zones and Boundaries,” this website hosts a document which states that the US exclusive economic zone “is the largest in the world,” “containing 3.4 million nautical square miles of ocean—larger than the combined land area of all fifty states.” The United States, the document asserts, “is an ocean nation.”<sup>29</sup>

This is conventional US geography turned on its head. The United States becomes visible as a country made up of predominantly oceanic and archipelagic spaces with just a minority claim to the North American continent. Further, and just as surprising, the United States does not simply border two countries, but it borders some twenty-one countries scattered across the globe. Astoundingly, this watery map of the United States reminds us that US and world borders are preponderantly oceanic today. And their borderwaters, I would say, are archipelagic.

The book draws on oceanic and archipelagic thinkers including Édouard Glissant, Zora Neale Hurston, Florence “Johnny” Frisbie, Epeli Hau‘ofa, Alice Te Punga Somerville, and Craig Santos Perez. The chapters of the book redescribe the United States and its planetary embeddedness in a way that finds touchstones in a series of

cultural-ecological events. These include the ways that massive Pacific and Caribbean hurricanes cause inundations and remake fundamental US ecological narratives. The way nuclear testing in the New Mexico borderlands and Marshall Islands borderwaters evokes interrelated testimonies and “testimonios” against the invisibility of desert and ocean island spaces. The way Japanese and Japanese American artists, unconstitutionally imprisoned in the Utah desert during World War II, engaged in beachcombing ten thousand and even half a billion years after the fact, making sense of asymmetrical human ecologies by contemplating mollusk shells from an ice age lake and fossils from the Cambrian ocean. It further addresses the way albatrosses in the US’s Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, in feeding plastic bottle caps to their chicks, are curating evidence that the beverage industry has convinced humans that we are sixty percent cola rather than sixty percent water. Often archipelagic thinkers, whether in international law or cultural criticism, have started at the shoreline to ask how far seaward we might trace the archipelagic waters and archipelagic relationalities. I do this in *Borderwaters*. But in tandem, and also with the shoreline as a starting place, I ask how far inland we might find these archipelagic waters and archipelagic relationalities. If the continent is archipelagizing, as Glissant has said it is, can archipelagic waters and relationalities be traced up a river, moving upstream like salmon swimming toward an ancestral spawning creek? Could you find archipelagic waters and islands in places that might at first appear landlocked, such as the Great Salt Lake in Utah? In fact, the cover of my book is a linocut, similar to a wood block print, inspired by the Great Salt Lake’s brine shrimp, red algae, and salt crystals.

The United States borders some twenty-one countries, and across the planet the border of today is preponderantly oceanic. Hence it becomes clear that for as useful as the notion of the borderlands must continue to be in relation to landed borders, this self-professedly landcentric model of the border cannot be simply applied to the vast majority of borders, which are watery borders within the planetary ocean. In complement and contradistinction to the borderlands paradigm, we need a way to talk about the watery borders and their borderwaters. This is urgent, as I explain at one point, because—to put it in terms of the visual arts—the land-based border might be thought of as nineteenth-century realism compared to the watery border’s twentieth-century cubism. The whole book, in some way, is about this. But Chapter Three, which distinguishes between Euclidean borders associated with land and the non-Euclidean borders associated with the ocean, offers something of an anatomy of different modes of borderwaters. First, we see a borderwaters in which waters and lands are simultaneously nodes and links, while borders are not lines but conduits. Second, we see a borderwaters in which states interact on terms set by the shoreline’s fractal churning with borders that are seaward projections three, twelve, or two hundred miles out from a shoreline that is in constant flux. We have talked about this anti-explorer, who walks the beach and plumbs the unknown of the individual grain of sand, or rock in the river, as it enters the ocean. Now, through the heuristic of the borderwaters, we can further imagine this anti-explorer, whose task is to walk a line

(the shoreline) that also becomes projected out into the water as the baseline for a watery border.

In Chapter Three of *Borderwaters*, we also see a third type of borderwaters, in which different states with different motives seek to preserve or promote access to the ocean by erasing or reinforcing watery borders. And a fourth mode of borderwaters, wherein the borderwaters interact with borderlands at the site of the shoreline and across oceans.

With support from friends and interlocutors from many walks of life, *Borderwaters* was born of my own experiences growing up in Hawai'i, Indonesia, and Tennessee, and now living in Utah. These are archipelagic and continental spaces that a settler-colonial and imperial United States has claimed or bordered. This watery map of the United States may seem like common sense—or common settler-colonial sense—to those who have lived in the borderwaters. But for the majority of US citizens and US watchers throughout the world, a borderwaters map turns the country's and the planet's geographical and ecological relationship with itself upside down.

**Michelle Ann Stephens:** Picking up on some of the questions asked at the beginning, I found myself thinking about the question of literature and literary studies. Maybe that would be a place to start. It occurred to me how much literary figures helped us both to think. The literary frameworks that Epeli Hau'ofa, Derek Walcott, and so many writers who were working with metaphoric language, who were thinking about the islands in metaphoric ways as opposed to scientifically descriptive ways, opened up new ways for us to think in both scientific and metaphoric ways. I think that it was really important to both of us because we felt it as we were working on *Archipelagic American Studies* to hold in tension the relationship between the metaphoric and the material: both matter. Many of the metaphors or the discourses around oceanic, transnational, transatlantic, we realized, were not really—less so oceanic, more the others—attached to a geographical space. The geomaterial reality of islands was important to us but the metaphoric was also so important. Those were my thoughts listening to both our conversations so far.

**Brian Russell Roberts:** I would like to add that, for me, part of this emphasis on the literary and the visual arts has to do with one of my own early graduate student experiences with Barbara Christian's essay "The Race for Theory," in which she, a Black theorist (and in my eyes an island theorist from the Virgin Islands) talks about her experiences in the Virgin Islands and how those have shaped how she thinks about her intellectual projects. She says Black folks have always been theorizing. In the stories they tell, the jokes they tell, the sayings they share. I feel like, perpetually, I am going back to creative writers, who have been engaged in doing things like writing stories, telling jokes, and advancing sayings that have the material specificity that Michelle is talking about, grounded or watered, and also have the theoretical component of what Glissant might call the "poetic imagination."

**Michelle Ann Stephens:** I thought it would be useful throughout this conference to think of “thinking” as a kind of mobility. What we are interested in, and what the writers—in a sense—gave us access to is “mobile thinking.” We are facing these rigid categories, like “the insular.” You say the word and you think narrow, and there is this whole set of associations that kick in and lock you in. The continental has also a set of associations that are more expansive. The idea then, that one could be more mobile in one’s thinking, is what I think the island writers—those living in insular spaces, doing insular thinking—helped us to think outside the box. Mandelbrot was so stimulating to both of us in pointing out this geometrical relationship to islands and ended up being really poetic for us. The poetics of Mandelbrot’s work became much more visible to us, even as he was trying to establish a scientific, mathematical way of better representing nature. There is something about thinking being mobile, that the work of the artist gives us access to, which then helped us to think of the insular in certain ways.

**Brian Russell Roberts:** Another question was about intersections between archipelagic studies and mobility studies, and how archipelagic thinking can help uncover imperial and “minor” mobilities. I have been thinking about that phrase, “minor” mobilities. It seems to me that often when we talk about mobilities, the flip side of that coin is “immobilities.” I think that Gabriele [Pisarz-Ramirez] in her recent *Atlantic Studies* article on imperial mobilities and immobilities does a good job of bringing to our minds this immobility–mobility dichotomy.<sup>30</sup> In terms of “minor” mobilities, I think that archipelagic thinking can help us think about “minor” mobilities that are small. Again, you think about the beach walker. Glissant has this moment where he says: “Archipelagic thinkers are concerned with the stones in the rivers,” so the beach walker is tracing the shoreline and then comes to the river, starts thinking about the stones in the river. He says: ‘Even the smallest stones, and even the smallest capillaries of those rivers, even the holes under the stones in those smallest capillaries of the rivers.’”<sup>31</sup> Here, he gets us into this incredibly granular view of space and mobility. One form of minor mobility that I would say the archipelagic opens up for us is this view of fractal mobility on very small scales. For instance, the reaching down of a hand to pick up a rock is a mobility. The river or stream or rivulet, as it moves a rock, which the beach walker then picks up, is a mobility. The beach walker holding a rock in her hand, blinking her eyes—that blink, so as to better see—winds up being a mobility. These are things (to link it back to maybe a more conventional notion of the word “minor,” as is encoded in the question, Indigenous and Black mobilities) that Black and Indigenous folks have been doing for a long time: approaching mobilities in ways that sometimes engage in the project of exploration as conventionally defined. But a lot of times what we find is anti-exploration. The anti-explorer engaged in “minor” mobilities that are not necessarily “minor” for their Indigeneity or Blackness but “minor” for the smallness of their mobilities. The smallness of archipelagic mobilities recoups a mode

of mobility that falls by the wayside when we think of mobility as covering vast swaths of ocean or continents.

**Michelle Ann Stephens:** I—like you—have been very interested in the “small”—in a sense—coming out of the project we did together. I found a different quote of Glissant interesting that finds a slightly different angle on this. I have contrasted it with “mapping.” A lot of the work we did in the introduction of *Archipelagic American Studies* was very focused on mapping, alternative mapping, and mapping itself. That is an element of what I am still interested in when thinking about the insular, but Glissant at one point uses this phrase, “spacing out.” He calls it “spacing out into reality.” He turns “spacing” into a verb and thereby into a form of mobility, a form of movement. And it involves moving from the individual subject, from the lived experience of the subject. Those dimensions in what Brian was saying when he was describing the hand movement to the rock, one of the implications at stake in “minor” mobilities—is that new notions and new praxes of the human, the new notion of the subject comes into view. So that is what is at stake in the contrast between “mappings” on the one hand, and “spacing out.” That too is something that is resonating for me in thinking about mobilities.

**Barbara Gföllner:** Thank you Michelle and Brian, for this enriching conversation.

**Michelle Ann Stephens:** A pleasure. Have a great conference, everyone.

**Brian Russell Roberts:** Thank you so much. I am looking forward to talking more.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Craig Santos Perez, “Transterritorial Currents and the Imperial Terripelago,” *American Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (September 2015): 619.
- <sup>2</sup> Alice Te Punga Somerville, “Our Sea of Anthologies: Collection, Display, and the Deep Blue Sea,” in *Cultural Crossings: Negotiating Identities in Francophone and Anglophone Pacific Literature = À la croisée des cultures: de la négociation des identités dans les littératures francophones et anglophones du Pacifique*, ed. R. Ramsay (Brussels, BE: Peter Lang, 2010), 232.
- <sup>3</sup> C. L. R. James, “Every Cook Can Govern: A Study of Democracy in Ancient Greece/Its Meaning for Today,” *Correspondence* 2, no. 12 (June 1956).
- <sup>4</sup> C. L. R. James, *Mariners, Renegades & Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (Hanover, CT: Dartmouth College Press, 2001), 161.

- <sup>5</sup> Elaine Stratford, Godfrey Baldacchino, Elizabeth McMahon, Carol Farbotko, and Andrew Harwood, “Envisioning the Archipelago,” *Island Studies Journal* 6, no. 2 (2011): 113–30.
- <sup>6</sup> Perez, “Transterritorial Currents and the Imperial Terripelago,” 619.
- <sup>7</sup> Lanny Thompson, *Imperial Archipelago: Representation and Rule in the Insular Territories under U.S. Domination after 1898* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2010); and Lanny Thompson, “The Chronotopes of Archipelagic Thinking: Glissant and the Narrative of Philosophy,” in *Contemporary Archipelagic Thinking: Toward New Comparative Methodologies and Disciplinary Formations*, ed. Michelle Stephens and Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020), 57–73.
- <sup>8</sup> Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens, “Archipelagic American Studies: Decontinentalizing the Study of American Culture,” in *Archipelagic American Studies*, ed. Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 20.
- <sup>9</sup> Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).
- <sup>10</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).
- <sup>11</sup> Benoit Mandelbrot, “How Long is the Coast of Britain? Statistical Self-Similarity and Fractional Dimension,” *Science, New Series* 156, no. 3775 (May 5, 1967): 636–38.
- <sup>12</sup> Reference to Benoit Mandelbrot, *The Fractal Geometry of Nature* (New York: Freeman, 1983), 26.
- <sup>13</sup> Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel and Michelle Stephens, “Isolated Above, but Connected Below: Toward New, Global, Archipelagic Linkages,” Introduction to *Contemporary Archipelagic Thinking: Towards New Comparative Methodologies and Disciplinary Formations*, ed. Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel and Michelle Stephens (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020): 1–44.
- <sup>14</sup> Roberts and Stephens, “Archipelagic American Studies: Decontinentalizing the Study of American Culture,” 11.
- <sup>15</sup> See Philip E. Steinberg, “Insularity, Sovereignty and Statehood: The Representations of Islands on Portolan Charts and the Construction of the Territorial State,” *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 87, no. 4 (2005).
- <sup>16</sup> John R. Gillis, *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
- <sup>17</sup> See Sean Metzger, Francisco-J. Hernández Adrián, and Michaeline Crichlow, “Islands, Images, Imaginaries,” *Third Text* 28 (2014): 333–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2014.940131>

- <sup>18</sup> Roberts and Stephens, “Archipelagic American Studies: Decontinentalizing the Study of American Culture,” 19.
- <sup>19</sup> Glissant, *Poetics*, 28.
- <sup>20</sup> Glissant, *Poetics*, 28–29.
- <sup>21</sup> Glissant, *Poetics*, 29.
- <sup>22</sup> Glissant, *Poetics*, 29.
- <sup>23</sup> Glissant, *Poetics*, 29.
- <sup>24</sup> See Deborah Jack, “what is the value of water if it quenches our thirst to bloom ...,” *still.motion.space*, <https://www.deborahjack.com/value-of-water-c1nhq>
- <sup>25</sup> Jack, “what is the value of water.”
- <sup>26</sup> Jack, “what is the value of water.”
- <sup>27</sup> Jack, “what is the value of water.”
- <sup>28</sup> Thomas Paine, “Common Sense,” in *Rights of Man, Common Sense and Other Political Writings*, ed. Mark Philip (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 27.
- <sup>29</sup> When the present conversation took place in July 2021, this information for the NOAA website was current, and the document was available via a link hosted on the following website: “Maritime Zones and Boundaries,” NOAA Office of General Counsel, [http://www.gc.noaa.gov/gcil\\_maritime.html](http://www.gc.noaa.gov/gcil_maritime.html). Although the URL for this page has been discontinued, the document itself is still available through the NOAA at the following: [https://www.gc.noaa.gov/documents/2011/012711\\_gcil\\_maritime\\_eez\\_map.pdf](https://www.gc.noaa.gov/documents/2011/012711_gcil_maritime_eez_map.pdf). For an updated version of the NOAA’s discussion of the EEZ, see “What is the ‘EEZ?’,” NOAA *Ocean Exploration*, <https://oceanexplorer.noaa.gov/facts/useez.html>
- <sup>30</sup> See Gabriele Pizarz-Ramirez, “Being Black in the Archipelagic Americas: Racialized (Im)mobilities in the Autobiographies of James Weldon Johnson and Evelio Grillo,” *Atlantic Studies* 20, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2021.1952052>
- <sup>31</sup> These references to Glissant are paraphrases of material found in Édouard Glissant, *Philosophie de la Relation: Poésie en étendue* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 45.

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