

FOR AN ARCHIPELAGIC ONTOLOGY:

Oceanic Care and Non-Controlling Responsibility in Monique Roffey's *Archipelago*

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ABSTRACT: Roffey's 2012 novel, *Archipelago*, provides a fruitful context for readers to consider the possibility of an archipelagic ontology and its potential as an alternative model to understand and address the climate crisis. This essay begins with a reflection on modern society's control-oriented approach to the environments and relates it to a terracentric way of life and worldview. It then uses the idea of 'wet ontologies' to examine how water in its various forms frustrates humanity's tendency to control the environments and, in doing so, attunes humanity to a less controlling way of life and relationship with the environments. Thinking with Glissant and new materialism, the essay further shows that an archipelagic ontology can lead to two affective-ethical components: 'oceanic care' and 'non-controlling responsibility.' Both are instrumental in facilitating a global transition to a less individualistic and less anthropocentric way of life in the Anthropocene.

KEYWORDS: Archipelagos, Island Studies, Monique Roffey, Anthropocene, Caribbean Literature

Introduction

In his now famous address to the Royal Geographical Society, Gilroy (2018) expressed his concerns about the so-called posthuman turn in the Humanities in the Anthropocene. To Gilroy, the Anthropocene, in presuming a generalised category of humanity, obscures the histories of racial colonialism and capitalist globalisation that are, in his view, particularly responsible for the current climate crisis (2018, p. 13). Targeting what he called "combative anti-humanism," Gilroy contended (not without some inconsistency in terminology) that the "popular post-humanist reflexes" in today's humanities contribute to an ongoing de-historicisation of the climate crisis through a "displacement of ideology by affect" (pp. 3-4).

Gilroy's insistence on historicising the climate crisis is well taken. But his critique of posthumanism represents a broader dilemma that has vexed the humanities—the academic family that has *human* front and center in the name—for some time. Broadly speaking, because humanities scholars tend to perceive inequality and injustice not as results of nature but as products of specific human histories, they (we) believe humanity are agents of change holding the potential and responsibility to correct inherited injustices through collective action. The climate crisis, however, exposes the limit of this anthropocentric view of progress and corrective justice, which, in turn, is premised on a broader metaphysics of a human and nonhuman divide. In a recent book, Chakrabarty (2021) questioned the very validity of this divide and humanity's capacity to correct past mistakes, specifically the harms we have

caused to the environments. He pointed out succinctly that, as a geophysical force, humanity “have acquired the capacity to interfere with planetary processes but not necessarily—at least not as yet—the capacity to fix them” (p. 45). Indeed, not all human-induced changes have been beneficial or ‘fixable’ from a planetary standpoint; and what *we think* are good and right may not be so for other species and the environments. As a species, it is fair to say, we have never truly grasped the full extent and complexity of our responsibility toward the environments and other lifeforms.

With Gilroy’s caution against anti-humanism in mind, this paper seeks to address what appears to be the more fundamental question underlying the dilemma of humanism in the Anthropocene as outlined above: What is *human responsibility* to the environments? How have we mainly understood this responsibility as a collective? Is it possible to approach human responsibility in a non-anthropocentric way; that is, without having ‘human’ at the center of it, despite the paradoxical nature of this exercise? In other words, is it possible to articulate a form of human responsibility that has a different logic than—and therefore is not a replication of—*human control of the environments* (i.e., the logic of anthropocentrism that is the root cause of the climate crisis)? In short, is a *non-controlling responsibility* possible?

Roffey’s 2012 novel *Archipelago* offers an interesting angle to approach this question. Set in the Caribbean and parts of coastal South America, *Archipelago* narrates the island-hopping journey of a Trinidadian man, Gavin Weald, and his six-year-old daughter, Océan, following the devastating losses their family had sustained during an intense summer flood. The flood killed Gavin’s infant son, Alex; sent his wife, Claire, into a severe depression; and subjected Océan to recurring PTSD. Gavin himself has also developed stress-induced psoriasis. A month after the flood, however, Gavin still finds it increasingly difficult to cope with his mental and physical problems. As effectively a single parent after Claire had left for her mother’s home to recover from her depression, he has no answer to Océan’s rapidly worsening PTSD either. Making a last-ditch effort to save his family, Gavin decides to take Océan and Suzy (their loyal old dog) on a seafaring journey. On a random weekday and without informing anyone then, the three board *Romany* (a restored sailboat Gavin had purchased but had not used for years) and commence their journey.

What makes *Archipelago* an especially relevant commentary on climate change and archipelagic living is how closely it reflects Roffey, a Trinidadian native, and her family’s lived experiences: The story is based on the flooding of her brother’s (the real-life Gavin) house in 2008 and the author’s own subsequent journey from Port of Spain through the Panama Canal to Galápagos—the exact itinerary in the novel (Kassabova, 2012; Harris, 2015). Moreover, the name ‘Océan,’ which may sound uncommon to non-Francophone speakers, is neither the author’s invention nor a literary conceit. It is an actual forename that has gained popularity in Francophone countries in the 21st century as a chic acknowledgement of the ocean and related environmental challenges. The Anglophone spelling (without the stress) has also become increasingly popular in North America over the last decade.¹ In recounting Gavin and Océan journey of surprising and, at times, heartwarming encounters with various human/nonhuman, aquatic/terrestrial communities, *Archipelago* creates a space for readers to imagine and even experience vicariously what an archipelagic living or *ontology* may be. This ontology, as I will argue, offers a fruitful possibility to think and act against the grain of

¹ I thank the anonymous reviewers for pointing out this fact to me.

modernity and its control-heavy interpretation of human responsibility toward the environments.

Critics have discussed *Archipelago's* relevance as a climate fiction: Krieg (2018) examined the novel's mythical language in mediating past trauma caused by climate change and future political engagement with it; Glassie (2019) read the fiction as a revision of the time-honoured sea novel in the climate crisis; and Kuznetski (2020) highlighted the fluid transcorporeality of humans and nonhumans represented in the novel. Despite these excellent and important insights, none had fully drawn out the implications of the novel's titular trope, namely, 'archipelago.' In the following, I begin with a critical reflection on modern society's control-oriented approach to the environments and relate this to a terracentric way of life and worldview via the philosophical speculations of Schmitt (2003) and Kant (1855). I then borrow the concept of 'wet ontologies' from Steinberg and Peters (2015, 2019) to examine how water in its various forms frustrates humanity's tendency to control the environments through rational and conceptual reduction. In this way, I show that an archipelagic ontology—that is, a way of life in which actual and imagined water is always in proximity—can adapt humanity to a less controlling worldview and relationship with the environments. Finally, thinking with Glissant and new materialism, I explore in more detail what an archipelagic ontology may entail. With examples from the novel, I show that an archipelagic ontology can lead to two further affect-based ethical components: *oceanic care*, a water-like, free-flowing readiness to connect and exchange care with others; and *non-controlling responsibility*, an understanding of human responsibility toward others not as unilateral control disguised in goodwill but based on a water-mediated and water-embodied feeling of interconnectedness. Both, I argue, can be instrumental in facilitating a global transition to a less individualistic and less anthropocentric way of life in the Anthropocene.

In taking archipelagos as the theoretical framework of this essay, I am indebted to a long line of thinkers and colleagues in island studies whose works have made it possible and rewarding to 'think with archipelagos' (DeLoughrey, 2001; Stratford, et al., 2011; Pugh, 2018). Archipelagos, as both a geophysical reality and a figure of thought, have been discussed as a symbol of inter-island solidarity vis-à-vis the continentalist hegemony of modern nation-states (Braithwaite, 1973; Hau'ofa, 1994; Sharrad 1998), a non-essentialist cultural and identity politics (Benítez-Rojo, 1996; Glissant, 1997; Pugh, 2013; Roberts & Stephens, 2017), and, more recently, as a critical framework to rethink multispecies relationship in the Anthropocene (Hayward, 2012; Pugh, 2018). Among these, Hayward's anti-anthropocentric and anti-terracentric framework, aquapelago, has been a key influence in my thinking of islands, archipelagos, and ecocriticism (Hayward, 2012; Lu, 2025). Readers will find that much of what I discuss in the following (e.g., the sea as actant changing human thinking and behaviour, oceanic care, trans-species connection) shares the same premise of the aquapelagic framework which places humans, aquatic, and terrestrial entities in a dynamic assemblage of constant mutual conditioning. While scholars have made clear how archipelagic thinking challenges the way we view culture, epistemology, and the environments at a macro-level, much can still be said about archipelagos as an *embodied experience*; that is, as an ontology that holds the potential to change human consciousness and affect at a molecular level (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). This essay is a contribution in this direction. It also responds to recent scholars' call to reorient discourse of archipelagos toward the broader debate of the Anthropocene and in connection with critical oceanic studies (Pugh, 2018; Obeegadoo, 2024).

Before continuing, I would like to clear up a few key terms by responding to two points in Gilroy's critique of posthumanism quoted and paraphrased above: his lumping together of distinguishable terms and, what seems to me, a rather unhelpful separation of ideology and affect in making wider social change. There are obvious differences in degree between the notions of 'post-human' (thinking 'human' differently), 'non-human' (not relating to human), and 'anti-human' (against human) that should not be confused despite their comparable intents to decentralise human. Homogenising these terms limits the possible directions in which critical thinking and dialogue can take. On the other hand, as Laclau (2005) and, recently, Anderson (2025), have both argued, ideology and affect cannot be separated in the making and understanding of political movements. If all articulated modes of thinking—that is, all ideologies—require “affective supplements” for their “grip to hold,” e.g., nationalism (Anderson, 2025, p. 33), we will do well by beginning to articulate an affect that can both precipitate and sustain the widespread emergence of a planetary thinking, politics, and action.

The landed will to control and watering down of control

In *Archipelago*, land- and sea-living are represented as two distinct experiences and having starkly different effects on the human body and mind. In archipelagic terms (Hayward 2012), the sea is not a mere backdrop in the novel, but a multiscale actant that constantly affects human thinking and behaviour with or without them knowing it. On land, humans tend to default to their customary way of thinking and behaving, which is predominantly linear, conceptual, and prone to control. Whereas, at sea, as the familiar sense of time and space wanes quickly in the absence of permanent landmarks, and land-acquired experience and knowledge cease to work all the time, human existence becomes enshrouded in a vague but omnipresent feeling of uncertainty which, paradoxically, also inspires humility, openness, and non-control.

That land is associated with humanity's will to control is a common topic in Western thought. But there is perhaps none other than the early 20th century German jurist, Carl Schmitt, who had attempted one of the most systematic explanations of their interrelation. In Schmitt's study of Greco-Roman mythical language, he famously argued that earth contains law through its just reward for labour; it manifests law by making visible the difference between cultivated and uncultivated lands; and it sustains law because, on solid ground, fences and walls can be erected to maintain boundaries between families, clans, tribes, and nations (Schmitt, 2003, p. 42). Although Schmitt's observation is tinged with his tendential yearning for the old territorial order of continental Europe, it provides a persuasive enough account to understand modern human's terracentric and anthropocentric worldview.

Apparently, for Schmitt, solid territory is the precondition for human history as such. Unlike flowing water, land provides the initial condition for humanity to accumulate their fruits of labour and, in doing so, build the confidence to control the environments incrementally. The difference between 'cultivated' and 'uncultivated' lands—or, in more familiar terms, between 'civilization' and 'wilderness'—then continues to prompt humanity to expand tirelessly to bring the not-yet-controlled nature under control, including people conceptually labelled 'natural.' As for Schmitt's last point, we know that in humanity's effort to control their growing territorial 'rewards,' they do not just build physical walls but conceptual ones (i.e., categories) to specify and safeguard boundaries, hierarchies, roles, duties, and rights.

In sum, in Schmitt's theory, law and order are the reward and punishment of *land*—which has the same rhetorical function as *nature* in his reasoning—according to human's effort to *control* it. In other words, we neglect our *responsibility* as humans if we failed to properly *control* nature. Schmitt's view and the European natural-law tradition he represents explain well the prevailing attitude of anthropocentrism in modernity and the human tendency to mistake control for responsibility in regard to the environments. Perhaps, it takes an authoritarian-leaning law scholar to see in earnest (and with zeal) the origins of the authoritarian way in which modern humans understand and interact with the environments.

Roffey's *Archipelago* offers a powerful counter-narrative to Schmitt's land-based account of anthropocentric control of nature by foregrounding in her storytelling the ubiquity, changeability, formlessness, and therefore uncontrollability of various water bodies. From the beginning, the originary flood that animates the narrative washes away not just the main characters' material properties but their confidence in keeping their seemingly safe environment under control. The novel, in this way, sets a sobering tone early on by highlighting the little control humanity actually have—not just in disasters but in the day-to-day moments leading up to and following them—in the climate changed present.

Before the flood hits, Gavin and Claire are indecisive on whether they should evacuate. Part of them still believes this particular rainstorm would be no different and just as controllable as the “half a dozen or so downpours this violent between June and December” in Port of Spain (p. 235). This misplaced confidence is especially ingrained in Claire. She “always knew nothing bad would ever happen to her or those she loved” because she “had a tranquil and blessed life until that night” (p. 235). But as the torrential rain continues and flooding begins, all Gavin can do is consider “getting down on his knees and praying” while Claire sits unmoved because “something inside her had already shut down” (p. 236). Then, with “an almighty *crack*,” (p. 236) Gavin watches as the flood rams through their wall and inundates the house. In the end, it is Gavin and Claire's habitual “illusion of control” (Langer, 1975) that prevents them from taking timely action (not unlike humankind in the Anthropocene as a whole), which reveals paradoxically their (and our) lack of control all along.

The flood eventually claims the life of their six-month-old son, Alex, and drives the family apart. Claire, who is unable to accept Alex's death, decides to leave for her mother's home. Yet, in the wake of these tragic losses, Gavin's immediate reaction is to reassert control. In place of the flood-demolished wall, he now has a taller and stronger wall built, which is “seven feet high” “with buttresses, steel enforced” (p. 13), despite its proven unreliability in the face of major floodings. The wall, as Kuznetski (2020) reminds us, has a symbolic significance. It separates “inside from outside, me from the material world as the other” (p. 200). It is the ability to categorise and separate that Gavin wishes to maintain control over, at least conceptually if not in effect. That Gavin chooses to install a new wall right after the flood mirrors a broader pattern of the primary ways in which modern societies fight the byproduct of human technology: with *more technology*. Or to quote Kuznetski's apt phrase: “fight the Anthropocene with the Anthropocene” (p. 200). It is at bottom, I will add, a confusion of responsibility with control.

By enacting the devastation of an unusually strong flood and the Weald family's reaction and inaction prior to and after it, Roffey shows allegorically that at the core of the Anthropocene is humanity's cultivated illusion of control. It is a deeply questionable confidence in our ability to use technological means to transform and manage human-altered and human-dominated environments at increasingly larger scales. The novel uses several other moments to drive home this very point: the housing developer who poorly maintains the uphill forest

behind Gavin's house and thus contributes to the disastrous flood (p. 233); an aquarium in Florida whose tank containing six lionfish proves no match against a hurricane and eventually causes an "unstoppable invasion" of the predator species in Caribbean waters (a real-world reference of an ongoing crisis) (p. 117)²; and the Panama Canal engineers who "couldn't think of everything" when they built the canal, thereby plunging an uncountable number of freshwater fish to their saltwater deaths "all the time" and "for a hundred years" (p. 284). In all of these incidents, the embodiments of human control (walls, tanks, and dams) put in place to separate what have been categorised as human/nonhuman, safe/unsafe, useful/useless prove simplistic amid the complex workings of nature. Perhaps one should say rather that it is the hubristic illusion of control on the part of the humans involved in these events that has directly caused, perpetuated, and exacerbated the catastrophes.

It is no accident that in all of the catastrophes enacted or mentioned in the novel, the sea plays the most important role in dissolving and rendering useless humanity's technology and confidence of control. The sea, with its fluidity, changeability, pervasiveness, and ubiquity in the atmosphere (Peters & Steinberg, 2019), has always acted as a check on human's land-inspired security. What is new and different now is that, as we progress deeper into the Anthropocene, one can only expect the sea to play a much more active role in shaping the planetary future in the forms of irregular rainfalls, excessively dry or sodden soils, frequent mega-hurricanes, rising sea level, and much more. Under these circumstances, as Baldacchino wrote recently (2025), it may be high times that human societies begin to reconsider many of our land-derived concepts of control (e.g., borders, boundaries, territories) that have informed so much of how we organise our social and political life and mediated our relationship with the nonhuman environments. Read in this light, Roffey's novel is a timely invitation to learn with her characters to *become archipelagic*—that is, to be on land but ready to get wet, to be able to feel at home but know safety cannot be guaranteed by human power alone, and to assume responsibility without control—in (what has always been) an anti-Schmittian reality.

'Wet Ontologies' at the limits of rational control

The ocean offers many possibilities to reform humanity's landed thinking tending toward control. This is the gist of what Steinberg and Peters (2015) famously termed 'wet ontologies.' The ocean, as they observed, with its ability to change quickly in materiality, volume, and composition, is "resistant to a terrestrial ontology of bounded zones and emplaced points of power and knowledge" (p. 253)—that is, to human's land-derived constructs and technologies of control in the language of this essay. Put in another way and in the terms of object-oriented ontology, the ocean is the single largest object—a hyperobject—on our planet that continually withdraws from human observation, expectation, conceptual and technical captures. As such, it can promote an ontology that facilitates constant and careful re-examination of what we think we know and an openness to what we do not and can never know (Harmon, 2018; Morton, 2013).

Roffey's *Archipelago* is both an enactment of wet ontologies and an argument for their necessity in a world of anthropogenic planetary water imbalance. If solid ground is the

² The lionfish invasion in the Caribbean and other parts of the Atlantic is considered the best documented and studied marine invasion to date among marine scientists. See Côté et al. (2013) for a comprehensive overview of the history, research, and impacts of the invasion.

essential condition enabling human's will to control, sustained interaction with the sea, on the other hand, provides a healthy spell of defamiliarisation that reduces the control-oriented mindset; the root cause of human-on-human and human-on-nature domination as well as the feelings of pain, regret, and anger when domination inevitably fails. By affording humanity the opportunity to feel time and space differently and without the usual grounded assurance of control, the sea makes a suitable space to explore radically different modes of being and relating to other beings.

Not long after Gavin and Océan set sail, they quickly realise they have entered a world full of unknown dangers and surprises. As a fairly experienced sailing enthusiast, Gavin always knows that the weather on the open seas can change quickly: "One moment it can be flat, quiet, agreeable, then of another mood entirely, wicked and vexed" (p. 38). However, the risks of sailing are not always tied to unfavourable weather conditions. They are frequently caused by human errors as well. Right after *Romany* has proven its extant seaworthiness by withstanding a severe storm, Gavin, to his shock, spots a massive hydrofoil catamaran "fast as a train, heading straight for him" (p. 42). Ironically, in this precise moment, "inside him, everything freezes, all his knowledge, all his reason and understanding of why he is here" (p. 42). Though the 'cat' sees them just in time to avoid a fatal collision, it is notable here that what gives in first is Gavin's 'knowledge' and 'reason,' the precise things that make the post-Enlightenment humans believe they are in control of, and therefore superior to, other species and the environments at large.

Gavin's early defeat here reveals a recurring anti-Cartesian theme of the novel: The constantly changing ocean and what this condition entails often exceeds and overwhelms humanity's rational thinking capacity, triggering adaptations that are therefore more corporeal than cerebral, more instinctive than contemplative. Even in the early days of their seafaring journey, Gavin can already "feel a loosening, a swell in his veins, his body's way of aligning with the vast sea around him" (p. 43). As his body gradually adapts to the oceanic scenery, movement, and weather—that is, to a form of wet ontology—his entire worldview undergoes a radical change as well: He begins to appreciate the uneasy but deeply liberating experience of non-control in a seemingly endless world of fluidity. He recites Rumi's poem 'Zero Circle' to express this conflicted feeling of maritime ease:

*So let us rather not be sure of anything,
Beside ourselves and only that, so
Miraculous beings come running to help.* (p. 78)

Comparing this to Gavin's post-disaster "rage" at the rain (p. 15) because of his inability to control it when the novel opens, the change after a few days of sailing and immersing in 'wet ontology' is remarkable.

The Sea as an anti-concept

At a deeper level, what causes Gavin's radical transformation and submission to the uncontrollable is the ocean's natural power to frustrate humanity's attempt to understand the world—so as to feel in control—in the way we know the best: reducing complex, multiscalar, and multifaceted phenomena into concepts and categories. Though useful and necessary for survival and daily functioning, the act of conceptual reduction creates formidable structures that limit possible ways of thinking and being and, in certain situations, they are the root cause of stereotypes and prejudices. Consider, for instance, when

we see a butterfly flitting by and call to mind the concept 'butterfly' accordingly, all we can think of at that moment is the form of the butterfly and the scale relevant to that form; not the intricate workings of its cells when it flaps its wings, nor the busy airflows caused by the flapping wings. When in reality all of these and many more are happening in an interconnected way the moment the butterfly is seen.

The ocean humbles humans and reminds us of our limitations not by being dangerous or unpredictable alone but, more fundamentally, by being anti-conceptual. One may even argue that the ocean is in itself an anti-concept, insofar as it is anti-space and anti-time. It must be noted, however, what I mean by anti-space and anti-time are still space and time in the Kantian sense as pre-givens; they just work against the terracentric perception of space and time as, to a significant degree, relation of discrete objects. If we followed Kant (1855) to understand that the existence of objects in space and time is the precondition for both our capacities to intuit and conceptualise (pp.139-140), the ocean—by being 'objectless' to the extent that objects are formally distinguishable—is an anti-concept. Sustained interaction with the ocean, therefore, is conducive to a non-conceptual or at least less conceptual mode of being. It is no surprise that for Kant, the philosopher of reason par excellence, the sea is "the region of illusion" as opposed to "the land of truth" (p. 178).

Roffey's *Archipelago* obviously repeats Kant's double dualism of land and sea, reason and unreason. However, it draws a completely different set of implications than Kant's hierarchical value judgement. In numerous instances, the sea is emphatically represented as featureless, an otherworldly space that exceeds the normal descriptive power of language and can barely be comprehended and communicated through metaphors; that is, through poetic disturbances of settled modes of signification and conceptualisation. The sea, as it were, looks like "a vast field of mercury," "a rippling carpet," "a fluid fabric, something unending and shifting, another surface," and "a different planet, where the ground is blue and ripples" (p. 43, 46). The narrator's recourse to the most imaginable objects here (mercury, carpet, fabric, ripples) is telling of a paradoxical intent to compensate for the inherent inadequacy of language to conceptualise the sea due to its radical objectlessness which is of 'another surface' and 'a different planet' altogether. To a broader extent, the narrator's struggle with language also enacts humanity's general inability to understand the sea by conceptualisation, because concept (as in the case of 'butterfly') freezes comprehension to a single moment and a single scale, when much is happening above, beneath, and within the sea beyond its apparent formlessness.

The sea does not yield to human conceptualisation, moreover, because it does not provide definable and durable shapes for thinking to latch on and for concepts to form. While staring at the sea during a long sailing stint, Gavin learns that "it becomes hard to tell what is what: what is low cloud, what is sky, what is sea, where they join, how low the clouds are" (p. 43). Without continuous visual affirmation, concepts like sky, cloud, and sea slowly lose their meaning, utility, and therefore guiding power, as all Gavin can see now are "indefinable shapes, twisting and lifting from the sea" (p. 43). Similarly, near the end of their journey, Gavin summarises his months-long sailing thus: "Acres of blue with little else to see. Little to say, but plenty to watch, plenty to sink into" (p. 246). Unlike on land where one can form a concept according to what they see and subsequently act to realise that concept relatively easily by *controlling* one's own or other human or nonhuman behaviours to effect changes in one's environment (e.g., turning right to avoid a standstill traffic), during seafaring and in the midst of continuous fluidity and non-purposive seeing, one is not fully in power to choose what or even whether to see, think, and act accordingly.

Seafaring, as Roffey's novel shows, acclimates humanity to a mode of being that is less conceptual and therefore less controlling, insofar as conceptualisation is integral to humanity's desire and capacity for control. Yet, importantly, it also shows that the embracement of a less controlling way of life is key to healing oneself and one's relationship with the world. It opens up unforeseen opportunities to make new connections and enter into new relationships with unlikely companions; opportunities that, in different times, are precluded by conceptual and categorical thinking. All these are what the sea can do to us as an aquapelagic actant (Hayward, 2012).

Non-conceptual connectedness

One of the most vivid examples enacting non-conceptual/non-controlling being as a liberating experience occurs when Gavin and a young woman skipper, Phoebe, work together to navigate the long distance from Aruba to Cartagena. At first, Gavin is deeply sceptical of Phoebe's sailing skills because in his mind (which has resumed conceptual after days of landed living in Aruba), the kind of person who fits the conceptual category of 'sailor' is a "small man with muscles, who can hoist sails, who can harpoon whales if need be. Not a blonde woman" (p. 190). This is in spite of the fact that Phoebe is a professionally trained skipper who went to a nautical college while Gavin is an experienced enthusiast at best. However, once they begin sailing, Gavin is soon reminded of how irrelevant conceptual thinking is in that situation:

All day, then all night. Tight seamanship, both of them in sync with the boat, both aware of a million things which could go wrong with the sea which is visible and the winds which are invisible. It is a fluid effort of rigour, mental and physical...And they work together: woman man, boywoman man, and sometimes he feels like a boy and sometimes he cannot see which of them is the woman and sometimes he feels big and sometimes he feels small. (pp. 246-247)

In sailing, people focus on working their bodies and minds in accordance with—not in resistance to—the boat, the waves, and the winds. It is 'a fluid effort of rigour,' a harmonising energy that flows through and connects different bodies and minds, humans and nonhumans to make the boat move smoothly. In this situation of shared vulnerability, moreover, human categories of gender and age are of little consequence, as people are defined less by their biological differences than by the roles (leader, led, helper, helped, protector, protected) they perform moment by moment.

The kind of boundary-transgressing solidarity—the feeling of becoming one with others around oneself—that Gavin and Phoebe experience momentarily is similar to what Gilroy (2018) described as 'offshore humanism,' a humanism premised on shared vulnerability in the absence of solid territory. Gilroy explained the meaning of offshore humanism with the brave deed of a Greek military officer, Antonis Deligiorgis, who risked his own life to save twenty Syrian and Eritrean refugees near a disintegrating boat on the Aegean Sea in 2015. Gilroy observed of the rescue scene he saw on the news thus:

Their salty saturation communicates something of the way that being human is transformed when the solidity of territory is left behind. We are afforded a glimpse of vulnerable, offshore humanity that might, in turn, yield an offshore humanism (p. 18).

Just like Gavin and Phoebe who temporarily forget about their age and gender as they work together to preserve themselves, Gilroy also noted that during the rescue “carrier and carried do not have to be seen or fixed as either black or white, African and European or even male and female,” as “ossified identity would sink quickly in this deadly water” (p. 18). When people are united by a shared goal to protect something precious to them—human lives in these examples—they are, as conventional wisdom has it, ‘on the same boat.’

Offshore humanism—the feeling of being on the same boat with others which fosters an empathy that cuts across gender, racial, national and other categories—is a uniquely beneficial feeling in the Anthropocene where the grounds beneath our feet are literally or figuratively becoming more and more slippery. Nevertheless, something still feels amiss and inadequate in this way of thinking. If we acknowledged that the current climate crisis is utterly unprecedented in scale, intensity, and complexity, should not this fact in itself warrant radically different ways of being, feeling, and thinking than what had ostensibly worked for our species in moments of shared crisis before? Apparently, offshore humanism connotes an empathy that is contingent on a negative condition. If that condition disappears—bearing in mind that all perceived conditions are also a question of representation to individual human minds—then empathy becomes questionable.

More importantly, offshore humanism, on-the-boat humanism, or any humanism under a new qualifier is still humanism—that is, anthropocentrism—at its core, a short-sighted and isolationist prioritisation of human wellbeing over that of other species and entities. Gilroy’s word choice ‘*deadly water*’ reveals as much even when water is life-giving to all known organisms. It is a “thinking of the world as individual parts rather than complex wholes” (Hickel, 2020, p. 8), a substantialist way of thinking which is “at the heart of ‘human exceptionalist’ social theory” (qtd in Moore, 2015, p. 128). Human interaction with the ocean as an all-encompassing anti-concept, I argue, reminds us of something deeper and ‘stickier’ than empathy, to which I will turn now.

More than empathy

To think and feel beyond anthropocentrism inherent in the humanist tradition (Braidotti, 2013), we also need to learn to think and feel beyond empathy. To be sure, empathy is one of the most salubrious feelings most humans can and should feel toward others given the appropriate situation. But empathy is also a *human-centered* notion. In other words, it is rooted in the same dualist ontology of Western Enlightenment—the intellectual foundation of capitalist civilization—that presumes humans as agents separate from and transcendental to subhumans and nonhumans. Humans, in this view, are either givers of empathy who control when and with whom/what to empathise; or designators of empathy who determine who/what are more capable or deserving of empathy based on inherited moral standards and social norms (Harrison & Hall, 2010).

In place of an anthropocentric, dualist ontology, I want to use the following discussion to amplify a worldview that highlights our inherent connectedness with other beings and our capacity to care and be cared by *all* beings. This radical readiness to extend and accept care may sound fuzzy but is neither impossible nor idealistic. It is, instead, rooted in the very materiality of our daily interaction with all beings. As Hickel (2020) pointed out, scholars in anthropology have long observed that, for most of human history, people operated on an ontology that can be broadly considered animist. Though marginalised by centuries of colonial and capitalist expansion, this worldview still thrives in many Indigenous

communities which treat nonhumans such as rivers, mountains, animals, and plants as kin (p. 32).

Roffey's *Archipelago* offers another possible—and watery—way to reinvigorate our innate capacity to form deep connections with all beings. To phrase this phenomenon in a more descriptive manner, I will evoke a watery image and call it 'oceanic care.' If conceptual categories work like dams and control the flows of identification (which is how empathy works), the watering down of conceptual thinking makes our capacity to identify with others flow in all possible directions like undammed rivers and fill up an all-encompassing sea of care. In other words, if empathy can be likened to a river running toward a specific direction, the latter can be understood as the ocean itself, which is vast, deep, and the precondition for empathy. I will use two examples from the novel to demonstrate this.

When Gavin and Océan are in Bonaire, they participate in a guided snorkelling tour led by a fellow Trinidadian, Lulu. After the day's diving and snorkelling, both are then invited to join Lulu and her crew for a private evening sail, a "Trini lime," as Lulu calls it (p. 132). As has happened between Gavin and Phoebe, the sea once again begins to work its magic and brings the people onboard closer together by making them temporarily forget about conceptual barriers and identities upheld by the landed society. Almost out of nowhere then, Océan begins to share their family losses with the people they just met hours before. Interestingly, Océan's unexpected sharing catches the equally unexpected attention from Charles, a reticent man who is piloting the boat:

My mother has become a mermaid. Now she lives with my other granny, Granny Jackie, the granny who is my mummy's mummy. It happened when my brother died. She is waiting for him to come back. She is waiting for us in Trinidad. She is making socks for my brother and she sings a lot and in the day she swims in Granny's pool and turns into a mermaid. We have gone sailing to find her.

Océan, he whispers. That's enough. He looks at Lulu and mouths the word sorry.

Lulu shakes her head.

Charles flips his mirror shades up onto his forehead.

They all look at Charles.

I lost my brother too, he says particularly to Océan. It was a diving accident, many years ago. He became a mermaid too.

Really?

Yes, I still know when he's around, you know, in the sea.

Me too. Océan brightens. My brother is always with me; he swims the sea with me.

Yeah, says Charles. I know what you mean. (pp. 133-134)

At first glance, this scene fits the common pattern of empathy-giving quite well: An older person presumed to have more life experiences consoles a young child by sharing a similar experience with her to make her feel better. However, Charles's rare breaking of silence, which surprises everyone so much so that they all look at him, suggests that something more than empathy is occurring here.

In effect, Charles does empathise with Océan. But his sudden interest and awkward intervention in the conversation allows for a reading of him as someone who is also on the receiving end of care. It is possible that Océan's innocent, out-of-nowhere, but wonderfully

anticonceptual comparison of depression to swimming, deceased family to mermaids provides a comforting expression and emotional outlet to Charles's grief for which he might have had no words. Now, thanks to Océan, he gains a new possibility to think of his late brother in relative peace as a mermaid swimming along his side. Read in this light, this scene represents not just a simple, one-way flowing of empathy, but a moment of immersive care in which identification flows in all possible directions.

In fact, it is clear that not only Océan and Charles but all who are on board at the moment—including the readers—who witness this exchange are uplifted and transformed in some way. It is likely that, as readers, we also feel a part of our hidden or repressed grief relieved as we 'participate' in this experience of overflowing care. Reading literature in this way, then, is much more than a matter of 'learning empathy,' as humanist criticism usually assumes. Rather, as Felski (2011) asserts, it "is also a matter of what it makes possible in the viewer or reader—what kind of emotions it elicits, what perceptual changes it triggers, what affective bonds it calls into being" (p. 585). In other words, as readers (humans) we do not unilaterally empathise with fictional characters (non-humans). Instead, we participate in what Felski (2011) calls "multidirectional linkages" (p. 590) which allow for a broadening of "perceptual possibilities" (2015, p. 176) in the most serendipitous way possible just like what happens between Océan and Charles.

In multiple instances, Roffey's novel also makes clear that humans are not the only species capable of offering care, consciously or otherwise. This idea is memorably enacted, for instance, through a mother dolphin's loving interaction with Océan, where the dolphin, upon sensing the temporarily motherless Océan's loneliness, swims toward her to play with and comfort her, "pushing Océan around like a ball, nudging her and whistling, blowing up through her spout and splashing her with water" (p. 166). Even the ocean itself makes both Gavin and Océan feel accepted and loved in their journey of healing. To them, the ocean keeps them out of themselves, out of their troubles by becoming one with them, and accepts them just like it accepts all other lives (p. 71, 114-115). Viewed in the aquapelagic light, sea animals and ocean are actants effecting real changes to human behaviours and ways of thinking. Another and arguably the most remarkable moment in the entire novel enacting the idea of trans-species care is the miraculous appearance of a white whale in the Pacific Ocean at a time when Gavin and Océan need care the most.

Critics have addressed the intertextual relation between *Archipelago* and *Moby Dick*, perceiving the former as a timely interrogation into the interrelated ideologies of racism and anthropocentrism represented in the Melville classic (Glassie, 2019; Krieg, 2018; Kuznetski, 2020). Glassie, in particular, reads Gavin, a wealthy man of many privileges, as an inattentive reader who misses the racial undertones not just in *Pequod*, the whaleship in Melville (referencing a Native American tribe decimated in 17th century New England), but also *Romany*, an obvious allusion to the much persecuted minority in Europe, the Roma (p. 929). Moreover, unlike his six-year old daughter who makes no difference in the pains of human and animal (the one-legged Captain Ahab and a dismembered sea turtle in this case), Gavin only reads himself in Captain Ahab's shoes as a sad man hurt by nature and the natural course of life in a dualist frame of human-nature divide (932). Nevertheless, with the gradual transformation of Gavin, Glassie asserts that *Archipelago* "counterposes its male protagonist's preoccupation with individual maritime skill...with a posthuman maritime competence that is ethically attuned to other species and improbable collectives (p. 925). What causes Gavin's transition from his romanticised notions of individualism and anthropocentrism to a trans-species awareness, I will add, is the non-conceptual way of being made possible by their archipelagic journey.

A few days after Gavin and Océan exited the western gate of the Panama Canal, they sail into a long stretch of calm water near the equator as they head toward their final destination, Galápagos. Perhaps the continuous calm weather and effortless cruising cause Gavin to relax his vigilance and forget about the ever-present dangers in seafaring. When the idea of putting a safety leash on Suzy crosses his mind, his land-cultivated illusion of control gets the better of him, as he decides, “No, for now he’ll just keep an eye on her” (p. 292). Gavin’s decision quickly proves tragic. In Suzy’s attempt to chase a mother booby above them to remind her of her baby bird who is being left onboard, she accidentally gets herself entangled in lifelines. Badly injured, Suzy eventually falls and disappears into the sea, becoming the latest loss to the already grief-stricken Gavin and Océan.

Serendipitously, it is at this lowest point in the novel, where Océan appears to have lost trust in her father and Gavin himself begins to question the very purpose of this journey, that the storied white whale appears before their eyes. From the father’s and daughter’s perspective, the sudden appearance of the white whale is nothing short of a miracle:

It seems to be up on its tail, rowing itself backward in the air, smiling and saying here I am. And the creature is completely white. White all over, like milk. White like peace. (p. 317)

Gavin compares this sighting experience to the moments when his children were born, when (note his watery diction) “he feels engulfed in this natural serotonin surge of love, of bliss,” which only occurs “occasionally, here and there, in moments of a long life” (p. 318). As the white whale continues to swim by and sing to them what sounds like a lonely song possibly to its lost mate, Gavin and Océan feel further comforted, as they are also on a journey to find their lost wife, mother, and the lost parts of themselves.

Roffey’s portrayal of trans-species connection here is almost magical, or mythical in Krieg’s words (2018), and appropriately so. The very language here performs the notion that there are experiences in one’s lifetime that lie far outside of conceptual understanding and linguistic representation. The sheer presence of the whale here is so immensely and profoundly comforting that it engulfs Gavin and Océan like the ocean itself, enlivening their innate capacity—their inner water, so to speak—to connect with all beings beyond differences and appreciate the pure connection which does not require linguistic or conceptual mediation. In this sense, their connection is beyond empathy, for there is not necessarily any conscious initiator or receiver of care but mere presence for each other. The whale saves Gavin and Océan without necessarily intending to do so but they are saved nonetheless simply because it is *there*.

In both of the instances discussed above, the novel shows moments of interhuman and inter-species connections that are deeper than and therefore cannot be exhausted by the human notion of empathy. None of the actors—including the readers—feel *for* others necessarily, or at least not exclusively. Rather, it would be more accurate to say that they feel *through* each other in a multidirectional way. They know more about themselves by listening to and being with one another. They understand the emotions they did not know how to feel or express by seeing others act them out. This is more than empathy, a non-controlling, free-flowing readiness to identify with and feel through (not just for) others. It is, I suggest, a necessary affect in the facilitation of non-individualistic and non-anthropocentric living in the Anthropocene. We do not need to wait for a negative condition—a shipwreck, a catastrophe, or grief—to remind us to care for others. Rather, we positively *need* each other’s

presence because we do not know when and from whom/what (a six-year-old, a dolphin, a whale, or a fictional character) that the life-giving and life-saving water of care will spring the next time.

Becoming archipelagic

Gavin and Océan's journey ends in their decision to go home after reaching Galápagos. What starts off (at least for Gavin) as a desperate escape from the debilitating reality at home ends up offering them much more than temporary distractions from their recent losses. Through their months-long archipelagic journey, in which the ubiquitous water literally and metaphysically brings them into contact with various human/nonhuman, aquatic/terrestrial communities, they learn in a profoundly embodied way more about themselves in their interconnectedness with others. In Glissant's (1997) apt phrases, their journey begins as an "exile" but ends properly as an "errantry" because while "exile may erode one's sense of identity, the thought of errantry—the thought of that which relates—usually reinforces this sense of identity" (p. 20). With the images of "Root" and "Rhizome," Glissant further explains errantry by indicating that "Root" denotes a territorial lifestyle that "takes all upon itself and kills all around it," whereas "Rhizome" depicts an "enmeshed root system" in which "each and every identity is extended through relationship with the Other" (p. 11). Thus, as Glissant suggests, errantry—the archipelagic or archipelagic-like movement of displacement—holds the key to healing humanity's relation with the world, as it can transform humanity's rooted ontology into a rhizomatic one. In other words, the thought of errantry (or, equally, the thought of relation) makes us remember that our relationship with other humans and nonhumans is what sustains and makes us *possible*.

For Gavin and Océan, the ever-present water in their archipelagic journey is what makes the thought of errantry a constant and palpable reality. It is the reason why, as we have seen throughout their journey, they are so ready to open themselves up and exchange friendship and care with others such as Lulu, Charles, Phoebe, the dolphins, and the white whale. Water, as Stacy Alaimo (2012) explains with the idea 'transcorporeality,' serves as a tangible reminder of humanity's constant and material connection with all beings, because water literally flows through "human bodies, animal bodies, and the wider material world" (p. 476). This idea is enacted near the end of the novel.

In seeing a large group of seals basking on the beach, Océan asks her father if they are all a family. After getting a positive response, she then asks:

Does everything have a family, Dad?

Yes.

Birds?

Yes.

Trees?

Yes. Everyone is related, my love. Everything on the planet is related to everything else.

How?

It's complicated. But trust me, we all have something to do with each other. Seals and humans have a link. Look at them; can you see what I mean? (p. 327)

As Gavin scrambles for an answer to explain to Océan the connection among all beings on Earth, Océan's questioning turns to water and the puzzle resolves itself:

Lu: For an archipelagic ontology

Am I related to a seal, Dad?

Yes, you could say that.

Was Suzy related to a seal too?

Maybe.

Does the Pacific Ocean have a family?

No. But the sea is water. We are made from water. So again, it's related. (328)

The realisation that everything and everyone on the planet is related—with water being a clear proof of this—helps the characters understand the smallness of humanity in the vast and multilayered web of life. This feeling of humility one gains through travel is also what Glissant (1997) emphasises as a defining trait of an errant:

One who is an errant (who is no longer traveler, discoverer, or conqueror) strives to know the totality of the world yet already knows he will never accomplish this—and knows that is precisely where the threatened beauty of the world resides. (p. 20)

The sheer complexity and totality of the interconnected parts that make up the whole world and the realisation of our inability to understand—let alone control—it is in itself a beautiful thing about living. When in Galápagos (the very islands where Darwin developed his theory of evolution) and overwhelmed by all the lives occurring on the water and in the sky, Gavin suddenly wonders about humanity's ever persistent and all too modern ambition to know and control everything through rational conceptualisation. He ponders, "How did Darwin look up and behold these skies and think there was no art here, no divine alchemy?" (p. 331).

The idea of the vast interconnectedness of all beings and, relatedly, humanity's smallness in it leads to the novel's most important and timely message for readers of the Anthropocene. It is, I argue, what an archipelagic ontology amounts to essentially: to learn to distinguish carefully in our daily decisions *control vs responsibility* as two distinct philosophies with which we relate to the world. Being embedded as an integral part of the environments—being the passengers of a boat, so to speak—humans are never separate nor transcendental to our environments. Control, therefore, cannot be the correct answer to our environmental challenges because, in the grander scheme of things, no scientific or technological fixes can keep us safe for all times and in all places. What we can and should do, on the hand, is to make responsible efforts to ensure that the environments in which all of us are transient tenants and passengers are as healthy as possible. Put simply and as people who live *with* any waterbody would know this by heart: When the environments are healthy, people are healthy; when they are not, we are not (Chen et al., 2013; Neimanis, 2009, 2012). Ultimately, what really prevents a flood cannot be a wall or a dam but the forests, rivers, oceans near and far, as well as the flora and fauna living in them.

The archipelagic ontology represented in Roffey's novel reminds us that humans are never only a landed species who could thrive in isolation and in our pretension of rational control of nature; instead, we are always already implicated and connected with others via the planetary water in countless ways. Before Gavin goes home, he calls Claire, who has recently gotten better from her depression, and tells her how he feels about this journey:

The sea, you know. It gets you thinking. I thought I was separate. Me against the world. I wanted to escape that house, everything. But really, I'm part of it all, the earth, the sea. I can't get away. (p. 356)

Unlike the Schmittian human whose narrow territorial lived experience disposes him to engage in an endless arms race against nature—that is, amping up control every time a previous control has failed to separate inside from outside, human from nonhuman, safe from unsafe—an archipelagic person, or an errant, knows humans are never grounded in one place. Rather, we are always in the world, with land and with water. In Hayward's terminology (2012), we are always already 'aquapelagic.' This is also what Glissant means (1997) when he characterises archipelagic experience as allowing "each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and in errantry" (p. 34). By teaching interconnectedness, archipelagos teach us responsible and caring coexistence, not control.

Conclusion

Roffey's *Archipelago* furnishes a fruitful context for readers in the Anthropocene to consider the possibility of an archipelagic ontology and its potential as an alternative model to understand and address the climate crisis. In narrating the Weald family's challenges during and after a lethal flood, it questions modern society's fundamentally control-based approach to the environments. By making the uncontrollability of water an ever-presence in the narrative, the novel highlights the inadequacy of humanity's land-derived techniques (linguistic representation, rational thinking, and conceptualisation) to understand and control the environments. However, the water which makes up the novel's archipelagic ontology also brings into focus humanity's inherent connection with other beings. It is a connection that is deeper and older than empathy. We can choose to exist *for* others in moments of shared pain. But before we can do that, we have always already existed *through* others in one way or another. The latter is not chosen but something we are always capable of doing, and the conscious recognition and remembrance of which is the condition that makes empathy possible. With the same notion of watery interconnectedness, the novel also suggests that human responsibility toward the environments cannot be synonymous with control, because our understanding of the environments is always going to be incomplete and reductive, and so our definition of normalcy will be one-sided and incomprehensive. Instead, this responsibility must be rooted in an awareness of symbiotic welfare—or oceanic care—among all beings, human and nonhuman.

At the end of the novel, Gavin leaves *Romany* at sea to whoever finds it next. It is an invitation for more people to become archipelagic: to be wet and reminded of our oceanic connectedness to others (p. 346). For we are never just a landed species, as Glissant argues. This paper is an attempt to outline an archipelagic ontology to enrich the scholarly discourse on archipelagos and aquapelagos, and how this ontology can furnish useful lessons to rethink the climate crisis. It is hoped that there will be more works to continue this archipelagic linkage to uncover and explore more aspects, dimensions, and applications of an archipelagic ontology—a way of being in which land and water are always with us and in us.

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