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*«From the mainland, I look at the island and try to think in geologic time. Walking along the beach, I pick up stones washed ashore by the lips of the tiniest waves which caress the littoral edge. Islands in miniature. They become my companions.»*

# THE ISLAND CONDITION

## Elise Limon

*Every time I visit the small town in Liguria it is there. L'isola della tartaruga. With its back arching out of the water, bathing in the slow moving sun. I do not know how far from the coast the island is, knowing the exact distance is irrelevant. This is an island you are prohibited from visiting. The closest one can get to it is by boat, flirting with its rugged edges and peering at the fragments of buildings visible from below.*

Gallinara is the only island in Liguria. All the others hug the coast too intimately to be considered a «true» island, a fact that endows Gallinara with a certain mythical quality. It is little known considering the other illustrious insular offerings of the country. Its size is not substantial like Sardegna or Sicilia, its history and sites not as famous as Capri's.

*I come to know Gallinara as a stranger.*

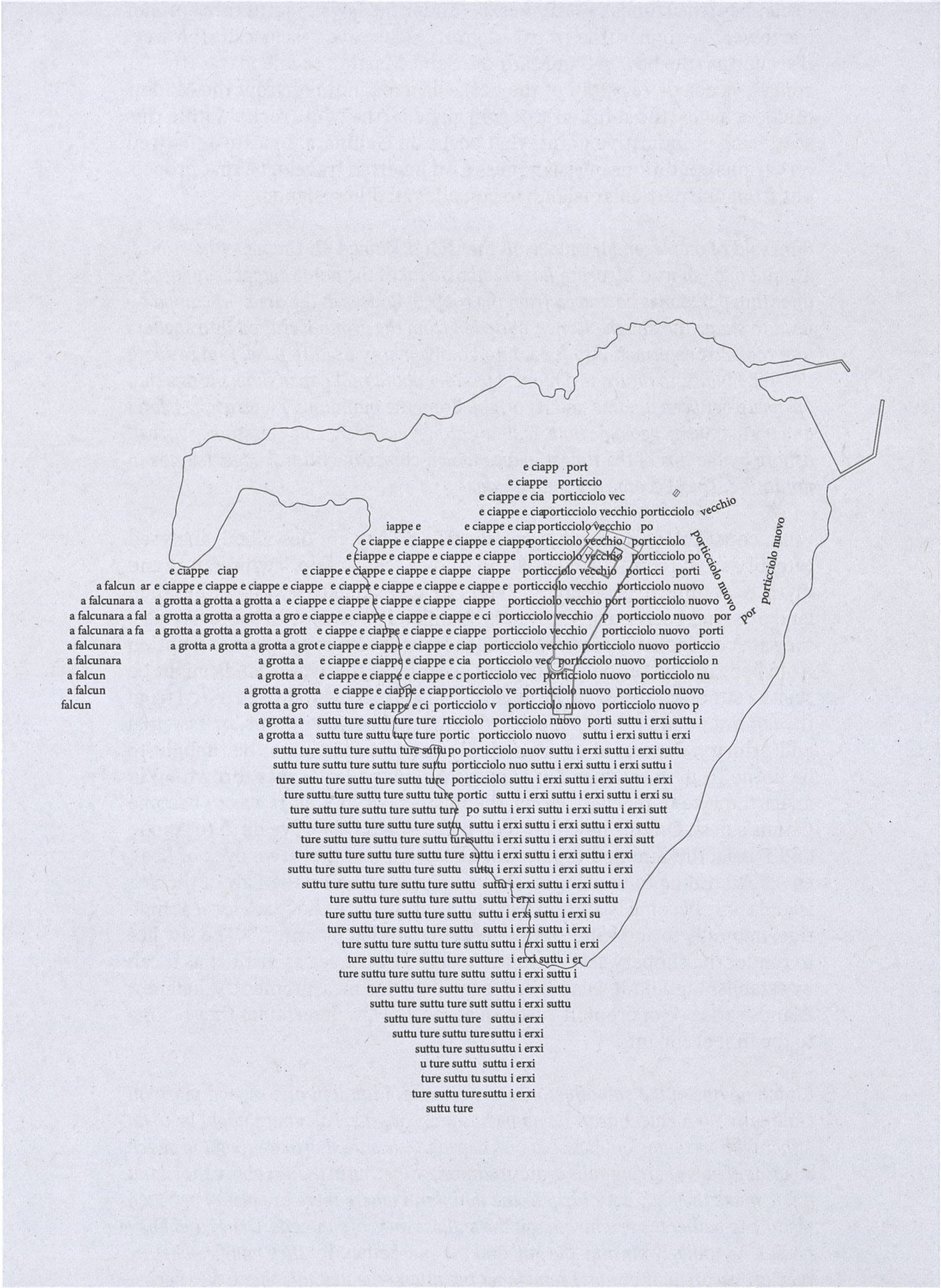
The bay of Alassio that almost embraces Gallinara is drawn back between the two promontories of Cape Mele and Albenga. The island gravitates closer to the latter. From the two categories of islands that geographers distinguish — oceanic and continental — Gallinara is continental, but everything that geography can tell us about these two types of island, the imagination already knew. <sup>(1)</sup> It appears now as a dropped stone, forested and floating. Regardless of its geologic origins, it exists in the minds of the inhabitants of this stretch of the Italian coastline as separate, detached.

*On most days, looking out across the flat Ligurian sea, the island presents itself. Only when the day brings enough cloud, in the thickest of mist, do I lose sight of its distinct outline. Gallinara reminds me of another island.*

Islands as landscape formation, as bounded sites of ecologies, economies and culture, present complex and fascinating sites for study. As commodifiable land contained and sometimes artificially made anew, islands are sites that satisfy global desire for accumulation, geo-political control and pleasure. As metaphor, fictional construction or myth, the island is a potent figure, perhaps «the central metaphor within Western discourse». <sup>(2)</sup> Their obvious distinctiveness, does not preclude their universality. All islands resemble other islands.

*As I wander through the town on the mainland, stories about the island are recounted to me. My knowledge of its geography and life is situated in the chance spots where its coming-into-view prompts a conversation about yet another part of its being. Whilst standing outside the Chiesa Santa Croce, on Via Julia Augusta which traces the edge of the mainland, I learn that places on the island are known by names sailors once attributed to them.*

Gallinara is small, and un-inhabited. This has not prevented people from giving names to a number of sites around the island. In fact, the same size of territory on the mainland would not gather such a quantity of names. Its «islandness» renders it unusual. Its topography gathers an informal demarcation. The place names are retained in the local Ligurian dialect: «porticcio-lo nuovo» (new port), «a capella» (the chapel), «suttu ture» (under the tower),



A map of the island Gallinara in Liguria constructed from the place names given to it by sailors. Image: author

«e ciappe» (the stones), «suttu i erxi» (under the laws), «suttu ture» (under the tower), «e togne» (the traps), «a grotto» (the cave), «sciuscaù» (blower), «l'archettu» (the bow), «San Marino» (Saint Martin), «a falcunara» (the falconry), «a coa da rea» (tail of the net), «da a madunina» (from the Madonina), «a nave» (the ship), «u scoeggiu giancu» (the white rock). Within this scattering of indicative points that occur on Gallinara, I locate and dwell on various conditions of «islandness». An inverted travelogue that propels out from one particular island, to consider all other islands.

*I am told of one legendary place on the island, named «E Ciappe» (the stones). A small oval-shaped Ligurian flat bread also takes the name ciappe, supposedly after thin flat stones borrowed from the roofs of houses in the area — «ciappa» — used to shape the dough. Stones, quarried from the ground, crafted into shelters, into tools, transformed into food, into bodily energy used to work and re-work the soil. Finally, to return to a name. I wonder about that gap in time, the one that opens up between a name and its origin. From the mainland, I look at the island and try to think in geologic time. Walking along the beach, I pick up stones washed ashore by the lips of the tiniest waves which caress the littoral edge. Islands in miniature. They become my companions.*

What constitutes an island is not settled.<sup>(3)</sup> They are described, analysed, categorised and constructed in island studies scholarship, law, literature and myth. According to geography, islands are formed in two ways: Either their land mass has been isolated from the mainland by erosion or sea level rise — they are continental — or they are born from a seismic or volcanic eruption from beneath the sea bed — they are oceanic. In this way, islands might be seen as either «derived» or «originary».<sup>(4)</sup> Land accidentally separated from the continent and orphaned over an elongated period of time, or essential and primary. Separated or created. Mythical islands might be thought to be borne from nothing and are always originary. Delos was thrown up in an earthquake to receive Latona, the mistress of Jupiter. It was to become Latona's nest. On this newly formed piece of land she gave birth to Apollo and Diana, the Sun and the Moon. The origins of life, «two eyes of heaven».<sup>(5)</sup> According to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, islands only become islands in legal terms if they are above sea level at high tide, naturally formed and completely surrounded by water.<sup>(6)</sup> The law has to render the slippery and changeable entity of the sea as distinct as it can by establishing a limit. Islands are formed by this measurement. When new islands «arise»<sup>(7)</sup> or erupt in the open ocean, the law determines they belong to the first occupant.

*Clutching one of the smooth stones in my hand, I am told of a second place on Gallinara — «A Falcunara». Its name has hazy origins. Falcunara might be to do either with weapons or birds. No one I speak to is sure. Further along the beach, swarms of noisy herring gulls draw attention, gathering in the sky above the island. A few make the easy aerial trip to the mainland where there are plenty of beach visitors to bother those who inhabit the endless lines of sun-beds. Dense and busy bodies. An unlikely kinship, the gull and the sun-bather. Yet they mingle, whether they are aware of it or not. I remember the often repeated tale that a few hens —*

*«galline» — once released from a boat, reproduced to fill the entire island with their wild bodies. The episode that gave Gallinara its name.*

Simply understood as bounded space, the island might be considered a model of the world. A space where the contained limits allow certain ecologies to develop that would not occur on the mainland. Such as the proliferation of a single species — wild hens for example. A perfect design experiment. Recent theoretical investigations within architectural theory and beyond have endeavoured to dissolve boundaries, in search of explaining the world's interconnectedness, multiplicity and indeterminacy. Conceptualising the constituent parts which make up the environments we design in as infinitely connected is worthwhile, yet leaves much open. The reverse is offered in the model of the island, the possibility of understanding what happens when the limits of design intervention are already set, when there is no arbitrary red line of site to even question. The study of living matter within the bounded space of the island, their biogeography, has been paradigmatic within ecological and evolutionary science for decades. «Galapagos» is synonymous with «Darwin». Darwin and Wallace's theories of evolution arose from the discernments they made about animal and plant life contained by a limited environment. The ecogeographical Foster's rule — «the island effect» — explains the deviations in species that have access to a finite set of resources. This limitation renders islands a convincing site for experiments with live matter, both real and fictional. In «The Island of Dr Moreau» species are meddled with by eminent physiologist Moreau to disturbing ends. If Darwin is an observer, Moreau is the designer.<sup>(8)</sup> What perverted lessons does this island tale lend designers who are questioning the consequences of their own interventions? Speaking of multi-species interaction.

*One of the place-names on the island is curious. «Suttu I Erxi.» It means «under the laws». No place, not even the islands in the safety of the widest, wildest parts of the open ocean escape civilisation's desire for conquest. Slipping under the water, I bathe in the Ligurian sea for the first time this trip. Next to me, a concerned father bellows to his swimming child who has begun to float a little too far away from the safety of the shore. Obedient and somewhat alarmed, the little body turns around and starts swimming back. I carry on, swimming a little closer to the prohibited island.*

The lively bodies of animals have their part to play in determining islands' fate with the law too. The Guano Islands Act of 1856 was established by the United States in an attempt to counter the monopoly Peru had acquired over the trade of guano, accumulated bird excrement. Winged populations deposited their waste matter across sets of Pacific islets and its amassing formed a material rich in nitrates and ammonium, nutritional chemicals that accelerate the growth of plants. Capital intervened. After it was discovered in the early nineteenth century, it quickly became a sought after commodity in the US for its use as fertiliser in agricultural production, initiating American efforts to take control of territories from which it could be harvested. The Act authorised any citizen of the US to take control of a «guano island» if it was uninhabited and unclaimed by any other government. The legal ter-

minology used was vague. Preliminary drafts toyed with various words to describe the novel dominion over these phosphate-rich isles: «Sovereignty», «territory», «territorial domain». <sup>(9)</sup> These disappeared to make way for the elusive term «appertaining», which lent itself to interpretation, meaning the islands would never have to be fully «incorporated» into the US (giving them eventual statehood and thus full rights under the constitution). The function these islands played in early American imperialism demonstrated that empire was not solely about mere territorial expansion, but the management of national boundaries and marginal territory. <sup>(10)</sup> They played their game with islands. By the end of the 19th century the US had claimed many guano islands this way and even as many were uninhabited, they retained a strategic value as trade routes. Gallinara itself was an important stop-off to and from Gaul and the Iberian peninsula. Roman shipwrecks discovered at its feet were laden with amphorae, most probably carrying cargos of wine, oil and cereals. Yet, its landmass offered no commodifiable fruits similar to that guano, the wild hens did not produce the right avian excrement. The fate of the island was sealed.

*If I swim directly out into the sea, both promontories slip from my peripheral view and I see just water, and Gallinara. I feel the desire to pull away. The island represents a removal from the world, within the world. Our earth is an island itself floating within a murky sea of cosmic matter. The sounds of the beach are muffled. I am reminded when you are alone with the calmness of your spirit, be planetary. <sup>(11)</sup> I remember one other place-name uttered to me in the morning's talk of Gallinara. «A Grotta» (the cave). I wonder if the small dent in the base of the island's rock I struggle to make out is A Grotta.*

For four years, from 357, Saint Martin of Tours led his hermitage on Gallinara. Before it became an iconic backdrop to this small beach-resort town, it was the parcel of land where this illustrious bishop, father of monasticism, retreated from the world. Whilst there, he fed almost exclusively on Hellebore, a partially poisonous plant strewn across the island and which brought the saint close to death. Isolated from other sources of sustenance, the island offered up its dangerous food. The word «isolation» comes — through French and Italian — from the Latin world for island, «insula». From this we also derive «insulation». Insula itself is quite delightfully derived from in «salo», (in the salt sea), from the Greek «nesos» (to float, to swim) and Irish «innis». Isolation is a defining feature of «islandness», making the island perhaps the most appropriate territorial paradigm of our age. Something is islanded if it is surrounded by another medium. The island qualities of retreat-from-the-world conjure up images of Special Economic Zones (SEZ), prisons, «Fortress Europe», border walls called for between the US and Mexico, militarized national boundaries and cries for more surveillance in wealthy gated communities. The SEZ is a particularly pervasive type of urbanism, or «city-building epidemic», of our times. Often taking the form of an entire city or (almost) city-state, it is designed as an economic island in a sea of regulatory rules. Free-ports are of course nothing new — in fact, the Greek island of Delos prospered as one in the first century BC with trading along established Italian, Phoenician and Armenian routes. <sup>(12)</sup> In D.H. Lawrence's 1927 novel

«The Man who Loved Islands», the love of islands by man is represented as a neurotic condition. Not so much islands as «I'lands»,<sup>(13)</sup> exceptional places where an inflated self smothers and obliterates every other presence of life. If the city is a state of mind, what modern neuroses does the Zone represent? We should remember, island boundaries also invite transgression.

*Leaving the beach, on my way back I take the long route up the mountain side to Torre di Vegliasco. The island disappears from view for a while until I reach the tower. Its use now defunct, the tower previously would have been a method of communication across the landscape, but it has not seen fire for some time. From here I see the island again. I think of the place on Gallinara called «Suttu ture», (under the tower) and I think of myself in both places at once. At this elevation, the monastic ruins and brow of the island's own watchtower peer over the shrubbery.*

The fate of Gallinara island does not escape being packaged as a prized jewel. It is to be sold to a wealthy Ukrainian investor, the son of a tycoon, for 10 million euros, to become his own island fiefdom.<sup>(14)</sup> Caught within a familiar battle between the right to access for all and the commanding machinations of capital, the residents of the local town fight for the island they have never had access to. «Islandness» is an unstable concept. Through it we can tell stories of single species and entire empires. Insularities across the world are mobilised as spaces, objects and narratives. Fictions sited on islands are a particular type of tale.

*My thoughts awash, sitting on the mountain side staring across at Gallinara, the sloping summer humidity blurs the air between the island and me. It appears hazy, almost as an apparition.*

