A CARTOGRAPHY OF INSPIRATION:

On my personal and academic relationship to the Faroe Islands

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I discuss my relationship to the Faroe Islands from childhood dreams and travels to adult academic projects and Island Studies based on my interest in cartography of imagined and real island places. My mental map of the northern islands resonates with my biography, migration trajectory, family and identity. What I am inspired by may therefore also be very different from what other islanders are inspired by. Life on the 'mainland,' far from the Northeastern Atlantic, influenced my reflections on the Faroe Islands in a series of binary oppositions: inside/outside, home/away, family/society, sea/land, and so on. The article examines emplaced inspiration from a holistic and processual perspective knitting life, imagination, time and maritime transport into the same meshwork of island mapping.

KEYWORDS: Faroe Islands, cartography, imagination, temporality, family

Drawing islands

When I was a child, I drew an island on a piece of paper and gave it a name. This was *my* country. I started by drawing the border to the sea, giving the island coves, fjords, headlands and peninsulas. Then I added villages and towns, roads and bridges crossing rivers and lakes. Maybe also sea stacks and skerries. I kept the map for a while, then threw it away (to be sure no one else would get hands on it) and created a new one. I kept the name of the country but changed everything else. I still have the name, but I have stopped making islands. It was always an island, never continental territory. My private cartographic hobby was inspired by real geographical maps from the atlas. My favourite book was the pocket-sized atlas of the world that my mother gave me. There were also larger (coffee table) atlases in the bookshelf at home. I memorised exotic place names that I found on the maps: Ouagadougou, Madagascar, Tierra del Fuego, and so on. The child's reverie about places faraway is well-known, but my fixation on maps was exceptional. My own drawings, I believe, were the result of a desire to give space to fantasy and diversion in the cartography of the 'real' spatial world. My island was inspired by the printed atlas, but it was probably also a graphic projection of emotions and thoughts on a piece of paper. I don't read the atlas for entertainment anymore, but I haven't given up my passion for geography.

I am not the first person to draw a map of an unknown island. What I did as a child is part of a long tradition in scientific, artistic and esoteric inquiries of the world. People have been searching for the most remote, insular and alien of islands, places beyond human understanding and imagination, for centuries. There are many famous fictional islands in world literature, for instance Plato's Atlantis, Thomas More's Utopia, Anatole France's

Penguin Island and Ursula Le Guin's Atuan. These islands are symbols of alternative worlds of the shadowy past or imagined future. As laboratories of the creative human mind, islands are good to 'think with.' They are depots of inspiration for people who are open and receptible to the ideas (Gilson and Kool 2019, 35). My childhood maps did not represent a Utopia/Dystopia, a critique of contemporary society, or a revolutionary political experiment. My maps were multi-purpose empty boxes that I could store anything inside. That is also why I easily could throw them away and make new drawings. Nobody could decipher my codes in the graphic. What started as a simple two-dimensional sketch of a fictitious place got new essence when I was ready to bridge my imagined island country and the Faroe Islands, a place in the printed authorised atlas. The lightness of the free childhood island creation was transformed into something much more solid and collective. I could not change the map of the Faroe Islands, hence there was no need for new drawings.

My cartographic approach to the world had been based on the naïve idea that each demarcated and named place on the map accommodates a special ambience, philosophy and art. In this image, the world was a spatial pastiche of the catalogue of human nature and culture The atlas was studied in a wishful search for internal inspiration, but the palimpsest of the islands of the world was not accessible through the colourful pages of the book. The Faroe Islands, the windswept northern archipelago that I feel deeply attached to, triggered something in me – what we could call external inspiration – that the empty maps could not mobilised. Among the tens of thousands of islands in the atlas, of which I knew the names and positions of quite a few, there was only *one* tiny archipelago that I knew from inside. The rest was *just* a reservoir of curiosities and imaginaries. The Faroe Islands have been my inspirational islands since adolescence, but I never thought of the islands as a general source of inspiration before. When I now explicitly affirm that the Faroe Islands are my inspirational islands, it silently readjusts my cartographic perspective on the rest of the world. Other islands, reviewed and evaluated through my Faroese optic, now evolve as faint variations of the quintessential islandness of the Faroe Islands.

While the Faroe Islands are 'real' islands found in the atlas, thus not the subject of random spatial revision, the meaning of the islands is open for discussion. This leads us back to my scrapped childhood drawings. The Faroe Islands are feeding the empty map of the fantasy island with rich meaning, which creates an inspirational atmosphere engaging "the head as well as the heart" (Trash and Elliot 2003, 878). While there have indeed been eureka moments when I felt that I was in a special zone of time-suspending lightness and happiness, representing intense inspirational experience, the inspiration that has defined my relationship to the Faroe Islands has above all been of a holistic and generative character. The flows of inspiration have been still, mild, wild or whirling, and the transitions have been strongly influenced by my life situation. My mental map of the northern islands resonates my biography, migration trajectory, family and identity. What I am inspired by may therefore also be very different from what the other islanders are inspired by.

Emplaced mind

The Faroe Islands, located in the northeastern Atlantic Ocean, between Iceland and Norway, is the home of my maternal family. In my childhood, I lived in other countries (first and foremost Norway) with my parents and siblings, but every summer was spent on the islands in the ocean. We – or at least I – did not have any wish to travel to any other places. The Faroe Islands was much more than a holiday destination; it was the home of the large and

close-knit family, the place where there never seemed to be any rush, and the country of people seeming to be strongly connected to the sea and nature. As a child, I felt that the Faroe Islands contained everything that the city of Oslo was missing. Already in August, when we went back to school, me and my siblings started longingly talking about next year's journey to the islands. I was daydreaming – while drawing maps – about the 'secret' summer islands that my Norwegian classmates and friends did not care or know anything about.



Figure 1 - Boy on beach. A summer day by the sea in the village of Tjørnuvík (author's photo)/

My paternal family is not from Norway, and my Iranian father never talked much about his homeland, so I invested all my emotional and imaginational capital in my mother's islands. Because I only knew the islands from enchanting summer holiday experiences, as well as my mother's language and inspiring storytelling, the Faroe Islands were for many years a place of dreams, hopes and future images. The islands were completely separated from my humdrum everyday life in Norway, creating the sense of an annual cyclical transfer between summer cosmos and winter cosmos. I absorbed all that I could sense and learn during the intense visits to the islands, as food for thought and inspiration, to bring back to Norway as stockpile for long monotonous winter months. Life on the mainland, far from the ocean of the Faroese, influenced my reflections on the islands in a series of binary oppositions: inside/outside, home/away, family/society, sea/land, and so on.

My maternal grandfather, Sigurð Joensen (1911-1993), was a writer, lawyer and politician. He was born in a small village called Gjógv in the northern part of the Faroe Islands. He studied and worked in Copenhagen, before returning home to the Faroe Islands in the aftermath of World War II. Sigurð, a founder of the Faroese (pro-independence) Republican Party established in 1948, was a Member of the Faroese Parliament from 1958 to 1970. My mother and her six siblings grew up in a home with lively conversations about Faroese language, culture, history and politics. For me, he was an avatar of the Faroe Islands embodying a set

of attitudes and virtues that I admire and place all my trust in. Sigurð talked about a unique country – much more than about a random group of small islands – and sparked my interest in the history and culture of the Faroe Islands. He was an outstanding storyteller, even by the standards of his generation, and an inexhaustible well of wisdom about the old peasant society, folklore and local politics. My grandfather was a mentor and early agent instituting my passion for the islands in the Northeastern Atlantic. I would go as far as to say that he sowed the seeds of my later engagement with research on island cultures.

Discovering Island Studies

My plan had always been to become a (human) geographer, and I indeed started my studies in a university geography department. Nevertheless, (social) anthropology, which was supposed to be my minor, became my major. I discovered that anthropology covered the subjects and perspectives that I wanted the fill into the geographical maps. When I was a university student in the 1990s, first in Oslo and then in Copenhagen, I had no academic interest in islands. Yet, I could not study social anthropology without reading seminal ethnographies about tropical island societies from the anthropology canon. The students discussed the kula exchange of the Trobriand islanders, coming of age and sexuality in Samoa, kinship and social integration in the Andaman Islands, and so on. It was indeed fascinating reading, but I did not connect it to my inspirational islands that I kept in a separate locked chamber in my mind.

The Northeastern Atlantic was, so to speak, beyond my imagined anthropological map, but cracks began slowly to appear in the wall between the published anthropological islands and the unpublished North Atlantic archipelago. With the newly appropriated anthropological toolbox, I could rethink the Faroe Islands in comparison with other island societies across the globe, and thereby also emancipate from the tautologies of exoticizing narratives about the 'untouched' and 'unspoiled' islands. Maybe the Faroe Islands, as case, could even contribute to Island Studies? After eight years abroad, I embarked on a major scientific journey into the cultural lives of the youth of the Faroe Islands in 2001 as PhD fellow at the University of the Faroe Islands. Analysing the information from my diaries, fieldnotes, interview transcripts, questionnaires and observations, I became aware of something that was scarcely ever exposed in European youth studies publications. There was something special about life in small island societies.

In this process, searching for answers to poignant questions emerging in my Faroese fieldwork, I rather accidentally came across 'island studies' as interdisciplinary school of thought. Among Faroese scholars in the social sciences and humanities, I never heard anyone talking about islands as anything but locus. There were discussions about smallness and remoteness, but not about islandness. The islands were normally compared to the continental Scandinavian neighbours rather than to other small oceanic island societies. Discovering Island Studies as an analytic approach to the study of the Faroe Islands was an eye opener. Not only my PhD fieldwork, but also my early personal and tangled ruminations on the cartography of islands were puzzled out through an island studies optic.

The art of waiting

Aside from the early interest in two-dimensional island cartography, which continues to shape my image of the Faroe Islands as a comprehensive source of inspiration (the outline of the islands, fjords, straits, lakes, etc.), my special interest in time and temporalities has cultivated my inspirational receptivity. I would even suggest that my inspirational 'chain reaction' – with triggers (what I am inspired by) and targets (what I am inspired to do) – can be drawn in maps. The family represents a map of chained relations and reciprocal social interdependence; the temporality represents a map of linear, circular and multidirectional time experiences; and nature represents a map of water, air and land in human/nonhuman constellations of knowledge and belonging. As mentioned above, in my childhood and adolescence, I experienced the Faroe Islands as a place without haste. It was a place beyond the authority of chronometric time. This was of course influenced by our 'holiday mood', a season without imperative school or working schedules, but it was also an observation of what I would call 'island time'.

What is island time? Is it just an imaginary of aquatic cadence, like my musing over the childhood drawings of islands? Imagination is important for inspiration, and vice versa. Inspiration is triggered by something emplaced out there, and imagination facilitates the negotiation between inner and outer inspiration. In the case of the Faroe Islands, my strongest sense of (temporal) inspiration grew out of diverse waiting situations. People were waiting for a delayed ferry, for changing weather conditions, for the turn of the tide, for an expected guest, for the radio news to start, and so on. During the waiting, people were chatting, telling stories, drinking coffee, playing cards, fishing, resting, listening to radio, and many other things. The waiting was an active temporal practice. There was no point in rushing and suspending such contextual waiting situations. This gave me material for the general image of 'island time', which motivated me to reflect on the relation between human life and (island) nature, and between local 'Faroese' time and abstract chronometric (clock) time. This emotional, sensory and intellectual process inspired me to write on island temporalities.

Time is something "touching everything and everyone"; it "accelerates, decelerates, expands, and contracts" (Bhandari, 2022, p. 779). In the Faroe Islands, I experienced a curious temporal dynamism and noticed that "the interplay between nature's flow and the movements and schedules of everyday life constitutes what could be called 'Faroese time'" (Gaini, Hayfield & Hayward, 2025, p. 479). The long years abroad with annual transient escapades to the Faroe Islands gave me a deep sense of moving between different time zones, or temporal regimes, affecting my perception of the islands in the ocean. The islanders' temporal-ecological adaptations to the island-water spaces of the North Atlantic were to me also a demonstration of resilience and resistance against incoming chronometric aggression. The experience of island time, especially in the stoic art of waiting, convinced me that the currents of accelerating chronometric velocity observed globally decelerate in different locations with diverse traditional temporalities (Gaini 2025, p. 328).

The sea of inspiration

Time is also resonating passage through space. My fascination for geographical maps was indeed highly motivated by my interest in movements across space, especially wayfaring to and from oceanic islands. One of my primordial recollections of the Faroe Islands is the

image of the islands seen from a passenger ship in the ocean. The recurrent childhood summer trips to the 'timeless' Faroe Islands were relying on waterborne transport links. The last hours of the journey west were magical. Here is a description of my key memories:

> *Norway is now far away and forgotten. First, small groups of sea birds approach the ship to welcome the guests to the Faroe Islands. The birds are the messengers, hinting that the captain has not got lost at sea. Faroese radio is streaming out of the loudspeakers of the cafeteria. Later, the peaks of the mountains break the monotonous line separating the sea and the skies in the distant horizon. The peaks rise gently from the ocean, like dark green pyramids being lifted from an aquatic bunker. One pyramid, then another one, then a third… The islands are expanding, and houses, rivers, valleys and inlets become visible. Small boats and fishing vessels meet the ferry. This is home.*

The annual ritual of crossing the ocean by ferry inspired me to (re)consider the role of the ocean in the life of the islanders of the North. "Running water is favourable to day-dreams," wrote Charles Dickens, "and a strong tidal river is the best of running water for mine" (Dickens, 1863, p.12). I would argue that North Atlantic water is the best elixir for weightless dreams.



Figure 2 - Between islands. View of the western side of the island of Streymoy (author's photo).

Islanders, regardless of which sea they belong to (yet more frequently in tropical than in polar regions), are often the victims of exoticisation campaigns' 'othering' them, but smart islanders might wittily return the message in reversed order: exoticising the exoticiser. They might even, equipped with a good sense of humour, turn to strategic self-exoticisation, for instance in touristic destination branding, to seize control over common stereotypical imaginary (Green et al., 2020). I have always had mixed feelings about outsiders' exoticisation of the Faroe Islands, even if I consider the islands familiar and exotic at the same time, because on the one hand it can be insulting and manipulative, and on the other hand it can

be harmless exaggeration of existing characteristics. In other words, the exotic images can be thought-provoking, but, obviously, they can also create alienating derogatory representations of the 'stranger' (i.e., the islander). But, first of all, they are trivial and seductive, providing the observer with a naïve sense of perception of the 'true' nature of the islands.

In the first sentence of his monograph *Tristes Tropiques*, the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss famously says: "I hate travels and explorers" (1955, p. 9). He expresses strong conflicting sentiments in relation to the writing of an ethnography about his own expeditions (fieldwork) in Brazil: "Is it necessary to recount in detail so many insipid details, so many insignificant events?" (1955, p. 9). He feels like a stranger in the world that he has travelled and that he is carrying in a heavy bag of life experiences.

Thinking with islands

Has the Faroe Islands influenced my intellectual trajectory? Yes. Do I feel inspired by the islands? Yes. Has my subjective island imagination informed my writing? Yes. What are the implications of these streams of thoughts and reflections? I don't know. I am trying in vain to imagine an alternative life where I had never visited or heard of the Faroe Islands – or not even visited any small island anywhere. Inspiration is an ongoing process, not an intuitive flash, and the co-working relationship between the writer and the written text is materialising the inspiration of the inspirational islands. In my newer texts, I am, among other impulses, inspired by my older texts.

Creative writing, and the exercise of switching between fiction and scientific articles, is also giving inspiration a name. Cartographic creativity, as in invented island maps, is also a kind of 'text' stimulating inspirational flows. However, it is important not to forget that personal life experiences will always inspire the images, metaphors, anecdotes and concepts funnelling the 'thinking' with islands. As regards the Faroe Islands as place, I can mention a some of the components guiding my imagining, thinking, writing, and mapping:

Nature:

- Wind. The islands are windswept. The weather is unpredictable with sudden changes.
- Water. The islands are rainy, foggy, and the ocean is never far away.
- Light. The islands are located on 62°N and have dark winters and bright summers.
- Mountains. There are few flat areas in the islands. Many cliffs and crags by the shores.
- Tides. The straits between the islands have rapid currents and (cyclical) tidal turns.
- Grassland. There are no forests in the Faroe Islands. The sheep are everywhere.

Society:

- Small population. People know and talk about each other, almost like a big family.
- Slow time. Faroese avoid rushing, plans change depending on the weather.
- The sea. The fishing sector (including aquaculture) is the main export industry.
- Mobility. People move out of the country to study, work or do other projects. Many return later.
- Autonomy. The Faroe Islands has own language, culture, flag, anthem and government.
- Nordic cultural heritage. The ancestors of the Faroese were Vikings from Norway.

This is an overarching and non-exhaustive outline not saying much about researchers' specific intellectual and professional trajectories, but which commonly emerges when the islands in the North are compared to other island societies bereft of these qualities. Together with the fact that the Faroe Islands is composed of many islands (in contrast to single island societies) and is an oceanic archipelago (in contrast to near-shore islands), the components mentioned above indicate some of the living conditions in the Northeastern Atlantic shaping the place-based identities of the islanders. They cultivate a sense of being at home in a place imagined as hidden and relatively isolated from 'the rest' of the world.

Interpreting islands

Rather than excavating atoms of knowledge with scientific 'evidence based' instruments in a search for the seeds of inspiration, I believe that inspiration is unfolding when we move and create tangled connections with people, animals and the nature around us. As Tim Ingold says: "knowing must be reconnected with being [...] thought with life" (Ingold, 2011, p. 75). There are indeed forceful moments of inspiration, surprising and enchanting flashes in the messy drama of life when a new idea takes shape, but the inspirational process is first and foremost a long journey with restraint dialectic interaction between reality and imagination, knowledge and feelings, and self and others. You could also add the tension between map (cartography) and landscape (topography).

Aiming to get closer to an answer to the question about the implications of the inspirational islands on my career and writing, it has been necessary to concentrate on the context of my relationship with the people of the islands in question. How do their 'views' influence my interpretations? This dilemma leads us back to classic anthropological discourses on (local) knowledge and ethnographic inquiry. In his collection of essays called *Local Knowledge*, the American cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz explains:

> *To see ourselves as others see us can be eye-opening. To see others as sharing a nature with ourselves is the merest decency. But it is from the far more difficult achievement of seeing ourselves amongst others, as a local example of the forms human life has locally taken, a case among cases, a world among worlds, that* the largeness of mind*, without which objectivity is self-congratulation and tolerance a sham, comes.* (Geertz 1983, p. 16, my emphases)

Drawing on the interpretive anthropology reflected in, among others, Geertz's work, my approach to the inspirational islands in the Northeastern Atlantic has been holistic and hermeneutic. I have, without any structured strategy, gathered inspirational energy through reflection on personal experiences, autoethnographic perspectives, cartographic imaginaries, and perception on island temporalities. The ways of 'knowing' islands, Ingold argues, is linked to the ways of 'being' in them (Ingold, 2011).

Islands and their surrounding bodies of water constitute spatial/cultural assemblages. Consequently, when the sea serves as a strong symbol of movement, openness and porosity, the islands also become handy to think with, as well as depositories of fresh ideas. Boldness and rescaling of ambition is needed in anthropology, because, as Bandak and Knight (2024, p. 22) assert with reference to the work of Michel Serres, there is no single dominating truth or pure reality to lean on. The North Atlantic, with its forever unrestful belly of water, is to

the body what the nomadic network of knowledges is for the mind. Obviously, an anthropologist does not need to be an islander, but in my point of view the islander's sea knowledge and cartographic imaginaries can supply the anthropologist with more fluid, storied and vibrant ways of knowing and sensing the world (George and Wiebe, 2020). The inspiration from the inspirational islands is, hence, also stimulated by the inspirational sea of the very islands.

Final remarks

Several accidental events lead me into the field of Island Studies. When I studies in Copenhagen, I had no plans of returning home (Faroe Islands) to work, let alone to become a researcher studying small island societies. My deep bonds to the Faroe Islands have been a double-edged sword in my intellectual trajectory: on the one hand, I have been blessed with rich experience and knowledge on small island societies 'for free', but on the other hand, this very privilege has probably also anchored me to the islands in a degree that has narrowed my mind and ideas. It is important to have alternative island(s) than the dominant inspirational island(s) to widen your horizon and bolster your intellectual force (e.g., through fieldwork, literature, collaboration and exchange). I have not written about them here, but I have other islands that have inspired my scholarship. Some of them are from the maps of the atlas, others are from my own drawings of imagined islands. My fieldwork experiences from other island settings have supported my work in the Faroe Islands, and there is probably (at least) as much magic in places beyond the horizon as there is at home.

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