

Insularity, positionality and cartography

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What you see in the world around you highly depends on what you are looking for, and from what perspective you are looking at the things around you. In my work as an academic in an island community and in island studies, this framing of perspective and distance has become very clear in understanding the objectification of the island as a unit of study, as a testing ground or as a romanticized destination. This conundrum of positionality and islandness is reified through maps, and the way in which they can teach us to see what otherwise remains hidden. Map readers rarely consider the positionality of the makers or those who pay for a map to be made. Do the mapmakers envision the promotion of tourism activities, the safety and success of navigators, the understanding of social inequalities, or do they steer us towards natural resources, ecological stressors or biodiversity hotspots? Have they ever visited the island on the map?

One of the interesting angles of island studies is that Small Island States (SIS) are very clearly geographically demarcated units of study. The island surrounded by the ocean forms a socio-economic and also an ecological segregated system, that allows for exhaustive inventories and descriptions of interactions and systems. These processes become visible through studies of the limitations of land availability and the constraints of the water-energy-food nexus (Jurgens et al., 2024; Singh et al., 2025), and studies of the resource insufficiency of island resource systems (Acevedo et al., 2023; Martin del Campo et al., 2023) and the associated socio-metabolic risks (Singh et al., 2022). Island communities live in very close relation to the ocean, whether it is because of food systems, extraction of fresh water through desalination, connection to other communities or the everlasting threats of floodings and erosion. In many places, these interactions have built a wealth of diverse and intense understandings of the balance between ocean and humanity, not grounded in scientific research but grounded in the intimate relations that have shaped in place over time. This wealth has led to an increased interest in studies of island ecological, social and economic systems from the outside. These studies, that are not rooted in the lived realities of the island communities, require careful positioning and navigation of the island community's value systems. As such, the researcher needs to be honest about the angle and distance to the island, their perspective, and the goals that underly their research, not only with the island communities where they want to do their research, but also with themselves.

Cartography can help us get our minds around pathways for sustainable development in SIS. At the same time, mapmakers can also add to the stressors that SIS experience, simply by ignoring impacts of the emphasis that they include in their maps. Maps frame how we look at the world around us. An example could be 1873 French Navy map of the Grenadines, part of the Windward Islands in the Caribbean. This map contains a traditional bird's eye view of the geolocations of the islands, with some toponymic data and contour lines, and the depths of the sea around them. The map's purpose is navigation. One section of the map is reserved for a completely different angle: it presents the vertical contours of the different islands from a specific angle, and from a specific distance. This feature of the map allows navigators to verify whether they are on the right course, by comparing what they see around them with what they see on the map. For that they have to be clear on their positionality, because they have to understand from what angle and from what distance they are looking at the island. And only when they are clear about that, they can get it right. I relate this navigational practice, to the understanding of positionality of researchers, and specifically island researcher "from the outside".

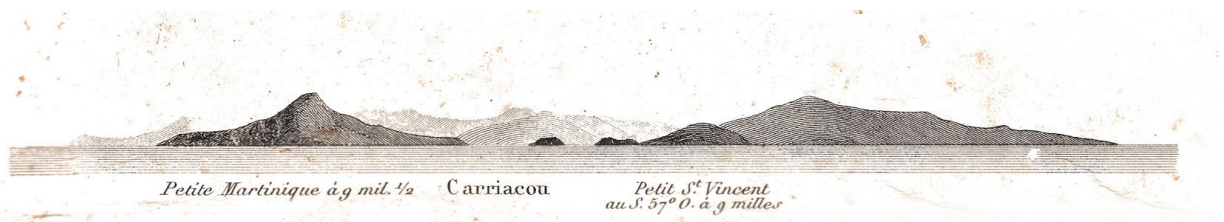


Figure 1. Inset from a navigational map of the Grenadines for the sailor to spatial orient themselves based on the elevation profile. (Service hydrographique de la Marine, 1873)

This image was selected for the back cover of the 2026 edited volume *Turning the Tide: Climate Change, Social Change and Islandness* (Mitchell et al., 2026) as it so directly illustrates and connects with the last chapter of this volume, which is a reflection on island studies and island scholarship (Mijts et al., 2026). Positionality of the researcher is of high importance, just like the positionality of mapmakers. Research forms part of an agenda, a pathway that leads to ecological, social and/or economic change, whether intentional or not. Furthermore, we need to expand that understanding to the boundless sea that surrounds the islands. However, when it comes to the ocean, island studies loses grip. As much as we are good at understanding terrestrial processes, we have a very hard time to imagine ourselves through the surface of the ocean and to make sense of human-hydrological interactions (Roberts 2007). For that purpose we need innovative approaches to translate the intimate connections of island communities to the ocean in maps that have depth, that immerse the user of the map in the relations between community and ecosystem beyond the terrestrial contours of the islands.

What we see in the world around us highly depends on what we are looking for, and from what perspective we are looking at the things around us. We need more maps to illuminate and communicate these different perspectives, and we need to be aware of the impacts that we have as researchers and as map makers on the communities and contexts that we depict, and the potential of leading the way in sustainable development.

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