BETWEEN IŽ AND DUGI OTOK ISLANDS:

Lived experience as a pathway into Island Studies

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ABSTRACT: Islands are frequently imagined as idealised spaces of escape, refuge, and exceptional experience, shaped as much by cultural and emotional projections as by their geographical realities. Drawing on personal memories and lived experiences from two Croatian islands: Iž and Dugi Otok, this article reflects on how encounters with island life across different life stages informed my scholarly engagement with Island Studies. Through a reflexive narrative approach, I trace a shift from childhood idealisation of islands as carefree summer landscapes to a more complex understanding shaped by off-season labour, infrastructural limitations, refuge during the Croatian Homeland War (1991–1995), and long-term familial ties. These experiences reveal islands as ambivalent and relational spaces, simultaneously offering safety and hardship, belonging and constraint. By situating personal experience within broader debates on island imaginaries, islandness, and resilience, the article argues for the importance of lived, embodied knowledge in island studies. It conceptualises islandness as an emergent and negotiated condition, shaped by seasonal rhythms, social solidarities, historical disruptions, and emotional attachments. Ultimately, the article demonstrates how personal memory and place-based experience can serve as productive sources of scholarly insight, enriching understandings of islands as dynamic spaces of memory, identity, and resilience

KEYWORDS: Iž; Dugi otok; islandness; Island Studies; island resilience

Introduction

Islands have long served as sources of inspiration for artists and writers, functioning not only as physical settings but as powerful cultural and literary symbols (Baldacchino, 2006). For those who do not live on them permanently but encounter them only intermittently, islands are often idealised as vaguely mystical spaces: places of retreat from the "real" world, of isolation from everyday concerns, and of heightened or exceptional experience (Gillis, 2003; Gillis, 2004; Baldacchino, 2010; Carvalho et al., 2024). They are frequently imagined as bounded and self-contained worlds, detached from mainland rhythms and pressures, and thus particularly amenable to projection and fantasy (Hay, 2006). In popular and cultural imaginaries, islands are also associated with notions of paradise, escape, and emotional refuge, offering a promise of slowness and simplicity in contrast to accelerated modern life (Baldacchino, 2008; Stratford et al., 2011). In this sense, the island often functions less as a geographical reality than as an affective and symbolic construct, what island scholars have described as an "imagined" or "mythic" island (Gillis, 2004).

Although I was not born on an island but on the nearby mainland, my early childhood was marked by contact with two Croatian islands on which members of my extended family lived,

on both my mother's and father's sides. One of these, the island of Iž (Figure 1), was strongly idealised in my childhood imagination. I spent summer holidays there with my grandparents and relatives, and my memories are saturated with sunbathing, swimming, forming friendships, playing outdoors, attending summer festivities, and experiencing my first adolescent infatuations. For many years, these impressions elicited an immediate sense of joy at the mere mention of the island and island life. Like most visitors, I perceived the island as a place of happiness: a space where obligations were suspended and where only pleasant memories seemed to exist. This perception shifted abruptly when I was twelve years old. This shift in perception may have reflected the different perspectives of a child and an adolescent, as well as the process of growing up; however, I felt it was primarily the result of new insights into island life gained during the time of year when the islands could be experienced fully, outside the tourist season. My mother decided to restore an old olive grove on the island and, in her determination to devote herself seriously to this endeavour, required us to spend winter weekends there clearing overgrown groves with rudimentary tools. The olive groves, which I perceived as being kilometres away from the settlement, were reached by long walks in cold weather, carrying equipment on our backs. The old stone house, poorly insulated, was unbearably cold. The return to the mainland was possible only via the sole early-morning ferry connection before sunrise, making the routine of waking early and waiting for the boat in freezing winds an experience that intensified the negative emotions the island began to evoke in me. It was during this period that I first became consciously aware of a more 'realistic' image of island life. My thinking shifted from individual memories of events on the island to the island itself as a composite entity: its problems, inhabitants, neglected landscapes, and structural limitations became fused into a single, enduring memory. The island ceased to be merely the setting of episodic recollections and instead became a lived totality, deeply embedded in my thoughts and perceptions.

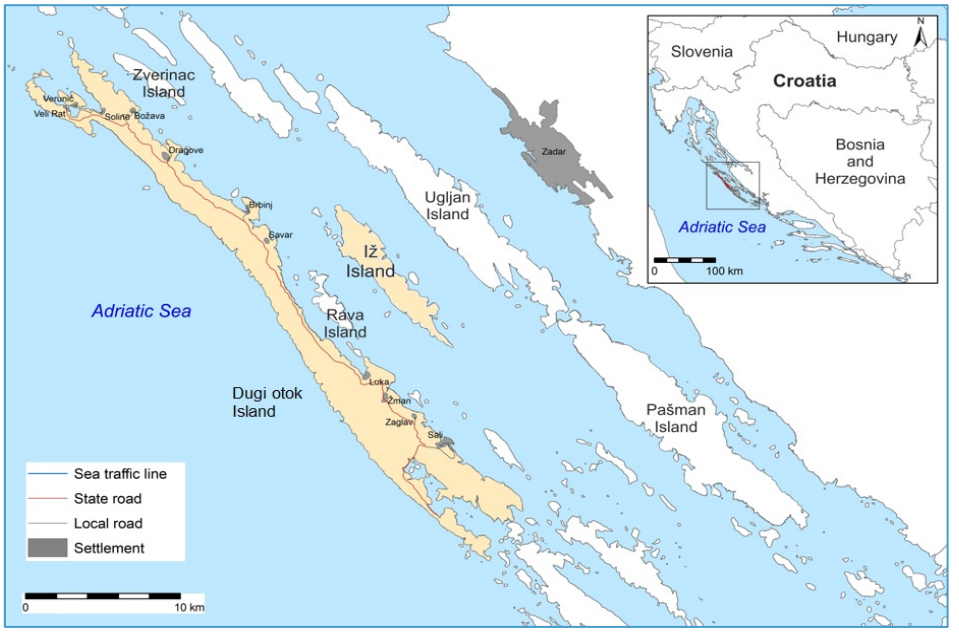

Figure 1 - Iž and Dugi otok (based on Croatian Geodetic Administration information [2016], Central Registry of Spatial Units in the Republic of Croatia [GIS shapefiles]).

A second, and ultimately more formative, source of inspiration later in life was Dugi Otok. My grandfather and unmarried aunt lived there; two characterologically distinct islanders who, unlike my grandparents on Iž, were born on the island and spent their entire lives there. Their lives were emblematic of what might be described as a 'typical' island existence. My grandfather (Figure 2) was a fisherman with worn shoulders and calloused hands, physically exhausted by a lifetime of labour. My aunt spent her entire life as an agricultural worker and as an employee in the island's only factory, a fish-processing plant. When Croatia declared independence from the former Yugoslavia and the Croatian Homeland War (1991–1995) broke out in the early 1990s, I was fourteen years old. While the city of Zadar, where I was living at the time, was subjected to bombing, the nearby archipelago and the islands, located only a few kilometres from the mainland, were spared from the devastation of war. It is noteworthy that islands have historically served as places of refuge during periods of conflict. During the Ottoman incursions of the 15th century, for instance, a significant portion of the mainland population fled to the islands, where many eventually settled permanently (Faričić, 2012). Fleeing from bombing, my family and I sought refuge in the same house on that island that would later become the primary inspiration for much of my research and writing. At the time, the island appeared forgotten, poorly equipped, and characterised by inadequate infrastructure; yet simultaneously, it functioned as a place of safety and shelter. During the years I spent living there, I encountered first-hand the many challenges that island life entails. For someone accustomed to an urban environment, these challenges imprinted themselves deeply in my memory and became a lifelong source of inspiration and inquiry.



Figure 2 - Jakov Čuka (my grandfather) and his mother Marija Maruša Čuka (the "white widow")

Scholars sometimes argue that islanders, or those who are closely tied to islands, may experience these spaces subjectively and are therefore unable to assess events and processes objectively, as their life experiences allegedly impede critical distance (Baldacchino 2008; Nadarajah et al., 2022; Grydehøj et al., 2025). While this may be true to a certain extent, my own experience has led me to the parallel conclusion that those who lack direct, lived familiarity with islanders and island life often misinterpret both their experiences of islands and the social, economic, and cultural processes that unfold within them. Fieldwork is a crucial component of island research, yet island communities can be highly closed and reluctant to engage openly with outsiders. Throughout my research and interactions with islanders, I have frequently encountered reserved, even cynical responses to questions about their lives and the problems they face. Only after learning of my own island experiences and familial roots did many interlocutors begin to speak openly and candidly. Such dynamics of guardedness towards outsiders and greater openness towards perceived insiders have been widely noted in island and small-community research, where trust, familiarity, and shared positionality strongly shape access to knowledge (Baldacchino, 2008; Hay, 2006; Nadarajah et al., 2022). This positionality, simultaneously insider and outsider, has profoundly shaped not only my perception of islands but also my research practices and interpretative frameworks. Rather than constituting an obstacle to understanding, my shifting perceptions, misrecognitions, and emotional responses have become integral to how I conceptualise islands as lived, remembered, and contested spaces.

Humans And Nature: Interdependence And Lived Experience

One of the first intense and distinctly island experiences I encountered as a teenager was water scarcity. Running water in unlimited quantities is often taken for granted in urban environments but the water regime I had to follow on the island – careful conservation and measured consumption – prompted me to rethink the environment in which I lived. I began to observe and analyse natural phenomena with unusual intensity: the seasonal distribution of rainfall, fluctuations in air pressure recorded on the barometer hanging in the kitchen, and the rhythms of daily life shaped by environmental conditions. Water supply depended entirely on precipitation, as the only source of potable water was rainwater collected from the roof into a large concrete cistern.

Winter days in the small, rural environment, devoid of urban entertainment, seemed to stretch endlessly with boredom, and spending time outdoors, wandering along narrow goat paths, became a daily routine. I was particularly fascinated by areas where water accumulated on the ground, realising what a precious resource it was. I explored dense maquis vegetation, searching for interesting landforms and hydrological phenomena in fully overgrown gullies and occasionally fertile patches of island terrain.

The interdependence of humans and nature became even clearer as I discovered that the lush vegetation often concealed anthropogenic forms. Dry stone walls, small field shelters, wild olives, and grapevines emerged from a landscape that appeared natural, yet hid stories of ancestors whose survival had depended on the careful use of natural island resources (Figure 3). What began as sheer boredom awakened a curiosity about understanding the island environment and the lives of the people who had shaped this cultural landscape, much of which had by then been abandoned.



Figure 3 - Dugi otok's agricultural landscape (author's photo 2025).

To shorten the winter days, we began following in the footsteps of our ancestors, clearing vegetation around the house in an effort to tame the slopes and plant olive trees amidst the rocky karst terrain. Soil erosion became an immediate problem, and I learned firsthand that it could be addressed by constructing dry stone walls along the contour lines of sloping land. The small amount of arable soil that remained was thus trapped' within these walls, and I felt pride in having woven a part of myself into the island landscape.

Agricultural stewardship of the land had sustained island communities for generations, and later, landscape transformations and land-use changes on Dugi Otok reflecting broader social and economic processes, became the focus of my doctoral research. I explored similar themes on other islands as well. Because of my personal experience and deep connection to the place, I felt that this research was a way of honouring my ancestors and the cultural landscapes they had created.

Becoming aware of island challenges: Social dynamics and migration

It was not only the natural environment that sparked my curiosity. Many aspects of island life captivated me, particularly the interactions among islanders, their habits, customs, and rituals. I was fascinated by the profound solidarity of island communities, which is palpable to anyone who lives there: even if you are quarrelling with a neighbour, in times of need, they will be the first to offer help. This is not merely altruism, there is a practical logic at play, a recognition that life on an island is interdependent; today you may rely on someone, tomorrow they may rely on you, and everyone is acutely aware of this mutual reliance. This solidarity reflects the form of everyday resilience grounded in the practical logic of island life. Also, in response to limited institutional support, islanders often develop informal systems for maintaining infrastructure, such as repairing paths, managing water resources,

or organising transport. These locally driven solutions are key expressions of island resilience, as they enhance adaptive capacity, reduce dependence on external actors, and strengthen community autonomy in the face of structural constraints.

Another topic that deeply moved me and later shaped my research interests was overseas migration. Islands have long been understood as sites shaped by migration, primarily of young people (Royle, 2001; King, 2009; Connell, 2018; Scheyvens & Russell, 2019), and Croatian islands are no exception (Faričić & Čuka, 2020; Čuka & Oroz, 2024). One day, while rummaging through old cupboard (i.e. once again motivated by boredom) I discovered a large bundle of letters. I was immediately drawn to the unusual envelopes, used for airmail, and even more captivated by the colourful stamps, unlike anything I had seen before. All but one of the letters were sent from Australia. I secretly opened and read letters that my uncle, an emigrant, had written from Perth. I could not understand why, since leaving in the mid-1950s, he had never returned to his hometown. Later, I learned that this was a period of illegal migration: he had fled the former Yugoslavia and was legally forbidden to return until the establishment of the new sovereign Republic of Croatia.

The only letter not from Australia came from the United States. It was written by my great-grandfather, who had emigrated to America at the beginning of the 20th century, leaving behind his wife and young son, my grandfather. My great-grandmother struggled to maintain the family property and care for her son; from family stories, I learned that she was of a strong and difficult character, frustrated and angry about life as a so-called 'white widow.' This term referred to women whose husbands had gone overseas in search of a better life but were unable to bring their families along. Such destinies were widespread across the islands, and the money sent from abroad enabled the construction of the house in which I grew up. The letter from the United States was the last one he ever sent. In it, he said farewell to his son, as he was gravely ill and had only a few months to live. I still keep this letter as a poignant reminder of the harsh realities faced by island communities and the limits that islands impose on the survival of their inhabitants. Islands are spaces with finite resources, which often constrain both economic and demographic development. This recognition naturally led me to consider questions of sustainable development as central to my research, particularly those concerning demographic sustainability and island infrastructure, issues that are critical if islanders are to achieve improved living conditions and secure futures. Inspired by these emigration stories, I later examined immigration records in databases related to Ellis Island, once the primary American immigration gateway, which eventually led to published research on islander migration and transnational networks (Čuka et al., 2020).

Island as a memory

Over the course of my life, islands have offered me a complex and evolving set of experiences, sun-soaked summer holidays filled with play, friendship, and the simple joys of nature on Iž; challenging winter weekends spent clearing overgrown terraces, hauling water, and confronting the harsh realities of island life; and the deeper emotional encounters with migration, loss, and ancestral histories on Dugi Otok. Each of these experiences left an imprint, some joyful and others difficult, some immediate and some realised only later through reflection.

What I have come to recognise is that these experiences, whether positive or painful, have transformed the islands themselves into something more than physical places. My memories

do not merely recall the events or the geography; they shape the island into a site of reflection, identity, and imagination. The islands exist now in my mind as living memories, layered with joy, struggle, discovery, and connection. In this sense, while my memories originate from the islands, they have also created the islands as memories themselves; places that carry the weight of lived experience, ancestral stories, and the sensory, emotional, and cognitive traces of a life intertwined with their landscapes.

It can be acknowledged that the physical islands continue to shape experience, but equally, the islands exist in my mind as complex, dynamic constructs formed by memory, reflection, and imagination. In other words, my lived experiences; sun, struggle, play, migration, loss, have crystallised, turning the islands into repositories of memory, identity, and research inspiration.

Islands emerge as inherently ambivalent spaces, where opposing conditions coexist rather than cancel one another. They can signify exposure and fragility while simultaneously offering a sense of completeness and protection; they evoke images of paradise as readily as experiences of hardship, and function both as sites of refuge and of exclusion (Baldacchino, 2005; Luo & Grydehøj, 2017; Ronström, 2009). These tensions were not abstract to me but deeply experiential. From my own perspective, islands represented safety and asylum, transforming into places of abundance and ease in the summer and into environments of difficulty during the winter months. I felt socially embedded within island communities, yet at the same time acutely aware of my separation from mainland infrastructures and everyday conveniences. It was through living these contradictions that my understanding of islands was formed and my research trajectory took shape.

Islandness between theory and experience

Within Island Studies, 'islandness' is a widely used yet conceptually fluid term. It is often described as a form of identity or sensibility that emerges from the material realities of island life (Randall, 2021). While some interpretations foreground physical features such as insularity and distance from the mainland (Fernandes & Pinho, 2017), these elements do not fully capture the diversity of island experiences. As a result, islandness remains a debated and context-sensitive concept. Viewing the sea solely as a separating force risks narrowing this understanding; alternatively, approaches that recognise the sea as a space of movement and connection, and that consider land and sea as relational, allow islandness to be understood in more expansive and inclusive terms (Foley et al., 2023).

My experiences of island life played a significant role in shaping my understanding of islandness and my perception of the concept. My own encounters with island life suggest that islandness cannot be fully grasped through abstract definitions alone. Rather than existing as a fixed set of characteristics, islandness emerged for me through everyday practices, seasonal rhythms, and embodied engagements with island space. Experiences of water scarcity, limited infrastructure, and dependence on weather conditions revealed the material constraints often associated with island life, while social intimacy, solidarity, and shared histories highlighted its relational and affective dimensions. These elements were not experienced separately but as intertwined aspects of daily existence, shaping both perception and behaviour. Living on the island also complicated notions of insularity and remoteness. While physical separation from the mainland was undeniable, most acutely felt through restricted transport connections, lack of services, and absence of urban conveniences, the sea simultaneously functioned as a conduit of movement, memory, and imagination.

Migration stories, letters from overseas, and family histories embedded within island households testified to long-standing transnational connections that challenged simplistic readings of islands as isolated or closed spaces. In this sense, islandness was experienced not as detachment from the world, but as a particular mode of being connected to it.

Islandness further revealed itself as deeply temporal and seasonal. The stark contrast between summer abundance and winter hardship structured not only economic and social life but also emotional responses to the island. Periods of warmth, sociability, and openness alternated with phases of isolation, scarcity, and introspection. These cyclical shifts reinforced the ambivalence that characterises islandness, producing simultaneous feelings of belonging and confinement, attachment and frustration. Such contradictions resonate strongly with scholarly accounts of islands as paradoxical spaces, yet their full meaning only became apparent through lived experience. Taken together, these experiences suggest that islandness is best understood as an emergent, relational condition, produced through interactions between people, environments, histories, and mobilities. My own position, shaped by partial belonging and repeated movement between island and mainland, allowed me to perceive islandness not as a singular identity or static condition, but as a dynamic process continuously negotiated in practice. This perspective has informed both my theoretical understanding of islandness and the methodological orientation of my research, positioning lived experience not as a limitation, but as a crucial lens through which island realities can be more carefully and reflexively interpreted.

Research trajectory, institutional context, and ongoing island engagement

The Croatian islands that inspired my initial engagement with island studies, most notably Dugi Otok and the wider Zadar archipelago, have remained central to my scholarly work. Over time, these places have shaped a sustained research trajectory addressing demographic change, mobility, land use, environmental pressures, and social inequalities in island contexts. Several of my publications focus directly on Dugi Otok, examining processes of concentrating economic activities and population along coastal areas and demographic transformation (Čuka, 2006), landscape and agricultural change (Čuka, 2013), and the interplay of multiple temporalities and changing mobilities in everyday island life (Čuka & Oroz, 2024).

Beyond single-island case studies, my work situates Croatian islands within broader archipelagic and national frameworks. This includes analyses of waste management and environmental perception (Špeh & Čuka, 2023), long-term land-use and land-cover change across the Croatian islands (Blaće et al., 2024), and tourism dynamics in the context of the COVID-19 and post-COVID periods (Čuka et al., 2024). More recently, my research has addressed questions of social and geographic marginalisation, focusing on healthcare accessibility and structural inequalities affecting island populations (Čuka, Sutlović, & Faričić, 2025). Together, these studies reflect a sustained engagement with islands as spaces where environmental, social, and infrastructural challenges intersect. My research has also been shaped by my institutional context. As a faculty member of the Department of Geography, at the University of Zadar, an institution historically and intellectually oriented toward the Adriatic Sea and island research, I work within a scholarly environment in which islands represent a central object of inquiry. Collaborative research projects and edited volumes emerging from this context (e.g., Faričić & Čuka, 2020; Čuka & Faričić, 2020) have further reinforced my focus on islands as relational spaces positioned between urban centres, maritime networks, and peripheral geographies.

Although I do not permanently reside on the islands that inspired my research, I live on the nearby mainland and maintain a strong, ongoing connection to them. I own a family house on the island, which I visit regularly, and I continue to care for olive groves inherited from my ancestors. These practices ground my academic work in embodied, seasonal engagement with island landscapes and forms of intergenerational responsibility. Over time, my scholarly engagement with Island Studies has deepened my awareness of these lived experiences, allowing theoretical reflection and everyday practice to inform one another.

Conclusion

My multifaceted experiences with islands have profoundly shaped my understanding of their complex and layered nature, as spaces of both refuge and challenge, memory and imagination. Through personal encounters, from idyllic childhood summers on Iž to the harsh realities of winter on Dugi Otok, and from familial migration stories to environmental engagements, I have come to perceive islands not merely as isolated geographical entities but as dynamic, relational, and ambivalent spaces, imbued with cultural, emotional, and ecological significance. These lived experiences have informed my conceptualisation of islandness as an emergent, relational condition, fluid, seasonal, and continuously negotiated through embodied practices, social interactions, and historical memories. My reflections further underscore the importance of acknowledging the subjective and emotional dimensions of island life, which shape both individual identities and collective narratives. By engaging deeply with the material constraints, social solidarities, and transnational connections characteristic of island life, I have come to understand islands as fundamentally spaces of tension, where notions of safety and fragility, abundance and hardship, coexist and intertwine. These insights challenge reductive or static portrayals, emphasising instead islands as sites of ongoing negotiation, cultural resilience, and personal meaning. Moreover, my research highlights the value of incorporating lived experience into island studies, revealing the nuanced ways islands are encountered, remembered, and reimagined. Recognising the relational and emotional aspects of islandness enriches scholarly understanding while affirming the role of personal memory and emotional truth in shaping perceptions of these unique spaces. Ultimately, my journey demonstrates that islands transcend their physical landscapes; they are repositories of memory, sites of identity, and catalysts for reflection, continually inspiring new ways of thinking about connection, belonging, and resilience within island communities.

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