INTEGRATING EVERYDAY INSPIRATION INTO HIGHER REALMS OF ACADEMIA:

The inspirational Faroe Islands

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this article is to unfold my personal inspiration to research islands, and specifically the Faroe Islands. To do so, I employ an autoethnographic inspired approach, a perspective that rejects the distinction between the higher realms of academia and other life domains in which researchers are positioned. Rather, autoethnography draws our attention to the everyday messiness and rhizomatic nature of life. In the article, I outline my use of the concept of inspiration. The subsequent discussion is structured around vignettes, which are moments which stand out as inspirational and analytically meaningful. I have revisited these moments many times, each playing an integral role in the journey toward becoming an Island Studies scholar. More specifically, my approach to Island Studies takes its point of departure from the concept of the aquapelago. To that end, each of the three main themes in the discussion commences with a vignette, representing an inspirational moment. The themes are: Embodied experiences of the islands, culture of migration, and closeknit social relations in the Faroe Islands.

KEYWORDS: Island studies, autoethnography, inspiration, Faroe Islands, migration

Introduction

> *Islands, and specifically the Faroe Islands, have figured in my imagination for as long as I remember. As a young child growing up in Edinburgh, Scotland, in the early 1970s, I heard my Faroese mother speaking in her mother tongue on the telephone to our relatives on the islands. My mother spoke to us of the islands, of family, and showed photos to us children, and I soon came to understand that the Faroe Islands were important to our identity. It was part of my mother and therefore, part of who we were. I imagined being on the islands and remember being curious about this place. Yet, I had not seen the islands—at least I could not remember visiting, as I was so young the only time, I had been there. The Faroe Islands, therefore, remained imagined, until I was eight years old.*

In this article I outline how and why islands became inspirational in my research. Inspiration has triggered my curiosity and motivation and fundamentally shaped the research questions I have posed. Yet the memories and experiences which have inspired me are not confined within professional life—on the contrary. Rather, inspirational moments are deeply

embedded in my personal biography and thus inseparable from my research inspiration. As argued by Mills (1959), the sociological imagination is situated and should address the public-private relationship (Brewer, 2004). Neither personal biography nor societal history and structures can be understood without attending to both. Therefore, I will outline how my sociologically emplaced inspiration represents an intertwining of my personal biography and the social structural, cultural, historical, and political environment in which my research is situated. I do so by structuring this article around vignettes—each framing discussions of themes within island studies, that I have engaged with.

The vignette above is one of my first memories of the Faroe Islands, which later came to be the centre of my research. To offer context for this article, I start with a short continuation of how the Faroe Islands in part became the place of my upbringing, education, professional journey—and home. As is common among citizens of small islands, I too was highly mobile and by way of in and out-migration, moved between Scotland and the Faroe Islands several times. My family migrated to the Faroe Islands when I was eight years old, where I completed my primary and secondary education. At eighteen, I moved to Scotland for a year of work before returning to the islands. Again, I relocated to Scotland at 21, initially for employment and subsequently to pursue higher education and my PhD studies. In my early thirties, I returned to the Faroe Islands, first working in private industry and later within a government ministry. In 2014, I joined the University of the Faroe Islands, where I have held an academic position since and consider the Faroe Islands my long-term (and hopefully permanent) place of residence: my home. I outline this migration history both to situate my own perspective and to reflect the broader culture of migration that characterises the Faroe Islands (Hayfield, 2017), something which I return to later.

The island encounters throughout my life, which have triggered my inspiration to study islands are moments of inspiration: moments, which are manifested in the selection of vignettes offered throughout this article. Whilst these moments speak to intersecting research themes within island studies, they are examined separately for the purpose of discussion. This emplaced inspiration—the motivation behind my island research—has taken shape across diverse moments. However, it was not difficult for me to pinpoint certain moments. Those I have included as vignettes stand out clearly in my memory as defining moments, as epiphanies, which have shaped my island life. As a point of clarification, when I refer to inspiration, it is that which for me has been motivational, and even constitutive of my quest to understand and research island places.

The aim of this article is to outline my island inspiration and how inspiration is manifested in a continuous dialogue between my research and the scholarly literature on islands. Through my own inspiration and situatedness in the Faroese context, I will discuss relevant theoretical issues within island studies. The moments I outline throughout the article have stayed with me, resurfacing through my own narrative, conversations with others, and an ongoing reflection and curiosity—even tracing back to childhood. Throughout the article I draw on my own material in the form of interviews, surveys, and fieldwork, as well as the work of other scholars. The discussion which follows is structured around three themes, significant for-and-in my work, and which I also argue are important within island studies in general. In doing so, I weave together my own writing and that of other Island Studies scholars with my inspirational moments. Before turning to the themes in the discussion, I provide three sections. The first is that of autoethnography, which has been helpful in bringing together personal experiences with scholarly research. I subsequently, provide the reader with context of the Faroe Islands, and thirdly, a brief discussion of inspiration as a concept and process.

An Autoethnographic inspired approach

This article is framed through the lens of inspiration, yet it ultimately explores writing itself, my "writing stories". Thus I situate my research into the complex, layered, contextual, and rhizomatic nature of life (Richardson, & St- Pierre, 2005). These other life domains into which "writing stories" are located, include family ties, community structures, personal history, academic debates, and research interests (Richardson, & St- Pierre, 2005). Seen this way, the process of remembering and reengaging with personal inspirational moments becomes a way of rejecting "…the distinction between a *higher* realm of conceptual, analytical life where predictability and certainty may be found and a *lower* realm residing in sensory, material, corporeal, and practical life…" (Bochner & Ellis, 2022, p. 9). Thus, the messiness of everyday human and non-human encounters, socially and professionally, can evoke inspiration. From cognition, to emotions, and body-environment encounters emerge entangled situations, which for a social scientist like me, fuel curiosity, inspiration, and motivation to understand human relations in the world.

At this intersection of personal experience and island analysis sits my approach, which I loosely define as autoethnography. Loosely, because it originally (at the time of the research) was unintentional, but transformed into a retrospect autoethnography based on memories, extensive fieldnotes, interviews, coded data, and writing. I refer to the process as autoethnography as I was a participant observer in the cultures I was studying, documenting these through various research projects. In doing so, I was not intentionally looking to study islands on their own terms (McCall, 1994). Rather I was interested in issues such as culture, social structures, youth out-migration, and gender in the Faroe Islands. As I delved into my research, it became clear that there was something about islands, for which the rural, community, and ethnographic literature was insufficient. When in my readings and many literature searches, I came across the term *Island Studies*, the analytical lens through which I approached research and interpreted data evolved, expanded, and was enriched. Thus, my ideas have emerged in the spaces of my own research and the work of other scholars.

Importantly, autoethnography involves the analysis of personal experiences to contribute to and develop understandings of broader phenomena, and in my case, *islandness* (Anderson, 2006). Living in the Faroe Islands, this autoethnography seeks to "retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 276). Writing about epiphanies this way concern autobiographically important moments, which are remembered because of their significant impact on self-understanding, identity, or the life trajectory (Ellis et al., 2011). Epiphanies encompass those identifiable moments which can be persistent memories and that which "compels the researcher to return to and explore that life-altering moment" (Kien, 2013, p. 578). Thus, in the context of autoethnography, epiphanies are understood retrospectively, and the experiences of epiphanies become analytically meaningful.

It is notable that epiphanies in autoethnography are not necessarily major life-changing moments. According to Denzin (2001) epiphanies are "existentially problematic moments" (p. 145) with diverse structures, which can also evolve from one another. The epiphany structures I consider most pertinent for this autoethnography are firstly, *relived* epiphanies: these are experiences which have an immediate impact, but through reliving (e.g. by remembering, pondering, reencountering, or referring to the event) meaning is attached retrospectively. Secondly, there are *illuminative* epiphanies: these Denzin (2001) points out

are minor episodes, but which nevertheless are symbolically representative of larger problematic issues. *Illuminative* epiphanies thus shed light on underlying structural conditions. There is, however, a distinction between epiphany and inspiration. Conceptually, an epiphany can suddenly, or over time, change how a researcher understands or sees issues, whereas inspiration includes a future-directedness, a motivation and an acting-upon of ideas. Put simply, an epiphany concerns understanding and meaning whilst inspiration is about motivation and action. I return to the concept of inspiration below for a fuller explanation.

Throughout this article, I refer to inspirational moments expressed through vignettes as shaping my inspiration over time. The vignettes, however, equally amount to epiphanies, mostly of the relived or illuminative type of epiphanies (Denzin, 2001), which either immediately or over time became inspirational. Thus, the vignettes more likely represent moments in which epiphanies and inspiration become blurred and interact to emerge as the foundation of research questions. Beyond being inspirational, the process through which I came to fully understand the moments in the vignettes are integral to my island studies research journey.

Living and working in the small Faroe Islands, inevitably entails that researchers become implicated in the lives of participants, and vice versa. Relations extend beyond the field, as people continuously encounter one another. Relations are multiple and it is impossible to avoid encountering or at least knowing-of one another. That is to say, being familiar with others, recognising them, e.g. from the media, or knowing which networks they belong to (Johannesen, 2012). In such contexts it becomes impossible to enter the research settings with one master identity. Although researchers may not have personal familiarity with participants, their encounters may still be shaped by preconceived notions of various positionalities. As I argue throughout this article, relationality (between humans and the non-human) is integral to understanding the Faroe Islands as an aquapelagic society. Relationality in this sense encompasses many forms of entanglements, which implicate positionality, of which I limit myself to the significant features of insider-outsiderness and aquapelagic- and social relational positionalities.

Faroe-based researchers share the aquapelagity (human-sea relations, weather systems, social relations, boundedness etc.) with those that they research. In this sense place and spatial orientations are embedded within positionality (Germinaro, 2025). Cognitive, bodily, and emotional experiences of the aquapelagity are, therefore, a position, which I unfold throughout the article. Social relations as positionality are another significant consideration when conducting research in the Faroe Islands. Emplacing people in social and family networks is integral to social navigation in the Faroe Islands (Hayfield & Schug, 2019). I have belonged to Faroese social and family networks since childhood and during fieldwork have often been asked about my family name. At times knowledge of social networks has even been a precondition for consent and for participants to determine what and how much information is safe to disclose (Hayfield, 2022).

Positionality, however, is more complex than the insider-outsider dichotomy suggests. The hyphen-space in between is a metaphor for highlighting shifting, fluid relations. The hyphen-space can be understood as "fluid relational spaces in which boundaries between researcher-researched are blurred, influence is mutual, and multiple meanings articulated and worked out in different ways by all research participants" (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013, p. 368). Throughout this article I have attempted to work in-and-with the hyphen by analysing how my own personal and professional experiences have shaped my inspiration to study islands.

Through this engagement, I elucidate the process through with my research transgressed from islands as locus, to islands as focus (Ronström, 2013), and subsequently to the islands as an aquapelagic society (Hayward, 2012, 2025).

The Faroes as context

Situated in the far North Atlantic Ocean, the Faroe Islands comprise 18 small islands with a population of 55,000 (Figure 1). The land area of the Faroe Islands is in total 1,400 square kilometres, however, the perspective of smallness changes when considering that the sea area covers 274,000 square kilometres (Government of the Faroe Islands, 2026). The island climate is hyper-oceanic meaning that variation in temperatures throughout the year is small. Furthermore, storms are frequent and the climate is windy with much precipitation (Kongsager & Baron, 2024). The geographical positioning entails that days are short during the winter, and long during the summer—when it barely gets dark. In stormy weather, the sea is rough, waves high, the sea spray striking, and waterfalls on the islands sometimes are literally blown upwards from wind gusts. Such weather systems, lightness, darkness, and the sea profoundly shape the sensory, bodily, and emotional experiences of people who live in and with such conditions (Souhami, 2023).



Figure 1 – The Faroe Islands position in the North Atlantic (Hayfield, 2026).

Constitutionally, the Faroe Islands belong to the Kingdom of Denmark; however, the islands are an autonomous region with their own government, flag, language, and a strong identity which is deeply connected to the Faroese language. The history of Faroese language is one of diglossia in which two language norms existed (Pax Leonard, 2011). Previously, Faroese

was spoken in an everyday "low variety", however, in church, schools, and formal settings Danish was the norm. After Faroese written language was introduced, a nationalistic movement was established in the late 19th century with the aim of legitimising and developing Faroese (Pax Leonard, 2011) in all domains of society. Spoken only in the Faroe Islands, the Faroese are highly protective of their language. Hoffmann and Holm (2025) have identified an ideology of authenticity and a language hierarchy amongst speakers, which privileges native speakers as the most legitimate and valuable form of Faroese: constituting a context for second-language learning, which is difficult and fraught with tension. This is exacerbated when immigrants realise that learning Faroese may not be enough; many environments, especially on the labour market, require knowledge of Danish too (Hayfield, 2024; Hoffmann & Holm, 2025).

The Faroe Islands are affluent and the welfare system is grounded within the Nordic welfare model (Jákupsstovu, 2007; Sundström, 2006). This means that education is free, and social and family policies are generous and provided for by the state e.g. affordable quality childcare, care for the elderly, and generous parental leave payments. The socio-demographic system promotes egalitarianism and has enabled women's labour market participation, which is amongst the highest in Europe (Hayfield, 2020). Despite its smallness, the Faroe Islands has its own university, with around 1,000 students. Originally established to develop Faroese scientific language, it now offers almost 30 degrees (bachelor and master, as well as PhD). Many young Faroese, however, out-migrate for educational purposes.

Industry and export in the Faroe Islands are overwhelmingly concentrated in fishing and aquacultural industries. The Faroe Islands has a long history of fishing, and industrial fishing commenced in the 1880s and in more recent decades, salmon fish farming has become an important industry. The sea, seafaring, and fishing significantly frame Faroese self-understanding. The sea is a place of (male) work and entails that men work long-distance: historically this was for many months, or even years; but is now more structured—typically 4-12 weeks at a time (Hayfield & Vágsheyg, 2024; Hovgaard, 2015). The sea, however, is also a place of great loss. These days working at sea is much safer, however, cultural memories of the sea as a place that both gives and takes is evident in the collective conscience and finds its expression through art, literature, rituals (annual day of remembrance for lives lost at sea), and public expressions (e.g. plaques or inscriptions) (Grand & Olsen, 2021).

Inspiration as moments

In this section, I briefly consult the literature on inspiration to frame how moments of inspiration have been, or became, intertwined with my work with islands. In some cases, these moments either informed or made sense in my dialogue with the island studies literature as I recognised myself in the theory. Other times the moments were inspirational in my data analysis and theory building. Thus, inspiration involved triggered-*by* moments, which evoked or transcended my hitherto knowledge and subsequently (sometimes over time) inspired-*to* research studies as an approach motivation (Thrash et al., 2014; Thrash & Elliot, 2004). Some moments, that I consider in this article, may have been unexceptional for those present, but struck me in a lasting way. Other moments might initially have appeared insignificant yet became extended processes of relived epiphany and inspiration unfolding over time. In still other instances, moments evoked inspiration and motivated an almost immediate action, e.g. triggering a research idea.

An holistic approach to inspiration involves encounters which are affective, cognitive and connotative (Gilson & Kool, 2019). This is compatible with the aquapelagic perspective of islands-sea-people relations as assemblages. Going back, I might not always have had this vocabulary but found there to be a gap in the rural, community, and ethnographic literature, which (in part) informed my perspective. Therefore, for me, inspirational moments have encompassed diverse sensory, emotional, and cognitive encounters. Certain inspirational moments were primarily affective, felt intensely at a bodily and emotional level, especially when I was a child. These I was not always able to fully interpret until later when I was older as they were relived and even became illuminative. At a fundamental level, therefore, my island-inspired encounters were always embodied, emotional, and affective, yet not always immediately cognitively understood.

Thrash et al. (2014) argue that inspiration, in contrast to emotion, is characterised by two focus objects, active and passive, to constitute a full episode of inspiration. These focus objects are evocation and transcendence i.e. being inspired *by* something (passive) as well as being inspired *to* something (active) i.e. motivational action (Thrash et al., 2014). In other words, a full episode of inspiration includes a trigger and beyond ordinary element, e.g. being moved by a piece of art (inspired *by*) as well as motivational action, e.g. motivation to create an artistic piece (inspired *to*).

I draw attention to the full episode of inspiration according to Thrash et al. (2014) to create a space to discuss temporality and inspiration. Inspirational moments during childhood were evocative and transcendental. Yet the second and active object of the episode, i.e. motivation to do research, took shape over time. This stands slightly in contrast to inspirational moments during adulthood, whilst in academia, which entailed episodes which were more compressed and holistic. These later moments, in which cognitive and connotative resources were increasingly mobilised, allowed initial triggers/epiphanies to develop into motivated action: most notably in the form of research projects. Thus, despite my inspirational moments taking on different shapes and temporal impacts, over time they have fuelled my scholarly interest in islands.

Embodied islands

> *Migrating to the Faroe Islands involved a long journey north from Scotland and a ferry crossing over a rough North Atlantic Sea. I have few memories from the journey except the harsh sea—and the fear and nausea it produced in my body. In Tórshavn relatives greeted us, and in the following days and weeks we visited relatives, many more than I had ever experienced. At my* abbabeiggi's (Faroese for grandfather's brother*) house, my siblings and I stayed for dinner. The meal—the Faroese delicacy, fermented lamb, and soup—had a sharp, strong, and intense taste, unlike anything I had ever tasted. Accustomed to relatively bland Scottish food, the meal caused a reaction in my body of physical discomfort. Unable to speak or understand Faroese, I observed how other extended family members ate heartily. In the months that followed, I became acutely aware of how small this island society was and how omnipresent the sea felt. The sea was always visible, and we frequently crossed it to visit relatives on the neighbouring island. I felt the cold climate and soon learnt to replace my skirts with trousers and be like other girls at school. The islands did not simply appear to me; they impressed themselves upon me—through weather, language, food, and the sea—in ways that were deeply embodied.*

This vignette represents memories of epiphanies, which I have often contemplated and retold because the affective encounter with the islands bordered on shocking. The shock triggered something in me, which I did not fully understand until years later through reliving them. As I navigated the islands upon arrival, my body was unfamiliar with the weather, sea, islands, and not least smallness, which the Faroe Islands impressed upon me. In 1980 the population of the eighteen islands was a mere 43,000 (Statistics Faroe Islands, 2026). Even the largest town of Tórshavn, where we settled, had around 14,000 inhabitants and was distinctly non-urban, with a close-knit, small-town atmosphere. The Faroe Islands lie relatively isolated in the middle of the North Atlantic and in 1980 connectivity was much less developed. It was, therefore, a stark contrast to the type of city life of Edinburgh, which was all I had known.



Figure 2 – Typical ferry sea-crossing conditions between Scotland and Tórshavn (c1980, Alvi Mortensen).



Figure 3 – Tórshavn, 1980 (Ásmundur Poulsen).

Consequently, when we immigrated, the islands were not yet entangled within me or I with them. I did not feel a sense of belonging, despite my cognitive awareness that our family identity and history was intertwined with this place. Our place-belonginess was connected to the legal rights we had to be in the Faroe Islands, and our many relations (Antonsich, 2010); yet I felt a stranger. Over the months and years that followed my bodily knowledge transformed as it became layered with spatial and social experiences of the islands (Germinaro, 2025). Over time, the island weather, temperature, wind, sea, mountains, cliffs, fog, smallness, close social and family relations, and the feeling of being connected to the natural environment was normalised and part of who I was becoming.

This island way of life had a psychological and emotional impact on me. It became part of my identity, mindset, mobility, manifesting in my identity (Matheson et al., 2024; Vannini, 2011). It was also a way of relating to smallness and physical isolation (Conkling, 2007; Foley et al., 2023), which is especially pertinent to island youth as they struggle with material (land) and social boundaries (Hayfield, 2017). It was however, not until years later, during fieldwork and interviews with immigrants and Faroese-born, that my inspirational trigger (in the vignette) led to new perspectives in my research. As I connected immigrant stories of embodiment to my own, I realised their stories illuminated and gave meaning to my own stories. For clarification, I am mindful not to conflate the experiences of all immigrants to the Faroe Islands. However, the themes I address in this article were pervasive throughout my research, experienced by both family reunified migrants (mostly marriage migrants) as well as many work migrants (at the time of my research there were no refugees in the Faroe Islands; presently there are around 200 refugees from the Ukraine).

Immigration is an emotional, material and bodily experience and these aspects of immigration have not been prominent enough in the wider migration literature (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015). Whilst this oversight may be a generalised shortcoming in research, the immigrants in my studies (all from non-Nordic countries) were conveying that the affective encounters of immigrating to the Faroe Islands were particularly intense. During my initial analysis, it was evident that immigrant experiences were overwhelmingly challenging due to factors such as Faroese social relations, Faroese language, being included and recognised and finding skills-relevant employment (Hayfield, 2024; Hayfield & Schug, 2019); findings which are compatible with other research in the Faroe Islands (e.g. Hoffmann & Holm, 2022, 2025; Ísfeld, 2019; Vijayavarathan-R, 2024).

However, as I revisited and analysed three datasets collected over several years, I realised that immigrants' continuous references to weather, darkness, cliffs, and sharp sea boundaries represented heightened affective experiences. To them, the harsh elements, fog, dark winters, fierce sea, and the unforgiving weather system were profoundly oppressive. Many reported feeling fearful and sensing danger within the Faroese natural environment. They perceived Faroese life as an aggressive way of living, in the sense that food culture and subsistence hunting includes climbing mountains to catch sheep for slaughter, fishing or bird-catching, and cliff egg harvesting. Originally, I had not understood the significance of these narratives as I was primarily focused on relations and social structures in my research. However, through recurrent analysis, I started to draw parallels to my own childhood experiences of arriving here. I recognised the immigrant's narratives in mine and vice versa. I came to understand that this heightened sensory experience of immigrating to the islands was embodied and very real. The sea and marine life, the islands, smallness, lack of anonymity, and weather system were inseparable from affect, cognition, and behaviour. Yet the functioning of these systems together had not yet manifested itself as bodily knowledge in the early periods of their immigration, just as in mine.

During these moments of realisation, I arrived at my motivation-*to* point of the episode of inspiration. Based on this newfound inspiration, I wrote a book chapter with a colleague addressing immigrant emotions and aquapelagic experiences (Hayfield & Cole, under review). Furthermore, this inspiration led me to reanalyse data from another study about employment (Pristed Nielsen et al., 2020) originally conducted in three island locations (Suðuroy in the Faroe Islands, Læsø in Denmark, and Narsaq in Greenland). What we found were continuous references to affective, bodily, temporal, and material experiences of living on islands, where fishing, ferries and the sea dominate life (Hayfield & Nielsen, 2022). Thus, the concept of aquapelagic societies moves the centring of islands beyond islands as bounded landmasses. Furthermore, thinking through assemblages of human and non-human actants shifts epistemology past socio-psychological and geographical frameworks. It offers a lens through which aquapelagic societies can be understood as dynamic socio-ecological systems.

Culture of migration

> *After my secondary education I was contemplating study opportunities abroad. My peers were also anticipating out-migration, overwhelmingly for educational purposes, and a few for employment. At the time I was not aware that more women than men out-migrate from the Faroe Islands, causing—I would later learn—a relatively large deficit of women. The vast majority of my peers migrated to Denmark, where there is a large Faroese diaspora. I was one of the few who left for other countries, in my case Scotland. I am not sure, if I had, at the time, ever heard of the University of the Faroe Islands, which had not assumed its current size. Even if I had, it was not on my radar. For us youngsters out-migrating was the most natural thing in the world: part of the life trajectory of Faroese youth. Out-migration was essentially an underlying assumption. When a friend told me she was going to stay and had applied to nursing college on the islands, I was simultaneously perplexed and intrigued. I pondered whether maturing, becoming knowledgeable, cultivated, and expanding one's horizon was compatible with remaining in the Faroe Islands. To me out-migration was more of an imperative than a choice, but, equally, I expected to return to the Faroe Islands at some point later in life. When though, I did not know.*

During the moment described in the vignette, I was becoming conscious of the Faroese culture of migration, although I did not have the conceptual tools at the time to identify it as such. It was a moment of transcendence which has inspired me and later transformed into research projects. Integral to the Faroese culture of migration is the prevalence of return migration, making migration a cyclical practice for many (Hayfield, 2017). I too moved back to the Faroe Islands, ten years after returning to Scotland to study. Although I liked living in Scotland, I yearned for the islands. The Faroese diaspora in Denmark tends to have ample opportunities to celebrate Faroese identity, customs, food etc. The Scottish context was different with hardly any Faroese staying in Edinburgh at the time. Furthermore, telephoning home or visiting the islands those days was a costly affair, and the internet was in its infancy. Therefore, I was in relative terms disconnected from the Faroe Islands. Today multiple modes of connectivity enable members of the diaspora to participate in Faroese society, virtually and physically (visiting); and their presence is felt in ways that were unthinkable only a couple of decades ago.

When I returned in 2003, I had come to see things from an outsider's perspective, especially at the time having lived two-thirds of my life in Scotland. This became apparent, during the initial months back in the Faroe Islands. The relative absence of women in the media, in politics and in positions of influence was striking, and occupied my thoughts and conversations. Men, I found, were speaking for and on behalf of all people. I wondered why women as almost half of the population were not better represented. This triggered a pre-inspirational state of epistemic curiosity. I wanted to understand gender relations in the Faroe Islands.

When I started working in Government, discourse in society was increasingly focusing on out-migration (at the time immigration of non-Faroese was negligible, only then really starting) and the associated long-term social and economic sustainability challenges facing the Faroe Islands. I was assigned to lead a project on a national population growth plan (Government of the Faroe Islands, 2013), however my being assigned this project was no coincidence. I had previously shown a keen interest in the issue within the Ministry and discussed significant demographic issues with the actual Minister. Working with demography—most notably the deficit of women, out-migration and other connected topics inspired me to pursue further research upon returning to academia. Thus, contributing to government policy on out-migration, and focusing on gender, became highly inspirational, and even foundational for much of my later research.

Out-migration of young people and skewed demographics are characteristics of many rural and island communities (Alexander, 2023; Baldacchino & Veenendaal, 2018; King, 2009; Strabac et al., 2026). The scholarly literature has devoted substantial attention to factors influencing migration decisions of young people in rural and small island communities, including educational and employment opportunities (Alexander & Henderson, 2024; Hayfield, 2017; Punch, 2015; Walsh, 2013), and feelings of claustrophobia in small communities (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006; Jones, 1999). However, the intimate connection between culture, socialization, and migration in rural and island communities has pushed island researchers beyond migration as an individualistic rational choice. These studies prefer to speak of cultures of migration, affective bonds with places, mobility imperatives of youth, and future life imaginations of youth, long before they leave (Corbett, 2007; Easthope & Gabriel, 2008; Farrugia, 2016; Hayfield, 2017; Kettunen, 2022; Simões et al., 2021). In other words, for youngsters, leaving may be a natural or necessary part of the life course.

A significant discourse associated with youth out-migration is of community loss, often expressed as brain-drain (e.g. Hadland, 2004; Sano et al., 2020), and youths who stay may be characterised as lacking ambition or as immobile (Østergaard et al., 2024). Furthermore, places of out-migration in the circumpolar north generally experience a female deficit (Hamilton & Otterstad, 1998; Hayfield et al., 2021) contributing to a skewed demography.

In his writing on islands and migration, King (2009) advocates for a new perspective of island migration studies, rooted in the mobilities paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Instead of focusing on island out-migration, depopulation, and island diasporas, he invites researchers to intersect island studies and migration studies to improve understanding of mobility in a globalised world. This involves integrating various types of mobilities to represent the complexity of mobilities, e.g. long-distance working, temporary work, tourism, and cyclical migration. To understand Faroese relations and interactions with the wider world, I have therefore, considered various mobilities in my research. In addition to out-migration, I have undertaken projects focusing on immigration (Hayfield, 2024; Hayfield et al., 2021; Hayfield

& Schug, 2019; Oddsdóttir et al., 2021), long-distance working, and gendered mobilities (Hayfield, 2018; Hayfield & Nielsen, 2022). Still out-migration from the Faroe Islands stands out as having major significance for societal dynamics, long-term welfare, and demographic makeup (especially age and gender). For years, the Economic Council of the Faroe Islands has drawn attention to the skewed demography as a severe threat to the long-term sustainability of Faroese society (Economic Council of the Faroe Islands, 2024). Specifically, longitudinal studies have found that the Faroe Islands lose a net one-fifth of every Faroese cohort. Said differently, 40% of every cohort out-migrate, and only half of this segment "return home" in the long run. Moreover, as more women than men out-migrate, the skewed gender-ratio increases, even when taking account of immigration (Statistics Faroe Islands, 2024).

Working on various research projects concerning Faroese identity, place attachment, and the culture of migration, entailed drawing on scholarly work positioned in the rural/periphery literature, as well as work within island studies. Several issues facing youth in rural and peripheral areas are similar to those of Faroese youth, especially those pertaining to smallness and limited educational/employment opportunities. However, my findings suggested that growing up in an aquapelagic society was a strong underlying influence for Faroese youth and reflected in several aspects of my research. This included both human relations and non-human relations—including the sea, weather, mountains, nature and not least the boundedness of the islands— demonstrating how the awareness of physical-geographical features can become amplified in small islands (Simões et al., 2020). Said differently, "Small islands impose a marked sense of delimitation. Surrounded by the sea, islanders display a more acute notion of boundaries, compared to continental rural populations…" (Simões et al., 2020, p. 911).

As a key issue, mobility likely diverges from rural mobility in the sense that transport to city environments is often more challenging for island youth. Instead of driving, say two-three hours, to a city, where youth can enjoy anonymity, partake in city life, and potentially return to a rural area for the evening, the equivalent for Faroese youth would involve a 1,300-kilometre flight, and an inevitable crossing over water. In this sense the rural-city/urban distinction is less absolute compared to the small island-city/urban distinction. Notwithstanding that mobility and connectivity within/to-and-from the Faroe Islands has transformed over the past two decades (cheaper flights and increased regularity, plus inter-island undersea tunnel connectivity), distance remains an integral feature of life in the Faroe Islands (Bærenholdt & Granås, 2016).

Faroese have strong identities and feelings of place-belongingness (Gaini, 2013; Hayfield & Nielsen, 2022), and are, furthermore, positive about growing up on the islands (Hayfield, 2017). According to Hernandez et al. (2007) island youth often display especially strong place attachment compared to rural and urban youths. Therefore, and importantly, Faroe islanders' future imaginings of life elsewhere should not be understood as a rejection of place. Rather out-migrating to Denmark remains part of practicing Faroeseness in which social capital of the diaspora is accessible—and for many—Faroese identity and island connections remain strong.

Bringing together aquapelagic understandings of island migration, in this case out-migration of youth, enables an augmented perspective in which islandness is a structuring feature. In this sense, island communities contain dimensions that require an island sensitive approach to youth mobilities. Young people shape and are shaped by the aquapelagy, as well as by

distant places. Thus, island and diasporic realities are continuously produced as processes which might be understood as aquapelagic becoming.

Smallness, relations, and research ethics in small island communities

> *Some time, shortly after I had returned to the Faroe Islands, and still in my early 30s, I started teaching at the local business school whilst writing up my PhD. This suited me well as I had previously taught at Edinburgh's Napier University. A few months into my teaching, I was in town with some friends having a night out. My friends and I were about to enter a club, when suddenly I heard someone shouting my name. A few of my students came running over towards me. They had been drinking alcohol, as had I, and they wanted to say hello and chat. I greeted the students and engaged in friendly chat with them. Yet, despite the light-hearted situation and despite having grown-up on the islands, I was nevertheless taken aback by this conflation of personal and professional life. In Scotland I was used to teaching students and would only encounter them again at the next lecture. My Scottish students, I knew only as students, they knew me only as their lecturer. In that moment outside the club, I was reminded how intertwined relations are in the Faroe Islands. On the islands there is no such thing as anonymity, and people cannot enter a situation with one master identity. There will always be multiple memories and identities conflated. I have recalled and recounted this encounter many times. It was for me a defining moment in which I became acutely aware of the context in which I now was living.*

Having been away from the islands, living in the city environment of Edinburgh, provided a cross-contextual perspective of the familiar stranger (Hayfield & Schug, 2019). This moment was transformative as an onset for my exploring social life in the Faroe Islands, and how lives are lived. As I conducted research, I recognized that the social dynamics of the Faroe Islands were a recurring phenomenon in my research. Regardless of the subject of investigation of my studies—from out-migration to the labour market and mobilities and to gender; it was evident that multiple relations is a defining feature of social navigation in the Faroe Islands.

A few years later, my inspiration was further fuelled. I was having a conversation with a Faroese woman who had professional dealings with immigrant academics. I enquired into their experiences in the Faroe Islands, expecting her to convey that immigrants had good experiences. After all, in my mind, the Faroese were a welcoming people. In contrast, she explained that the reality for immigrants was of difficulties, and most notably feeling excluded, unable to access Faroese social networks and society in general. I was somehow shocked—in disbelief—emotions which soon transformed into inspiration to act. This then manifested in ongoing research over several years on the topic of immigration to the Faroe Islands. The immigrants of the studies were marriage and work migrants, who had lived in the Faroe Islands for at least one year. This enabled us to capture experienced and long-term migrants. From three projects, I have been involved in, on immigration, the relational and emotional challenges for immigrants coming to the Faroe Islands stand out as key findings. As I analysed immigrant perspectives, it became clear that Faroese social networks are opaque and inaccessible, leading to widespread feelings of exclusion, frustration and for some, even depression (Hayfield, 2024; Hayfield & Cole, under review, Hayfield & Schug, 2019). This led to me being confronted with my positionality as a (privileged) socially embedded member of the community, and an awareness of a quite false narrative of the Faroe Islands as a welcoming society—albeit in most cases due to ignorance rather than deliberation.

Social dynamics in the Faroe Islands are characterised by multiple relations. Smallness, and until recently a highly homogenous population (ethnicity, religion, Faroese-born), has resulted in a close-knit society where family and social networks powerfully frame island life (Gaffin, 1996; Gaini, 2013; Hayfield, 2024; Leonard, 2016). The Faroe Islands and its people continuously engage and interact with the outside world, and their outlook is global; yet it remains a condition of life that the islands are geographical bounded and remote. In contrast to many rural places from which city life might be a relatively short drive away, islandness involves more expensive, time-consuming, and significant mobilities. In other words, to access city/urban contexts where anonymity prevails, requires much greater effort for islanders. I argue therefore, that social dynamics not only emerge from smallness or kinship, but from being island grounded.

In the Faroe Islands, social relations are frequently long-term and the ensuing social memories become dense, layered and embedded within social structures (Haas et al., 2025). In other words, people are known, located, and remembered for their roles, actions and (family) connections (Hayfield & Schug, 2019), which at the same time serves to exclude immigrants, who are not part of deep social memory. As relations are deeply interlinked there emerges a moral accountability, which is reciprocal, complex, and ongoing. Consequently, social dynamics strongly shape and regulate social interactions and identity. In such contexts, occupying multiple roles can foster relational ambivalence, as individuals may experience conflict with others in one role but not in another. Understood this way, relational ambivalence involves the existence of simultaneously strong and opposing feelings; attitudes and obligations in relations (Rothman et al., 2017).

Although I have argued that island social dynamics frame place-belonging, it is clear that researchers in the Faroe Islands navigate this reality, just as everyone else does. In my research, I therefore, started to question positionality and especially how researchers can uphold moral responsibility to the communities in which they work. Researchers themselves are embedded in multiple relations and experience conflicting and conflating roles (Baldacchino, 2012; Baldacchino & Veenendaal, 2018). I have argued elsewhere that this calls for an island sensitive research ethics approach (Hayfield, 2022) given that approaches to consent, confidentiality, justice, accountability, and research ethics in general are highly individualistic and urban-centred (Barrett & Parker, 2003; Israel, 2014). Instead, complex networks of relations require research ethics which centres relational ethics. By recognising the complex interdependencies between people in small island communities, relational ethics "…recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work" (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). This I argued was necessary as part of a situated research ethics, which goes beyond normative ethics. Rather, ongoing social navigation within and outside the research situation entails that researchers must develop ethical alertness (Hayfield, 2022). As such Faroese researchers are neither insider nor outsider, they continuously move—and are moved, by their respondents and interlocutors—between various relational positions and frequently occupy the hyphen in-between (insider-outsider) (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013).

Conclusion: Inspiration to Islands

The aim of this article was to revisit why islands, and why specifically the Faroe Islands, became inspirational to my work. Through an autoethnographic inspired approach, I have looked back and tried to make sense of my inspiration and how it evolved into an Island Studies perspective. Evolved— because many years ago, I had not encountered Islands Studies as a field of research. Other fields of research such as the rural, community and ethnographic literature, had proved valuable and insightful. However, they failed to adequately illuminate lived realities in small island communities like the Faroe Islands.

The vignettes I have provided throughout this article are moments in both my personal and professional life, which have triggered inspiration for epistemic pursuit. Over time, as I analysed data and examined various strands of literature, the Island Studies literature, and later, the concept of the aquapelago, made sense. This in itself was inspirational and presented new dimensions in my empirical work. It also provided a stepping stone to the literature on emotions and sensory experiences which I found to be insightful to understand relations to islands, the sea, materialities, and elements. The connections between the vignettes in this article, bring together human and non-human elements embedded within aquapelagic societies. The strong presence of the sea, its boundaries, and its materialities, powerfully frame history, industries, employment, gender relations, scales of opportunities, and not least identities in the Faroe Islands. These prove foundational for people's outlook, their life trajectories, their cultures of (out)migration, and their engagement with non-human elements.

Historically, life in the Faroe Islands was characterised by hardship, shaped by harsh weather conditions, geographical remoteness, and the constant risks associated with industrial and subsistence fishing at sea. To understand how people have adapted to and survived such conditions over time, I argue, requires a perspective sensitive to people-sea-land-weather entanglements. Virtual and physical connectivity now have transformed life dramatically, and despite some degree of mobility irregularities (e.g. weather conditions preventing planes from landing or freight liners delayed in stormy weather at sea), the Faroe Islands are well connected to, and in, the world. In other words, the meaning of remoteness has been redefined. Yet, notwithstanding modernity and the transformation of life today, I have shown throughout this article how islandness in an aquapelagic context continues to profoundly shape life on the islands.

The themes of the vignettes in this article—sensory and embodied experiences of islands, social life in small island communities, migration, mobilities, gender, and emotions—speak to dialogues in Island Studies generally, and those in aquapelagic societies specifically. My scholarly output has emerged from my research in the Faroe Islands and in conversation with other literature, especially Island Studies and the concept of the aquapelago. Whilst there is much important and interesting work published, I welcome greater integration of other fields into aquapelagic thinking, such as gender, youth, social dynamics, and professional life to name few. Going forward, this could also promote the establishment of Island Studies perspectives in other disciplines, rather than being a body of research which is relatively islanded in itself.

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