



**UNIVERSITY  
OF ICELAND**

Ph.D. Thesis  
in Tourism Studies

# **Mobilities in Melrakkaslétta**

Ethnographic inquiry into placemaking, tourism  
and other mobilities on the margin

Þórný Barðadóttir

2025





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## Ethnographic inquiry into placemaking, tourism and other mobilities on the margin

Þórný Barðadóttir

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of a  
*Philosophiae Doctor* degree in Tourism Studies

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Bibliographic information:

Þórný Barðadóttir, 2025, *Mobilities in Melrakkaslétta. Ethnographic inquiry into placemaking, tourism and other mobilities on the margins*, PhD dissertation, Faculty of Life and Environmental Sciences, University of Iceland, 175 pp.  
Author ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8415-7846>  
ISBN: 978-9935-9837-3-2



# Abstract

This doctoral research explores the entanglements of placemaking, mobilities and the making of margins in the context of tourism. The research examines how places come to be and are transformed in relation to various mobilities within as well as through connections. This means investigating how mobilities can be both creators and undoers of margins, caused by distances, lacking connections, or both.

The research makes use of flat ontology and relational materialism which rejects traditional dualism to instead assume that reality is created through interconnected, ever-evolving entanglements of material human and more-than-human relations.

The research is qualitative, based on ethnographic investigation, and its main methods are participatory observation, interviews and conversations in the field of research, Melrakkaslétta peninsula. Melrakkaslétta is the northernmost area of the Icelandic mainland, situated far north of the main routes of domestic travel. The peninsula is furthermore about as far from the country's main entering hub as is geographically possible within the country.

The research investigates what makes the place Melrakkaslétta, how it has evolved and transformed in relation to more-than-human mobilities. The novelty of the research is its approach of conducting tourism research in a non-touristy rural area and it demonstrates the agency of mobilities in the creation of centres and margins, not least in the context of the potential of rural tourism development.

**Keywords:** Tourism, Mobilities, Margins, Placemaking, Rural Tourism, Iceland

# Útdráttur

Þessi ritgerð fjallar um doktorsrannsókn á tengslum staðarmyndunar, hreyfanleika og jaðarmyndunar í samhengi ferðamála. Í rannsókninni er horft til þess hvernig staðir verða til og umbreytast í tengslum við og í gegnum hreyfanleika, bæði innan staða sem og í tengingum þeirra við aðra staði og önnur svæði. Í ritgerðinni er því jafnframt velt upp hvernig hreyfanleiki getur á sama tíma myndað tengingar sem og stuðlað að jaðarmyndun, hvort sem það gerist vegna fjarlægða, vegna skorts á tengingum eða hvoru tveggja.

Rannsóknin byggir á kenningum um flata verufræði og efnislega tengslahyggju, sem gengur út frá því að veruleiki okkar sé byggður á tengslum. Hefðbundinni tvíhyggju er hafnað og í staðinn horft til þess hvernig veröldin er samansett af samofnum, síbreytilegum, efnislegum þáttum þar sem hið mennska er hluti þess meira-en-mennska.

Rannsóknin er eigindleg og aðferðafræð hennar byggir á etnógrafískri nálgun þar sem helstu aðferðir eru vettvangsathugun, viðtöl og samræður á rannsóknarsvæðinu. Það er Melrakkaslétta á norðausturhluta Íslands. Melrakkaslétta er tangi sem teygir sig lengra til norðurs en nokkurt annað svæði á meginlandi Íslands. Tanginn stendur jafnframt langt norðan helstu ferðaleiða innanlands og eins langt frá helstu gátt til landsins og landið leyfir.

Til rannsóknar er hvar og hver staðurinn Melrakkaslétta er, hvernig hann hefur þróast og umbreytast í tengslum við meira-en-mennskan hreyfanleika. Skoðað er hvernig þessi sami hreyfanleiki hefur áhrif á og myndar miðju og jaðar og áhrif þessa á möguleika fámenns svæðis utan alfaraleiða til uppbyggingar ferðaþjónustu. Nýnæmi rannsóknar felst í að beita fræðilegri nálgun ferðamálafræða við framkvæmd rannsóknar á fámennu svæði utan alfaraleiða og niðurstöður hennar sýna fram á þátt hreyfanleika sköpun miðju og jaðars, sem ekki á síst við í samhengi ferðamála.

**Lykilorð:** Ferðamál, hreyfanleiki, jaðar, staðarmyndun, ferðaþjónusta í dreifbýli, Ísland

*Dedication*

*To Aðalheiður Anna and Barði Þór - in the loving memory of Anna and Barði.*



# Prologue

This dissertation narrates doctoral research within the field of rural tourism. The research is set within the flat ontology of post-Actor-Network Theory. In brief and greatly simplified terms the aim is to trace the connections of human and nonhuman actors of affect within the scope of investigation. Its approach is in theory that everything there is can and does have an effect and be affected in networks of connections. How so, to what extent and where the networks lay, develop and are disrupted is the matter of research. These entanglements can have unexpected twists. Already as I entered the position of researcher in this ethnographic research, one thing bothered me: my irrational fear of birds. The area of research, Melrakkaslétta peninsula, the Icelandic tundra, the land of the midnight sun and endless views also happens to be the land of various species and countless numbers of birds. Without a trace of pride, I can honestly state that I am afraid of them all. Growing up in the area as a descendant of a long line of Melrakkaslétta's farmers, I have always been bluntly aware of the birds. As a child, each spring my friends would take tours to collect their eggs. To say that I dreaded being dragged along on these trips would be a wild understatement. I remember myself helpless, unable to move, frozen in fear, as the war-cries of dive-flying terns filled the air and the world. Adding the songs, calls, shrieks and howls of a variety of other bird species did nothing but complete the scene of horror – and now, this was to become the field of my research.

Then the magic happened. A year earlier I had suffered a bad fall to the back of my head, leaving me fighting long-term post-concussion syndrome. As I unbalanced and hesitantly had become able to stagger onto short outdoor walks, I swallowed my bashfulness and began wearing a helmet. Then I arrived to the field, where I with gritted teeth and self-enforced deterrent gaze walked off into Melrakkaslétta's spring and birdlife. Then, I realized that the helmet I was still wearing on outdoor walks, provided a shelter, serving as an armour from the birds. And there, at last, not only was I able to take in the marvel and variety of Melrakkaslétta's birds, but also to truly enjoy the outdoors of Melrakkaslétta's spring. A fall, a helmet and an alteration of experiencing my childhood grounds - a manifestation of the relational effect deriving from altering one aspect of an everyday activity.

Although not an aspect of investigation, the birds however proved to have their own agency throughout the research. Initially I was uncertain as to whether my old fear might be causing me to overinterpret the emphasis the data showed the birds to play in the essence of Melrakkaslétta. And yet, they kept flying into the data in various contexts, becoming ever more apparent the further I got in the process. On one occasion I actually welcomed them. This was when interviewing an elderly woman, a former permanent

resident, now a summer dweller in Melrakkaslétta. Sitting across from her, in the living room of her tiny old house, I was getting rather anxious. The interview was stiff. Instead of a flowing dialogue where I would hint towards a topic based on an interview guide, followed by conversations, I here seemed unable to get the interview easily flowing. Instead, it felt like I kept asking her direct questions. She merely provided short replies, often that of pointing me towards others she thought better able to *answer*, even when inquiring about her childhood plays, outdoor tasks and her favourite sites.

Then I required about her annual arrival in Melrakkaslétta, to which she replied “early May<sup>1</sup>”. “Why then” I asked, with her replying “The birdlife, then it’s coming to life, more or less”. As soon as she mentioned the birds, I watched her relax and truly smile for the first time since entering through her door. I decided to stay on the topic.

Me: Ah, the birds.

Her: Yes.

Me: So, do you have a favourite?

Her: Many.

Me: Which one?

Her: Probably the common redshank. We have one here, acting as the mayor of the land. Always standing on an old telephone pole, arguing with itself.

Me: [laughing slightly] Always a common redshank?

Her: [determined] Always the same.

Me: Really?

Her: Yes. We used to have one that was one-legged, but we haven't seen it this year. It was here for many years.

Me: So now there is a new major?

Her: Now another one has arrived, yes, so it’s probably their offspring, knows how to do this, although, [small grin] who knows?

Me: So, the common redshank you say, that’s your favourite bird?

Her: [lights up] Well, then of course there’s the Arctic tern.

Me: It’s your favourite?

Her: I love it.

Me: [laughing] How? I mean, why?

Her: [small laugh] Because it’s so tiny and still such a *hex*<sup>2</sup>. I admire it. And it’s so beautiful when flying, so graceful [small hesitation] but all birds are beautiful.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a transcript from an interview conducted in Icelandic and translated to English by the author

<sup>2</sup> *Hex* is an Icelandic slang, adopted from Danish, used to describe resolute, witchy, yet charming characters

When the birds had paved the way for a less staccato exchange and our conversation finally had fluidly moved on, she suddenly and quite out of context proclaimed “Oh, the common snipe. It’s a favourite. It can predict weather”. When somewhat bewildered I asked her to elaborate she did, and although rejecting the idea that anyone would rely on its predictions she then said “well, maybe it’s no less reliable than predictions from the Meteorological Office”. Ending up asking if she followed up on the birds, she did not hesitate before saying “Of course I do. There’s just something that tells me that now we have reached this or that season because now this or that bird has arrived” continuing, after a small pause “or I’ll come here to find out, in case I’m not certain it’s that time of the year”.



**Picture 1.** Arctic terns and Melrakkaslétta ©Pórný Barðadóttir, 2022

The birds, seasons, and sounds are all actants in and of Melrakkaslétta, and as we will soon learn, so are various other local and global matters. Coming into this PhD research in September 2020, meant that throughout the first year, the Covid pandemic was an actant in its own right, causing changeable quarantine measures, stay-at-home periods, and social lockdowns. This however also meant that everyone was in their own bubble. In researchers’ context, my rather lonesome existence in my apartment, in a deep fjord in mid-Northern Iceland, had with the pandemic become just as central as any university around the globe. The situation made virtual meetings with researchers domestic and abroad an easy and obvious mode of practice. The Covid situation furthermore meant that I was able to partake

in several graduate courses, meetings, and presentations at the University of Iceland, each announced with the same proclaimer: Due to the pandemic the course/meeting/talk will be held online. Travelling to the capital for each of these sessions would have been out of the question, meaning that in these contexts, the pandemic turned out to make it easier for those residing out of the capital area to partake in Uni-experiences. While conducting tourism research amid global lockdown and travel restrictions at times felt rather odd, the pandemic itself managed to move margins.

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# Paper Collection

## List of Publications

- Barðadóttir, Þ. (2024). Melrakkaslétta the meeting-ground: performing qualitative research at the tourism margin. In B. Thorsteinsson, K. A. Lund, G. T. Jóhannesson & G. R. Jóhannesson (Eds.) *Mobilities on the Margins. Creative Processes of Place-Making* (pp. 139-158). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41344-5\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41344-5_8)
- Barðadóttir, Þ., Jóhannesson, G. T., & Lund, K. A. (2023). Mobilities on the margins: the becoming of Melrakkaslétta as a tourist destination. In P. Vannini (Ed.), *Mobilities in remote places* (pp. 86-100). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003321163-9>
- Barðadóttir, Þ. & Lund, K. A. (2024) “Few people and the birds”. Negotiating tourism development and more-than-human hospitality on the margin. *World Leisure Journal*, 66(4), 617-635. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16078055.2024.2398462>
- Barðadóttir, Þ. (under review). Reaching the Edge of the Arctic. On mobilities, infrastructures, and distances on the tourism margin. *Polar Geography*

## Contribution from the authors.

- Paper 1: The author was solely responsible for the undertaking of the paper.
- Paper 2: The first author was responsible for writing the first draft of the paper, providing empirical data, and carrying out edits while all three authors contributed to its conceptual framework, argumentation, and decisions on revisions.
- Paper 3: The first author was responsible for writing the first draft of the paper, providing empirical data, and carrying out edits while both authors contributed to its conceptual framework, argumentation, and decisions on revisions.
- Paper 4: The author was solely responsible for the undertaking of the paper.



# Acknowledgements

My deepest gratitude to Melrakkaslétta and its people who during the research process lent me their stories, thoughts, time, smiles, chattering bearings, and various ways of assistance during my many stays for research. My warmest gratefulness to all my supervisors and doctoral committee members. I thank Gunnar Þór and Katrín Anna for their valuable guidance, knowledgeable advice, and much appreciated support. My deepest thanks to Jo for his compassionate, always kind, solid and honest advice throughout the process.

The first three years of the PhD project was conducted as one part of the research *Mobilities on the Margins - MoM*.<sup>3</sup> Throughout its first running year, an essential part of the project were monthly meetings of its researchers. Each month the academics would select papers all of us would read and report on to exchange our thoughts and discuss on. Given the different fields of education, profession and affiliations the groups' researchers held, this provided the perfect opportunity to delve into and absorb different angles to academic approach and thinking, much more so than would have been possible to gain from reading alone. I thank my fellow members of the MOM-research group for all their insights and valuable discussions.

My dearest fellow MoM PhD scholar and now Dr Elva. Thank you for all our irregular, always constructive and at times much needed talks. To my work fellows, the amazing team of RMF/ITRC researchers, all I can say is: Takk.

Last, but not least, I thank my children, siblings, other family members and friends, who willingly - and unwillingly – have spent the last four years listening to me obsessing over small and large angles of this project. You have followed me through endless small wins and losses, rescheduling and cancellations. Thank you for believing in me when I needed boost of confidence and to leave me flying when the right winds occurred.

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<sup>3</sup> *Mobilities on the Margins. Creative Process of Place-Making* was funded by the Icelandic Centre for Research, RANNÍS 2020-2023 [Grant number 207144-051].



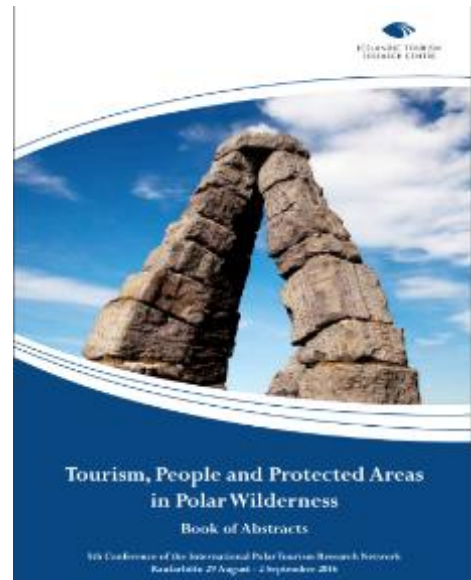
# Part I

The research



# 1. Introduction

In the autumn of 2016, the International Polar Tourism Research Network - IPTRN – held its 5<sup>th</sup> biannual conference in Iceland. Having started out in the town of Akureyri mid-north Iceland the group, counting around 40 international researchers, headed further northeast to continue the conference in the remote village Raufarhöfn on Melrakkaslétta. By that time the village and the neighbouring farmlands had for years been forced to face serious and longstanding socioeconomic downturns. The IPTRN-group, however, was welcomed by smiling and helpful villagers, providing their assistance in any possible way as well as guiding this group of tourism researchers through their village and neighbouring areas. Amongst visited sites were abandoned constructions and factory buildings from an era when Raufarhöfn was a bustling herring site and the Arctic Henge, an outdoor monument under construction at the roots of the village. This massive sculpture of rocks undoubtedly played its part in the village becoming the chosen spot for the conference, as can be gathered by the cover of its book of abstracts (Figure 1-1).



**Figure 1-1.** From the Book of abstract of the 5<sup>th</sup> IPTRN-conference in 2016 (ITRC, 2016)

To me, the conference was a personal voyage. Its host was the Icelandic Tourism Research Centre, the very institute I had only a few months earlier been hired to as a researcher. By the time of the conference tourism studies still felt a bit unknown field, although the conference site was not. I was raised in the neighbouring village Kópasker on the same peninsula. After taken on a guided tour rounding Melrakkaslétta's northern coast, the group visited Kópasker. While making a stop at the village's convenience store, we learned from its owner that the group was travelling in the very first visiting bus of the tourist season. This was Wednesday, August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016. As the Icelandic rural tourism season tends to end in early September, the store owner's revelation seemed a manifestation of how the group indeed had entered the very margins of Icelandic tourism.

Heading into tourism research and taking with me an interest in regional development, I could not have wished for a more suitable combination of topic and venue. The conference emphasised research on the phenomenon in the northern- and southernmost areas of the world and hence in fragile environments and sparsely populated areas. Unknowingly and inevitably, I started wondering about what kind of research I might prefer to come up with and conduct. As I listened to presentations and discussions of the

academics on various research on impacts, possibilities and challenges in northern and southern tourist destinations, I felt myself thinking: What about the areas that are in no way destinations - yet? Who can ever know which areas become destinations? What are the residents' thoughts on tourism in non-touristic areas? Is there a way to 'map' such matters as a way of 'before' when it comes to tourism development and impacts? Such were my thoughts in the late summer of 2016.

Time went by and work led me into different ways. Then, however, in 2020, two things fell in sync. The first was an accident leaving me unable to stare at a computer screen for hours without long breaks and hence making it challenging to fulfil my office hours. The second, a few months later, was the announcement of an open PhD position in Tourism Studies at the University of Iceland. The position was within a research project titled *Mobilities on the Margins* with the research to be conducted in Melrakkaslétta. It goes almost without saying that, despite the infirm state of my health at the time, I applied for the position. To date, it is hard to judge which of us showed greater relentless courage, or trustfulness, me by applying or my coming doctoral committee by hiring me to do the job, but here we are, at last.

## 1.1 The MoM-project

The overall research project, *Mobilities on the Margins* – MoM – dealt with two sites of research, the southern part of the Westfjords, West-Bard (Einarsdóttir, 2024) in the Icelandic northwest and Melrakkaslétta in its northeast. By the time of my employment, the objective of Melrakkaslétta's case was still quite open for me to set its approach and demarcation. The project's outline nevertheless stated that while the West-Bard case was to be mainly human/nature based, the focus of the Melrakkaslétta case was to hold a strong community angle. The project description further read that while the West-Bard case included spots of touristic attractions, Melrakkaslétta offered no such sites of magnetism. The proposal, however, highlighted two main settings of interest in the context of tourism potentials in Melrakkaslétta: the remaining herring constructions in Raufarhöfn and the unfinished outdoor monument, the Arctic Henge.

I soon realised that while I felt the relevance of the societal perspective, I did not connect with the approach of demarcating the project to philosophical scrutiny around the two sites of mention. Still having in the back of my head the questions awakened while I as a novel tourism researcher attended the 5<sup>th</sup> IPTRN conference in Raufarhöfn, I wanted to take a somewhat different approach. I wanted to apply tourism theories to the settings of this non-touristy rural area, to know how those with felt knowledge of Melrakkaslétta view tourism as a sector and whether they view Melrakkaslétta as a potential tourist destination.

## 1.2 Research questions

This research offers contribution to the ongoing theoretical discussion within the field of tourism studies. The project's research questions reflect the goal of the research, which is to capture how tourism is performed and perceived in a sparsely populated area, situated off the beaten tracks of tourism. The aim is furthermore to apprehend the encounters of mobilities, placemaking and the notion of margins in and beyond the tourism context.

The project's main research question is:

- **How has the place Melrakkaslétta been shaped by mobilities and entanglements of humans and more-than-humans?**

To demarcate the research, it is directed towards the following sub-questions:

- *What are the mobilities that Melrakkaslétta contains?*
- *How do the interconnections of mobilities and margins emerge in the context of tourism in Melrakkaslétta?*
- *How are the more-than-human environments of Melrakkaslétta performed in tourism?*

In the coming chapters, the design and methodology of the research will be presented, followed by an introduction of its conceptual framework, the research area and the methods applied when conducting the research. Thereafter the research questions will be readdressed as the main research output is introduced through the project's four academic papers, followed by discussion and conclusion on the overall research project.



## 2. Research paradigm

This doctoral research is titled *Mobilities in Melrakkaslétta. Ethnographic inquiry into placemaking, tourism, and other mobilities on the margin*. As the title implies, the research is set within the academic field of tourism studies with focus on rural tourism. It explores the entanglements of mobilities, placemaking, and the creation of margins in the context of tourism in a rural and remote area. The research is set to inspect tourism beyond merely a phenomenon of linear economic growth (Huijbens & Jóhannesson, 2019) or as a solitary, stable subject but instead regard it as a process of ever ongoing becoming (Ren & Jóhannesson, 2018). To meet this end, the research is aimed towards “making research matter, moving beyond the image of academia as detached from society” (Ren, van der Duim et al., 2020, p. 2). This means directing the research agenda towards capturing placemaking processes, the interactions, and the coexistence of humans and the more-than-human world in the entanglements of travel and tourism on the margins.

The research outline is not directed at seeking answers to how tourism development in Melrakkaslétta, or for that matter any area, should be. Its approach is hence not normative, and neither is it critical when understood as searching for comprehensive and unbending truths. The research takes notice of Latour’s (2004) notion that researchers are dealing with “*matters of concern*, not *matters of fact*” (p. 231). This he set forth as an argument for the importance of and value in research related to climate change and its multilayered effects, even if “the evidence is not complete” on such changes occurring (Latour, 2004, p. 226). Here, while zooming in to conduct tourism research in a non-touristy rural and remote area, it is firmly believed that such a subject makes a valuable ‘matter of concern’. Most research on rural tourism has been conducted in already-established tourist destinations and with the main research focus set on the economic impact of tourism (Rosalina et al., 2021). The novelty of this research is hence to conduct qualitative research on tourism and other mobilities, in an area which, as of yet, is situated out of the beaten track of tourism.

This research furthermore assumes that there is a potential agency in the very enactment of performing research. This is due to the reason that when “researchers engage in research we are busy making realities” (Jóhannesson et al., 2018, p. 39). The goal therefore, is to strive to follow Veijola et al., (2014) when setting a research outline that is “*not* deconstructive but constructive” for the purpose of “bringing something - a concept, an idea, or a practice – alive” and hence to “stimulate, not paralyze or end, discussion” (p. 8). Here the aim is therefore to set research design within a constructive approach, meaning motivating and encouraging, when investigating “tourism beyond binary accounts of hope and despair, celebration and condemnation” (Ren, 2021, p. 138). In this context, tourism is regarded as neither good nor bad, but as a phenomenon in all its complexities. The research

focus is hence set on capturing the research matter by following the cohabitation of humans and more-than-humans and to search for and follow the entangled threads of mobilities and tourism on the margins.

The constructive approach set when collecting the narratives of Melrakkaslétta means avoiding the sole emphasis on hardship and difficulties too often found in research on rural lives (Graugaard, 2021; Mankova, 2018). Instead, the research is set to pay equal attention to the wellbeing and playfulness expected to be found amongst the challenges and restraints of any being, on the social and geographical margin as elsewhere in the world (Clark, 2019). Here notes are taken from that “mobility and an ontology of becoming, can be a positive alternative to the conception of society as a bounded and static social group” (Vergunst & Árnason, 2012, p. 149). For this, it is worth taking notice of Haraway’s (2016) words, that “it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with” and so does it matter “what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories” (p. 12). In other words, it matters what stories are told, how so, whom by, and to whom. In research, it likewise matters who conducts it, how its focus is set and on what, and how the data is collected, managed, analysed, and presented.

At the core of all research are their position, direction, and underlying paradigm. Still, while highlighting the importance of ontological and epistemological stances, Marsh et al., (2018) acknowledge the contested understanding and adoption of these very terms. There seems however to exist general agreement on epistemology being the philosophy of knowing and ontology being the philosophy of being. Then there is the matter of methodology which rests on and has to sync with the former two (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This research focuses on rural tourism and its interconnectedness with mobilities, place and margins. Appropriate to the multilayered fashion of tourism and the field of tourism studies, the research makes use of interdisciplinary epistemologies, ontologies, and methodologies widely applied within tourism research, anthropology, sociology, and geography. The main research agenda, however, is to be found within the relational materialism of flat ontology and post-Actor-Network Theory, the subjects of the next subchapter.

## **2.1 Material Relationalism and Post-ANT**

Actor-Network Theory - ANT is one amongst other world views within what has been termed an ‘ontological turn’ (Heywood, 2017; Kelly, 2014). The turn grew from scepticism regarding whether researchers might, when inspecting the unknown, inevitably force known epistemologies into research. From this grew the idea that instead, researchers might search beyond and adjust their conceptual, ontological, and methodological ways in order to grasp worldviews, issues, being, and beliefs of the unknown as “our understanding of the world is inseparable from the world itself until we make that separation” (Heywood, 2017, p. 4). From

this seed grew the ontologically focused philosophical stance of material relationalism and flat ontology.

Placing the research agenda within relational materialism through post-Actor-Network Theory (ANT) means setting out to identify interlinked and relational actor-networks establishing societal assemble. ANT “extends the word actor - or actant - to *non-human, non-individual* entities” (Latour, 1996, p. 370), thereby opening “the social sciences to non-humans” (Callon, 2007, p. 273). Viewing the world through an ANT lens hence has to do with treating matters of scrutiny as of possible effect in “the webs of relations within which they are located” (Law, 2008, p. 141). Including non-humans – also framed more-than-humans – into investigations means escaping dualism (mind-body, human-nature, culture-economy), and thus the term flat ontology. The flatness is not that of the world nor does it refer to theoretical flatness but to that of regarding all there is as having an equal ability to matter (Ash, 2020; Harman, 2020). How so and to what extent then become the matters of concern.

The ontological premise of ANT is that reality is created within networks of actors – human as well as non-human – where “all things are relational” and “where nothing is thinkable outside relations” (Jóhannesson & Bærenholdt, 2020, p. 34). This means to regard “anything as real as long as it has an effect on something else” (Harman, 2020, p. 375). According to Latour (1996), ANT provides merely “a black and white picture, not a coloured and contrasted one” (p. 380). This is caused by that within ANT no distinction is made between the micro and macro - near and far - up close and faraway (Latour, 1998). Geography - or rather distance - hence is just one actant in the connections at play within actor-networks. As is with other world views, ANT has had its share of criticism. King (2023) even proposes blunt dismissal of ANT on the grounds that it places far too much focus on actants. Here, however, the aim was not that of strictly following “actors as they fluidly move across nature and culture, technology and society, the big and the small” (Fariás & Paulos, 2024, p. 34). Instead, the ANT lens was directed at indicating the relational ordering of the matters of concern and the interlinked role of humans and the more-than-human world in such relations.

ANT, deriving from Science and Technology Studies, originally focused on technologies, production, and material machineries in the sociological context and construction (Vicsek et al, 2016). Here, however, the underlying research focus leans more toward post-ANT. Post-ANT studies have extended the ANT thought by shifting the focus from how social order is created through networks to paying equal attention to the establishments, presence, and destruction of diverse modes of ordering (Jóhannesson & Bærenholdt, 2020). Post-ANT furthermore embraces multiplicity and heterogeneity of the

social world, including an "ontological claim about the multiple identities of every object" (Fariás & Paulos, 2024, p. 37). This means not only appreciating the multilayeredness of the world assembly but recognising the multifunctional role of each of its actants and objects. Post-ANT studies have also extended the agency of actors and actants to include for example feelings and experiences (Haug, 2012). Yet another example of how ANT has evolved is that while earlier ANT studies attempted to identify the origins and even endpoints of actor networks, post-ANT studies acknowledge that in the multilayered entanglements of our reality, such findings are not likely to be obtained (Jóhannesson & Bærenholdt, 2020). Instead, post-ANT studies strive to find and follow the relational and ever mobile networks and actants of influence in relation to matters of concern without expecting closure.

Here, the post-ANT lens has been applied as an underlying tool when searching for and tracing the relational aspects of placemaking, tourism, and other mobilities in the marginal Melrakkaslétta, without aiming to trace every possible actant within these networks. Jóhannesson, Ren and van der Duim have proposed post-ANT as offering a useful tool in the multi-layered and complex ordering of tourism (Jóhannesson et al., 2012; 2015; 2016; Ren, Jóhannesson et al., 2018; Ren, van der Duim et al., 2018; 2020; van der Duim et al. 2013, 2017, 2012) where tourism research is directed at "the networks and rhizomes through which tourism knowledge is co-created" (Ren, van der Duim et al., 2020, p. 6). They reason that tourism research "is about the different ways in which tourism interferes with, is shaped by and is entangled in 'other things'" (Jóhannesson, et al., 2015, p. 2) as well as the agency of tourism in social order and disruption.

## 2.2 Methodology

This research strives towards making research which matters "beyond the image of academia as detached from society" (Ren et al., 2020, p. 2). This means engaging with the research matter "not to build large and coherent chunks of knowledge" (Ren et al., 2012, p. 22), but to delve into and gain a deep understanding of the research topic - the matters of concern. To meet this end, the research applies the qualitative approach which is widely applied when the aim is to capture multilayered subjects (Braun et al, 2017; Clarke et al. 2015), here the complexities and entanglements of placemaking, tourism and other mobilities on the margins. Qualitative research has been criticised for lacking "clearly established, straightforward and agreed-upon" procedures and measurements (Moshbah, 2024, p. 133) delimiting their reliability and validation. On the other hand, it has been stated that qualitative research methods "are not truth conveying" to the same degree as is often strived for through quantitative research (Reichertz, 2018, p. 128). Instead, qualitative research, set within a qualitative research paradigm, "share in common a rejection of the

possibility of discovering universal meaning, because meaning is understood as always being tied to the context in which it is produced” (Clarke et al., 2015, p. 223). Hence, both paradigms strive for obtaining research rigor only by somewhat differing aims, terminology and perspectives (Golafshani, 2003). Where quantitative research regards reliability and validation as having to do with consistency, measurability, explanations and truths, within qualitative research it is rather about trustworthiness, depth, understanding and meaning.

Ethnography is a form of qualitative research that pertains striving to "*learning about people*, in contrast to *studying people*" (Jones & Smith, 2017, p. 98). It can also be described as entailing "long-term participant observation in farflung, 'exotic' places, where the researcher might even 'go native' (that is over-identify with the research participants and thus lose all sense of objectivity)", and that doing so is "not necessarily a bad thing" (Jones, 2010, p. 3). This means that ethnography does not anticipate static reality from an objective, unbiased and passive researcher. Quite the opposite as evident by phrases such as "the researcher is the (research) instrument" (Dodgson, 2019, p. 166; Pezalla et al., 2012, p. 166) and "knowledge cannot be separated from the knower" (Malaurent & Avison, 2017, p. 920, quoting Steedman, 1991).

This means that the researcher includes and utilizes her senses to produce knowledge, where even our "emotions become a critical research instrument" (Sirris et al., 2022, p. 141). Awareness of experiences and feelings is an important part of conducting ethnographic research. Pink (2015) stresses the importance of researchers using their senses, as they else can never fully understand, learn, and respect the lives of others. Conducting ethnography furthermore entails respecting the matters of concern regardless of their initial familiarity. An example of this is that to "study ghosts ethnographically means to take issues of haunting seriously. If the analyst merely made fun of beliefs in ghosts, the study would be of little use" (Tsing, 2000, p. 351). Conducting ethnographic research hence means appreciating, respecting and valuing worldviews, beliefs, occurrences, and emotions unfamiliar to the researcher.

A researcher's stance and position can be described as 'a skin not a sweater' as it "cannot be put on and taken off" (Marsh et al., 2018, p. 177). Qualitative research not only emphasizes and embraces the active role of researchers but also regards the researcher's subjectivity as a resource "rather than viewing it as a 'problem' to be managed" (Clarke et al., 2015, p. 223). Still, in order to become such a tool, researchers essentially need to conduct and state self-reflexive observations on their own stances and beliefs within research (Malaurent & Avison, 2017; Pezalla et al., 2012). It is therefore important to revisit the fact that I, the researcher, have strong ties to the research area, those being my childhood grounds and innate in my ancestry. Self-reflexive recognition makes me aware

that I am thereby holding at least double agency in the relational ordering of this doctoral research. I am the designer and conductor of the research as well as the interpreter of its outcomes. My felt connection to the research area furthermore and inevitably plays a part in me not wanting the main research focus to be on the common rural challenges alone, but instead to equally pay attention to its positives and possibilities.

Ethnography derived as an ideology and a tool for Western researchers to perform research in unfamiliar settings, amongst unknown cultures. It has later adapted to become one of the most applied qualitative methodologies, within and beyond known cultures (Braun et al., 2017; Jones & Smith, 2017), even as is the case here, when the researcher can be regarded as semi-native from the very beginning. Hence, applying ethnography is about delving into the area of research where the researcher utilizes her emotions, experiences, and senses and combines these with the narratives of those with felt knowledge of the field of research, in this case, the residents and other dwellers in Melrakkaslétta. How this was performed in this research will be a matter of later chapters but first to come is an introduction of the main concepts framing the study and a short overview of the area of research.

### 3. Conceptual framework

The research is framed by four main concepts namely *tourism*, *mobilities*, *place* and *margins*, each introduced and discussed in the coming subchapters.

#### 3.1 Tourism

Huijbens (2021) has argued that when it comes to tourism “nobody really knows what it is, entails or can become. In effect tourism can be anything, as long as it involves visitors or non-locals” (p. 47). These words highlight the complexity of pinning down a clear definition of tourism. Its versatile nature has been echoed in academic discussions, reaching from reservations about whether there even exists a scholarly field of tourism (Tribe, 2006) and the emergence of tourism as an academic discipline (Mulet-Forteza et al., 2021), onto improved ways of research to reflect its multidimensional aspects (van der Duim et al., 2017). Research on tourism has also grown to include societal change, new and emerging norms and technological swifts (Cheng, 2024; Liburd, 2012). Still, researchers seem inclined to regard tourism as merely an economical, societal and/or geographical phenomenon (Huijbens & Müller, 2022) with tourism studies tending to “produce fixed dualisms between the life of tourism and everyday life” (Larsen, 2008, p. 21). This has been emphasised with other fixed dualistic focuses, such as “away as opposed to home” or “the extraordinary as opposed to the ordinary” and “guest as opposed to host” (Larsen et al., 2007, p. 246).

Yet, tourism is a phenomenon seeping into every aspect of society. One example of this becomes evident in the results of the Icelandic Tourism Taskforce which in 2015 attempted to follow the threads of tourism into the domestic nature of the legal framework, administration, information, production and knowledge creation, to name only a few (Figure 3-2). The scope of the figure and its format makes it a challenging read, but what is of interest here is how it demonstrates the various aspects and layers of tourism assemblage. Still, in it no notice is taken of the relational aspects or the interconnectedness of the various actants in tourism networks.

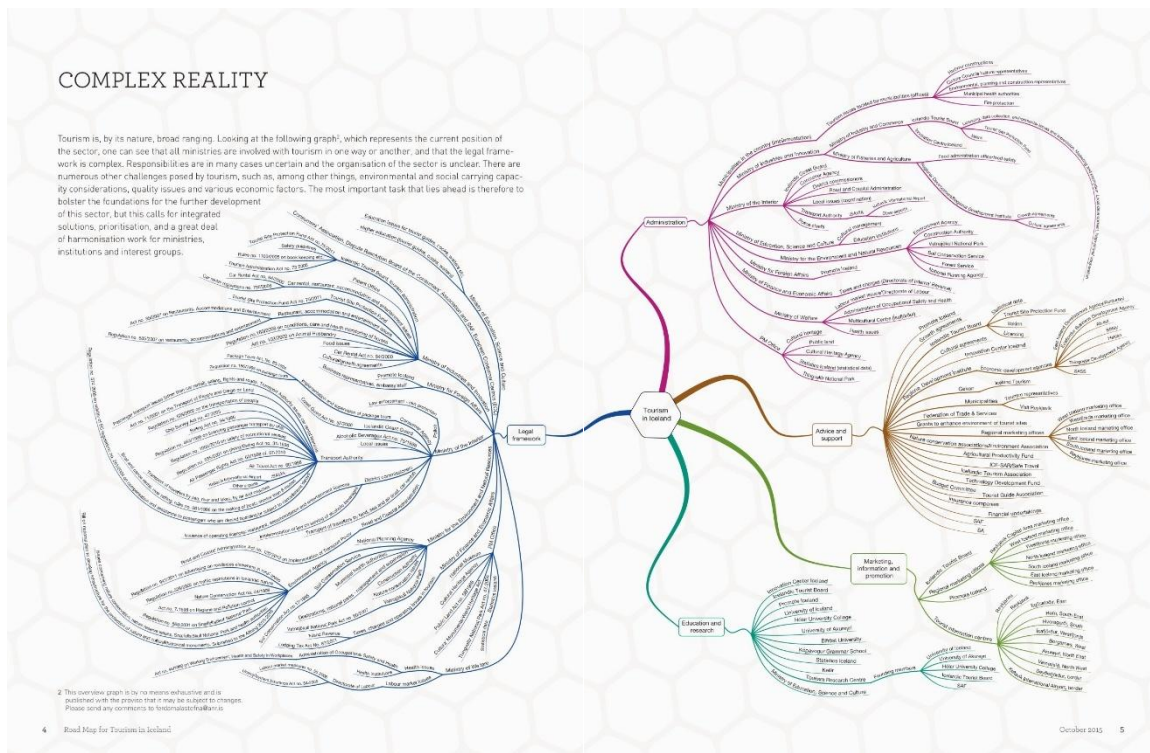


Figure 3-1. The complex reality of tourism, as found by the Icelandic Tourism Taskforce (2015, pp. 4-5).

In 2023 global tourist arrivals counted 1.3 billion, yet to reach the pre-pandemic record from 2019 at one-and-a-half billion (UNWTO, 2024). Hereof around two million occurred in Iceland (Icelandic Tourist Board, n.d.). Although modest in a global context, the North-Atlantic island of Iceland has repeatedly been mentioned in the context of overtourism (Gil-Alana & Huijbens, 2018; Sæþórsdóttir et al., 2020). Even if the usefulness of the term ‘overtourism’ has been questioned, the “problems linked to overtourism are very real” (Jóhannesson & Lund, 2019, p. 93) with signs of fatigue for residents, resources, and travellers in the areas being visited. In Iceland, this was in particular relevant in that tourist numbers had more than quadrupled in less than a decade (Sæþórsdóttir et al., 2020). Then, however, in 2020 the agency of Covid-19 resulted in a grave disruption in the actor-networks of global travel.

The lockdown caused serious concerns about its effects, highlighting the importance of tourism as an employment instigator and hence creator of socioeconomical value and a source of domestic income. The downturn resulted in counteractive actions from tourism authorities around the globe, including the Icelandic government (Government, n.d.). There were, however, those who perceived the drawbacks and its worldwide relational ramifications as an opportunity to rethink the global tourism sector and direct it into more sustainable ways (Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020; Tourism from zero, n.d.). Such re-evaluations included aspirations for conditions where residents and environments of hosting areas would gain a stronger say in tourism structures (UNWTO, n.d.-a). Then, the pandemic

loosened its grip and the world saw exponential growth in international travel, a phenomenon termed 'compensatory tourism' and even 'revenge tourism' (Arora et al., 2023) when describing the impatience and piled-up demands for travel post-Covid.



Picture 2. Tourism in action. Preparing to dine at a local restaurant in Melrakkaslétta ©Þórný Barðadóttir, 2021

Social aspects and residential involvement in local tourism formation have been regarded as important factors in tourism development (Eslami et al., 2019; Sharpley, 2014), having to do with “the extent to which social inclusion plays a part in such development” (Sharpley & Roberts, 2004, p. 173). Research on the social impact of tourism includes resident’s perspectives on tourism (Helgadóttir et al., 2019) and residential support towards tourism (Hateftabar & Chapuis, 2020; Nunkoo & So, 2015). In later years the impact of overtourism gained much research focus (Szromek et al., 2020; Sæþórsdóttir et al., 2020) and most recent are research on post-Covid effects (Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020; Ramkissoon, 2023) and anti-tourism movements (Milano et al., 2024) in tourism host communities.

What this research has in common is that it is aimed at and conducted within already established tourist destinations. Less is however known about how tourism is perceived and supported in areas of *undertourism* at the tourism margins, the rural areas potentially

becoming tourist destinations. In the next subchapters, we will explore *tourism* in the context of the three underlying concepts of this study, namely *mobilities*, *place* and *margins* before merging the four concepts in a short subchapter on tourism mobilities and places on the margins.

## 3.2 Mobilities

Reduced to its essentials, the core of mobility research traditionally dealt with the opposition between movement and fixity, as in: “Things move or stay still” (Merriman, 2009, p. 134). The early 2000s saw the rise of a new emphasis in research on transport, trade and travel with the emerging of terms such as ‘the new mobilities paradigm’ and ‘the mobility turn’ (Cohen et al., 2015; Hannam et al., 2006; Harney, 2024; Lund & Jóhannesson, 2014). This new approach was grounded in the huge rise and impacts of globalised travel, transport, technologies and tourism, as well as the networks, power relations and enormous societal changes this caused, “even for those who have not moved” (Hannam et al., 2006, p. 2). The new mobilities paradigm combined the dialogue of the era on fluidity and movement within the social sciences, geographies and economics (Cresswell, 2014; Sheller, 2021), by not regarding transportation and human travel as separate elements, but instead by “putting social relations into travel” (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 208). Such relations result in that tourism has become the metaphor for “how a successful life is now measured” (Franklin, 2008, p. 27). This includes showcasing who are able to travel (Hannam et al., 2006; Urry & Larsen, 2011), to where they are longing to travel (Saarinen, 2004) and to where they have travelled (Silva & Prista, 2016).

The mobilities paradigm set into focus how the networks and systems created for such vast and various ways of transport and travel, rely on “complex patterns of social experience conducted through communications at-a-distance” (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 208). Tourism mobilities are highly dependent on - and influential in – presumably immobile, yet ever-evolving – infrastructures for transport and travel, including roads, docks, tunnels, airports, escalators and boarding pass printers. Embodied tourism mobility counts people moving by walking, biking, running and riding, while in a globalized world, far-reaching travels are likewise made possible by the use of aeroplanes, trains, cars, ferries and other forms of motorised transport within and between places (Blunt, 2007; Hui, 2013; Sheller & Urry, 2004). The extensive construction of transport infrastructures has been introduced as an important factor in the creation of many of today’s tourist destinations in the United Kingdom (Shields, 1991; Urry & Larsen, 2011), Denmark (Bærenholdt et al., 2004) and the Americas (Peters, 2023; Piglia, 2011). Tourism has therefore often followed the development of transport infrastructure originally constructed for other means such as militarization and exploitation of natural resources (Sheller, 2021). Williams (2013)

highlights this relational network of mobilities, societal change and progress in transportation when demonstrating the five stages of tourism. The first was the result of industrialisation and rural-to-urban movements and revisits. The second he links to the development of railway systems, the third followed increased personalized ownership of cars, the fourth was the result of air access and the fifth followed the age of digitalization. What these examples show, is the relational and multilayered aspect of mobilities and how they reach far beyond human travel from place to place – or the lack of it.

In the decades since its emergence, the new mobilities paradigm has been much applied in research following the escalation of chosen and forced movement of people, be it anywhere on the scale between pure leisure and the desperate search for asylum. Consequently, the true appropriateness of the paradigm has been questioned, even to the degree where “mobility as a term simply serves as a replacement for migration with an implicit nod to the changing lexicon and its related implications” (Harney, 2024, p. 16). The new mobilities paradigm, however, saw tourism “as one among several forms of activity where bodies, goods, commodities, ideas and knowledge are in motion” (Coles, 2015, pp. 62-63). This means that research on mobilities inspects various interconnected threads of movements, each and combined showcasing “the recarving of channels and the remapping of the possibilities of geography” (Tsing, 2000, p. 327).

The interlinked global networks of travel, trade and tourism are by Franklin (2008, 2018) termed as ‘tourism ordering’ where tourism is ‘the choreography of a mobile world’ (Franklin, 2012). What this means is that tourism is performed, on the one hand as a managed, channelled, controlled and rehearsed network, while on the other an outcome of a fluid, uncontrolled global wave of people, goods, information and technology. The massive scale of modern days mobilities becomes even more evident when put on hold. Regardless if such a pause is caused by global financial crises (Cohen, 2012; Jóhannesson, 2015) or disrupting ash from a volcanic eruption (Lund & Benediktsson, 2011; Ramkissoon, 2023), the standstills showcase how “from the mobilities perspective, tourism is brought into being through (dis)ordering of different mobilities” (Jóhannesson, et al., 2012, p. 3).

Another disorder in the networks of global mobilities was caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (Cresswell, 2020; Hall et al., 2020). For a couple of years, the pandemic moved most human interaction into the virtual sphere of online mobility (Blanchard, 2021; Falk & Hagsten, 2021). Still, the novelty of virtual mobility was not down to matters of technology as online education and meetings had been utilized since the late 1990s (Snow & Coker, 2020). While the virtual sphere, however, in the times of travel restrictions managed to show its usefulness (possibility, access, travel times, continued interactions, etc.), lacking was the human factor as “contact, affections, and emotions are almost impossible to reproduce on

an online platform” (Porpiglia et al., 2020, p. 302). Over a decade before the Covid-19 pandemic hit, Larsen et al. (2007) argued that virtual communication was mainly being used for planning and preparation of visits and meetings in person, as no virtual exchange makes it possible for humans to “share a meal or buy rounds or hug one’s mother or cuddle one’s grandchild or kiss the bride” (p. 247). This is indeed the essence of tourism, being it brought on by business, boredom, leisure, curiosity, visits or wanderings: the ways tourism is performed and felt experienced in “multi-sensuous ways, touching, tasting, smelling, hearing and so on” (Larsen & Urry, 2011, p. 14). Where such tourism experiences are felt brings us to the matter of sites of tourism performances, the places of tourism.

### 3.3 Place

Defining the notion of a place is not a straightforward task. According to Massey (2005), a place is a collection of “stories so far” (p. 5), as a “throwntogetherness, the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now” (p. 140). A place is therefore a mediated space, and importantly, always dynamic, as “a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices” (p. 9). This view of the continued emergence and evolvment of places is echoed in the words of Ingold (2011) when describing spaces and places as “a world of incessant movement and becoming, one that is never complete but continually under construction, woven from the countless lifelines of its manifold human and non-human constituents” (p. 141).

Places are filled with narratives and material meanings of human and more-than-human actors. Hence, there are countless aspects and factors at play in the making of a place. Such aspects include lightscapes (Bille & Sørensen, 2007; Edensor, 2017), soundscapes (Kato, 2009; Smith, 2000), smellscapes (Xiao, et al., 2020) and other sensory factors playing into the essence of a place. For Ingold (1993) a place cannot be cut out from what surrounds it. To him, a place “owes its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend time there” (p. 155) as experience “does not mediate between mind and nature, since these are not separated in the first place” (Ingold, 2000, p. 10).

Places are furthermore brimming with meaning, symbols, beliefs and knowledge created as understood by those residing and dwelling in these given spaces, hence making them into places (Frisvoll, 2012). A place is however not merely about symbolic meaning on a personal level but there where “communities may distinguish themselves from other social collectives” (Shields, 1991, pp. 62-63). In that sense can no place be simply a location, but rather are they “sites for someone and of something” (Shields, 1991, p. 6) where natural surroundings and the myths of those, become an integrated part of the self and that of communal integration. A place thereby obtains and entails connections to, and meanings of, a given space.



Picture 3. Locals on an autumn walk in Melrakkaslétta ©Þórný Barðadóttir, 2020

Places are bearers of narratives with strong sociological power as they “mediate the way space is apprehended and comprehended” (Gulson & Symes, 2007, p. 99) Pálsson (2017) reminds us of how the connection to a childhood home, the sense of being grounded and knowing one’s roots, adds a third dimension to the otherwise flat geographical spot a house rests on. People can however be strongly attached to other places as well, and to more than one place all at once. In addition, a place can bear different meaning to different people (Bærenholdt et al., 2004). It emerges through habitus, activity, stay, connections, and memories. Places are therefore never static, never ready-made, but consisting of fluid ideas, emotions, atmospheres and sensory elements as well as “physical stuff, which is itself always in motion” (Sheller & Urry, 2004, p. 1). All this is to say that while a place is an important part of both our identity and of what it means to belong to a community, the exact definition of the same place can rarely be a clearly defined circle on a map.

Places and their location, however, are one of the cores of tourism branding - place promotion - where a clear image of tourist products is produced and introduced to potential visitors as clientele (Boisen et al., 2018). Yet, tourism places, like other places, come into existence through movement and are themselves mobile. Lund and Jóhannesson (2016) remind us that tourism places - destinations - are more than “the effect of human practice taking place on the ‘passive’ surface of the earth” or “cultural constructs that only relate to

the natural environment and landscape as a passive resource” (p. 654). This relates to how tourism places are performed and how “in these performances they are put into play in relation to other places” (Sheller & Urry, 2004, p. 1). This means that places “come into existence through *relationships*” (Larsen & Urry, 2011, p. 64) They move around within global networks of humans, technologies, imaginations and images that situate them “within a cultural economy of difference *and* similarity” (Bærenholdt et al., 2004, p. 72).

In branding and marketing, placemaking is a planned and narrated top-down process (Lew, 2017). Should tourism be perceived as the mutual experience of before, during and after travel, that is as “circles of anticipation, performances and remembrance” (Bærenholdt et al., 2004, p. 3), then a clear image of what to expect is sure to help on the first phase. It has nevertheless been questioned if such reduction and simplification in the end benefits destinations or the local tourism sectors (Ren & Blichfeldt, 2011; Richards, 2017). The reducing, often stereotyped, process of placemaking in branding and marketing, can furthermore alienate an area from its residents when the uniform branding image ends up differing from the locals' ideas of their region (Førde, 2015; Saarinen, 2004). The top-down process of branding and marketing can therefore be viewed as opposed to the always active, never-finished, bottom-up processes of organic place making (Lew, 2017).

### 3.4 Margins

Margins can be the *Places on the Margins* (Shields, 1991), the people on the margins (Kovach, 2015) or the knowledge on the margins (Tsing, 1994) to name a few examples. Still, none of these are set or static but the result of multiple and differing forms of perception and practices. In the context of tourism mobilities, these could include accessibility, travel opportunities, landscape, risk, weather, serviceability and infrastructures. Margins however only occur as opposed to something, that is, as at the margin *of* something and is hence inherently relational. This means that margins are not merely created through geographical cartography of near and far, but are a relational creation of distances, lacking connections and remoteness (Barðadóttir, under review).

This can be explored and contextualised by inspecting the situatedness of Iceland in relation to the Arctic. Geographically, Iceland is on the margin of Europe, an island in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean. Still, in the Cold War period from the eve of WWII until the late 1980s', Iceland's geographical position became at the centre of geopolitical tension (Ingimundarson, 2013). It was also at the centre of economic tension during the 'Cod War' period (Heininen, 2010) following Iceland in levels extending its territorial waters and exclusive economic zone between 1952-1975 (Ívarsson, n.d.). Iceland's geographical location has also enabled the creation of a hub for airborne mobility between continents (Huijbens & Jóhannesson, 2013; Lund et al., 2018; Lund, et al., 2017), thereby positioning

the country at the centre of international airways. Furthermore, Iceland is on the southern margin of the Arctic. Yet, the continued melting of the Arctic Ocean's icecap resulting from global warming, has aroused expectations of the opening of new ways of seaborne cargo through the Arctic Ocean. There Iceland might become a marginal island at the centre of global transport (Drewniak et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2015).

Another form of seaborne transport on the rise in the Arctic area is cruise tourism. This applies in particular to expedition ships, small passenger ships, operating in Antarctica since the 1950s (Stewart & Draper, 2008) and later introduced into the Arctic where their travels have escalated within the last decade (Cajaiba-Santana, Faury, & Ramadan, 2020). This includes the Icelandic waters (Harkison & Barðadóttir, 2019). These expedition cruises typically carry a few hundred passengers, as opposed to thousands, and due to their moderate size and relatively shallow reach of their keel, they are able to navigate in shallower waters and narrower fjords than the larger cruise ships. Iceland has been described as a gateway into Arctic cruising (Huijbens, 2015; Lund et al., 2018; Lund et al., 2017) and is already fast becoming a main Arctic cruise serving hub (Long et al., 2023). These examples show that despite the geographical solidity of Iceland's position on the globe and thereby its unchangeable proximity to other countries and continents, its perceived position has nevertheless moved alongside the geographical, environmental, geopolitical, and technical networks. All this to say: margins are mobile.

Then there is the matter of margins not only applying to geographical locations on the periphery. They can likewise derive from sociocultural aspects where again perception, relations and practices define what is regarded as a margin. Hansen and Ren (2021) have noted that the increased global interest in the Arctic has been followed by an escalation in research interest and funding possibilities. They however also stress how that can end up in top-down knowledge production, where strong, external funding agencies are those controlling knowledge creation within and about the area. This relates to what (Graugaard, 2021) calls hit-and-run research in the rural areas of Greenland. This applies to when research is conducted by researchers who arrive without prior knowledge and stay merely long enough to collect raw data before departing again. This means that they never gain any real connection to their sites of research. Graugaard (2021) furthermore notes how wordings and framings of researchers can emphasise their misunderstandings and detachment from the research matter.



Picture 4. Autumn tradition of sheep collection in Melrakkaslétta ©Pórný Barðadóttir 2020

The “discourse of region is based on the idea and conceptual nature of the region as a historical and social construction” (Saarinen, 2004, p. 168). Tourism can and has provided an opportunity to preserve and regain narratives and cultural aspects by telling the stories of the past (Gustafsson & Amer, 2023) by creating meeting grounds where the stories told become the core. Modern days tourism has created a venue where even ruins can and have been transformed into “spaces of improvisation and creativity” (Lund & Jóhannesson, 2014, p. 445), as with folklore, mores, ghosts and even “heritage of pain and shame” (Pálsson, 2013, p. 178) which all have become popular tourist attractions. There the often abandoned sites and ruins are perceived as authentic, as opposed to touristic urban centres.

Western media tends to maintain such an image when showcasing rural areas as pessimistic places that have lost their cultural originality and tradition (Mankova, 2018) in a “depiction of traditional folkways and mores and its evocation of continuity despite the march of time and change” while “on screen, the city sparkles in the light” (Fowler & Helfield, 2006, pp. 1-2). Massey (2005) argues that such a difference in time and space has been used as a tool in the creation of “a particular form of power/knowledge” (p. 69) where the time of those being observed differs from the observers' time. Early days anthropologists have been criticized for ‘othering’ faraway cultures from a Western ‘us’ when drawing conclusions based on “what they know, feel, and believe” (Appadurai, 1988, p. 37). Likewise,

Graugaard (2021) stresses, how the focus of research conducted in rural areas often is set to capture problems and identity struggles, rather than seeing the residents as “active agents of change” (Ren, Jóhannesson, et al., 2020, p. 6) as if humour, laughter and wellbeing were not existent in marginal places as they are elsewhere in the world.

### 3.4.1 Tourism mobilities and marginal places

According to Ashworth (1989), tourism research long suffered from *rural bias* as interest in studies on urban tourism first awoke in the 1980s to finally correct what he called 'imbalance in attention'. Yet, rural tourism has also been described as being inherently urban, meaning that its earliest rise can be traced back to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, then growing "as an antidote to industrial cities and the industrial revolution" (Lane, 2009, p. 354). Overseas grand tours of Thomas Cook (Franklin, 2008; Urry & Larsen, 2011) and the domestic pioneering tours of John Byng (Franklin, 2018) had their role in the development of the European tourism sector. Improvement of transport systems also went hand in hand with tourism development, allowing access to coastal and rural areas (Marjavaara et al., 2022; Prideaux, 2000; Vannini, 2023).

International travel, be it for business or leisure, still results in tourism activities mainly occurring in urban areas, or in what Gartner and Lime (2000) term ‘consumption centres’. This is the case for the world’s most densely and sparsely populated areas alike, as is the case in the Arctic and sub-Arctic where most tourism activities take place around main gateways of international airports and ports facilities (Ren et al., 2024). Tourism tends nevertheless to be introduced as a way to revitalise rural areas (Rosalina et al., 2021). This means perceiving tourism as a “rural diversification and development tool for a countryside losing jobs and income through the modernisation of agriculture” (Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015, p. 1134), although that might be regarded as "an employment issue rather than a farm development issue" (Sharpley & Vass, 2006, p. 1050). The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), furthermore states that “[R]ural tourism has a high potential to stimulate local economic growth and social change because of its complementarity with other economic activities, its contribution to GDP and job creation” (UNWTO, n.d.-b). Such focus on economics has further been emphasized through it being the long-lasting, main research focus in studies conducted on rural tourism (Rosalina et al., 2021).

Geographical distances play a decisive role in the possibilities and probabilities of rural areas for tourism development (Lane, 2009; Tan et al., 2022). Still, distances are not a linear geographical phenomenon, but a highly relational and perceptual one. This has been conceptualised through terms such as distance decay, which is about how perceived distances seem to multiply the further they reach (Larsen & Guiver, 2013; McKercher, 2018;

McKercher & Lew, 2003; Tan et al., 2022). This means that "distance exerts a frictional effect" on tourism mobilities (McKercher & Lee, 2003, p. 159), making distances a key limiting factor in travel demand (Tan et al., 2022).

Research on distance decay has predominantly been quantitative with a focus on statistical measurements and comparison of certain factors under scrutiny. The concept has furthermore mostly been applied to research urban rather than rural tourism (Tan et al., 2022). The same applies to Cresswell's (2010) conceptualization of mobilities as constellations, dealing with how geography, infrastructure and human mobility are interconnected and ever-changing patterns within urban transport and travel. These concepts, however, are just as applicable and rhetorically relevant when dealing with tourism and mobilities on the margin (Vannini, 2023). Research on distance decay can be somewhat summed up in that the "impact of distance on demand is self evident" (McKercher & Mak, 2019, p. 344) while constellations of mobility have to do with "the importance of movement, representation and practices" and how they interact "in the production and reproduction of power relations" (Cresswell, 2010, p. 26). The providence of access and shortening of distances with infrastructure development is summed up by Marjavaara et al. (2022) describing the Swedish Arctic where "the construction of a railway facilitating the exploitation of northern resources also allowed tourists to access the North" (p. 7).

In a tourism context, 'going north' has become somewhat of a synonym for "travelling quietly away from civilization, deep into nature and myth" (Duckworth, 2017, p. 57). As travellers arrive to the marginal north, they might, however, not merely be met with the expected 'poetics of nothingness' (Lund, 2023), but instead "encounter locals, scientists, other tourists, the remains of ancient civilizations, dolphins, whales and birds" (Duckworth, 2017, p. 58). Duckworth's scene is set in Scotland, where "landscape has been intimately associated with views: the picturesque Highland mountain scenery that simultaneously embodies both nature and the nation and is looked upon in order to assert their reality" (Vergunst, 2013, p. 122).

Scenic landscapes are likewise an inherent aspect of the Icelandic tourism sector. Nature has been the long-lasting decisive factor in decisions on arrivals to the country by foreign guests wanting to visit pristine Icelandic nature and dwell in what they regard as an unspoiled Icelandic wilderness (Ingólfssdóttir & Gunnarsdóttir, 2020). Such perception of nature can, however, be regarded as being both static and distant or as termed by Grimwood et al. (2018) an *external* nature "raw and pristine, autonomous from society" (p. 2). In such a scenario the earth and nature are merely "a passive surface upon which a universal humanity has settled" (Jóhannesson et al., 2016, p. 78), rather than the entangled

meshwork of more-than-human existence. The encompassing role of Icelandic nature in the uprise of the country's tourism sector showcases how nature and our environment are active actants and as such "response-able in the same sense as people are" (Haraway, 2008, p. 71). That is, humans and non-humans alike can and do affect and are affected in the networks of tourism contexts, as within the remainder of what is.

With all this in mind, the time has come to introduce the research area, Melrakkaslétta, before inspecting the methods applied when conducting this doctoral research on tourism and other mobilities in a marginal place. As the coming chapter is a summary of document analysis describing the becoming and being of Melrakkaslétta as well as historical events, the chapter is presented in both present and past tense.



## 4. Melrakkaslétta – the area of research

Melrakkaslétta is a peninsula on the northeast coast of Iceland. Its naming derives from the Icelandic words *melrakki* (Arctic fox) and *slétta* (flatland). The peninsula offers relatively easy human access as the flatland is not cut through with wide impassable rivers, high mountains or other restraining features. Its landscapes, surroundings and vegetation make it one of the areas of Iceland with the strongest Arctic natural features (Jóhannsdóttir et al., 2014). Sheep farming and small-scale fishing by the farmers were historically the main occupations of the residents of Melrakkaslétta (Lund, 2016) as was long the case for most Icelanders (Gunnarsson, 1987). One of the peninsula's farmsteads, Raufarhöfn, offered a deep, sheltered, natural harbour as is reflected in its naming, that is *rauf* (opening) and *höfn* (harbour).



Picture 5. Midnight bustle at Raufarhöfn harbour. The name-giving harbour opening visible to the upper left ©Þórný Barðadóttir, 2022

The site was particularly important at times when the ocean was the main highway for travel and trade. In the 1700s some trade was taking place at Raufarhöfn's natural harbour and in the first half of the nineteenth century it became a licensed trade resort with the necessary permission from the Danish king (Hólmsteinsson, 1985). The growing trade created an opportunity for a small settlement close to the harbour area where the settlement

of Raufarhöfn grew as the northernmost village of the Icelandic mainland. While the farm Raufarhöfn on Melrakkaslétta's eastern coast slowly grew into a village, the peninsula's other village, Kópasker, meaning *kópar* (seal pups) and *sker* (skerry) stayed merely a placename until in the 1890s. Then the site was chosen as a spot for the establishment of a local Farmers Cooperative Society. The settlement of Kópasker was created with the first residential house built in 1912 (Björnsdóttir, 2003), slowly growing into a village throughout the following decades.



Picture 6. Kópasker and one of the skerries surrounding the village ©Þórný Barðadóttir, 2021

The ways of living in Iceland have always been dependent on its nature and environment. So much so that Jónsson (2009), states the dependency of the Icelandic economy on natural forces as being responsible for frequent regressions, occurring more often and for much longer in Iceland than in any other western country. In Melrakkaslétta everything was nature-dependant. Sheep-farming, fishing, seal-, shark- and bird hunting, egg-collection, berry-picking, processing driftwood, collecting eiderdown, various methods of making clothing and processing and conserving food – as well as where and when to walk, sail, ride and travel. These conditions and material actants were what made Melrakkaslétta a place and knowing how to utilize, cohabit and survive was based on practised knowledge. Conditions of weather, wind, temperature, and precipitation had a huge effect on the land, flora, and fauna and as a result, on the human residents (Lund, 2016). The grassy flatland offers little shelter from the harsh, northern ocean wind, leaving the area with relatively low average temperature and frequent fog, in particular its eastern

part (Jóhannsdóttir et al., 2014). During winters the consistent northern wind throws droplets of the salty Atlantic Ocean throughout the flatland, creating caplets of hardened snow.

Other relational aspects and actants were furthermore at play in Melrakkaslétta as elsewhere. In the nineteenth century, small settlements were developing all around the Icelandic coastline. The Icelandic population had grown significantly causing outmigration to the seaside from the farms not able to sustain their household members and the shortage of grasslands did not sustain new farms. The surrounding farmlands were therefore the social backbones of each of the settlements around the Icelandic coastline. The area drawing the most, however, was the sheltered, fruitful fishery area of the northern coast of Reykjanes peninsula on the Icelandic southwest coast - today the capital Reykjavík and its surroundings. In a societal context, the whole country therefore was the backbone of Reykjavík's growth (Gunnlaugsson, 1993). This straightforward description of development is however rather simplistic. Lacking are countless other factors leading up to and influencing societal changes on that scale. In Melrakkaslétta's case, some had to do with agricultural changes (Lund, 2016), new methods and techniques in fisheries (Hólmsteinnsson, 1985), and even effects from harsh winters, exhausting sea ice conditions and natural disasters that in the late 1800s resulted in an unprecedented outmigration from Iceland to the Americas. Out of an Icelandic population of 70,000, between 16,000-20,000, Icelanders emigrated, including around two-thirds from the sparsely populated northeastern part of the country (The Icelandic Emigration Centre, n.d.) there amongst from Melrakkaslétta.

Lacking yet are other relational actor-networks affecting societal changes, including the arrivals of migrant workers and immigrants into the rural areas, for work in fisheries (Skaptadóttir, 2004; Skaptadóttir & Proppé, 2005) and later in tourism (Karlsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2016; Wendt et al., 2020). Melrakkaslétta, however, was never crowded, neither with farms nor residents. At the most 15-20 farms were at each time inhabited on the peninsula (Lund, 2016). It was therefore not predominantly the nationwide development of un-sustained, overcrowded and landless farms described by Gunnlaugsson (1993) that caused the small settlement in Raufarhöfn to grow into a village. The herring did.

From the late 1930s until the mid-1960s the Norwegian-Icelandic herring stock created golden years for Raufarhöfn and other villages on the northern and north-eastern coastline of Iceland (The Herring Era Museum, n.d.) and Raufarhöfn was one of the big herring-sites (Lund, 2016). The fishing and salting of herring were however highly seasonable processes. While it is estimated that Raufarhöfn counted around 2,000 inhabitants in the summer high seasons as flocks of seasonal workers headed to the village (Stefánsdóttir, 2009), the registered numbers of residents in those years were 350 – 430 at

the most (Statistics Iceland, n.d.-b). The herring, however, had its ways of comings and goings and in 1969 it had disappeared from the waters out of north-east Iceland (The Herring Era Museum, n.d.).

The agricultural roots of Kópasker meant that the village had never grown to become as large as the fisheries had made Raufarhöfn, but neither was its number of residents as fragile. Still, even though it must be safe to assume that most of the seasonal workers disappeared from Raufarhöfn with the herring, the number of registered residents was, for a short period, still on the rise. Due to persistent outmigration from the Icelandic rural areas to Reykjavík and its surroundings, the state launched an initiative program, lasting from 1972-1980, to enhance rural development. Investments in fishing trawlers and freezing plants created new jobs in various locations around the Icelandic coastline (Ólafsson, 1997). Raufarhöfn was one of those locations, and for a few years, its number of residents reached around 500. This was between 1976 and 1982 (Statistics Iceland, n.d.-b). From there the spiral went quickly downwards.



Picture 7. Reminders of a time passed: Former tanks for herring oil in Raufarhöfn ©Þórný Barðadóttir, 2022

In the 1980s the residents of the Icelandic fishing villages were “busy developing their identities as modern Icelanders” taking “pride in their position of being central in the national economy and being part of the fisheries” where some found that “those who came from the capital ... had no idea of who really provided the wealth of the nation” (Skaptadóttir,

2004, p. 262). However, changes were on the rise. Some had to do with the emergence of the freezing trawlers in the 1980s and soon after the introduction of transferrable fishing quotas. Then the bulk of the Icelandic fishery production moved out to the sea, and ownership of the fishery rights moved from the villages to private corporations. Since the late 1980s' continuing outmigration from Raufarhöfn caused much concern. In 2012 when the Icelandic Regional Development Institute (IRDI) launched a project called Fragile Communities (is. *Brothættar byggðir*), Raufarhöfn was chosen as a pioneer-community. The reason was that out of all the Icelandic villages, Raufarhöfn had for years shown one of the highest ratios of outmigration (IRDI, 2018). The number of registered residents was down to 185 (Statistics Iceland, n.d.-a) and the surroundings of Melrakkaslétta counted less than 20 residents on four farms and three houses in permanent residency (Lund, 2016).

The ideology of the Fragile Communities project was to apply a bottom-up method to enable residents of areas facing serious outmigration to come up with new ways to make their sites feasible for new residents – or at the very least to stop or delay the long-standing outmigration (IRDI, n.d.). At the projects' public kick-off meeting in Raufarhöfn, the residents rated employment issues of the highest significance, or to be more exact: increased fisheries and tourism (IRDI, 2012, 2013). While new ways and emphases of fisheries were somewhat detailed, the tourism part was left without further explanation. That is not the first time. Tourism had for a long time been a kind of rhetorical 'go-to-saviour' for each downturn in the traditional Icelandic sectors of fisheries and agriculture. Then local and national governments alike would point towards tourism as a tool to the rescue, for long with little-to-none action plan attached to the statements (Huijbens et al., 2014; Jóhannesson, 2009).

The Fragile Communities project in Raufarhöfn originally had a timeline of two years. Further into the project a public workshop still rated fisheries and tourism as the two most important sectors for Raufarhöfn's development and increased employment, this time with somewhat specific goals linked to the tourism part. Those were the need for signposts and marked walking paths and emphasis on the renovation of housing and surroundings for aesthetic purposes for tourists, not the least the buildings of the former herring sites. Also listed was the need for increased speed in the construction of the Arctic Henge (IRDI, 2018). The Arctic Henge is an impressive outdoor sculpture of rocks, 3-10 meters high and 54 diameters wide. It was created under the influences of the poem *Völuspá* and Norse mythology as well as the Stonehenge monument in England. The overall idea is to create a play of light between the sculpture and the Arctic midnight sun (Barðadóttir et al., 2023)

The residents' emphasis on the Arctic Henge seems to be shared by the regional Destination Marketing Office (DMO), Visit North Iceland (n.d.). When searching for things to do and visit on its website the Arctic Coast Way in March 2025 the hit shows two sites

of accommodations, a lighthouse, and the Arctic Henge to be the only reasons for a drive to Raufarhöfn. As for the rest of the peninsula, only on its western coastline can two nature sites be added to the list of interesting sites in Melrakkaslétta (Arctic Coast Way, n.d.). Inland, no other locations are mentioned.

#### **4.1 Mobilities in /of Melrakkaslétta**

The northernmost point of the Icelandic mainland is Rifstangi on Melrakkaslétta (NNA, n.d.). For long, the northernmost point was, however, believed to be another spot on the peninsula, namely Hraunhafnartangi at 66°32'16,91"N (Parliament, 41/1979). Then, in 2017, new measurements showed that Rifstangi does stretch some meters further north at 66°32'26,03"N (Parliament 58/2017). What this comes to show is how even coordinates on a map are far from static, but an ever-evolving becoming, affected by changing circumstances, advances in technology and new learnings, that is, they are a becoming.

Directing the focus towards human mobilities in and of Melrakkaslétta shows how for centuries, walking paths and the North-Atlantic Ocean were its main 'highways'. After the mid-twentieth century, aviation for some decades also played an important role in the area's travel and transport, where the two villages Kópasker and Raufarhöfn were connected to Akureyri – the regional service centre in mid-north Iceland – by two to four weekly flights (Parliament, A387/1973-1974). Scheduled flights to Melrakkaslétta came to an end in the late 1990s (ISAVIA, 2012) but while on track, the area was connected by relatively fast travel with connecting flights from Akureyri to the capital area (Parliament, A387/1973-1974). During the British and later US armies' occupation of Iceland during World War II a military airport was built on the western point of Reykjanes peninsula, on the Icelandic southwest coast. By the end of the war, the Icelandic state gained ownership of the airport, serving both military and commercial aviation until 1987 when a new airport opened on the location (ISAVIA, n.d.).

Keflavík International Airport became an important spot in trans-Atlantic aviation. Icelandair and later other Icelandic aviation companies used the airport as a hub offering a 'stopover in Iceland' (Huijbens & Jóhannesson, 2013) as mentioned above. The stopover-flights brought in tourists stopping for a few nights and at that time, not necessarily heading for Iceland as their main destination (Lund et al., 2017). This becomes particularly interesting in that while Icelandair has flirted with the Arctic image of Iceland as a gateway into the exotic otherness of the Arctic periphery (Lund et al., 2017), Keflavík International Airport is located about as far from the Arctic area of Melrakkaslétta as possible within the Icelandic mainland.

As for the landways, public transportation by bus was for decades routing some (changeable) days and seasons, connecting Melrakkaslétta to the county centre Húsavík

and onwards to Akureyri. This service gradually decreased and in 2019 the route had been cancelled (Skúladóttir et al., 2019), that is in the midst of the Icelandic tourism boom. This was however not caused by impassable roads, although the area has had its share of those. A road with whole-year accessibility opened in Melrakkaslétta in the early 1980s (Barðadóttir et al., 2023). This is a gravel road, following the old paths created by centuries of human and sheep walking, however later made accessible for tractors, trucks, and buses during summers. The road connected the peninsula's two villages and the farms alongside Melrakkaslétta's coastline. The construction came as a response to a close-in of the area when the seaway had become impassable due to persistent sea ice in the late 1970s (Sigfússon, 2016).

The Icelandic road system (Figure 4-1) is categorised into different road types, depending on location, number of residents they are to reach, importance, and scale of service (IRCA, 2017). Highway 1 (the ring road) circles the country and from it routes of different scales and quality spread out to a number of fjords and peninsulas as well as summer roads leading to the Icelandic highlands. In 2010 a new paved Melrakkaslétta road opened, crossing the peninsula with a one-way turn-off to Raufarhöfn (Barðadóttir et al., 2023). The new road connects the peninsula to the ring road with a serviced primary road, while the few farmsteads on Melrakkaslétta were left with the gravel road, thereafter categorised as a secondary road with minimum service (Figure 4-1).

Seasonality is a key challenge for the tourism sector in the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions (Rantala et al., 2019) and thereby for Icelandic tourism. Around 40-50% of foreign visits to Iceland are conducted during the three summer months, June through August (Guðmundsson, 2019; Óladóttir, 2016, 2018, 2019) meaning nearly half of the visits are distributed throughout the other nine months of the year. The average stay of visitors is shorter during the winter, spring and autumn, compared to summer visits (Óladóttir, 2019) and while nearly 70% of all summer visitors rent a car for self-drive, the number of car rentals during the winter months is considerably lower at 46% (Guðmundsson, 2019).

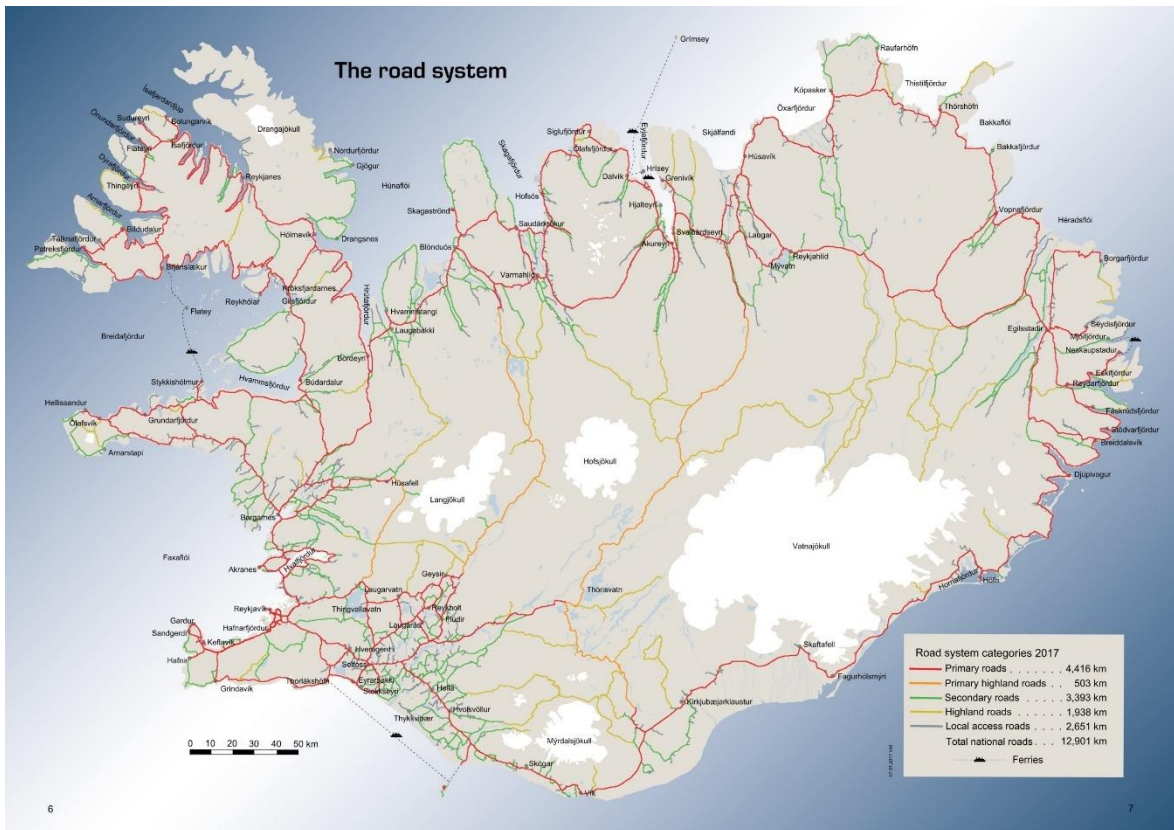


Figure 4-1. The Icelandic road system (Icelandic Road and Coastal Administration, 2017, pp. 6-7)

Self-driving in rental cars has become the number one choice of travel for foreign tourists touring the country. However, while the majority of those follow some parts of the Ring-road to popular tourist sites in the southern and western parts of the country the ratio of those rounding the country is much lower (Guðmundsson, 2019). Distributing tourists out of the capital area is therefore another challenge facing the tourism sector. Given the long drive from Keflavík International Airport to Melrakkaslétta and the fact that the peninsula is located far north of the ring road, it becomes clear that the domestic mobility systems are not favourable for tourism in Melrakkaslétta, which remains one of the least visited areas of the country (Óladóttir, 2016, 2019, 2020).

Icelandic residency is far from equally distributed around the country. The Icelandic capital area counts around two-thirds of the Icelandic population (Statistics Iceland, n.d.-c) while the remaining one-third is scattered unevenly throughout the country. It is a challenge to look past the uneven development and existing tension often arising between the urban and the rural. In such context transport systems, or rather the lack thereof, can be the very creators of peripheral areas through inaccessibility (Vannini, 2023) and thereby detachment from ruling networks of transport.



Picture 8. From Melrakkaslétta's coastal gravel road ©Þórný Barðadóttir, 2024

As the Covid 19 pandemic hit the global and hence the Icelandic tourism sector, the economic effect of the Icelandic tourism boom was not the least affecting the country's capital and surrounding areas – closest to the international airport - counting half of all overnight stays of foreign visitors with the rest of the country dividing the other half (Óladóttir, 2018, 2019, 2020). As mentioned above, the residents of the Icelandic fishing villages used to be proud of their role as providers for the nation, even hinting that they - as opposed to the residents of the capital area – were the real creators of value in the Icelandic economy (Skaptadóttir, 2004). With the Icelandic tourism boom, the capital area took over as the main creator of export value while the former fishing village of Raufarhöfn and the rest of Melrakkaslétta remain mostly bypassed by the foreign guests of Iceland. What this means is that the relational networks of global and domestic tourism - in both geographical as well as socioeconomic sense – just might have moved Melrakkaslétta even further out on the margin.



## 5. Research methods

Heading into performing the research, it is useful to recall its aim and approach for context. The research is set to inspect the entanglements of placemaking, mobilities and the making of margins in the context of tourism. It is performed in the sparsely populated and remote Melrakkaslétta peninsula on the northeast coast of Iceland. Melrakkaslétta is situated far northeast of the beaten track of Icelandic tourism, albeit an area not without its tourism potential (Barðadóttir et al., 2023; Barðadóttir & Lund, 2024). The main research question is *How has the place Melrakkaslétta been shaped by mobilities and entanglements of humans and more-than-humans?*, demarcated to the following sub-questions: *What are the mobilities that Melrakkaslétta contains?*, *How do the interconnections of mobilities and margins emerge in the context of tourism in Melrakkaslétta?*, and *How are the more-than-human environments of Melrakkaslétta performed in tourism?* In order to seek answers to these questions, the research makes use of a qualitative research paradigm and the methodological approach of ethnography. The research furthermore applies the lens of relational materialism and post-ANT when searching for the intertwined existence of humans and the more-than-human world.

Traditional ethnographic research methods have to do with exchanges, observation and participation of the researcher in the field of research. Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) describe two different worldviews of knowledge creation by comparing researchers to miners versus travellers. The miner sets out to carve for knowledge amongst her respondents, as in to find truths that are “uncontaminated by the miner” (p. 19). To research as a traveller, however, is to take on “walks along with the local inhabitants, ask questions and encourage them to tell their own stories” (p. 20). In order to initiate such an exchange, Flick (2018) describes three different ways of performing ethnographic research. These are “*talking to people*”, “*walking to people*” and exploring “*the traces left behind*” (p. 8). The first refers to collecting stories related to the research topic through a direct, somewhat formal exchange of interviews, focus groups and workshops. The second is about initiating unplanned exchanges when approaching people in the field of research. Lastly, there is the procedure of observation without direct approach or exchange as well as analysing documents and written material (Flick, 2018). When conducting this research, I applied all three approaches which will be further explored in the coming subchapters. In that these are a chronological description of events, they are presented in past tense.

### 5.1.1 Data collection

Despite my felt connection to Melrakkaslétta, early on I realised that while having been raised in one of its two villages, Kópasker, my decades away had made my connections to

its everyday events and beings rather distant. Then there was that I had never had any real connection to the peninsula's other village, Raufarhöfn. Furthermore, despite my many traces of ancestry to Melrakkaslétta's northernmost flatland, I had not had any real felt knowledge of it since childhood. In the initial research outline, the research design was therefore intended to be framed in the research field of Melrakkaslétta.



Picture 9. Preparing for research ©Þórný Barðadóttir, 2021

The plan was to start by (re)connecting to the area through preparatory unplanned conversations, observation and dwelling. Only, conducting this research proved to show that matters do not always go according to plan. Such distractions are a recurrent theme in the world of research although rarely explained when providing research findings (Barðadóttir, 2024; Braun et al., 2017). For months the agency of the Covid-19 pandemic made it impossible to fulfil that plan, due to recurring travel restrictions. Instead, I had to adjust and conduct the preparatory stages of the research by other means. That is, to explore the traces left behind by conducting observation without direct exchange. This I conducted with desk(top)-study, literature review and analysis of biographies, anthologies and historical collections on the area, as well as public material such as parliamentary documents, news outlets and social media content. Knowing that “subject matters do not rest stable, waiting for us to unravel or map them with our tools” (Ren & Jóhannesson, 2018, p. 35), I was aware that this work neither would nor should provide one defined truth about Melrakkaslétta. This process however allowed me to mentally connect to the area while unable to make an embodied visit. In that the aim of this preparatory study was primarily

intended to be a substitute for preparatory dwelling and communications in the research area, their output has as of yet, not been prepared for publication. These studies, however, provided valuable context and input into the framing of the research agenda.

#### *Observation and dwelling*

Observation is a vital part of ethnographic research. It is conducted to gain an understanding of behaviours, practices, daily routines and cultural aspects of humans (Jones & Smith, 2017; Ortner, 2006; Seim, 2021; Wästerfors, 2018). In order to gain such understanding, an imperative aspect of ethnography is conducted through dwellings, as stays in the field. Simultaneously, participation serves the purpose of making ways for “careful research practices” to gain “critical proximity” to the research matter (Jóhannesson et al., 2018, p. 40). This includes respecting how research is always a co-creation between the researcher, those under investigation and diverse other actors. Here dwelling is hence understood as a stay, as intended dwelling where instead of conducting “hit-and-run” research (Graugaard, 2021, p. 35), I would be able to (re)connect with the land and living of Melrakkaslétta.



Picture 10. (Re)Connecting with Melrakkaslétta ©Sigríður Hulda Arnardóttir, 2020

Observation is performed by inspection alone as in observing the traces left behind, or through participation, such as when walking to people and interacting with them in the field (Flick, 2018; Jones & Smith, 2017). Participation can be regarded as participatory observation, observant participation or a mixture of these (Seim, 2021), dependent on the position and direct involvement of the researcher in occurrences in the field. Post-ANT studies, however, have highlighted how such a field is partly created by the researcher through the performance of a study (Jóhannesson et al., 2018) and that when conducting ethnography, researchers neither enter nor leave a field of research but move it along with it. Furthermore, while settings and surroundings have been vital elements within

ethnographic research, applying post-ANT lens means reevaluating the notion of a field. Instead of regarding it as a defined space a research field is “continuously on the move and in the making through “*fieldwork*” (Jóhannesson et al., 2018, p. 45). A research field hence performed through research.

While including settings in fieldwork is a central aspect of conducting ethnographic research, at its core, ethnography can nevertheless be regarded rather human-centric, in its approach of “*learning about people*”, and not merely “*studying people*” (Jones & Smith, 2017, p. 98). Applying the post-ANT lens means adding further emphasis on capturing the more-than-human world of the said field. For this observations can be conducted to embrace and take in the natural surroundings (Einarsdóttir & Lund, 2024; Lund, 2024). Outdoor walking offers an opportunity to interact with and experience nature through our senses (Lund, 2012). Walking is a natural thing to most humans while being at the same time a “profoundly social activity” (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008, p.1). This is through “lived experience, where the earth we tread interfaces with the air we breathe” (p. 2). While walking has long been applied as a research method, Vannini & Vannini (2017) warn against treating walking as a structured means of procedure. By doing so, researchers would strip the method of all connection and felt perception of the surroundings. This means that applying walking as a research method is more than merely a “monotonous tread of feet” (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008, p. 8). Instead, “walking demands that we acknowledge our surroundings as vital agents with whom we walk, rather than a backdrop we merely walk in” (Einarsdóttir & Lund, 2024, p. 105). In other words, outdoor walking allows us to be, breathe and become while walking *with* the landscape and the environment. Such outdoor activities furthermore enable a deeper understanding of the research topic and the narratives collected while at site (Barðadóttir, 2024).

Since the autumn of 2020, I have spent around half a year combined in Melrakkaslétta (see Appendix 4). I initially planned four two-week periods in 2021-2022, set to include stays during all four seasons. Besides using these to conduct semi-structured interviews and unstructured conversations, they also provided the chance to conduct both participatory observations and observant participation. I stayed rooted to spots, walked about and drove around, armed with my camera, notebook and pen. Sometimes I would merely watch and observe, while at other times I approached people. I also sat in on communal meetings, at some only to observe, at others participating in discussions and posing questions. Then there was the time I bought a dessert cake to attend a communal dinner event, the time I joined a local team to attend a pub quiz, suffered a rather humiliating defeat at communal card-playing night, drank in the smell of sheep at the annual Ram days, sang karaoke, tried darts and danced the night away at annual balls. In all instances, I would return to my room

and make field notes in my researcher's diary (Wästerfors, 2018). The research diary became an essential part of the research data as I therein recorded various contents, including a listing of events, observations of my felt experiences and progress along the way. In the summer of 2022, I worked for a month as one of two employees at a local guest house.



Picture 11. Evening walk in Melrakkaslétta's summer night ©Þórný Barðadóttir, 2021

I also made use of outdoor observations and walking. The walks were performed both through guided, informative, structured walks in an arranged group as well as through various unstructured wanderings through different settings, seasons and my own state of mind, being it alone or in the company of others. These walks provided the opportunity to take in and gain felt understanding of the land, the elements and the non-human beings of this sub-Arctic, marginal, Icelandic north while at the same time deepening the connection to and understanding of the narratives collected from those with felt knowledge of Melrakkaslétta.

#### *Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews*

The research made use of other traditional ethnographic methods of talking to people through direct exchange. This I had planned to do through interviews and focus groups, or what Braun et al. (2017), somewhat critically, call go-to, über-methods of qualitative

research. Here the agency of the Covid-19 pandemic, however, again came into effect. The first round of focus groups was planned to take place, first in the second and then in the third stay in the field. Still, both rounds had to be cancelled due to restrictions on social distancing, coming into force while I was at the site. During the fourth stay, having yet again arranged a round of focus groups, no such domestic regulations were in effect. Then, however, upon my arrival covid-19 community spread occurred in the village, making it unethical to go forth with the plan. It ended up in me cancelling the focus groups altogether, while being able to go forth with other methods of research.

During fieldwork, I performed semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with chosen respondents. The somewhat self-explanatory term face-to-face means that the interview takes place in person, as a direct exchange between the interviewer and the interviewee. Semi-structured, however, refers to when “interviewers actively follow up on the subject’s answers and seek to clarify and extend the interview statement”. (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 5). In other words, instead of structured question-answer scenarios, semi-structured interviews are based on conversations navigated by the interviewer. That is, instead of a set questionnaire applied in structured interviews or the spontaneous conversations of unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews make use of an interview guide of pre-defined themes (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Flick, 2018). The interview guide sets the base for the exchange while the emphasis on each of the themes may vary between interviews, often depending on the knowledge or interest of the relevant interviewee (Braun & Clarke, 2021b; Roulston & Choi, 2018). Staying true to the research design, I here formed the interview guide to capture the matters of place, mobilities and margins, the current state as well as perceived potentialities of a local tourism sector and not the least, the coexistence and interactions of humans and the more-than-human world of Melrakkaslétta.

I went on to list whom I wanted to include as interviewees, deciding on permanent residents, former residents, summer residents and landowners, frequent visitors and local (tourism) service operators in the area – that is, those with first-hand and felt knowledge of the land, the living and the none living of Melrakkaslétta. Everyone not fitting any of the above criteria was to be excluded, with three exceptions: representatives of the municipality, regional tourism and the regional marketing and Destination Marketing Office (DMO). It proved fairly uncomplicated to engage with the latter three representatives. I contacted each of the relevant offices, explained the context and got in contact with an appropriate representative. Selecting the local interviewees, however, proved more of a challenge, as “each individual person - each and every one of them - is an important source of knowledge” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2012, p. 28). In the end, I applied targeted chain-referral-sampling, that is, knowing the characteristic of the preferred respondent (targeted)

I asked each interviewer for ideas on persons fulfilling the given criteria (chain-referral-sampling) (Firdaus et al., 2022; Heckathorn, 2011). Each interview thereby left me with a group of names, wherefrom I chose whom to contact, partly out of mundane reasons like whom I was able to reach, whom I would be able to meet while in Melrakkaslétta and that of maintaining appropriate age and gender distribution. Two locals declined my request for participation while three had said yes without us being able to pursue the matter for differing reasons.

I conducted 36 semi-structured interviews, each lasting about an hour on average (see Appendix 3). Some of the selected interviewees represented more than one group of respondents such as resident and role of work, resident and tourism services, summer resident and landowner, former & summer resident, former resident & landowner and so forth (see Appendix 3). All but the frequent visitors and the three respondents included for work alone had direct ties to Melrakkaslétta through permanent, former or part-time residency and/or proprietary rights. All respondents signed a form of informed consent (Marvasti, 2014; Mertens, 2018) on their agreement to participate in the research, on allowing recording of their interview and on their consent to their own words possibly being provided through direct quotes in research outputs. The consent form furthermore allowed each interviewee to request the right to remain anonymous (see consent form in Appendix 1). I asked each interviewee to decide where their interview took place. This I did to avoid the research falling into the pit of taking “emplaced and material dimensions for granted” (Sand et al., 2021, p. 595) and instead respect how the place of an interview is in itself a “methodological tool” (p. 594). The premise is the sensory inputs of surroundings and the comfort of the known environments of everyday settings. All but four out of the 36 interviewees chose to have me come to their place, home or work, to conduct the interviews. There they welcomed me into their place of control and decided where we sat and if, when and what we had for beverages.

The interview guide applied was formed to be directed at the permanent residents with slight adjustments made to meet the other groups (see Appendix 2). I opened all the interviews by asking them to state their name for the recording and to tell me what and where Melrakkaslétta was to them. Thereafter I went on to inquire about their residency in the area, narratives of everyday life, the accessibility of the area and if and where they travel for services. To capture their connection with the more-than-human world of Melrakkaslétta, I asked, how they spend their days and how they played when they were kids. I also inquired about how they entertain their guests and asked them to tell me about their favourite sites in the area. Then there were the matters of the local tourism sector and what they saw as fitting for Melrakkaslétta’s tourism development. These were the matters

covered in each of the interviews, although their order and emphasis varied. As for the concept of margins, I found it most fruitful to simply ask: is this a margin? By this, it was left up to each respondent to interpret the context and meaning of the term and this approach proved to initiate various narratives as well as confirmation, rejection, or both, as to whether Melrakkaslétta can be regarded as or at a margin.

#### *Unstructured interviews*

Having conducted the 36 semi-structured interviews I found that I had for the most part reached saturation, although not to the extent “where further interviews yield little new knowledge” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 49). While every interview and exchange kept adding to the understanding and entanglements of the research matters, the last few interviews seemed not to add new layers overall to the research matters of concern. There were, however, still a few issues I found might benefit from further context and clarity. Instead of carrying on with the semi-structured interviews, I decided to turn to unstructured interviews. There the exchange between the researcher and respondent “is more likely to resemble everyday conversation” (Roulston & Choi, 2018, p. 233) than the somewhat formal and lengthy exchange of semi-structured interviews.

I conducted unstructured interviews with ten targeted respondents (see Appendix 3). While unstructured interviews tend to be respondent-driven, with each of the unstructured interviews I had a particular issue of inquiry as a follow-up from earlier exchanges. Examples of these are contradicting information on the intended closeup of access to one of Melrakkaslétta’s old farmlands. Here I made a phone call to a representative of the land in question to learn more about the matter. Another example is regarding arranged recreation in Melrakkaslétta. While most data seemed to point to a general lack of such options, the semi-structured interviews still counted mentionings of both guided bus tours and horse riding tours, each offered by tourism operators in North Iceland. Again I made phone calls to both of these operators, starting by inquiring about such tours.

While in all ten unstructured interviews, I had one issue of inquiry, and hence a question, I still regard these exchanges as unstructured. The reason is that after having discussed the initial matter of concern, I opened the rest of the exchange by asking for my respondents' thoughts on the research matters, to then leaving the conversation to go where it would take us. During our talk, I took notes which I read to my respondents by the end of each exchange for confirmation. These exchanges were not recorded nor were the respondents of unstructured interviews asked to sign their consent. All accepted the utilization of their input into the data based on the notes I had taken, thereof three on the restriction of promised anonymity.

### *Unplanned conversations*

Besides the semi-structured and unstructured interviews with targeted interviewees, I conducted a total of 54 unplanned noted conversations (see Appendix 3). In general, conversations are an ancient way to “obtain systematic knowledge” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 5). Conversations are likewise an adapted method within research amongst Indigenous cultures when the aim is to collect knowledge “based on oral storytelling tradition” (Kovach, 2010, p. 40). Then conversations are performed to capture transferred and co-created knowledge within the “relational dynamic between self, others and nature” (p. 41). Here the method is in line with ethnographic interview, a method commonly utilized to combine conversation and observation in the field (Flick, 2018). Initiated by walking to people, here the term unplanned conversation is applied for unstructured, unplanned interactions, which are yet noted and added to the dataset.

While all the interviews, semi-structured and unstructured, were performed with singular, targeted interviewees, the unplanned conversations were conducted with coincidentally chosen respondents, and count exchange with individuals, pairs and groups. The 54 conversations thereby include the voices of well over 100 respondents. Armed with a notebook and a pen, I approached people wherever I found them, introduced myself and the research and asked about their thoughts on the matters of concern. By the end of each conversation, I read my notes to the respondents to omit misunderstandings. These respondents were not asked to provide their names and neither were they asked to sign any form of consent.

The unstructured interviews were conducted by the end of the interviewing process, while the unplanned conversations were conducted throughout that time. The reason for this is how their aim differs. The unstructured conversations were conducted to clarify particular matters of concern raised by other exchanges. The goal of performing the unplanned conversations, however, was to include voices beyond what I might unwillingly have singled out when selecting my respondents, to gain insights from those not with felt knowledge of Melrakkaslétta and to see if the conversations prompted issues which should be added as themes to the interview guide. While the latter did not come to be, these conversations deepened my understanding of the narratives collected in the interviews and provided various insights into the research matter.

Conducting a Post-ANT study furthermore means the utilisation of “unorthodox informants”, including “physical structures, food products, clothes, discourses ... and local residents all become ‘informants’” (Ren et al., 2012, p. 20) on the relational actor-networks in question. Hence, unlisted yet are various and unnumbered differing conversations, discussions, tellings and exchanges I experienced while in the field and elsewhere. While

not noted on site or introduced as data to the respondents, such unnoted exchange nevertheless makes an integral part of the ethnographic fieldwork, whereof many I accounted for in my research diary.



Picture 12. Joyful conversing in Melrakkaslétta ©Guðný Hrund Karlsdóttir, 2022

### 5.1.2 Data analysis

Staying true to the research outline of not aiming to find proof for matters of fact, the aim of this research is still that of gaining an understanding of how its matters of concern are understood and experienced within the field of research. The research counts rich data from dwellings in the field for half a year while performing participant observation, observant participation, walks, drives and countless other activities. Then there are the 100 recorded interviews and noted conversations besides other exchanges throughout the research period of over four years. Such extensive information inevitably consists of diverse and dispersed matters, subjects, issues, topics and affairs.

To navigate through this abundant data, I applied thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is one of the most used methods when the aim is to identify patterns of shared meaning within a set of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021a; Hultin, 2019). It is performed by categorisation and thematization of the given data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021b). Analysing data through coding into categories and themes is not solely about

producing research output. The process is furthermore a methodological tool to "assist researchers in using their cognitive ability to categorize and bring order" to the collected data (Hultin, 2019, p. 95). Analysing research data is furthermore about processing the underlying and felt meanings and sensing the researcher has experienced. This in the words of Petitmengin (2007): "Although fuzzy, a felt meaning is generally specific, i.e. peculiar to a particular situation (it cannot be confused with any other)" (p. 63). Furthermore, Gendlin (2004) emphasizes the significance of what he calls "a bodily-felt sense" which is somewhat peculiar felt notion although "often the most important aspect of what we need to say" (pp. 291-292). This again stresses the active and instrumental role of researchers within qualitative research and analysis.

While there are various ways of searching for themes within sets of data, here reflexive thematic analysis was applied. The method, deriving from psychotherapy, is a way to reach beyond the quantitative outlines often tied to claimed qualitative research within the field (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The method embraces the core of qualitative research which is based on qualitative research design (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021b). This means that not only is the researcher regarded as an essential instrument in designing and performing research, but the method furthermore highlights and embraces the role of researchers' stance, beliefs and effect on the research output. The method is performed through phases of familiarisation, coding and thematization in repeated rounds of revisitation (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019).

I performed the first round of familiarisation of the semi-structured interviews during verbatim transcriptions of all recordings (Barbour, 2018). The at-times tiresome and always time-consuming process of transcribing hours of conversations into written text is "where meanings are created, rather than simply a mechanical act of putting spoken sounds on paper" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). After having added my notes from the unstructured interviews, unplanned conversations and other field notes from my researcher's diary, I conducted repeated runs of coding and thematizations to identify, "define and refine ... the 'essence' of what each theme is about" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92). The process of data analysis was primarily done manually while also making use of the data mining software QDA Data Miner.

Conducting reflexive thematic analysis is to be aware of how the research and I as the researcher are the creators of themes. This is from the aims, direction and demarcation of the study. Post-ANT studies furthermore remind us about how the researchers through their research "are busy making realities" (Jóhannesson et al., 2018, p. 39). Here, for example, it would be futile to claim that the study showed the themes of tourism, place, mobilities and margins somehow, suddenly and surprisingly emerging from the data. The

task is to search for *how* and in what *context* these themes appear as in how they are *related* to other themes within the data.

### 5.1.3 Research ethics

Conducting research raises several ethical concerns. These are highly dependent on the research topic, how close to the subjects they are aimed and the way the research subjects are expected to provide their information (Mertens, 2018; Roulston & Choi, 2018). Although here the matters of concern cover neither sensitive, difficult nor highly personal life experiences, this does not result in that I thereby had no ethical issues to consider. A vital aspect of research ethics has to do with that conducting ethnographic research entails stepping into someone's home. In the case of conducting interviews, the researcher may literally enter the respondents' houses while during observations the field is the site of the residents' daily lives.



Picture 13. Observation - Art installation in Raufarhöfn ©Þórný Barðadóttir, 2022

While the researcher's head is throughout the research process firmly buried in research conduct, those who are observed are people going about their everyday tasks, for the most part, "unaware that they are participating in research" (Mertens, 2018). For this reason alone it is vital that researchers not only focus on conducting rigorous research but to do so in an ethical manner. Such concerns apply when the embodied researcher arrives

in what is for her a research field but is home to its residents. Inevitably, the researcher is furthermore bound to take with her manners, beliefs, behaviours and values (Mertens, 2018). This can cause misunderstanding and misinterpretation of everyday life as well as the information gathered throughout the process of data gathering, analysis and reporting. The researcher can furthermore exhaust her field when not knowing her limits, going about unacceptably or unintentionally reviling the identity of respondents to whom she has promised anonymity (Wästerfors, 2018).

For the semi-structured interviews, I prepared a consent form (Roulston & Choi, 2018) briefly explaining the overall aim of the research (see Appendix 1). At the beginning of each interview, the interviewee read the short introduction and the criteria listed on the form. These include the interviewees' full name and signatures and their connection to Melrakkaslétta. By signing the consent form they also provided their agreement to the interview being recorded and their permission for possible use of their words in research outputs. The form furthermore provided the chance to specify whether their anonymity was to be protected. Then, only after our exchange and recording had been stopped, did the interviewee sign the form. This procedure was for them to know what they were agreeing to. Being the other half of each interview, I alone have had access to the recordings in question, the signed consent forms and the verbatim transcripts made from the interviews.

As mentioned above, no such formal process was applied in the process around the unstructured interviews and unplanned conversations. I have however done my very best to protect the confidentiality of informants as required. When it comes to observations and other aspects of fieldwork, much of what I saw, felt, smelled and heard added to, and even initiated, my understanding of the study matters. I had, however, from the very start set myself some ground rules of ethical conduct. These include

- not attending events unless they were openly announced, to the degree of announcements made on local venues I specified for this purpose. On the other hand, all events announced on these venues I regarded as open for me to attend
- not add to the data conversations I overheard, but only those I conducted with willing participants
- to report back to the field, the research process and its main findings before preparing them for publications
- never to take pictures of children
- to be aware of not showing people's faces in photographs from day-to-day observation. I however could and did ask for permission to take pictures of posing subjects upon their verbal consent on possible utilization in research outputs

Most of the above may be regarded as common-sense manners but knowing that common sense is not always all that common, it felt important to demarcate these in an attempt to neither overstep nor shy from performing the ethnographic fieldwork. In order to report back to the field (Ramirez-Andreotta et al., 2016), I have during the research process held two open presentations in Melrakkaslétta. The first I held on the premise, status and main outcomes of the research before the publishing of the first paper. The latter I held to inform about the status of the research as I went into the writing of this Kappa.

It is worth mentioning that throughout the process of interviews and conversations, I took notice of the occurrences of hesitations, silences and interruptions (Lestary et al., 2017). Besides having to do with bodily felt meanings and the researcher's sense, and hence valuable information into the research matter, such occurrences call for ethical considerations. While still a part of the research data, I here decided to try my best to avoid providing direct quotes from sentences of unmistakable unsureness or the respondents' uneasiness when presenting the research output. As it happens, the next chapter of the Kappa introduces the storyline of the four papers making the main output of the research, followed by their abstracts and a short resumé of each of the papers.

## 6. Publications – The narratives of Melrakkaslétta

In what follows we will, through the abstracts and summaries of four publications, learn about the main outputs of the research. The four papers make the storyline of the project shown in chronological order of writing. With differing emphasis, all four papers have ties to the research questions set forth at the start of the research process. These are recalled here for context:

- **Main research question:**
  - **How has the place Melrakkaslétta been shaped by mobilities and entanglements of humans and more than humans?**

Sub-questions:

- *What are the mobilities that Melrakkaslétta contains?*
- *How do the interconnections of mobilities and margins emerge in the context of tourism in Melrakkaslétta?*
- *How are the more-than-human environments of Melrakkaslétta performed in tourism?*

The first paper follows the journey of the PhD study from the setting of its approach and agenda throughout the preparation and performing of the research. It follows many of the various interlinked processes and actants affecting the research as well as highlighting some of the many choices, obstacles, and small wins such a process entails. Papers two to four introduce some main research findings. Following the flat ontological approach and post-ANT lens, these publications follow different entangled threads of placemaking, mobilities, and tourism on the margins within the research data.

### 6.1 First paper

Citation: Barðadóttir, P. (2024). Melrakkaslétta the meeting-ground: performing qualitative research at the tourism margin. In B. Thorsteinsson, K. A. Lund, G. T. Jóhannesson & G. R. Jóhannesdóttir, (Eds.) *Mobilities on the Margins. Creative Processes of Place-Making* (pp. 139-158). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41344-5\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41344-5_8)

*Melrakkaslétta the Meeting-Ground: Performing Qualitative Research at the Tourism Margin*

#### **Abstract**

This chapter follows the journey of a doctoral research project from the setting of a research agenda, a theoretical framework, and a methodological approach to conducting research on site. The research sets focus on Melrakkaslétta, a rural area on the Icelandic northeast coast. Melrakkaslétta is situated far north of the beaten

Icelandic tourism track and has as such mostly been bypassed by the recent global tourism boom. This however does not mean that Melrakkaslétta is an immobile place as it has for centuries been inhabited and visited by humans and other beings.

The research design is set within a qualitative research paradigm, where through flat ontology and a post-ANT lens, ethnographic methodology is applied with the aim of co-creating knowledge with the humans and the more-than-human world of Melrakkaslétta. The chapter explores the decisions and reasoning for the research, where the aim is to inspect tourism in a non-touristy, rural area, with the agenda of avoiding perceiving the margin either as a rural idyll or a site of rural hardship, decline and struggle. Instead, at the core is the assumption that in Melrakkaslétta, as elsewhere in the world, joy and well-being occur amongst the various challenges of any existence.

This paper was set to answer the underlying question: *How to conduct PhD research while staying true to the research area and the narratives provided?* The paper is an auto-ethnographic analysis of the PhD journey. It describes my entrance into the research project, the process of demarcation, setting the research agenda and approach, the theoretical groundings, research design, conceptual framework, methodology and analysis, all while staying true to the narratives collected in the area of research. Thereby the paper ties to the framing of all the research questions, the main question *How has the place Melrakkaslétta been shaped by mobilities and entanglements of humans and more-than-humans?* as well as the three sub-questions *What are the mobilities that Melrakkaslétta contains, How do the interconnections of mobilities and margins emerge in the context of tourism in Melrakkaslétta?*, and *How are the more-than-human environments of Melrakkaslétta performed in tourism?*

The paper reports the first cautious steps and milestones of a researcher's becoming. Months of reading had left me with the humbling question "How did they all start?", with 'them' referring to academic authors and researchers. Out of the plenitude of diverse papers, books, blogs and videos, I had drowned myself in, painstakingly few seemed to report any doubts, learning periods or hesitations from the academics. Instead, what I kept finding was self-assured reporting of accomplished academics and their full-fledged and important research. Realising that I could utilise my learning period, I decided to trace my steps and fill my researcher's diary with real thoughts, reservations, moments of enlightenment, and the lot, to chronologically report them in academic contexts. Perhaps, I thought, this might even provide a ground zero for other PhD students finding their way through the fog of research. This means that this is a paper marking a marginal area of reporting while describing research conducted at the tourism margins.

## 6.2 Second paper

Citation: Barðadóttir, P., Jóhannesson, G. T., & Lund, K. A. (2023). Mobilities on the margins: the becoming of Melrakkaslétta as a tourist destination. In P. Vannini (Ed.), *Mobilities in remote places*, (pp. 86-100). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003321163-9>

### *Mobilities on the margins: the becoming of Melrakkaslétta as a tourist destination*

#### **Abstract**

This chapter sets focus on Melrakkaslétta, a marginal place on the Icelandic northeast coast and a home to few hundred people. As Iceland's northernmost place, Melrakkaslétta is experienced as remote, located far from the country's main route of travels, the Icelandic highway that circles the country. The community has experienced outmigration in recent decades and tourism has been brought to the fore as a tool for economic diversification.

Based on ethnographic research we explore the entanglements of placemaking, tourism and other mobilities in Melrakkaslétta with a focus on road (dis)connections and efforts to develop an attraction that is capable to channel mobilities to the area. This is the Arctic Henge, a giant rock structure dedicated to Norse Mythology and seasonal as well as celestial movements. Findings bring forth how old and new routes of mobility entwine in relation to the Arctic Henge. We describe it as an effort to tinker with and change Melrakkaslétta's position on the margins, an effort that evokes hopes and controversies among residents and the regional tourism sector. For some it stands as a creation of the area's much needed tourism magnet, for others it is a more modest intervention in global mobilities, built as a monument with the solely aim for the place of not being forgotten.

The second paper focuses on how roads mark lines of human mobilities while at the same time having the ability to materially frame - and reframe - a place. The paper revolves around the concepts of place, margins and constellations of mobility. It ties predominantly to the main research question *How has the place Melrakkaslétta been shaped by mobilities and entanglements of humans and more-than-humans* as well as the sub-questions *What are the mobilities that Melrakkaslétta contains* and *How do the interconnections of mobilities and margins emerge in the context of tourism in Melrakkaslétta*.

The paper focuses on some of the interlinked alterations caused by moving the main road through the Icelandic northeast from Melrakkaslétta's coastline to the base of the peninsula. Realising how this change would leave the village Raufarhöfn on Melrakkaslétta at the end of a long drive, the locals set out to build an outdoor monument, the Arctic Henge as a marker of the village. The Arctic Henge is an art piece which is slowly becoming a main tourism magnet of the marginal Icelandic northeast. The narratives of the locals in

Melrakkaslétta, however, reveal other threads of tourism networks and ordering in their uncertainty regarding the ownership and potential usage of the monument as well as concerns regarding the potential increase in tourism travels onto the now abandoned and poorly maintained coastal gravel road.

### 6.3 Third paper

Citation: Barðadóttir, Þ. & Lund, K. A. (2024). "Few people and the birds". Negotiating tourism development and more-than-human hospitality on the margin. *World Leisure Journal*, 66(4), 617-635. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16078055.2024.2398462>

*"Few people and the birds". Negotiating tourism development and more-than-human hospitality on the margin*

#### Abstract

Rural tourism is regarded as having the ability to contribute to the often much-needed social and economic (re)vitalisation of provincial regions. For that, the sector is dependent on services and sites of leisure to "sell". While valuable research has been conducted at a variety of rural tourism sites, few have focused on tourism at potential destinations.

Applying a theoretical approach of more-than-human cohabitation and hospitality, this paper discusses entanglements of tourism development in a peripheral area. The focus is on the remote Melrakkaslétta peninsula on the Icelandic northeast coast. Once the setting of wealthy farms and utilization of natural resources, the area has in recent decades faced vast depopulation and socioeconomic challenges. In a counteractive attempt, the residents have proposed local tourism as one way forwards. Melrakkaslétta, however, is one of the least visited areas of Iceland. And yet, this is a place of various comings and goings of humans and birds.

Introducing findings from ethnographic research conducted in Melrakkaslétta, the paper reveals the paradoxical role of the birds in the area's potential tourism development; for some an aspect to underline and bring to the fore while for others Melrakkaslétta should remain the tranquil place of few people and the birds.

The third publication continues exploring Melrakkaslétta as a place and the cohabitation of humans and the more-than-human world. It seeks to answer the set research question *How can tourism become a part of established human-bird co-habitation and environments?* The paper furthermore resonates with the main research question *How has the place Melrakkaslétta been shaped by mobilities and entanglements of humans and more-than-humans?* as well as the sub-question *How are the more-than-human environments of Melrakkaslétta performed in tourism?*

The paper finds that what makes the place Melrakkaslétta are the more-than-human networks of birds along with its landscapes, lightscapes and soundscapes together with its tranquillity, partly created by near absence of humans. The paper showcases some of the concerns raised by Melrakkaslétta's residents, landowners and down farmers regarding the potential effect of increased tourism travel in and through the flatland. They also worry about the effect further marketing of Melrakkaslétta might cause, claiming it is already

causing an increase in visits by those neither interested in, nor knowledgeable of, touring this land of birds. This causes disturbances for the birds residing in Melrakkaslétta during summers. The paper argues that the humans and the more-than-human world already coexist in the area and such cohabitation is only possible through mutual co-hospitality, where visitors merely add yet another layer to its actor-networks and ordering.

## 6.4 Fourth paper

Citation: Barðadóttir, Þ. (under review). Reaching the Edge of the Arctic. On mobilities, infrastructures and distances on the tourism margin. *Polar Geography*

*Reaching the Edge of the Arctic. On mobilities, infrastructures and distances on the tourism margin.*

### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the encounters of mobilities and margins in relation to rural tourism by focusing on transport systems and infrastructures. Tourism development can and has followed infrastructural progress through eased access and shortening of distances. Infrastructure development can thereby pave the way for mobility flows and hence become a decisive factor in whether areas become feasible sites of visits. Infrastructure investments, however, are dependent on political decision-making and funding, issues tending to be negotiated somewhat far from the margins.

The paper debates these issues in the context of potential tourism development in Melrakkaslétta, a rural peninsula on the northeast coast of Iceland. After longstanding socioeconomic challenges and downturns, the locals have proposed tourism as a way to rebuild their homestead. For furthering the sector, a group of small local tourism services have formed a collaboration under the term 'Edge of the Arctic'. Only, Melrakkaslétta is located far northeast of the country's main enring point and travel routes.

Here I investigate these matters with references to the narratives of the locals in Melrakkaslétta, stemming from ethnographic research conducted in the area. The findings leave me to hypothesize about the possible effects future scenarios of the Icelandic systems of mobilities might cause on the potential tourism development in Melrakkaslétta and thereby on other tourism margins. This, I argue, is relevant in that the systems and ordering of transport infrastructures are an ever-evolving becoming and hence, in fact, mobile.

The fourth publication seeks to answer the question *How do transport infrastructures and distances affect the potentials of tourism development on the margins?* The paper furthermore resonates with the project's main research question: *How has the place Melrakkaslétta been shaped by mobilities and entanglements of humans and more-than-humans?* as well as the sub-question *What are the mobilities that Melrakkaslétta contains* and *How do the interconnections of mobilities and margins emerge in the context of tourism in Melrakkaslétta?*

The paper focuses on the concept of mobility and margins by exploring the role of transport infrastructure and distances in the potentials of a remote and rural area becoming

a tourist destination. It is somewhat a continuity of paper two, but instead of focusing on mobilities *in* Melrakkaslétta here the focus is on distances, infrastructures and tourism mobilities *to* and *from* the place.

The paper argues that Melrakkaslétta is not a set marginal place but the result of path-dependent state investments and decision-making, leaving the peninsula as far away from the country's main gateway as geographically possible. At the same time, the narratives collected in Melrakkaslétta show mismatching hopes regarding future tourism development in the area. While the regional tourism sector sees unseized opportunities and potentialities for increased tourism development in Melrakkaslétta, some of its residents and landowners seem just as eager to protect the tranquillity of the place.

## 7. Discussion

In this Kappa, I have outlined the assumptions, approach and performing of my doctoral research conducted within the field of tourism studies. The research sets focus on the entanglements of tourism, place, mobilities and margins, conducted in the non-touristy rural and remote Melrakkaslétta peninsula on the northeast coast of Iceland. The research is set within a qualitative research paradigm and ethnographic methodology, applying a post-ANT lens and reflexive thematic analysis. The research is directed at exploring what makes Melrakkaslétta the place and how it has been shaped by human and more-than-human mobilities. Its aim is also to capture how those with felt knowledge of Melrakkaslétta view tourism as a sector and whether they view Melrakkaslétta as a potential tourist destination.

The discussion chapter of a PhD Kappa is hardly the place to introduce new research data. It is nevertheless too tempting to resist revealing the following direct quote from an interview with one of Melrakkaslétta's frequent visitors, hardly taking the time to breathe when recounting their thoughts on the place

years back when I started coming here, I fell utterly in love with this area, it's so peculiar and beautifully ugly and then there's this, well, something, that keeps drawing you in, this kind of savagery and something else that just pulls you in, again and again. But then, what's here to be seen, really? Nothing but hummock after hummock. There truly is nothing to see. This is entirely flat. But what I see, and I believe others do too, is this peculiar light surrounding this place. This is the only place I've ever been to in the entire world where there's this purply brightness and then this is all so pristine. And it's green, at least in the summer, and well, I'm not all that fond of all the gravel, nothing but endless rocks and boulders, but when the green gets mingled in, then, yes, I quite like it. And there's also another thing quite peculiar about [Melrakka]Slétta and that's that this is the only place I can be bothered to walk. Why, you'll ask of course, well, that's because it's so wonderfully soft underfoot and you're not really walking up any hills. Then it's panoramic, just endless views, no trees to bother you. It's so utterly different from what you see elsewhere, but the weather of course is a bummer, absolutely, but you just have to take it as it is. And yet, I have never been sunburned as fiercely as here, I could just peel of my skin, like clothing, because I didn't realize how clear the air is and how much the sun can burn. But I think that Slétta's main charm is the silence, the tranquillity, and this rare contact with nature, and of course, the sounds of the birds. And well, I like to be away from people really, just by nature, so this simply suits me perfectly because the area has been made unreachable, it just stands utterly alone and, what to say, just isolated all by itself, cut off from contact with the habitable world. This is no margin, it's more than a margin, just out of the edge. No sane person would even consider settling here, not now, but of course once this area was one of the richest areas to live in, the most habitable, and that's what's a bit remarkable, isn't it, this, these transformations, reversed from being the most habitable area to being the most uninhabitable, because there are altogether and completely different societal requirements now

These words are from one of the very last of the 36 semi-structured interviews I conducted in Melrakkaslétta. As per procedure, I had started the interview by introducing the research and its main concepts and then asked them to tell me about their thoughts on Melrakkaslétta - and off they went. I recall listening with fascination while thinking that in one undisturbed paragraph, they might have summed up much of what I had learned about Melrakkaslétta throughout the research process.

The quote tells about the more-than-human co-habitation, the tranquillity, the birds, the panorama views and the more-than-human mobilities (Barðadóttir & Lund, 2024). It also highlights the multilayered and relational elements of a place (Barðadóttir et al., 2023; Barðadóttir & Lund, 2024). The respondent is mainly describing Melrakkaslétta's northernmost flatland, that is the area north of Melrakkaslétta's villages and north on its demolishing coastal gravel road. The tale, however, also describes the makings of a margin, or more than a margin, and how such making is entangled in changing and lacking connections to other areas of the country and beyond (Barðadóttir, under review; Barðadóttir et al., 2023). The quote brings forth the transformations, de- and re-constructions, the ever-ongoing becomings and the entangled threads and orderings of mobilities, placemaking and margins. These are the matters this research is concerned with (Barðadóttir, 2024) and in awe, I followed the lively respondent roll undisturbed through the research matters. Still, in hindsight, my felt reaction to their words might have been different, had this been one of the first interviews.

Research is a process that is at times long, time-consuming, bumpy and fuzzy. It is a procedure of learning, connecting, processing, adapting, understanding and reporting. Regardless of preparation, the aim, scope and angle of research are often adjusted underways. An example of this is that when demarcating this research and setting its research questions I initially applied the word *narrative* in two of the sub-questions (Barðadóttir, 2024). This was because one of the main premises of the study was to direct it inward and collect the tellings, the narratives, of Melrakkaslétta. Only, the word *narrative* also applies to a research method, narrative analysis, one which I am not applying. To avoid unnecessary confusion, I later changed the wording of the research questions to instead include *mobilities*, a key concept of this study and hence without altering its aims. The research questions were further readdressed when realising that out of the four concepts framing the research, *mobilities* was in fact the only word included in their initial version (Barðadóttir, 2024). Lacking were the concepts of *tourism*, *place* and *margin* resulting in that the original research questions did not capture the core of the research. This called for a revision of their wording to include all four of the core concepts.

Another example of adjustment is regarding the research angle. The initial research idea was to capture the relational aspects of tourism and other mobilities in a marginal place and the everyday activities of hospitality. Then the focus would have been on welcoming and entertaining guests in the context of more-than-economic aspects of tourism mobilities at the margin. Only, another premise of the research is how the residents themselves have proposed tourism as a way to counteract their home area's social and economic challenges (Barðadóttir, 2024). The deeper I got into the process and the more time I spent in Melrakkaslétta, the more that focus shifted. I became convinced that if tourism was to provide any form of socio-economic boost in this rural and remote area, then visits needed to be utilized as some form of service, tourism. Focusing on visits as merely that of receiving guests who somehow found their way even to the margin started to feel somewhat romanticised, if not a bit degrading.

Callon and Latour (1981) have argued that when researching social phenomena, researchers rarely apply the same tools to examine the large and the small, macro and micro. Instead, frameworks of analysis tend to be adopted and changed when inspecting the micro. Thereby researchers “confirm the power relations giving aid to the winner and giving the losers the ‘vae victis’” (p. 280). When designing this research and framing its conceptual approach, I deliberately attempted to avoid making it fall into the all-too-common urban-rural jargony and powerplay (Barðadóttir, 2024). Instead, and in the spirit of applying the tools of the macro when researching the micro, I decided to apply tourism theories and traditions in the research settings of a non-touristic rural and remote area. That, however, did not always run smoothly.

I wanted to dig into demographical and tourism statistics on Melrakkaslétta, only to find that official statistics on the Icelandic northeast count some of the country's largest tourist destinations. These include the nature wonders of Lake Mývatn, the capital of the North, Akureyri and the whale-watching town of Húsavík (Statistics Iceland, n.d.-e). Then I tried to utilise the chance of tailored statistics (Statistics Iceland, n.d.-d) only to learn that due to the scarce number of residents and businesses, no such information could be made available. This lack of statistical data even applies to traffic. The Icelandic Road and Coastal Administration, IRCA, offers continuously updated information on traffic on the Icelandic road system (IRCA, n.d.). What I was about to learn, however, is that no counters are situated out on Melrakkaslétta's coastal gravel road. When contacting ICRA to inquire about such traffic information I got the reply that no counters are needed since there is hardly any traffic on that road. So much for that idea.

Kühn (2015) describes how the words periphery, margin and centre refer to situatedness, relations and distances while the terms peripheralization, marginalization and

centralization deal with socio-spatial inequalities, powerplays and processes towards the making of such margin/centres. Investments and distribution of public funds are some of the most obvious ways in such margin/centre creation (Eriksson, 2017; Eriksson & Tollefsen, 2022). There are however also the small reminders rural residents face on a daily basis. One obvious way in which such marginalization occurs became evident during the infamous Covid-19 years. Months before the first incidence of Covid-infection occurred in Melrakkaslétta, its residents dutifully complied with the many rounds of regulations on social distancing, school closures and communal cancellations. After communal spreads became more common, in Melrakkaslétta as elsewhere, such domestic restrictions were set and lifted at regular intervals. Only, the condition of contaminations tended not to follow the state of the pandemic out on the margins. This resulted in prolonged durations of social restrictions, closures and cancellations, besides making the small matter of my stays in the field a logistical nightmare.

In retrospect, I have realised that I came somewhat naively into the research process. As said, I deliberately attempted to avoid making this research about urban-rural powerplays. Instead, I wanted to direct the focus of the research towards motivating and constructive matters. In practice, this has not been an entirely easy task. During the process, I have attended several conferences, seminars and meetings with fellow academics. At these events, comments showing idealized opinions on how tourism on the margin *should* be, have been too frequent to ignore, this to the degree of obvious ‘othering’. Examples of this are sentences like ‘They *do* receive visits’; ‘It’s more important for *them* to be aware of sustainable ways because they need more people’; ‘These are *so* fragile areas’; ‘It’s important to keep *some* of the old gravel roads’; ‘Of course, *these areas* should stay untouched’, ‘We have to have *some* rural areas to visit’, and on the list goes. These examples showcase how rural areas seem to be out there, somewhere, for ‘us’ the urbanists to visit, if and when we want to, highlighting how rural tourism in the end is no less an urban matter.

These were examples of comments made by fellow academics. Throughout the past four years, I have furthermore and repeatedly become astonished and annoyed, if not upset, by comments made by strangers, acquaintances and even close friends, when learning that I have been conducting my doctoral in Melrakkaslétta. These comments can roughly be divided into two groups. Into the smaller of the two, fall comments on how the folks of Melrakkaslétta must be in much need of help in increasing their tourism. A bit like if the project was about building an amusement park or a casino, the residents were utterly helpless and that performing the project could be considered as being some kind of development aid. Still, this group might be regarded as almost positive towards the idea that Melrakkaslétta might, someday, host a growing tourism sector. The far larger group,

however, entails various comments on the ridicule of hoping for, not to mention expecting, this faraway marginal land to become a tourist destination, ever. Looking back, there were times when I had to remind myself to keep my initial optimism and purpose with the work.

The participatory nature of conducting ethnographic research and applying post-ANT lens means that I can hardly distinguish between “being ‘at the office’ or ‘in the field’” (Ren et al., 2018, p. 4). For the past four years, I have been thoroughly enmeshed in this research, so much so that for me the field has in many ways been wherever I have embodied myself. This furthermore means that throughout the research process, analysis has been “happening in many different locations, also when ethnographers don’t have their minds set on doing analysis” (Winthereik, 2020, p. 25). The different approach to the research described by Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) about researchers representing miners versus travellers resonates with a distinction made between applying qualitative methods from a qualitative or quantitative approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Clarke et al., 2015). In this Kappa, I have distinguished between analysed and non-analysed data by an exact listing of 100 communications making up the analysed data set. This might come across as I in the end was conducting qualitative data mining, regardless of my claims otherwise. Such distinction, however, is in line with how data is managed within reflexive thematic analysis. This in the words of Braun and Clarke (2006): “Data *corpus* refers to *all* data collected for a particular research project, while data *set* refers to all the data from the corpus that are being used for a particular analysis” (p. 79). Still, there are also practical reasons for why I make this division. Besides the mundane practicalities of argumentation, of being able to provide exact ‘doings’ to somewhat positivist reviewers of research papers, there are the matters of logistics and research ethics.

By logistics, I mean that while much exchange was noted, logged, and hence subjected to data analysis, countless other exchanges and experiences were not noted and hence are not a part of the analytical process. Still, as I am firmly situated in the midst of this research, these unlogged exchanges are entangled in my understanding and therefore the relational proceeding of interpretation, analysis and makings of research outputs. With the statement of research ethics, I am referring to that while the field has been a part of my skin which I neither would nor could undress from, for the residents I do nevertheless enter their home when arriving in Melrakkaslétta. During my many stays, I have witnessed events and incidents, overheard comments and conversations on personal and confidential levels, and even found myself within such occasions. These are not accounted research data, nor do I feel they should be. I am furthermore rather convinced that when I was invited to family events and at-home coffees while staying in Melrakkaslétta, much such invites were to Þórny, not a researcher. While I can hardly distinguish between the two, I can still be a

considerate and thoughtful person. Hence, there are data which are subjected to listing and analysis, stemming from knowingly provided data and then there are uncounted data providing an essential understanding of the research matters.

Staying with the matter of analysis it is worth noting that I had some contradictory experiences when applying software for analysis. The software provides thoroughly systematic and numerical outputs. This includes showing how often in an interview and in how many lines of transcripts a certain theme occurs. By using the software, the process therefore shifted somewhat from a qualitative analysis to a more quantitative one. This resulted in that I had to keep reminding myself that what I was interested in is *how* the matters of concern appear in the data and in what *context*, and that I had myself created such emphasis when framing the research and formulating the interview guide. While still feeling rather relieved that I did not start out by applying the software for analysis, I have later found that storing the analysed research output within the software is helpful. As time has passed since I conducted the bulk of the initial analysis, storing the analysed research output within the software made it more straightforward to find my ways through the data later on, with the software serving as a form of a data-library.

What the analysed data brings forth is the presented and discussed in the four publications making the theoretical output of the research. They each follow particular threads of the entangled ordering of rural tourism and the relational becoming of places, mobilities and margins. They showcase how a new road at the roots of Melrakkaslétta provides a framing for enlarged place (Barðadóttir et al, 2023; Barðadóttir & Lund, 2024). This new framing, however, also seems to be somewhat a rhetorical one, having to do with the materiality of the new road (Barðadóttir et al., 2023). The findings, however, also show how a place is hardly a cemented static geographical point but an ever evolving becoming (Massey, 2005; Ingold, 2011) and a societal co-production of space into a place (Shields, 1991; Massey, 2005; Bærenholdt et al., 2004). Here further analysis of the data shows that Melrakkaslétta the place is not merely an area framed by a road but has just as much to do with human and more-than-human mobilities. This includes soundscapes, lightscapes and tranquillity (Barðadóttir, 2024; Barðadóttir & Lund, 2024), in parts created by the comings and goings of a wealth of migrant birds and in parts by limited human travel (Barðadóttir & Lund, 2024).

The sparse human travel, however, has a direct link to mobility systems and how they are structured and produced – or neglected (Barðadóttir, under review; Barðadóttir et al., 2023). The findings reason that the situatedness of marginal places has much to do with infrastructural decisions and lacing connection, rather than being an unavoidable constant or the result of obvious geographical attributes (Barðadóttir, under review). This speaks into

existing literature on marginalization (Kühn, 2015) and the creation of margins through public investment and decision-making (Eriksson, 2017; Eriksson & Tollefsen, 2022). The findings resonate with the existing literature on the interplay of mobility systems and tourism travel (Hannam et al., 2006; Lund & Jóhannesson, 2014; Sheller, 2021; Sheller & Urry, 2006) while directing the focus on mobilities on the margins. Here these issues are discussed in the context of opportunities and challenges posed by mobility marginality and how that interplays with rural tourism development (Barðadóttir, under review; Barðadóttir et al., 2023). The findings furthermore endorse contesting of the conventional imagery of rural and remote areas as the places of backwardness, passivity and pessimism (Mankova, 2018; Graugaard, 2021; Fowler & Helifield, 2006). Instead, they bring forth a dynamic place where counteractive actions have been taken in order for the area to become a part of the domestic tourism sector, actions coming as the result of changes in mobility systems within Melrakkaslétta the place (Barðadóttir, under review; Barðadóttir et al., 2023).

## 7.1 Research matters, limitations and further publications

Applying a qualitative research paradigm means recognising and respecting that no research is ever going to grasp all angles of societal entanglements. Knowing this does not mean that one does not both aim for and hope to research it all. I started out with a literature review on nine different concepts, none of which were the ones I ended up applying. I wanted to conduct a survey, on something, in hindsight mostly to be able to say that I had conducted one. I wanted to compare Melrakkaslétta with other areas, in Iceland, in the Nordic countries, or in the Arctic, only to realize that by doing so I would have to tailor the research to matters fitting for comparison. I wanted to hold workshops, not that I had decided on what, the method just sounded creative and exciting. I wanted to perform focus groups, really wanted to, nearly to the degree of obsession, and many such groups at that. Reality check reminded me that Melrakkaslétta counts around 300 residents, not all of whom of an age to attend a focus group without being accompanied by a legal guardian. Going forth with all the initial groups, I would not only have had to include *all* eligible residents, but to have them each sitting in on various groups. I had negotiated myself down to three when the Covid-19 pandemic took over and deemed even that modest number unobtainable. Still, all of these processes were down to choices, delimitation, decisions and learning.

Positioning research within a qualitative paradigm and ethnographic methodology is to acknowledge the effect of choices and decisions made by researchers. Applying a post-ANT lens and reflexive thematic analysis is to highlight this reality. This means knowing and respecting how another researcher, conducting tourism research in Melrakkaslétta, might very well end up with different research outputs. Not as in *would* but that they *could*. In no

way is it my intention to downplay the rigour of, or value in the knowledge found through this research. I am merely stressing my stance and agreement that findings do not emerge from research data (Braun & Clarke, 2021b), nor are the matters of concern merely waiting for me, or any other researcher, to discover (Ren & Jóhannesson, 2018). Research findings are matters of interpretation, whether it is regarding decisions on which numbers of measurements fall within acceptable criteria or the meanings and connectedness of different narratives.

Demarcating research agenda means to direct the research focus and consequently its findings towards particular matters of concern. In that no research can capture every matter of interest, important issues can and do go amiss and so is it in this research. It has left out an issue of utmost importance which is the tourism related emission of greenhouse gasses. The overwhelming challenges caused by climate change and its destructive effects has its links to travel-related emission. This is a subject of wide concern which has been discussed by many of the authors quoted in this Kappa (e.g. Bærenholdt et al., 2021; Haraway, 2016; Huijbens, 2021; Jóhannesson, 2015; Ingold, 2011; Larsen & Urry, 2011; Latour, 2014; Maher et al., 2022). The cause of and challenges imposed by emission of greenhouse gases are by these authors discussed in the context of globalisation, the destructive impacts of human actions on the environment and in the context of emission from the ever-increasing global mobilities including from the global tourism. The subject, however, was neither a matter of concern within the research design, nor is it an impromptu subject within the data. This is, however, an obvious angle for further research on rural tourism. This could not the least be relevant in the context of energy transformation from fossil fuel to electricity and the infrastructural and technical alterations it calls for

Delimitations, interpretations and choices are also at play when it comes to setting forth research outputs. Here this applies to which matters of concern were made to become a part of the four research papers. Again, to clarify, this research found the evident emphasis on how Melrakkaslétta the place is created by more-than-human mobilities and entanglements of its tranquillity, light, views and birds (Barðadóttir & Lund, 2024). So was it regarding how a novel road at the roots of Melrakkaslétta peninsula has reshaped and materially framed the place Melrakkaslétta. The importance and implications of its old coastal gravel road in the potentiality of Melrakkaslétta's tourism were likewise apparent (Barðadóttir et al., 2023) as well as the emphasis on distances and issues regarding mobility connections (Barðadóttir, under review). It is what is still uncounted for, which is of concern here, the many other interconnected themes and issues which, as of yet, have not been the main focus of publications. This is an example of what might have been subjected to different choices by another researcher.

One such example is the above-mentioned marginalization experienced by the locals of Melrakkaslétta. This has so far not been a main theme of publication, although being underlying in the four research papers. Another worthy approach for a paper could be the relational, yet multidimensional aspect of margins. While the narratives collected in this research highlight various positives of living in Melrakkaslétta they also include sayings on the residents' felt marginalisation. This is regarding the lack of public services and the costs of buying groceries when not able to shop in a supermarket. On worries about whether it will be possible to recruit new doctors or if the local school and kindergarten will be kept open due to the scares number of children. About feeling forgotten, hidden away, on a domestic level and by their own municipality leaders, due to distances and the sparse number of residents and hence lacking power or influence.

Still, what was most disturbing to listen to were the countless narratives on relentless and daunting demands for explanations and defence for one's life choices. Such questions, even described as attacks, were regarding why they choose to reside in Melrakkaslétta, on if they plan to keep rotting there, on if they have tried to escape and why they haven't managed to do so, *when* they plan to move, as in not an *if*, and then not *to* any particular place, just *from* Melrakkaslétta. While the residents seemed well able to laugh these issues off, to me they felt like sad tellings. They also made me wonder about the relational effect such societal and geographical marginalization - such othering - is bound to have regarding choices of residency and hence, in the context of this research, for rural tourism potential.

Above I have mentioned the agency of the Covid-19 pandemic. It amplified the notion of margins through the different spread of the virus in Melrakkaslétta versus the capital region where administrative restraints were set. It was also an actant in the planning and performing of the research with the recurrent travel bans and forced social distancing it resulted. The pandemic furthermore generated a world order where geographical situatedness was altered as societal participation was down to internet access as most formal and informal interactions moved online. The effect was eased participation in university education and academic activities from afar. Then there is the immense effect on tourism with near pausing of global travel. Conducting ethnographic research amid the pandemic hence seems like a chance to capture a moment of virtual uniqueness.

The moment of the pandemic was undoubtedly there. This Kappa, however, has mentioned various other moments of alteration too. This includes the moment of halting international travel following the 2008 global economic crisis and later due to ash from volcanic eruption. The unpredictable yet relational effects of change can be seen in that both proved to have positive impact on the Icelandic tourism sector after the dust - literally and figuratively - had settled (Benediktsson et al., 2011; Jóhannesson, 2015). Then there are

the moments of schools of herring arriving and disappearing from the ocean north of Raufarhöfn, the moment of deciding to place a Farmers Cooperative Society at the uninhabited bay of Kópasker and the moment of a new road altering human travel in Melrakkaslétta. What these events manifest is how reality is a collection of significant moments as well as an ever evolving becoming, not a fixed, static reality wherein researchers can produce measurable, consistent findings of truths.

Yet, I firmly believe in the potential agency of conducting research and I do agree that researchers are the co-makers of realities (Jóhannesson et al., 2018). Not that I alone am the maker of things, as agency “does not stem from being human, but is accomplished by enacting and being entangled in web of connection” (van der Duim et al., 2017, p. 141). The agency of this process hence comes as a result of performing research in the setting of a non-touristy rural and remote area, where the locals themselves have proposed tourism as a way for socioeconomic rebuilding. The very performance of the research might act in “bringing something - a concept, an idea, or a practice – alive” (Veijola et al., 2014, p. 9). The agency of the research hence lies in the relational effects of repeated suggestions towards tourism when conducting interviews and conversations, being visible, armed with my camera, writing block and pen, and randomly approaching those on my way. By making visits and drinking coffee, attending local events and by taking on walks and drive-about. Then there is the constant reminder when continuously making embodied returns to Melrakkaslétta for yet another round of conversations, presentations, and ponderings with the locals about the potentials of tourism development in their area. Always met with smiles, hugs, offerings and helpfulness resembling a joint, relational and active remembrance of the research and its matters of concern.

## 8. Concluding remarks

An essential part of performing research is to introduce and discuss it with fellow academics for thoughts, demarcation and new insights. At the very first seminar where I presented the outline of this study, then in its initial stages of preparation, a professor at the University of Iceland asked: “Why would you want to study this area?” The question was not meant as a constructive preparedness of a nervous student but was expressed in an honest and obvious bewilderment. This was four years ago, but both despite and also because of everything I have learned during this process, I would still provide the same answer: “Why not?”. I would argue that just as no research alone is going to provide all the answers to any particular study area or topic, neither is any research likely to be without its worth of knowledge creation. Gaining knowledge from ethnographic research conducted in the rare settings of a rural and remote area carries no less value than research conducted in an urban setting - and vice versa.

Applying qualitative methodologies and a post-ANT lens when conducting research is not merely about rejecting measurability, consistency and truths within research (Braun & Clarke, 2021b; Reichertz, 2018) or the influence of how researchers are actants in research outputs through their design, interpretations and choices. It is also about acknowledging how the world is an ever-ongoing and relational becoming only to be understood in collaboration between researchers and those with knowledge of the research matter (Ren & Jóhannesson, 2018). It is about taking into account the relational multilayeredness of world order (Farias & Paulos, 2024). This with the goal of gaining understanding and meaning in order to make sense of the research matter (Ren, van der Duim, et al., 2020). Instead of aiming for consistency in research output, the aim is to acknowledge and follow the ever-changing threads of agency in the matter of concern, to gain understanding of some of the relational actants within the various networks and orderings of what is under investigation (Jóhannesson & Bærenholdt, 2020). There is therefore value in the ability to access and combine findings from differing research, including those conducted at the margins.

In the discussion chapter I distinguished between Þórný and Þórný-the-researcher on the grounds that I was convinced that at times I had been invited to events in Melrakkaslétta as me, the person. There have, however, undoubtedly been other instances and events, albeit somewhat more formal, where I have been invited to attend because I am a researcher. This has included meetings, seminars and presentations. I have also been able to include locals of Melrakkaslétta in proposals for continued research in the area and I have likewise been asked to partake in applications for research initiated in Melrakkaslétta. I have even been asked to represent Melrakkaslétta at certain seminars and events. Perhaps

only within ethnographic research would such example of *going native* be tolerated, but my point is that these instances of dedication and mutual trustworthiness are not the least to be considered as outputs of the research.

The discussion chapter of this Kappa opened with an impressive quote, the words of a person with felt knowledge of Melrakkaslétta. There my respondent seemed able to run through the issues of this research with an enviable ease, while I have had to face my struggles. For the duration of the research process, I have repeatedly found myself testing the words of Law (2004) that researchers tend to diffuse complex matters when trying to explain them. This, he says, is “because simple clear descriptions don’t work if what they are describing is not itself very coherent” (p. 2). It has been no small task to find, follow and account for the different and entangled matters active in the networks and ordering of tourism, mobilities and the making of places and margins in Melrakkaslétta.

Still, this research takes part in the ongoing academic discourse on rural tourism by offering contribution to the conceptualisation of mobility, place and margins in the context of tourism. The research challenges the traditional portrayal of rural areas as passive and backwards to instead showcase their dynamic, resistance and relational complexity. The research highlights how places like Melrakkaslétta are not inherently marginal but becoming such as the result of relational entanglements, mobilities and infrastructural decisions. It furthermore unfolds how the marginal situatedness of such places affects their potential to partake in tourism development. The research recounts the human and more-than-human co-production of a place and how places are produced and reproduced through human and more-than-human mobilities as well as infrastructural changes. Finally, the research proposes ways to affect the marginal situatedness of Melrakkaslétta and suggests an ethical framework for further tourism development on local level.

The coming Part II of this Kappa is dedicated to reporting the main research findings as presented through the four research papers making the output of this research. The first paper is an autoethnographic study and analysis of the making of the research from the setting of its approach and methodology to its performance in the field. The second paper follows the networks of placemaking, mobilities and margins in the context of tourism possibilities in and around Melrakkaslétta peninsula. The third paper inspects these issues with a focus on human and more-than-human hospitality within Melrakkaslétta while the fourth paper focuses on the relational aspects of infrastructures and distances in the context of mobilities to and from Melrakkaslétta. Hence, what this research shows is how neither a place nor a margin is static or fixed but inherently relational, constructed, perceived and performed. Melrakkaslétta might be perceived as a margin now, but once the perception might well have been that no sane person would even consider leaving such a habitable and

rich place, and well, in the spirit of mobilities and becomings, those times just might come again.



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## Part II

### The papers

Below, the three published papers are shown in their original layout of publications upon permission for re-use for non-commercial purposes.

The fourth paper is shown in its current form as a manuscript in the process of being submitted for peer review



CHAPTER 8

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Melrakkaslétta the Meeting-Ground:  
Performing Qualitative Research  
at the Tourism Margin

*Pórný Barðadóttir*

INTRODUCTION

Hraunhafnartangi is a place where no one has ever lived. That is, no humans have ever called it home. In a human sense, this place is therefore on the margin of nothingness—in other contexts it might be the core of everything. This place is real; it is a marked location on maps. To me this is also a personal place, connected to my childhood by family visits. The salty smell of seaweed and the ocean. A flashback to my small feet trying to balance a walk on the wet stones in slippery rubber boots. Sweaty sandwiches eaten at the foot of, what then felt like, a giant lighthouse; fights with my siblings over the last drops of lukewarm cocoa; the overwhelming threat of potential attacks from an army of arctic terns, a real threat to me-the-girl, although my parents probably never planned a visit here during the ‘angry tern-bird’ season. Hraunhafnartangi, one of

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© The Author(s) 2024  
B. Thorsteinsson et al. (eds.), *Mobilities on the Margins*, Arctic  
Encounters, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41344-5\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41344-5_8)

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the northernmost points of the Icelandic mainland, located on the coast of Melrakkaslétta, northeast Iceland.

Now, this place to me somehow resembles Melrakkaslétta overall. The place where my foremothers and forefathers were born, lived and died. On this peninsula is the farm where my mother was born, spent her childhood, sought her identity and always called home. And close by is the place where I grew up—in my father's childhood home—the place I for long called home, my roots. Today's visit to Hraunhafnartangi—the first in decades—awakes pleasant childhood memories yet interrupted by a sad reminder of what has been and of those who are not 'here' anymore.

Today, the heavy northern storm is powerful and loud, the ice-cold rain bites the few bits of skin not covered with layers of clothes. The overwhelming North Atlantic Ocean hammers its huge, smashing waves on the bulk of rocks it has for centuries thrown and built to a wall on the seashore of Melrakkaslétta's flatland. The lighthouse is still here, not as huge as it used to be, but now even a stronger reminder of seafarers touring the massive ocean waves—not always successfully.

It's early September 2020. No longer am I a child, visiting Hraunhafnartangi with my family. I am an adult with an agenda: a field trip to Melrakkaslétta as a kick-off into a research project. At this point in time, I have for two days been able to call myself a doctoral student in Tourism Studies at the University of Iceland.

These lines are from the first pages of my research diary, written as I started my newly assigned position of a PhD student at the University of Iceland. In early 2016, I had been employed as a researcher at the Icelandic Tourism Research Centre. That was in the midst of the Icelandic Tourism Boom. That year this island of 330,000 residents welcomed just under 1.8 million foreign visitors. By the time the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 harshly paused most of the world's travels, annual arrivals had for a couple of years exceeded two million (Icelandic Tourist Board, n.d.), making the tourism sector the main creator of the country's foreign exchange value (Sæþórsdóttir et al. 2020). The Icelandic capital area and the country's south and southwest are where the most tourism-related activities, development and economic effect have occurred (Árnason and Welling 2019). This chapter, however, is about the becoming of tourism research performed on the 'other side' of Iceland and the 'other side' of the Icelandic Tourism Boom; an area on the tourism margins annually visited by around 1% of the country's foreign tourists (Óladóttir 2020); the rural area of Melrakkaslétta, northeast Iceland.

The aim of the research is to explore place-making processes, the interactions and coexistence of humans and the more-than-human as well as the interlinked networks of tourism and other mobilities in this remote, non-touristy area. This chapter is about the designing of this research, set within a qualitative research paradigm, where through flat ontology and using a post-ANT lens, ethnographic methodology is applied with the aim of co-creating knowledge with the humans and the more-than-human world of Melrakkaslétta. Conducting qualitative research requires self-reflexivity (Pezalla et al. 2012). Writing the chapter offered a chance to critically reflect on the research agenda and my—the researcher’s—role in the process. The introduction above, written to situate the reader in Melrakkaslétta, is furthermore a statement of my connection to and appreciation of Melrakkaslétta.

The becoming of the research is here explored through autoethnography, a qualitative research method that is at the same time a process and a product (Ellis 2004), applied when “the researcher is the subject of study” (Hughes and Pennington 2017, 5), a method partly emerging from the way that “some anthropologists began actively questioning their ways of knowing about others” (8). The method seemed well suited to investigate and review my journey throughout the research process. Finding courage in the notion of Braun, Clarke and Gray that when publishing academic papers, researchers rarely provide information on their uncertainties, challenges and “what at the time can feel like complete disaster to manage” (2017, 6), what follows is an honest telling about my ‘travels’ through the research process. The chapter, arranged in chronological order, trails the setting of the research outline, its aim and scope and follows the performing of the research before narrating some lessons learned during the process.

### THE SEARCH FOR GROUND ZERO

As can be gathered from the title and context of this book, my position as researcher was within the research project titled *Mobilities on the margins—creative processes of place making*, funded by The Icelandic Centre for Research. While the title of the underlying project set the general tone, by the time of my employment the part I was to conduct, tourism research in Melrakkaslétta, was still scarcely defined. In retrospect, I should from the start have set my focus on the *why* and *what-for* of the research—as in why conduct tourism research in a non-touristy area, and

to what purpose. Truth be told, those were not my focus points. Instead, I went straight on and got lost in the question of *how* to perform the research.

Diving in headfirst, my PhD study felt like *the* chance to learn and try out new ways of conducting research. I drowned myself in literature on research methods and then eagerly stressed to my supervisors my many ideas on methods to apply within and beyond Melrakkaslétta. Their reply was something in the line of “You need to think about the ontological and epistemological approach of the research”. Such big words. Coming from applied research, this was a bit far from my everyday language, whether in English or Icelandic. It turned out that I was getting lost in a familiar process of being “more interested in solving a problem than in promoting analytical, theoretically informed work” (Gobo 2018, 66). Back to the reading, this time on research design, study outline and paradigms; ontology, epistemology and methodology—only to find somewhat conflicting information and an interchangeable use of terms. This led me to a vast literature on philosophical thinking where the list of what felt like necessary readings just kept growing. What I became sadly aware of during these months of falling further down the bottomless barrel of existing literature was that, given the half a century I had on my back, chances were my years ahead just would not cut it.

I had some breaking points for my gradual landing from reading mode. The real saviour, however, was Punch’s subtle advice on getting back to “What are we trying to find out here?” (2014, 5). Not that this should have been news. Only, becoming a student yet again seemed to have robbed me of much of my experience, knowhow and even common sense. I grabbed a hold on Punch’s lifeline and slowly got my head around the assignment. What I needed to do was to demarcate the project by drafting my first research questions. Those would become my ground zero—the *what* would lead me to the *why* and from there I would get to the *how*. Best of all, having started the process during travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, now months into the project, this would mentally reconnect me with Melrakkaslétta, the area of research.

### MAKING READY FOR RESEARCH

Historically Melrakkaslétta is the northernmost part of a peninsula on the Icelandic northeast coast (Fig. 8.1). Its history of human settlement traces back for centuries where sheep-farming and fishing were the main

occupations. Although rich in natural resources, Melrakkaslétta's bare and hence scarcely sheltered rocky tundra has nevertheless been considered rather harsh for modernised farming (Lund 2016). In recent times, the area has faced vast depopulation leaving most of the farms on its northern coast abandoned during winters.

Two small villages are on each of the peninsula's coastlines (Fig. 8.1), Raufarhöfn, growing from fishing and fish-processing (Kokorsch and Benediktsson 2018) and Kópasker, growing from services to its neighbouring farmlands (Björnsdóttir 2003). Kópasker has remained the smaller of the two villages, yet more stable at around 130 inhabitants. Raufarhöfn's residents peaked at little over 500 in the late 1970s whereafter vast depopulation has left the village to count around 180 residents (Statistics Iceland, n.d.).

In 2012, Raufarhöfn became a pilot settlement in a project titled Fragile Communities, initiated by the Icelandic Regional Development



**Fig. 8.1** Melrakkaslétta and its location in Iceland (*Source* The National Land Survey of Iceland. Place names added by the author. Map by Michaël Virgil Bishop)

Institute (IRDI), set to counteract the long-standing depopulation from rural areas (IRDI, n.d.), faced in particular by areas furthest away from the capital area and regional service centres (Bjarnason 2020). In 2015, Kópasker entered the project as a part of the neighbouring agricultural area, Öxarfjarðarhérað (IRDI, n.d.). In the project, applying a bottom-up approach to include and enable the locals to come up with feasible ways for their area's development, the residents of both Raufarhöfn and Öxarfjarðarhérað named local tourism development as one of their homestead's main possibilities (IRDI, n.d.).

This, I thought, would be my starting point. What I 'wanted to find out here' was to gain knowledge of the status and perceived role of Melrakkaslétta's tourism—that is, if the locals still regard tourism as the way forward in their area's development. But these were still questions for applied research, and I needed to dive deeper.

### DESIGNING THE RESEARCH

After consulting with my supervisors, the research was set within relational materialism seen through a post-Actor-Network Theory (ANT) lens. ANT has its base in flat ontology, the form Harman calls Latourian, which "treats anything as real as long as it has an effect on something else" (2020, 375). According to ANT, reality is created within networks of actors where "all things are relational" (Jóhannesson and Barenholdt 2020, 34). For Latour, researching social phenomena is not as much a "science of the social" as it is about "*tracing of associations*" (2005, 5). Research within ANT is therefore on how social order is established through networks of interconnections between humans and the more-than-human with an emphasis on the role of materials in these processes (Latour 1998), as materials are themselves seen as active players in the establishment of actor-networks. While ANT evolves around how stable order is established through actor-networks, post-ANT studies have broadened its scope by focusing equally on how networks evolve, change and are disrupted (Jóhannesson and Barenholdt 2020). The post-ANT lens furthermore sees, e.g., experiences and feelings as being able to have an effect and be affected by actor-networks (Haug 2012; Jóhannesson and Barenholdt 2020).

In setting the research's key concepts, I decided to follow the threads set in the underlying research project and focus on the concepts of *mobilities*, *place* and *margins*. By this, I felt I could combine its core with my

urge to capture the status and perceived role of tourism in Melrakkaslétta. Human travels are dependent on—and the driving force of—various forms of *mobilities* (Sheller and Urry 2006) through dynamic, complex and non-static systems, created through cooperation and integration of the human and the more-than-human (Ren et al. 2020). Mobilities are bound in relational patterns of movement, representation and practice through what Cresswell (2010) calls ‘constellations of mobility’, patterns that need to be studied holistically in order to be understood. In the context of tourism research the concept therefore seemed a highly relevant focal point.

Melrakkaslétta is as other *places* not fixed in time and space, but rather “always in the process of being made ... a simultaneity of stories so far” (Massey 2005, 9). Thinking of *places* in the context of tourism brings forth how they, for the purpose of destination marketing, often are portrayed as specific locations with well-defined characteristics (Boisen et al. 2018). However, the locals’ connection to the same place tends to be diverse (Ren and Blichfeldt 2011) and closely related to perception, symbols and memories (Frisvoll 2012). Places are where communal thinking and social characteristics are created (Shields 1991) although rarely being a defined point but rather existing in the context of what surrounds them, in the minds of those who stay there (Ingold 2000). Investigating Melrakkaslétta the place hence felt like a relevant task.

*Margins* are relational in that they occur as the margin *of* something. Conducting tourism research in a rural, non-touristy area might entail margins as a given, even more so when seen in the context of how rural tourism has been used to preserve and restore cultural heritage (Rytkönen and Tunón 2020). While Shields proposes places on the margins as being “left behind” and yet still able to “evoke both fascination and nostalgia” (1991, 3), Western media tends to portray daily life in the rural as rooted in the past, even presenting a depressing picture of rural existence (Mankova 2018). Research carried out in rural areas likewise tends to focus on various challenges, struggles and existential problems (Graugaard 2020).

I intentionally decided not to include in the core concepts the somewhat obvious conception of power in relation to the rural (Carson et al. 2020). Melrakkaslétta is an area “located beyond the immediate influence of either the Reykjavík capital area or any of the [country’s] regional centres” (Bjarnason 2020, 58) and its societal vulnerability is evident from its fragile community status. Margins, however, do not only occur

through geographical remoteness but also as a result of remoteness from decision-making and lacking connections (Bock 2016). Melrakkaslétta's local government is based in the Western end of the municipality Norðurþing while Melrakkaslétta marks its eastern end. Despite good road connections, Melrakkaslétta is situated northeast of the domestic travel systems of aviation and public buses, while a visit to a specialised doctor or a hardware store demands a 2.5-hour drive to the regional service centre of Akureyri in central north Iceland.

While not wanting to hide from the obvious challenges these and other hindering factors are bound to cause, I felt that directing the research towards power-imbalance and hardship would clearly leave me with answers on just that. However, neither did I want the research to become an uncritical rant on Melrakkaslétta's greatness or a 'rural idyll' (Frisvoll 2013). I wanted to learn about Melrakkaslétta the place and find its "characteristic of localness" (Ingold 2000, 229) based on the assumption that challenges *and* wellbeing are part of everyday life in Melrakkaslétta as it is elsewhere in the world (Clark 2019).

### TOWARDS THE RESEARCH PRACTICE

As can be gathered from the introduction above, the setting of this research is close to my heart. Growing up in Kópasker as a descendant of Melrakkaslétta's farmers, this is 'my old home'. The peninsula's other village, Raufarhöfn, set to be at the centre of the research, felt somewhat more distant. Due to that, as well as to the number of decades passed since I last lived in the area, I did not expect to feel like researching a community that I would feel connected to. And yet, early on I realised that I was perhaps not an insider, but neither was I an outsider.

This might seem alarming to those embracing quantitative research methods that assume "a detached and value-free researcher in the acquisition and interpretation of gathered data" (Pezalla et al. 2012, 167). Those working within qualitative research might be less worried about my possible lack of true impartiality as the researcher is, within qualitative methodology, regarded as an active part and a tool within research. Qualitative research not only emphasises and embraces the active role of researchers, but is furthermore about "embracing researcher subjectivity, rather than viewing it as a 'problem' to be managed" (Clarke et al. 2015, 223). It felt clear that for me to capture the essence of tourism in the

everyday life of Melrakkaslétta and make use of my connection to the area, the research would be set within qualitative approach.

Qualitative research includes ethnography, which in the words of Ortner is “the attempt to understand another life world using the self – as much of it as possible – as the instrument of knowing” (2006, 42). I however did not want to merely utilise my own self and senses as research instruments. Avoiding seeing it as my role to “mine data, analyse it and represent reality ‘out there’” (Ren et al. 2020, 2), I wanted to strive for the research developing through co-creation. This would be not merely through a community-academic partnership (Drahota et al. 2016) or even as a collaboration in rural tourism development (Chimirri 2020). What I wanted to aim for was research conducted within “a spatially and temporally situated practice ... created through the combined effort of researchers and others” (Jóhannesson et al. 2018, 39). Setting out to conduct research *in* rather than *about* Melrakkaslétta, I was striving for its becoming through “*working together* in ways which strives for *critical proximity*” (Ren et al. 2020, 10), hence staying close to the research matter, still in the belief that “knowledge is always co-created through situated practices” (Ren et al. 2020, 10). That is, I was aiming for research that would be a co-creation *with* the humans *and* the more-than-human in Melrakkaslétta.

Having set the core concepts of the research and its ontological and methodological approach I was heading back to the methods and the performing of the research. For that I decided to aim for traditional ethnographic methods: observation, interviews and focus-groups, where the latter two are according to Braun et al. (2017) the ‘gold standard’, ‘go to’ and ‘über-methods’ of qualitative research. For analysing the data, I applied reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA). This felt well-fitting to analyse data gathered from qualitative research conducted through post-ANT thinking.

Applying a post-ANT lens means appreciating the relational complexities of the world and hence respecting the potential inability to “reach the end point of network order” (Jóhannesson and Bærenholdt 2020, 34). Analysing data through reflexive TA means staying true to the core of qualitative methodology by acknowledging the active role of the researcher throughout the research process (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2019; Clarke et al. 2015). Furthermore, reflexive TA is about recognising that data can be introduced either through predominant themes or as a detailed analysis of particular themes. The former means that “some depth

and complexity is necessarily lost” (Braun and Clarke 2006, 83), while the latter is about detailed analysis on data relevant only to the theme in question (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2019).

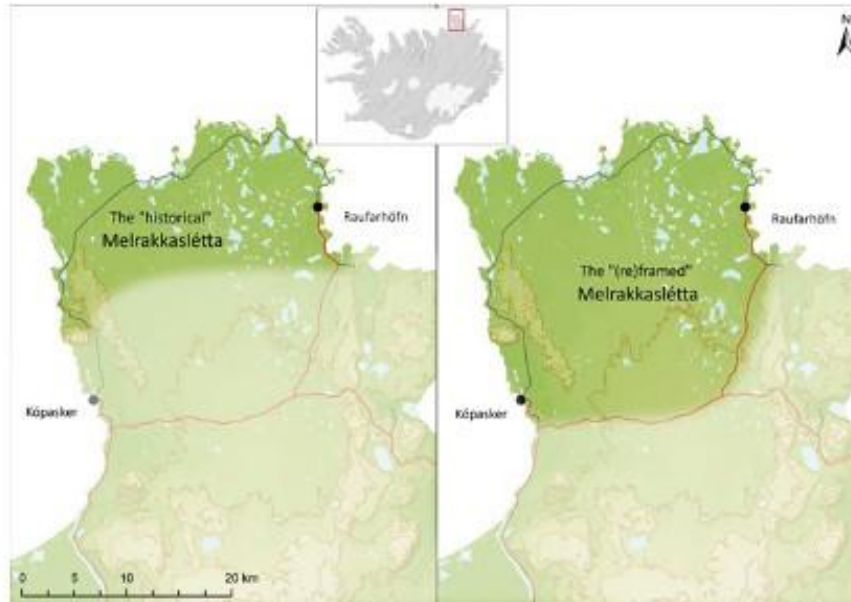
### PERFORMING THE RESEARCH

The research was conducted during travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While able to plan and adapt dwelling on site and the face-to-face interviews according to the changing situation of the pandemic, running the repeatedly planned and cancelled focus-groups turned out to be ‘a complete disaster to manage’, ending up in me having to cancel the idea.

Despite my connection to Melrakkaslétta, I felt the need to reconnect to and (re)learn about the area and thereby escape what Graugaard (2020) calls ‘hit-and-run’ research, when researchers arrive in the field, staying only while collecting raw data, hence never connecting to the sites of research. I was able to dwell in Melrakkaslétta during all seasons, for four months in total, from the spring of 2021 to the autumn of 2022, conducting participatory observation (Phillippi and Lauderdale 2017), face-to-face semi-structured interviews (Brinkman and Kvale 2015) and planned as well as unplanned noted conversations (Radel 2018). For the semi-structured interviews, I drafted an interview guide (Brinkman and Kvale 2015), formed in accordance with the research design, to capture the issues of mobilities, place and margins, the conditions of the local tourism as well as the interactions of humans and the more-than-human in Melrakkaslétta.

Already feeling the connection to Melrakkaslétta, I initially thought I knew its location. And yet, after months of reading, I had realised that a place just isn’t out there for me to make into a field. As with other matters of research, places “do not rest stable, waiting for us to unravel or map them with our tools” (Ren and Jóhannesson 2018, 35). I, therefore, decided to start the interviewing process in the village Raufarhöfn and amongst the landowners out on the northernmost flatland. It soon became clear that Melrakkaslétta the place has been (re)framed and enlarged by a new road at the roots of the peninsula (Barðadóttir et al. 2023) including ‘my old home’, the village Kópasker. Hence, this became the area of research (Fig. 8.2).

In order to capture Melrakkaslétta’s ‘characteristic of localness’, I wanted the interviewees to be those with first-hand and felt knowledge



**Fig. 8.2** The location of Melrakkaslétta. Historical location on the left—enlarged Melrakkaslétta, the research area, on the right (*Source* The National Land Survey of Iceland. Place names and area-definition added by the author. Map by Michaël Virgil Bishop)

of Melrakkaslétta. I applied targeted, chain-referral sampling (Heckathorn 2011) when selecting representatives of permanent residents in the two villages and in the area, landowners and frequent guests. Amongst the respondents were permanent residents who had been raised in Melrakkaslétta, others who had immigrated years ago, while yet others had a shorter record of residency. Amongst the landowners were those I identified as summer residents and summer dwellers. The summer residents annually arrive in early spring for a stay in Melrakkaslétta until the autumn when they leave to spend the winter elsewhere. The summer dwellers are those co-utilising their land and houses with others for shorter or irregular summer stays. Then there were the frequent visitors, those with no connection through ownership, yet repeatedly visiting Melrakkaslétta. The only respondents not with a felt connection with the

area were those directly targeted as representatives of the municipality, regional tourism and regional marketing office.

After having conducted 36 semi-structured interviews, I felt I had for the most part reached saturation based on the interview guide (Braun et al. 2017). For further clarification of selected subjects, I conducted ten planned noted conversations (Radel 2018) with regional and local (tourism) operators, landowners, residents and former residents, while the voices of tourists in Melrakkaslétta were collected through 54 unplanned noted conversations (Radel 2018). During and after the phase of field-work, I transcribed the recorded interviews. Analysing the data collected applying reflexive TA (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2019; Clarke et al. 2015) I started out with a semantic, inductive analysis on the combined data and thereafter conducting latent analysis on predominant themes, that is, on the “particular patterns of shared meaning across the dataset” (Braun and Clarke 2019, 592).

### SOME LESSONS LEARNED

In my research proposal, I had suggested walking as a possible approach to explore the human and the more-than-human encounters of Melrakkaslétta. Having read how walking offers the opportunity to interact with the land—the nature (Lund 2012)—in that walking can awake something far beyond “what is registered on the ground in the monotonous tread of feet” (Ingold and Vergunst 2008, 10), the method had me curious, yet a bit hesitant. Conducting PhD research felt as the time to follow the rules of research. However, not only did the rules of the walking method seem hard to grasp, it even seemed as if the goal was to escape all rules, as formulated by Vannini and Vannini: “In treating walking as a means to gather data in the traditional sense the act of walking becomes detached from both body and place, and this reduces walking to a set of overly planned instrumental protocols and procedures” (2017, 187). This did not make the matter less perplexing.

Then, during one of my stays in Melrakkaslétta, I went on a four-day guided walking trip in the area. The trip was enjoyable and informative, even more so since it provided the opportunity to see and feel the area through the notions of my walking mates. On three of the four days, we followed old coastal trails, some new to me, others I had last visited as a child. On the fourth day, the plan was set to visit the uninhabited heathland of Melrakkaslétta. Unable to join as the group headed out, I

followed later. The first hour or so I was not really enjoying or focusing on the walk. The weather was cold, the wind loud and the drizzle seemed unsure as to whether it should turn into full-blown rainfall. Furthermore, my concentration was on searching for fresh footprints in the moss and mud. Suddenly, I realised that I was more alone in the world than I had ever been in my life. Despite the proximity to my childhood grounds, never before had I been alone in the heathlands. No traces of humans, nothing but the flat moorland in view. Then, out of nowhere, the fog appeared on the horizon, approaching at the speed of an avalanche. There it hit me, my uncontrollable reaction, my fear, was the embodiment of what my interviewees had been describing, yet without me having the connection to really relate to it. Here, in the homogenous endlessness of Melrakkaslétta's heathland, fog is not just an irritating blurring of view, it is an overpowering, dangerous force of nature—an active player in the networks of human and more-than-human coexistence of Melrakkaslétta and my understanding of it came through the act of walking, of being there. I was learning, not just about walking as a research method, but also about myself as a researcher. In that I relate to Ellis's words "I learned as much from what I felt as from what I observed" (2004, 10).

Another major actor, I learned, in the networks of human and more-than-human entanglements of Melrakkaslétta is light, and the lack of it. Birds and mammals are affected by the continuous summer daylight and winter darkness of the high north (Blix 2016) where the midnight sun and northern lights alike draw visitors (Saarinen and Varnajot 2019). However, in that the way humans experience and observe light is dependent on, for example, the way the surfaces and surroundings absorb, deflect and reflect it (Edensor 2017), the natural features of Melrakkaslétta become relevant actors.

Melrakkaslétta is a flatland, covered with low vegetation, meaning that there is hardly a natural feature obstructing its rays of light. The surrounding North Atlantic Ocean furthermore reflects and bathes the peninsula in light. This together with Melrakkaslétta's northern position just below the Arctic Circle results in its peculiar shimmering light-blue daylight, the various kinds of orange during summer nights and the deep blue-black darkness during most of its winters. Remembering how I as a child had played outdoors long into Melrakkaslétta's spring and summer nights and how my friends and I would wander together, back and forth, during winter afternoons as none of us dared to walk home alone in the dark, I could relate to the many narratives on Melrakkaslétta's light and

darkness. It was however first during the interviews and the following analysis that I realised how active a part the arctic summer light and winter darkness play in the networks of human and more-than-human coexistence in Melrakkaslétta. The encompassing brightness is what the summer residents long for prior to arrival and what the frequent guests describe as one of the features repeatedly surprising them during visits, and the winter darkness is what keeps many of the summer stayers from becoming winter guests.

### WHAT WAS IT ALL FOR?

Despite my intention to strive for the co-creation of knowledge, looking back I must admit that while setting the research agenda and its methodology I still had myself placed right in the middle of things. Although respecting the importance of the principle that researchers “listen to the stones without forcing our will on them” (Gan et al. 2017, G11), I was still unsure how I should grasp the more-than-human aspects of Melrakkaslétta. The examples above are a few of the many pieces to the puzzle I collected along the way towards grasping the core of co-creation. As the researcher I *was* in the middle of things, but my role was never that of knowing-it-all but to co-listen to my respondents *and* the more-than-human world of Melrakkaslétta. My part, as the researcher, was that of combining the information selected through interviews and conversations and my felt experiences from observation, dwelling and walking in Melrakkaslétta. Hence, my respondents, human and more-than-human, together with myself, contributed to the knowledge created through the research. Some aspects I did need to experience to understand what I was told, and other aspects I was able to relate to because of my connection to the lands, the living and the non-living beings of the area.

Coming into the project I felt it could become a challenge to argue for the relevance of such a singular case study, making me unsure if I might need to compare Melrakkaslétta to other places. Yet, the further I got, the more convinced I became that a comparison, for the sake of just that, would leave me demarcating and aiming the research towards factors fitting for comparison, as to “set up my project for macroanalysis” (Ellis 2004, 10). My months of reading have shown me how scarce knowledge there is on the context of tourism in non-touristy rural areas. Therefore, I decided to conduct this research to the best of my ability and then strive for being able to argue for its relevance.

Far from being indifferent towards Melrakkaslétta, I initially felt the urge to conduct good research that might serve as a voice of the humans and the more-than-human of this marginal place. In hindsight, I seem to have come out of the deep, dark foggy lands of academic literature, wanting to conduct good research, period. Not only did I briefly lose sight of Melrakkaslétta, but the very definition of good research is moreover a fluffy notion, or as formulated by Law and Mol, “Philosophy has a rich tradition of painstakingly seeking to establish standards for ‘the good’” (2002, 84), and yet, the definitional task of that ‘goodness’ remains uncertain.

Despite the emphasis described above on my strong urge to conduct ‘real’ academic research, this journey has offered an opportunity to learn through research practice the blurred line between the conceptual and the applied. That is, conducting research based on academic thought does not exclude its agenda and outcome from having applicability. This became clear when, staying true to the research design of the co-creation of knowledge, in the fall of 2022 I went to Melrakkaslétta for the real exam: to present the research, report its findings back to the locals and have an open discussion on its premises and outcomes. After an approving reception and fruitful discussion, the real prospect of the research became clear through the words of a local: “Great thing you are doing this. It might wake us up to act on our tourism development ourselves”. Should one dare to hope that the very performing of the research might play a small part in enabling the residents and “setting free what lives” (Veijola et al. 2014, 8)—that seems like the best kind of ‘goodness’ there is.

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## 9.2 Paper 2. Mobilities on the Margins<sup>4</sup>

### 7 Mobilities on the Margins

#### The Becoming of Melrakkaslétta as a Tourist Destination

*Þórný Barðadóttir, Gunnar Thór Jóhannesson, and Katrín Anna Lund*

It is midnight in Melrakkaslétta peninsula at the summer solstice. The sun has not set and is not going to for the next two weeks or so. Instead, its orange colors are reflected on the land and the ocean. Melrakkaslétta is the northernmost place of Iceland and one of its most remote settlements. The remoteness is not a result of impassable rivers or steep mountain passes. Nor is Melrakkaslétta lacking road connections; rather remoteness here is the result of natural, societal, and technical changes that have left this area in a geographical and social margin.

Melrakkaslétta is home to a few hundred residents, most of whom live in the peninsula's two villages. The rest of the flatland is home to a few scattered residents. Many others have moved away, or simply moved on. Still, many of their descendants return each spring and so do countless numbers of migrant birds, all returning to their heartland. Those with heavy bones return to harvest and enjoy Melrakkaslétta's summer, and those with light bones fly in for nesting or as a stop-over on their way farther into the Arctic.

Melrakkaslétta, far from being Iceland's best-known tourist destination, is one of the few places in Iceland characterized by Arctic tundra landscapes (Jóhannsdóttir, Kolbeinsson & Þórarinnsson, 2014). The land is mostly covered with low vegetation, which is at this time of year still yellowish in its wake of yet another long Arctic winter. The grassy tundra features moorland, lakes, and an incredible quantity of rocks in all possible shapes and sizes, from pebbles to boulders. Most rocks form a natural part of the surroundings, scattered around, thrown up in stacks, or forcing themselves up through the surface of the earth. A visitor to Melrakkaslétta is also likely to come across a less natural element of the landscape, a peculiar stone structure made of rocks that have been skillfully cut to their enormous sizes and precisely built up to form a monument, the Arctic Henge (Figure 7.1). The monument proudly stands on a hill above the country's northernmost village, Raufarhöfn. The hill offers a panoramic view over the Melrakkaslétta flatland, the hills on each of the peninsula's outer roots, up to the highlands, and onto the surrounding North Atlantic Ocean.

While the monument is itself evidently immobile, with its multi-tonnage building-rocks heavily grounded deep into the land, it is enmeshed in mobilities. The

DOI: 10.4324/9781003321163-9

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*Figure 7.1* The Arctic Henge ©Þórný Barðadóttir 2021.

Arctic Henge is itself both a product and symbol of mobility. It is created to capture the movements of the sun and tell the time by casting precise shadows. The Henge was also designed to follow celestial movements by playing with the midnight sun and the Aurora Borealis as well as to pay respect to the Icelandic Sagas and Norse Mythology. Importantly, it also has a genuine, more earthly purpose: to attract visitors to the village and thus affect its current marginal position and image of being too remote to visit.

This chapter focuses on the mobility of a place. It revolves around the entanglements of the Arctic Henge and changes in the road infrastructure within the area and how that affects the position of Melrakkaslétta as a place on the margins. We focus on the genesis of the Arctic Henge, how it connects to changes in routes channeling human mobilities, and the role it plays in the region and in Melrakkaslétta, an area located far off the beaten tracks of the Icelandic tourism mobilities (Árnason & Welling, 2019), now slowly becoming a tourist destination.

The chapter is built on ethnographic research based on 36 recorded, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with some of Melrakkaslétta's current and former residents, landowners, local government, tourism operators, and frequent guests in the area. The data also include notes from 10 targeted and 54 unplanned conversations with residents, landowners, tourists, former residents, and other guests in Melrakkaslétta. Data collection was conducted during fieldwork in four two-week stays in the period of June 2021 to March 2022, and the data were analyzed through thematic analysis.<sup>1</sup>

The study is grounded on relational ontology with a focus on the interconnections between humans and more-than-humans in accomplishing as well as defying social order and placemaking (Latour, 2007; van der Duim, Ren, & Jóhannesson, 2017). A relational approach to place frames it as a point where “varieties of spatial relational processes intersect, meet up, and are ‘thrown together’” (Granäs, 2018, p. 49 and see Massey, 2005). This view sees places as mobile, continually becoming through relational practice and networks.

Mobilities are relations of movement, meaning, and practice, as “constellations of mobility” occurring through certain yet ever-evolving patterns (Cresswell, 2010). Mobility research has underscored how life is shaped by and enveloped within different kinds of mobile systems that connect places across space while at the same time performing or composing the space of which they are part of (Allen, 2011). The idea that rural and remote places are somewhat fixed and static vis-à-vis urban centers has thus been undermined (Lund & Jóhannesson, 2014; Vannini, 2012). Nonetheless, it is important to study the becoming of places, the ways in which their positioning as remote and marginal or close and central is shaped, cemented, and contested through various constellations of mobilities.

### **Mobile Melrakkaslétta**

Before entering the field, one of us (Þórný) already felt a strong connection to Melrakkaslétta. There her mother grew up, on a farm where Þórný spent a large part of her childhood summers. Þórný, however, grew up in the village of Kópasker on the same peninsula, just south of what was then considered as Melrakkaslétta, the northernmost flatland of the peninsula including the village Raufarhöfn (Lund, 2016).

Aware that a place is hardly ever an easily defined point but is rather always made of “sites for someone and of something” (Shields, 1991, p. 6), owning “its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend time there” (Ingold, 1993, p. 155), Þórný was still somewhat surprised to find out how true it was that one’s “returns are always to a place that has moved on” (Massey, 2005, p. 139). This was when she realized that now Melrakkaslétta has grown south to include the village of Kópasker (Figure 7.2). When having a coffee with a local man in Raufarhöfn he explained this and said: “now there is this cutting line, the Hólaheiði road, and everything north of it is Melrakkaslétta.”

The perception of Melrakkaslétta as a place, she learned, has moved with the construction of a new road that cuts through the peninsula. This is a road that was meant to improve the connection between different places on the northeast corner of Iceland and whilst serving such purpose it simultaneously expands and redefines the margins. This underlines how places “become through relational ordering of mobile practices” (Lund & Jóhannesson, 2014, p. 444), themselves being mobile and coming to existence through movement (Sheller & Urry, 2004). But before we can make sense of such changes from a mobility perspective, let us briefly put the area into a social, historical, and geographical context.



Figure 7.2 Map of Iceland. Roads and the "historical" and "new" Melrakkasléttur drawn by authors via Felt.com.

Melrakkaslétta's rich natural resources have throughout the centuries offered ideal conditions for human settlement. These include rich birdlife, countless lakes and streams filled with trout and char, the surrounding North Atlantic Ocean providing fish and small mammals to hunt, and driftwood that once was much needed for heating and as building material. The ocean also served as a highway for transport and trade—and at times brought its hazards in the form of sea-ice and occasional visits by polar bears (Lund, 2016). Thus, Melrakkaslétta was shaped in large part by the connections to the more-than-human mobilities of the area and the ocean.

Most farms are now abandoned during winters, including almost all farms situated on the northernmost part of the peninsula. The village of Kópasker, on its southwest side, grew from trade and services for the neighboring farmlands (Björnsdóttir, 2003). It has never grown much above 130 residents and has not faced the same level of depopulation as the fishing villages in northeast Iceland such as Raufarhöfn (Jóhannesdóttir, Ingólfssdóttir, & Þráinsdóttir, 2019) and still holds the position of a service hub.

The village of Raufarhöfn, on the peninsula's northeast coast, has always depended on the presence of natural resources. Fishing and processing of herring and later demersal fish created the conditions for the growing village in the early twentieth century, with a short-lived peak of a population reaching 500 in the late 1970s (Statistic Iceland, n.d.). However, the vanishing of mobile fishing stocks (Lund, 2016) and alteration of the Icelandic fishing industry (Kokorsch & Benediktsson, 2018) played a key role in the rapid depopulation of the village from the early 1980s and onwards. Outmigration has long been a bitter reality in rural Iceland, particularly in the areas farthest away from the capital and regional service centers (Bjarnason, 2019).

In a 2012 governmental initiative, focused on applying a bottom-up approach to counteract the long-standing outmigration from the village, the residents rated fisheries and tourism as the main possibilities for their homesteads' development (IRDI, 2018). Melrakkaslétta has in fact for long been visited for birdwatching and angling. The peninsula is part of the Northeast Birding Trail (Visit North Iceland, n.d.), and the locals told Þórný how the rich salmon rivers falling to sea on the peninsula's east coast were the spur behind the opening of the local Hótel Norðurljós in the mid-1970s. Attempts have since been made to utilize the many streams and ponds on the peninsula's heathland for angling tours, but as explained by a former operator "the heathland is just too hard to drive through and these customers are not used to this much walking in the moss and moorland." Furthermore, the customers proved to have been "expecting somewhat more luxury than we can offer."

Tourist facilities in the area are modest. In Raufarhöfn there is a hotel with an à-la-carte restaurant, a café offering lunch, a guesthouse, a camping site, and a few houses, apartments, and rooms available for rent via booking sites. This, together with an indoor swimming pool and a small convenience store, comprises the service sector of the village. Although modest, it is more than what is offered in the neighboring village. For the residents of Kópasker, where tourists can visit a couple of museums, stay in a guesthouse or at a campsite, and buy lunch at the local convenience store, the services of Raufarhöfn are viewed with envy as explained

by a woman living in Kópasker “in Raufarhöfn ... there’s just much more to do. There’s a pool and there’s a soccer mini-pitch and just a cafe and a restaurant and a hotel. We have nothing like that.” Out on the flatland, one birdwatching shelter completes the tourism infrastructure.

The modest tourism in Melrakkaslétta, as elsewhere in the Arctic, is highly seasonal (Rantala et al., 2019). In Raufarhöfn, the services are open from March/April depending on the weather, until the first weekend of October. The tourist season’s end can be said to be marked by a week of festivities and the locally celebrated Ram-Day. During winters “there is no basis to keep the firm open, none at all” according to a local tourism operator.

### **Road Connections**

Road construction has long played an important role in regional politics (Bock, 2016; Carson, Carson, & Lundmark, 2014; Dalakoglou & Harvey, 2012). As early as 1956, the lack of all-season roads in Melrakkaslétta and neighboring regions was the cause of much concern, as the then-changing mobilities were pointing to a decrease in seaborne traffic and an increase in the use of landways (Althingi, 1956). In a 1976 parliamentary report on the area’s rural development plan, the bad road conditions of the northeast were considered bad to the degree of discrimination (State Executive Agency, 1976).

Melrakkaslétta is connected to the Icelandic ring road, Highway 1, through road 85, a route over 320 kilometers long in its present form (see Figure 7.3) (Icelandic Road and Coastal Administration—IRCA, n.d.). Its route followed Melrakkaslétta’s coastline on the current road 870 (Figure 7.3). The coastal road was built as an all-season gravel road in the early 1980s. It followed century-old walking paths that had gradually been made accessible for vehicles during summers. The coastal gravel road can therefore be seen as “an embodiment of connection” (Argounova-Low, 2012, p. 193) in its materialization of the already existing routes within Melrakkaslétta. Its all-season construction came as an action to a close-in of the area, after the seaway had become impassable due to persistent sea-ice in the late 1970s (Lund, 2016).

The coastal gravel road connects the peninsula’s two villages and the farms alongside Melrakkaslétta’s coastline (Figure 7.3). It still left the residents further east on route 85 with a long drive to the service center of Akureyri mid-north Iceland (see Figure 7.3), leaving them calling for the replacement of a sunken, inland, summer trail over the Öxarfjarðarheiði heathlands (see Figure 7.3). After decades of discussions, planning, and repeated delays, in the late 1990s, a decision was finally in on road construction on Melrakkaslétta’s parts of road 85.

The outcome was to build a new road over Hólaheiði heathland, in between the two existing routes. Hereafter, this part of road 85 will in this chapter be referred to as the Hólaheiði road (see Figure 7.3). Its location was not based on any form of social assessment, although in its environmental assessment report, it is noted that the desperate need for road construction and asphalt roads in the area would result in positive social outcomes, regardless of the road course (IRCA, 2005). The



Figure 7.3 The road connections of Melrakkaslétta and northeast Iceland. Drawn by authors via Felt.com.

focus on the asphalt might have its links to how Harvey (2010) visions concrete as “a substance that binds the material and ideational promises of modernity” (p. 32).

### **The Arctic Henge**

The story of the Arctic Henge is revealing of local grassroots efforts and volunteer energy. The driving force behind the Arctic Henge was Erlingur Thoroddsen, then the hotel manager in Raufarhöfn. His vision was to create an outdoor sculpture based on an original idea to build a sort of sundial with the aim of capturing and playing with the unique Arctic lightscapes (Bille & Sørensen, 2007) and the panoramic view of Melrakkaslétta. The vision gradually evolved, and the final version of the monument expanded to include references to the Icelandic Sagas as well as Norse Mythology and cosmology (Arctic Henge, n.d.).

What this official origin story does not tell us about is another somewhat earthlier, although just as genuine, purpose of the Arctic Henge. Erlingur wanted to create a reminder for the village as a reaction to the announced change of the road, in other words, to get travellers to take a turn from the inland Hólaheiði road and make a visit to Raufarhöfn. A former delegate of the local government described this becoming of the Arctic Henge to Þórný: “when they started working on the Hólaheiði-road, [Erlingur] realized that he would lose the traffic going through ... so, something had to be created.” And create they did. The monument is a circle of 50 meters in diameter with a 10-meter-high centerpiece. It is built from stacked rocks, cut in a local mine. The rocks are spoken about with pride by locals, as in: “Fun fact, the largest rocks are weighing up to 25 tons.”

The role of Erlingur in the creation of the Arctic Henge shows the driving force of entrepreneurs in tourism development (Jóhannesson & Lund, 2018). He was however not acting alone. After a pause in the building work following the sudden passing of Erlingur in 2015, the construction has been managed by a board which combines a small group of locals who according to a municipality representative “really haven’t been thanked enough.” What seems to be the hardest to explain, and grasp, is the fact that “it’s not like there’s any money in this” a board member told Þórný, continuing: “we are doing this for Erlingur first and foremost, it’s his idea ... his ideology ... just a completely non-profit thing.”

In the minds of locals, the Arctic Henge belongs to Raufarhöfn. For the summer residents out on the flatland and the residents of Kópasker, it’s an “obligatory stop” on summer drives around Melrakkaslétta. In Kópasker, Þórný met a former supervisor of a local museum who revealed how the museum board had held back on seeking public funding, as they did not want to compete with the Arctic Henge. They found that the continuing construction of the Arctic Henge was more important as was reflected by his comment: “I think that we will benefit from it here too.”

A resident in Raufarhöfn stated how the Arctic Henge has already met its goal, saying “it pulls people in, which was the purpose of it, to get people down the drive-off.” It is also vital for the modest tourism sector in the area, or as stated by a local tourism operator “I don’t know where we would be without it.” Even though the residents know there isn’t much else to do than visit the Arctic Henge, as in

“come, observe, and then leave again,” they still seem quite happy about their situation. They are proud of their monument and the increased visits it brings and they welcome the modest services it has generated during the summer season. The summer openings are a positive addition to everyday life and the winter hibernation is not necessarily seen as negative. For the residents in Kópasker and the summer residents out on the flatland, the services of Raufarhöfn are welcomed, as in the words of a summer resident “now you’re able to make a stop there and get yourself a slice of cake or a beer, or something.”

The Arctic Henge is a non-profit attraction. Therefore, it is not clear if, how, and who could benefit from the visits it draws in. In 2002, when Erlingur introduced the idea of the Arctic Henge to the local government, foreign tourist arrivals in Iceland counted little less than 300,000. He saw the Arctic Henge as a place for those few that would make the effort to take the turn off the new Hólaheiði road. Since then, the context of tourism in Iceland has changed to count two million annual tourist arrivals (Icelandic Tourist Board, n.d.). As tourism in Iceland has grown, the initial purpose of the Arctic Henge has been altered in that the regional tourism sector and marketing agency see it as an unseized opportunity for tapping into a growing flow of tourists.

Tourism marketing and development is often carried out by institutions not necessarily physically located in each destination. Thus, a local destination is dependent on and part of a wider-reaching network extending across regional and national boundaries (Saarinen, 2004). In June 2019 a new tourism product, the Arctic Coast Way, formally opened (Visit North Iceland, 2019). This is a marketing tool for the 900-kilometer-long coastline of North Iceland (Arctic Coast Way, n.d.) created to draw tourists out of the beaten track of the Icelandic ring road, Highway 1.

The Arctic Henge plays a large role in the marketing of the Arctic Coast Way. The northeast has proven hard to “sell” for the regional marketing agency, as a spokesman told Þórný, further describing how the lack of tourism magnets on route 85 earlier left them with “just having problems with this area ... now we have this: Come, here is this huge magnet.” This means that no longer is the Arctic Henge about drawing in those few taking the turn into the Raufarhöfn drive-off, now it is becoming framed more directly as a tourist attraction as a part of an institutionalized marketing effort of the Icelandic northeast. Furthermore, with social media becoming a central vehicle for spreading images of picturesque spots worthy of visit, the attraction of the Arctic Henge may quickly come out of control of local or regional actors creating new controversies.

While the regional marketing office and tourism sector speculate on how the northeast area can be marketed in order to grow local tourism, the residents in Melrakkaslétta are somewhat more hesitant, as evident by many of their remarks, summed up in the words of a resident in Raufarhöfn: “people want guests and to show their village ... but obviously they don’t want the masses,” and another resident saying “no one wants a boom.” This was further emphasized by a member of the Arctic Henge board, quite bluntly saying:

we should be wary of not going into some marketing and try to sell something people might get disappointed by ... it’s just in progress ... [the Arctic Henge]

is doing exactly what it was supposed to do ... we should not try to speed things up ... just, please tourism, don't ruin our Melrakkaslétta.

### **The Melrakkaslétta Coastal Road**

The road system is the base for mobilities and thus tourism development in Iceland. The main concerns of the residents of Melrakkaslétta, however, are not the expected emphasis on the marginal situatedness of Melrakkaslétta in the context of the Icelandic systems of tourism mobilities. Instead, the interviews show that the main concerns have to do with changes in road infrastructure and the tourist flows in the peninsula.

Although the Hólaheiði road was built to replace the old coastal route on road 85 (IRCA, 2005), it seems as despite—or perhaps because of it—the traffic on the coastal gravel road has in fact increased. This is caused by a combination of the draw-in effect of the Arctic Henge and the circle-drive created by it.

In Melrakkaslétta, this is observed by the local tourism operators. One tourist operator in Raufarhöfn told Þórný how when people complain about the back-and-forth route of the Raufarhöfn drive-off, she would say: “you don't have to, you can drive on, take the circle-drive, go to Kópasker and view Slétta.” This, in the words of another local tourist operator, means that “a vast majority drives out on Slétta either as they arrive or when they are leaving.”<sup>22</sup>

In their research on the rural area of Strandir in the Icelandic Westfjords, Lund and Jóhannesson (2014, 2016) found that the area's dirt-road was much noted “both as a negative and limiting factor and as a positive component for the image of the region as mythical and authentic” (Lund & Jóhannesson, 2014, p. 447). In the case of Melrakkaslétta, the old coastal gravel road was likewise very prominent all throughout the interviews, although in no case was its nostalgic condition praised. Just as Harvey (2010) sees concrete as the substance of modernity, the lack of it “allows us to observe how and where fractures appear” (p. 32).

The village residents, no longer having to travel the gravel coastal road, now seldom choose to do so, as explained by a Raufarhöfn resident: “it's a bit embarrassing but you hardly drive round Slétta anymore because you're just always in a hurry.” In that, the Hólaheiði road has resulted in a detachment between the residents and the Melrakkaslétta's northernmost flatland. As the Hólaheiði road was built as a part of road 85, the Melrakkaslétta coastal road is now a secondary road no 870 (IRCA, n.d.), a degrading which led the IRCA to reduce its already miniscule maintenance. This came regardless of the residents still living out on the flatland and the summer traffic.

The road's degrading seems to have been somewhat successful. The residents have repeatedly complained about the road's condition, as a former farmer who had to make repeat visits to Raufarhöfn expressed:

I kept talking to this good man at IRCA who paternally explained that there was a new road ... I tried to tell him that not only was that a much longer drive for me, but I would still need to drive the first 15 km on this road. He just didn't understand, or didn't want to.

The summer residents are equally exhausted and irritated about the road's condition. One of them told Þórný: "my neighbour said the other day that we should all just make calls. Everyone is going crazy over this" continuing to say: "then he told us that ... his wife had been calling the IRCA repeatedly complaining ... she always talked to the same man ... it ended with him just dying." Shamelessly, both Þórný and her host were bursting into laughter as came the pun "So, I said: Who's next?"

The need for improvements of the coastal road becomes clear in the context of tourism. For some, that seemed to mean the need for the road to be paved, as in the words of a local tourism operator: "just a narrow stripe," while others emphasized the problem being its long-standing lack of maintenance. Such was the view of a representative of the local government, telling Þórný how Melrakkaslétta needed "a passable road, a gravel road if necessary, just a road that isn't dangerous."

Despite the increased traffic on the gravel road, it is still considered a hurdle for the tourism development of the area. A regional tour operator told how he had given up offering tours to Melrakkaslétta: "The old Slétta road is just a huge barrier for us who are in this tour business ... this is just such a disgusting treatment of cars ... the washboards are like steep waves at sea."

The fractured road is furthermore seen as limiting the experiences of visitors. A woman planning to create a small tourism service in Kópasker told Þórný: "I went out to Slétta about a week ago and in my opinion, it is just impassable" consequently explaining that "when people ask me what to do, I look at their cars, then just say: you know what, this is the most beautiful place in Iceland, but I don't know what you want to expose your car to."

What the visitors not able to drive the Melrakkaslétta coastal road are missing out on is an area "really fascinating ... it's the history and the reminder on what it must have been like 50 or 70 years ago" explained a neighboring farmer. A woman Þórný met in Kópasker told her she found Melrakkaslétta to be "such a mysterious place ... like so many things you don't know and many sites you would like to know the story of, you know, ruins and such."

Melrakkaslétta's flatland oozes narratives, mobilities, and ruins. The encounters of Melrakkaslétta's narratives and the condition of the coastal road are quite summed up by an Icelandic couple Þórný met in Raufarhöfn as they came from their first visit around Melrakkaslétta. With wide eyes, the woman said: "it was just captivating ... the old houses and just the whole place ... the old machineries ... ruined boats just lying out on the ridges." She was then interrupted by the male as he with a small grin stated: "Just a shame one must keep staring at the road to not having the car swimming off it on all the washboards and loose gravel."

### Conceptualizing Remoteness

Melrakkaslétta is as other places "becoming as processes rather than a thing," to use the words of Massey (2005, p. 141), a place "thrown together" (Granås, 2018) as a homestead to peoples, rocks, birds, moorlands, and roads—and a place to visit.

The Hólaheiði road moved the main routes of Melrakkaslétta's human mobilities from the coastline into the root of the peninsula. This renewed direction of mobilities has for now remade Melrakkaslétta as a place by materially (re)framing and enlarging it.

Roads create connections that can be strong or weak, with lanes of mobility either fast or slow (Dobbs, 2007; Sheller & Urry, 2006), literally and figuratively. Yet, in that mobilities as other aspects of places are relational, a more accurate wording would be that some mobility lanes are "slower or faster" than others (Vannini, 2012, p. 251). Margins become not merely through geographical remoteness but furthermore through lack of connections as relational remoteness (Bock, 2016). Margins therefore become not a given in an order of things, but an effect of continuing mobilities. The reasons for human travel, its speed and rhythm, the channelling of routes taken, the emotional effect travel brings, and frictions as when and why the movement ends are all relational aspects of what Cresswell (2010) calls "constellation of mobility."

Mobility flows and frictions do not occur through uniform distribution (Cresswell, 2010). While the Hólaheiði road was built as a channel for faster travels on road 85, the road's situatedness and the resulting long drive-off to Raufarhöfn generated concerns that the village would become even more remote, forgotten. Hence, the creation of the Arctic Henge, built to change and channel the flows of mobilities. Then, following yet another change in mobilities with the growth of the Icelandic tourism sector, the regional marketing agency and the regional tourism sector now also see the Arctic Henge as an opportunity to channel tourism flows into the tourism margins of the Icelandic northeast.

The Hólaheiði road cut the peninsula off the area's main routes of travels. While its two villages are connected to this faster mobility lane, each with its own paved drive-off, the northernmost Arctic flatland has been left with the slow lane of demolishing gravel road, now even slower in comparison. Melrakkaslétta's village residents now rarely choose to drive the coastal road, leaving the northernmost flatland a remoteness to them, a margin. In conjunction, however, the Hólaheiði road and the old coastal road have created a new circle route around the peninsula. This, together with the attraction of the Arctic Henge, has caused increased traffic on the Melrakkaslétta coastal gravel road, the very road that was to be replaced by the Hólaheiði road.

The coastal road leads tourists through the landscape of the Arctic tundra, narratives of times passed and the homesteads of birds and few human residents. This old route of mobilities within a place has now become a new channel as a tourist route, a result of tourist visits to the Arctic Henge. However, while the Arctic Henge was intentionally created to affect travel routes, the increased circle-drive is a result thereof. And yet, the bad condition of the gravel road is now feared to create friction in Melrakkaslétta's further tourism development. These entanglements manifest that just as places are always a becoming, so are the constellations of mobilities, the relational patterns of movement, representation, and practice, ever evolving and yet, partial.

## Notes

- 1 The study is part of a larger ethnographic research, funded by the Icelandic Centre for Research, on the interconnections of placemaking, tourism, and other mobilities on the margins.
- 2 Melrakkaslétta is often referred to as Slétta by the locals.

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### 9.3 Paper 3. Few People and the Birds<sup>5</sup>

#### “Few people and the birds”. Negotiating tourism development and more-than-human hospitality on the margin

Authors: Þórný Barðadóttir\* and Katrín Anna Lund

##### **Abstract**

Rural tourism is regarded as having the ability to contribute to the often much-needed socio-economic (re)vitalization of provincial regions. For that, the sector is dependent on services and sites of leisure to “sell”. While valuable research has been conducted at a variety of rural tourism sites, few have focused on tourism at potential destinations. Applying a theoretical approach of more-than-human cohabitation and hospitality, this paper discusses entanglements of tourism development in a peripheral area. The focus is on the remote Melrakkaslétta on the Icelandic northeast coast. Once the setting of wealthy farms and utilization of natural resources, the area has in recent decades faced depopulation and related challenges. The residents have proposed local tourism as one way to counteract these challenges. Melrakkaslétta, currently one of the least visited areas of Iceland, is home to significant bird populations. Indeed, Melrakkaslétta is a place of continuous comings and goings of birds and humans. Introducing findings from ethnographic research conducted in Melrakkaslétta, the paper reveals the paradoxical role of the birds in the area’s potential tourism development. For some people, the birds are something to underline and utilize while for others Melrakkaslétta should remain a tranquil place of few people and birds.

##### **Introduction**

This paper is about cohabitation of birds and humans in a peripheral zone in Iceland. It brings forth questions about conflicts that may arise with increased tourism and leisure activities in peripheral and sensitive places inhabited by non-human creatures. By using an ethnographic approach, our aim is to explore the potentials of a remote place as a destination, in terms of how it is co-habited by more-than-human, heterogenous occupants and, simultaneously, with care and “response-ability” (Haraway, 2016, p. 2). The novelty of this research is that of applying more-than-human approaches when researching the interconnected, even competing aspects unfolding in an area on the verge of potential tourism development.

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Although researchers have introduced frameworks for ethical management of wildlife tourism (Aquino et al., 2021), research still shows clashes between outdoor leisure activities and wildlife (Esfandiar et al., 2022; Kline & Fischer, 2023; Ouma & Stadel, 2021). This has left Mueller and Graefe (2018) to state that “conflict has been a major research interest within the field of outdoor recreation for over 50 years” (p. 26). This research has, however, been directed at established tourism areas, whereas here these issues are explored in a non-touristic, peripheral area.

While much academic work has been accomplished on defining the concept of leisure (Singh et al., 2023), we apply the concept in the meaning of time spent on hobbies and outdoor activities (Sivan, 2020). This includes what Stebbins (2018) calls the “common sense definition of leisure” (p. 259) of “leisure as not work”, while we also recognize the various layers of entanglements accompanied with leisure activities (Carnicelli et al., 2021; Stebbins, 2018). Setting out with the research question *How can tourism become a part of established human-bird co-habitation and environments?*, our aim is to inquire about “livelihood opportunities” (Holden, 2015, p. 6) for all residents, human and non-human. Furthermore, we deal with questions of hospitality and agency (Pyyhtinen, 2022) in a potential place of leisure for outdoor activities and recreation.

To set the scene, we will start by introducing the site of research, Melrakkaslétta in northeast Iceland, and the paper’s theoretical assumptions about the concepts of more-than-human cohabitation and hospitality in the context of placemaking, outdoor leisure and tourism. Thereafter these assumptions will be explored in relation to the research findings before further discussion and concluding remarks are presented.

## **Exploring the tourism margins**

It is summer solstice and spring near the Arctic Circle. We have signed up to join a small group undertaking a four-day guided walk through the rural tundra of Melrakkaslétta, northeast Iceland. For us the walk is part of fieldwork which is a part of a larger project on the more-than-human entanglements of placemaking, tourism and other mobilities in peripheral places (Barðadóttir, 2024; Lund, 2024). Icelandic nature, viewed as pristine and spectacular, has long been a decisive factor in foreign visits but Melrakkaslétta does not offer many of the typical picturesque features tourism promoters use for marketing Iceland (Lund, 2024). Instead, this is an arctic flatland, a scarcely sheltered tundra, the land of few people and birds. Melrakkaslétta, however, is not without its attractions. One is the Arctic Henge, an impressive art-piece of boulders. Although still under construction, the Henge is already regarded as vital in the potentialities of tourism development in the

Icelandic north- east, although the area is annually visited by merely 1% of the country's foreign tourists (Barðadóttir, 2024).

Today, we are walking towards Hraunhafnartangi, one of the two northernmost points of Iceland, both stretching into the North Atlantic Ocean from the low coastline of Melrakkaslétta, just below the Arctic Circle. The flatness and low vegetation provide the walkers with near endless panorama views out to the surrounding Atlantic Ocean and over the vast lowland until their gaze meets low ridges at the peninsula's roots. Today, the weather is cloudy, although the sun does on occasions manage to break through. There is a light breeze and the air feels rather cold for early summer. Despite the temperature the arctic terns (*Sterna paradisaea*)<sup>1</sup> know the season. Their eggs are laid, and this is the time for fierce protection of their territories, nests and recently hatched offspring. Their brave safeguarding also creates sheltering grounds for other more reserved and less outspoken birds such as the eider duck, making this a territory of inter-species kinship (Haraway, 2016).



**Figure 1.** A small group of human walkers finding their ways through the rocks, tussocks and birds' nesting grounds at Hraunhafnartangi on Melrakkaslétta. © Þórný Barðadóttir 2021.

The soundscapes, the “complex web of human-nature relationships embodied and conceptualised as a cultural landscape” (Kato, 2009, p. 83) is overpowering. As we sense the breeze, we hear the smashing waves of the ocean and the calls, shrieks and alarms of

the wealth of birds. A visit to this place makes it near impossible to envision a scenario where all the world's birds had disappeared in a daunting "silent spring" (Whitehouse, 2015, quoting Carson, 1922). And yet as "kinships exclude as well as include" (Haraway, 2016, p. 207) some birds are fought off as predators and we, the humans, are thoroughly made aware that we are not included kin but trespassers. On our walk our caution is threefold (Figure 1), to keep our balance as we stumble onwards through the rocks and tussocks, to try escaping the awaiting attacks on our heads from the terns and to be careful as the terns' juveniles are scattered around and hard to spot where they are hidden by the low tundra growth. Our careful treading demonstrates our attempt to show respect, while consciously invading the terns' space. As mentioned above, undertaking the walk is one part of a larger research project about tourism on the margins. While previous publications have introduced other aspects of the overall research outcomes (Barðadóttir, 2024; Jóhannesson et al., 2024; Lund, 2024) this paper focuses on how to negotiate the potential emergence of tourism and co-habitus of the few people and birds in this remote, northern place.



**Figure 2.** Melrakkaslétta and its location in Iceland. © The National Land Survey of Iceland. Place names added by the authors.

Melrakkaslétta was once the setting of wealthy farms making use of the area's rich natural resources such as vast grassing grounds for sheep farming, driftwood for heating and building and rich fishing in the ocean and lakes beside extensive hunting of seal- and shark for export of oil. However, as the industrialization of agriculture (Sharpley & Vass, 2006) has increased, this barren flatland with all its tussocks, hummocks, rocks and arctic weather has proved to not comply with the needs of modern day technological and

commercial farming. Living in Melrakkaslétta still is and has always been about co-living and sharing space with birds. Although the northernmost part has few permanent human residents, during summers it is co-habited by more- than-human summer dwellers as migratory birds and humans, take up temporary habitation. This becomes their home until they take off and leave again in the fall, placing them in the joint role of hosts and guests (Lee, 2020).

Around 300 human residents live in two small villages located on Melrakkaslétta, Raufarhöfn and Kópasker (Figure 2). The villages have faced a longstanding decrease in number of residents and downturns in their economy and employment opportunities. As a counteractive act, the villagers have introduced local tourism development as a much-needed socioeconomic boost of their home area (Barðadóttir, 2024; Barðadóttir et al., 2023). Melrakkaslétta is one amongst many places where tourism has been brought to the fore as a tool to rescue rural development, although how or with what results is often much less clear (Bohlin et al., 2016; Rosalina et al., 2021). Whilst the villagers may hope for socioeconomic improvement with increased tourism services, it is the land outside the villages that is attractive for outdoor leisure activities such as walking, cycling and exploring. This reveals how tourism development can cause conflicting interests regarding how the land should be co-habited and co-utilized as will be presented and discussed below.

## **Methodology**

Here we aim to engage in conversations with all parties involved on an equal basis. This brings forth different, sometimes clashing, more-than-human perspectives to examine how a multi-species territory may be shared and conflicts eased by maintaining care. The empirical data introduced in the next sections stem from notes from the guided walk after which Þórný stayed on for further fieldwork. The dataset also includes transcripts from 36 semi-structured interviews with current and former residents in Melrakkaslétta, some with all-year residency and others residing during summers. Other respondents were frequent visitors and landowners in Melrakkaslétta as well as representatives of the regional tourism sector, regional destination marketing office and municipality. The interviewees, targeted through a chain referral method, signed a statement of their consent for audio recording of interviews, references to their words and waiver of anonymity. The interviews were conducted in Icelandic with direct quotes shown in the paper translated to English by the authors. In order to capture the more-than-human aspect of the study matters, other methods applied were guided and un-guided walking and staying during all seasons in order to connect with the area.

The data were gathered during six stays through all seasons, counting four months in total, between spring 2021 and fall 2022. Applying thematic analysis, the data were manually coded before making use of QDA miner software. The first round of analysis followed the conceptual framework of the overall research project, namely mobilities, placemaking and margins (Barðadóttir, 2024). Thereafter semantic, latent analysis was conducted in order to detect patterns of collective understanding within the dataset. In the next section, the empirical data will be introduced in the theoretical context of placemaking, tourism and more-than-human cohabitation and hospitality.

### **Places, cohabitation and more-than-human hospitality**

Researchers have applied the term cohabitation in a wide range of studies. Examples include research on the biodiversity of mountainous rivers (Rozzi, 2022), street dogs in urban areas (Srinivasan, 2019), human-bear coexistence (Toncheva & Fletcher, 2021) and human–computer interaction in the context of biodiversity of gardens (Rosén et al., 2022). Scattered as these may seem, these authors share the stance of working within the approach of flat ontology and hence the entanglements of human and more-than-human interactions and coexistence. The same applies to the work of Carreño (2016) when exploring the sociality of food consumption, production and distribution in the context of the sentience of a place. Such exploring of places follows what Lew (2017) calls “organic placemaking”. That is, seeing a place emerge through inter- actions, relations, symbols and perception (Frisvoll, 2012) in the dynamic and ever ongoing processes of a becoming (Massey, 2005), where places unfold in the context of their landscapes, environment and surroundings (Ingold, 2011).

Somewhat contrary is the placemaking of the tourism sector. As tourism tends to be introduced as being where “production, consumption, and experiential characteristics become interconnected in a given location” (Saraniemi & Kylänen, 2010, p. 133), the sector relies on destinations as places to visit and “sell”. This leaves the focus of tourism branding and marketing on defining characteristics at specific locations (Boisen et al., 2018). Lew (2017) refers to this as a top down process of “place- making”, as opposed to the bottom-up organic process of “placemaking”. According to Ingold (2011), a landscape is “given only in relation to its inhabitants, to their lives, movements and purposes, and the places where they dwell, and draws its meanings from these relations” (p. 129). Adding to this, research conducted within the approach of flat ontology does not regard humans as the only inhabitants under investigation but also the species they cohabit with.

Tourism as a sector is inherently based on services and hospitality. Hospitality, however, can be understood beyond the economic aspect. Regarding hospitality through

a more-than-human lens leaves humans and non-humans in the joint role of hosts and guests (Lee, 2020; Pyyhtinen, 2022). Exploring the codependent aspect of a more-than-human world at a given location means “to decentre the sovereign human actor” (Pyyhtinen, 2022, p. 3) and instead perceive humans as one amongst other inhabitants. This demands exploration of more-than-human cohabitation that regards places not merely as destinations “that only relate to the natural environment and landscape as a passive resource” (Lund & Jóhannesson, 2016, p. 654). Hence, it is now time to return to the tourism margins and inspect the issues of more-than-human cohabitation, hospitality and placemaking in relations to the narratives of the habitants of Melrakkaslétta.

### **The place and the birds**

Some of Melrakkaslétta’s birds are all-season residents. Others inhabit the peninsula during summers on their annual migration between nesting and wintering grounds, whilst yet others are passage migrants who make a short stopover on their travels further into the arctic. This makes Melrakkaslétta an important site for a number of different bird species (Icelandic Institute of Natural History, n.d.). For the human habitants the comings, presence and goings of the birds are essential in what makes Melrakkaslétta as a place, thereby symbolizing the “co-constitutive power of the nonhuman in evoking emotional, aesthetic, and practical relations in humans” (van der Duim et al., 2013, p. 7). One example of this were the narratives of a young woman, recently returning home to Raufarhöfn, after semesters away for study. She told Þórný how for her Melrakkaslétta could be framed by the word “birdlife”, before offering several narratives of her enjoyment from following their everyday activities. Another example could be the words of a former resident in Raufarhöfn, now a frequent visitor to the area. Asked if there was a particular reason for her recurring visits, the reply was “there’s just this particular and peculiar energy I sense when I’m here. Maybe it’s the silence [pause], or the sounds, the sounds of the ocean, and of course, the birds”. A resident in Raufarhöfn told how “the spring in my mind, it’s the birdlife. It’s when you start waking up to the sounds of the birds, here that’s spring and summer”. Their words emphasize how, although “bird- song is a feature of experience that many people rarely notice” (Whitehouse, 2015, p. 53), the sounds of Melrakkaslétta’s birds are far from ignored.

This also shows how the birds are an informal “focal point for many people’s sense of seasonality” (Whitehouse, 2017, p. 172) as the birds frame and make Melrakkaslétta’s seasons. A resident in Kópasker told how the spring comes about as “everything comes to life, the light increases, and the birds arrive”. A former resident in Kópasker told how, due to frequent travels abroad with her work, she tried to stay at home in the capital

for her vacations. This, however, meant that her returns to Melrakkaslétta were scarcer than she would want them to be. She then said “but I always long for Melrakkaslétta in the spring. I can just envisage the light, the terns, the few people and the birds”.

In the interviews and conversations, the birds appeared in various contexts. A woman, having resided in Kópasker for a little over a decade was describing her fascination with the area, in particular Melrakkaslétta’s northern flatland,

it’s just this, just the ocean and the shoreline, all kinds of shorelines, and all this life. And the vastness, how far you can see. So, yes, the birdlife, and the smell [laughs] the foul smell of rotting seaweed, which of course is nutrition for the birds. These are all links in the same chain, you know.

For centuries the birds provided the residents of Melrakkaslétta valuable nourishment. A man in his early eighties, a former farmer, still living on his farm near Raufarhöfn, was recalling his childhood when saying,

my brother and I often just went and lay somewhere out in the sea-cliffs and then when the birds had sat, we would just run and grab the eggs we could. We would often spend, well, I don’t know, maybe three or four hours out there. The terns of course would chase us [chuckles], sometimes we stumbled and lost it all but usually we would escape with the lot. We often managed to come home with maybe 30–40 eggs.

The birds still offer much cherished activities. A frequent visitor, making annual visits to her in-laws who utilize one of the abandoned farmlands, told how for her kids, the spring was interrelated with the presence of the birds. “I mean, for me spring is sitting outside at a café [laughs] but for them it’s coming here and get active with the birds, it’s their whole world”.

## **Leisure activities and the birds**

Utilization of natural resources is still central to the human activities on Melrakkaslétta’s northern flatland. These might no longer be the lands of extensive sheep farming, but its farming has not come to an end, although now what is farmed is eider down. The tasks the down farming entails was described by the frequent visitors as rather a tedious occupation; long and tiresome standstills while picking heather, leaves and small branches from the drying loads of down (Figure 3), all the while having to endure endless bites from down fleas. Despite this, the down-farmers, many of whom are former residents, impatiently wait for each spring and down season to emerge.

They described the many tasks of the down farming, including daily walks through the nesting grounds where they carefully remove parts of the down the eiders have plucked off their bodies for insulation for their eggs. Instead, the down is replaced with hay the farmers harvest on their lands. Besides down collecting and haying, eider farming demands

numerous other tasks, such as repairing fences and making and managing scarecrows as well as attempts to fight off predatory birds, foxes and minks.



**Figure 3.** A down farmer in Melrakkaslétta checks the dryness of a load of eider down. © Þórný Barðadóttir 2022.

In their narratives, the down farmers' work seemed particularly enjoyable in the context of togetherness and, in fact, of not being bored. This was explained by a woman taking summer residency in a relatively new house on one of the old farmlands. "It's hard work and long hours but we really enjoy it. Just generations coming together and fuss around the birds and the down, and having something to do, you know". The work around the birds offers all at once, project-based, casual and serious leisure activities (Stebbins, 2018). Hence the birds were highly present in these narratives of togetherness and every-day leisure, as in the words of a young woman co-utilizing another of the old northern farmlands.

I mean, you could get a summerhouse anywhere and just be there, but here there's so much life, the arrival of the hatchlings means so much buzzing around and there's just always something to do. Like just being outside. Here there is no need to set screen-time for the kids, here there're just activities. The eider-nests, all the fuss around that, just working the birds.

While the landowners had near endless stories to tell of memorable moments of togetherness related to the everyday leisure of working the eiders and cohabiting the lands

with the charismatic, yet dominant and aggressive terns, there is also an economic side to the down farming as the down is an important source of funding for renovations of the old farmlands. This was explained by an elderly woman spending much of her summers in an old farmhouse out on the northernmost coast of Melrakkaslétta. There, together with her family, she keeps fighting the arctic weather and the ocean when sustaining her late father's childhood home. She told Þórný that “it's not like anyone is getting rich by this but selling the down is what makes it possible for us to maintain the houses and the lands. All we earn we spend on the farm”. But then there are those for whom the birds bear another, and perhaps more formal and direct economic side, namely in the context of the area's potential tourism development.

### Birds in tourism

The human residents and summer dwellers of Melrakkaslétta are far from being alone in enjoying the presence of birds. One indicator of this is the rising subsector of global bird tourism, phrased through various terms including birding, twitching, birdwatching, bird photography, ornithological tourism and avitourism (Afanasiev, 2022; Steven et al., 2015). In the context of attempts to increase tourism, the regional tourism sector in northeast Iceland regard the birds of Melrakkaslétta as essential. Asking a representative of the marketing office of Visit North Iceland about what Melrakkaslétta had to offer in terms of tourism, the reply was “we introduce this area as a birding area, we highlight it in the context of the Arctic Coast Way and then we have a special marketing project around the birds”.

The Arctic Coast Way (Figure 4) is a route designed to draw tourists to the long coastline of North Iceland. Melrakkaslétta is included on its summer route, while the winter route warns of “Extremely limited access due to irregular snow clearing” (Arctic Coast Way, n.d.-a). The birding project is a route called *The Birding trail Northeast Iceland* (Figure 4). It is

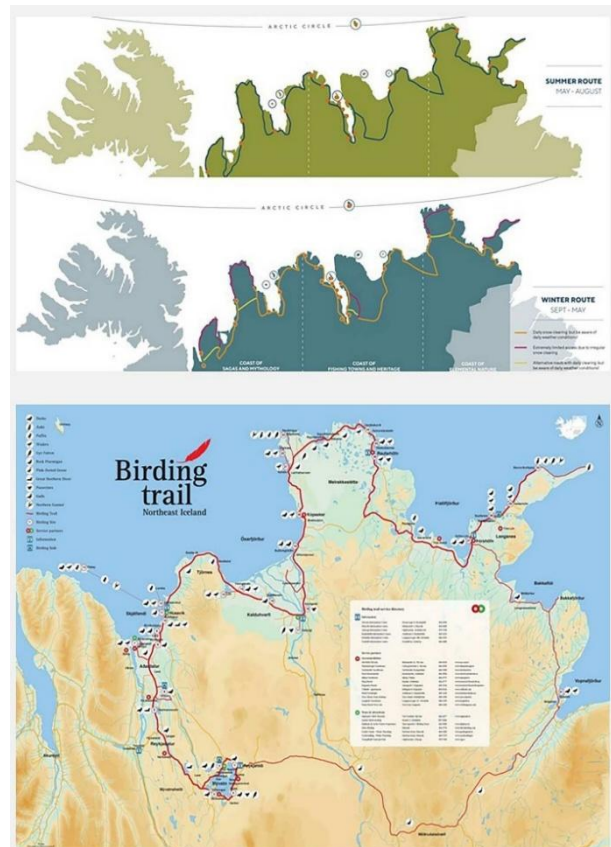


Figure 4. Maps showing the Icelandic Arctic Coast Way (n.d.) [above] and Birding Trail North Iceland (n.d.) [below].

designed to introduce the Icelandic northeast to international birdwatchers (Birding trail, n.d.). Interestingly, the Birding Trail was not present in the narratives of the locals in Melrakkaslétta, with the exception of only one of its local tourism providers. This was the operator of the Kópasker hostel, who in fact had been on the board of the Birding Trail. While to him the birds were at the core of what the area had to offer their guests, he was able to recall only a few groups of guests arriving for birdwatching in recent years. When meeting up with the owner of the Raufarhöfn hotel, he told Þórný “there have been some groups, particularly British, but not much really” then thoughtfully added “I haven’t seen as many of these birdwatchers as I would have expected”. The same was said by an employee at the hotel’s restaurant who told how he could “only recall a few small groups of foreign birdwatchers and then some Icelandic birders”.

Birders are able to take guided birdwatching tours, offered to international avitourists in more than 100 countries (Flaherty & Abdul Shukur, 2016), including Iceland. Birdwatching tours are also available in Melrakkaslétta, although few seem to make use of them. This was discussed by an employee of a regional tour operator Þórný met in the neighbouring town of Húsavík. After proclaiming his fascination of Melrakkaslétta’s northern flatland, its long shoreline and unique arctic features, he went on to offer narratives on the variety of bird species he had seen in the area. Then, however, he explained that because the Birding Trail includes the well established destination of Lake Mývatn, that is where the birders want to go,

if someone was to contact me from, say the UK, wanting to take on a guided birdwatching tour here in North Iceland, he just wants to go to Lake Mývatn because he would just google it and that’s it. Everyone just starts at Mývatn, it’s like carved in stone, even though a tour to Melrakkaslétta could show you a larger variety of species.

Previous research has shown that, although willing to travel long distances for the visibility of birds, avitourists seem to mainly follow the beaten track of tourism. The most visited bird-watching sites are therefore mainly those offering easy access and proximity to tourism facilities, rather than the peripheral sites often richest in different bird species (Hausmann et al., 2019). Hence, Steven et al. (2015) claim it is questionable to rely on avitourism for tourism development, “especially in rural settings in need of economic opportunity” (p. 1270). Yet, while the modest service sector of Melrakkaslétta’s villages reported this near absence of birdwatchers amongst their limited clientele, the landowners out on the northern flatland had quite a different story to tell.

## Tourism mobilities and the birds

The Arctic Coast Way, the Birding Trail North Iceland and the outdoor monument the Arctic Henge mentioned above, all have their links to the birds and Melrakkaslétta. While the birds were just as present in the narratives of Melrakkaslétta's frequent guests as with its current and former human residents, their appearances seemed somewhat more hidden in the conversations with Melrakkaslétta's occasional guests, the tourists. Their focus seemed more on experiencing Melrakkaslétta's tranquillity, its long shoreline and many fishing lakes, and visiting the Arctic Henge monument. Still, some noticed the birds, as a French couple Þórný met in Raufarhöfn after their drive around the northern flatland. Their comments on the birds came in the context of Melrakkaslétta's unique landscapes and environment. After the woman had told how she observed the northern flatland as being "bypassed" and "like the end of the world", they then described how the tundra seemed owned by the birds. This the man explained by saying "they didn't even move from the wrecked road, just sat there, right in the middle of it. We had to drive so, so slow, the birds were just everywhere". Signposts and scarecrows are further reminders of the presence of and needed caution for Melrakkaslétta's birds (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** A composite image showing signs and a scarecrow as reminders of Melrakkaslétta's birds. © Þórný Barðadóttir 2022.

This leads us back to the interview with the marketing office mentioned above. Having told Þórný about the tourism possibilities of the tourist routes and the Arctic Henge, he continued to say "we have of course Hraunhafnartangi and then it's just the shoreline itself, it's just so incredible, like you can just make a stop somewhere on the beach, anywhere really, and then of course there are the birds". It is this "stopping anywhere" and "of course

the birds” that raised deep concerns amongst Melrakkaslétta’s landowners and again highlights the paradoxical role of the birds in the potential becoming of the rural Melrakkaslétta as a place for tourism.

### **The birds and human visits**

Birders do not represent a large percentage of the clientele of the modest tourism sector in Melrakkaslétta’s villages. Regardless, the landowners out on the northern flatland reported increased, and to them more alarmingly, changed human mobilities out on the old gravel road following the peninsula’s northern coast. According to them Melrakkaslétta’s rich birdlife has indeed for long attracted “some few eccentrics interested in the birds”, as proclaimed with a grin by one of the landowners who is also a former operator of the Raufarhöfn hotel. The landowners had many tales of people arriving to view the birds. One landowner had become worried as she had seen a campervan parked out by the shoreline. The van itself was not what surprised her, as there seem to be many spots on the flatland where overnighing vehicles have long been a common site. What was newsworthy in this story was that this particular camper had been parked at the same spot for days. Investigating, what she found was a group of English students in environmental studies: “they hadn’t been planning on staying this long, but the birds just had them transfixed”. She retold their description of the overpowering sensation of witnessing the variety and wealth of birds. When it came to the playful flocks of snow-buntings on the black sand beach, she said “they had never seen anything like it, really, their eyes teared up and all”.

This had been long before the Icelandic tourism boom of recent years. However, the introduction of tourist routes and the increased drive-through related to tourists brought in by the Arctic Henge, the still modest tourist visits to Melrakkaslétta are changing. This in the words of a landowner

It used to be just bird-lovers coming here, people knowing how to behave amongst the birds. They would just tiptoe around and watch the birds in awe. Now there are just all kinds of people coming here, stumbling around, clueless on how to behave in a nesting ground.

Another landowner told how they had witnessed rental cars, small busses and large busses “just make a stop somewhere and anywhere, and then the tourists storm off, over anything that might be in their way, even kicking the nests and tramping on the eggs”. He then continued to say that while he felt sure this was done by accident, it was what would happen when the arriving guests “just don’t have any idea about any- thing here”. The landowners reported this as a growing problem on many of their lands, but in

particular in Hraunhafnartangi. The site is the proclaimed northernmost point of the country (Visit North Iceland, n.d.) and one of the few spots of interest in Melrakkaslétta according to the web of the Arctic Coast Way (n.d.-b). But while Hraunhafnartangi was included in the printed brochure of the local tourism association, the Edge of the Arctic (2019), it is not included on the “Places to see” section of their web (Edge of the Arctic, n.d.). An explanation for this may be that the landowners of Hraunhafnartangi have sought and received formal rights on prohibiting all access, driving and walking, on and through their lands during the annual nesting season of 15 April to 14 July (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Announcement on prohibition of access to the lands of Harðbakur on Melrakkaslétta during the nesting season, including Hraunhafnartangi (visible by the lighthouse in the background). © Þórný Barðadóttir 2022.

The matter of tourism development and access restrictions came up in an interview with a municipal officer, telling Þórný how “this is the only formal way farmers and landowners have in order to protect anything, it’s that of applying to the county sheriff for the right to ban access to the eider nests during birding season”. This is due to the fact that in Iceland the public right to roam through lands is well-established. That “this right does not clearly differentiate between domestic wanderers or large-scale tourism” has caused various challenges and conflicts “including the issues of access” (Siltanen et al., 2022, p. 314).

This prohibition of human access might cause serious challenges for the tourism services of Melrakkaslétta's villages, who addressed their concerns regarding the restrained access to Hraunhafnartangi. In Kópasker an operator of a small service told Þórný how "Hraunhafnartangi needs to be accessible because so many are heading towards the northernmost point of the country". In Raufarhöfn a local tourism operator said

people want to visit Hraunhafnartangi and that's something we need to be aware of or manage somehow. Now visits are prohibited during the birding season, and I don't know if we somehow can ensure access during that time or what we can do.

Regarding respecting the presence of the birds the marketing office claimed in relation to their marketing material,

we do promote respect for the nature and with the Arctic Coast Way, for example, there is a section on just that, including a reminder on not to go into the nesting grounds while the birding is going on and just to respect it, so we are posing an emphasis on the need not to cause any damage.

Still, amongst the owners of abandoned farmlands the matter of protection seemed to have been discussed, with one stating "we are all considering this". Given that Melrakkaslétta consists of mainly privately owned lands and, in the words of another landowner, "here, of course, there is eider-nesting on almost all the farms", further restrictions might prove to become a serious concern for the proposed local tourism development of Melrakkaslétta's villages, while the landowners seek ways to protect the birds and the every-day leisure activities farming the down offers.

Yet, there were those for whom tourist visits offer the chance to inform and advise on the welfare of the birds by providing an "educational message" (Kline & Fischer, 2023). This includes a resident in Raufarhöfn, who together with his extended family co-owns one of Melrakkaslétta's former farmlands. After having told how the disturbance of visitors at times could get tiresome and was regarded as a challenge by some of his family members, he said "but this could also be an opportunity, that's the way I see it, an opportunity to inform people, to teach them how to act and behave around birds. Like make them aware". By doing so, the local tourism, landowners and residents could through cohabitation enact more-than-human hospitality and informed tourism leisure in Melrakkaslétta.

### **Cohabitation and more-than-human hospitality on the margins**

Nearly all Melrakkaslétta's permanent human residents live in the peninsula's two villages, where the residents seek new economic and employment opportunities. Proposing the rise of a local tourism sector is bound to have effects on the northern flatland, something already causing concerns amongst Melrakkaslétta's landowners and summer dwellers. Entangled in

these issues are the birds, in multilayered and paradoxical ways. The paper has shown how the birds are an informal, yet essential aspect in the making of Melrakkaslétta the place. They are proposed and presented as a formal and defined aspect of the area's tourism draw. They offer natural resources to the landowners of Melrakkaslétta as nourishment and through leisure activities of down production, thereby initiating togetherness and generating income to help maintain lands and properties. The eider's nesting grounds offer the landowners a rare possibility to formally restrain access to their lands. Last, yet most importantly, is the fact that the birds are inhabitants of Melrakkaslétta.

The formal prohibition of human access to Melrakkaslétta's lands is not about the privacy of humans. Rather, it is about protecting the nesting grounds of the eider duck. Waage and Benediktsson (2020) explore the agency of the eider duck in the first Icelandic laws on bird-protection, manifesting how animals "in all their worlds, are response-able in the same sense as people are" (Haraway, 2008, p. 71). These laws can be seen as a formal proclaiming of cohabitation of humans and birds. The restriction of human visits through the sites of the eider-down at the same time offers protection to terns and other bird species. Through these restrictions the landowners can be seen to be respecting their role as hosts (Lee, 2020). Being a host "entails a notion of ownership", while the temporariness of the term guest "implies welcome" (Lee, 2020, p. 111). The scarecrows used by the down farmers to keep predators away from the eider grounds mark safe places that other birds utilize. This resembles "hospitality that takes place between species" (Pyyhtinen, 2022, p. 3). How fiercely the terns protect their territories and, as a result, provide breeding grounds for other species manifests the kinship of "multispecies collective" (Haraway, 2016, p. 207). This cohabitation of hosts and guests, humans and birds, rests on multi-species hospitality as the "aporia of recognition, acceptance, and embodiment of the other" (Lee, 2020, p. 112). Each new arrival, be they village residents, other humans touring or visiting birds, adds another layer to this cohabitation and co-utilization, and the multilayered nature of hospitality.

Hospitality means that the hosts allow "space for intrusion and disturbance and does not efface or suppress the otherness" (Pyyhtinen, 2022, p. 2) of their guests, human or non-human. By their provision of such unstructured hospitality, the hosts preserve their ownership (Lee, 2020), thereby having the power to welcome and hence have their say in how the landscape is performed by their visitors. Hospitality, therefore, is "also a means of social control" (Pyyhtinen, 2022, p. 10). While for Ingold (2011) people and landscape "are 'mutually constituted'" as landscapes "take on meanings and appearances in relation to people" (p. 129), our argument in this paper has been that this also includes other aspects of the more-than-human world. People inhabit Melrakkaslétta and so do the birds,

making this a place of cohabitation. Although it might be true that “reasons exist to challenge the idea that practically any location can be transformed into a tourist destination” (Bohlin et al., 2016, p. 1789), this should not have to be the case. Despite the somewhat contradicting states between the villagers seeking ways to boost their homesteads and the habitants of the northern flatlands, there are those who propose a way to include the birds in their plans of tourism development and protection. Providing information on how to act and enjoy the birdlife could then become a way to foster serious as well as casual leisure activities amongst tourists. That is, instead of merely utilizing the lands and presence of the birds for human tourism and leisure, there is a need to develop tourism and leisure with an emphasis on animal welfare (Kline & Fischer, 2023) and hence respect the co-hosting role of the birds in the more-than-human cohabitation of Melrakkaslétta.

## Conclusion

While this paper reveals the multilayered and paradoxical role of Melrakkaslétta’s birds in the context of possible increased tourism, here we explore possible ways of cohabitation, as they get entangled in both formal and unstructured ways in the hopes and tourism plans of the human villagers.

To conclude, this paper is about the encounters of proposed tourism development and the many birds of Melrakkaslétta with reference to current lives and leisure of those in the area. It is also about the issues to consider when an area facing socioeconomic challenges searches for new ways to expand employment and counteract depopulation. In the case of Melrakkaslétta, the proposed development is linked to the mismatch between Melrakkaslétta as a haven of tranquillity for “the few people and the birds”, and Melrakkaslétta as a site of tourism for visitors in unfamiliar settings. Drawing from the words of a former resident, now landowner and summer dweller in Melrakkaslétta, “for me it’s just this strong connection to the ocean, well of course the ocean is everywhere, but with this rich birdlife, this combination, this particular merger that we have here, this is just unique”. Melrakkaslétta is not the only a site of birding, nor is it the only site of frictions regarding tourism and issues of land use or other resources. Inquiries into these matters are therefore hardly a novelty. What is new, however, is addressing these issues at a potential tourism site in a rural area. Our aim, therefore, has not been that of proclaiming Melrakkaslétta’s uniqueness but of highlighting how even in an area on the tourism margins, more-than-human cohabitation and co-utilization of lands for leisure and tourism are already causing potential frictions on the horizon. This offers the opportunity to rethink tourist places as a multi-species cohabitation. Rather than regarding them merely in terms of the service-oriented tourism sector, we should instead appraise them through the lens of

“multispecies hospitality beyond invitation” and that of a more-than-human “welcoming the other” (Pyyhtinen, 2022, p. 9). In other words, it is important to regard non-humans as well as humans as co-hosts in potential tourism and leisure development.

## Note

1. For brevity, the arctic tern will hereafter be referred to as “tern”.

## Acknowledgements

We thank all the residents of Melrakkaslétta for providing us the chance to conduct this ethnographic research in their homesteads. The authors also thank The Icelandic Research Fund (RANNÍS) for funding of the underlying research, Mobilities on the margins (grant no. 207144-051).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## 9.4 Paper 4. Reaching the Edge of the Arctic

### Reaching the Edge of the Arctic. On mobilities, infrastructures and distances on the tourism margin

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#### Abstract

This paper explores the encounters of mobilities and margins in relation to rural tourism by focusing on infrastructures. Tourism development can and has followed infrastructural progress through eased access and shortening distances. Infrastructure investments, however, are dependent on political decision-making and funding, issues tending to be negotiated somewhat far from the margins.

The paper debates these issues in the context of potential tourism development in Melrakkaslétta, a rural peninsula on the northeast coast of Iceland. After longstanding socioeconomical downturns, the locals have proposed tourism as a way to rebuild their homestead. For furthering the sector, a group of small local tourism services have formed a collaboration under the term 'Edge of the Arctic'. Only, Melrakkaslétta is located far northeast of the country's main enring point and travel routes.

Here I investigate these matters with reference to the narratives of the locals in Melrakkaslétta, stemming from ethnographic research conducted in the area. The findings leave me to hypothesize about the possible effects future scenarios of the Icelandic systems of mobilities might cause in Melrakkaslétta and thereby on other tourism margins. This, I argue, is relevant in that the systems of transport infrastructures are ever-evolving becoming and hence, mobile.

**Keywords:** Tourism Mobilities; Rural tourism; Distances; Margins; Path Dependency; Iceland

#### Introduction

In this paper, I aim to explore the relational aspects of mobility systems and infrastructures in rural tourism development. The paper focuses on potential tourism development in rural Iceland. From 2010 until 2019 when the Covid-19 pandemic paused most travel, tourist arrivals to Iceland had increased by 400%. This exponential growth, often termed the Icelandic Tourism Boom, left the country repeatedly referred to in the context of overtourism (Gil-Alana & Huijbens, 2018; Sæþórsdóttir, Hall, & Wendt, 2020). As the pandemic loosened its grip, the Icelandic tourism sector soon headed back to the big numbers. Only, the tourism boom has not hit the island evenly. The Icelandic south and southwest have remained the areas most affected by the ongoing rise in the tourism sector (Thórhallsdóttir, Ólafsson, Jóhannesson, Árnason, & Gudmundsson, 2024). This paper, however, focuses on potential tourism development on the other side of the country and the other side of the Icelandic tourism boom.

The site is the rural and remote Melrakkaslétta peninsula on the Icelandic northeast coast, one of the country's least visited areas. Still, this does not mean that the area is altogether absent from visits, and there a group of small local tourism services have formed a collaboration under the term "Norðurhjar", translated to English as the 'Edge of the Arctic' (n.d.). While the northern areas

of the world were long looked upon as “cold, unpleasant and inaccessible”, Arctic tourism has grown to become “something exciting and exotic” (Viken, 2014, p. 30). Although neither the Arctic nor its tourism can be regarded as thoroughly defined or a unison phenomenon (Saarinen & Varnajot, 2019), in terms of tourism there are some shared challenges facing these northern lands. This has partly to do with their vastness and scattered population (Müller, 2015) and hence distances as well as lacking connections between tourism services and into the Arctic regions (Ren et al., 2024).

Tourism has often and repeatedly been introduced as a tool to rescue regional development, even sometimes presented as a rural rescue, although how to obtain such positives, is often much less clear (Bohlin, Brandt, & Elbe, 2016; Rosalina, Dupre, & Wang, 2021). Still, when tourism is introduced as a possible way of boosting rural areas, some hopes for new socioeconomic activities and the maturing of local tourism are bound to be anticipated. This leads us to the concerns of this paper. By asking *How do transport infrastructures and distances affect the potentialities of tourism development on the margins?*, the aim is to provide input into the ongoing theoretical debate on the multilayered and relational systems of tourism mobilities. It furthermore explores infrastructures in relation to the ways political procedures, investments and decisions tend to follow pre-fixed path dependent procedures (Robinson, 2024; Williams, 2013).

In what follows I will explore how the structures of mobility systems created for travel, and the way they are implemented and managed, play a decisive role in rural tourism development. Franklin (2004) urges researchers to seek beyond the aspect of tourism sites as such a narrow view would mean “privilege the site as tourism itself” (p. 278). It might seem that research focus on the rural Melrakkaslétta would mean doing just that. Still, here the aim is not that of inspecting how tourism is performed at a particular site, nor is it to regard tourism as a “distinctively spatial phenomenon” (Franklin, 2007, p. 133) but indeed, quite the contrary.

The very premise of the paper is to regard tourism as a highly relational, local and global phenomenon. Hence, it is now time to explore the systems of mobilities leading the way into tourism possibilities on the tourism margins. In the next sections, I investigate theories on mobilities, infrastructures and distances before narrowing the lens to introduce Melrakkaslétta and its location. Thereafter I will present the narratives of Melrakkaslétta’s residents stemming from ethnographic research conducted in the area. Finally, these are merged as I hypothesize about the possible effects future scenarios of the Icelandic systems of mobilities might cause on potential tourism development in Melrakkaslétta and hence on other tourism margins. This, I argue, is relevant in that the systems of transport infrastructures are an ever-evolving becoming and hence, in fact, mobile.

### **Tourism mobilities, infrastructures and distances**

The theoretical approach of the paper stems from the conception of mobility systems (Hannam, Sheller, & Urry, 2006; Sheller, 2021; Sheller & Urry, 2006, 2016) and transport infrastructure. The point of departure is how “it seems that the intrinsic relationship between space-making and infrastructure is so obvious, so unquestionable, and intuitively clear and prosaic so that in scholarly literature it often appears to be taken for granted, little problematized, and rarely explicitly addressed” (Burchardt & van Laak, 2023, p. 1). Given the emphasis on infrastructure in this paper,

it is important the state that hereafter the term will be applied in the meaning of transport infrastructures.

Tourism, transport and infrastructures are interdependent on diverse levels. These include information, communication, institutions and regulations (Hannam et al., 2006; Sheller, 2021; Sheller & Urry, 2006, 2016). Such aspects create intertwined systems of mobility, together with various infrastructures which are “exceptionally immobile platforms, transmitters, roads, garages, stations, aeriels, airports, docks” and so on (Hannam et al., 2006, p. 3) making travel and transport possible. Tourism, however, is an ever-evolving relational becoming, created through various systems and networks of political, social and cultural nature. Researching tourism structures therefore calls for inquiries on how they are “ordered in practice” (Franklin, 2004, p. 278).

Geographical distances play a decisive role in the possibilities and probabilities of rural areas for tourism development having to do with reduced travel motivations, as in the “impact of distance on demand is self evident” (McKercher & Mak, 2019, p. 334). Distance, however, is not merely an “indication of either separation or proximity” (Allen, 2011, p. 258) but a matter of political investments and decisions which are prone to follow pre-given traditions of path dependency (Robinson, 2024; Williams, 2013). While urban mobility discourse has in recent years moved towards new sustainable transport options and post-growth solutions (Schramm, Lloveras, & Pansera, 2024), such a focus is rarely applicable in regional and rural contexts where most emphasis remains on basic infrastructure development (Shibayama & Emberger, 2023).

The providence of access and shortening of distances with infrastructure development has proven essential in the creation of tourist destinations (Larsen & Urry, 2011; Seetanah et al., 2011), quite summed up by Marjavaara, Nilsson, and Müller (2022) describing the Swedish Arctic where “the construction of a railway facilitating the exploitation of northern resources also allowed tourists to access the North” (p. 7). This showcases how rural areas, the remote places of the world, are not “a fixed state, but an outcome of social, cultural, economic and geopolitical forces” as something “arising from entanglements of mobility and connectivity” (Vannini, 2023, p. 1).

Still, the immense effect of changes following altering connectivity and shortening of distances can also cause opposition. That is when those on the receiving end fight proposed connections in order to protect their self-governance and in that way defend their ‘right to remoteness’ (Schweitzer & Povoroznyuk, 2019). This also stresses how increased access through infrastructure development can affect travel routes by altering and minimizing the correspondence between distances and accessibility.

Access and distances are hence amongst other determinant factors in rural economies together with relational effects of “infrastructures that penetrate and/or manipulate rural spaces” (Young, 2006, p. 254). One prominent way of shortening distances on a global scale has been through the advanced systems of international aviation, making aviation and tourism in a global context mutually dependent (Milano & Koens, 2022). This has perhaps become most evident at times of forced immobility, be it caused by ash from a volcanic eruption (Benediktsson, Lund, & Huijbens, 2011) or a global pandemic (Milano & Koens, 2022) pausing tourism travel. What this furthermore means is that the physical location of international airports can and does on a domestic

level play a vital role in tourism flows and destination development (Papatheodorou & Arvanitis, 2009; Ren et al., 2024; Williams, 2013) and therefore in reality affect tourism margins.

## **Methodology**

In order to contextualize these issues, it is time to contract our focus and explore mobilities, distances and public infrastructure investments in and to the marginal Melrakkaslétta. The data introduced in this section was gathered through qualitative research, based on ethnographic methodology, conducted in Melrakkaslétta between the autumn of 2020 throughout spring of 2021 and fall of 2022. Besides the researcher's diary from dwellings and participatory observations in Melrakkaslétta, the empirical data corpus counts transcripts from 36 semi-structured face-to-face interviews, conducted between the spring of 2021 and fall of 2022. The respondents were current and former year-round residents, summer dwellers and frequent visitors in the area, as well as representatives of the local government, regional tourism sector and regional tourism destination marketing office (DMO) (Þórný Barðadóttir, 2024).

The underlying research focus and hence the interview guide applied was centered on the concepts of mobilities and margins. As set themes, these were in the following thematic analysis initially analyzed through a theoretical approach before exploring their context and patterns of shared meaning within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). On grounds of context, the next section introduces findings on transport, travel and distances in the setting of everyday life on the margins before heading into (potential) tourism mobilities. But first some background on the area and the situatedness of Melrakkaslétta within the Icelandic mobility system.

## **Mobilities in/to Melrakkaslétta**

Melrakkaslétta stretches into the North Atlantic Ocean from the northeast coast of Iceland. This Arctic flatland, the Icelandic tundra, and home to the northernmost points of the country was once an area of extensive sheep farming, fisheries and the local's utilization of other natural resources. Today, however, the northernmost flatland has merely a few year-round human residents, although the former farmlands are still utilized for summer dwelling and the farming of eider-down. Two small villages rest on each of the peninsula's coastlines, Kópasker and Raufarhöfn, with around 300 year-round residents combined. As the villagers have sought ways to counteract depopulation and other socioeconomic challenges, they have introduced local tourism development as a possible way forward (Barðadóttir 2024; Barðadóttir et al., 2023).

Tracing the threads of the Icelandic mobility system shows that the main gateway to this North Atlantic island is Keflavík International Airport (KEF). The airport is located on the Reykjanes peninsula on the southwest coast of Iceland (Figure 1), about forty minutes drive west of the capital Reykjavík. Melrakkaslétta, however, is situated on the country's northeast coast (Figure 1). A vast majority of foreign tourists travel within Iceland in rental cars. Most follow parts of the Icelandic highway road 1, the Ring Road (Figure 1), to popular tourist sites in the Icelandic south and southwest while the traffic decreases the further it gets from the capital area (Thórhallsdóttir et al., 2024).



**Figure 1.** The Icelandic Ring Road and road connections from Keflavik International Airport to the site of research, Melrakkaslétta. Place names and highlighting of roads drawn by the author via Felt.com ©Þórný Barðadóttir. The smaller map (lower right corner) shows the complete Icelandic Road System (Icelandic Road and Coastal Administration, 2017, pp. 6-7)

Visiting Melrakkaslétta as a self-driving tourist requires one to follow half the Ring-Road (Figure 1 – black road), and then leave it to follow the less beaten tracks of the Northeast Road no 85 (Figure 1 – orange road). There again, travelers need to make a turn to follow one of the two routes leading to the hardly beaten tracks of Melrakkaslétta’s coastal road no 870 (Figure 1 – red road). Melrakkaslétta’s marginal position in regard to mobilities was explained in the interviews by one of Melrakkaslétta’s former residents, now a summer dweller out on Melrakkaslétta’s northern flatland. They said “you can’t live in a place like this without owning a car, of course not, to claim otherwise is completely ridiculous. Here there’s not even any public transport”<sup>6</sup>. This is because Melrakkaslétta is positioned far northeast of the rather weak Icelandic public transport systems of aviation and buses. That is, the Icelandic system of mobilities appears to be rather unfavorable towards tourism development in Melrakkaslétta.

Still, in the interviews and conversations, the apparent focus of the respondents was somewhat different, showcasing the ever-ongoing becoming of mobility systems. In their eighties, the eldest respondents remember times when the Atlantic Ocean was Melrakkaslétta’s highway for transport and human travel. Travels on land were then made by walking and riding, mobilities that created a net of trails within and through the flatland. Throughout the twentieth century, the trails were gradually made accessible for vehicles, but it wasn’t until the early 1980s that an all-season road was built on the peninsula, linking it to the domestic road system. This was after the area was frequently cut off in the 1970s when harsh winters closed the landways, and persistent sea ice

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<sup>6</sup> The interviews were conducted in Icelandic. Quotes were translated to English by the author.

hindered sailings into the short Arctic summers, obstructing the transport of goods produced in the area. The often termed 'sea-ice road' is a gravel road mostly following an old coastal trail. It served as the main road through the Icelandic northeast until 2010 when a new paved highway was built at the root of the peninsula, taking over as Northeast Road no. 85 while the coastal road became Melrakkaslétta Road no 870 (Figure 1) (Barðadóttir et al., 2024).

The matters of mobilities, travel and distance appeared in various contexts in the narratives of the respondents in Melrakkaslétta. They told stories about past close-offs and memorable - even questionable - travels through heavy storms and blinding blizzards. Then there were the spring thaws. Asking an elderly former resident of the flatland, now residing in Raufarhöfn, about his favorite season his answer was a bursting "definitely not the spring" then recalling journeys when "there was so much mud and wetness that you couldn't move. If you went off trail anywhere, you'd be up to your knees in sludge". The emphasis in the narratives of the eldest was therefore the eased and altered travel to and through Melrakkaslétta. Another former resident, now an annual summer dweller out on the flatland, recalled some unforgettable childhood travels and exclaimed with a grin and a shaking head "now it's all become somewhat so [snorts], well, just so easy".

The eased access was still an issue reflected in the narratives of much younger permanent and former residents, although distances were still a matter of concern. A woman in her forties, a former resident in Kópasker, explained how her busy schedule seldom allowed her the chance to visit Melrakkaslétta, then said: "for me, living in the capital, well the access is fine, and the roads are good, but it just takes a long time to get there, it's just so distant and the journeys are complicated". For others, the long journeys through distances were simply a part of their being. One told how he and other of Melrakkaslétta's year-round residents would gladly drive for over an hour just to join up for a cup of coffee, then stating "elsewhere it might be considered a long drive but not for us living here". This was also the case for the annual summer dwellers as explained by a young woman travelling from the capital each spring and again in the summers to stay at one of Melrakkaslétta's abandoned farms. She explained that

this is of course the northernmost tip of the country. I drive 800 km to get to my happy place and I do so gleefully and smiling and find it a small matter because I just love being here. If it was just down to obligation, it would be horrible having to make the drive.

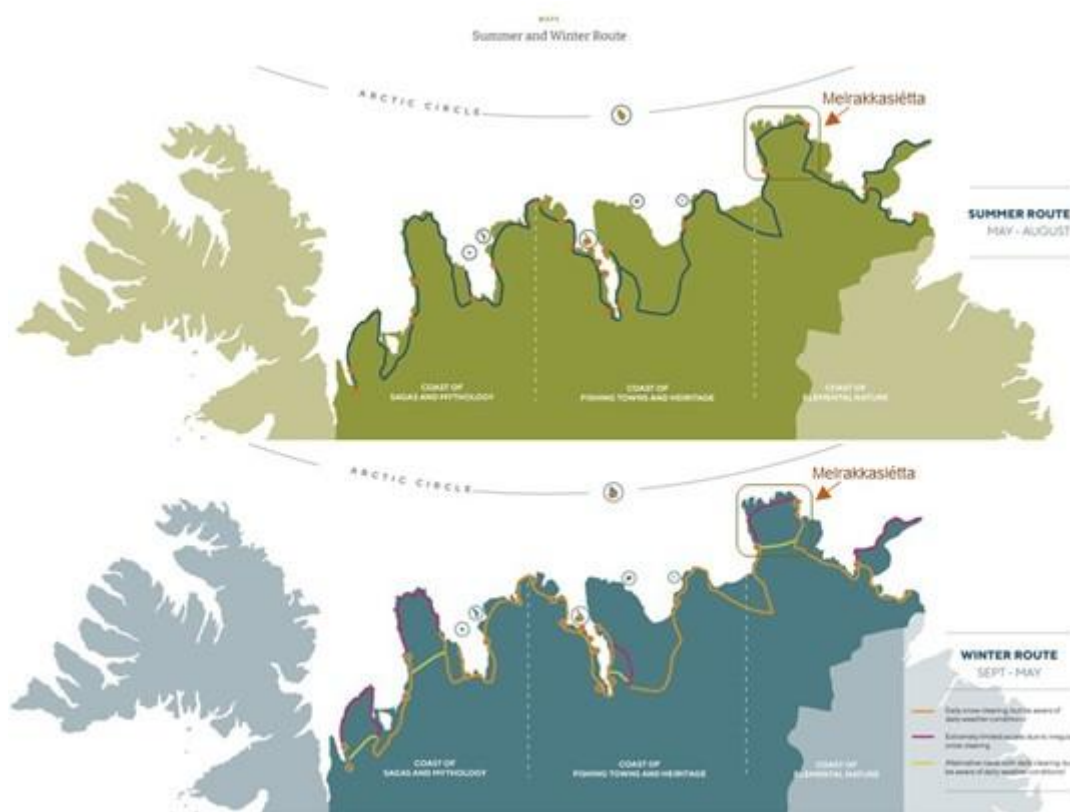
These narratives show the relational aspect of distances and furthermore how "there are some cases where attractiveness and uniqueness of the destination overcomes the tyranny of distance" (Marjavaara & Müller, 2007, p. 205).

Still, the long and complicated travel to Melrakkaslétta proved to have its effect in other ways. A woman in her twenties, living in Raufarhöfn, told how her friends and cousins having moved to the capital hardly got the chance to visit as "they would like to come more often but this is just such a long drive so most of the weekend is spent on the travel". When asking another of Raufarhöfn's residents how she entertained her guests the reply was "I had guests from the capital last week and when they arrived, they just announced that whatever we did, they had no interest in car rides".

Being willing and wanting to travel to revisit places of childhood and old friends is quite different from deciding to cross the whole country in order to visit Melrakkaslétta the margin, a matter which leads us to the potentialities of tourism development in Melrakkaslétta.

### **(Potential) Tourism development in Melrakkaslétta**

The official Icelandic website for tourist information, Visit Iceland (n.d.), introduces “The famous ‘Ring Road’” as the main route for tourism travel in the country while encouraging that “travellers spending more than a week on the road should consider” detours of it and explore other areas of the country (Visit Iceland, n.d.). Although a vast majority of foreign visitors in Iceland spend far less than a week in the country (Icelandic Tourist Board, n.d.), and hence do not comply with Visit Iceland’s recommendations, other routes have in recent years been created in an attempt to affect the dependent paths of tourist travel and wider the distribution of tourists. One is “the scenic Arctic Coast Way” (Visit Iceland, n.d.), a route designed to guide tourists to follow “900 km of coastal roads close to the Arctic Circle” (Arctic Coast Way, n.d.). Formally introduced in 2019, the Arctic Coast Way includes the old coastal road of Melrakkaslétta on its summer route while its winter route warns against this way, as there is “Extremely limited access due to irregular snow clearing” (Figure 2).



**Figure 2** Composite image from the web of the Arctic Coast Way (n.d.) showcasing its summer and winter routes. Markers for Melrakkaslétta added by the author.

The absence of winter services on Melrakkaslétta’s old coastal road is in itself an indicator of one of the many hurdles rural tourism development faces in practice. Another was registered by a representative of a regional tour operator, who said “For developing the tourism sector there needs to be this critical mass of people, that’s just the way it is”. Then there is the geographical hurdle of

distance, an issue not ignored by the few local tourism providers in Melrakkaslétta. Asking one of the forefronts of the Edge of the Arctic association for their take on the future of Melrakkaslétta's tourism sector, they explained the decaying effect of distance on tourism travel:

For the tourism sector here, when all tourists are just shoveled in as far from us as possible, like we are just so far from practically the only gateway into the country, so of course, we are a margin in a tourism context.

This was echoed in the words of another of Melrakkaslétta's service providers, combined with a practical solution that could alter the scenario of the Icelandic system of mobilities:

To build up a strong tourism sector here, it would of course help to have another gateway into the country, a direct flight to Akureyri ... It is of outmost importance really. Like if you travel to Iceland and have maybe 4-5 days to spend, what do you do? I mean, you arrive in the south, down there in Reykjanes, so what do you do?

In the next section, we will learn how the matter of increased international flights to Akureyri is not a new idea, but part of a longstanding strive of the tourism sector of the Icelandic North towards the making of an established Akureyri International Airport.

### **The mobile systems of tourism mobilities?**

In 2011 a project of cooperation was formed by the tourism sector of Northern Iceland along with municipalities, institutions and other stakeholders, aiming to pave the way for increased direct flights to the alternate international airport in Akureyri, central North Iceland. The project, titled Air66N, has from the start been hosted by the regional DMO office Visit North Iceland (n.d.). The matter of international flights to the North came up in an interview with their representative. Explaining the long struggle towards increased and year-round international aviation to Akureyri, they then exclaimed "this is just a joke, the funding this has received, the emphasis, like none existing". Then they told how the marketing of the alternate airports was no longer a concern of the regional destination marketing offices but that of the state platforms Visit Iceland and ISAVIA, the official operator for aviation services and security in Iceland.

The declared strategy of the Icelandic tourism authorities is to work towards better distribution of tourists throughout the country, as in "All regions should enjoy the benefits of tourism, all year round" (Government of Iceland, n.d.). Assuming it is true that aviation is "a key driver of tourism" (Milano & Koens, 2022, p. 224) and "the key element in developing new markets beyond the reasonable reach of travel by car" (Prideaux, 2000, p. 61), the mobility system of aviation is likewise a base for tourism development. The funding, marketing and maintenance of public airports, international or not, is however a highly political issue, one having to do with "real material consequences" (Eriksson, 2008, p. 396).

My interview with a representative of the regional DMO office included a long and rather sad tale on the continued struggles and lost battles towards investments and marketing of Akureyri International Airport. These are summed up in their reflection on the implementation of a long-established decision on a rather modest extension to the airport's housing

like now, finally, they are rerunning the tender for this construct, just this annex, and that is because the one they received in the last round was rejected and you just cannot help but think: what on earth is happening here? So [silence] yeah, that's how it is.

This was in the summer of 2021. By the end of that year, ISAVIA (2021) announced the joyful news that a construction contract was finally being signed. Yet a few months later, ISAVIA was back to issue a 'Masterplan' for KEF airport "based on a forecast of steep long-term growth in flight traffic and passenger numbers" (ISAVIA, 2022), again manifesting the ways the Icelandic systems of mobility in reality are "ordered in practice" (Franklin, 2004, p. 278) with future investments and further cementing of the country's main gateway.

Yet, as the interview at the DMO office was coming to an end, smilingly they said:

But on a positive note, we have been having incredibly promising dialogues with airlines and travel agencies and if we consider the Covid situation happening in the meantime, it's quite amazing that they are even talking to us at all. But really, there is such interest so we're just very happy with that.

Despite the lack of official support, Akureyri Airport has indeed seen some scattered and seasonal aviation from Europe. In mid-2022, it appeared as if both the alternate international airports of the North and East were on the bridge of promising start as record-high numbers of international landings were expected in 2023 and onwards. This was through scheduled flights between Frankfurt, Germany to Akureyri and Egilsstaðir (Akureyrarbær, 2022). In the next section, we will explore how realizations of such plans might alter the Icelandic mobility system and the possible consequences they might cause in Melrakkaslétta, the tourism margin.

### **Tourism mobilities at the margins**

The planned connection between central Europe and the Icelandic North and East opened the possibility of cooperation between the tourism sectors of the areas. This was done by joint marketing and highlighting the possible drive-through between the two airports (Gunnarsson, 2022). The opportunities in cooperation between the Icelandic North and East were again highlighted by the Government of Iceland (2024) in an announcement of at least some official funding for a two-year project on marketing of the international airports in Akureyri and Egilsstaðir. What such plans manifest is how the situatedness of Melrakkaslétta could be altered within the Icelandic mobility systems (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The Icelandic airports in Akureyri and Egilsstaðir and road connections between them as well as road connections to Melrakkaslétta. Place names, highlighting and numbering of roads drawn by the author via Felt.com ©Pórný Barðadóttir

There is, however, yet another layer to these ambitions towards maturing of the Icelandic alternate international airports and hence reshaping Melrakkaslétta's situation regarding the Icelandic systems of mobilities. That is whether, and how, these might increase tourism travels to this current marginal place. Throughout the research data, the tranquility of Melrakkaslétta was a recurrent theme.

A woman having for years returned as a visitor to one of Melrakkaslétta's old farmlands explained that

it's this peacefulness and quietness, that's what I enjoy about coming here, what we all enjoy, the calmness, the silence, the closeness to nature, the birds ... I always come here with my foreign guests and every time they get equally amazed, just to experience this raw, challenging nature, the untouched shoreline, this peculiar light and all this unbelievable emptiness, the tundra, which as it happens, is quite enjoyable for walking because the land is so soft for treading

Melrakkaslétta is the home of the two northernmost points of the Icelandic mainland and a massive outdoor sculpture, the Arctic Henge, that is already making its appearance on social media (Barðadóttir et al., 2023). Together with this emerging attraction, the elements of tranquility, soft rhythm, calmness, tundra land, the views and the Arctic light, flatness and wealth of birds were reflected in what was considered the main possibilities for developing recreation for tourism in Melrakkaslétta. A woman residing in Raufarhöfn explained

this should be a place where there are good restaurants, good cafes, just somewhere you could come, you know, where there's not too much glam, where you could come to recharge your batteries, enjoy the peace and quiet, not to have everyone hovering

over you all the time. Just take a walk out on the flatland, get in touch with nature, enjoy the birdlife and not having to see other people's faces.

While Melrakkaslétta's tranquility can be regarded as a selling point for some, there is a practicality to tourism in this area pointed out by the representative of the regional tour operator. As our interview went on, he again stressed how the development of a tourism sector was dependent on clientele, regardless of the vision of the locals

although, well, they might not envision too many people coming there, but there is no escaping that when you really think these things through, then it's of course quite obvious that you need this critical mass of visitors, it's just fruitless otherwise.

Then there were strong words of advice. A frequent visitor to the northern flatland stated that "as soon as this becomes a tourist destination you have ruined exactly what it is I and we all are experiencing by staying here, this peculiar, self-enforced isolation". A former resident who up until a few years ago was one of the few permanent residents out on the flatland stated that "this is one of the reasons you become a sheep farmer in a place like this, that is to be left alone" and an eiderdown farmer still residing out on the flatland stated that "it's okay if someone wants to pass hereby, of course, we have nothing against people, but this is not what we who live here want, tourism, we just want to be left alone".

Asking a former resident in Kópasker how she saw Melrakkaslétta as a tourist destination, this is what she had to offer:

Too many people, that's what needs to be avoided. We have to be aware of that factor in tourism planning. That is true everywhere, of course, but really, what Melrakkaslétta genuinely is all about is untouched, raw nature, the vastness and this tranquility. That's its resource, truly, and too many people will soon ruin it, just kill it off.

This was further stated by a representative of the local government of Norðurþing Municipality when saying, "this is how we like it, just rather few, you know, rather few people than the masses". The year-round residents agreed and their ideas on tourism development were eloquently explained by a resident in Raufarhöfn when saying "of course, people like to receive guests and to show the village, but I don't think anyone wants the masses". What these narratives indicate is something of a contradiction between the path dependent decision-making of the Icelandic tourism authorities, the ambitions of the regional tourism sector, and the visions of the locals in Melrakkaslétta, as will be further explored and discussed in the next section.

### **Contextualizing mobilities on the margin**

In this paper, I have explored the possibilities of rural tourism development in the context of mobility systems and infrastructures as well as distances and the creation of margins. Through existing literature and narratives collected in Melrakkaslétta, we have been reminded of the relational aspect of mobility systems, distances, and governmental infrastructure investments, and how these intertwined factors are at the core of tourism travel. There are those who are overwhelmed with the very thought of the long drive to Melrakkaslétta, others making the journey despite the distances

and yet others seemingly not concerned with the long drive. This narrates the perceptual, natural and social elements of distances (Young, 2006). In the context of tourism mobilities this also showcases how, regardless of the decaying effects of distances, there are places able to “attract visitors despite being a bit distant to travel” (Tan, Ismail, & Syed Jaafar, 2022, p. 2).

Access to and control of functioning mobility systems is a powerful notion. The immense effect and changes following infrastructure developments can alter connectivity, shorten distances and change routes of mobilities, and hence have the power to undo – and create – margins. The power of decision-making is not static in place but stretchable as outcomes spread out from a center in a non-geometric way. This means that “the gap between ‘here’ and ‘there’ is measured less by miles or kilometers and more by the social relationships, exchanges and interactions involved” (Allen, 2011, p. 284). In a rural context it becomes evident in that distance is not merely about geographical distances but also remoteness from political discourse and decision-making in that “much of the way that power is made to work for the center is through authorities *reaching into* the politics of regions and localities” (Allen, 2011, p. 291”).

Prideaux (2000) claims that each advance and progress of transport “has enabled the traveler to go further, at greater speed, for a cheaper price, and in greater comfort and safety” (p. 53). Regarding transport infrastructure as a key element in tourism development means seeing it as “a potential determinant of the attractiveness of a destination” (Khadaroo & Seetanah, 2007, p. 1022). Infrastructure development therefore has the ability to counteract “determining factors in rural inequality and regional development” (Flipo, Sallustio, Ortar, & Senil, 2021, p. 1), linking tourism development to debate on regional development and rural discourse in general.

As infrastructures, access and distances play a major, if not determining, role in “the relative attractiveness of locations for tourism” (Hall et al., 2013, p. 74) the way mobility systems are ordered has a real effect on tourism development. The materiality of lacking infrastructure in rural areas can play into the perception of them being ‘left behind’ and in public discourse, they even presented as “not really part of the modern nation” (Eriksson & Tollefsen, 2022, p. 221). Regional development therefore is influential in, and based on, representational and political stances having to do with “the interplay and making of national peripheries” (Eriksson, 2008, p. 384). Geographical margins hence can occur “simply by the virtue of a specific practice of mobility and connectivity” (Vannini, 2023, p. 1).

Melrakkaslétta in northeast Iceland and Reykjanes in its southwest are both peninsulas stretching out to the North Atlantic Ocean from the coast of the Icelandic mainland. Yet, one is a center, the other a margin. This highlights that centers and margins are not merely geographical phenomena but are created by various interlinked perceptual factors. Here the center is home to the Icelandic capital region and Keflavík International Airport, the margin the home of few people and birds - one a bursting center of services, the other a tranquil heaven. One is the center of mobility connections, the other a mobility margin, even being pushed further out on the edges in the relational comparison with the ongoing increase in the booming mobilities at the center.

The perceived pristine Icelandic nature and nature-based recreation has been and continues to be the number one draw of visits to the country (Óladóttir, 2019, 2020). Iceland is inclined to be

marketed as a destination 'off the beaten track'. Still there, as elsewhere in the Arctic regions, most tourism activities are concentrated in proximity to larger cities and main gateways (Ren et al, 2024). The areas of the Icelandic North and East closest to the Ring Road are annually visited by around a third of the country's foreign visitors (Óladóttir, 2019, 2020). There tourists visit already-established nature-based tourist destinations, including waterfalls, national parks, grand canyons and nature-baths. How distant these destinations are is however down to entering points.

Exploring the Icelandic system of mobilities in the context of the management of international aviation is not only an indication of how the systems are "ordered in practice" (Franklin, 2004, p. 278) but also how they are "unequal in effect" (Sheller & Urry, 2016, p. 12). The Icelandic operator for aviation services ISAVIA is owned by the Icelandic State. Although run by an executive director and board, it is governed by the Icelandic Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs (ISAVIA, n.d.). The announced vision of the Icelandic tourism authorities is to work towards the geographical and seasonal distribution of tourism (Government of Iceland, n.d.). Yet, the release of KEF airport's Masterplan shows how the reaction to continued rise in the Icelandic tourism sector is that of further enlarging the country's main international airport, which raises the question of how the Icelandic tourism authorities plan to enact their claims.

Papatheodorou and Arvanitis (2009) argue that utilizing domestic airports for international aviation is the best way to create new destinations and thereby reduce "over-concentration of traffic" at busy locations (p. 409). In Iceland, the areas in closest proximity to KEF airport and the capital area are those mostly affected by the tourist boom of recent years (Thórhallsdóttir et al., 2024). Hence, these are the areas under scrutiny when links are made between Iceland and overtourism (Gil-Alana & Huijbens, 2018; Sæþórsdóttir et al., 2020). The ongoing and planned enlargement of KEF airport and the concurrent neglect of further development of the alternate airports, point towards path dependency of the Icelandic tourism authorities. This as official procedures, investments and decisions regarding domestic infrastructures and tourism mobilities are "locked into a particular pattern from which it may be very difficult to move" (Robinson, 2024, p. 9) and hence a further cementation of already established trails of mobility (Williams, 2013). This leaves the question of whether the Icelandic systems of tourism mobilities might not be all that mobile after all.

The interviews with representatives of the regional DMO office revealed that the main hurdle towards increased international aviation through Akureyri Airport is not that of lacking interest from abroad but from the decision-making powers on a domestic level. Should there be real intent behind the statements of the Icelandic tourism authorities towards improved distribution of tourism throughout the country, perhaps 'path creation' (Williams, 2013) through investments in the Icelandic North and East might prove more effective than focusing only on further cementing of path dependence with enlargement of KEF airport. That might not only serve to expand the Icelandic tourism sector but furthermore, counteract the notion of overtourism threatening the Icelandic South and Southwest.

These decisions, however, will continue to be taken elsewhere than in the tranquil Melrakkaslétta. There, on the margins, the residents are quite detached from such decision-making,

although unremittingly being affected by it. Whether residents of rural areas are 'left behind' (Eriksson & Tollefsen, 2022) when it comes to governmental infrastructure investments, or are left dealing with decisions on "infrastructures that penetrate and/or manipulate rural spaces" (Young, 2006, p. 254), their geographical and relational remoteness from decision making leaves it beyond their power to influence.

In fact, the locals of Melrakkaslétta seem to still ponder what kind of tourism development, if any, they are hoping for. They enjoy receiving visitors and some socioeconomical boost is much appreciated. They wish for not too many visitors, although that very definition is down to perception. While Melrakkaslétta's modest local tourism sector is hopeful in regards to the effort of the regional marketing office to create a strong Akureyri International Airport, the year-round residents and summer-dwellers of Melrakkaslétta alike, seem just as willing to defend their 'right to remoteness' (Schweitzer & Povoroznyuk, 2019). They opt out of any notion of path dependent mass tourism but are happy to share with some as they enjoy their world of few people and the birds at the margins.

## **Conclusion**

This paper aims to hypothesize about the potentialities of tourism development in a non-touristy rural and remote area, applying the location of Melrakkaslétta as an example. Its focus is on some of the relational and interdependent aspects of tourism development, the role of mobility systems in tourism development, the hurdles of path dependency in governmental decisions and investments, the redistricting effect of distances in rural tourism, and the possible effect alterations of infrastructures, access and distances might have on the current tourism margins. Here the aim has not been that of providing solutions but to offer input into ongoing theoretical debate on the multilayered and relational systems of tourism while its novelty is the settings of a non-touristy rural and remote area.

The perception of Melrakkaslétta the margin is not a constant, or rather, it does not have to be. It is the result of the relational system of mobilities to and within Iceland. What I have shown, however, is the complex, multilayered and relational aspect of tourism travel, and how rural tourism development is based on global and domestic entanglements that are dependent on strong mobility systems. In this context, we need to recognize that political decisions on investments and infrastructures are not made in Melrakkaslétta or elsewhere on the margins. Instead, residents in rural and remote areas are left responding to decisions, or lack thereof, taken elsewhere with results still bound to affect them, even at the edge of the Arctic.

## **Acknowledgement**

I want to express my appreciation and gratitude to Dr Jo Vergunst, University of Aberdeen, and Dr Gunnar Thór Jóhannesson, University of Iceland, for their valuable insights, recommendations and revising directions during the writing of this paper. Appreciation is also due to the Icelandic Centre for Research – Rannís, for funding the underlying research this paper is a product of: Mobilities on the Margins – Creative Processes of Place Making (2020-2023 – grant no. 207144-051).

## Statements

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author. While writing this paper the author applied no generative AI or AI-assisted technologies beyond basic tools (references, spelling, grammar). Due to the nature of the research and hence ethical restrictions, supporting empirical data is not available. The author takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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## 10. Appendix

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## Appendix 10-1. Consent form

### **Samvera á jaðrinum – Melrakkaslétta á ferð?**

Eigindleg rannsókn til doktorsprófs

Viðtöl tekin við íbúa, landeigendur, gesti og aðila sem tengjast Melrakkasléttu.

Hljóðritað einstaklingsviðtal sem innlegg í rannsókn á tengslum staðarmyndunar, hreyfanleika og ferðapjónustu á Melrakkasléttu.

Við framkvæmd viðtals verður stuðst við fyrir fram mótaðan spurningaramma.

Hvert viðtal tekur að jafnaði 40-60 mínútur í framkvæmd.

Viðtöl verða afrituð og þemagreind.

Upplýsingar um nafn, aldur, kyn og tengsl hvers viðmælenda við Melrakkasléttu eru skráðar.

#### **Staður og stund:**

**Viðtal tekið:** \_\_\_\_\_ **þann:** \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Viðmælandi:**

Nafn: \_\_\_\_\_

Starfstíll/önnur „aðgreining“ (ef vill) \_\_\_\_\_

Kyn: \_\_\_\_\_ Aldur: \_\_\_\_\_ Tengsl við Melrakkasléttu: \_\_\_\_\_  
íbúi (núverandi/brotflutt), hús-/landeigandi, tíður gestur, embættistengsl, án tengsla)

Við birtingu á niðurstöðum verður frásögnum leyft að lifa með beinum tilvitnunum að hluta.

Þar verður viðmælenda getið með upplýsingum um tengsl við svæðið, aldur og kyn.

#### **Vinsamlegast merkið við hvort óskað er nafnleyndar við birtingu beinna tilvitnana:**

- Fullt nafn má birtast
- Nafnleyndar er óskað

Með kærum þökkum fyrir þátttökuna,

#### **Þórný Barðadóttir**

Doktorsnemi

Ferðamálafræði

Líf- og umhverfisvísindadeild

Háskóli Íslands

Sími: xxx xxxx

### **Meeting grounds on the margins- Melrakkaslétta on the move?**

Qualitative research for a doctoral degree

Interviews with residents, landowners, visitors and others related to Melrakkaslétta.

Audio-recorded face-to-face interview conducted as a contribution to research on the relational elements of place-making, mobility and tourism in Melrakkaslétta.

During the interview a pre-formulated interview guide will be applied.

The duration of the interview can be expected to be between 40-60 minutes.

The interview will be transcribed before thematically analysed.

Information on name, age, gender and relationship of each interviewee to Melrakkaslétta is recorded.

#### **Place and time:**

Interview conducted: \_\_\_\_\_ on: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Respondent:**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Work title/other "distinction" (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Connection to Melrakkaslétta: \_\_\_\_\_  
(current/former resident, house/landowner, work connection, no connection)

When publishing findings, narratives will partially be provided through direct quotes.

The interviewees will be mentioned with information about their connection to the area, age and gender.

#### **Please indicate if anonymity is desired when publishing direct quotes:**

- Full name may be displayed
- Anonymity is requested

With sincere gratitude for your participation,

#### **Þórný Barðadóttir**

Doctoral student

Tourism Studies

Faculty of Life and Environmental Sciences

University of Iceland

Phone: xxx xxxx

## Appendix 10-2: Interview guide(s)

Viðtal nr: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Viðtalsrammi - íbúar**

Ávarp, þakkir og opna með: Fyrir upptökuna, viltu segja til nafns og segja mér hvað – og hvar Melrakkaslétta er fyrir þér?

Hefur þú búið annars staðar?

Hefur þig langað til þess? / Hvers vegna fluttirðu aftur hingað?

Hvað geturðu sagt mér um aðgengi að/frá svæðinu?

Árstíðir?

(hvernig) hefur það breyst?

Áttu þér uppáhaldsárstíð hér?

Hvers vegna?

Manstu eftir hvernig þú lékst þér sem barn?

Hvað gera krakkarnir núna?

Er gestkvæmt hérna?

Er það sama fólk sem kemur eða frekar ný andlit?

Á öllum tímum árs?

Hvað gerirðu með gestum?

Er það misjafnt? (endurteknar komur – árstíðir)

Er samgangur milli þorpanna?

Hvert sækirðu þjónustu?

(Hvernig) Hefur þetta breyst?

Hvað geturðu sagt mér um umferðina hér / Um Melrakkasléttulétta?

(Hvernig) Hefur það breyst?

Hvað finnst þér um ferðamennsku á Melrakkaslétta?

Hverjir finnast þér vera helstu möguleikar svæðisins?

Hvað þyrfti að varast?

Upplifir þú Melrakkaslétta sem jaðarsvæði?

Ef já: Á hvaða hátt? – Ef nei: Hvað væri jaðar?

Færðu þau viðbrögð almennt frá öðrum?

Geturðu nefnt eitthvert sambærilegt svæði á Íslandi?

Er eitthvað sem þú saknar þegar þú ert ekki hér?

En þegar þú ert hér?

Hvaða litur kemur upp í hugann þegar ég segi Melrakkaslétta?

Geturðu lýst andrúmsloftinu/stemningunni á Sléttunni?

*Hvað kemur upp í hugann ef ég bið um eina Melrakkaslétta-sögu að lokum?*

Interview no: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Interview guide – Residents**

Address, thank and open by: For the recording, could you please state your name and tell me where – and what - Melrakkaslétta is to you?

Have you ever lived anywhere else?

What brought you back? / Have you wanted to?

What can you tell me about the accessibility to/from the area?

Seasons?

(how) has this changed?

What is your favourite season in Melrakkaslétta?

Why?

Can you recall any childhood plays?

How do the kids play now?

Do you receive many guests?

Are those repeated guests?

Do you get visitors throughout the year?

What do you do with your guests?

Does it differ? (repeated arrivals – seasons)

Is there interactions/cooperation between Melrakkaslétta's villages?

Where do you go for services?

(How) Has this changed?

What can you tell me about the traffic here / around Melrakkaslétta?

(How) Has it changed?

What is your opinion on tourism in Melrakkaslétta?

What do you see as the main tourism potentials of the area?

What should be avoided?

Is Melrakkaslétta marginal area in your opinion?

If yes: In what way? – If no: What would you consider a margin?

Do you generally get that reaction from others?

Can you think of a comparable Icelandic area in that sense?

Is there anything you miss when you're not here?

What about when you are here?

What colour comes to mind when I say Melrakkaslétta?

Can you describe the atmosphere/ ambience of Melrakkaslétta?

*What springs to mind if I ask for one Melrakkaslétta-story to end with?*

Viðtal nr: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Viðtalsrammi – Landeigendur/Sumaríbúar**

Ávarp, þakkir og opna með: Fyrir upptökuna, viltu segja til nafns og segja mér hvað – og hvar Melrakkaslétta er fyrir þér?

Segðu mér hvernig þú tengist Melrakkaslétta

Dvelur þú eitthvað á Melrakkaslétta á hverju ári?

Hvað heldurðu að þú verjir mörgum dögum árs á Melrakkaslétta?

Er það misjafnt? Milli ára?      Árstíða?  
Hvers vegna dvelur þú hér?

Hefur tengingin við svæðið breyst með árunum?

Hvað geturðu sagt mér um aðgengi að/frá svæðinu?

Árstíðir?  
(hvernig) hefur það breyst?

Varstu hér eitthvað hérna sem krakki?

Segðu mér hvernig þú lékst þér þá  
Hvernig leika krakkar sér hérna núna?

Er gestkvæmt hérna?

Er það sama fólkíð sem kemur eða frekar ný andlit?  
Á öllum tímum árs?

Hvað gerirðu með gestum?

Er það misjafnt? (endurteknar komur – árstíðir)

Er samgangur milli bæjanna hérna?

Hvert sækirðu þjónustu?

(Hvernig) Hefur þetta breyst?

Hvað geturðu sagt mér um umferðina hér / Um Melrakkasléttulétta?

(Hvernig) Hefur það breyst?

Hvað finnst þér um ferðamennsku á Melrakkaslétta?

Hverjir finnast þér vera helstu möguleikar svæðisins?  
Hvað þyrfti að varast?

Upplifir þú Melrakkaslétta sem jaðarsvæði?

Ef já: Á hvaða hátt? – Ef nei: Hvað væri jaðar?  
Færðu þau viðbrögð almennt frá öðrum?  
Geturðu nefnt eitthvert sambærilegt svæði á Íslandi?

Er eitthvað sem þú saknar þegar þú ert ekki hér?

En þegar þú ert hér?

Hvaða litur kemur upp í hugann þegar ég segi Melrakkaslétta?

Geturðu lýst andrúmsloftinu/stemningunni á Sléttunni?

*Hvað kemur upp í hugann ef ég bið um eina Melrakkalétta-sögu að lokum?*

Interview no: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Interview guide – Landowners / Summer-dwellers**

Address, thank and open by: For the recording, could you please state your name and tell me where – and what - Melrakkaslétta is to you?

Tell me about your connection to Melrakkaslétta

Do you spend time on Melrakkaslétta every year?

How many nights in a year would you say you spend here?

Does it differ?

What brings you here?

Has your connection to the area changed over the years?

What can you tell me about the accessibility to/from the area?

Seasons?

(how) has this changed?

What is your favourite season in Melrakkaslétta?

Why?

Did you stay here as a child?

Can you recall any childhood plays?

How do the kids play now?

Do you receive many guests?

Are those repeated guests?

Do you get visitors throughout the year?

What do you do with your guests?

Does it differ? (repeated arrivals – seasons)

Is there interactions/cooperation between Melrakkaslétta's (parttime) residents?

Where do you go for services?

(How) Has this changed?

What can you tell me about the traffic here / around Melrakkaslétta?

(How) Has it changed?

What is your opinion on tourism in Melrakkaslétta?

What do you see as the main tourism potentials of the area?

What should be avoided?

Is Melrakkaslétta marginal area in your opinion?

If yes: In what way? – If no: What would you consider a margin?

Do you generally get that reaction from others?

Can you think of a comparable Icelandic area in that sense?

Is there anything you miss when you're not here?

What about when you are here?

What colour comes to mind when I say "Melrakkaslétta"?

Can you describe the atmosphere/ ambience of Melrakkaslétta?

*What springs to mind if I ask for one Melrakkaslétta-story to end with?*

Viðtal nr: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Viðtalsrammi – Sveitarfélag**

Ávarp, þakkir og opna með: Fyrir upptökuna, viltu segja til nafns og segja mér hvort – og þá hvaða – tengingu þú hefur við Melrakkaslétta?

#### **Spurningar:**

##### ***Einstaklingurinn!!***

Hvað – og – hvar er Melrakkaslétta fyrir þér?

Hefur þú heimsótt Melrakkaslétta – dvalið þar?

Áttu þér uppáhaldsstaði á Sléttu?

Ferðu þangað á öllum árstíðum?

Sérðu fyrir þér að Melrakkaslétta geti orðið áfangastaður ferðamanna?

Ef já: hvað væri það helst?

Ef nei: Hvað vantar á?

Upplifir þú Melrakkaslétta sem jaðarsvæði?

Ef já: Á hvaða hátt? / Jaðar frá hverju?

Ef nei: Hvaða svæði er jaðarsvæði í þínum huga?

Heldurðu að Melrakkaslétta sé almennt álitin jaðarsvæði?

Þetta þér í hug önnur sambærileg svæði á Íslandi í þessu samhengi?

##### **Sveitarstjórnarfulltrúinn**

Hvernig birtist Melrakkaslétta í stjórnslu sveitarstjórnar?

Er eitthvað sem minnir á svæðið í daglegu starfi sveitarstjóra?

Hvernig finnst þér aðgengi að/frá svæðinu?

(Árstíðir?)

Hefur sveitarstjórn eitthvað með viðhald og framkvæmdir vega að gera?

Hvað með aðra þætti innviða?

Hvað geturðu sagt mér um umferðina á og fyrir Melrakkaslétta?

Sérðu fyrir þér að það breytist í náinni framtíð?

Segðu mér frá Norðurhjarar?

Hvað með Húsavíkurstofu?

Kemur sveitarfélagið að markaðssetningu á öðrum svæðum innan sveitarfélags?

Kom sveitarfélagið að undirbúningi og framkvæmd Norðurstrandarleiðar?

Hvað með Fuglastíg á Norðurlandi?

Sérðu fyrir þér að það gæti einhverrar togstreitu í garð sveitarstjórnar?

Hvað heldur þú um andrúmsloftið / stemninguna á Melrakkaslétta?

*Er eitthvað sem þú vilt koma á framfæri að lokum?*

Interview no: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Interview guide - Municipality**

Address, thank and open by: For the recording, could you please state your name and tell me about your connection to Melrakkaslétta, if any?

#### **Interview guide:**

##### ***On a personal level!***

What - and where - is Melrakkaslétta to you?

Have you visited Melrakkaslétta - stayed there?

If yes: Do you have favourite places in Slétta?

Do you go there in all seasons?

If no: Is there a reason for why so?

Do you consider Melrakkaslétta as a becoming tourist destination?

If yes: what would be its main draws?

If no: What is missing?

Do you consider Melrakkaslétta a marginal area?

If yes: In what way? / Margin from what?

If no: Which area is marginal in your mind?

Do you think that Melrakkaslétta is generally considered a peripheral area?

Can you think of other similar areas in Iceland in this context?

##### ***The representative:***

How does Melrakkaslétta come into the administration of the local government?

Is there anything that reminds you of the area in the daily work of the council/committees?

How do you feel about the accessibility of the area?

(Seasons?)

Does the local government have anything to do with road maintenance and construction?

What about other aspects of infrastructure?

What can you tell me about the traffic in and around Melrakkaslétta?

Do you see that changing in foreseeable future?

Tell me about Norðurhjarí (The Edge of the Arctic)?

What about Húsavíkurstofa (Visit Húsavík)?

Does the municipality deal with marketing in other areas within the municipality?

Was the municipality involved in the preparation/ implementation of the Arctic Coast Way?

What about the Northeast Iceland Birding Trail?

Do you find that there is any tension towards the local government?

What do you think about the atmosphere / mood in Melrakkaslétta?

*Is there anything you would like to say in conclusion?*

Viðtal nr: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Viðtalsrammi – Markaðsstofa / Ferðaskrifstofa**

Ávarp, þakkir og opna með: Fyrir upptökuna, viltu segja til nafns og segja mér hvort – og þá hvaða – tengingu þú hefur við Melrakkaslétta?

#### **Spurningar:**

##### ***Einstaklingurinn!***

Hvar – og hvað – er Melrakkaslétta fyrir þér?

Hefur þú heimsótt Melrakkaslétta – dvalið þar?

Áttu þér uppáhaldsstaði á Melrakkaslétta?

Ferðu þangað á öllum árstíðum?

Sérðu fyrir þér að Melrakkaslétta geti orðið áfangastaður ferðamanna?

Ef já: hvað væri það helst?

Ef nei: Hvað vantar á?

Upplifir þú Melrakkaslétta sem jaðarsvæði?

Ef já: Á hvaða hátt? / Jaðar frá hverju?

Ef nei: Hvaða svæði er jaðarsvæði í þínum huga?

Heldurðu að Melrakkaslétta sé almennt álitin jaðarsvæði?

Þetta þér í hug önnur sambærileg svæði á Íslandi í þessu samhengi?

##### **Starfsmaðurinn**

Hverjir finnast þér vera helstu möguleikar Melrakkaslétta með tilliti til uppbyggingar ferðaþjónustu?

Hvernig kemur Melrakkaslétta inn í starf markaðsstofu/ferðaskrifstofu

Er eitthvað sem minnir á svæðið í daglegu starfi?

Hvernig finnst þér aðgengi að svæðinu?

(árstíðir?)

Hafið þið /getið þið beitt ykkur varðandi viðhald og framkvæmdir vega

Hvernig myndir þú vilja sjá veginn fyrir Slétta til framtíðar?

Hvað með aðra þætti innviða?

Viltu segja mér frá opinberum styrkjum og lista yfir vægi framkvæmda

Veistu hvernig umferð um Sléttuna er?

Sérðu fyrir þér að það breytist?

Segðu mér frá Norðurstrandarleið

Hvernig gekk samstarf við landeigendur varðandi áningarstaði?

Hvað með Fuglastíg?

Hvað, ef eitthvað, finnst þér helst skorta varðandi ferðaþjónustu á Melrakkaslétta?

Viltu segja mér frá vindmyllumálinu eins og það snýr að sveitarstjórn

álitur þú að myllurnar eins og þær líta út núna geti farið með ferðaþjónustu á svæðinu?

Hefurðu skoðun á andrúmsloftinu eða stemningunni á Melrakkaslétta?

*Er eitthvað sem þú vilt koma á framfæri að lokum?*

Interview no: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Interview guide - Travel Agencies / Marketing Office**

Address, thank and open by: For the recording, could you please state your name and tell me about your connection to Melrakkaslétta, if any?

#### **Interview guide:**

##### ***On a personal level!***

What - and where - is Melrakkaslétta to you?

Have you visited Melrakkaslétta - stayed there?

Do you have favourite places in Slétta?

Do you go there in all seasons?

Do you foresee that Melrakkaslétta can become a tourist destination?

If yes: What do you see as its main possibilities?

If no: Why not - What is lacking?

Do you consider Melrakkaslétta a marginal area?

If yes: In what way? / Margin from what?

If no: Which area is marginal in your mind?

Do you think that Melrakkaslétta is generally considered a peripheral area?

Can you think of other similar areas in Iceland in this context?

##### ***The representative:***

What, in your opinion, are the main possibilities of Melrakkaslétta in context of tourism development?

How does Melrakkaslétta come into the work of a travel agency/marketing office?

Is there anything that reminds you of the area in your daily work?

How do you feel about the accessibility of the area?

(seasons?)

Do you have/can you act regarding road maintenance and construction?

How would you like to see the Melrakkaslétta road in the future?

What about other aspects of infrastructure?

Tell me about public funding and the priority-list of projects?

Do you know what traffic is like out on Melrakkaslétta?

Do you recon that will change?

Tell me about the Arctic Coast Way

How was the cooperation with the landowners regarding places to visit?

What about Birding Trail?

What, if anything, do you find is most lacking regarding tourism in Melrakkaslétta?

Would you like to tell me about the wind turbine issue as it relates to local government?

do you think that the turbines as they look now can support tourism in the area?

Do you have an opinion on the atmosphere or mood on the Plain?

*Is there anything you would like to say in conclusion?*

## Appendix 10-3. Interviews and conversations - Listing

Autonomised information on respondents in interviews and conversations

### **Semi-structured interviews: Interviewees (N36)**

- 20 Residents / Landowners
- 9 Summer dwellers / Landowners
- 4 Frequent visitors
- 3 Connection through work

#### Respondents representing

- 20 Permanent residents
  - Raufarhöfn 10; Kópasker 6; flatland 4
- 9 Former residents
- 7 Summer dwellers
- 14 Landowners
- 4 Frequent guests
- 7 (Tourism) services
- 5 Due to work/role

#### Other information

- 20 Women
- 16 Men
- 57 Average age (years)
- 3 Requesting anonymity
- 58 Average lasting interviews (minutes)

### **Unstructured interviews: interviewees (N10)**

- 2 Residents
- 3 Former residents
- 2 (Tourism) services
- 3 Landowners

### **Unplanned conversations: respondents (N54)**

- individuals, pairs and groups
  - 9 Residents
  - 6 Former residents
  - 4 (Tourism) Services
  - 2 On site due to work
- 33 Tourists



## Appendix 10-4 Periods of field work

### Periods of field work

<b>Dates</b>	<b>Main tasks</b>	<b>Stayers</b>
02 - 05 September 2020	Kick-off field trip	MoM research group
13 - 21 June 2021	Stay - Interviews - Observation	Solo
22 - 26 June 2021	Stay - Observation - Conversations - Guided walk	With supervisor
19 July - 02 August 2021	Stay - Interviews - Conversations - Observation	Solo
18 - 20 August 2021	Residential meeting, attendance - Interviews	Solo
24 - 27 September 2021	Seminar - Walking	MoM research group
28 Sept. - 11 Oct. 2021	Stay - Interviews - Community event – Observation	Solo
19 Feb. - 4 March 2022	Stay - Interviews - Analysis - Walking - Observation	Solo
1 - 31 July 2022	Stay - Stand-in work- reception of a local Hostel	Solo
26 Sept. - 08 Oct. 2022	Stay - Presentation: Reporting back - Writing	Solo
30 Jan. - 11 Feb. 2023	Stay - Community event - Conversations - Writing	Solo
16 - 24 June 2023	Writing - Walking - Conversations	Solo
3 - 10 October 2023	Community event - Conversations - Writing	Solo
4 - 10 February 2024	Community event - Conversations - Writing	Solo
15 - 24 July 2024	Writing - Walking - Conversations	Solo
5 - 12 September 2024	Community event: Rock concert - Conversations	Solo
3 - 9 October 2024	Presentation: Status report - Writing – Conversations	Solo

