

Nagisa Mochizuki

EMBODYING TRANSFORMATION THROUGH THE MUNDANE

An affective autoethnography of international student experience in Rovaniemi

University of Lapland

Master's thesis

Tourism, Culture, and International Management, Tourism Research

Spring 2026

University of Lapland, Faculty of Sciences

Title: Embodying transformation through the mundane: An affective autoethnography of international student experience in Rovaniemi

Author: Nagisa Mochizuki

Degree programme /subject: Tourism Research (Tourism, Culture, and International Management, TourCIM)

The type of work: Master's Thesis

Number of pages: 56

Year: 2026

Abstract:

International students experience tourism as both hosts and guests. These experiences outside their home countries often lead them to internal transformations, such as adjustment and acculturation. Their learning journey, however, is a more complex and ongoing process; hence, I aim to understand the detailed longitudinal processes of international students' experiences in the tourism context. This research is guided by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological body. Building on his ideas, embodied learning experience in affect and movement is set as the theoretical framework, which posits transformation as a continuous, relational, and sensory process. Guided by this perspective, the study is organised around two main research questions: (1) How do international students experience tourism through their embodied practices during their stay? and (2) How do international students learn and transform through the affective embodiment of their everyday lives in their destination?

Affective autoethnography is used as the methodology of this study. I disclose my learning diary with my body reflexivity, which pays attention to the awareness of bodily senses and movement in my experience. My personal stories in Rovaniemi illustrate that international students experience tourism in various ways through mundane practices at the destination. Through these tourism experiences, I have learned together with multiple others, and my body has become embedded in the entanglement of Rovaniemi. These learning experiences demonstrate that the transformation is a dynamic and continuous process that is deeply connected with the material and situated world. Revealing this entire process in my research could provide insights into tourism as a potential opportunity for reflexivity, where students may encounter new possibilities and perspectives through experiencing the mundane activities of the destination.

Keywords: body, transformation, international student experience, autoethnography

Contents

1. INTRODUCTION	4
1.1 Arrival.....	4
1.2 Living as international student as way of experiencing tourism	5
1.3 Understanding transformation through the lens of affective body	7
1.4 Autoethnography as methodology	9
1.5 Structure of the thesis	11
2. MUNDANE TRANSFORMATION THROUGH THE AFFECTIVE BODY	13
2.1 The body in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology	13
2.2 Affect and emotion	15
2.3 Mundane as transformation	18
3. AFFECTIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY IN RELATIONALITY.....	22
3.1 Relational ontology	22
3.2 Affective Autoethnography	24
3.3 Writing as inquiry	26
3.4 Research ethics	29
4. EMBODYING TRANSFORMATION.....	31
4.2 Dwelling in Rovaniemi: Guest–host relationships.....	31
4.2 Embodying Aurora: Knowing with more-than-humans.....	34
4.3 Sharing experiences: Making knowledge together in difference	39
5. TRANSFORMING THROUGH THE MUNDANE IN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE	43
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	49
REFERENCES	50

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Arrival

I arrived in Rovaniemi, Finland, in August 2024 to begin my master's studies at the University of Lapland. Until the very last moment before my flight, I was saying goodbye to many friends in Japan; I knew it would be two years before I would see them again. I appreciated being in my home environment in which I could do my best, surrounded by people who supported me. I knew I always had a place to which I could return.

When I arrived in Rovaniemi following a long flight from Japan, I was surprised by the comfortable temperature compared to the extreme heat in my homeland and by the fact that the sun was visible almost all day. I noticed that locals were enjoying the beach under the bright sun around 3 p.m., and I tried to relax on the beach as they did. Lying there, I somehow felt closer to the clouds than I did in Japan, alongside a mixture of hope, excitement, and anxiety about the academic journey ahead.

In Rovaniemi, I am learning tourism as an international student. In tourism studies, the differences between tourists and non-tourists have become blurred, and various categories have emerged in between, such as work-related mobility (e.g. Doering, 2007) and lifestyle mobilities (e.g. Cohen, 2011). International student mobility can be one example of tourism, where students stay in a place for several months to years (Sheller & Urry, 2006; Selby, 2021). This temporary mobilities offers an international student a way of living that is neither characteristic of their life in their home country nor of the culture in which they are immersed as a permanent resident.

While studying tourism as an international student in Rovaniemi, I have gained different and new perspectives throughout my everyday life. Indeed, many studies of international students' experiences with tourism suggest that these opportunities lead to transformative growth in various aspects of their lives, including intercultural competence and self-understanding (e.g., Brown, 2009). However, few studies have focused on the process

through which international students gain these experiences. It has been argued that their learning journey is more complex than simply gaining new competencies through encounters with people, places, and their overall surroundings (Selby, 2021). For this reason, it is essential to explore their experiences longitudinally and from intersubjective perspectives. As an international master's student studying tourism, I am able to provide detailed descriptions of my own experiences.

Therefore, this research departs from my personal experiences, combined with the lack of academic literature focusing on the detailed longitudinal process of international students' experiences in tourism. In this study, drawing on my own experiences in Rovaniemi, I explore the meaning and possibilities of experiencing tourism as an international student.

1.2 Living as international student as way of experiencing tourism

A total of 6.9 million students pursued degrees outside their home country in 2022, and this number is expected to grow to more than 10 million by 2030 (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2025). These international students can exert significant social, cultural, and economic impacts on their host destinations. Due to the temporary nature of their stays and the multifaceted influences they bring, international students are regarded as tourists in many studies (e.g. Brown, 2009; Malet Calvo et al., 2023; Selby, 2021). However, at the same time, international students also take on important roles as residents or hosts within their communities. They generate tourism through visits from friends and relatives or even act as hosts by welcoming other tourists (Kashiwagi et al., 2018). Moreover, their internal attachment to the new places and community strengthens through their involvement in everyday local practices; in fact, they develop a sense of belonging and home in their new environments (Prazeres, 2018). During their temporary studies at their destination, international students also often recognise themselves as insiders of their new community.

As such, the roles of international students are not fixed but, rather, fluid and situational. Sheller and Urry (2006) state that when mobility perspectives are included in tourism, the relationship between tourists and non-tourists becomes fuzzy, and tourism activities have

expanded from sightseeing to experiential and embodied practices. In contemporary tourism studies, mobility and home cannot be considered separate, and dwelling emerges while tourists travel (Prazeres, 2018; Wilson & Obrador, 2022). These studies reveal that experiencing new places as an international student can be one way of engaging in tourism (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 212).

As they spend their lives in these different places and environments, international students are experiencing internal transformations through culture shock, emotional and cultural adjustment, and acculturation. Many studies have indicated that international students' experiences hold transformative potential as they learn about other cultures, adjust their perspectives, and negotiate everyday life (Brown, 2009; Fritz et al., 2008; Zhou et al., 2008). For example, Andrade (2009) highlighted language difficulties as a common issue among international students. Beyond language barriers, other challenges – including financial difficulties, separation from family, and differences in academic culture – contribute to the stress and anxiety that are experienced by international students (Fritz et al., 2008; Zhou et al., 2008). While these initial struggles are significant, understanding the factors that influence cultural shock (Zhou et al., 2008) and intercultural interactions (Andrade, 2009) is crucial for facilitating acculturation.

Many studies have aimed to categorise or generalise international students' experiences according to nationality, region, or student status. Previous research has frequently grouped students into broad categories such as Asian or European, often overlooking the cultural, social, and personal differences that exist within these groups (Andrade, 2009; Fritz et al., 2008). Fritz et al. (2008, p. 244) particularly cautioned against understanding international students as a homogenous group, emphasising that their experiences are shaped by diverse cultural backgrounds, individual histories, and social contexts. Such categorisations may simplify and sometimes overlook the complexity of students' lived experiences and their unique ways of engaging with unfamiliar environments in their destination.

Therefore, in this study, I posit that the experiences of international students are always contextual and individual (Selby, 2021; Cockayne, 2025). Their experiences vary depending

on the destinations they visit, the subjects they study, and their own personal backgrounds. Indeed, the Japanese philosopher Watsuji (1935) argued in his travel writing, *Fudo (Climate and Culture)*, that if differences among societies derive from climate conditions that appear to provide advantages to certain regions, we must become aware of our own disadvantages and learn from one another. As Watsuji suggested, experience is always grounded in context, and by placing ourselves in different circumstances, we are able to reflect upon and re-evaluate the backgrounds from which we come. Therefore, through their negotiations and interactions with diverse environments at their host destinations, international students continually reflect on and reorder their own values and perspectives through their learning processes.

1.3 Understanding transformation through the lens of affective body

To investigate the experiences of international students and understand their transformative processes, this study approaches mundane transformation through the lens of an affective body. Bodily aspects have been widely discussed in tourism research over the past three decades, following Veijola and Jokinen (1994), who situated the body as the key to performing and experiencing tourism. In their work, *The Body in Tourism*, Veijola and Jokinen (1994) emphasised bodily and non-representational dimensions of tourism experiences rather than merely visual or highly theorised understandings. Paying attention to bodily aspects enables one to focus on intersubject aspects of tourism experiences and understand complex and sometimes neglected aspects of tourism (see Johnston, 2001; Minca, 2009).

To grasp the holistic experiences of international students, this study is guided by Merleau-Ponty's understanding of phenomenology (1962). He posited that the world is not merely what we think; instead, it is opened to us through our bodies, and our perception is a mutual engagement with this world. He continued that human experiences do not occur from a position outside the world but unfold as part of it (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Based on Merleau-Ponty's perspective, this study understands that we come to think about and understand the world through our embodied experiences of space and time (Stolz, 2015, p. 482).

Additionally, this study examines the transformation of international students in the unity of

the mind and body or subjects and objects (Johnston, 2001; Stolz, 2015).

The rise of non-representational theory and affective turn has particularly incorporated these aspects of phenomenology towards understanding bodily experiences. Paying attention to non-representational aspects extends beyond the bodily understanding of how and why bodies are placed into motion or experience emotions (Rickly, 2021, p. 249). The concept of affect particularly challenges the way of thinking that knowledge originates from visual or linguistic representation (d'Hautesserre, 2015). It can be understood as the forces or influences that arise, spread, and interact within and between the body, non-humans, places, and other people (Kugapi & Höckert, 2022). Within this understanding, past studies have demonstrated that affect emerges through the mutual engagement of the body with atmosphere (Anderson, 2009; Haanpää et al., 2022), landscapes and spaces (Jóhannesson & Lund, 2017), and objects (Kugapi & Höckert, 2022). Moreover, affect has been understood to occur in one's preconscious and sometimes feels as atmosphere (Martini & Buda, 2020). Those non-representational elements influence one's behaviour and sense, significantly contributing to shaping experience.

Perspectives on the affective body also contribute to the understanding of international students' experiences as a process of transformation. Tourism can lead to transformation through its extraordinary aspects of experience and isolation from the ordinary (Urry & Larsen, 2011; Oh et al., 2007). The transformation of international students can be considered to be the outcomes of extraordinary experiences away from their home countries (Brown, 2009, p.517). However, focusing on the embodied and affective aspects of experience, this study understands transformation as a continuous learning process in relation to the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Becoming aware of our affective agency allows us to reflect on and re-order our relationships with our surroundings (see Kugapi & Höckert, 2022; Rantala, 2018). From this perspective, transformation can be understood as an experience within the mundane, rather than temporary isolation from it.

This understanding corresponds to Ingold's (2015) argument, that learning is not taking place and moving between the positions of knowledge; rather, it is about the reflection of ourselves

and the interpretation in our ways. Through the embodied practices of their everyday lives, international students attempt to re-order their relationship with the world rather than treating it merely as an emotional response or a tourism experience (Ingold, 2015; Rantala, 2018). Hence, the bodily practices of living and engaging in their destinations as international tourism students suggest that learning takes place continuously by engaging with the world and experiencing bodily senses and interactions.

Building on the theoretical lens of the affective body, this study explores how international students experience tourism through their bodies. The focus on the body enables this research to understand learning as a continuous, relational, and sensory process, which is different from a cognitive or representational approach. Additionally, this study explores the transformative processes of international students through these embodied experiences. Guided by this perspective, the study is organised around the following research questions:

(1) How do international students experience tourism through their embodied practices during their stay?

(2) How do international students learn and transform through the affective embodiment of their everyday lives in their destination?

1.4 Autoethnography as methodology

To explore the possibilities of bodily experiences of international students, I reflect on and disclose my personal learning experiences in Rovaniemi. Qualitative research approaches, including ethnography, have challenged the objectification of social reality by encouraging researchers to become part of a community and to position themselves within its context (Ellis et al., 2011). In particular, autoethnography has gained increasing attention in social sciences over the past three decades, since this method seeks to understand the nuanced and complex phenomena of social life, focusing on personal narratives, emotions, and the body (Adams et al., 2017; Ellis et al., 2011). As both researchers and participants, autoethnographers are able to describe cultural practices and experiences, their relationships with others, and the meanings that emerge from these processes (Adams et al., 2017, p. 2).

In this study, my daily life in Rovaniemi as an international student is the central focus of my autoethnographic inquiry. Rovaniemi, a mid-sized Finnish city of approximately 64,000 people city (Visit Rovaniemi, n.d.), is located in the country's northernmost region, right on the Arctic Circle. It is the largest town in Europe by area, spanning 8,017 km². It serves as the regional capital of Finnish Lapland and is famously known as the official hometown of Santa Claus. Due to the town's rich natural resources and recreation opportunities, tourism is an important industry in Rovaniemi. In 2024, Rovaniemi received 948,000 passengers at its airport and recorded 1.5 million overnight stays (Rovaniemen Kaupunki, 2025). Tourism generated more than 400 million euros in income for Rovaniemi in 2024 (Visit Rovaniemi, 2025).

Living in Rovaniemi, one of the most well-known tourism destinations in Finland, is meaningful for exploring the international student experience within the context of tourism. Grimwood et al. (2015) suggested that students' understanding of tourism and its complexity could be deepened when they combine their experiences in the place with literature, seminars, discussions, and writing in the university setting. The researchers stated that such experiences enable students to "give life and greater clarity to higher order epistemological, methodological, and critical issues" (Grimwood et al., 2015, p. 377). Hence, living and learning tourism in Rovaniemi allows for embodied learning, where classroom learning, daily routines, interactions with the local community, and engagements with tourism sites all become part of the learning process.

This thesis includes personal written stories that also represent narratives about the writing process itself. Many scholars argue that writing a narrative has power as a method of knowing, a way to understand both oneself and one's research topic (e.g. Leavy, 2020; Richardson, 2000). Leavy (2020, p. 45) explains that the desire to share narratives stems from a will to express human truth, engage with research, and foster reflection and connectivity among readers. This aligns with my research aim to describe and convey the entangled experiences of being an international student rather than presenting categorised or representational understandings of such experiences. As readers reflect on my personal narratives, reflections, and transformations, I offer them the possibility to reflect on their own

ways of engaging with the world around them.

Since my arrival in Rovaniemi, I have continuously written about my experiences, emotions, and reflections. One of the main practices has been my daily diary, which briefly records what I have done each day along my emotional and affective responses to those events. These entries often include my unfiltered feelings, allowing me to capture honest and ordinary moments. In addition to the diary, I engage in a more structured form of writing through postcards sent to Japan on the 5th of each month, as part of my communication with the foundation that provides my scholarship support. Unlike the diary, which tends to be private and honest writing, the postcards are shaped by an awareness of audience and purpose. They generally emphasise positive experiences, academic progresses, and reassuring accounts of my life in Finland.

To analyse these writing materials, I created my own stories, both fictional and non-fictional. Richardson (2000, p.187) describes this writing process as “writing-stories”. She argues that producing stories requires paying attention to context in which writing is produced and is a valuable creative analytic practice, offering critical reflexivity about the writing-self (Richardson, 2000). Writing stories from fieldnotes such as a diary is indeed employed by past studies as a way to convey detailed and nuanced experiences (e.g. Valtonen et al., 2017; Stanley, 2015). Additionally, Richardson (2000) discusses fiction writing, clarifying its difficulties in terms of rhetorically poor aspects. However, fiction writing can be understood as true research, which expresses our visions of social science. Through the process of creating my own stories and writing them as text, I attempt to understand how bodily experience as an international student is shaped through affect and emotions.

1.5 Structure of the thesis

This first chapter has presented the background and context of this research. It has conceptualised the phenomenon of international student experience as a tourism experience and has established the research questions. In Chapter 2, the theoretical framework is built by discussing in more detail the relevant academic literature in three themes: (1) body, (2) affect and emotion, and (3) mundane transformation. This theoretical framework helps to illuminate

how the bodily experiences of an international student are a novel lens to understand transformation in the context of tourism experiences. The methodological framework that guides this research is described in more detail in Chapter 3. Specifically, I underline four elements of the research process that form the foundation of this study: relational ontology, affective autoethnography, writing as inquiry, and ethical choices made. Chapter 4 outlines themes that emerged from the analysis of my writing, and I further discuss the meaning of learning as an international student, building on my experiences in Rovaniemi. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the broader implications of these emergent themes and connects the research aims and objectives with the findings.

2. MUNDANE TRANSFORMATION THROUGH THE AFFECTIVE BODY

2.1 The body in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology

This chapter examines the theoretical framework of mundane transformation through the affective body. Previous research on international student experiences has often approached students primarily as objects of study, focusing on categorising or describing the types of experiences they have (e.g. Brown, 2009; Fritz. et al., 2008; Zhou et al., 2008). However, this study understands their experiences as an embodied process. It defines the living body and experience as simultaneously subject and object, drawing on Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenological idea of the body. His understanding of the body provides a valuable foundation for exploring international students' experiences and understanding the relationship between the body and knowledge creation.

Maurice-Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. vii) started his work on *Phenomenology of Perceptions* by explaining what phenomenology is, defining it as "the study of essence". This refers to the way or style in which we think about ourselves and the world around us. At the basis of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of phenomenology is the assumption that all problems regarding humans and the world can be approached by identifying their essence (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. vii). Importantly, when identifying the essence of problems, phenomenology attempts to understand it as it exists in reality rather than abstractly through theory or concepts (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. vii). He claimed that the world already existed before our reflections. In this assumption, phenomenology draws attention to this condition and aims to re-achieve our direct and primitive interactions with the world, thereby attributing philosophical qualities to it (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. vii). Accordingly, all essences of humans and the world can be perceived differently depending on one's bodily experiences. In that sense, the body can be the significant matter for phenomenology.

The body is often understood as a physically recognisable and observable entity; however, for Merleau-Ponty (1962), the body is a way to observe, manipulate, and scrutinise external objects. In his phenomenological account, the body is the universal way by which individuals

experience and possess the world, and through bodily experience, we can recognise the meanings attached to objects (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 249). Our experience itself can be understood as positioned within the world as part of it, so that we are part of the world. Therefore, his phenomenological account of the body unifies the subject and object in its notion of the world or of rationality (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xxii).

Washida (2020) interpreted Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body in phenomenology, stating that it is neither an objective entity belonging to no one, nor a body existing merely as an object among things. Rather, it is a phenomenal body, what he called the "living body", functioning as the subject's organ or, rather, as the subject's very being itself (Washida, 2020, p. 101). Washida (2020) also interpreted Merleau-Ponty's argument that we are embedded within the world's thickness through perceptual experience as revealing that the body is fundamental to all meaning-making. Similarly, Yakhlef's (2010, p. 415) reading of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology suggested that action and engagement through the body constitute the primary source of knowledge. These studies on Merleau-Ponty imply that we experience the world through our lived body, and, through this process, the mind embodied in the body attains meaning as a subject.

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty (1962) considered that the body does not simply occupy space and time, but dwells within them. This means that perception is not a fixed act of observing the world but a process of re-engaging with past experiences and their relational meanings while remaining situated in the present. In this sense, we are dwelling rather than being in the space. Indeed, in Washida's (2020, p. 89) reading of Merleau-Ponty, bodily experience is an internal interaction with the world, the body, and others – not existing alongside them, but existing with them. Experience can be understood not as pure being but as an exchange in which the subject is intermingled with the world (Washida, 2020, p. 89).

In this sense, kinaesthetic and corporeal intelligence become an important aspect of knowledge creation. Understanding bodily movement in space is a primary way of relating to the rest of the world, as it involves engaging with spatial, temporal, social, cultural, material, and technological arrangement (Haanpää, 2022; Jääskeläinen, 2023). Haanpää (2022)

suggests that this kinaesthetic approach consists of human and more-than-human agents, and a person can affect and be affected in their abilities to feel and respond to the movement of others. As such, movement becomes the way of knowing the world, as it involves learning how to move within and between one's surroundings (Haanpää, 2022; Ingold, 2015). Thus, this approach resonates with Merleau-Ponty's (1962) argument that thinking involves the entire body.

Therefore, as Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. xvii) suggested, "the world is not what we think, but what I lived through". Our presence in the world is possible through dwelling in this already-existing world and being within it. Merleau-Ponty's (1962, p. xx) notion of phenomenology, therefore, expands the traditional intellect from the study of true and immutable essences to an approach that involves total intentionality, including non-representational aspects. More-than-humans, more than text, even multiverses have meanings and provide us with a better understanding of the world when we experience it through the body (Vannini, 2015, p. 318). Building on Merleau-Ponty's (1962) understanding of the body's role in knowing the world, the following section turns to the concept of affect. It explores how perception emerges through non-representational relationships between the body, materiality, and sensations.

2.2 Affect and emotion

The concept of affect has been widely discussed, with increased scholarly attention focused on the body and movement (Veijola & Jokinen, 1994), emotions and feelings (d'Hauterres, 2015), and atmosphere (Anderson, 2009; Haanpää et al., 2022) within social sciences and tourism studies. This theory challenges the way of thinking that knowledge originates from visual perception or linguistic representation (d'Hauterres, 2015; Kugapi & Höckert, 2022). Instead, it situates the body as central to our knowing, sensing, and feeling, in relation to both the self and others, and paying attention to all of the different agents that generate body experiences (d'Hauterres, 2015; Kugapi & Höckert, 2022). By employing affect theory, researchers are able to cultivate an analytical sensibility that attends to the everyday contexts or situations in which relations emerge, focusing on how elements such as events, practices, assemblages, and affective atmospheres intersect and intertwine (d'Hauterres, 2015;

Vannini, 2015).

Understanding affect theory varies depending on the researchers. One of the most-cited authors of affect theory is philosopher Baruch Spinoza; he argued that the body's capacities are always determined by the field or context of its force-relations (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 3). Building on Spinoza's argument, Seigworth and Gregg (2010, p. 2) described that affect emerges in the intensities transmitted between – including human, non-human, and partial bodies – in the resonances that circulate between bodies and the world and, in some cases, in those resonances that temporarily adhere to them. Similarly, philosophers Deleuze and Guattari argued that affect allows us to perceive affective bodily capacity (Clough & Halley, 2007, p. 2). Their understanding of affect indicated that affect theory helps us understand Merleau-Ponty's (1962) concept of body in phenomenology, not just by explaining what the body is but to understand its persistent affective structuring of the world, reflecting the specific situatedness of both the world and the body.

Some researchers have discussed the interrelation between affect theory and emotion or feeling. For instance, from psychological perspectives, Silvan S. Tomkins identified nine basic affects that are the main forces motivating human behaviour, including six core affects (e.g. interest–excitement, enjoyment–joy), one affect-auxiliary (shame), and two drive-auxiliaries (disgust and dissmell) (McIlwain, 2007). While Tomkins's work influenced various fields of research, it also raises questions regarding the differences between affect and emotion, a topic still discussed by modern researchers. Seigworth and Gregg (2010) highlighted these differences, emphasising that affect exceeds emotion and emerges at a preconscious level. Moreover, Martini and Buda (2020, p. 683) argued that the relationship between affect and emotion remains ambiguous, suggesting that affect initially arises as a preconscious bodily experience and may become recognisable as emotion once it gains intensity and is consciously perceived.

In this way, affect transmitted and resonating between bodies is sometimes experienced as atmosphere (see Kugapi & Höckert, 2022; Haanpää et al., 2022). In her long-term research on tourism destinations, Anne-Marie d'Hautserre (2015, p. 86) posited that affective

relationships are complex and active, often appearing only partially and spreading in unpredictable ways. On the basis of these characteristics, affect is understood not as something that belongs to a specific subject but as something that emerges within relationships (Martini & Buda, 2020). Therefore, atmosphere can be understood as a shared ground from which subjective states emerge, along with their associated feelings and sensations (Anderson, 2009, p. 78).

Consequently, Anderson (2009) argued that it is significant to focus on the subject itself as well as its surroundings when exploring affect. In other words, affect cannot be understood in isolation from the environment in which it occurs, as the relationship between the individual and their surroundings is dynamic and mutually influential. For example, in the context of event experience, Woodward and Swartjes (2023, p. 46) identified that the atmosphere of an event is created not only by controllable elements such as lights and music but also by less controllable factors such as nature and the surrounding environment. This results in an affective atmosphere that is constantly changing. In this sense, atmosphere emerges through interaction with humans and more-than-humans, and it is fundamental to our experiences (Martini & Buda, 2020; Woodward & Swartjes, 2023). As such, the concept of affect allows us to sensorially understand our relationship with the body, the more-than-humans, places, and other people through mutual engagement, and thereby induce human reactions and behaviours (Anderson, 2009; Kugapi & Höckert, 2022).

As discussed, affect can be understood as the forces or intensities that emerge through relationships between bodies and the world, prior to consciousness or cognition. Therefore, Tucker and Shelton (2018) argued that affect allows us to comprehend the broader understanding that influences our being in and engaging with the world (p. 66). By analysing narratives about post-disaster tourism destinations, Tucker and Shelton (2018) emphasised that moods of loss and hope are produced, which continuously influence how individuals exist in the world and their capacity to act within it. Additionally, Martini and Buda (2020) insisted that affects are always experienced relationally and in connection to the body and its responses. As with emotions, our movement and actions are also shaped by affect beyond conscious awareness (Abulhawa, 2015, p. 136). In this way, affect allows us to pay attention

to relationality in our experiences and to understand the interplay between our own bodies and others (Jóhannesson & Lund, 2017; Vannini, 2015). In this sense, affect offers a foundation for further exploring how embodied experiences are formed through relational and situated encounters in everyday life.

2.3 Mundane as transformation

This study focuses on the tourism experiences of international students and attempts to explore their learning processes through their affective bodies. In this chapter, I interpret the meaning of transformation for international students by engaging with literature on tourism experiences. Urry and Larsen (2011, p. 23-24) explained that tourism has often been understood as an extraordinary experience, which is opposite to our regular or ordinary life and involves movement to particular places (see also Oh et al., 2007). These extraordinary aspects of tourism are frequently considered to lead to transformative experiences (e.g. Arnould & Price, 1993; Kirillova et al., 2017). Arnould and Price (1993) explained that such extraordinary experiences – including interaction with the natural environment and different cultures as well as connections with others – can induce both positive and negative emotions that tourists do not experience in their ordinary lives. Kirillova et al. (2017, p. 507-508) further explained that transformative experiences are shaped by strong emotional reactions, which allow tourists to construct meanings and develop a sense of connection to something greater than themselves.

The experiences of international students, which require their temporary relocation to another country for study purposes, have frequently been considered to be extraordinary and transformative experiences. Previous literature has examined how students experience the process of personal and cultural transformation through cultural shock, adaptation, and adjustment in the host destination (Andrade, 2009; Fritz et al, 2008; Zhou et al., 2008). They face several challenges in adapting to their new culture and experiences during their internal transformation (Selby, 2021, p.3). For example, Brown (2009) found, through his ethnographic studies on international students, that living outside one's home country as an international student can generate significant stress and personal crisis, leading to changes in

life philosophy and behaviour, resulting in a greater sense of autonomy. Such transformative experiences are often attributed to the geographical and emotional detachment from one's familiar home environment and the outcome of extraordinary new experiences (Brown, 2009, p. 517).

Accordingly, transformation in tourism contexts has often been described as an outcome of separation from everyday life through mobility. Detached from their daily routines, tourists are believed to be experiencing intense emotional reactions and eye-opening events that they have not encountered previously. However, recent literature has begun to question the assumption that tourism experiences are isolated from everyday life, instead stressing the significance of mundane practices within tourism (Veijola et al., 2019 p. 24). For example, Kugapi and Höckert (2022, p. 469) cited a story about self-knitted mittens, saying that such mundane objects give our lives rich meaning and enhance the understanding of our connections with the world. Similarly, Rantala (2018) argued that examining nature tourism through ordinary practices helps tourists understand the bodily rhythms and sensations in nature. This perspective allows one to realise that nature is not an independent concept for tourists; instead, it is connected and intertwined with their everyday lives (Rantala, 2018). Instead of believing that only extraordinary places and experiences are powerful, these studies stressed that focusing on mundane practices also is significant power in reconstructing individuals' relationships with the world (see also Haanpää et al., 2022).

Building on this literature, this study understands transformation as a complex and dynamic phenomenon that is intertwined with mundane everyday practices (Rantala, 2018, p. 69). Rather than understanding transformation merely as the result of emotional intensity or the acquisition of new knowledge through a temporary detachment from everyday life, it can be seen as a shift in the ways in which individuals engage with the world through their experiences. By examining tourism experiences in relation to everyday practices, it becomes possible to reconsider and reorder one's relationship with the world. Additionally, these embodied sensibilities and forms of awareness may extend into everyday life (Rantala, 2018, p. 68), becoming the condition for other processes, events, and relationships (Tucker & Shelton, 2018, p. 73). In this regard, Veijola et al. (2019, p. 25) described such a process as a

slow encounter or a slow arrival. From their perspective, transformation can be seen as gradual and subtle, rather than immediate or intense change.

This understanding of transformation aligns closely with Ingold's (2015) concept of becoming, in which human beings are understood as always in the process of becoming. According to Ingold (2015), every moment of beginning occurs in the midst of ongoing processes and simultaneously represents a moment of ending in relation to what has come before. In other words, human life is not directed toward a predetermined or fixed endpoint but unfolds as a continuous process of becoming through engagement with others and the world. From this perspective, transformation cannot be understood as something separation from the practice of the mundane; rather, it is always occurring within the entanglements of everyday life.

From this perspective, transformation is experienced through the body as a lived, sensory process rather than something that individuals intentionally undertake (Ingold, 2015, p. 242). As previous studies have suggested, understanding through embodied rhythms and practices allows us to become aware of our affective agency in relation to the surroundings and to reorder our relationship with the world (see Kugapi & Höckert, 2022; Rantala, 2018). Indeed, some studies have demonstrated that as students think, feel, act, and reflect in the field, they are deeply engaged with their surroundings, including other students' movements (Haanpää et al., 2022; Küper & Wee, 2018). Such embodied understanding enables us to connect present and the past experiences and continuously learn about how to move in and between them (Haanpää, 2022, p. 618). Therefore, transformation can be understood as an ongoing process of engaging with the world through the body. Moreover, knowledge emerging from embodied experiences has the potential to reconstruct and re-engage one's relationship with the world.

Therefore, this study conceptualises the mundane practices of international students as transformative. Instead of viewing transformation as an outcome of extraordinary and temporary events, this study emphasises how a metamorphosis emerges through ongoing engagement embedded in the everyday practices of the destination. As Merleau-Ponty argued (1962, p. 249), through bodily experience, we come to attribute meaning to the world of

objects. Building on this perspective, international students gradually understand themselves and reconstruct their ways of relating to the world through affective and bodily experiences in everyday life (Stolz, 2015, p. 482). From this viewpoint, transformation is a continuous process of becoming (Ingold, 2015), shaped through embodied engagement with others and the surrounding environment. In the next chapter, I discuss the methodological choices of this study.

3. AFFECTIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY IN RELATIONALITY

3.1 Relational ontology

Onto-epistemology, which explains how we understand reality and knowledge, is always fundamental to our choices and interpretations in research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). It shapes the methodological framework of the study and researcher's values, beliefs, and the impacts of their choices throughout the research process. This research focuses on international students' longitudinal experiences and the transformative process through which students come to know themselves and the world around them through the affective body. As such, the study focuses on my personal experiences through autoethnography, aiming to understand the intersubjective dimensions of embodied learning through affect and emotion. Supported by past literature about this subject, relational ontology serves as the fundamental basis of this research.

Through the lens of phenomenology, I believe that our being consists of social and material relationships with others and the environment rather than existing alone. Merleau-Ponty (1962) argued that in the phenomenological world, our fundamentals of being do not exist in the mind but through embodied existence, as we relate to the world through experiences or movement. Although his understanding starts from one subjectivity, it does not mean that we exist as a separate self; rather, the affective body can be understood through the entangled interactions of in-betweenness (see Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). For Merleau-Ponty (1962), the world emerges when we interact with it through our body, particularly by hand and through our eyes. Therefore, our being can be defined relationally through engagement with multiple others. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. xxii) described that the phenomenological world is "sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people intersect and engage each other". In this way, through bodily experience and engagement with the world, our existence emerges and can be understood.

In addition to this phenomenological understanding, relational ontology in this study is also

inspired by the Japanese philosopher Watsuji Tetsuro (1935) and his concept of *aidagara* (間柄). Watsuji's understanding of subjects is close to Merleau-Ponty's argument regarding the unity of body and subjectivity, and from this perspective, he viewed the subject as embodied in action (Johnson, 2019). In this work, Watsuji (1935) questioned whether our being can be possible in isolation, thereby developing the concept of *aidagara*. He argued that ethical values are grounded in relationships rather than residing within individuals themselves (Watsuji, 1935). These relationships are not limited to human connections but also include family, society, culture, history, and nature. Hence, individuals are always formed within relationships. From the beginning of the research process, I have been thrown into these relationships with others, and this relational understanding provides the starting point for contemplating my being and experiences.

Ingold (2015) noted the importance of distinguishing between “between” and “in-between”, as these two terms point to fundamentally different ways of understanding relationships and processes. While the notion of between suggests a bridge over a world that is already divided, in-between refers to the ongoing movement of creation and disappearance in a world where phenomena are not yet given but are continually becoming. There is no endpoint to the in-between, but it is always in process. This understanding aligns with Watsuji's (1935) emphasis that embodied action or movement is central to understanding the subject, and such action becomes a key condition for the notion of in-between (Ingold, 2015). In this sense, our focus is not on intermediation but on the becoming within corresponding and midstream processes.

Throughout my studies, I have built knowledge through various embodied experiences. However, this knowledge cannot be understood by focusing solely on an isolated individual subject; rather, it can be understood as emerging within relational contexts. From this perspective, researchers do not exist as independent observers operating outside the phenomena they study. Instead, they are embedded within the social and material realities they seek to understand. As Kuuru (2022, p. 236) suggests, the process of conducting research implicates not only ourselves but also others. Within this ontological framing,

affective autoethnography provides valuable insight into understanding international students' experience and their meanings, as it attempts to explore the phenomenon within, concentrating on the researcher's embodied, emotional, and situated engagement with the phenomenon.

3.2 Affective Autoethnography

As I mentioned in the introduction, I started my life in Rovaniemi as an international student in August 2024. The beginning point of this study is my experiences learning about everyday life in this place. Being an international student, particularly in the field of tourism, has expanded my understanding of myself and the world around me, as well as my possibilities for interacting with them. These experiences have led me to think that learning as an international student carries meanings beyond uncovering facts about one's own study subjects. Since the research is oriented around my own experiences, the methodology follows the origin of the research. Through autoethnography, I attempt to connect my personal and emotional experiences to broader cultural phenomena.

Ethnographic methods have been widely employed in various fields of the social sciences to better understand the culture from both insider and outsider perspectives (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 275). Researchers seek to understand practices, common values, beliefs, and shared experiences by observing and participating in cultural contexts. Autoethnography, which developed from ethnography, has gained increasing attention over the past two decades. It seeks to describe personal experience and systematically analyse it to understand cultural experience (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 274). This method highlights subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's personal influence on the research process. The assumption underlying this approach is that each individual holds particular assumptions or perspectives about the world (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 274-275). Therefore, the stories and interpretations produced through autoethnography are necessarily personal. However, they are meaningful in expanding the lens through which we understand the world and in offering nuanced insights into social and cultural practices and processes (Dashper, 2016, p. 216) by drawing from individual perspectives.

As autoethnography centres on researchers' individual perspectives, the researcher's affective body often becomes a central focal point of the study. Rather than positioning the researcher as a detached observer, autoethnography acknowledges that knowledge is produced through lived and embodied experience (Lapina, 2018). For example, Valtonen and Haanpää (2018) introduced body-reflexivity as a new technique for autoethnography, which emphasises awareness of bodily senses and movement in the research process. Since autoethnography attempts to move beyond the boundary between the inside and the outside of research, this methodological approach provides significant insight into Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenology of the body, which attempts to unify both object and subject.

Additionally, paying attention to the bodily aspects through autoethnography can provide deep insight into how experiences are constituted through thought, affect and emotion. By acknowledging how our bodies respond to and interact with social and cultural contexts, researchers can gain a rich understanding of the lived experience beyond what can be captured through cognitive reflection. Particularly, placing a focus on a researcher's embodiment and feelings provides valuable knowledge when that person assumes several social roles in their research setting (e.g. Hokkanen, 2017; Lapina, 2018). In this research, revealing my affective body can deepen the understanding of international students' experiences in various positions as students, researchers, tourists, and locals in Rovaniemi.

The previous methodological approaches to international students' experiences are diverse depending on the research focus, such as interviews (Cockayne, 2025), visual photography (Prazeres, 2018), and ethnography (Brown, 2009). These methodological approaches seek to obtain insider perspectives by being conducted in natural settings over a long period of time (Brown, 2009, p. 506). However, to deepen the understanding of the international student experience and to avoid single answers or categorised knowledge, it seems insufficient merely to conduct interviews or observe students. Since international students' experiences are individual and situational (Stanley, 2015), it is essential to write these experiences from within, from the standpoint of someone who is experiencing international student life. While Phiona Stanley (2015) described her PhD journey in a journal article, she suggested that writing this process through autoethnography allowed her to connect her behaviour and

feelings and clarify and realise her experiences in new ways.

3.3 Writing as inquiry

For phenomenology, writing is significant and is not about explaining or analysing; rather, it seeks to describe the experience itself (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). In this study, I also attempt to describe my personal experiences through writing. Although writing is often regarded as a mode of telling about the social world and is positioned as the final activity of the research project, Richardson (2000) emphasised that writing is one of the ways of knowing (p. 179). Writing is an embodied process through which we think, feel, and act in the world (Jääskeläinen, 2023, p. 28-29). Indeed, as Stanley wrote about the travel involved in her PhD journey (2015, p.145), learned that she could find her way and even discover herself. Therefore, writing is regarded as a method of inquiry in this study; writing is a way to discover both myself and my topic – international student experiences – in this context (Richardson, 2000, p. 179).

In this study, I primarily used self-observations and self-reflection. I wrote individual field stories based on the diaries I kept and the postcards I wrote. Dairy writing is a frequently used method in autoethnography (e.g. Kuuru, 2022; Hokkanen, 2017; Valtonen et al., 2017). In the research process, researchers can record the epiphanies that have significantly affected their lives by keeping a diary from within the cultural context (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 275). Since my arrival in Rovaniemi in August 2024, I have continuously written about my experiences, emotions, and reflections in my diary to leave a record of my life as a master's student outside my home country. One of the main practices is my daily diary, which briefly records what I have done and how I have felt each day, and each entry consists of five or six sentences.

Another writing practice is sending postcards to Japan as part of my communication with the foundation that provides my scholarship support. During my stay in Rovaniemi as an international student, I selected a postcard and wrote about what I had learned, then I mailed the card on the 5th of each month. The postcards aimed to express gratitude to my supporters

and report on my well-being. This is sometimes used as a slow method of communication in past studies (see Höckert & Grimwood, 2024; Veijola et al., 2019). Although such slow communication is regarded in tourism experiences as a letter which captures and shares something of ephemeral experience of foreign events or places, often with pictures, Veijola et al. (2019, p. 25) reported that it also includes “the air of thinking with”. For example, Höckert and Grimwood (2024), writing their paper based on postcard exchanges, attempted to disclose their process of building knowledge about hospitality. As Veijola et al. (2019, p. 25) highlighted, writing postcards creates a new unstable time or space of emergent possibility. Building on these discussions, in this study the practice of writing postcards is positioned not merely as a way of reporting experiences but as an embodied practice of reworking my learning and emotions within relationships with others.

In the process of analysing my written text, I have attempted to understand how bodily experiences are shaped through affect and emotions across different times, spaces, and social context, rather than categorising them into a fixed theme. Although my data continues to accumulate as long as I live in Rovaniemi as an international student, I began the analysis phase by carefully reading my own writings. While reviewing these texts, I was able to clearly recall what I did and felt at specific moment, even though the diary entries did not record everything that happened in a day. For example, in my writing from last autumn, I described experiencing deep depression, since it was my first time living in the seasonal darkness and spending time with people from different countries. When I read my diary, I clearly remembered the feeling of loneliness in the darkness in Finland. As Valtonen and Haanpää (2018) discussed in relation to body-reflexivity in autoethnography, re-reading my diary enabled me to recall embodied feelings. Similarly, the postcards I selected based on my monthly experiences – such as Santa Claus in December or blueberries in August – evoked strong sensory and emotional memories. Reviewing these images allowed me to recall what I had done during these months as well as the atmosphere surrounding those experiences. These embodied feelings and emotions that emerged through reading and viewing became the starting point of my analysis.

Rather than categorising the data into fixed themes, I have adopted an interactive and flexible

approach, moving back and forth between my personal experiences and the relevant literature. This dialogic nature of autoethnography analysis, in which theory informs the reading of empirical data, has often been emphasised in previous studies (e.g. Eskola, 2024; Haanpää, 2017). Ideas, themes, and concepts emerging from both the literature and empirical materials were examined in relation to one another throughout the processes. This approach allowed me to interpret my experiences not only as individual emotions but also as part of broader social and cultural phenomena related to international student experiences. In doing so, I was able to understand how knowledge emerges through affect and entanglements with others (Eskola, 2024, p. 106). Importantly, the analytical process was not limited to reading and writing but also took place through everyday embodied practices, such as walking to the university, talking with friends, and taking a shower at home (see Valtonen et al., 2017, p. 525-526). I continued to think about my embodied experiences and develop the ideas about the meaning of experiencing tourism as an international student.

At the stage of drafting the narrative I want to present, I labelled my experiences as an international student into three forms, focusing on their transformative aspects: guest–host relationships, learning with more-than-humans, and making knowledge together. Based on this framework, I selected and constructed stories from my diary and postcards that best illustrated these themes and translated them into English. Storytelling is frequently used as a way of representing data in embodied forms (e.g. Valtonen et al., 2017; Haanpää et al., 2022). Following these studies, I worked carefully to maintain affectivity in the stories during the process of translation, as some words and expressions lose their nuance when translated from Japanese into English. These narratives were rewritten multiple times, during which I refined descriptions, incorporated details from other writing texts, and occasionally removed parts based on my embodied memories (Valtonen & Haanpää, 2018). This rewriting process was not merely a matter of editing but also an interpretive act through which I sought to convey nuanced and emotionally rich understandings of my experiences.

Vannini (2015) has highlighted that it is not sufficient merely to discuss affect as theory in non-representational methodology; the research itself needs to be affective. In her affective ethnography, Stewart (2017, p. 192) demonstrated that research and narratives should evoke

affect in the reader, noting that “affect came into view through a slowed ethnographic practice attuned to the forms and forces unfolding in scenes and encounters”. Through her slowed ethnography and writing, she paid attention to unfixed and unstable events and understood the emerged meaning and value in relation to theory. Therefore, my aim in describing these stories is not only to convey them to the reader but also to remain attuned to and feel through my experiences.

3.4 Research ethics

Although autoethnography primarily centres on the researcher’s own personal experiences rather than focusing on external research settings or other participants, it is still essential to discuss how to conduct research ethically. Since my personal narrative inevitably includes my experiences and interactions with others – such as friends, local residents, and even people supporting me from Japan – ethical consideration must extend to my responsibilities towards these individuals. To protect the participants’ privacy, I have maintained their anonymity, and descriptions are written with careful reflection, self-awareness, and ethical responsibility. Furthermore, when there is a possibility that a person may be easily identified based on the information presented, I have explained my research purpose and have obtained their consent to include relevant descriptions in my thesis.

The decision regarding what, how much, and in what ways I reveal my personal experiences are significant issues and need to be considered carefully (Dashper, 2016, p. 221). Since the autoethnography process involves exposing one’s personal experiences and interpretations, it is important to consider self-protection as well. In conducting this research, I chose to create my stories as a part of the analysis process. This approach enables me to choose the details of the story in case I feel uncomfortable disclosing every detail of the data. Sometimes, it feels uncomfortable to reveal my personal stories or insights publicly, and doing so can even carry the risk of being emotionally hurt or unexpectedly criticised. For that reason, I have carefully considered which parts of my experiences I will disclose, and I allow myself the option to withhold or revise certain details in the text.

It is also important to acknowledge the credibility and reliability of autoethnographic research, particularly because this methodological approach centres on deeply personal and subjective experiences. The texts of stories and reflections are often written from my point of view, particularly experiences as an international student in Rovaniemi. However, even though autoethnography primarily examines individual narratives and reflections, this does not mean they are meaningless or generalisable. As Ellis et al. (2011) emphasised, it is not enough for researchers to focus solely on their personal stories; researchers also need to engage with previous studies (p. 276). In this study, I aim to create thick descriptions that contribute to theoretical and methodological discussions as well as to understanding international student experiences. Moreover, it is important to convey lived experience to the reader by differentiating between showing and telling and by engaging the reader affectively (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 276).

4. EMBODYING TRANSFORMATION

This study aims to understand how international students experience tourism through their affective embodied experiences and how they transform through the affective embodiment of mundane practices in their destination. Guided by these two research questions, I present three stories in this chapter and illustrate how my affective body experiences transformation through everyday practices in Rovaniemi. The first story, “Dwelling in Rovaniemi: Guest–host relationships”, examines how international students negotiate and understand themselves in the place through human culture encounters. The second story, “Embodying Aurora: Knowing with more-than-humans”, elaborates on the process of transformation that emerges within the entanglement of humans and more-than-humans. The third story, “Sharing experiences: Making knowledge together in difference”, demonstrates how master’s degree programme members create knowledge by sharing experiences in their differences.

4.2 Dwelling in Rovaniemi: Guest–host relationships

One day, I was sitting in the sauna at a swimming pool. Going to the local swimming pool has recently become one of my favourite hobbies, where I can take my mind off both the Finnish winter darkness and the stress of studying. From my observation, I knew that Finnish people take a sauna before swimming and again after swimming.

I was taking a sauna after swimming and was alone in the room. Since no one else was there, I had the responsibility of throwing water onto the *kiuas* (sauna stove). I usually avoided taking on this responsibility because I was still unsure about when to throw water onto the *kiuas* and how warm I was expected to make the sauna. A local woman entered the sauna and asked me a question in Finnish. I responded with “Sorry?”, which conveyed the fact that I did not understand her words and also functioned as an apology for not speaking Finnish. She then asked in English, “Water in bucket?”, but before I answered, she checked herself and picked up the *kiulu* (water bucket) and went outside the sauna to fill it.

“Are you a tourist?”, she asked me when she returned. I replied, “I am a student at the University. I study tourism.” She seemed interested in my answer and said that she works at a hotel in Rovaniemi. “I appreciate tourism because I am working in the industry, but when it becomes too much, it’s a problem”, she said. Her words made me reflect on my identity in Rovaniemi, since I can be seen as an outsider from her perspective. Indeed, she asked me whether I am a tourist or not.

During my stay in Rovaniemi, I have been trying to understand the Finnish culture, but as a foreigner, I am still unsure about it. I have been living in Rovaniemi for at least one and a half years and sometimes I welcome tourists as a host, yet I do not speak Finnish fluently. How can I understand myself in Rovaniemi? Am I a host, a tourist, a resident, a student?

The encounter with the local woman in the sauna became an opportunity through which I characterised my experience in Rovaniemi as being in-between host and guest. According to d’Hauteserre (2015, p. 81), social and cultural practices in the destination shape tourists’ senses and experiences, generating different emotional responses. She further emphasised the importance of recognising that moving between cultural settings can evoke emotional dynamics for tourists in unpredictable ways (d’Hauteserre, 2015, p. 81). This also can be applied to the experience of international students who temporarily stay in a destination and encounter different cultures (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Since they position themselves within different cultural practices, international students evoke their emotions and construct their identities through everyday experiences in the destination, being both affected and affecting (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010).

The sauna is an integral part of Finnish culture. In the experience of sauna, I have attempted to engage with the host community through meaningful and mutual interactions and communication, which is identified as a significant motivation for tourists to visit a particular place (Oh, et al., 2007, p.122). In this space, I have become more aware of Finnish culture and have attempted to immerse myself in it by throwing water in the suitable timing or adjusting the temperature of the sauna. Through these practices, I have attempted to

demonstrate familiarity with the place and its culture, thereby creating a sense of insider in the place (Prazeres, 2018, p. 921). This desire to immerse myself in the destination by following local routine practices may have been evoked by the fact that I was visibly a naked foreigner in the sauna space, which created discomfort and pushed me into action (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 2).

However, when the local woman asked me in Finnish about the water and then filled the bucket herself, I felt a sense of apology, particularly because I could not fully understand the Finnish culture and language despite studying it. Her actions also led me to think that perhaps I should have filled the bucket with water before starting the sauna. Such a reflective response suggests how affect emerges within intersubjective encounters (Tucker & Selton, 2018). In close bodily proximity to this woman, our interaction unfolded through minuscule details arising from physical closeness (Abulhawa, 2015). Affect, in other words, is generated through mutual and close interactions between people and manifests as bodily and emotional responses situated in a particular moment.

I have been carefully observing the behaviour of Finns in sauna spaces and also have been studying the Finnish language. However, this experience led me to realise that, despite such efforts, I cannot fully position myself as a host or a local, even though Prazeres (2018) indicated that learning social practices or linguistic skills can enhance the sense of international students as locals. As Merleau-Ponty (1962) emphasised, meaning emerges through bodily engagement with the world, where individuals come to understand places and cultures through lived and sensory experiences. My interaction with the local woman made me more aware of myself as a foreigner through language, behaviour, and uncertainty. I came to recognise that I am, at the same time, a guest who seeks to understand the culture and a host who has the sense of a local insider in relation to that culture.

In Rovaniemi, a small town of only 64,000 residents that annually hosts 1.5 million overnight tourist stays (Rovaniemen Kaupunki, 2025), tourists are everywhere in everyday spaces for residents, especially during the peak winter season. The atmosphere in this city is shaped and communicated between tourists and locals through emotional and embodied interaction

(d’Hautesserre 2015, p. 86). Within this atmospheric setting, I started to think that the relationship between hosts and guests is no longer fixed. When a large number of foreigners are present in the town, I sometimes try to involve myself in society by speaking the Finnish language or practicing the local culture. However, similar to the experience at the sauna, I often feel a sense of ambiguity myself as to whether I am a guest or host. This is because when I visit the city centre of Rovaniemi, I also appear to be a tourist to others.

However, this does not mean rejecting being seen as a tourist or guest. Rather, it emphasises the fluid and multi-relational nature of Rovaniemi, beyond host-and-guest binary. I continuously negotiate my positionality or identity within the cultural practice of the destination. This fluidity, however, is not always mutually recognised, and other people may force me to position myself as a certain identity. Indeed, the encounter with the local woman in the sauna illustrates that she positioned me as a guest, despite my effort to learn and adapt to Finnish cultural practices. Such encounters reveal that an identity as between host and guest is not solely my construction as I remain flexible to encounters; instead, it is shaped through my everyday interaction with humans and cultural encounters in the destination. In the story of the sauna, the gap between how I behave as local and how I am perceived by others generates affective responses, such as uncomfortable emotions and self-reflections. Therefore, whether I am positioned as a being a host or a guest at a destination is always negotiated and determined within human and cultural constraints.

4.2 Embodying Aurora: Knowing with more-than-humans

In early October, I saw the aurora for the first time in my life. Around 9 p.m., I was relaxing in my room and watching a K-drama when my roommate suddenly knocked on my door. She told me, “We might be able to see the aurora tonight. The aurora app says it will be active in the next 30 minutes to an hour”. Although I had downloaded the same aurora app two months earlier, I had always hesitated to go outside alone late at night to search for the aurora. That night, I was about to miss the opportunity again, but my roommate suggested that we drive to darker area with a clearer view of the sky. With her encouragement, I finally decided to go aurora hunting for the first time.

My first aurora experience in Rovaniemi began with this conversation in my flat. Until that moment, I had been following my mundane routine: going to school, having dinner, and watching dramas in my room. Such patterned and expected movements have been described as cyclical and linear repetition (Abulhawa, 2015) or as a form of pre-choreography that structures everyday action in advance (Haanpää, 2022, p.617). At that time, this routine also became an excuse for me to avoid venturing out to see the aurora. However, my roommate's unexpected invitation disrupted these habitual rhythms and forced me to move. As Abulhawa (2015, p.141) suggests, even activities that appear outside of everyday mobility are not isolated events; rather, they are generated through the ordinary spatial and temporal practices of specific environments (see also Rantala, 2018). From this perspective, my aurora experience did not arise outside of everyday life but was instead produced within the rhythms of my routine activities, such as staying in my room, watching dramas, and hesitating to go outside at night.

After our conversation, I quickly put on my jacket, muffler, and gloves. My phone battery was only 15%, but I hoped it would last long enough, since I knew that the aurora appears much more vivid in photographs than to the human eyes.

While we were driving, my roommate asked me, "Have you ever seen the aurora in Finland before?" I answered, "No, I haven't, because I usually need to stay up late at night, and it is often too bright to see it around our apartment". She agreed. "But you really should see it because you are in Lapland now. You also need to see it before or after the snow comes, because the sky is much clearer". While we were sharing these experiences and knowledge about the aurora in the car, we watched the sky to check whether the aurora was moving. We were a bit hurried; not only was there limited time to see the aurora, but our excitement added to our nervousness. We said to each other, "We are hunting the aurora, literally".

After about 20 minutes of driving, we decided to stop at the Arctic Circle Hiking Area. Even from the parking spot, we could already see the aurora, but we decided to walk farther into the forest to find a clear and more open background. My roommate used her

phone light to help guide our way in the darkness, as I needed to conserve my battery for photographing. We walked carefully, as the ground in the forest was messy, and the tracking trail was wet and quite slippery.

On our way to see the aurora, the rhythm of our movements accelerated, shaped both by the aurora already visible from the car and by our conversation as we exchanged knowledge and observations of this natural phenomenon. We felt that we might miss it if we did not hurry, because we knew the aurora is a temporary phenomenon. At the same time, our excitement and expectation of seeing the magical aurora after driving and walking through the slippery forest pushed us to move towards the aurora. Throughout this experience, a tangible material – my phone, which had not been charged and had only 15% battery remaining – was always in my head as both a mental anxiety and a physical hindrance in the darkness, because I prioritised my desire to take photographs. Our excitement and sense of urgency were shaped by the surrounding environment, such as the visible aurora, the slippery path, the cold temperature, and the phone.

In this way, our bodily movements were co-created with the space around us (Haanpää, 2022; Jääskeläinen, 2023). Haanpää (2022) described the body movement in such an experience as temporary and collaborative, emerging within the space of human and more-than human actors. Specifically in the context of the aurora experience, Jóhannesson and Lund (2017) argued that aurora choreography is always contingent and partly improvised by human and more-than-human bodies during aurora tours. Through our embodied movement, we deeply connected between people and objects (see Kugapi & Höckert, 2022). On the way to the aurora, our bodily movements were co-created in the space in-between me, my roommate, our materials, and the surrounding nature (see Ingold, 2015). There were no fixed or repetitive rhythms or movement within these dynamic relationships; rather, I learned how to move within or between them (Haanpää, 2022).

“Okay, shall we stop here?” Once my roommate suggested that, and as she turned off her phone light, I suddenly realised that the aurora curtains were surrounding us. Under the darkness, I could clearly observe both strong and weak lights moving in different

rhythms, although the aurora itself does not make sounds with its movement. On this quiet and cold stage, I felt my roommate and I were standing at the top of the Earth, and another aurora layer was covering the Earth.

I tried to take as many photos as I could before my phone battery died in the cold temperature. My fingers had already become frozen, making it difficult to properly adjust the camera settings. I wanted to reduce the brightness to better capture the aurora, but even the simplest touch felt clumsy. My phone soon shut down under the cold temperature, and I regretted not charging it earlier, but such unpredictability is part of the aurora experience.

Space and time are always experienced through one's body since we are dwelling within them (Abulhawa, 2015; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). To experience the aurora, I needed to enter the darkness – an uncertain, undefined space. Lund (2020) described this uncertain dark space as deterritorialisation, in which darkness enables us to sense what is more than visual through an earthbound awareness. In the darkness, one does not have a clear visual boundary between each actor, and the separation between objects, space, and bodies becomes less ambiguous. As a result, perception relies less on visual cues and more on bodily senses, which become attuned to the surrounding environment.

Additionally, to be wrapped up in darkness demands that one moves with its flow and adjusts to its rhythms (Jóhannesson & Lund, 2017). In my experience, the cold temperature and darkness also limited my movement. I could not take photographs smoothly with my cold hands, and we had to reduce our movement to conserve energy in the cold conditions. Darkness also disrupted my usual walking pace, making it difficult to move at the same speed as in everyday life. In this way, darkness altered my bodily relationships with my surroundings, requiring me to attune to it, flow with it, and be with it. These limitations of movement in nature slowed down my everyday rhythm and let go of the heaviness I feel in the light (Rantala, 2018).

During the aurora experience, I found myself immersed in the touristic practice of chasing the visible aurora, while at the same time I attempted to capture this phenomenon through my

smartphone. Over the past decade, the aurora experience has increasingly become one of the main tourist attractions in Rovaniemi. Social media platforms are filled with beautiful images of the northern lights seen from Rovaniemi, and their unpredictable nature attracts people to participate in a magical or once-in-a-lifetime experience. Although I know I am able to stay in Rovaniemi for two years, unlike temporary tourists, I still felt a strong desire not to miss the moment and to capture it on my phone. This urge pushed me to move quickly in search of clear view of the aurora, while also worrying about saving my phone battery.

However, at the same time, the growing boom of aurora tourism has created challenges in Rovaniemi. Signboards advertising aurora tours are everywhere in the city centre, a space which is shared by both tourists and residents in their daily lives. Additionally, large groups of aurora hunters riding large buses late at night create noise and disruption, and some individual tourists also trespass on private properties (see Rovaniemi Kaupunki, 2025). Tourists sometimes leave rubbish and cause damage to ecosystems, which can be seen especially once the snow begins to melt. While tourism contributes significantly to the economy of Rovaniemi, the increasing commercialisation of the aurora phenomenon can be seen as producing tension between accessibility and preservation. These problems raise a question for me regarding whether tourism in Rovaniemi can still be considered socially and environmentally sustainable.

Through reflection on my bodily experience of the aurora with my roommate, I began to understand it as more than a magical phenomenon to be captured in photographs. Instead, the darkness highlighted the importance of bodies and movement as well as how they interact with surroundings – human and more-than-human alike – in shaping tourism experiences (Jóhanneson & Lund, 2017, p. 189; see also Martini & Buda, 2020; Woodward & Swartjes, 2023). In the darkness, my body did not move to the same mundane rhythms, and my senses became more attentive to my bodily movement and how it is shaped through my surroundings, including my roommate, my phone, and the visible auroras. This suggests the different possibilities of aurora experiences in Rovaniemi, which extend beyond hunting this natural phenomenon or taking photos of it as a tourism object. As Tucker and Shelton (2018, p. 66) argued, the mood and embodied experiences broadly influence one's being in and

engaging with the world. The aurora experience also offers the possibility for tourists to be culturally and environmentally responsible, becoming attentive to their surroundings within the entanglement of human and more-than-human relationships under the darkness.

4.3 Sharing experiences: Making knowledge together in difference

“How’s your life going?” This is a question our programme friends often ask each other. This time, it came up at a *laavu*, a traditional Finnish lean-to shelter in the forest. Since it was the summer holiday, we had decided to spend time there together, sitting at the *laavu*, surrounding the fire, and eating sausages. From what I heard, some people were working, others had moved to a new house or had returned to their home countries during the summer holiday.

After sharing our life updates, including some gossip and complaints, the topic shifted to our studies. Someone said, “I cannot believe that our second year is starting soon, and we have to write our thesis”. I could not believe it either. I still clearly remember when I arrived in Rovaniemi last August with hope and anxiety.

Looking at the fire with my friends, I began to reflect on my first year in Rovaniemi. While I sometimes felt challenged living outside my home country, I also enjoyed learning new knowledge and spending time with friends from various backgrounds, just as I was sitting around the fire at that moment. I used to think that life as a master’s student would be lonely and quite stressful, but in reality, it has been a much richer experience than I expected. Now, I am in a learning environment in which I can share my recent updates and the stresses of studying while sitting in front of a fire in the forest. I am grateful for this safe learning environment, and I am certain that I will never forget these two years as an international master’s student.

Dialogue and reflection on my learning experiences as an international student have allowed me to recognise how comfortable I am in my current situation. When we first arrived and started our programme as international students, we were guests attempting to understand the local context. However, now we embody local practices, sitting among the trees, gathering

around the fire, and enjoying conversations at the *laavu*. In this space, there is no longer a host who explains or gives meaning to the experience. Instead, we are creating meaning together by opening ourselves to each other and accepting our differences (see Anderson, 2009; Woodward & Swartjes, 2023).

Surrounding the fire, the atmosphere felt open and inviting, allowing us to talk and listen to each other outside the classroom, rather than hurrying to understand and know the different others. This open and warm atmosphere encouraged us to share recent updates about both our academic progress and everyday experiences among programme members. This openness may be shaped by the warmth of the fire or by the surrounding natural environment, including the trees near the lake and the brightness of the summer light (Woodward & Swartjes, 2023, p. 46). This atmosphere cannot be described or explained; rather, as Anderson (2009, p. 80) suggests, the atmosphere is spread across spaces and between us. While sitting and watching the fire, I felt that the atmosphere was emotionally empowering, as it enabled me to open up to talking and listening and to sense the closeness to human and more-than-human others through my body (d’Hauteserre, 2015, p. 82; see also Kugapi & Höckert, 2022).

I felt that the understanding between us was deepened not through efficiency or structured discussion but through our willingness to listen and remain present with one another. Though these slow conversation in the *laavu*, I came to realise that there are many differences among programme members and that these differences are significantly meaningful within the learning process. Throughout my experiences in this international degree programme, I have often had opportunities to study and interact with students from different backgrounds. The differences I noticed ranged from small aspects of everyday life, such as how people spend their summer holidays or explain their motivations for studying, to much larger differences, including communication styles and different ways of perceiving and understanding the world. Although such differences can sometimes feel challenging, they also become valuable opportunities for learning and reflection.

This experience of spending time at a *laavu* and engaging in conversation is generally

regarded as a mundane everyday practice within the local context of Rovaniemi. However, at the same time, it can also be understood as a form of touristic experience in which meaning is co-created through embodied interaction and the sharing of differences in-between human and in more-than-human settings (Ingold, 2015). From this perspective, transformation emerges not because the experience is extraordinary in itself but through the way individuals engage with the experiences and the situated context in which everyday life is experienced. Consequently, even experiences that appear mundane for the locals may emerge as meaningful tourism experiences of recognising differences for international students.

Jutila et al. (2024) emphasised that togetherness in conducting research creates hope and strength while also requiring openness, understanding, acceptance, and appreciation of differences. Of course, it is not possible to fully understand all differences among us or to eliminate them. However, through our dialogue and reflection in the *laavu*, I acknowledged that openly sharing differences with each other can expand our perspectives and help to co-create new knowledge in meaningful ways. As Watsuji (1935, p. 147) posited, when we understand ourselves, the diverse characteristics of different regions of the world can gain true meaning and vice versa. In other words, being open to differences can be understood as a fundamental basis for co-creating knowledge in international learning environments. In my case, this openness to differences was experienced through embodied interactions at the *laavu*, where the shared atmosphere, conversations, and sensory engagement with our surroundings enabled us to co-create meaning together.

Through this experience, I began to reflect on how the process of learning together despite differences could be one of the most significant aspects of my educational journey as an international student. Instead of acquiring correct knowledge (Stolz, 2015), an open and warm environment enabled us to engage with diverse perspectives in the creation of knowledge. From my experiences in the *laavu*, I strongly believe that what is most important for creating knowledge is seeking to understand different perspectives and values instead of raising our defences or rushing to reach mutual understanding. In addition, although something may seem to be a small piece of knowledge, it is an indispensable part of the larger whole. Each experience and perspective is not isolated but interconnected, forming a

broader meaning. Therefore, rather than overcome or compete with each other, learning in differences can provide international students opportunities to create better knowledge together. Such learning is not limited to the classroom but is continuously developed through everyday interactions and shared experiences.

5. TRANSFORMING THROUGH THE MUNDANE IN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE

This study has explored international students' experiences of tourism and the transformative processes within mundane practices through my affective body. Following Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology (1962), this study has understood that my learning experiences happen through my body. I have paid attention to non-representational aspects of bodily experience such as affect, senses, movements, emotions, and atmosphere (d' Hauteserre, 2015; Vannini, 2015; Kugapi & Höckert, 2022). Moreover, to explore the detailed processes of the learning experience, I have conceptualised the mundane practices of international students as transformation. Rather than considering only extraordinary experiences to be meaningful, this study understands the transformation as taking place within the connection to everyday practices (Rantala, 2018; Ingold, 2015).

Drawing on my experience as an international student and engaging with theoretical readings, I have used an autoethnographic approach to relate three stories that represent my transformative experiences in Rovaniemi (see Valtonen et al., 2017; Haanpää et al., 2022). In previous studies, students' learning experiences of students have been investigated from researchers' perspectives, and students are often objectified (Küpers & Wee, 2018). Additionally, some studies have attempted to reach beyond the researcher-and-participant divide to understand the learning process, employing various methodological approaches, such as interviews (Cockayne, 2025), visual photography (Prazeres, 2018), and ethnography (Brown, 2009). The autoethnographic approach, which is used in this account, is an effective way to bridge the boundaries between researchers and participants, positioning students as both researchers and observers at the same time (Ellis et al., 2011).

The insights from my autoethnographic experience are personal and positional knowledge; therefore, they cannot be generalised to all international students, which is a limitation of this study. However, as highlighted in the introduction, this study understands that international student experiences are subjective and contextual, depending on students' personalities,

destinations, and fields of study. Instead of generalising or categorising knowledge, this study aims to contribute to the body of knowledge by providing an in-depth understanding of the experiences from intersubjective and longitudinal perspectives. By employing affective autoethnography, I have focused on emotions and bodily movement as the central tools of analysis. Additionally, I have reflected on the validity and reliability of this research in the subchapter on methodology. As Stanley (2015, p. 146) argued in the studies of autoethnography of their PhD journey, this provided new perspectives and a nuanced understanding of the learning experiences of international students. I believe the findings of this study through autoethnography could provide insight into the valuable experiences of international students in the context of tourism.

This study particularly presented my personal experience through the novel approach, utilising stories from my writing materials. I created and rewrote stories multiple times based on my bodily memories (Valtonen & Haanpää, 2018). As Richardson (2000, p. 179) argued, this study considers that writing is a significant practice of knowing about myself and the topic (see also Jääskeläinen, 2023). The first story, relating my encounter with the local woman in the sauna, allowed me to recognise that my positionality in Rovaniemi is not fixed to either host or guest. Through reflection on this experience, I started to understand my identity as negotiated and determined through social and cultural interactions in the destination. The second story, about my first aurora experience, was created with human and more-than-human contexts. Through this aurora experience, I related that the meaning of the aurora experience is more than just a magical phenomenon to capture in photographs; rather, it is an opportunity to be socially and environmentally responsible, becoming attentive to more-than-human agents under the darkness. Furthermore, the dialogue with my programme members in a *laavu* developed my understanding of knowledge creation. Through this reflection, I understood that openness to difference is an integral attitude for developing knowledge together. These are presented as separate subchapters in this study, yet they are closely interwoven, supporting existing research on international students and tourism in their own ways.

As elaborated in the narrative stories, I have experienced tourism in multiple ways, which responds to the first research question of this study: How do international students experience tourism through their embodied practices during their stay? The aurora experience can clearly be identified as a touristic experience in Rovaniemi (see Jóhannesson & Lund, 2017). The rushed feeling of chasing the aurora, due to its limited visibility, and its strong dependence on digital material represents an embodied experience of the aurora, which is one of the most popular tourist experiences in Rovaniemi (Visit Rovaniemi, n.d.). Additionally, experiencing the social and cultural practices of the locals through my meaningful interaction with a woman in the sauna is another significant aspect of the tourism experience (Oh et al., 2007, p.122). Furthermore, the story of the *laavu* can also be interpreted as a tourism experience within mundane practices in the destination. Although sitting around a fire and enjoying conversation at the *laavu* are mundane practices in Finland, they were meaningful and somewhat extraordinary experiences for me as an international student, as students from different backgrounds interacted in the space and created meaning together.

These three stories of tourism experiences – a sauna, the aurora, and sitting at a *laavu* – are packaged and marketed to tourists in Rovaniemi. However, the meaning attached to these experiences by international students differs from that attached to curated tourists' experiences, thereby offering new ways of understanding the tourism experiences of international students. Previous studies have investigated the tourism experiences of international students either from the perspectives of host (Brown, 2009; Malet Calvo et al., 2023; Selby, 2021) or guest (Kashiwagi et al., 2018; Prazeres, 2018) in the destination. However, as Sheller and Urry (2011, p. 211) argued, the boundary between tourists and non-tourists has become blurred, and international students are situated within this ambiguous position as a something in-between host and guest in the destination. Unlike tourists who experience activities through organised and guided settings, international students experience the everyday practices of locals from a position in-between tourist and host, and they create touristic experiences for themselves from these local mundane activities. The intensity of independently navigating these experiences often produces deeper emotional and embodied meanings, thereby creating a more powerful experience than the polished tourist version.

Moreover, it has been indicated through my stories in Rovaniemi that the experience of tourism in everyday practices provides opportunities for international students to encounter and interact with new others outside of their home country and culture. As presented in the narratives, these others could include different humans, nature, places, cultures, and objects. Through encounters with these unknown others in different cultural and social contexts, I have sometimes come to recognise my ignorance and arrogance in thinking I know a lot about the surrounding world. Moreover, when I have acknowledged my ignorance of the world, I have felt uncertainty and embarrassment. While staying outside their home and experiencing tourism, international students become aware of the unknown world and disrupt their existing assumptions and understandings of the world.

Transformation, in this sense, is understood differently from previous studies of international students and tourism. This answers the second question of this study: How do international students learn and transform through the affective embodiment of their everyday lives in destinations? As Rantala (2018) argued, my stories in Rovaniemi revealed that transformation is an ongoing process of continuously updating one's understanding of the world through encounters with various others through mundane activities and reflection on previous attitudes. It is the process of becoming attentive to our surroundings (Ingold, 2015). This transformation is demonstrated in my stories as negotiating and situating myself in human and cultural encounters in the destinations, becoming aware of the agency of more-than-humans, and welcoming differences. Transformation occurs in silent, still, slow, and small ways (Veijola et al., 2019, p.25), rather than as an extraordinary or intense event. These cognitive shifts in transformation may be small changes, yet they can significantly influence one's later life, creating new ways of relating to the entangled world.

This understanding overcomes the isolation of the extraordinary from the ordinary in the tourism context and considers experiences in relation to everyday practices. As discussed in the theoretical framework in Chapter 2, transformation has often been understood as an outcome of extraordinary events and an escape from everyday ordinariness (Arnould & Price, 1993; Kirillova et al., 2017; Urry & Larsen, 2011). The same aspects have been applied in studies on international students, where separation from the home country and exposure to

extraordinary experiences, such as acculturation and language development, are seen as causes of transformation (e.g. Brown, 2009; Fritz et al., 2008; Zhou et al., 2008). However, the findings of this study encourage researchers to pay attention to how tourists or temporary mobilities build relationships and create meanings through continuous negotiate with embodied and sensory engagement with places and their surroundings. This study makes it possible to understand transformation as a continuous process and tourism experience from a more dynamic and relational perspective.

Therefore, from my personal experiences in Rovaniemi, I now understand that learning as an international student can be interpreted as a relational and continuous process of knowing with, rather than knowing about, or capturing representational understanding. It is the process of situating and connecting ourselves with the material and situated world with humans, nature, places, cultures, and objects, though or with our bodies (Ingold, 2015; Rantala, 2018). Additionally, it is the practice of understanding the world through these relationships. In my experience, learning and transformation have occurred through this relationality of bodily senses and affective engagement (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Furthermore, these interactions with new others outside my home country through the ordinary activities of the destination disrupted my existing assumptions and understanding, prompting me to reconsider my relationship with the world. Such encounters were not merely about acquiring knowledge but constituted a process through which new meanings and possibilities emerged by being with others. In this sense, learning cannot be understood solely as acquiring existing knowledge; instead, it is continuously generated through ongoing relationships with others and the environment.

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for higher education practitioners who administer international programmes. Current educational approaches often focus on producing competitive human resources for industry, and an emphasis is placed on acquiring correct knowledge and creating measurable outcomes (Edelheim, 2020; Stolz, 2015). While such outcomes are important, my own experiences as an international student suggest that education is not only about the measurable results. This study highlights the importance of considering students' learning experiences as taking place within mundane practices and

relational contexts. Therefore, in future research, international education can be redefined as a space that fosters relational and processual learning experiences for students rather than focusing on producing competitive human resources.

I hope future researchers examine the experiences of international students from the students' own perspectives. In this study, the autoethnographic approach provided in-depth insights into my experiences in tourism, making it possible to shed light on subjective and emotional aspects through the everyday practices of the destination. However, as emphasised in the introduction, students' experiences at a destination differ depending on the destination, their field of study, and their personal backgrounds. Since this study focused only on my experiences in Rovaniemi, further research could be conducted from other students' perspectives to reveal a broader range of transformative experiences among international students.

Additionally, different approaches could be used to represent international students' personal experiences. Storytelling was particularly valuable in presenting my embodied experiences in this study and offered a nuanced understanding from my own perspective. However, Richardson (2000) highlighted that there are numerous ways to record and represent lived experiences, including poetry, visual representations, drawing, and other creative methods. Future research, therefore, could explore these more creative and affective forms of representation to enrich the understanding of international students' experiences.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I decided to record my transformative experiences in Rovaniemi as a master's thesis, as I do not want to forget the experiences and the people involved in these processes. Living in Rovaniemi as an international student was sometimes challenging, but it becomes a precious time for me, especially because I encountered people who supported me throughout this journey.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor, Minni Haanpää, whose comments always inspired me and encourage deeper reflection. My interest in this topic was first sparked during her first lecture in the master's programme, Christmas Experience Academy. Thank you for inspiring me throughout my studies and guiding me through the thesis process with your profound knowledge.

This master's journey would not have been possible without the generous financial support from the University of Lapland and the Egashira Hospitality Industry Promotion Foundation in Japan. Thanks to this support, I was able to focus fully on my studies without financial burden.

I would also like to thank the researchers in the tourism research at the University of Lapland. Their feedback to my work always encouraged me and helped develop my research abilities. I am also deeply grateful to my programme members, who shared this memorable and unforgettable times in Rovaniemi. Without our mutual emotional support, both inside and outside the classroom, I could not have reached at this point. I am very happy that I was able to study as a master's student in such a safe and welcoming environment in the tourism research at the University of Lapland.

My deepest thanks extend to my families in Japan. I always grateful for your emotional support. Now, I have come to realise how wonderful it is that you warmly accepted and supported my decision to live abroad. Finally, thank you, Daijiro, for giving me the greatest support everyday throughout my master's studies. I am looking forward to spending the rest of my lives with you.

Rovaniemi, May 13th 2026

Nagisa Mochizuki

REFERENCES

- Abulhawa, D. (2015). Locating rhythms: Improvised play in the built environment. In M. MacLean, W. Russell, & E. Ryall (Eds.), *Philosophical perspectives on play* (pp. 136–151). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315732213>
- Adams, T. E., Ellis, C., & Jones, S. H. (2017). Autoethnography. *The international encyclopedia of communication research methods*, 1-11.
- Anderson, B. (2009). Affective atmospheres. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 2(2), 77-81. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2009.08.005>
- Andrade, M. S. (2009). The effects of English language proficiency on adjustment to university life. *International Multilingual Research Journal*, 3(1), 16-34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19313150802668249>
- Arnould, E. J., & Price, L. L. (1993). River magic: Extraordinary experience and the extended service encounter. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 20(1), 24-45. <https://doi.org/10.1086/209331>
- Brown, L. (2009). The transformative power of the international sojourn: An ethnographic study of the international student experience. *Annals of tourism research*, 36(3), 502-521. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2009.03.002>
- Clough, P. T., & Halley, J. O. (2007). *The affective turn: Theorizing the social*. Duke University Press.
- Cockayne, H. (2025). Embodied journeys: international students as active co-creators of inclusive higher education spaces, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 44(5), 1065-1078. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2025.2463525>
- Cohen, S. A. (2011). Lifestyle travellers: Backpacking as a way of life. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 38(4), 1535-1555.
- d’Hauteserre, A. (2015). Affect theory and the attractivity of destinations. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 55, 77-89. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2015.09.001>
- Dashper, K. (2016). Researching from the inside: Autoethnography and critical event studies.

- In I. R. Lamond & L. Platt (Eds.), *Critical event studies: Approaches to research* (pp. 213-229). Palgrave Macmillan/Springer Nature.
- Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2018). *The sage handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). Sage.
- Doering, T. A. (2007). "Don't just visit. Live it!": a descriptive study of Japan exchange and teaching programme participants' experiences in Miyazaki prefecture (master thesis, University of Otago).
- Edelheim, J. (2020). How should tourism education values be transformed after 2020? *Tourism Geographies*, 22(3), 547-554.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1760927>
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: an overview. *Historical Social Research*, 36(4), 273-290. <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.36.2011.4.273-290>
- Eskola, M. (2024). *Exploring embodied luxury: Practice-theoretical autoethnography of a yoga retreat holiday*. Lapin yliopisto.
- Fritz, M. V., Chin, D., & DeMarinis, V. (2008). Stressors, anxiety, acculturation and adjustment among international and North American students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 32(3), 244-259.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2008.01.001>
- Grimwood, B. S. R., Arthurs, W., & Vogel, T. (2015). Photo essays for experiential learning: Toward a critical pedagogy of place in tourism education. *Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism*, 15(4), 362-381. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15313220.2015.1073574>
- Haanpää, M. (2017). *Event co-creation as choreography: Autoethnographic study on event volunteer knowing*. University of Lapland.
- Haanpää, M. (2022). Co-creation as choreography. *Qualitative Market Research*, 25(5), 614-624. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QMR-01-2022-0018>
- Haanpää, M., García-Rosell, J. C., & Hakkarainen, M. (2022). Walking the concepts: elaborating on the non-representational sensitivities of tourism experience. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 38(15-16), 1832-1850.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2022.2058591>

- Höckert, E., & Grimwood, B. S. (2024). Inquiring with hospitable methodologies. In O. Rantala, V. Kinnunen, & E. Höckert (Eds.), *Researching with proximity: Relational methodologies for the Anthropocene* (pp. 21–41). Springer Nature Switzerland.
- Hokkanen, S. (2017). Analyzing personal embodied experiences: Autoethnography, feelings, and fieldwork. *Translation & Interpreting: The International Journal of Translation and Interpreting Research*, 9(1), 24-35. <https://doi.org/10.12807/ti.109201.2017.03>
- Ingold, T. (2015). *The life of lines*. Routledge.
- J Jutila, S., Höckert, E., & Rantala, O. (2024). Becoming fragile. In O. Rantala, V. Kinnunen, & E. Höckert (Eds.), *Researching with Proximity* (pp. 43-56). Springer Nature Switzerland. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-39500-0_3
- Jääskeläinen, P. (2023). Research as reach-searching from the kinesphere. *Culture and Organization*, 29(6), 548-563, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2023.2224485>
- Jóhannesson, G. T., & Lund, K. A. (2017). Aurora Borealis: Choreographies of darkness and light. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 63, 183-190. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2017.02.001>
- Johnson, D. W. (2019). *Watsuji on nature: Japanese philosophy in the wake of Heidegger*. Northwestern University Press.
- Johnston, L. (2001). (Other) bodies and tourism studies. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 28(1), 180-201.
- Kashiwagi, S., Nagai, H., & Furutani, T. (2018). VFR travel generated by international students: The case of Japanese students in Australia. *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal*, 66(1), 89-103.
- Kirilova, K., Lehto, X., & Cai, L. (2017). What triggers transformative tourism experiences? *Tourism Recreation Research*, 42(4), 498-511. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2017.1342349>
- Kugapi, O., & Höckert, E. (2022). Affective entanglements with travelling mittens. *Tourism Geographies*, 24(2-3), 457-474. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1801824>

- Küpers, W., & Wee, D. (2018). Tourist cities as embodied places of learning: Walking in the “feelds” of Shanghai and Lisbon. *International Journal of Tourism Cities*, 4(3), 376-390. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJTC-12-2017-007>
- Kuuru, T. K. (2022). Embodied knowledge in customer experience: reflections on yoga. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 25(3), 231-251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2022.2025783>
- Lapiņa, L. (2018). Recruited into Danishness? Affective autoethnography of passing as Danish. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 25(1), 56-70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506817722175>
- Leavy, P. (2020). *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice*. Guilford publications.
- Lund, K. A. (2021). Creatures of the night: Bodies, rhythms and Aurora Borealis. In N. Dunn & T. Edensor (Eds.), *Rethinking Darkness: Cultures, Histories, Practices* (pp. 178-190). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429259654-13>
- Malet Calvo, D., Nofre, J., & Fuarros, Í. S. (2024). Unveiling the intersections between tourism industry and student mobility. *Population, Space and Place*, 30(4), e2752. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2752>
- Martini, A., & Buda, D. M. (2020). Dark tourism and affect: Framing places of death and disaster. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 23(6), 679-692. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2018.1518972>
- McIlwain, D. (2007). Pleasure in mind: Silvan Tomkins and affect in aesthetics, personality theory and culture. *Theory & Psychology*, 17(4), 499-504. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354307079294>
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception* (C. Hurley, Trans.). Routledge.
- Minca, C. (2009). The island: Work, tourism and the biopolitical. *Tourist Studies*, 9(2), 88-108. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468797609360599>
- Oh, H., Fiore, A. M., & Jeoung, M. (2007). Measuring experience economy concepts: Tourism applications. *Journal of Travel Research*, 46(2), 119–132. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287507304039>

- Prazeres, L. (2018). At home in the city: Everyday practices and distinction in international student mobility. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 19(7), 914-934.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2017.1323343>
- Rantala, O. (2018). With the rhythm of nature: Reordering everyday life through holiday living. In L. James, C. Ren, & H. Halkier (Eds.), *Theories of practice in tourism* (pp. 58-76). Routledge.
- Richardson, L. (2000). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 179–200). SAGE.
- Rickly, J. M. (2021). Performing beyond the view: Embodiment and tourist experiences. In R. Sharpley (Ed.), *Routledge handbook of the tourist experience* (pp.246-265). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003219866-13>
- Rovaniemen kaupunki. (2025, March 24). *Kaupunginhallitus käsitteli matkailun tilastoja ja lyhytviikoksiin liittyvää lausuntokierrosta*. <https://www.rovaniemi.fi/news/Kaupunginhallitus-kasitteli-matkailun-tilastoja-ja-lyhytviikoksiin-liittyvaa-lausuntokierrosta-35150/8b6bdf11-6b96-4208-bbf1-cfe7916e165e>
- Seigworth, G. J., & Gregg, M. (2010). *The affect theory reader*. Duke.
- Selby, M. (2021). Mobile student experience: The place of tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 90, 103253. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2021.103253>
- Sheller, M., & Urry, J. (2006). The new mobilities paradigm. *Environment and Planning*, 38(2), 207-226. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a37268>
- Stanley, P. (2015). Writing the PhD journey (s) an autoethnography of zine-writing, angst, embodiment, and backpacker travels. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 44(2), 143-168. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241614528708>
- Stewart, K. (2017). In the world that affect proposed. *Cultural Anthropology*, 32(2), 192-198. <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2236-381X>
- Stolz, S. A. (2015). Embodied learning. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 47(5), 474-487. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2013.879694>

- Tucker, H., & Shelton, E. J. (2018). Tourism, mood and affect: Narratives of loss and hope. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 70, 66-75.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2018.03.001>
- UNESCO. (2025, June 23). *Record number of higher education students highlights global need for recognition of qualifications*. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/record-number-higher-education-students-highlights-global-need-recognition-qualifications>
- Urry, J., & Larsen, J. (2011). *The tourist gaze 3.0* (3rd ed.). SAGE.
- Valtonen, A., & Haanpää, M. (2018). The body in autoethnography. In A. Norrgrann & H. Syrjälä (Eds.), *Multifaceted autoethnography: Theoretical advancements, practical considerations and field illustrations* (pp. 125-145). Nova Science Publishers.
- Valtonen, A., Meriläinen, S., Laine, P. M., & Salmela-Leppänen, T. (2017). The knowing body as a floating body. *Management Learning*, 48(5), 520-534.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507617706833>
- Vannini, P. (2015). Non-representational ethnography: New ways of animating lifeworlds. *Cultural Geographies*, 22(2), 317-327. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474014555657>
- Veijola, S., & Jokinen, E. (1994). The body in tourism. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 11(3), 125-151.
- Veijola, S., Höckert, E., Carlin, D., Light, A., & Säynäjäkangas, J. (2019). The conference reimaged: Postcards, letters, and camping together in undressed places. *Digitium*, 24, 21–35. <http://doi.org/10.7238/d.v0i24.3168>
- Visit Rovaniemi. (2024). *Rovaniemi statistics and estimates for winter season 2023–2024*. <https://www.visitrovaniemi.fi/wp-content/uploads/Rovaniemi-statistics-and-estimates-for-winter-season-2023-2024.pdf>
- Visit Rovaniemi. (n.d.). *Rovaniemi Arctic Capital: Urban small town ambiance in Lapland, Finland*. <https://www.visitrovaniemi.fi/love/rovaniemi-arctic-capital/>
- Washida, K. (2020). *Merleau-Ponty: Reversibility*. Tokyo: Kodansha.
- Watsuji, T. (1935). *Fūdo*. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.
- Wilson, S., & Obrador, P. (2022). Dwelling in campervans: homemaking and mobile

neighbouring on the move. *Mobilities*, 17(1), 102-118.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2021.1967095>

Woodward, I., & Swartjes, B. (2023). Making music festival atmospheres: Nature, materials, and the play of atmospheric properties. In Steadman, C. and Coffin, J. (Eds.) *Consuming Atmospheres. Designing, Experiencing, and Researching Atmospheres in Consumption Spaces* (pp. 36-50). Routledge.

Yakhlef, A. (2010). The corporeality of practice-based learning. *Organization Studies*, 31(4), 409-430. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840609357384>

Zhou, Y., Jindal-Snape, D., Topping, K., & Todman, J. (2008). Theoretical models of culture shock and adaptation in international students in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(1), 63-75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070701794833>