

CRISIS AND COLONIALITY AT EUROPE'S MARGINS

Creating Exotic Iceland



KRISTÍN LOFTSDÓTTIR



Crisis and Coloniality at Europe's Margins

Crisis and Coloniality at Europe's Margins: Creating Exotic Iceland provides a fresh look at the current politics of identity in Europe, using a crisis at the margins of Europe to shed light on the continued embeddedness of coloniality in everyday aspirations and identities. Examining Iceland's response to its collapse into bankruptcy in 2008, the author explores the way in which the country sought to brand itself as an exotic tourist destination. With attention to the nation's aspirations, rooted in the late 19th century, of belonging as part of Europe, rather than being classified with colonized countries, the book examines the engagement with ideas of otherness across and within Europe, as European discourses continue to be based on racialized ideas of 'civilized' people. With its focus on coloniality at a time of crisis, this volume contributes to our understanding of how racism endures in the present and the significance of nationalistic sentiments in a world of precariousness. Anchored in part in personal narrative, this critical analysis of coloniality, racism, whiteness and national identities will appeal to scholars across the social sciences with interests in national identity-making, European politics and race in a world characterized by crisis.

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Two women very important in my life passed away while I was completing this book: Ásta Jónsdóttir, my grandmother, and Helen K. Henderson, one of my mentors during my PhD studies. They had strength, humor and an ability to have strong positive and inspiring effects on those around them – including me.



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Introduction

I move slowly toward the intersection, cars jammed ahead and behind. I need the slow pace because I am on my mobile trying to understand what my husband is saying. Over the phone, his words are clear, but what he is saying is incomprehensible. He explains that he is at the bank surrounded by a crowd, all doing the same thing: trying to withdraw as much money as possible, because – as he puts it – “there is no way of knowing what will happen.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, “What can happen?”

“Well, I don’t know.” Even while trying to avoid the question, his words reveal a future of uncertainty where even the most absurd things can happen. It is as if the phone is not only connecting us through space, but also bringing us toward a radically different envisioning of the future.

I say the unspeakable, which would have been ridiculous just a month before: “Could the bank go bankrupt? Is that what you mean?” I remind myself of the tiresome monologue I’ve had to listen over the last few weeks; that he just knows that things will go wrong, there are so many similarities to the boom period preceding the US crash in 1929 and other crashes he knows from history. He works in a bank, so he should know. But he’s been warning of this for a while and besides, he could be wrong. After all, everyone else working at the banks seems to think things are fine.

“I don’t know, but it is really crazy here,” he continues. “Really surrealistic. I have to talk to you later.” He hangs up and the image that lingers my mind is not the US in 1929, which he has so often mentioned, but Niger.

In Niamey, where I spent a part of the two years in Niger doing my dissertation research, I remember people taking out plastic bags full of money from the bank – a sign of a so-called third-world country, where the banks were weak and where business was transacted between individuals with real money in their hands. Somewhere in the shadows of my own mind, a plastic bag full of money in the hands of respectable businessmen at the bank probably signified the country’s backwardness – after all, my mind had been shaped not only by my theoretical engagement in anthropology, but also by racialized European discourses of modernity and Africa’s incompatibility with it. Only much later did I realize that I was far from the only one who slipped into this feeling: that Iceland was becoming *almost* like a non-Western country as it neared economic collapse. My research

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in Niger, focusing on a small group of WoDaaBe pastoral nomads, had included an analyzed globalized imagery of racism and exoticism that the WoDaaBe were embedded in. When I moved back to Iceland in the late 1990s, I had attempted to understand racism and the imagination of Africa historically in Iceland, moving closer and closer to a more critical understanding that images of Africa in Iceland were not really about Africa but more about Iceland's position in the world of nations. In a sense I was moving away from the understanding of how racism had shaped people living in the African continent toward understanding the importance of whiteness and coloniality in shaping what it meant to be European – and what it meant to be Icelandic in the world of nations. Simultaneously, it was also becoming clearer to me how these subjects that seemed perhaps distant, Niger and Iceland, were part of the same reality in the sense of being part of the same larger historical processes. While reading about colonial imaginary and racism in Africa, I had observed more and more in my own society that the then ongoing economic boom was described in highly nationalistic and masculine terms; I was struck with the parallels this had with how Icelandic scholars in the late 19th and early 20th centuries had discussed Africa where they focused largely on European explorers. Both sets of discourses seemed to revolve very strongly around membership in the wider global and European community and as such were highly entangled with a conversation with Europe's colonial history. Colonial imaginary and global hierarchies of different bodies and societies were not just things of the past but all around me as I would be reminded over and over again as things started to unfold.

My husband was right. A few days later, three of Iceland's major commercial banks became technically bankrupt, marking the beginning of an extensive financial crisis that would last for years to come. Iceland's 'fall' in October 2008 was abrupt, and most people did not realize what was about to happen until they were already living it. The crash was not only harsh economically; it also involved a deep crisis of national identity and selfhood. It led to new and old questions relating to Iceland's status as a European country and the dynamic formation of national identity rooted in past historical processes – concerns which were, in fact, never far away during the boom.

This book is about the rise and fall of the idea of Iceland as an important player in the world, enmeshed with ideas of proper European-ness and discourses of whiteness. Using the economic crisis in Iceland as a lens for a nuanced understanding of imagining the European subject in a broader European perspective, the book stresses how the analysis of the recent economic crisis has to take place within a wide frame of geopolitical relations. Iceland's crisis affected European countries in different ways and brought up old questions about relationships between European countries and Iceland's designation as 'European,' as well as overlapping with racial geographies of power intrinsically linked to coloniality. While the book teases out these discourses in relation to Iceland, it uses them to reflect on broader issues of coloniality and identity in the European context.

The economic crash thus had to do with an interplay of desires and anxieties which have long formed part of the Icelandic internal discussion, including the desire to gain recognition from more powerful European nation-states and the

anxieties of being associated with colonized and globally marginalized communities. This book investigates how contemporary ideas of crisis in Europe and beyond involve a particular reconfiguration of the past – the past, as Andreas Huyssen (2001) has underlined, providing an important resource in comprehending complex global interrelations in the present.

Iceland's ambiguous placement within Europe is an important part of this past, as is reflected in its status up until 1944 as a Danish dependency while also belonging with the Nordic countries and Northern Europe and, being as such, associated with whiteness and a sense of 'proper' European-ness. As I will show, the representations of Iceland, which made the economic expansion meaningful at the time, must be seen as a part of larger narratives of being European within a world that has been long interconnected. Even though the book is concerned with questions of race and geographies of racism, it does not attempt to map out racism in Iceland, which I have done elsewhere. Rather, it tries to understand more broadly how racialization is part of everyday aspirations and understanding of the world, and thus how coloniality, as an "underlying logic" (Lee, Hongling and Mignolo 2015, 187), continues to be an important part of the present.

Critical whiteness at the margins of Europe

The central role of colonialism and imperialism in shaping European identities in the 19th century has been well established by scholars (Gilroy 1993; Dirks 1992). Postcolonial theories can, however, be criticized for often assuming a particular European subject, i.e. those European countries that held colonial possessions. Colonialism and imperialism have been theorized less often in relation to European countries that did not themselves have colonies or were in some sense peripheral to the building of colonial empires. The recent exploration of the term "coloniality" in the writings of Walter D. Mignolo (2007, 2011) and Arturo Escobar (2007) draws deep attention to modernity as intrinsically embedded with colonialism and thus coloniality as a lingering condition and ways to think about the world that extends beyond the end of formal colonial administration (Grosfoguel 2011). This theoretical focus, generally referred to as the decolonial perspective, places the modernization project firmly within the logic of colonialism, thus coloniality and consequently racism are embedded within the project of modernity (Grosfoguel 2011). Within anthropology, scholars such as Laura Ann Stoler have in fact long criticized postcolonial theories for being too "confident" in the sense of tending to overgeneralize the colonial experience (2008, 192), as demonstrated by her earlier call to better recognize how the dichotomy of the categories "colonized" and "colonizer" encompass diversity¹ (Stoler 1992, 321).

These studies emphasize the need to analyze the emergence of these categories historically and thus, as Audrey Horning puts it, to acknowledge colonialism as a "messy past" (Horning 2011, 68), and to call for a more detailed and contextual analysis (Smith 2003). Such voices thus argue for analyzing colonialism from points of view similar to the decolonizing perspectives, involving not only colonies and colonial subjects, but coloniality as saturating modernity and

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belonging also to those Europeans who were not necessarily involved in colonialism and imperialism in the same way as major colonial powers, such as the UK and France. Barbara Lüthi, Francesca Falk and Patricia Purtschert (2016) speak of such countries as “blank spaces in colonial history” (2016, 1). Gunlög Fur (2006) points out that attempts to define outer edges of such categorization create marginal spaces, which involves a struggle of where the boundaries should be drawn; thus, in real life situations margins are “dislodged and recreated” (p. 494–495). To complicate matters further, the complex relationships between different parts of Europe were often characterized by a history of internal power dynamics taking forms similar to colonialism (Hechter 1999; Hipfl and Gronold 2011).

What I want to stress here is how the placement and self-perception of being on the margins – recognizing the margins as historically constituted and shifting – means a particular type of liminality or ambiguity. I have found it useful to think of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structural analysis of myths, where the figure of the trickster is conceived as a mediator situated “halfway between two polar terms,” retaining “something of that duality – namely an ambiguous and equivocal character” (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 226). The idea of the trickster implies that focusing on what does not ‘fit’ can in fact clearly illuminate the dualistic positions which Lévi-Strauss assumes are intrinsic to human thought and organization.

The Lévi-Strauss analogue of the trickster is useful when reflecting on Iceland’s position in the 19th- and early 20th-century environment. Iceland was a colony under Danish rule. It was not, however, a colony in the same sense as African colonies under European rule, many of which were brutally subjugated with violence, dehumanizing practices and massacres constituting a part of people’s everyday lives (see for example Franey 2003). Simultaneously, Icelandic people participated in colonized practices, both through their participation in settler colonialism in the Americas (Brydon 2001; Eyford 2006; Bertram 2018; Eyþórsdóttir and Loftsdóttir 2016) and through reproducing racism against colonized people.

Icelanders had conceptualized themselves as a distinct group of people for some time – a sentiment which was then articulated in particular ways within nationalistic ideas that became important in Iceland during the 19th century. Icelandic intellectuals often felt misunderstood and ridiculed by the Danes. When nationalist ideologies swept through Europe, it was relatively easy for Icelandic students in Copenhagen to frame their own sense of being Icelandic within the larger conception where nations were seen as the inherently true form of human organization. Throughout much of its history, Iceland was one of the poorest countries in Europe, and its inhabitants were often viewed by elites and intellectuals elsewhere in Europe as little better than the ‘savages’ living in other parts of the world. For the Icelandic elite, this perception was extremely painful, especially at the time when Iceland was seeking its full independence.

Explorations of how coloniality was lived and executed at the margins of Europe can be seen as a part of the deeper and more nuanced analysis of colonialism for which Stoler and others have called for. Such analysis involves a deeper exploration of the messiness of colonial categories and attention to the salience of dualistic thinking in Western history, where the question was to be *either* civilized

or not. Focusing on the margins of Europe is thus not only important in order to understand the construction of margins but also to deepen the understanding of the “project” of Europe. Europe, after all, as stressed by Sandra Ponzanesi, is ambivalent “both as a concept and as a project” (2016, 159).

Colonialism has generally not been perceived as a part of the history of those European countries that did not own colonies (Purtschert 2015; Rastas 2005; Hübinette and Lundström 2011). Nationalistic narratives in the Nordic countries generally exhibit a strong dismissal of Nordic involvement in colonialism (Keskinen et al. 2009; Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2012a; Palmberg 2001). When acknowledged, Nordic colonialism has often been seen as gentler than other colonialism, ignoring diverse and the often intense involvement of Nordic countries in the colonial project (Naum and Nordin 2013). Lars Jensen and I (2012) have found the concept ‘Nordic exceptionalism’ useful in capturing how this refusal to acknowledge Nordic involvement in colonialism constitutes a part of larger discourses that position Nordic countries as more peaceful and gentle. As is the case with other European countries that lacked colonies (Hipfl and Gronold 2011; Lüthi, Falk and Purtschert 2016; Loftsdóttir and Hipfl 2012), it is often stressed in various contexts that due to the lack of their colonial involvement, the Nordic countries do not share the burden of racism with other European countries. Racism is thus seen as non-existent in the present due to the imagination that these countries had no colonial past. In such an imagination, racism is also often reduced to hateful or aggressive acts between individuals.

This book affirms how Iceland actively participated in the reproduction of racist stereotypes of colonized people. At the same time, it primarily emphasizes how such categories and subjectivities form some strands in the material that weaves together people’s innermost desires and longings, where coloniality is part of the world’s wider social and historical structures, also of those who criticize racism. Racism is not only about bad people doing bad things. Racism involves racialization which structures how the world is perceived and acted upon, racialization referring to processes where race becomes meaningful in a particular context (Garner 2010, 19). Analyzing coloniality, as indicated earlier, reveals how racialized views continue to be embedded in various ways in current social and global structures and imagination of the world (see Grosfoguel 2011). Whiteness, as part of racialization, has historically been conflated with various markers of superiority (sometimes embedded in the terms ‘Nordic’ and ‘European’), and I especially benefit from recent interest in understanding whiteness as articulated in a European context.

Feminist theories of intersectionality (Collins 2015; Yuval-Davis 2006; Valentine 2007; Phoenix and Pattynama 2006) have been crucial in showing that race is entangled with other identities and identifications. Drawing on such a perspective, Philomena Essed and Sandra Trienekens see whiteness within the European context as a “floating concept” coded within notions of national identity, Western superiority and civilization (2008, 68, see also Gullestad 2002). Ramon Grosfoguel, Laura Oso and Anastasia Christou (2015) define racism as a “global hierarchy of human superiority and inferiority” that is produced politically, culturally

and economically (p. 636). This definition allows for taking into account how whiteness becomes meaningful through its intersection with other identifications. Notions of ‘whiteness’ must therefore, to some extent, take different forms by becoming embedded in different histories and local traditions (Hartigan 2010; Harrison 1998), while simultaneously recognizing how the current and past global mediascape has not respected imaginary boundaries between states and regions (Appadurai 1996). I stress that ‘whiteness’ is, furthermore, always seen as having been produced under a “special set of social and material circumstances” (Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2003, 9), while also being entangled within larger global discourses of difference and power. Whiteness is important in the Nordic context because ‘Nordic’ often assumes a white subject, as we see often in discourses of equality in the Nordic countries, both in terms of gender equality and equality in terms of immigrants and native populations (Gullestad 2002).

Postcolonial studies and whiteness studies may be said to have the common goal of destabilizing the idea of ‘the West’ or Europe as the main point of reference. Postcolonial studies point out how the European as the knowing subject was created in the colonial encounter, while whiteness studies seek to disrupt the invisibility of whiteness in the context of the terms Europe or Westerner. While the anthropological tradition has long aimed to criticize Western societies as the normative society (Marcus and Fisher 1999), the analysis of whiteness and racism in Europe remained for a long time peripheral within anthropology. What I see as valuable in anthropology is the discipline’s self-criticism and self-awareness in acknowledging its own troublesome roots in colonialism. Anthropology, furthermore, not only seeks to deconstruct and critically address the world around us, but also seeks deeper insights into why particular notions are meaningful and powerful, which involves understanding how meaning is constructed by those involved. Analysis of texts alone is certainly important, but this approach usually can neither capture the flesh and blood of the individuals behind the texts nor how particular acts and representations become salient to them in their particular historical environment. To better understand how racism ‘endures’ in the present (Amin 2010, 4), we have to analyze the different manifestations of racialization in the present where racism is not only seen as consisting of hateful acts but embedded in structural relationships between people and their everyday encounters and social surroundings.

Iceland, the postcolonial country

Until recently, relatively little attention has been paid to Iceland’s involvement in colonial ideologies. Critical post colonial perspectives are, however, present in the analysis of some anthropologists of Iceland early on (for example the works of anthropologists Ann Brydon, Gísli Pálsson, Sigríður Dúna Kristmundsdóttir and Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir). Postcolonial perspectives were not necessarily or always central to their analysis; rather, such perspectives were embedded in their recognition that Iceland’s position as a Danish dependency played a major role in shaping Icelandic nationalism and gender concepts, as well as situating Iceland within

international power relations. Only recently have Icelandic historians addressed Iceland's history in relation to the colonial or postcolonial context. One reason for this may be that most Icelandic historians dismissed Iceland's classification as a colony, leading to an absence of conversation about the idea (Ellenberger 2009, 99).

When I started working in Icelandic academia after completing my doctoral research in 2000 on *WoDaaBe*, my interest in Iceland was driven by my desire to understand what 'Africa' meant in Iceland. When analyzing late 19th- and early 20th-century images in Iceland from different mediums such as schoolbooks, newspapers and journals, it became apparent to me that these images were not really so much about Africa as about male Icelandic intellectuals struggling to understand Iceland's position in the world of nations, and simultaneously trying to shape conceptions of Icelandic national identity and the country's hierarchical position in the colonial world. After Iceland's settlement in the ninth century, the period of commonwealth² had come to an abrupt end in 1262 with the subjection of the country under Norway and then later under Denmark. Independence was gained in steps with Iceland becoming a sovereign state in a personal union with Denmark in 1918 and gaining full independence in 1944. At the time when I did this research, research on Icelandic nationalism strongly focused on positioning Icelandic nationalism within a wider criticism of nationalism in general, i.e. the earlier emphasis on nationalism as a primordial phenomenon. While the importance of this contextual focus should not be underestimated, it did not generally place the shaping of Icelandic nationalism within perspectives that recognize how European nationalism itself was shaped by racism and imperialism, which, as this book will show, were intrinsic to nation-building in Iceland.

My first attempt to draw attention to Icelandic national identity construction in relation to colonial images and to ask how this related to Iceland's position under Danish rule was a 2002 publication in Icelandic on Iceland's participation in the then recent World's Fair Expo (Loftsdóttir 2002). The article had been rejected by another journal more than a year earlier – perhaps because the issue had little legitimacy in Iceland at the time.

Still, I remained convinced that understanding Iceland's engagement with colonial ideology and racism also required understanding Iceland's position under Danish rule. While Iceland was probably not a colony in political terms, it can possibly be said to have been so economically or culturally (Ellenberger 2009, 13). As Gavin Lucas and Angelos Parigoris point out, the issue is not only whether we can use categories of politics or economics to classify particular countries as colonies; but also that we have to account for the "colonial experience" being a more "complex and dynamic process" than mere administration (2013, 93). Focusing on people's lived experiences also draws attention to how the issue of nationalism in Iceland was ultimately integrated into Iceland's position in a world of colonies and colonizers (Loftsdóttir 2002, 2008; Lucas and Parigoris 2013, 93). Claims to Iceland's independence could be strengthened by engaging with European colonial discourses, and to contrast Iceland as intrinsically different from other colonized countries. To me, however, the technical question of *if* and *how*

Iceland can be classified as a colony is ultimately not as interesting as the fact that during the late 19th century people in Iceland started to feel it necessary to claim that they were not colonial subjects.

Globalization, crisis and neoliberal subjects

The book's key pillar to understanding notions of European-ness and coloniality is a focus on the economic crisis of 2008 in Iceland. The economic crash of 2008, alongside Iceland's steady neoliberalization³ from the mid-1990s (Sigurjónsson and Mixa 2011), and the crisis following it, are all a part of a global phenomenon. In Iceland, these processes were understood in deeply nationalistic terms which engaged with wider notions of coloniality, the Icelandic fascination with modernity, and Icelanders' own past as under Danish rule until the 20th century. Neoliberalization, as I will show, was important in transforming Icelandic society and I find important to understand more broadly how neoliberalization builds on, mobilizes and cuts across earlier colonial formations and their expression in the present. As Johan Comaroff and Jean Comaroff (2009) argue, the most important changes in ethnic identity in the age of globalization and neoliberalization are the double process of emphasizing ethnic essence and deeply commoditizing ethnic identities (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, 1; see also Lavie and Swedenberg 1996, 5–6). The idea of 'culture' has consequently been increasingly commoditized and, as stressed by Henrietta Moore (2004), becomes the means "through which diversification is replicated through globalized processes, experiences and inter-connections" (p. 78). This draws attention to the significance of neoliberalism in creating particular types of subjectivities. My discussion shows how a particular imagination of Icelandic subjects, rooted in the colonial past, becomes mobilized in quite a specific way in the new neoliberal environment in Iceland, and how the 'dry' issues of banks and investments during the boom took on a central role in generating an understanding of what it meant to 'be Icelandic.' By tapping into affective and meaningful nationalistic icons of being Icelandic – or what Appadurai (1996) has called "warehouse of cultural scenarios" – the neoliberal discourses in the early 2000s in Iceland became extremely difficult to criticize because such criticism became simultaneously criticism of national identity. This reworking of ideas of ethnic and cultural essence hints toward how neoliberalism thus intrinsically reworks ideas and categorizations that are embedded in colonial history and racism.

The reworking of ideas of ethnic and culture essence also took place during times of crisis⁴ as the book shows in its second part where I stress crisis as a field of engagement, asking critically how the notion of crisis engages with being in the world, historical memories and past practices. Crisis disrupts the notions of linear time due to the unpredictability inherent in what constitutes a crisis (Knight 2012, 371), where people have a sense of diverging from a 'normal' time (Bryant 2016, 20). Long before neoliberalism became a dominant policy in the world, notable anthropological scholars such as Max Gluckman recognized how crisis can also become part of reproducing the social organization of society. As Gluckman

stresses, rebellions do not necessarily draw attention to the oppressive structures of the system itself; rather, they can be part of a renewal of the “unity of the system” (1954, 3). Thus, as more recently elaborated in Naomi Klein’s (2007) analysis of reconstruction after crisis, existing power structures can reproduce and enforce themselves through economic crisis involving not only losses, but also opportunities for multinational corporations, companies and institutions. I argue, in the last part of this book, that this is exactly what happened in Iceland – how despite massive mobilization and calls for a ‘new’ Iceland, the system was not overthrown but rather reproduced.

Doing fieldwork at home

The book is based on research in my own country – the environment into which I was born, where I grew up and to which I still feel a sense of belonging. The book is also shaped by my training as an anthropologist in the academic environment of the USA; by my two-year fieldwork experience in Niger focusing on issues relating to globalization and racialization; and my previous research in Iceland on nationalism and racialization. Even though the research for this book focuses on Iceland, it was not limited to one fixed location. I draw attention to discourses that are mobile across time and space, but many of my insights also derive from my mobility as an academic scholar when I traveled to diverse locations outside Iceland, such as to academic conferences and archives in other countries. As the text reflects, I find it crucial to see fieldwork as a research activity involving close engagement and diverse kinds of experiences, regardless of where it takes place. Judith Okely (1992) points out that experience is crucial in generating insights into the subject matter, and how by ignoring it we can trivialize the relationship between methodology and theories. Qualitative research, in contrast, is often based primarily on interviews in somewhat controlled settings (Holmes 2013). Even though anthropologists often do just that, they often base their work on all kinds of materials (Shah 2017). In fact, some anthropologists even claim that ethnographic fieldwork cannot really be classified as a type of qualitative research (LeCompte and Schensul 1999, 54; Harrison 2007). This argument highlights the ‘messiness’ of ethnographic research, where researchers use various types of data, their own insights and where subjectivity necessarily forms part of the process. I see, then, ethnographic research teaching us how the use of diverse methods helps to gain deeper insights into our subject matter (see also Wolcott 1999).

This interest in Iceland is also personal. I was unavoidably involved in a very intimate way in my research. The economic boom and crisis affected my life and those around me in a profound way. Some parts of the text can thus be described as auto-ethnography, where I consciously pull together various bits and pieces from my own experience to enrich my analysis beyond the systematic data gathering in which I engaged. Anthony Cohen (1992, 226) emphasizes that we should investigate the methodological possibilities offered by our own subjectivities. Taking up his suggestion, Lejla Voloder (2008) stresses that auto-ethnographies need not be about the researcher as an individual; instead they can deepen the understanding

of certain issues by using the researcher as a subject. In auto-ethnography, the author can thus try to work him- or herself into the text as a secondary character (Tedlock 1991, 81).

As feminist scholars have long emphasized, subjectivity is important in order to move away from the objective and positivistic representation of ‘others’ toward critically engaged scholarship, where the researcher speaks from *within* his or her own subjective position rather than *for* someone else (Mohanty 1991). Here I find it important to critically engage with the term ‘native’ anthropologists, where we acknowledge that the anthropologist does not only have nationality but also is categorized in terms of other social classifications such as race, gender and class (Narayan 1993). Furthermore, anthropology in this unstable category that we refer to as ‘home’ can also, as some scholars have stressed, be part of ‘decolonizing anthropology’ (Jacobs-Huey 2002), and thus work toward dislodging cultural difference as a key principle in the ethnographic project (Bunzl 2004, 439, 440).

After an intensive ethnographic research in West Africa for my PhD, it was strangely humbling to do research about my own community where, as an anthropologist, I was pushed towards utilizing some of the same analytical questions I’d asked in Niger in my own society. This was especially thought-provoking at times when interest in Iceland as a subject was exploding – first after the economic crash, then with international media discussion glorifying popular protest and finally with massive tourism arising after 2010. All these events created an intense interest in Iceland as both a popular and scholarly subject (Jóhannesson 2012); Iceland was suddenly a hot topic for scholars in diverse fields. Prior to the crash, I hardly remember any students, scholars or journalists consulting with me when writing stories about Iceland or doing research connected with Iceland, but after the crash this changed significantly. Interestingly, my conversations with students, scholars and journalists from abroad doing research on Iceland in relation to my work at the University of Iceland simultaneously positioned me as an ‘expert’ and as a ‘research subject.’ While a part of my PhD had included looking critically at the process of othering through various textual presentations (Loftsdóttir 2008), it was different to confront them when I, and my own society, became the objects of inquiry.

Another reason it’s important to place myself within the text is because I can only disclose limited information about those with whom I formally interviewed. There was an intense fear among most people I interviewed that other Icelanders would identify who they were – a fear which has to be put in the context of the fragile job security at the time and the political sensitivity of the issues discussed, in addition to the smallness of Icelandic society. I also refer to people from my own personal history not because their histories are more significant than the stories of others in Iceland, but rather I find it important to situate historical processes in the context of the desires and aspirations of particular individuals. Doing research in one’s own intimate environment is challenging in multiple ways, some of them slightly different from the challenges arising at fieldwork locations further away from home. In some instances, I failed to collect particular data or participate in particular events that would have been interesting for my research

because I found it too depressing to deal with them at the time, as if wishing that the whole situation would somehow become resolved if I averted my eyes. Like everyone else, I was afraid of how the crash would affect my most essential personal concerns and the future of those around me. Not only that, there was also an intense sense of sadness seeing the world I had known, the future I had thought existed, vanish, even though in my work I had actively criticized many aspects of this society and been critical of this future.

Other things are, however, not so different from fieldwork far from home. My ethnographic research in Niger was constructed in an intense involvement with those with whom the research was concerned, meaning that I lived with a family who became much more than my research subjects. It was fruitful to encounter a similar fear of objectifying my own society, and my own close social environment, as I did when writing down results from this previous fieldwork.

The world of bankers

Part of the data I gathered are interviews with individuals working within the financial industry and Icelandic international development, as well as with selected groups of economic migrants to Iceland. These individuals have all been given pseudonyms for reasons discussed above. Even though the book is informed by these formal interviews and an endless number of informal discussions with various people, I refer here in particular to the interviews with bankers, and the way in which they experienced events related to the economic crash. By capturing their voices, I want to convey a sense of how this particular group of people experienced the financial crisis. As I point out, these individuals are not necessarily speaking as members of an extremely privileged group by Icelandic standards, especially not during the economic boom years when wages in Iceland were generally high and when the banks constantly recruited new people with diverse social economic backgrounds. Elsewhere, working in investment firms is strongly class-based. US investment firms, for example, prefer graduates from Ivy League colleges (Ho 2009a, 11–12), and in the UK, recruits have to be from the ‘right’ schools (McDowell 1994, 739). In Iceland, the difference between investment bankers and members of the general public is, however, less salient with investment bankers in Iceland in the early 21st century coming from different social and educational backgrounds (Mixa 2014). The individuals interviewed here demonstrate how economic actors are shaped by various discourses and concerns beyond purely economic ones. Thus, my concern in the interviews was less with operations of the banks as such, and more with how the economic crash appeared to these individuals who are shaped by different discourses in Iceland and positioned not only as ‘bankers’ or ‘people in the financial industry’ but who occupy intersecting subject positions. Few interviews were also taken with bankers in other countries, Denmark and the UK, then in relation to their dealings with the Icelandic bankers. The economic migrants that I focus especially on here come from Latvia and Lithuania, but the analysis of this discussion is based on earlier critical engagement with Icelandic racism in a broader perspective, which included also interviews with

migrants from different African countries (for example Loftsdóttir 2010a, 2014). The great majority of these individuals interviewed from Latvia and Lithuania came to Iceland as economic migrants. As those working in the financial sector these individuals have different subjectivities that shapes their experiences.

In addition, I base my findings on an extensive analysis of business journal articles published in 2006 and 2007, and on media discussions and blogs. I analyzed selected issues concerning the crisis, such as referenda on the Icesave agreements, the loan that Iceland received from the IMF and the closing of McDonald's in Iceland. Highly controversial in Iceland at the time, each of these events suggested dynamics going beyond opinions about these particular cases. Ann Brydon (2006, 239) claims that Iceland's small population and relatively high participation in the public debate may result in less of a gap between the perspectives set forth in the Icelandic media and those expressed by the public than is the case in many larger countries. Thus, as stressed by Brydon, media analysis may provide windows into the "conversations Icelanders have with one another" (p. 239). The interviews with those engaged in the financial industry were in fact often quite similar to the ongoing discussions in the media about selected issues. In Iceland, the analysis of Internet discussions has also become an interesting tool for studying particular issues. The Internet is often seen as existing without spatial boundaries (Anahita 2006, 143), but in the context of a group speaking a small language such as Icelandic, the boundaries of particular debates single out those who read and speak Icelandic, who would in most cases coincide with their ethnic identification as Icelandic.

The discussion also draws on archival material collected over the last few years in various institutions in Denmark and Iceland. Most notably the National Archives, Tivoli Archives and the Museum of Copenhagen (Københavns Museum) in Denmark. Archival research was also conducted at the Icelandic National Library and the National Museum of Iceland.

Organization of the book

The book is divided into two parts. Part I, entitled "Before the Crash," begins in Chapters 1–3 to focus on historical representations in Europe of Icelanders, and how such representations were understood in Iceland. Chapter 1 outlines Iceland's geopolitical position at the beginning of the 19th and early 20th centuries in general terms, demonstrating how European colonial discourses shaped Icelandic national identity and informed the position of the Icelanders as Danish subjects. The following two chapters focus on more specific examples of how Icelandic identity was shaped from discourses of modernization and coloniality. Chapter 2 focuses on the 1905 Colonial Exhibition in Copenhagen, where Icelanders were to be exhibited alongside other colonial subjects in Denmark, and Chapter 3 focuses on a 1930 festival held by the Icelandic government in order to demonstrate Iceland's compatibility with other European countries.

The second half of Part I focuses on the economic 'miracle' in Iceland from 2000 until 2007, stressing how closely this was interwoven with nationalistic aspirations for the future, and how it engaged with Iceland's colonial history.

Chapter 4 explains the mobilization in Iceland aiming to show the world the unique ‘Icelandic’ way of doing banking, and thus Iceland’s importance in the global neoliberal world, while Chapter 5 gives a more nuanced sense of nationalistic sentiments that were mobilized in Iceland during the economic boom. In Chapter 6, the ways in which Icelanders engaged with the idea of ‘colonialism’ during the times of economic boom are spelled out in more detail.

Part II, “After the Crash,” shows both the intense sense of international humiliation experienced in Iceland after the economic crash, and the rebuilding of Iceland through embracing the same exoticism which Icelanders had for so long tried to resist – an exoticism based on long-standing colonizing discourses. Chapter 7 focuses on the crash itself and its consequences in Iceland, while in Chapter 8, the focus is more specifically on the sense of being an outcast from the wider European and Western world. In Chapter 9, I explore the continued importance of nationalism after the crash. Chapter 10 then discusses how Iceland’s reputation and economy were rebuilt by embracing international representations of Iceland as different and exotic. These new reifying discourses of the Icelandic national character are reminiscent of discourses seen in the lead-up to the crash and in the early 20th century, both firmly based on coloniality as a key building block. Finally, the last chapter of the book, “All’s Well That Ends Well,” shows to what extent the economic crash, and despite the democratic attempts that followed, there was a continuation of neoliberal processes similar to those taking place before the crash.

Perhaps it can be said that my phone conversation with my husband was the one of the first seeds for this book. The events that followed would radically transform my life and those around me, but as a scholar they would also offer important insights into the resilience of coloniality, nationalism and how a sense of crisis in general has become very salient in the present. Furthermore, they would give deeper insights into how affective meanings are made during times of transformation, through engagement with familiar concepts and ideas from the past.

Notes

- 1 Benedikts Kalnačs (2016) argues in fact that the decolonial approach’s acknowledgment of the “specificity of each particular historical experience” (p. 5) can make it more adept than postcolonial theory for analyzing the situation of countries at the contextual margins of Europe.
- 2 Durrenberger (1988) has described the commonwealth period in Iceland as a stratified society consisting of independent households but without a centralized state structure.
- 3 The concept of neoliberalism has for many scholars been useful for current restructuring of the current global economy as a social and political project, while it is also disputed how it should be theorized. For instance, whether neoliberalism should be seen as an overreaching framework or as a concept used alongside other important concepts used by anthropologists (Collier 2012; Jessop 2013). Karen Ho (2014) has called for “ethnographic examination of neoliberalism” where the workings of neoliberalism are not conflated into a unified whole, but analyzed in a context that is both national and global.
- 4 The growing body of anthropological research focusing on different aspects of recent neoliberalization and crisis in the global north (Schwegler 2009; Peebles 2010; Ho 2009a, 2009b) has followed a long disciplinary tradition of looking at economies and finance holistically as embedded in a larger nexus of social relations and history.



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Part I

Before the crash

When I moved back to Iceland after doing my research in Niger, many of the questions about colonialism, whiteness and the relationship between the global north and global south continued to haunt me, leading me toward wanting to understand better my own country, Iceland. Upon my arrival, my grandmother gave me an old yellow tablecloth. She explained that I should have it because of my interest in the past – probably referring to my endless questions trying to understand everything as an anthropologist. She explained that the cloth had been produced to commemorate a significant event in the history of Iceland and had been given to her by her mother-in-law, my great-grandmother. It was bright yellow with an Icelandic coat of arms woven into the fabric, framed within a banner marking the year 1930. This gift was deeply meaningful to me because I had not seen many items from past generations of my family.

I folded the delicate tablecloth and put it into a closet in my bedroom and eventually forgot about it. But it became a kind of emblem of my slowly building interest in Icelandic history – primarily in relation to my research in Africa. What, I wondered, would Africa have meant to people in a far away, obscure place like Iceland? What do representations of colonized people in colonized places like Niger mean in a part of the world that was struggling to become a sovereign state itself? In what ways do colonial images exist in another world of poverty and subordination?



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1 The trickster in the north

In the world of colonizers and colonized

In 1906, most members of Iceland's Parliament visited the Danish Kingdom at the invitation of the Danish king. The goal of this visit was to strengthen the connection between the countries after harsh disputes arising from Iceland's attempts to seek independence from Denmark. The king's invitation was debated over by the Icelandic Parliament and many members were suspicious that the king simply wanted to flatter the lawmakers to make them more submissive and thereby weaken their desire for independence (Bjarnason 2012, 35).

Nevertheless, a group of 33 men left Iceland on the 13th of July and arrived in Copenhagen a few days later. The delegation was met by large crowds of people curious about this remote part of the Danish Kingdom. The Icelandic parliamentarians were shown different parts of Denmark along with main official buildings and museums in Copenhagen, and were treated generously in every way. The Danish media also covered the visit extensively (Bjarnason 2012), but the visit was not without its Danish detractors. Some questioned the king's lavish treatment of the Icelanders – in a cartoon published in a Danish newspaper that I found in the one of the archives, an Icelander, drawn as the rest of the Icelandic Parliamentary members to look dull and old fashioned, is dragged toward a fancy table loaded with spectacular food.¹

The visit is particularly interesting here for the way it revealed to some of the Icelandic legislators just how the Danes perceived Iceland and its people. One Dane, Sigurður in Vigor, wrote about the surprise they felt at how handsome the Icelandic Parliamentary members were and how similar they were to Danes. "It would probably have evoked less surprise . . . if the Icelanders were dressed in animal fur with hoods and shoes made of fur"² (Bjarnason 2012, 38). As Sigurður's words indicate, the Icelanders in Denmark were to some extent seen as distant and exotic, reflecting popular representations of Icelandic people in Europe. The historian Gunnar Þór Bjarnason (2012) points out that some of the Icelanders were shocked when they encountered these ideas. As Bjarnason suggests, the visit did probably not have any real effect on the negotiations regarding Iceland's independence nor did it significantly change Danish views of Icelanders (2012, 41). Perhaps the practical outcome of the visit was symbolic: the evolving legitimacy of Icelanders as political subjects.

In discussing how the Icelandic subject was shaped from discourses of modernization and coloniality, it is important to stress that despite its geographical position as an island in the Atlantic, Iceland has always been a part of wide transnational networks. The commonwealth period after Iceland's settlement in the ninth century ended when Iceland became a part of the Norwegian Kingdom in 1262 and then part of the Kalmar Union in the late 13th century in a union of the crowns of Sweden, Denmark and Norway. Iceland, along with other North Atlantic areas, became then a part of the Danish crown in 1536 when the Kalmar Union ended. Denmark was at that time about to become a powerful global empire from 17th until the 19th century, with colonial possessions in the North Atlantic, India, Gold Coast and islands in the Caribbean (see Figure 1.1). When we position the Nordic countries in relation to coloniality, it becomes clearer how transnational the Nordic countries already were prior to modern times, participating in different ways in empire building in various parts of the world (Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2012b; Keskinen et al. 2009; Naum and Nordin 2013).

This perspective also draws attention to the way in which ideas of the nation were shaped not in isolation (Tuori 2009, 63), but in complex relationships of power beyond the North Atlantic and within complex European dynamics and relations with the wider world. The Danish East India Company had trading posts



Figure 1.1 “Greeting from St Croix.” The drawing shows the interwoven gendered and racial aspects of the colonial imagination

Source: The National Museum of Denmark



Figure 1.2 A stamp from 1916. The text says “Vote against the sale of the Danish West Indies”

Source: The National Museum of Denmark

on the eastern coast of India and the Bay of Bengal, in Tranquebar (1620–1845), Serampore (1755–1845) and Nicobar Islands (1756–1868), exporting spices, cotton and textile made from silk. Sugar plantations in the Caribbean Islands, St. Thomas (1665–1917), St. John (1675–1917) and St. Croix (1733–1917) exported sugar to the Nordic countries and the Baltics (Naum and Nordin 2013, 6). The workforce on these plantations were slaves, often coming from the Danish trading posts that also sent gold and ivory to Denmark (*ibid.*, 6–7). Denmark also attempted to strengthen its hold on its interests in the North Atlantic, such as through limiting the access of foreigners to the fishing and whaling grounds in the north (Naum and Nordin 2013, 8). As a part of the Danish Kingdom, Iceland became in multiple senses a part of a vast transnational space. Some Icelandic individuals even became a part of these transnational spaces more intimately by traveling to distant parts of the world, such as Jón Ólafsson, who visited Africa and India while working for the Danish East India Company in early 1600. He wrote about his experiences and the people he encountered and his writing was widely read in Iceland (Durrenberger and Pálsson 1989, xiii). Another Icelandic,

the parish minister Ólafur Egilsson, was one of hundreds of other Icelanders captured in 1627 by Algerian pirates who sailed to Iceland to kidnap people to sell in slavery. Egilsson also wrote about his experiences that were as well widely read in Iceland (see discussion in Loftsdóttir and Pálsson 2013; see also Helgason 2018).

Political organization in Iceland was, furthermore, shaped by ideological changes in wider Europe, including Enlightenment ideas and religious disputes (Agnarsdóttir 2013). Even though Danish officials generally did not stay in Iceland until the end of the 19th century (Folke Ax 2009, 14), Iceland was visited by Danish officials, as well as German, English, Spanish and French merchants and fishermen (Sigurjónsdóttir 2000). While these individuals did not settle in the country, in different ways they were still a part of the social landscape in Iceland at the time.

In the 15th century, a German observer from Nurnberg, Martin Behaim, famous for his *Erdapfel*, the oldest surviving globe in the world, wrote that the inhabitants of Iceland were white and Christian but sold their dogs for a high price and gave their children away to traveling merchants (Bjarnason and Jónsson 2013, 20; Thoroddsen 1892–96, 96). This somewhat undignified image of the country's inhabitants was to some extent in line with the portrayal of the north as place of barbarians and fit well with subsequent characterization for centuries to come (Ísleifsson 2011). The images of Iceland's population as semi-savages that circulated through the centuries reflects to some extent Iceland's weak global position. Such images were of great concern to Icelandic intellectuals at different times (Durrenberger and Pálsson 1989), and even in early medieval times Icelandic writers, such as the author of *Landnámabók*, which was written in the 12th century, wrote their own correctives to the prevailing narratives of the Icelandic settlement (Hastrup 2009, 125). In one version of *Landnámabók*, for example, Melabók, the writer, openly explains the importance of telling foreigners the right version of 'our' history and ancestry (Hastrup 2009, 122).

In the 16th century and later, descriptions of Iceland appeared with increasing frequency (Ísleifsson 2011), with Iceland routinely described in European geographical literature at the time as "the home of a most exotic and primitive people" (Karlsson 1995, 49). A merchant from Hamburg, Görries Peerse, who made several trips to Iceland in the mid-16th century, wrote sensationally about Iceland, even repeating the idea of Icelanders giving away their young children (see Bjarnason and Jónsson 2013, 237). His work was published several times, much to the dismay of Icelanders who had economic ties with Hamburg at the time (Eggertsdóttir 2006, 189). The English traveler and physician, Andrew Boorde, writing in 1547, describes Icelanders as "animal-like beasts" dressing in the furs of wild animals (Thoroddsen 1892–96, 96, 127). Some writers also remarked on Icelanders' animal-like nature by discussing their presumed bodily form and savage sexuality (Ísleifsson 2011, 47). This image of the country can be seen positioned as a part of hegemonic discourses in Europe that for a long time situated the 'north' as wild and as inhabited by 'barbarians' (Lagerspetz 2003, 50; Ísleifsson 2011). The wildness associated with Iceland was also presented in the portrayal of Icelandic nature, which was often associated with Hell (Oslund 2002, 318) with the volcano Hekla described as its gateway.

Brevis Commentarius de Islandia by Arngrímur Jónsson was published in 1593, followed five years later by Oddur Einarsson's description of Iceland in 1597. These texts aimed to defend Iceland against such presentations of the country and its inhabitants (Benediktsson 1971; Eggertsdóttir 2006, 189). Arngrímur followed up with *Crymogæa*, published in Hamburg 1609, in which he glorifies Iceland's past and language, celebrating the Icelandic commonwealth period and its heroes during that period. Despite not succeeding in changing the perception of Iceland, his writing was influential in introducing ancient Saga literature and history to the wider Scandinavian community (Eggertsdóttir 2006, 189–190). As Gunnar Karlsson (1995) observes, his writing must also have given Icelanders a higher sense of “self-esteem,” as people with their own language (p. 49), who could later be mobilized within a new political and ideological environment in Europe emphasizing nations as the ‘natural’ building blocks of society.

The 19th and early 20th centuries

During the 19th century, Iceland's economy had been based on agriculture, animal husbandry and fishing, with the large majority of the population living on small, isolated farms³ (Karlsson 1995). As the century drew to a close, trading posts had become towns. Still, most people in Iceland were born in houses made of turf and rocks that blended in with the natural landscape. The early history of Iceland can be seen as the history of poverty which, as a social memory, remains salient in the present despite Iceland's completely changed economic position.

My great-grandmother, Kristín, arrived to Hafnarfjörður as a child at the dawn of the 20th century. She was born into intense poverty, as were many others at the time. She migrated to Hafnarfjörður with her parents from the north of Iceland with hopes of a better life. Hafnarfjörður was then just emerging as a town, and provided work opportunities in fisheries. At the turn of the 20th century, Iceland was a poor European country, inhabited by only 78,000 people (Statistics Iceland 2016a). Iceland's population had been low for centuries due to a series of natural disasters. The Lakagígar eruptions in 1783 were the most dramatic, killing a quarter of the population. By the mid-19th century, Iceland's population had grown to 60,000 (Hálfðánarson 2001, 106). Reduction in child mortality probably also stimulated population growth, but even at this time of growth, in the mid-19th century, one of every four children died before reaching their first birthday (Garðarsdóttir 2005, 2002). Lack of farmland, in addition to a colder climate (Jónsson 2001, 251) led to a sharp increase of poverty during the last quarter of the 19th century. Almost a fifth of the population received relief of some kind (Jónsson 2001, 26; see also Gunnlaugsson 1993). In the mid-19th century, many Icelanders also started migrating to the North America, becoming part of much more extensive migration in Europe to the New World. Most migrated between 1870 and 1914, with the majority settling in Canada (Kjartansson 1980).

By the 19th century, Icelandic people were still positioned within wider Europe as objects to be gazed upon, analyzed and used as props by people from different nationalities that were a part of Europe's cultural elite. European travelers

sought to experience Icelandic nature as both travelers and on geological explorations as Iceland became “a destination for scientific and literary European tourism” (Oslund 2011, 31, 35). Active volcanoes and rough lava fields strengthened European intellectuals’ ideas of astonishing monuments, of Iceland as wild and uncivilized (Oslund 2011, 59). For people living in Iceland, however, the Icelandic landscape was more commonly seen as symbolizing the hardship experienced by Icelanders during settlement, especially after 1800 (Oslund 2011, 60). However, travelers often remarked upon the presumed laziness of the Icelanders, as in one British traveler’s statement that it would take an English worker only a few hours to complete a task that took Icelanders days to finish (Ísleifsson 1996, 185–193). The Austrian intellectual Ida Pfeiffer visited Iceland in 1845 and described, as many others had, the filthiness of Icelandic homes and laziness of Icelanders (Ólafsdóttir 1994, 28). Comparing Iceland to her native city, Vienna, it is not surprising that she was not impressed by the sparsely populated country devoid of cities.

These travel accounts situated Icelanders not only as curiosities to be gazed upon but also used established references that had been used for other colonized and poorer populations back home (McClintock 1995, 52). In some cases, the Icelandic population was directly compared to “primitive” populations, as done by the British scholar and explorer, Sir Richard Burton, who traveled to Iceland during the summer of 1872. Already well known at that time for his extensive travel in Asia, the Middle East and Central Africa, Burton stated that art did not exist in Iceland and that judging from the small museum in Iceland, it has always been “primitive,” as in central Africa. He sardonically remarks that ‘civilized men’ would rather choose the guillotine over listening to the playing of piano music in Iceland (Ólafsdóttir 1994, 22). The remark clearly implies that the Icelandic population did not belong to the category of ‘civilized men.’

Expeditions of British travelers between the 1770s and 1830s were mainly motivated by an interest in Iceland’s landscape, but became increasingly driven by and coupled with growing interests in the Icelandic medieval Sagas (Helgason 2017a, 107). Once steamships made travel to Iceland easier in the mid-1800s, more people visited, resulting in more travel literature about Iceland (Helgason 2017a, 113). These perceptions, reports and notions of Iceland continued to be of interest and concern to the Icelanders themselves, as reflected in a book compiled by geographer Þorvald Thoroddsen, who wrote about the writings of others about Iceland, “it being interesting for Icelanders to have one coherent overview of everything that had been written about our country”⁴ (Thoroddsen 1892–96, 96).

European sources did not solely present Iceland or Icelanders in negative ways, but Iceland was also brought into the European imagination as a part of Germanic history, due to the old Sagas and other medieval manuscripts being preserved in Iceland. This interest has to be contextualized within the rise of nationalism in Europe, under the influence of Johann Gottfried Herder’s ideas. The sense of an unique nationhood was based on increased reification of Europeans as different from others, as Jean-Loup Amselle’s writings (1990/1998) on European colonialism have clearly demonstrated. While the concept of race had appeared in previous centuries, by the 19th century racial categorization gained a more comprehensive

and authoritarian voice through science as the ultimate measurement of truth,⁵ where the colonies became important counter-identification for the European nation-states. The nationalistic project spreading over Europe was contradictory, based simultaneously on an image of timeless cultural heritage while emphasizing development and modernity (Löfgren 1993). Two crucial ideological streams were thus reified in the 19th century: the idea of separate autonomous nations and of Europeans as intrinsically different from the rest of the world. European subjects were not only differentiated into national categories or as civilized subjects, but also along lines of gender and class. People from the 'lower' classes were routinely described in similar way as 'primitive' populations in distant countries (Pickering 2001, 125), and white European women as less developed and closer to the primitive than white European men (Schiebinger 1990). The essentialized category of 'white' as elaborated in this period was notably never fully coherent. It was based on a subjection and discrimination of some European populations or classes as well as well as being highly gendered (McClintock 1995), but its potency was nevertheless important in creating a new subject position. In the robust claim of the German philosopher Christoph Meiners in his book *Grundriß der Geschichte der Menschheit* (from 1785), it essentially revolved around the idea that the human race only needed to be divided into two groups: the beautiful and the ugly (De Gobineau de 1915, 107). The position of the white race as the 'beautiful one' signals that while the language of race gained authoritarian and scientific bases later on, it did from the beginning clearly mark particular subjects as inherently superior than others.

Within such ideas of European nationhood, Iceland's position became ambiguous. The growing interest in Germanic and Celtic history, along with rising nationalism, became particularly important for Iceland (Ísleifsson 1996, 84–85). Icelandic medieval literature was, for example, often represented in Britain during the mid-19th century as the heritage of the German race, and thus indirectly the heritage of the British⁶ (Pálsdóttir 2000). Icelandic people were thus perceived at this time as 'noble,' somewhat childish and as people close to their cultural heritage, while the Icelandic landscape was seen as the "complete opposite of the 'tamed' fields of continental Europe" (Helgason 2017a, 122). In Denmark, Iceland increasingly became seen as part of old Danish culture despite becoming a financial burden on the country, especially after the destructive Laki eruption in 1783 (Agnarsdóttir 2008, 71). These attitudes glorified to some extent Icelandic culture, but simultaneously located it as a part of the past and premodern (Karls-son 1995, 45; Hálfðánarson 2000a). After Denmark's participation in the Napoleonic wars, the Danish state was close to bankruptcy and sold its tropical colonies in Africa and India to Great Britain, and then in 1917 the Danish West Indies, later renamed the US Virgin Islands, to the USA (Oslund 2002, 328). Karen Oslund (2002) claims that it would have been rational from a purely economic standpoint to sell Iceland as well; the fact that it wasn't reflects that cultural concerns were quite important in the case of Iceland, overwriting economic priorities⁷ (p. 328).

The people living in Iceland were influenced by ideas of rising nationalism in Europe, with the period after 1830 often seen as marking the beginning of claims

to nationhood in Iceland (Hálfðánarson 2000a, 91; Jónsson 2014, 17). Icelandic medieval literature and language became the most important factors in claiming Icelandic national identity (Sigurðsson 1996, 42) as they created both sense of unity and continuity between the present and glorious past of the Icelandic commonwealth period⁸ (Hálfðánarson 2000, 91). This also reflects how old phenomena of different kinds constitute, in the words of Gabriella Elgenius (2015), “tools to think about the nation as old, given and necessary” (p. 162).

The Icelandic Sagas and medieval manuscripts were furthermore important in inscribing a sense of continual habitation on the country’s sense of its history, i.e. to create a sense of history taking place within particular locations (Sigurðsson 1996). This is particularly significant due to the lack of physical structures or monuments from the past which, in many other contexts, are used to create this link between past and present (Loftsdóttir and Lund 2016).

The establishment of the Icelandic Parliament in 930 at Þingvellir became especially significant (as *lieux de memoire*), seen as symbolizing a free ancient country. The Parliament had been moved in 1798 to Reykjavík but consequently became, from the 1840s, a key site to dwell upon Iceland’s past glory and beauty (Hálfðánarson 2000b). Jón Karl Helgason (2017b) suggests that this changed meaning of Þingvellir possibly arose under the influence of two British travel books published in 1811 and 1818 where Þingvellir was discussed in a much more passionate way than in most other such travel books. It indicates how the Icelandic sense of national identity and creation of national symbols were shaped not only by discourses within Iceland, but by mobile transnational discourses.

The small population, speaking its own language and maintaining a sense of ethnic identity, as the historian Guðmundur Hálfðánarson shows, created an especially fertile ground for nationalistic ideas that were emerging all over Europe (Hálfðánarson 2000a, 90). From the mid-19th to the 20th centuries, the struggle for independence became such a key issue in Iceland that the concept ‘politics’ was used as synonymous with ‘independence’ (Karlsson 1995, 42). As Karlsson notes (1995), the importance of the issue is partly reflected in the fact that while bitter disputes took place in Iceland about different ways of gaining independence, no disputes existed in regard to independence as a principle⁹ (p. 42).

The intellectual Jón Jónsson Aðils is often seen as one of the most influential persons in shaping Icelandic nationalism (Matthíasdóttir 1995, 36–64). Dividing Iceland’s history into stages, Jónsson characterized Icelandic nationality as one of beauty and glory after its settlement but with corruption and deterioration dominating the loss of independence. Nationalism, according to Jónsson, was thus a “holy supremacy” (*helgur vættur*), with hidden protective power (*hulinn verndarkraftur*) that supported the nation through its difficulties and prevented it from giving itself over to foreign influences (Jónsson Aðils 1903, 245). As portrayed by Jónsson Aðils, nationalism protects the “pure” and “uncorrupted” Icelandic nation, while foreign influences aimed at destroying it. Thus, he argued, the reason for Iceland’s poverty was its foreign rule (Jónsson 1903, 245).

As Matthíasdóttir (2004) shows, Icelandic nationalism in the early 20th century portrays Icelandic men as the actors bringing about modernity, and women

representing the country's timeless nature. The nationalistic discourse's strong reference to Iceland's settlement involved, for example, men only with the strong female characters of the settlement period widely known in Iceland never being mobilized to any degree as nationalist symbols (Matthíasdóttir 2004, 217). The general construction of the nation as "brotherhood" (Pratt 1990), draws attention to how women are often connected to the nation through their physical bodies, rather than through their actions or ideas. Feminist scholars have long recognized the importance of women's bodies in constructing the nation (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989; Pratt 1990), while generally being excluded from direct power and full citizenship (McClintock 1995, 354–355). In Iceland, the symbolic figure of the mountain woman became a key representation of Iceland in the 19th century, embodying both Icelandic nature and culture (Björnsdóttir 1997, 5). It thus becomes useful to distinguish between nationalistic notions of Icelandic nature, embodied in the figure of a nurturing woman, and conceptualizations of the Icelandic nation, articulated in quite masculine ways (Loftsdóttir 2005).

As elsewhere the nationalistic project not only emphasized timeless cultural heritage but the need to modernize the country and the nation. The analysis of Iceland's government cultural policy by historian Ólafur Rastrick (2013) in the first 30 years of the 20th century clearly shows the ways in which ideas 'cultivating' Icelandic 'culture' revolved around ideas of modernization. These as Rastrick shows (2013) strongly embedded in ideas of a 'lost glory' of the golden age of Iceland that needed to be recaptured. In 1924, maps of Reykjavík's future design as a city were introduced, where the city was seen as equal to ancient Athens (Rastrick 2013, 7). Through such modernization projects, the emerging Icelandic intellectual and administrative elite saw Iceland as fulfilling its 'historical destiny.' The pillars of European culture itself, Rastrick points out, were perceived by these individuals to be found in ancient history and language of both Greece and Iceland (p. 7). Such voices are strangely out of tune with Iceland's position at the time but probably reflect regained confidence after 1918, when Iceland became a sovereign state in a personal union with Denmark.

These ideas of modernity were not only entangled with ideas of masculinity, but also class (Matthíasdóttir 2004). Matthíasdóttir (2004) shows how men from the upper layers of Icelandic society were conceptualized as representing the 'true' spirit of the Icelandic nation: bold, daring and individualistic (p. 152). Her analysis indicates the class elements at play in this hegemonic masculinity that excludes not only women but also certain men (Connell 1998). In spite of a strong emphasis by the Icelandic intellectual elite that was placed upon traditional Icelandic culture's peasant roots, men within the administrative and intellectual classes of society were seen as the inheritors of the 'true' Icelandic essence¹⁰ (Matthíasdóttir 2004, 150–152). These Icelandic governmental officials felt strong anxieties in regard to fitting in with Copenhagen intellectual life (Pálsdóttir 2010). This anxiety was probably not misplaced, as can be seen in the case of Jóhanna, a daughter of an Icelandic official during the early 19th century. She had to be 'retrained' when she came to Denmark to fit in with the Danish upper class. Despite being the daughter of an Icelandic magistrate (*sýslumaður*), the Danish woman who

was asked to take Jóhanna in saw her upbringing as not suitable in Copenhagen¹¹ (Halldórsdóttir 2011, 94). For the small part of the population that interacted with Danish officials, visited Denmark or entertained or assisted foreigners arriving in Iceland for geological excavation, tourism or other reasons, the relationships with Danes were probably more fraught than for the majority of Iceland's population.

The racialized others

In an insightful analysis of Icelandic nationalism, Ann Brydon (1995) draws attention to how the “language of the centre” was often appropriated selectively by the colonized as a way of self-inscription, a process of “transculturation” (p. 246). In Iceland, the “language of the centre” was important to locate Icelanders more firmly within the civilized category, as reflected in anxieties Icelanders had about not being recognized by other Europeans as belonging with them. Thus, while emphasizing independence as natural for themselves and protesting their description as ‘uncivilized’ people, these Icelandic intellectuals participated in recreating and reaffirming racialized and dehumanizing images of colonized people elsewhere (Loftsdóttir 2008).

One place where these images appeared were in periodicals published in Icelandic. These periodicals generally written by Icelandic intellectuals in Copenhagen, intended to bring news to Icelanders about the rest of the world and they became crucial in demonstrating Iceland's position within the category of the civilized. The literacy rate was high in Iceland and through reading societies, many of these journals were widely available (on literacy see Guttormsson 1990). *Skírnir* was published by the Icelandic Literary Society (*Hið Íslenska Bókmenntafélag*), founded in 1816 and based in Copenhagen. Initially, the society celebrated the importance of the Icelandic language and cultural traditions (Pálsson 1978, 71; Línal 1969, 20), and aimed at publishing classical works and material concerned with Iceland (Sigurðsson 1986, 33–34).

The publication of the journal reflects clearly the beginning of solidification of nationalism in Iceland. The fact that it was published in Copenhagen and transported to Iceland tells us something about Iceland's situation at the time as one of Europe's poorest countries without any extensive towns or centers. Transportation connections were, for example, better between Denmark and Iceland than between various parts of Iceland and Reykjavík (Sigurðsson 1986, 22). As a news journal *Skírnir* brought information about the world to Icelanders by annual publications providing an overview of the most ‘important’ things happening worldwide. *Skírnir*'s text in the late 19th to the early 20th centuries was written solely by males, reflecting women's position in Iceland at that time.¹²

The journal's discussion about colonized populations such as on the African continent usually revolved around European explorations and settlements of these places, normalizing white/Western male bodies as the movers of history (Loftsdóttir 2008, 178). Very often the texts do not in fact focus so much on the African body, but more on the European explorer who is portrayed in heroic terms. *Skírnir*, for example in 1890, provides a long and detailed discussion about Henry Morgan

Stanley's trip to the African continent in 1887–1889. Stanley's trips caused excitement of course for much larger European communities but this particular trip is often seen as Stanley's most controversial one (Driver 2001, 126). *Skírnir's* 1890 narrative stresses that this is not the first article in the journal to talk about Stanley, followed by a celebration of his past and heroism (see discussion in Loftsdóttir 2009a). The African people themselves are curiously absent from many of these narratives.

Colonizing images of subjected people were reproduced in schoolbooks in Iceland published at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. Geography books presented a classification of the world's populations into different racial groups in a degrading and stereotypical way (Loftsdóttir 2009b, 2010a). One book from the early 20th century states that the tropical areas are mainly inhabited by "savages, such as black (*blámenn*) people in Africa" (Arason 1929, 6) and in another that "Sudan negroes are kind but loud and talkative"¹³ and that "Hottentots are very much like monkeys, with very wrinkled faces"¹⁴ (Finnbogason 1913, 101, 106). These two books were republished over and over in a very similar format. In schoolbooks focusing on world history, a similar focus is cast upon the heroic individual explorer as we see in *Skírnir*. Individual male explorers are portrayed as the ones moving Europe's history forward with little regard for the colonized people themselves. One schoolbook, for example, talks about Christopher Columbus as a self-made man who could be "tough" (*harðjaxl*) when needed and that he "showed white people the way to the endless resources of the western part of the world"¹⁵ (Arngrímsson and Hansson 1943, 10). In the same book, Iceland is inserted into this history by indicating that Icelanders are to be thanked for initiating the age of discoveries, when it is stated that the *Icelander* Leifur Eiríksson should be given the honor of finding America, while Columbus could certainly be credited for having found a new route to go there (p. 10). Jointly, many of these texts imply "brotherhood," to borrow Pratt's (1990) term, but not of the Icelandic nation but a brotherhood of white European men that embody the forces of progress. Through reading about colonialization in other parts of the world, Icelandic men could imagine themselves as part of the progressive, civilized Europeans, these parts of the world becoming spaces where masculinity and European-ness were enacted and reified (see Loftsdóttir 2010a; see also Loftsdóttir 2009a). The gendered characteristics of this nationalistic narrative are clear: men are seen as signifying the Icelandic spirit (Matthíasdóttir 2004). Women of course have their particular role within the national rhetoric: the Icelandic country itself was often seen as the body of woman. The body of the nation as a whole, however, was portrayed as male.

Schoolbooks about Icelandic history published during a similar period provide another important part of the imagination of Iceland's place in a world of colonialism. The two most important books of Icelandic history depict the population as deriving from the 'best' part of the Norwegian population and shaped by hardship of the country itself (Loftsdóttir 2010a). As Oslund (2011) points out, during the early 20th century Icelanders started to paint their own landscape as representing "the Icelandic spirit," emphasizing the wilderness and inhospitable nature of the

island's landscape while also drawing attention to the fact that Icelanders had survived in this environment for centuries (Oslund 2011, 54). Within these historical narratives, the Icelandic population is not only set apart from other colonized people but also from their neighboring countries. Perhaps such a narrative was needed to hold on to the idea that Iceland was on par with the other European nations, by emphasizing the exceptionality of Icelanders from everyone else.

Engaging with the wider world

A Danish article published just a year before the trip¹⁶ of the Icelandic Parliament to Denmark, discussed at the beginning of this chapter, can be taken as an example of the emerging subjectivity of Icelanders. The author, Carl Thalbitzer, a Danish economist and intellectual, stresses the importance of the Icelandic medieval literature in stimulating the growing interest in Iceland in Denmark, and remarks that nationals from other countries have even studied ancient Icelandic to read these texts in their original language. Thalbitzer (1906) claims that in “Denmark there is much less knowledge of Iceland and its conditions than it should be”¹⁷ and speculates that Iceland's possible independence could create a golden age in Iceland's culture.¹⁸

Thalbitzer's final words deserve particular attention. “If that happens [the creation of a golden age] then the educated countries will *again* pay attention to the country and Iceland will *again* be seen as part of contemporary culture-nations” (p. 14; italics mine). As discussed in more detail in the next chapter, his suggestion that Iceland once belonged with so called ‘culture-nations’ (when translated roughly from Icelandic) but had lost their status over time reflects discourses taking place in Iceland at the time. Sovereignty, Thalbitzer argues, is the key to gaining the respect of other nations. Embedded in this idea is, of course, that stark distinction that reflects the dominant colonial narrative: nations are either civilized or they are not.

Here Iceland's trickster status becomes evident once again: not fully belonging with the modernizing nations but yet not belonging with other colonized countries either. Within racialized ideas of the time, Icelanders were able to pass as ‘white’ for the most part, and as such had greater opportunity to move closer to modernity than most other colonized populations, even though racist ideas of human diversity were not fully fixed, nor were ideas of racialized ‘black’ and ‘white’ in all cases clearly defined. Due to the trickster status of Iceland, they have the possibility to reinvent themselves to regain in some sense a higher status within the community of nations.

Notes

- 1 Unfortunately I did not receive permission to publish this image from the Museum of Copenhagen where I found it.
- 2 In Icelandic: “Minni undrun hefði það að líkindum vakið . . . , ef Íslendingarnir hefðu verið klæddir dýrafeldum með hettur á höfðum og loðskó á fótum.”

- 3 In 1860, agriculture was still the main occupation of 80% of the population, while only 3% of the population were engaged in industry and trade (Karlsson 1995).
- 4 In Icelandic: “Gæti verið fröðlegt fyrir Íslendinga að fá í einni heild yfirlit yfir flest það, sem skrifað hefur verið um land vort.”
- 5 While dark skin color had appeared as a sign of inferiority in various European medieval sources, in no way had, for example, Africans always been referred to in negative terms due to their skin color (Northrup 2002).
- 6 Some of the travelers who came to visit Iceland to see the sites of the Sagas must still have been rather disappointed due to the lack of structures or remains to observe where only landscape connects the stories to the land (Oslund 2011, 5).
- 7 The Danish King still had offered Iceland to Henry VIII and then later in the mid-1780s (Wawn 2000, 16).
- 8 Iceland’s settlement is generally linked to Ingólfur Arnarsson who settled in Iceland in 874, with the first Parliament being established in 930.
- 9 As earlier suggested, the move toward emphasizing national identity is still not seen by scholars as signifying the first sense of a distinctive Icelandic identity because a sense of separate Icelandic ethnic identity seems much older (Karlsson 1995; Hastrup 2009, 121).
- 10 Within the traditional farming system in Iceland, class distinctions in the sense of a heritage were historically, however, not as rigid as in the rest of Europe. Historian Gunnar Karlsson suggests that the relatively fluid class system became an important factor in mobilizing people of different economic positions in Iceland around nationalistic ideals with the society “not divided into segregated groups of any kind” (p. 53), in spite of extensive differences in wealth.
- 11 In Icelandic: “Sæti yfir fé, þæfði ull, syngi vísur og læsi Íslendingasögur eða hlustaði á þær lesnar.”
- 12 The first formal institutions for women’s education, *Kvennaskólinn í Reykjavík*, for example, was only established in 1874 (Halldórsdóttir 2011, 17).
- 13 In Icelandic: “Súdan-Negrar eru góðlátir, en háværir mjög og málugir.”
- 14 In Icelandic: “Hottentottar eru mjög líkir öpum, ákaflega hrukkóttir í framan.”
- 15 In Icelandic: “vísað hvítum þjóðum leið að óþrjótandi auðlindum Vesturálfu.”
- 16 The article was republished translated in the Icelandic paper *Ingólfur* in 1906 where I accessed it.
- 17 In Icelandic: “Í Danmörku er miklu minni þekking á Íslandi og högum þess en vera skyldi.”
- 18 I only have an Icelandic translation of this text. In Icelandic it says: “skapi blómöld í þjóðerni og menningu Íslands.”

2 The Colonial Exhibition in Tivoli

Racism and colonial others

Victor Waldemar Cornelius had just turned seven and Alberta Viola Roberts was four in 1905 when they were brought to Copenhagen from St. Croix in the West Indies, which was one of Denmark's colonies. Victor's mother struggled in poverty in St. Croix, working as a cleaning lady for the white upper class and Victor later in his life recalled that despite very harsh conditions, she always made sure he and his siblings were properly clothed when attending the Sunday school (Kristensen 1977). As for his trip to Denmark, Victor later told an interviewer that at first he was excited to visit a large town, unaware he would sail away and never see his mother again. Once he realized that he was leaving, he had to be dragged to the boat crying, screaming and kicking. He and Alberta were locked up in a dark cabin all the way to Denmark (Kristensen 1977). The reason for them being brought over was that the Colonial Exhibition that opened the same year in Tivoli in Copenhagen needed subjects from Denmark's colonies to exhibit.

The Tivoli gardens in Copenhagen, today one of Copenhagen's most important attractions, reflect Europe's long-standing dream of exotic and remote worlds. Some of the buildings that stand there today seem to have escaped from the pages of an orientalist storybook in their style and form, a sensation intensified by the lavish flower beds. Typical theme park attractions, such as a Ferris wheel, swings and roller coasters rest between these structures, almost like an afterthought. The Tivoli gardens were established in 1843 and were then the site of various kinds of amusements, concerts and public gatherings, just as they are today. But it was in 1880 and beyond that Tivoli became a popular place for the exhibitions of people and animals from places seen as exotic and remote (Jørgensen 1996, 30–48). The Colonial Exhibition, held a year before the parliamentary visit discussed in the last chapter, aimed to exhibit all of Denmark's colonies – including Iceland. This enraged Icelandic students in Copenhagen, who protested wildly at their country being included in Denmark's exhibition.

My story does not focus on Alberta and Victor but their experiences provide an important insight into the workings of such exhibitions and the racism that they entailed. The Colonial Exhibition is also important in the context of this book because it offers a nuanced example of Iceland's ambiguous status within the European context, which vividly reflects the interlocking racialized and gendered conceptualizations existing in wider Europe at the beginning of the 19th century.

The students' protests reflected the need to locate Iceland more firmly within the category of a nation, and reveals the predominance of the ideas of civilization, 'whiteness' and masculinity as woven through the idea of the nation-state within Europe.

The exhibition of 'exotic' people alongside plants and animals had a long history in Europe but was then mainly for royalty (Andreassen and Henningsen 2011, 12). It wasn't until the mid-19th century that such exhibitions became accessible to the wider European public. These exhibitions engaged with Europeans' growing sense of themselves as divided into different nations that were intrinsically different from those seen as non-white and uncivilized 'others.' The world exhibitions, where each nation and different industries got to display themselves, were extremely important in fostering a sense of nation-states and of a world heading toward modernization by displaying colonial assets and the peoples from these locations who could be seen as 'other' or 'primitive.' The numbers of people visiting the world exhibitions reflect the interest in these displays and thus the importance of the visual narratives they told: For example, 48 million people visited the Paris Exhibition in 1890 (Benedict 1983, 1).

These exhibitions quickly developed into a demonstration of power and competition among industrialized nation-states (Stoklund 1994, 37). One of the key issues here is that the exhibitions not only gave opportunities to display cultural uniqueness and recent developments on the path of modernization, but they also allowed the participating nation-states to "read their relative place in international evaluations" (Stoklund 1994, 38). The exhibitions were thus displays of power in which different nations could compare their own position directly to the others within a global community of nations.

It was the Paris World Exhibition in 1867 when 'exotic' people were first put on display in this way (Lindfors 1999, vii), often originating from areas recently and brutally colonized by European states. Somewhere between a 'freak show' and an 'ethnographic exhibition,' exhibitions of these individuals created a mini-world which could be more easily controlled and organized than the colonies themselves, creating a powerful narrative about the relationships between those seen as civilized and those seen as primitive. As Pollock, drawing from Foucault, has pointed out, what is at stake in visual representations is who is "authorized to look at whom with what effects" (1994, 15).

The Paris Exhibition demonstrated the relationship of power between those represented and those watching. The European audience could walk undisturbed through this space and see how the world's human diversity could be classified, observe progress through new technologies, learn about the utility of the colonies to the colonizers and consider how the colonies should be controlled.

The Paris Exhibition of 1900

The Paris World Exhibition in 1900 featured Icelandic artifacts displayed as a part of Denmark's contribution to the exhibition. Interestingly, Danish participation at the Paris World Exhibition consisted largely of clothing and objects from

Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Iceland, locations subjugated by Denmark, rather than cultural items from Denmark itself (Árnadóttir 2011, 72). In contrast, at the 1878 Paris Exhibition, the Danish exhibit revolved around a living room from Amager Island, one of the many islands constituting the Danish state, which was presented through a typical ethnographic display of artifacts (Stoklund 1994, 41; DeGroff 2012). The growing emphasis on material culture, like the Amager room, which was designated as timeless ‘folk culture’ in the second half of the 19th century, grew from the preoccupation at the beginning of the century with oral traditions and language. Material culture or ‘folk art’ was not presented in the earliest world exhibitions but became quite important later on. For the nation-states, ‘folk culture’ was used to characterize their differences from other nation-states (Stoklund 1999, 6).

The items on display on behalf of Denmark at the 1900 Paris Exhibition had been collected during Captain Daniel Bruun’s expeditions in the North Atlantic. Bruun was from a prominent Danish family and had various engagements with Iceland, such as participating in archeological excavations (Gardiner and Mehler 2007, 391). When the Danish exhibit was set up briefly in Copenhagen prior to its transportation to Paris, Icelanders living in the capital criticized it because Iceland was not represented as a *modern* nation (Árnadóttir 2011, 72).

An article in the Icelandic journal *Ísafold* engages with this criticism and Bruun’s defense¹ (*Ísafold* 1900). The unidentified author of the article in *Ísafold*, probably Björn Jónsson who had established the journal, points out that Bruun has acknowledged that Iceland is in fact similar to its neighboring countries (interestingly, Bruun had mentioned Sweden and Norway in comparison to Iceland, but not Denmark). Bruun defended himself from the criticism of the Icelanders in regard to how Iceland was presented in Paris, by saying that his focus on what is different – what he refers to as the “peculiar natural beauty” (*einkennileg náttúrufegurð*) and “peculiar culture” (*einkennilega þjóðmenningar*) – was intended to encourage foreigners to visit Iceland and see for themselves that Iceland is in fact a well-educated nation (*vel mentuð þjóð*) (*Ísafold* 1900, 91). The foreign traveler, according to Bruun, will thus realize that, in addition to its peculiar culture, Iceland also constitutes part of the Nordic culture. Bruun, furthermore, says that he has to admit that the majority of those individuals who visit the exhibition in Paris will see Greenland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands as almost one, and “the inhabitants of these countries as having the same living conditions and same culture.”² And Bruun states, that in fact for most of the visitors to the Paris Exhibition, “this little exhibition from the arctic countries is in fact the real Danish exhibition.”³ The words attempt to draw out the fact that the countries are, after all, part of the Danish Kingdom and exhibited as such, and that the internal differentiation between them would be irrelevant to those visiting the exhibition.

The Icelandic author, however, counters that Bruun’s conclusion can be understood in such a way that “we” – the Icelanders as well as the Danes – will be made into “Eskimos” by viewers from the south. The unnamed author adds, with a twist of irony, that it would mean that the Danes would then suffer the same fate as the Icelanders, using the Icelandic term shipwreck to capture the sentiment (“Og er þá

sætt sameiginlegt skipbrot”) (*Ísafold* 1900, 90). His comment cleverly illustrates the fact that if Bruun is correct that the guests are not able to distinguish between inhabitants of Greenland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands, why should they then be able to distinguish the Danes from these nationalities? For the French audience, then, the Danes are likely to be just as exotic as the Greenlanders or Icelanders.

This discussion indicates clearly that the Icelandic position was radically different from other colonized and racialized subjects while it simultaneously reflected their uncertain position of power toward the Danes. The Icelandic intellectuals seem constantly to have felt that they had to remind the larger European community of their position as a ‘white,’ civilized, European nation, and thus as distant from those who could well be exotic or uncivilized others.

Angry Icelanders

The debates surrounding the Colonial Exhibition in Copenhagen in 1905 were fiercer than those of 1900 Paris, making even clearer Iceland’s ambiguous positioning and the intensive European racism against various colonized subjects at this time. Icelandic students in Copenhagen were particularly important in this debate and were active in disseminating the ideas of nationalism that blossomed in Europe, as well as the racism that was part of it. At the turn of the 19th century, Copenhagen was Iceland’s intellectual center. Even though Iceland had two colleges, the first university was only established in 1911 (Sigurðsson 1986, 39), and so in 1904, when preparations for the exhibition began, there were around 100 Icelandic students in Copenhagen (Finsen 1958, 20). These students followed what was happening in the world around them and had strong aspirations for the future of their country.

The exhibition was put on by *Dansk Kunstflidforening*, a society whose mission was to teach applied skills to the poorer inhabitants of Denmark, and its goal was to introduce to the rest of Europe the Danish colonies, their main products and handicraft traditions, as well as to collect money for the association (Jóhannesson 2003, 137). Its key organizer, Emma Gad, was a writer and an active figure in Copenhagen’s social life and women’s associations, in addition to being the chair of *Dansk Kunstflidforening*. Celebrities were associated with the exhibition too, including the wife of Denmark’s future King Fredrick VIII, Crown Princess Louise, who became its special protector (Finsen 1958, 18). Mr. Moses Melchior, a well-known businessman, was hired to head the committee responsible for organizing the exhibition (Nielsen 2011, 99).

The exhibition was to be held in the Tivoli gardens, which had a long history of such exhibitions in Denmark; the first in Tivoli being held in 1878 to exhibit a group of African people defined as ‘Nubier’ (Nubia was along the Niger river in what today is a part of central Sudan and southern Egypt). In Copenhagen, exhibitions of ‘exotic’ people had, as elsewhere in Europe, taken place for the royal family but became public events at the end of the 19th century (Andreassen and Henningsen 2011). Caspar Jørgensen has noted in his writing on Copenhagen that Tivoli was perceived as a place where Danes of different classes came together

(Jørgensen 1996, 39). Perhaps the Tivoli exhibitions of ‘primitive others’ or Danish colonial subjects furthermore created this nationalistic sense of the Danish nation as one.

The Danish newspaper, *Berlingske Tidende*, provides information on the ideas about what might go on display. As the biggest country exhibited, according to *Berlingske Tidende*, Iceland would dominate, so the visitors would, for example, see an Icelandic farm where a family of farmers would be displayed with the small Icelandic horses, sheep and cows. Panorama illustrations of Icelandic nature would give the visitors an impression of how striking Icelandic nature is (*Islands storlaaede natur*). From the Faroe Islands, the visitor would also be able to see a family in its house and with its animals, in addition to an extensive selection of stuffed seabirds. From the Danish West Indies, there would as it is phrased in the *Berlingske Tidende*, “of course” be a “negro family” (*Negerfamilie*) on display along with its huts and animals and, from Greenland, an “Eskimo” family with its dogs and kayaks (Spero 1904). An interview with Emma Gad, furthermore, reveals her ideas to give a sense of the people’s life. Until now, she claims, “our” colonies and dependencies had never been displayed as a whole in Denmark. The “negro family” would make straw mats in an original hut, and there were hopes to create a little lake where the Greenlanders could row in the kayaks (Hektor 1904). There would also be a *tombola*, sales booths and restaurants with young girls in the national costume from each of the displayed nations offering things for sale (*ibid.*).

The Icelandic Student Association in Copenhagen fiercely protested these plans in both Danish and Icelandic newspapers. For the Icelanders, there were several intersecting issues at stake: The Icelanders protested the name of the exhibition on the basis that they were not a “colony.” They also rejected the term “dependency” (*biland*), which often was used to refer to the relationship between Iceland and Denmark. The Danish newspaper *Politiken* reflected amusingly on the difficulty of finding another word that could reflect the common relationship that Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Greenland and the Caribbean Islands had with Denmark (*Politiken* 1904b). These speculations in *Politiken* indirectly drew attention to what the Icelandic students were objecting to: That Icelanders, from the Danish perspective, were in the same category as the other colonized populations within the Danish realm. The *Politiken* article humorously suggests other possibilities for the name of the exhibition, such as “The properties of the Danish crown” (*Den Danske Krones Besiddelser*) or “Far away countries” (*Fjerneland*), while admitting equally humorously that these suggestions would probably also be rejected by the Icelanders (*ibid.*).

These arguments about the name of the exhibition reflect the messiness of colonial categories, and reveal how the need to proclaim “we are not a colony,” says a lot about the politics of power. The seriousness of the matter to the Icelanders and the humor in which it was discussed in the Danish media indicates the unequal power relationship between Denmark and Iceland. It should, furthermore, be remembered that the Icelandic students’ refusal to acknowledge Iceland as a colony did not revolve around criticism of the way other colonized countries

were treated at the time. Africa, for instance had been brutally subjugated in the 19th century in a colonizing process involving dehumanization and butchery. This included Denmark's colonization of areas in western Africa and the Danish West Indies as was earlier mentioned, where slaves from Africa were brought to the Danish plantations in the Caribbean working under Danish masters.

As noted by Timothy Mitchell (1989), colonized subjects were regularly represented as objects of spectacle, degrading them, regardless of whether this was the intention of the organizer of the exhibitions (p. 218). Mitchell takes as an example the Paris Exhibition in 1889 where the French had built a representation of medieval Cairo with careful attention to various details, such as dirty, unkempt houses and the creation of an atmosphere of chaos with 50 donkeys going up and down the street. Egyptian visitors to the exhibit were shocked when observing this spectacle (Mitchell 1989, 218). Mitchell's analysis draws attention to the way the process of displaying and selecting what is displayed creates an object for others to gaze upon.

The Icelandic students observed, through similar exhibition in Copenhagen and possibly elsewhere, the techniques of representation based on systems of classification and hierarchies, or as phrased by Mitchell (1989), the "machinery of what we think of as representation" (p. 221). The location of the exhibition in Tivoli was, for example, seen as adding to the insult, as it positioned Icelandic 'culture' in a particular context that the Icelandic students found odious. An Icelandic author of a letter published by *Þjóðólfur* in 1904 talks about how Tivoli hosted exhibitions of various kinds

all from rats and dogs up to blacks and other savages, and possibly sometimes a little higher up. But most of these exhibitions have involved silliness, and the main goal being to show something peculiar and strange that people can make fun of.⁴

(*Þjóðólfur* 1904)

The racism in his statement is clear, but his words also make obvious the desire that Icelanders be recognized as real political subjects, not "something peculiar and strange" for the amusement of Danes in Copenhagen.

A similar comment is noted in the Icelandic newspaper *Fjallkonan* where the author notes that the Icelandic students themselves point out that they are not only "alone in a 'foreign' country"⁵ (putting foreign within quotation marks) but that these students are physically located where the exhibition will be held and thus will be the ones who have to listen to the smug remarks and laughter of the Danes (*Fjallkonan* 1904b).

The key issue behind the Icelanders' objection to the Colonial Exhibition, beyond their criticism on the location and the name, revolves around Iceland's association with racialized colonized subjects. This association was clearly stated by the students: In an announcement in the *Politiken* on December 28th, 1904, the student association opens by emphasizing the need to maintain good relations between Denmark and Iceland. It goes on to argue, however, that exhibiting

Icelandic people along with “gros” and Greenlanders is “humiliating” (*nedværdignde*) for the Icelandic culture and nationality (*Politiken* 1904a). Icelanders clearly saw themselves on a different plane. In many of the Icelandic texts the concept “*skrælingi*,” a degrading reference, is used for the Greenlanders. A statement from the student organization in *Fjallkonan* published in the same month reflects clearly how this comparison with other colonized populations was of crucial importance to them. The student organization writes that Iceland will be exhibited:

with uncultured savage tribes (*siðlausum villipjóðum*) . . . to disgrace us in the eyes of the cultivated world. . . . There is no less than a great danger that awaits our culture and what other countries think about it: we are being categorized along with uncivilized savage people . . . and being unsuitable in the eyes of the educated world . . . in addition to that people are being taught that we should be observed as on the same stage of culture and progress as the *skrælingjar* and blacks.

(Fjallkonan 1904a, 199)

This statement underscores how association with other colonized populations was the key issue in the protest. In the European binary worldview, the European was positioned as civilized, cultural and masculine while the colonial subject was uncivilized and feminine. The former were often associated with white skin color while the latter was associated with dark skin color.

But Iceland was to some extent anomalous to this dualistic model, as these debates show, or a trickster that does not fit nicely in the dualist mode. The Icelandic students seem to fear that the association with Greenlanders and people who the students called “blacks” would push Iceland further to the wrong side. Their comments highlight distinctions between “true” nations and those seen as closer to nature (Jóhannesson 2003). Icelanders are thus laying claim to their political identity, while adhering to wider racialized ideas that placed so-called primitive or savage people within the realm of nature.

The public debate about the Colonial Exhibition also highlights other issues that relate to other colonized populations, suggesting the anger regarding the exhibition also mobilized broader feelings of humiliation experienced by Icelanders in Copenhagen. An article, signed G. Sv., about the exhibition in *Fjallkonan* under the title “Icelanders Disgraced in Danish Newspapers”⁶ remarks that Danish media coverage of the exhibition disgraced the Icelanders. One example the author points out is the incorrect spelling of Icelandic names (*Fjallkonan* 1905, 9). The author of another letter in *Fjallkonan* angrily proclaims that the Danes are very used to being able to exhibit “us” when it suits “them” wherever in the world (*Fjallkonan* 1904b).

Some of the comments in the newspapers written by the students refer to Icelandic women in the national costume. Early on, Emma Gad expressed a desire for portrayals of this kind at the exhibition and the Icelandic sub-committee

involved in the exhibition mentioned in a statement from the beginning of December 1904 that women in Icelandic costumes would be present during the event (Havsteen et al. 1904). As discussed earlier, feminist scholars have long recognized the importance of women's bodies in constructing the nation (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989; Pratt 1990), while generally being excluded from direct power and full citizenship (McClintock 1995, 354–355). From that perspective, the fact that women only were supposed to be present and dressed in national costume is revealing. Also, presentation of exotic women as sexual objects was not unusual at such exhibitions in Copenhagen (Andreassen and Henningsen 2011), which was possibly known to the Icelanders. Interestingly here, though, women are not actors who can speak for themselves, but instead are voiceless individuals who have to be spoken for by male Icelandic students and or intellectuals.

Pratt's (1990) observation on the masculine construct of the nation as "brotherhood," a society of men, draws as earlier stated attention to how women are often connected to the nation through their physical bodies. It thus becomes useful to distinguish between nationalistic notions of Iceland as such, embodied in the figure of a nurturing woman on the one hand and conceptualizations of the Icelandic nation that were articulated in quite masculine ways on the other (Loftsdóttir 2005). As we will see in the next chapter, the Icelandic nation was very much visualized in Iceland as a nation of men, while, as demonstrated here in the context of colonialism, the nation was seen as embodied in the figure of women, both by Icelandic men and Danish subjects. In such a context, the symbolic display of women in national costume, side by side with "black" bodies, thus became the ultimate insult to Iceland.

Internal disputes

The students' association encouraged the Icelandic members of the organizing committee to "stop Iceland's part in the exhibition"⁷ (Fjallkonan 1904a, 199). Hannes Hafstein, an Icelandic minister on the committee, quickly announced that he would not take part, even though he was apparently pressured to rejoin by the main committee (Arnórsson 1905). Another male committee member Finnur Jónsson was harshly criticized by the students:

It is worth mentioning that the most uncompromising person of the committee, professor Finnur Jónsson, let word spread around in the paper "Samfunded" after news came from the home country, that there was no dishonour for Icelanders in being set in the same category as "*skrælingjar*" and black people at the show here in Copenhagen.⁸

(Sveinsson 1905a, 10)

Finnur Jónsson tried to explain his position in the newspaper *Reykjavík*, stating that he felt that participation in the exhibition could stimulate interest in Icelandic commodities and thus open more extensive markets for Icelandic products



Figure 2.1 Inside the exhibition showcasing Iceland at the Colonial Exhibition. The large painting is a Memorial plaque to District Commissioner Ari Magnusson and his wife Kristín Guðbrandsdóttir, made shortly after their death in 1652. The painting is now in the National Museum in Iceland

Source: The National Museum of Denmark

(Jónsson 1905, 41). An article signed G. Sv., which probably stands for Gísli Sveinsson, a student in Copenhagen, harshly responds:

That the professor is trying to convince Icelanders that it is in the country's interest to exhibit its culture in the same category as *skrælingjar* and uncivilized black rabble – that is adding insult to injury – piling up insult in words upon impudent actions.⁹

(Sveinsson 1905b, 70)

There were others who also thought that the exhibition could be beneficial for Iceland. The Icelandic newspaper *Austri* demonstrated early support for the exhibition, emphasizing that it could provide an opportunity to introduce Icelandic craft to a wider audience and stressing its support to the “good men and women” working on the exhibition in Reykjavík. According to *Austri*, these men and women were active in the Thorvaldsen Association, which was an Icelandic charity of more affluent women generally educated in Copenhagen¹⁰ (Rice 2007, 3).

At the end of December, *Austri* published a statement signed by nine Icelandic individuals who constituted the local Icelandic sub-committee for the exhibition, five men and four women. The reason why there are so many women in comparison to men in other committees is probably linked to the handicraft emphasis of the exhibition. These individuals asked for Icelandic support for the exhibition, and which would be demonstrated by a submission of Icelandic crafts, both new and ancient, for possible inclusion in the exhibition (Havsteen et al. 1904). They also tried to show their support to the students by writing to the Danish committee asking for clarification on some of the issues raised by the students and stressing in the Icelandic newspapers that a “middle way was needed.”

In the Danish newspaper *Politiken* in February 11th, 1905, the main committee of the exhibition declared that they were willing to make considerable changes to the exhibit, due to the potential damage that could be done to the relationship between the two countries if the original exhibit plan was maintained. The writer of the article adds, in a rather patronizing tone, his hope that Icelanders will realize that the goal had not been to offend them (*Politiken* 1905a, 2). The newspaper columnist refers to the Icelanders protesting as “angry,” as if referring to a child or a subordinate person (*Politiken* 1905a). Nevertheless, the name of the exhibition was changed to “Colonial Exhibition along with Exhibition from Iceland and the Faroe Islands,” solidifying more clearly what nationalities could be racially divided into white and non-white.

Exhibiting the colonial world

When the exhibition opened on May 31st, 1905, most of the artifacts displayed in regard to Iceland were those that had been collected for the Paris Exhibition in 1900, as well as items owned by individuals in Copenhagen. This meant that Icelanders had not been active in sending artifacts to display and some of the students even stated boldly that this meant that there was no “official” participation on behalf of Iceland (*Reykjavik* 1905, 27). The items were exhibited in a special house devoted to Iceland. The plans to exhibit whole families in their homes from Denmark’s different colonies and to have a lake with “Eskimos” rowing around in kayaks seems not to have materialized as envisioned so optimistically by Emma Gad. The two children, Albert and Victor, were, however, brought to Copenhagen especially for the exhibition from the West Indian island of St. Croix. Also, one man, William Smith, came from St. Thomas with black pigs and his mules one week after the opening of the exhibition, who was to be exhibited in the West Indian part of the exhibition (Nielsen 2011, 100). The committee had difficulties finding others from St. Croix even though they had offered to pay for the trip to Copenhagen (Andreassen and Henningsen 2011). At the day of the opening there was actually only one person originating from the Caribbean (West Indies) that had African background, a woman named Henriette Jensen who had lived in Copenhagen for almost ten years. She was hired to serve in the restaurant, and while she spoke Danish and had lived in Denmark for years, great care was taken to dress her in white with a checkered scarf on her head, in line with what was seen as characterizing the West Indian fashion (Nielsen 2011, 101).

At the exhibition's opening ceremony, held at Tivoli's beautifully decorated concert hall, King Christian sat in the first row with the Crown Prince, Princess Louise and many others from the royal family, along with Copenhagen's elite. Or, as was written in one Icelandic newspaper, "It is said that more noble people have never been seen in Tivoli"¹¹ (*Stefnir* 1905). In his opening address, Melchoir, the president of the exhibition committee, felt it necessary to mention the resistance of Icelandic students to the exhibition. He proclaimed that while it had not been the goal to offend anyone, it was the Icelanders who had been unjust to the committee (*Stefnir* 1905; *Politiken* 1905b).

Interest in the exhibition was even more intense than originally anticipated by the organizers (Freiesleben 1998, 40). Much of it focused on Alberta and Victor, who had arrived in Copenhagen in May. The committee had initially intended to send the children back to their families in St. Croix, but that never happened and the children remained in Denmark.

In Copenhagen, the two children stayed with a Danish family and were each day escorted by the family's teenage daughter to the exhibition. There, they were expected to be part of what was displayed and to pose for pictures with guests. Special attention was given to schoolteachers during a day devoted to them, with 7000 visiting on that day. Following their visit, thousands of schoolchildren went to the exhibition to see Alberta and Victor, and to learn about Denmark's colonies (Freiesleben 1998, 40–41).

The two children were supposed to stay in the West Indies section of the exhibition but when looking back at this time, Victor recalled that he had liked much more to play in the Greenlandic section, where there was a kayak and a stuffed sled dog. To him, a young child, it must have been incomprehensible why he had to stay in one particular section. Nevertheless, he was punished for his wanderings and, finally, when he failed to obey, he and Alberta were put in a cage.

In later interviews, Victor recounted the rumors that arose following this imprisonment suggesting the children were put into the cage because they were a danger to the visitors – that he and Alberta were so dangerous that they had to be caged like animals. Kids poked their fingers through the bars to see if the children were savage enough to try to bite them. Some people pitied them, though, Victor remembered and pointed out that Alberta got candies to eat during these days while he:

in desperation due to the confinement, responded to any form of attention with spitting and sobbing. No doubt that was not the most convincing way to show that I was as much of a human being . . . but at the time I knew no better.
(Freiesleben 1998, 157)

At seven, a full three years older than Alberta, Victor probably felt the humiliation and dehumanization more intensely. A comic picture in the Danish *Extrabladet* in September featured the two children in a dehumanizing way and remarked on their inability to "behave." The caption explained that someone had complained about how unruly the children were. Underneath, in larger text probably intended to be humorous, it says, "God, to think that there are some people who still want

to sell the West Indian Islands.” The text seems to stress through irony that selling the islands would be a good idea in light of the behavior of the children, reflecting both the racism in Danish society at the time and depicting the ‘savage’ who will never become civilized (see Figure 2.2).

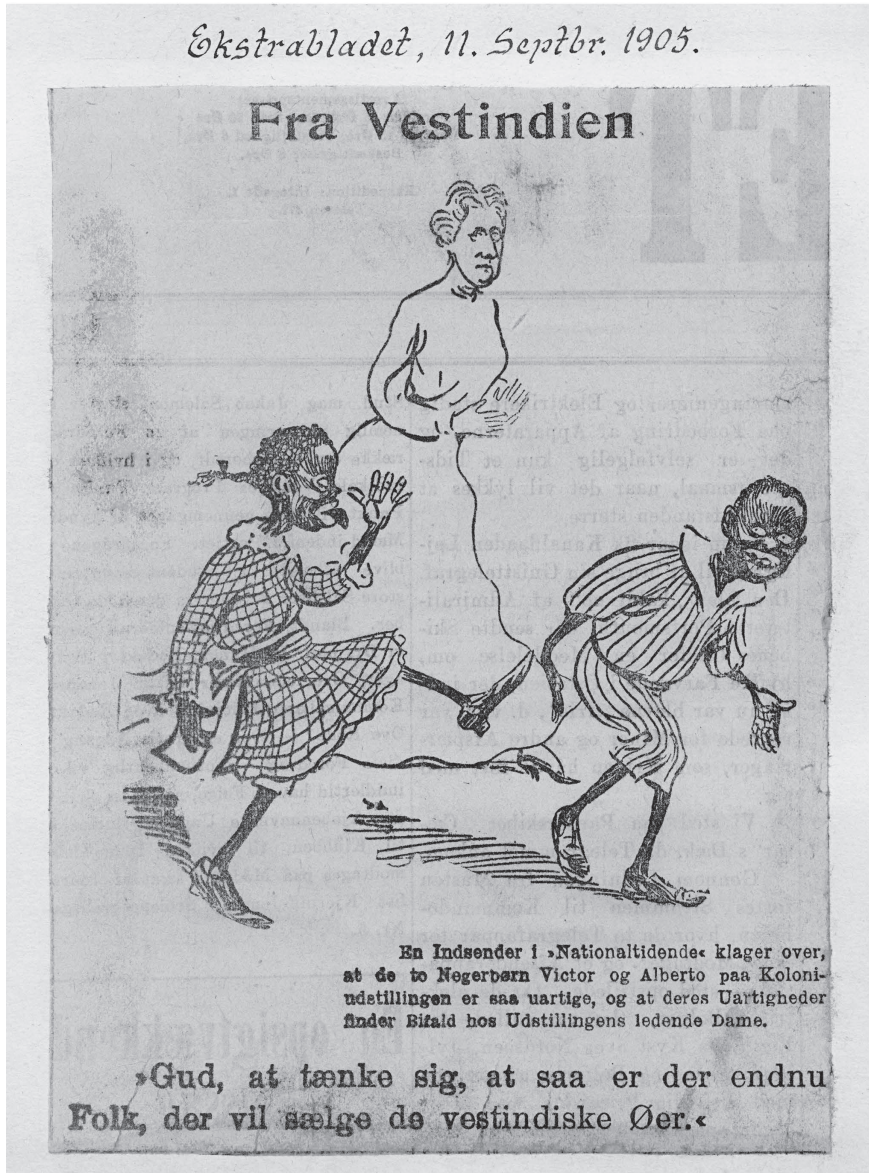


Figure 2.2 Racist depiction of Victor and Alberta in a Danish newspaper

Source: The National Museum of Denmark



Figure 2.3 Victor and Alberta playing. Underneath the image the caption says: ‘Negro-children from St. Thomas.’ The text is possibly written by Emma Gad

Source: The National Museum of Denmark

The dehumanization of these two children is driven home when one looks at this comic and simultaneously thinks of Victor crying and little Alberta sitting there with him in the cage under the gaze of strangers. A photo of the two children at a better moment shows them as the children they actually were. They are both laughing playfully – a woman standing further away from the camera who is observing the children seems to be smiling, accepting of their behavior (Figure 2.3).

Victor went on to become a teacher and musician in Denmark (Andreassen and Henningsen 2011; Kristensen 1977), but Alberta died of tuberculosis at age 15; she was buried on March 31st, 1917, the same day the Danish West Indies were handed over to the US (Freiesleben 1998, 91).

I visited Tivoli for the first time at the age of 12 while on a vacation with my parents. It was a magical place. Coming from Iceland, I found Copenhagen exotic

and exciting in itself, but Tivoli was like something from another world. The rides were obviously captivating but, in a less overt way, so were the references to old European orientalist images. Only many years later, I saw Tivoli as one of many sites of colonial imagination and as yet another place where racism was crystallized and intensified. My colleague, Helga Björnsdóttir, then my PhD student, was at the time helping me with the research project focusing on the image of Africa by going through old Icelandic journals. She had found references to the Colonial Exhibition and told me that this should be interesting to me. She was right, of course.

The Colonial Exhibition not only demonstrates European racism at the time but also how such ideas were a part of the Nordic countries as well. No Icelander seems to have objected to the exhibition of Victor and Alberta and, when I later visited Copenhagen to collect material in archives on the exhibition, I thought about what the Icelandic students must have thought when they saw the exhibition. Did they see Alberta and Victor caged within ‘their’ space representing the West Indies? Were they fascinated by the display of different artifacts?

In fact, given the political and historical context of such exhibitions, it is not surprising that the Icelandic students did not want to have their nationality exhibited within such a context, some having observed the display of other cultures in similar exhibitions in Copenhagen. Again, let’s not forget that the Icelanders did not really seem to have any problem with exhibiting human beings in this manner; rather, their complaint was that they did not belong with “uncivilized savages,” a phrase routinely used in these protests.

As I collected material on the exhibition, I also came across evidence of the gendered presentation of Iceland through two photos. One of them depicts two women dressed in the Icelandic national costume, standing proudly in front of the Icelandic hut. Both of the women are serious and behind them an Icelandic falcon is displayed. Were there Icelandic women dressed in the national costume at the exhibition after all? Victor’s account tells of Danish women dressing as women from Iceland and the Faroe Islands due to their shared whiteness, so possibly these women are not Icelandic. But perhaps it does not matter. What matters is that here once again we see women’s bodies depicting traditions and the country itself, regardless of whether it is a performance by Danish or Icelandic women.

The other photo is even more interesting because it depicts three women standing side-by-side, with the caption explaining, “From Iceland, West Indies and the Faroe Islands” (Figure 2.4).

The woman said to be from Iceland is the same as the woman standing in front of the Icelandic hut in the first photo I mentioned, and she and the woman from the Faroe Islands are both dressed in national costume, as if to indicate their association to particular, socially defined spaces. The black woman standing between them, possibly Henriette Jensen, is dressed in a white dress and she smiles somewhat shyly at the camera. Even though they are not all smiling in the photo, and perhaps because I want to believe it, it seems possible they were having a chat and were then interrupted by the photographer who asked for their photo. I perceive a sense of intimacy in the photo and, regardless whether I understand it correctly or not, it reminds me of



Figure 2.4 Image of the three women identified as from Iceland, West Indies and the Faroese Islands

Source: The National Museum of Denmark

the different kinds of agency involved when people did not necessarily remain confined to the categories that were given to them. When we look at text and photos we do not get the whole picture of how people resisted and manipulated the subject and object positions within which they were placed.

Perhaps, just as Victor bravely resisted the categorization as racially subjugated other,³ only to be put more firmly in his place, these women were able to transcend this position for a few stolen moments.

Notes

- 1 Large parts of the article are direct quotes from an earlier article by Bruun. The article in *Isafold* is not credited to a particular author, but Björn Jónsson, a prime minister in Iceland for many years, who established *Isafold* and was one of the main authors of the various articles published therein.
- 2 In Icelandic: “eigi við hér um bil sömu kjör að búa og hafi sömu þjóðmenningu.”
- 3 In Icelandic: “mikill fjöldi þessara gesta heldur að þessi litla sýning frá þessum heimskautsbaugalöndum sé hin eiginlega Danmerkursýning.”

- 4 In Icelandic: “allt neðan frá rottum og hundum upp til svertingja og annarra villimanna og ef til vill stundum ofurlítið hærra upp. En flestar hafa þær sýningar verið með einhverjum skrípablæ, og það haft mest fyrir augum, að sýna eitthvað skritið og einkennilegt, er menn gerðu gaman að.”
- 5 In Icelandic: “Einstæðingar í ‘framandi landi’.”
- 6 In Icelandic: “Íslendingar smánaðir í dönskum blöðum.”
- 7 In Icelandic: “að afstýra hluttöku Íslands í sýningunni.”
- 8 In Icelandic:

Þess er vert að geta, að hinn óbilgjarnasti af nefndarmönnum próf. Finnur Jónsson, lét það boð út ganga í blaðinu ‘Samfunded’ eftir að fréttir komu að heiman, að Íslendingum væri engin vansæmd í því að vera skipaðir á bekk með Skrælingjum og Svertingjum á sýningunni hér í Kaupmannahöfn.
- 9 In Icelandic:

Að prófessorinn skuli ætla að reyna að telja Íslendingum trú um, að það sé gagn landi þeirra að sýna menningu þess í flokk með Skrælingjum og siðlausum Blökkumannalýð – það er að bæta gráu ofan á svart – hlaða móðgun í orðum ofan á ósvífni í verki.
- 10 James Rice points out that in Iceland at that time, as in wider Europe and the US, charities were often one way for women to have a political voice (Rice 2007, 4).
- 11 In Icelandic: “Göfugra fólk er sagt að aldrei hafi sést í Tívoli en við þetta tækifæri.”

3 The desire to become modern

Forging of the Icelandic subject

In June 1930, a Parliamentary Festival, *Alþingishátíðin*, was held at the old parliamentary site in Þingvellir to honor 1000 years of the Icelandic Parliament. My original interest in the festival arose from a love story. An Austrian musician had been invited to Iceland to establish a symphony orchestra when he fell in love with a young woman and married her. Their grandchild became my partner and the father of my children. Even though the Austrian musician died long before I met my partner, his story entwined *Alþingishátíðin* with my own life's history.

When I started browsing old newspapers looking for references to the festival, I came across an old advertisement. It displayed a tablecloth, made of the finest material, created especially for the festival. It was intended to carry with it “the memory” of the festival “from generation to generation” (Verslunin Egill Jacobsen 1930). Upon reading this advertisement, a thought crossed my mind. I abandoned my research and began digging into my closet, where I found the tablecloth given to me by my grandmother. When I gently unfolded it, I saw the symbol of the festival embedded within the yellow and white fabric. The cloth was soft in my hands, almost like new.

Iceland's position had changed radically over the 25 years that had passed since the Colonial Exhibition, moving the country forward on the road toward full independence. Denmark's defeat by Prussia in 1864 meant that Denmark had lost the Danish-speaking area of Schleswig to Germany. After Germany's defeat in the First World War, Denmark tried to get these lands back by using arguments of self-determination of the Danish-speaking population in Schleswig. This made it more difficult for Denmark to refuse Iceland's request of self-determination (Byock 1992, 50–51). The Act of Union Law (*Sambandslögin*) of 1918, in which Iceland became a separate state in a personal union with Denmark's king, meant that Iceland could manage its internal affairs while its external affairs were managed by Denmark (Byock 1992, 51).

So the *Alþingishátíðin* came at a time of great change for Iceland, and reflected how, in the 20th century, Iceland's desire for modernization was closely intertwined with its desire to demonstrate its readiness for independence. Unlike the Colonial Exhibition in Copenhagen, *Alþingishátíðin* was organized by the Icelandic State and its goals were to demonstrate Iceland both as an old civilization and as a nation moving toward the future. As with the Colonial Exhibition

discussed earlier, *Alþingishátíðin* reflected the desire to show other European nations Iceland's 'true' position as fully equal to other European nations. In contrast to the Danish Colonial Exhibition, Icelanders were here positioning themselves as subjects deserving of sovereignty. The festival was seen generally as a great success.

In the preparation for the festival, the class and gender differentiation of Icelandic society of the time became clearly demonstrated, simultaneously as how the festival mobilized people across different spectrums of Icelandic society into believing in the project of modernity. No less important, *Alþingishátíðin* provides an opportunity to delve deeper into people's desires and dreams in Iceland during the early 20th century as more than just recipients of racialized ideas circulating in Europe.

The festival accomplished many things, which I'll explore in the next pages, including creating European subjects as envisioned by Iceland's elite, and helping create forms of governmentality in Iceland. I'll also delve into the kind of political subjects the organizers of the festival were aiming to create, and how these were understood and acted on by individuals within Icelandic society who made the festival part of their own aspirations and hopes for the future. While the previous chapter highlighted coloniality as an integrated part of nationalism and ideas of modernity, here the focus is on how nationalistic ideas also carried a certain hope for the future and a feeling of dignity and meaning.

That said, in respect to Icelandic society, it is important for the present to draw out the links between nationalism, racism and xenophobia. Ethnic identities were also mobilized within nationalism in a way that gave early 20th-century subjects in Europe positions as self-governing individuals. As discussed in Chapter 1, as anthropologists and historians (Karlsson 1995; Hastrup 2009) have shown, Icelanders had developed a sense of ethnic identity for centuries that was easily mobilized with the idea of the nation-state that emerged in the early 18th century.

My great-grandmother, Kristín, was still a young woman of 33 at the time of the festival. Even though the tablecloth was hers, I have no evidence that she actually attended the festival. However, it was important enough to her that she not only acquired the commemorative tablecloth, but she also held on to it long enough to pass it on to future generations. All over Iceland, the festival was seen as the 'dawn' of a new beginning for Iceland, allowing the nation to display its cultural uniqueness within the Danish realm and thus its legitimacy as a fully independent nation-state.

Kristín died a few years after I was born, so I was unable to ask her about her recollections of the country's response to the festival; newspapers, however, offer a sense of the national mood, as does a questionnaire sent out in 1993–1994 by the Icelandic National Museum, which included questions about Icelanders' recollections of the 1930 Parliamentary Festival. These written responses reveal the political and personal perspectives on the festival from everyday Icelanders. It's clear, for example, that the festival was important in mobilizing the population both in creating a sense of intimacy and of Iceland as a modernizing nation in the imagination of the general public.

As mentioned earlier, the festival was widely seen as part of the “awakening of Icelanders,”¹ symbolizing the beginning of a new future for the country. A letter in the Icelandic journal *Lögrjetta* describes the festival as marking “a turning point in the progress of Iceland, it will be in the minds of the generation growing up now like the morning sun looking over the tops of the mountains . . . with the soft light of future hopes”² (Jóhannesson 1930, 15). In one journal, a columnist writing on the festival stated that the year 1930 would always be perceived for “newly awakened powers” (*nývaknaðra afla*) that “struggle and fumble forwards, sometimes delusional, sometimes in a dream, but still creating a new era that we modern men only see vaguely in the distance”³ (*Mánaðarblað K.F.U.M. í Reykjavík* 1930, 6). However, another journal, *Norðlingur*, compares the festival to one in 1875 when the 1000th anniversary of Iceland’s settlement was celebrated, arguing that it was this earlier festival that actually symbolized the “awakening” of the nation that walked “into the light of new times” (*ljós hinna nýju tíma*). The 1930 festival, the author speculated, what was symbolized similar ideas for future generations (*Norðlingur* 1930).

These “new times” are envisioned not only as breaking away from the past, but as a revitalization of the old times of Icelandic settlement. Writing in 1930, Ólafur Friðriksson draws these links between the past and future, showing the sense of one nation and one country: “We see that the [Icelandic] nation [living now] is the same as lived in the country in ancient times but has improved since then”⁴ (Friðriksson 1930). These voices reflect how the nationalistic project emphasizes timeless cultural heritage and modernity while also looking toward the future (Löfgren 1993). In Iceland, the break from the past was a promise to break from the poverty characterizing the lives of many at the turn of the millennium. The reference to the past aimed to underscore the fact that Iceland was now a ‘civilized’ nation.

In addition to my beautiful tablecloth, special dinnerware was produced for the festival, along with pins displaying the symbol of the festival, stamps and other items. Many Icelanders also bought framed photographs of the festival. An advertisement in an Icelandic newspaper for my tablecloth emphasizes that the festival is about “remembering” (*minningarhátíð*) Iceland’s past, and the continuous settlement in the country, but it also emphasizes the importance of remembering the event itself, and thus to carry the memory of the event “from generation to generation” (Verslunin Egill Jacobsen 1930). The advertisement highlights the tablecloth’s ability to imprint the memory of the event into the everyday life of future generations, objectifying the event and its importance even before it had actually taken place.

Why was it so important to Icelanders in 1930 that future generations remember the event itself? One respondent to the questionnaire hints at an answer when addressing the temporality of the event. He refers to the festival as something that people will later use to measure time, with events categorized as happening either before or after the festival.⁵ His observation shows how the festival was supposed to become a defining moment in people’s lives, distinguishing Iceland’s poverty-stricken past from a modern future.

Governmentality

The organization of the festival started many years before the event took place. As discussed by Ólafur Rastrick (2013), at the beginning of the 20th century the organizers hoped that the anniversary would also be when Iceland would receive its full independence (p. 231). These hopes did not materialize, and consequently the festival became important in symbolizing that Iceland was ready to become a sovereign nation. Not only an event to commemorate the past, the festival was also a “judgment” of the whole nation (Rastrick 2013, 234).

In 1926, the intellectual Guðmundur Finnbogason gave a speech advertised under the heading “Judgment day 1930.” It sounds like a reference to a terrible ending but he was in fact emphasizing that the Icelandic nation had to prepare itself for a new beginning. As Rastrick points out, Finnbogason effectively connects the festival as a ‘festival of memories’ with the idea that it entailed a “test” of the nation itself (*sjálfsprófun þjóðarinnar*), and thus was of crucial importance for its future (Rastrick 2013, 234).

Furthermore, Guðmundur Hálfðánarson and Ólafur Rastrick (2006) have shown how the festival was part of an attempt by the Icelandic government to link different art forms and national identity, reinforcing and celebrating a sense of the cultural uniqueness of the nation. This was a relatively new idea in Iceland. Prior to 1920, the Icelandic government had not systematically reinforced the idea of national identity through the systematic cultivation of art (*ibid.*, 91). Similarly, grand national projects were also taking place during this period, such as the establishment of the National Theatre Trust in 1923, the Cultural Council and Cultural Fund in 1929 and the National Radio in 1930 (Hálfðánarson and Rastrick 2006, 90) (see Figure 3.1).

As Hálfðánarson and Rastrick point out, the festival should thus be seen as a part of governmentality in the Foucauldian sense, with art becoming a part of governmental undertakings to shape values and influence the population. Michel Foucault’s concept of ‘governance’ is particularly appropriate here because it draws attention to the ways in which individuals modify their behavior when governed in a particular way by the state and other actors. In addition, Finnbogason’s ideas strongly emphasized that each individual and each group in society should seek to improve themselves in accordance to what was appropriate for their position and role in society (Rastrick 2013, 235).

This emphasis on modernization and solidification of the nation mobilized people in various ways, such as with various collections in Reykjavík that aimed at raising money for monuments of men perceived as ‘significant’ for the nation. Thus, in the beginning of the 20th century, there existed a certain kind of urgency to create national icons to commemorate the nation for present and future generations (Helgason 2013, 91–105). Sigríður Matthíasdóttir (2004) has illustrated how the festival carried a presentation of Iceland that was seen favorably by particular sections of the population. Because Icelandic ideas of modernity were entangled with ideas of masculinity and class, men within the administrative and intellectual classes were seen as the inheritors of the ‘true’ Icelandic essence (Matthíasdóttir 2004, 150–152).



Figure 3.1 A part of the nation's grand projects. Image of the parade taken at the Parliamentary Festival June 26–28th, 1930

Source: National Museum of Iceland

In organizing the festival, the administrative elite (*borgaraleg valdastétt*) took the lead position within the main organizational committee established by the Parliament in 1926 and which was composed of seven men, six of whom were themselves members of the Parliament (Matthíasdóttir 2004, 169). The committee was to offer suggestions and do the necessary preparation for the festival. They also administrated the assigning of positions both in organizing and execution of tasks (p. 163).

The women's association in Iceland was bitterly disappointed at being excluded from organizational roles, having stressed the importance of including women in these tasks. In 1927, the general women's meeting in Reykjavík (*Almennur kvennafundur*) urged the Parliament to include women in the organizational committees; Ingibjörg H. Bjarnason, a member of the Parliament, pointed out that a

festival of the nation should not suggest that men only shaped the country (Matthíasdóttir 2004, 164–165).

However, only one of the ideas proposed by these women, an exhibition of traditional Icelandic craft (*heimilisiðnaður*), was executed, and even then to a much lesser extent than they hoped for (Matthíasdóttir 2004; Rastrick 2013, 244). *Heimilisiðnaðarfélag Íslands* (Handicrafts Association of Iceland) was asked to oversee the exhibition, but according to Matthíasdóttir, it received scant financial support (Matthíasdóttir 2004, 165). Matthíasdóttir also points out that no woman gave a speech at the festival and, in fact, the only women who were acknowledged by name for having participated in preparing formal entertainment were three young women who choreographed a children's dance (p. 166).

It is interesting to contrast this with the Colonial Exhibition discussed in the previous chapter, where Icelandic women were present in its organization, even though in debates on the legitimacy of the Colonial Exhibition they were mainly reduced to objects symbolizing Iceland.

The Icelandic Youth Association (*Ungmannafélag Íslands*) also had great expectations for the festival. It was made responsible for exhibiting Icelandic traditions, which in the end consisted of two dance events (*vikivakasýningu*) and traditional wrestling. The association also actively encouraged people to attend the festival in their national costumes (Matthíasdóttir 2004, 168).

There were more exclusions. Those who were politically left-leaning felt ignored in preparations for the festival. The same was the case with representatives from leaders of laborer organizations. Rastrick (2013) points out that for the most part any criticism of the festival was not aimed at the festival itself, but at its organizers and organizing principles. The main complaint seemed to be that different social groups in society did not have an equal voice in organizing and executing it (p. 240). This thus not only reflects the inequalities in Iceland at that time, but also interestingly how across different classes there existed a general agreement that the festival was vitally important.

Matthíasdóttir stresses that while the main committee trusted the *Heimilisiðnaðarfélagið* and the youth association to organize the events concerning Iceland's traditional way of living, the main committee took charge in organizing what they saw as higher cultural events as well as providing the money needed for those events (2004, 169). The committee turned to educated artists and intellectuals to assist with the execution of the cultural events (Matthíasdóttir 2004, 170), with a key emphasis on presenting an image of Icelandic arts as in line with classical European art, while also displaying local particularities (Rastrick 2013, 254).

The energy spent on musical events clearly signify how the organizing committee saw music as essential in defining the nation. Rastrick points out that even though the emphasis was on showing the “best and the most beautiful” of Icelandic cultural life, much of what represented this in the festival was specifically created for it by the organizational committee. Thus, as Rastrick claims, “the festival created what it was supposed to show”⁶ (Rastrick 2013, 242).

A good example of this was the presentation of music. In addition to the training of singers and composers, there was a competition for poems and songs, with committees of male Icelandic elites selecting what would be representable

(Rastrick 2013, 242). ‘Icelandic symphonic music,’ that in fact had no tradition in Iceland, was now seen as essential for an emerging nation. The Icelandic musician Jón Leifs, who had made a name for himself in Germany, offered to bring a symphony orchestra from Germany that had given a concert in Iceland years before. However, this was rejected on the premises that an Icelandic symphonic orchestra should perform because this was a national festival. The Reykjavík Music Band (*Hljómsveit Reykjavíkur*), then, was selected even though it was unable to perform what was required and consequently, a decision was made to bring in an outsider to transform the band into a symphony (Rastrick 2013, 242). One of the committee members traveled to Vienna in search of a composer for the symphony, eventually hiring the Austrian musician Franz Mixa, who became instrumental in establishing the first and only symphony of Iceland (Bjarnadóttir 1987, 4). It was declared at the time that most of the players in the band needed to be Icelandic, though the end result remained that several Danish musicians were hired to perform with the band. Mixa’s later reflections suggest he felt Icelanders at that time were undeveloped modern subjects, lacking the discipline that characterized Austrian musicians: “They wrote to me that I should direct a music band, but it wasn’t really a band at all”⁷ (Bjarnadóttir 1987, 4–5). It is not difficult to imagine how Iceland looked to Mixa in 1930, coming from his Austrian background in Graz and Vienna, with their long and proud history of classical music and ‘high’ culture.

In a sense, the need for discipline in the music band also shows a clash of different kinds of mentalities. It indicates how Icelandic people at that time had not learned discipline, that to someone like Mixa seemed necessary. Part of creating subjects suitable for modernity is the discipline of the body and work ethics, where people learn to become ruled or governed in particular ways. The “judgment day” thus involved creating particular kinds of Icelandic subjects, disciplined bodies and not only to exhibit what was already there, but also to create what was missing.

The festival of memories

In Hafnarfjörður, where my grandmother Kristín lived, the local paper from that time expressed the commonly felt excitement surrounding the festival. Like other places in Iceland, Hafnarfjörður had grown rapidly over the last few decades before 1930, from a few hundred to 3,550 in 1930 (Statistics Iceland 2017). Hafnarfjörður had been a trading post for centuries, dominated by German merchants until 1602 when Denmark established a trade monopoly on Iceland (Gardiner and Mehler 2007, 405). Hafnarfjörður thus reflects Iceland as a part of various transnational connections, but also where a local population maintained a strong ethnic identity. The Germans had built a church in Hafnarfjörður and may possibly have developed into a non-Icelandic trading town if the trade monopoly had not been imposed by the Danish government (Gardiner and Mehler 2007, 405). In some sense the town was probably more transnational at the beginning of the twentieth century than at the time when I grew up there. Flensburg, my high

school, which stands high above the harbor, received its name from Flensburg in Germany and honors its past interactions with Hafnarfjörður.

The town's inhabitants during the time of my great-grandmother were, like her own parents, mainly seamen and laborers who had moved from the countryside (Kristjánsson and Zóphaniásson 2007, 11). Paid work in Hafnarfjörður was for the most part controlled by non-Icelandic entrepreneurs, consisting of companies such as Helleyer Bros and the Scottish company Bookless Bros. Ltd. Unemployment was high, there were no fixed work hours and people did not know if they had work from one day to the next.

Living conditions in Hafnarfjörður were difficult due to the high unemployment rates, but excitement was high in regard to the festival. The organizational committee requested that the city council of Hafnarfjörður suspend all work during the days of the festival and that stores be closed (*Brúin* 1929–1930). Public transport from Hafnarfjörður was organized by the festival's organizational committee, as well as from other parts of the country. The local newspaper in Hafnarfjörður, *Brúin*, gave extensive information about the festival as well as practical information such as the availability and timetables of busses to Þingvellir. *Brúin* emphasized the festival's importance for the nation as a whole, which contrasted with the paper's usual focus on much more localized affairs in Hafnarfjörður. Þingvellir is actually not far from Hafnarfjörður, a little less than 60 kilometers and even less from Reykjavík.

This intimate sense of nationhood is clearly reflected in other papers of the time as well, such as *Fálkinn*, which declared Alþingishátíðin “the day which most has been talked about in the country during this century”⁸ (*Fálkinn* 1930a, 12), and the event that the “whole nation has been talking about for the last weeks” (*Fálkinn* 1930b, 4). Or, as one woman replying to the aforementioned questionnaire says: “the atmosphere was characterized by the whole nation aiming at the same goal.”⁹ (see Figure 3.2) Another woman who, like my grandmother, was unable to attend Alþingishátíðin, writes in the questionnaire that it must have been so wonderful to be able to attend, recalling that many young girls tried to acquire the national costume – some sewing it in order to wear it at the Parliamentary Festival – and that people tried to get hold of brochures, poems and other things connected to the festival.¹⁰

Located in a rift valley, Þingvellir's natural environment is characterized by low birch woodland. In the gorge Almannagjá, many believe that the ancient parliamentary meetings were held. To execute the festival, numerous preparations had to be made in terms of providing places for visitors to sleep, and platforms to show the different arts and performances. At least 4500 tents were set up for the visitors of the festival (*Fálkinn* 1930a, 12). The day before the festival there was a sense of admiration regarding the setting up of tents and people's arrival at the site, or as described in one journal:

It was also extraordinary to be an observer the Wednesday before the festival when the city started coming to life and the tents filled with new inhabitants. One wave after another came from Almannagjá and thousands of people



Figure 3.2 An intimate sense of nationhood at the Parliamentary Festival

Source: National Museum of Iceland

walking, as a thick stream moving in the roads to the tents. Large groups of people came riding from the mountains and from the countryside . . . all roads led to this new white city.¹¹

(*Mánaðarblað K.F.U.M. í Reykjavík* 1930, 2)

The “new white city” referred to are the tents organized in several rows at Alþingi’s fields. This description vividly reflects the sense of a new temporality and beginning that the festival was able to inspire, which was coupled with anxieties of it possibly failing. Clearly engaging with the idea of judgment day, the author says, “Never so much has been risked to do a good job. Many people were full of anxiety long before the festival began”¹² (*Mánaðarblað K.F.U.M. í Reykjavík* 1930).

One reason for these anxieties was Iceland’s unstable weather. The anonymous author of *Mánaðarblað KFUM* explains that many people were likely to have been very concerned when going to sleep the day before the festival, asking themselves what would happen if the weather was bad, fearing that all the preparations would be in vain (ibid. p. 2). However, apparently to everyone’s great surprise the weather was exceptionally favorable, even though there were occasional showers.

The good weather helped to add to the sense that this was almost a sacred moment, a sense that we see in this description of the beginning of the festival:

In the Almannagjá gorge . . . a powerful pulpit was set up and there on the green fields between the walls of the cliff the population stood, in larger numbers than ever had been seen in Iceland. Everything was decorated with flags, except the cliff; it did not need it. The pulpit, undecorated, became more a part of the look of the cliffs than it would otherwise. There stood the nation with a thousand years in its mind. It was still and quiet. There was no sound, no screaming, not a cheer, no hustle and bustle. No cheering was heard when the king and the dignity of the states walked into the great cathedral of the nation.¹³

(*Mánaðarblað K.F.U.M. í Reykjavík* 1930, 2)

Even the parade from the pulpit at the end of the Öxará waterfall to Lögberg was seen as symbolic for the new nation, and as phrased by one author its power came from being a “celebrational parade of the living free nation who know how to behave without being ordered”¹⁴ (*Mánaðarblað K.F.U.M. í Reykjavík* 1930, 3). Or, as described in *Morgunblaðið*, even though the parade was not organized, “all the people started walking together toward Lögberg. All over the fields everyone walked toward the same goal, to the most sacred place of the nation. Everyone walked quietly, silently captured by the festive atmosphere of the day”¹⁵ (*Morgunblaðið* 1930a). The author’s emphasis on Lögberg (literally meaning ‘law-rock’) – the central location of the parliamentary assembly during the commonwealth period – draws also attention to the links with the past golden age of Iceland.

This sense of hope for the future and of belonging within a community is clearly expressed in these quotes taken from the questionnaire from the National Museum in Iceland:

There was happiness and anticipation in Reykjavík when we set out in our cars in fine weather. My dad drove us all in the old Ford. It was in the air, what captured me the most, when the nation has the same goal, all the cars went down to Almannagjá.¹⁶

[The celebration] was unforgettable. This celebration in 1930 is one of the most beautiful pearls on a string of memories from the past in my mind. To be able to hear what took place and see the crowd, which had joined together at this place; to feel the mood and the sense of ‘oneness’ that was present there.¹⁷

It was the general rejoicing of people over becoming a free and independent nation.¹⁸

What strikes me when reading about this past in different sources is how these voices and many of the newspaper articles are not really focusing on the art as such, but more on the sense of community. As phrased by one man, “My feeling is that Icelanders received [at the festival] a confirmation that they were something.”¹⁹

Those replying to the questionnaire, all of whom were recollecting events that had taken place decades ago, did not place a strong emphasis on how the festival would look to the numerous dignified guests who attended. To the organizers, however, this was of crucial importance, as was reflected in the Icelandic media at the time. Jónas Jónsson, a member of the festival's organizing committee, underlined the importance of presenting Iceland in the right way to foreign guests:

The art of our countrymen must be among the things that first spring to mind. Of course we are not capable of astounding our guests with what we can show them, but at least we can convince them that here lives a nation that can be considered as demonstrating promise on the road to cultural maturity.
(Rastrick 2013, 252)

A special issue of the journal *Fálkinn* published in honor of the *Alþingishátíðin* included a detailed list of the honorable foreign guests from around the world. The Danish king and queen were there, several members of the Danish Parliament and a large group of Danish students. Also, *Fálkinn* specified that the Swedish and the Norwegian crown princes were attending the event, along with official representatives from other countries, such as Finland, France, Italy, Canada and the UK (*Fálkinn* 1930a). The special issue of *Fálkinn* also listed and celebrated Iceland's industrial and cultural advances, pointing out that agriculture had become more 'modern' (*nýtiskusnið*) while also acknowledging that there was still a long way to go (*Fálkinn* 1930a, 28). *Morgunblaðið* featured a brief discussion about a short documentary made about the festival, proclaiming that one of its purposes was to capture a moment when "Icelanders were capable, as others, to do lasting images of the greatest festival to have been held in Iceland"²⁰ (*Morgunblaðið* 1930b, 4). What this indicates is the sense of how the Icelandic people were finally able to produce their own images of themselves and their country – having taken the power to speak for themselves.

The author of the article in *Norðlingur* claimed that the festival would be influential in shaping the views of foreigners, and speaks of foreigners' "wall of ignorance" (*vanþekkingarmúr*) to symbolize the "foreigners" lack of knowledge of Icelandic society. The festival, will, he claims, "create a large dent" in this "wall of ignorance." Or as he claims, those who attend the festival will clearly see that:

here [Iceland] lives a nation with culture, certainly poor and few in numbers, but with a firm direction toward maturity. Foreign men will see now that a great deal of innovation is taking place here in all aspects, and this proves the nation's ability for culture. The consequence will be that Iceland will no longer be seen as a savage island in the north ocean. The nation will be perceived as being on route to higher culture and continuous development.²¹
(*Norðlingur* 1930)

In these words, we clearly see how Icelanders at that time experienced themselves as "savage others" in the eyes of the outside world, and simultaneously the salience of the division of nations as either moving toward "maturity" and "high

culture” or not. Here, it is seen, at least to some part of Iceland’s population, to be a crucial issue that “foreigners” would see Iceland as having “ability for culture.” Ólafur Rastrick concludes by asserting that what foreign guests got to see was a conservative selection of different displays of culture and arts, selected and performed by Icelandic artists and intellectuals who had been educated in Europe. Therefore, performances tended to be of a kind that the foreign guests could identify with, demonstrating Icelandic arts as equal to European arts and locating Icelanders as part of European culture (2013, 255).

The country and its people

In 1938, the journal *Fálkinn* commemorated the 20 years that had passed since the Law of the Union, with a special issue on Iceland written in the languages of other Nordic countries. The journal was composed of 30 articles that aimed to show Iceland on a path toward modernization, as reflected in the journal’s title *Modern Iceland in Text and Images (Nutidens Island I tekst og billeder)*. The text at the beginning of the special issue firmly positions the discussion as a whole by explaining that as late as 1907, Iceland was still “primitive,” but that now “Reykjavík is a modern city”²² (Finsen and Skúlason 1938, 43). The rest of the issue provides an overview of varied elements to demonstrate this, such as the position of art and music in Iceland and the modernization of different industries. Browsing through the issue, one is presented with photos of different institutions, such as Iceland’s University, the National Theater, the National Museum and a school established at historical Reykholt.

An article by Iceland’s prime minister at the time, Hermann Jónsson, entitled *Greetings to the Nordic Countries*, is the only article that was published both in Icelandic and a Nordic language. In spite of the title, it is questionable if the intended readership was in fact the Nordic countries, rather than the Icelandic people. Jónsson’s primary aim seems to have been to emphasize Icelandic people’s uniqueness and character as shaped by the harsh natural environment. Perhaps the prime minister also felt the need to reconcile the history of poverty in Iceland by establishing a political image of the country as a modern nation belonging with more powerful European nations.

Jónsson uses a sculpture made by the renowned artist Einar Jónsson to illustrate the strong bond between the Icelandic character and Icelandic nature:

The good artist, Einar Jónsson, has created a sculpture that he calls the “Anchorage of the Atlantic,” it is a beautiful image and symbolic for Iceland and the Icelandic nation. Silently but gracefully the steep cliffs of the island rise from the lone depth of the ocean. The peak is the head of the lone inhabitant, serious and thoughtful in the bright, cloudless north. The columnar basalt (*stuðlaberg*) in the cliff is like runes that the centuries have inscribed on the surface of the country. And it is also the symbol of the irreversible runes of destiny that harsh and merciless struggles for basic subsistence and the solitude of the lone inhabitant have carved into the soul of the nation that lives in this country.²³

(Finsen and Skúlason 1938, 18)

Jónsson also talks about Iceland's historical isolation, which he sees as the result of the country's geographical location, emphasizing that Icelanders wrote the ancient histories of the other Nordic countries:

This loneliness and the conditions of living in the dark centuries shaped the Icelandic nation in a way that only those who have tried it can understand. But in these conditions – and partly because of them – Iceland also rose high in spiritual matters.²⁴

(*ibid.* p. 18)

Jónsson acknowledges that due to Iceland's historical isolation, the country was “far behind” other Nordic countries materially. But, he argues, this has now changed and Icelanders celebrate the Nordic collaboration that “modernity” has made possible for them. To strengthen relations with other Nordic nations is seen as natural, due to shared ‘blood’ and cultural traditions (Finsen and Skúlason 1938, 18).

When I first read Jónsson's text, I found it captivating how masculine and reifying it was. Here in just a few paragraphs was a coherent outline of all the stereotypical views of Icelanders that would be reanimated almost 100 years later, as I will discuss in the second part of this book. Jónsson himself was a well-educated and respected politician, though considered to be hot-tempered. He was the embodiment of masculinity in various senses: tall and a champion wrestler (Alþingi 2015). As an educated man, he was part of the elite in Iceland who saw themselves as “true” Icelanders (using Matthíasdóttir's 2004 phrase). So perhaps the image that Jónsson sees in his mind's eye when he writes the text is of men like himself bringing the nation out of the darkness of the past and into the future.

But when I read the words yet again, in the quiet of the library, I also thought about their contextual meaning at the time when they were written, about how they spoke to the wider experiences of less privileged people enduring poverty. As masculine and reifying as this text is, it must still have spoken to the experience of many people in Iceland at that time, giving dignity and strength even to those outside the elite class. Though it may seem as if it goes without saying, during that time natural conditions shaped most Icelanders' basic subsistence. It is easy for privileged people in the global north today to forget that the lives of some are deeply shaped by the materiality of weather and other conditions beyond human control (Alonso 2000). For people living in Iceland in the early 20th century, the iconic image of the Icelandic man likely embodied their experiences of hardship while creating meaning about their position in the world.

Moving toward modernity

I have no idea if my great-grandmother bought the commemorative tablecloth or if someone gave it to her. Those who would know have all passed away. But for her the festival was probably important for imagining a future and her place within it. Her father and mother had come from intense poverty in the northern part of Iceland, where they belonged to a large group of landless laborers who

would have remained trapped in lifelong servitude if they stayed. Her father was orphaned at six,²⁵ whereupon he was taken in and abused at different farmsteads, never having a permanent place to stay. Her mother also lived a precarious life, moving from farmstead to farmstead. They arrived in Hafnarfjörður in 1906, the same year as the Icelandic Parliament members went to Denmark, just as Iceland was beginning to reposition itself on the global stage.

To these people, the parents of my great-grandmother, Jónsson's account of the essential characteristics of the Icelander surviving alone in a harsh country would have resonated deeply, reflecting their own experiences. Their lives had also been hard, characterized by drudgery and poverty, as well as isolation. My grandmother Kristín was nine years old when her parents moved to Hafnarfjörður, so in a way that small fishery town was their New World, bursting with opportunities for a new life. Although poverty was high in Hafnarfjörður, with only a few people holding steady jobs, the family was still able to make a good living there and watched the town grow rapidly toward its present form. Kristín's own small home in Hafnarfjörður consisted of four rooms and a loft, but she always reserved one room as the 'good' living room that could only be used on special occasions. I have been told that a small table stood in the center of the room. I imagine that the yellow tablecloth often decorated the table.

For me, Kristín's insistence on reserving part of her modest home for special occasions suggests not only that she desired a space that the elite likely took for granted, but also a modern home. Even though this strong desire for modernity is difficult for me to understand with all the problems that we now associate with the modern era, it is comprehensible when contextualized in early 19th-century Iceland, where the discourse of modernity was a promise for a better future.

In aiming to create modern subjects, the Parliamentary Festival seems to have been largely successful. One of the respondents to the questionnaire points out that all critical discussion of what he refers to as "Danification" stopped after the festival, whereupon the move toward modernity began (*nútíminn kominn á skrið*): people building stone houses, owning better farming equipment and so on. He directly attributed this to the festival.²⁶ His words also indicate how certain processes that were associated with "Danes" prior to the festival were now seen as universal and unquestionable. As such they were considered the only way to move into the future (Norgaard 1994). The framing of these ideas of modernity as universal and unavoidable, and the role of Icelandic intellectuals in that framing, reminds me of Ann Brydon's (1995) discussion of appropriation of the "language of the center" in a process of cultural transformations. To the Icelanders that responded to the questionnaire from the National Museum of Iceland, however, the impression of the foreign guests did not seem crucial, but more the sense of community that the festival was able to create. To the organizers, however, and those who expressed themselves in the Icelandic journals, foreign visitors' impressions were crucial, as well that the festival showed disciplined bodies performing different forms of 'high' arts.

By the time I was born, the days of poverty were over for Kristín, and the struggle for independence and harsh living conditions was just something that had happened in the past. In 1944, in the shadow of the Second World War, Iceland gained independence. The new fully independent Icelandic Republic was established at Þingvellir on June 17th, 1944 on a windy and rainy day. One woman who replied to the National Museum's questionnaire says that it rained quietly, like tears dripping down a person's face,²⁷ which nicely expresses the significance of the day to everyday Icelanders. The relationship between Iceland and Denmark had been severed years before due to the fact that Denmark was occupied by Nazi forces beginning in 1940, while Iceland had been occupied by the British.

British military forces were later replaced by US forces. Iceland's continued occupation in the post-war period led to concerns what continued foreign presence meant for Iceland as an independent country²⁸ (Björnsdóttir 1989, 100). The military continued to be a hotly debated political issue after the war. While the military was almost entirely fenced off in one area of the country, its continued presence²⁹ facilitated various US cultural influences in Iceland, including televised materials (Björnsdóttir 1989, 100).

The presence of a US base in Iceland can also perhaps be interpreted as an indication of Iceland's positioning as betwixt and between in multiple senses. Iceland is geographically halfway between Europe and North America. While the Western part of Iceland drifts toward America, as pointed out by sociologist Stefán Ólafsson (2003a), the Eastern part moves toward Scandinavia or Europe.

Post-independence, Iceland received massive development assistance, including aid from the US Marshall Plan, which helped the country modernize its infrastructure and its valuable fisheries resources. Fishing became especially instrumental in building up Iceland's economy, and fishermen brought valuable foreign currency into the country. Places like my hometown of Hafnarfjörður, which literally means harbor fjörd, idealized fishermen but also respected the sacrifices inherent in such a risk-heavy job.

The modernization of Iceland took place through industrialization, as well as the building of infrastructure and services. As Árnason et al. (2015) point out, the transformation of the country's transportation infrastructure – of dirt tracks into tarmacked highways – evokes the parallel transformation from the “nation's struggle for survival in a harsh landscape” to “post-independence economic development and affluence” (p. 12).

During most of the second half of the 20th century, Iceland's economy was nevertheless heavily regulated, politicized and inward-looking when compared with other European countries (Wade and Sigurgeirsdóttir 2011, 685; Danielsson and Zoega 2009, 3). For example, the Icelandic government showed little interest in taking part in international organizations but focused more on self-determination considering the nation's recent independence (Þórhallsson 2005). Iceland in fact also had little expertise in participating actively in international collaborations (Þórhallsson 2005). Icelandic international development did, for example, not start until 1971 due to this lack of interest (Þórhallsson 2005). The

banking system was embedded within party politics, with political parties having a strong influence over the boards of banks. As a result, all major decisions regarding loans were shaped by political affiliations (Danielsson and Zoega 2009, 3). There were also strong restrictions on foreign currency, with Icelanders traveling abroad needing to apply for specific amounts for their travel expenses (Mixa 2014, 37).

In the 1980s Iceland became more visible in the eyes of the rest of the world through a series of unrelated events.³⁰ The selection of an Icelandic woman as Miss World in both 1985 and 1988 received a lot of attention in Iceland, creating a lingering sense of being in the world's spotlight. The charismatic Jón Páll, who won the *World's Strongest Man* competition several times beginning in 1984, emphasized his Viking heritage when commenting in the international media, which strengthened the image of Iceland as an exotic place of strong Viking men and exceptionally beautiful blond women (Jónsdóttir and Johnson 2014, 232).

Then, in 1986, Iceland was unexpectedly pushed into the global spotlight again after being selected as the location for the summit talks between US president Ronald Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, the country being symbolically located between these two powerful countries. Filling in long hours of waiting for news from the summit itself, international reporters discussed Iceland's isolation and remoteness, but also engaged with the idea of the country as an 'exotic' place where people believed in ghosts and elves (Jóhannsdóttir 2011).

The celebration in Iceland of Iceland's partaking in these diverse events probably partly reflects the lingering sense of marginalization from larger global affairs. No less significantly, they provide occasions upon which people in Iceland mirror themselves within the international press's representations of Icelandic people as a whole. When speaking about her stay in Iceland around this time (in 1988), Ann Brydon (2006) refers to Icelanders feeling that foreigners continued to misrecognize Iceland; that they felt them as not recognizing Iceland as fully part of modernity as Europe and the USA (p. 236).

As for me, I vividly remember, as a teenager, staring at the door in Höfði where the US–Russia summits were held, as it was being broadcast on international television. Everyone was waiting for the two leaders to step outside and announce something important. It struck me then that people all over the world were also looking at that door in Iceland, waiting for an important global event to unfold.

How did Iceland transition from its early 20th-century dream of a safe and modern future to its catastrophic failure in 2008? In some ways, writing about historical events to which I have little connection beyond my shared nationality is easier because I have no intimacy with them. The story of the 2008 crash is different. I lived it. And it affected me, and those I know, in many ways, both large and small.

Notes

- 1 Nationalist rhetoric often referred to how the nation had to ‘wake’ up, referring to the Iceland commonwealth period and the stagnant period of foreign rule which Icelanders needed to move beyond.
- 2 In Icelandic: “Alþingishátíðin á að marka tímamót í framförum Íslands, hún verður í huga hinnar uppvaxandi kynslóðar eins og geislar morgunsólar, sem eru að gægjast upp yfir fjallatinda og vefja dali og hlíðar mjúkum bjarma framtíðarvonanna.”
- 3 In Icelandic: “brjótast um og fálma sig fram, stundum í óráði, stundum í draumi að vísu, en eru samt að skapa nýtt tímabil, sem vjer nútímamenn sjáum aðeins hilla undir í fjarska.”
- 4 In Icelandic: “Við sjáum nú að þjóðin er sú hin sama og til forna bjó í landinu og stendur þó frammar nú en þá.”
- 5 Respondent nr. 10955. The National Museum of Iceland.
- 6 In Icelandic: “hátíðin skapaði það sem hún átti að sýna.”
- 7 In Icelandic: “þeir skrifuðu mér að ég ætti að stjórna hljómsveit en það var eiginlega engin hljómsveit.”
- 8 In Icelandic: “sá dagur, sem mest hefir verið talað um hjer á landi á þessari öld.”
- 9 Respondent nr. 10954. The National Museum of Iceland.
- 10 Respondent nr. 10974. The National Museum of Iceland.
- 11 In Icelandic:

Þá var það líka mikilfenglegt að vera sem áhorfandi miðvikudaginn fyrir hátíðina þegar hin reista borg fór að fá líf og tjaldborgir fóru að fyllast af hinum nýju íbúum. Hver aldan á fætur annarri kom úr Almannagjá og þúsundir manna gengu á þjettum straumi eptir vegunum út í íbúðartjöldin. Stórir skarar af riðandi fólki komu ofan úr fjöllum og utan úr sveitinum . . . allir vegir lágu til þessarar hvítu nýju borgar.

- 12 In Icelandic: “Aldrei hefur verið teflt djarfara tafl um það hversu takast mundi. Margir voru á fullir af kvíða löngu á undan.”
- 13 In Icelandic:

Í Almannagjá rjett hjá ‘þar sem hún Öxará fellur ofan í’ gjána, var reistur gnæfandi predikunarstóll og þar á grænum grundum milli hamraveggjanna stóð mannfjöldinn, stærri og meiri en nokkru sinni áður hefur sjest á Íslandi. Allt var fánum skrytt, nema hamraveggurinn; hann þurfti þess ekki, og predikunarstóllinn, sem þannig óskreyttur rann betur inn í heildarsvip hamranna, en hann mundi annars hafa gjört. Þar stóð þjóðin með þúsund árin í huga. Það var kyrt og hljótt. Enginn gnýr, engin óp, engin fagnaðarlæti; enginn ys og þys. Engin húrrahróp hljómuðu, er konungur og tignarmenn ríkjanna gengur inn í hina miklu dómkirkju þjóðarinnar.

- 14 In Icelandic: “hátíðarganga lifandi frjálsrar þjóðar sem kann án skipana að haga sér.”
- 15 In Icelandic: “allur mannfjöldinn lagði af stað samtímis í áttina til Lögbergs. Hvert sem lítið var um vellina stefndu allir að sama marki, að hinum helgasta stað þjóðarinnar. Allir gengu rólega hljóðir, gripnir af hátíðarblæ dagsins.”
- 16 In Icelandic:

Gleði og tilhlökkun ríkti meðal Reykvíkinga dagana sem heimilisbílarnir lögðu af stað í góðu veðri. Pabbi keyrði okkur öll í stóra gamla Fordinum. Þá lá í loftinu þetta sem ég hrífst mest af, þegar þjóðin öll stefnir að sama marki, öll bílamergðin ók niður Almannagjá.

(Respondent nr. 10954. The National Museum of Iceland.)

- 17 In Icelandic:

Var ógleymanleg. Þessi hátíð 1930 er ein fegursta perla á bandi minninga liðinna ára í mínum huga. Að hafa átt þess kost að heyra það sem fram fór og sjá það mannhaf sem var saman komið á þessum stað. Finna fyrir þeirri stemningu og samhug sem þar ríkti.

(Respondent nr. 11033. The National Museum of Iceland.)

- 18 In Icelandic: “hinn almenni fögnuður fólksins yfir að vera orðið frjáls og sjálfstæð þjóð” (Respondent nr. 11857, The National Museum of Iceland).
- 19 In Icelandic: “Mín tilfinning er sú að Íslendingar hafi þá fengið staðfestingu á því að þeir væru eitthvað” (Respondent nr. 10919, The National Museum of Iceland).
- 20 In Icelandic: “Íslendingar færir um það eins og aðrir, að gera lifandi myndir af stærstu hátíð, sem enn hefur haldin verið hjer á landi.”
- 21 In Icelandic:
hjer býr menningarþjóð, að visu fátæk og fámenn, en með öryggi stefnu í þroskaátt. Erlendir menn sjá nú, að hjer er að fara fram mikil nýsköpun á öllum sviðum og það sannar menningarmátt þjóðarinnar. Af þessu leiðir það, að það verður ekki lengur litið til Íslands sem villmannaeyju norður í höfum. Þjóðin verður talin með í för þjóðanna fram til hærri menningar og sígilds þroska.
- 22 In Danish: “Reyjavik blitt en helt moderne by.”
- 23 In Icelandic:
Hinn ágæti listamaður, Einar Jónsson, hefir gert mynd, sem hann nefnir ‘Einbúinn í Atlantshafi,’ það er fögur mynd og táknræn fyrir Ísland og hina íslenzku þjóð. Í þögulli tign rís brött hamraeyjan úr eyðilegu djúpi hafsins. Tindurinn er höfuð einbúans, alvarlegt og íhugult í hinni björtu heiðríkju norðursins. Stuðlaberg í hamrahlíðinni er eins og rúnir, sem aldirmar hafa rist á ásýnd lansins. Og það er líka tákn þeirra óafmáanlegu orlagarúna sem hörð og miskunnarlaus lífsbarátta og einvera einbúans hafa rist á sál þjóðarinnar, sem byggir þetta land.
- 24 In Icelandic: “Þessi einvera og lífskjör þjóðarinnar á hinum dimmu öldum mótuðu hina íslenzku þjóð á þann hátt er þeir einir skilja til fulls er reynt hafa. En við þessi skilyrði – og sumpart vegna þeirra – reis Íslands líka hátt í andans heimi” (p. 18).
- 25 His mother was alive, but she was unable to have him with her due to poverty and because she had other younger children who took priority.
- 26 Respondent nr. 11860. The National Museum of Iceland.
- 27 Respondent nr. 10954. The National Museum of Iceland.
- 28 While these were directed at the soldiers in general, the potential presence of ‘black’ soldiers was seen as especially alarming by the Icelandic government, leading to a secret agreement of the Icelandic and American governments that no ‘black’ soldiers would be stationed in Iceland, in addition to strict restrictions of the soldiers’ movements in Iceland (Ingimundarson 2004). When the American government sent a black US navy officer representative to investigate racism in Iceland in 1963 in context of these demands of the Icelandic government, his conclusions were somewhat surprising. He argued that non-Icelanders were more likely to be harassed in Iceland due to their nationality than their racial categorization as black (Ingimundarson 2001, 85). Icelandic racism continued thus to be entangled in somewhat a contradictory way with ideas of foreigners, as both objects of desire and seen as threatening the ‘nation.’ The occupation also led to disputes during the war, due to the close relationship between the soldiers and many Icelandic women (Ingimundarson 2004).
- 29 The military left in 2006.
- 30 In 1972, Iceland had still been in the international spotlight due to the chess match between Bobby Fisher and Boris Spassky held in Iceland, which was strongly conceptualized in Cold War connotations.

4 The big bite

The economic miracle in Iceland

Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* envisions the possibility of visiting one's past and future. We can imagine the ability to select a moment in time when things took a dramatic turn. An Icelander visited by Dickens's spirit of things past might take her to September 9th, 1993. We would see that a great deal had changed since the Colonial Exhibition and Alþingishátíðin, the festival of memories. Now, with a population of a little over 200,000 people, Iceland is considered an affluent country with low disparities in terms of education and wealth and good general access to healthcare. The buildings would look small compared to many other European cities, most of which were built in the 20th century.

We would fly to a house in downtown Reykjavík, long noted for its significance as one of the town's oldest buildings, with foundations built in 1805, and peer down from above. Inside, we would see a crowd of people celebrating the opening of a restaurant. They would be mostly men dressed in suits, all part of Iceland's administrative and business elite, holding glasses of wine, laughing and full of hopes for the future.

The scene we just observed symbolizes a time of the birth of neoliberalism in Iceland, but in retrospect it seems like the beginning of the end.

The scene we observed is the opening of the first McDonald's restaurant in Iceland. The event was featured in major newspapers featuring different images. The business journal *Frjáls verslun* captured this cheerful moment with a series of photos showing leading finance and businessmen in Icelandic society toasting happily together (only one woman is visible in the photographs, so I do not use the term 'men' by coincidence). Adding to the symbolic capital of the opening of this franchise, the Prime Minister at the time, Davíð Oddsson, showed his support by being the first person to eat an 'Icelandic' McDonald's burger (see Figure 4.1). The widely distributed media image of Oddsson's big bite shows the embodied consumption of global symbols and their full internalization, marking the beginning of a new era in Iceland led by the Icelandic prime minister.

The term 'McDonaldization' has been used to refer to a particular technological rationalization, uniformity and efficiency (Ritzer 2010), but McDonald's was not the first fast food place in Iceland. Kentucky Fried Chicken had operated in the country since 1980, so the celebration of the opening of McDonald's in Iceland has to be taken as more symbolic of a nation envisioning itself as fully integrated in



Figure 4.1 Images of the prime minister eating the first Icelandic McDonald's were widely distributed in Iceland

Source: Photo by Pjetur

modernity. The celebration should also be contextualized within wider discourses of Icelandic nationality, as previously discussed, which revolve around Icelanders' historical ability to survive in an uninhabitable country and suffer through the centuries in a state of persistent crisis resulting from intense poverty. Davíð Oddsson's willingness to become a part of the McDonald's publicity stunt demonstrates how his policies aligned with the interconnected globalized world and with neoliberalism. Furthermore, he was following in the footsteps of Margaret Thatcher, who opened a McDonald's in Britain in 1989 (Margaret Thatcher Foundation 2013). The big bite of the Icelandic prime minister thus became the triumphant exclamation of a society that had overcome difficult conditions in the past and had finally gained the ultimate sign of modernization: a McDonald's restaurant.

This chapter focuses on the economic miracle in Iceland between 2000 and 2007, examining how it was interwoven with nationalistic aspirations for the future. In this chapter, I invoke a sense of how it involved what one of those I interviewed referred to as "collective craziness," strongly mobilizing the population in Iceland in a very nationalistic discourse about the economic expansion. In the following chapters I will show more closely how the economic expansion involved a particular sense of coloniality – which exposes continued geopolitical arrangements of different European subjects – and thus as well how the economic expansion engaged with Iceland's colonial history.

Már Wolfgang Mixa (2009, 292) labels this period leading to the crash as the ‘Manic Millennium years.’ The term captures the intimate sense in Iceland at the time that the new millennium would be the beginning of something great for Iceland.

John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff’s (2000) coining of the term ‘Millennial Capitalists’ also reflects a sense of new beginnings, which they position as the rearticulation of capitalism as neoliberalism (or capitalism’s second coming), with the prospect of salvation. In Iceland, neoliberalism as the gospel of salvation presented itself in the promise to transform Iceland into one of the most modern and respected nations in the world. Older desires for recognition by the outside world also factor into this sense of hope, though articulated differently within the framework of neoliberalism in a new international era. The gospel of neoliberalism would supposedly create proper neoliberal subjects by mobilizing the Icelandic people, essentialized as ‘energetic’ and ‘risk-taking,’ which coincides with the rise of business masculinities as a hegemonic masculinity worldwide (Connell and Wood 2005). Moreover, such masculinities fitted nicely with the older nationalistic ideas in Iceland earlier discussed, where men were as well seen as bringing Iceland into a new modern world.

The ‘Millennium Glass’ immodestly symbolized the new millennium as the bringer of prosperity for Iceland. Sold as a pair, the luxurious glasses featured a golden stem forming the number 2000, and were intended for toasting with champagne during the turn of the millennium. As with my great-grandmother’s tablecloth, the idea was to commemorate the present point in history. The glasses were wildly popular in Iceland as a Christmas gift in 1999, and I was not surprised when I received my own pair as a gift. In fact, later I saw on the website of the National Museum that apparently among the many souvenirs for the Parliamentary Festival in 1930 were crystal classes with the sign of the festival.

The Manic Millennium

Neoliberalism is widely recognized as more than a political philosophy informing specific policies. It involves rationalities that impact people’s lives in varied and unequal ways (Harvey 2010; Gledhill 2004, 342; Schwegler 2008, 686). Karen Ho points out that “once a phenomenon is ‘so big’ that it influences everyday life, it is not so much characterized by its farawayness as by its everywhere-ness: It becomes the air we breathe, ubiquitous yet too close to be observed directly” (2014, 33).

In Iceland, neoliberalism slowly but steadily transformed society in various ways, becoming, as Ho so eloquently put it, the air that we breathe. As shown by scholars, some of the many effects of neoliberalization include changes in labor disciplines, where audit and quality control have been used to change people into “flexible, agile, self-regulating workers” able to adapt to shifting conditions within the global markets (Dunn 2004, 7). More ‘flexibility’ generally meant that workers were taught to accept job insecurity and risk (Dunn 2004, 19), leading to a growing sense of uncertainty on a global level.

Decreased spending on social welfare in Iceland, justified under the premises of neoliberal ideology, meant intensified social inequalities (Ólafsson 2003b) and an increased emphasis on the need to privatize all kinds of services where the state no longer played an important role. Governing practices in Iceland also increased the emphasis on auditing procedures and surveillance techniques (Rafnsdóttir, Tómasson and Guðmundsdóttir 2005). Public institutions, such as museums, modified their practices to fit the logic of neoliberalization, more strongly emphasizing for example commercialization and a collaboration with the private sector (Hafsteinsson 2016, 2014). This commercialization involved for example the production and selling of souvenirs based on references to Icelandic ‘culture’ (Hafsteinsson 2016, 4–5). Also, as Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson (2014) shows, Icelandic politicians in power effectively utilized a new language that emphasized free enterprise, competition, flexibility and the benefits of new global order for Icelandic society. All of these concepts were important to talk and think about the new Icelandic society (p. 27).

In 1984, the country’s most important natural resource, fish, was privatized with the advent of the Individually Transferable Quota (ITQ) system. This was somewhat jarring, considering that liberal access to fish had been for decades associated with one of the pillars of Icelandic identity. It had even proved a point of social cohesion when, between 1958–1961 and later in the early ’70s, Iceland entered into a dispute with the British government over Iceland’s extended fishing limits. This so-called ‘Cod War’ quickly became symbolic of “the nation’s cultural and economic survival” (Mitchell 1976, 134). The Cod War significantly added to the sentiment that the history of the Icelandic nation was one of a constant struggle for independence from various outside forces (Hálfðánarson 2009).

It was within this context, then, that the new quota system took effect. Effectively the ITQ system meant that the fish in the sea became as a private property of a lucky few that could, as with other market commodities, be bought and sold, with rights to harvest inherited by descendents (Helgason and Pálsson 1997). The extreme effects of the system were especially felt in many rural economies when the quota was sold out of the villages to outsiders, despite the fact that fishing was the village’s economic backbone. This meant, in practice, that fishing villages that had based their economy on fishing were no longer allowed to do so (Bjarnason and Thórlindsson 2006, 293) but were offered nothing in replacement.

In fact, the quota system itself has been described as the true ‘economic crash’ of rural communities in Iceland, highlighting the destruction of livelihoods long before the Icelandic economic crash of 2008 (Wilson 2016, 254). The establishment of the ITQ destroyed not only the economic livelihoods of many people but also created extensive wealth for a small minority within Icelandic society – a wealth basically given to them by the Icelandic state.

Neoliberal policies in Iceland such as the introduction of the ITQ did not signify a break with ideas of ‘modernity’ nor a transformation into some sort of second modernity seen by some scholars as characterizing the present (Beck 1992; Latour 2003). Politicians and local authorities promoted heavy industries, such as aluminum smelting, because they saw “industrial jobs that result in a material,

tangible output” as particularly important alongside an emphasis on information industries and the virtual economy (Benediktsson 2009, 27). One example can be found in Kárahnjúkar, the massive power plant that went online in 2002. Built in the Icelandic highlands, and 200 meters high, Kárahnjúkar was built to provide energy to a new aluminum smelter in Reyðarfjörður (Benediktsson 2009). These large-scale projects led to increased demands for labor, which was followed by an extensive housing boom in the Icelandic economy. These increased demands for labor led to an increased number of foreign laborers coming to Iceland in hope of good salaries and new opportunities.

While Iceland had always been a part of transnational connections of traders and seamen, the level of new settlement into the country in the 20th century had been low when compared to other Nordic countries. Nevertheless, in 1996, a large part of Iceland’s population, or 95% of those with Icelandic nationality, had parents of Icelandic origin (Statistics Iceland 2009, 5), underscoring the dearth of foreign settlers in Iceland.

When Iceland became a part of the Schengen area in 2001, after joining the European Economic Area (EEA) in 1994, it became easier for Schengen area foreign nationals to apply for jobs in Iceland.¹ The resulting influx of foreign workers, immigrants and refugees since this time has meant that more Icelanders have parents who were born and raised in other countries. Between 1995 and 2007, the number of foreign nationals grew from 1.8% of the national population to 7.4% (see discussion in Skaptadóttir 2004).

Prior to 1996 most immigrants came from Denmark and the other Nordic countries (Statistics Iceland 2009, 11). However, the largest groups of immigrants during the boom period were from Poland (see discussion in Skaptadóttir 2004), with a substantial number also coming from the Philippines and Lithuania (Statistics Iceland 2009, 11). As Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir (2010a) discusses, those emigrating to Iceland during this period were primarily seeking better work opportunities, and while they did not necessarily lack employment in their home countries, most sought to enhance their economic security in the future with higher salaries and the possibility of sending money back home (p. 317).

One notable aspect of this change is highlighted in Skaptadóttir’s (2010a) research involving an extensive analysis of the economic participation of immigrants in Iceland, which has shown the gendered implications of the labor demand during the economic boom, wherein women’s economic opportunities were concentrated in the service sector and men’s in the booming building industry (p. 38–39). It’s interesting to note that, as Skaptadóttir remarks, these migrant workers were not seen as a “part of Icelandic society though their labor was crucial to Iceland’s economic growth” (2011, 26).

Banking in the Manic Millennium years

In 1997, the process of the privatization of Icelandic banks began, a process which concluded in 2003 when the three largest banks had been fully privatized (Sigurjónsson and Mixa 2011). While the large numbers of shareholders

made it appear as though the banks were still owned by the people of Iceland, in fact individuals and groups with strong political connections and no experience in banking were permitted to buy controlling stakes in the banks (Mixa 2014: 38).

Furthermore, the Financial Supervisory Authority had no experience in dealing with the rapid development in the banking sector. In addition to being small compared with the fast-growing banks, the Authority lacked the ability to influence decisions made within the banks. The fact that customary practices in international banking, such as the separation of bankers' dealing with the bank's proprietary investments and investments on behalf of their clients, were only enacted in 2002 indicates the lack of overall experience in the system (Loftsdóttir and Mixa 2013).

Icelandic banks drew international attention when they began growing at an incredible rate in the late 1990s (Wade and Sigurgeirsdóttir 2011, 685). The social and economic consequences of this growth were extensive, including a boom in the real estate market and high inflation rates, both of which lead to extensive consumption and debt accumulation (Mixa 2009). The banks collaborated closely with Icelandic investors by providing loans for economic ventures or by direct collaboration, where, in some cases, bank owners even borrowed money from their own institutions to invest globally (Sigurjónsson and Mixa 2011, 210). From 2003 to 2007, total assets of Icelandic banks multiplied by factors of between seven and eight (Halldórsson and Zoega 2010, 21).

When Iceland became a part of the international financial market, it had scant history of commercial banking and no history of investment banking (Mixa 2014, 37). Mixa writes that during the first years of investment banking in Iceland, hardly anyone had the necessary experience for such endeavors and most individuals involved were very young (2014, 34). Even as late as early 2008, when Mixa himself worked in the interbank loan department at Icebank (one could say that was some kind of central bank for the Savings Banks in Iceland), none of the individuals working with him had worked in the bank for more than two years (Mixa 2014, 41). Despite their inexperience, these individuals were still handling interbank loans amounting to 20% of Iceland's GDP – all of which was lost in the economic crash (Mixa 2014, 41). It is perhaps unsurprising that in one interview for my research, a British banker who had been extensively involved with the Icelandic banks during the boom years bitterly proclaimed that he did not really consider the Icelandic bankers to be bankers at all.

Acknowledging that policies have diverse outcomes (Shore and Wright 2011) forces us to ask from what perspective particular decisions appear 'rational' and for whom. Harpa, a woman in her forties with diverse experience in Iceland's financial landscape and who had herself been responsible for investing large sums of money, agreed somewhat reluctantly to talk to me. She explained how an integral strategy for the reduction of personal risk on the part of the individual banker was to "go with the flow" because a wrong decision was seen as "bad luck" if consistent with what others were doing. If it was not consistent with what others

were doing, it was more likely to be seen as sign of incompetence or neglect. As Harpa explained,

It is so much easier to do as the others do because then you are not sticking out if you take the wrong decision . . . if you are alone swimming against the current then . . . you need to explain your decision and can end up in a very serious situation.

From the individual banker's perspective rationality here becomes about making 'irrational' decisions about investment, so long as these decisions conform with the general flow of other people's actions. As Mixa describes, the more experienced bankers were sidelined, while those taking the highest risks were highly celebrated (Mixa 2014, 40).

The stage was now set for new types of Icelanders to take the helm. 'Business Vikings' was the term used in everyday talk to refer to bankers in the top layers of their institutions and other high-profile investors who became international investors with heavy support from the banks. Kevin, a Danish banker who was also reluctant to speak to me due to his negative experience of the Icelandic economic crash, captured the extravagance of these men by referring to them as "Gucci bankers." He explained that everything was somehow "over the top," how foreign visitors to the banks were taken to fish in Iceland's most expensive salmon rivers; rivers whose fishing rights were bought by the banks specifically for valuable clients. Smiling, he shook his head and said: "It was all over the top for simple fishing; the champagne and the food they were serving. When you are fishing, you want to have a can of beer, not expensive whisky and whatever."

The collective craziness

Aðalsteinn agrees to meet with me in a coffee shop. It is early in the morning; the place half empty and it is dark and gloomy outside like during so many mornings in Reykjavík during winter time. He is a little younger than me, in his early thirties, slim with blond hair. He worked as an investment banker in one of the Icelandic banks. When I ask him if he was critical of what was happening during the Icelandic boom, he smiles.

No, no, I was just moving with the rest and I think that we . . . afterwards . . . it was clearly like a collective craziness (*hópbilun*) that was going on. As it happens, as a nation we also have a tendency to do this. . . . Let's take the example of when FL Group² went to American Airlines and made tons of money over a short period of time and you were just sitting there and thinking: "Wait! I have recently read that this kind of investment is the most tough that you can go into. And still these guys just go in there and make lot of money. They must be complete geniuses." And you are just sitting there and thinking that you yourself must be so stupid. And then often when we were working on all kinds of investment projects, you were wondering why we are going into this.

Aðalsteinn elaborates that he did not ask these critical questions.

We just thought that they [the managers] had the answers and they would know what they are doing. . . . And that is how it intensified. . . . And during this time of course it did not matter what you invested in, everything worked out.

Thinking of his comment that Iceland was “just that kind of nation,” I ask him what kind of nation we are. He leans on the table, looking somewhere past me, and says: “Well, I don’t know. We have a tendency . . . there is a certain crowd behavior in us and because we are so close to each other it probably happens faster. We are such a small nation.”

I spoke with another former investment banker, a woman named Ragnheiður, at my office. When I remind her that I am interested in hearing the experiences of those working at the banks during the boom and the crash, she smiles somewhat hesitantly. But it is obvious that, just as with Aðalsteinn, she is interested in talking to me and reflecting back upon this time.

Ragnheiður’s experience in the banking sector is extensive, and when I comment on her background, saying that she must have seen a thing or two, she laughs somewhat mysteriously and says, “Yes, I think I have seen several things.”

I ask her to think back to the boom. She nods, and says, “There was of course no criticism during the period before the crash, and perhaps even not even after it.” In particular, she found it difficult to understand what was happening in the two years before the crash.

I did not understand what was going on and I was never fully pleased with, for example, taking a foreign loan. I remember that I bought a car in 2006. I owned part of the amount but the rest I had to borrow. I remember I got the contract and I read it over and said to the car salespeople: “Hey wait! You are giving me a loan in foreign currency, I don’t want that, I want to borrow in Icelandic currency.” And the car sales people looked at me and then at each other, kind of like, we don’t know anything about the difference between such loans.

Even though Ragnheiður does not state it in the interview, the decision not to take a loan in foreign currency was an especially fortunate decision for her, due to the fact that foreign loans skyrocketed after the crash, sending many homeowners into foreclosure and even bankruptcy.

Ragnheiður continues,

Even though I said a thing or two of critical nature, I never had all the pieces in the puzzle and perhaps that is just the feeling, afterwards, which lingered, that I never understood this completely [what was going on].

She laughs, and so do I. In my mind, I recall my husband’s experience when he was working on the trading desks the year before the crash. The customers

frequently took offense when he strongly advised against particular investments because they involved dangerously high risks. Others would listen politely, but he knew when they hung up that they were just taking their business elsewhere. Other people that I knew were, however, urged by their personal financial advisors into taking foreign loans and were told that there was no risk involved.

I ask, “Do you think that a part of the problem was that many people within the banks did not have extensive experience?” She replies,

I believe there are many intersecting factors and one of them was probably the way youth was idolized [in hiring practices of the banks]. Another important factor that I am pretty certain about is the high percentage of people with engineering education who entered the banks at this time.

She hesitates, and then adds,

Engineers, businessmen and economists have a different way of thinking. I am not saying that one is better than the other. I think a certain mix works fine. But engineers have a tendency think in a strongly linear way. They go from a to b and from there to c and so on. And they usually don't assume that any kind of interference happens, such as human behavior. They have very fixed pattern of thought and they controlled the banking system. . . . Another thing that I noted in my job was that the banks worked far, far, far too fast, which meant that if someone somewhere in the system got an idea they would just run with it. Anyone deviating from this aggressive trend in banking was just left behind. When the collapse of the banking system appears in the papers they had no idea what was going on. So even though the financial institutions looked fine on the surface, I have heard many stories of the large majority of employees of the banks having no idea what was going on or how things that happened. And it is really unfortunate how big the banks became . . . and it was obvious that they just got to decide what they wanted to decide. They got to influence the law, they influenced politicians and they used those people. And those people had no idea of what was going on.

Ragnheiður's choice of words are interesting; she uses “they” to refer to particular groups within the banks, which suggests she did not consider herself or most of her coworkers a part of those groups. When I ask her who “they” are she tells me, “This probably started as something that just happens, but there are certainly individuals who are more predominant actors – or what do you say – are the embodiment of the crash.” When I nod in encouragement she continues, “At least you need certain individuals in key positions so things can go this way. And you probably need immoral individuals.”

Her comment also critically points toward the unstable nature of policy making. Anthropologists focusing on policy have criticized the conventional wisdom that policy is produced by rational actors making informed decisions based upon fully informed choices. On the contrary, actors should rather be seen as moving

between different local, national and international contexts where rationality is not a fixed object (Shore and Wright 2011, 6). These theoretical perspectives draw attention to the contradictory and complex social effects that policies produce in particular localized contexts (Li 2005; Shore and Wright 2011, 8), which, in the context of the transformation of the Icelandic banking system, become tragic. Ragnheiður stresses that engineers were important because they were good with numbers, but with numbers people can easily be confused, and within a competitive environment they can often be afraid to draw attention to their own ignorance.

Ragnheiður also emphasized the insular structure of her workplace, contrasting how in other countries one needed to go through several people in the company in order to approach the person you need to talk to.

I remember when foreigners were asking about this and I would just point out to them, what I mean is that I could literally point out, individuals [within the financial system] that I had been in class with in school. One of the most well-known Business Vikings had been brought up ten houses away from me. You know it is such a short distance. . . . There is a risk of codependency because the system is so small. There is always some codependency, just like in a dysfunctional family. There is this little loser in the family and perhaps it would be good for the family just to tell him: “Hey we will talk to you after a year. If you are in trouble, then here is an emergency number.” But, the tendency is always to make things work. No one wants to be the bad guy, because sooner or later you will go to a family gathering with the person that you criticized.

Notes

- 1 Residents of countries not part of the European Economic Area (EEA) still needed work permits to come and work in Iceland.
- 2 FL Group was an Icelandic investment company that was established around the business operations of Icelandair in 2005. With the use of borrowed money and the proceeds from selling its stake in Icelandair, it became a major investment company, being very visible in Iceland and even internationally at the time. Once the financial crisis began in 2007, FL Group began facing massive losses and was declared bankrupt September 29th, 2008.

5 Warehouse of cultural scenarios

Creating the new Icelandic character

I flipped through photocopied pages of the old Icelandic schoolbooks piled in front of me. When conducting my research in Niger, I often wondered what I had learned as a child about Africa – this diversified continent that Niger is a part of. When analyzing the books in the mid-2000s, I saw again some of the images and the texts from my own childhood in the 1970s. And, to my disbelief, I saw them as well in books originally published as early as 1915, realizing that often the same books had been republished for decades. I had as a child read the different racial classifications in the old geography books and that Icelanders were courageous but difficult to rule, as phrased in one history book from 1915 (Jónsson 1915). Another kind of familiarity was, however, even more surprising: These old schoolbooks, produced at the height of Iceland's fight for independence from Denmark, seemed in a way similar to the current celebration around the Icelandic businessmen and bankers. Colonialism has been my interest for years, and while it started with projects focusing on Africa, I had almost unintentionally moved closer and closer toward nationalism and whiteness in my own society, understanding both as deeply shaped by colonialism. I started in 2005 and 2006 more and more – as it felt at that time – to steal time from my 'real' research by focusing on Icelandic nationalism. It is like a puzzle, the old schoolbooks, the celebration of Icelandic success abroad, the bankers, Iceland's various globalization – it all seems connected somehow and also to my research that I started in Niger. In a strange way, all of this when put together seemed to hint at the desire to reclaim Iceland's position in a globalized world, engaging ultimately with coloniality and racist ideas embedded in the present.

As late as 1996, fish was still perceived to be Iceland's most valuable resource, and constituted about 50% of the total export earnings (Skaptadóttir 1996). In fact, during the second half of the 20th century, the prosperous fishing industry stimulated the growth of Reykjavík and its neighboring municipalities, such as Hafnarfjörður. But then the larger metropolitical area developed more toward the service sector (Bjarnason and Thórlindsson 2006, 292). Nevertheless, as Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir (1996, 274) points out, despite the fact that only a small portion of the population was involved in fisheries at this time, Icelanders still continued to define themselves as a 'proud fishing nation' with the 'fisherman' embodying the qualities of the nation as a whole.

But then came the iconic image of the ‘Business Vikings’ (*útrásarvíkingur*) – a phrase increasingly used during the last years of the Manic Millennium years to refer to Icelandic investors – which proved essential in creating a new Icelandic subject more suitable for the era of global neoliberalization at new millennium. Curiously, perhaps, the Icelandic word ‘*útrásarvíkingur*’ directly associates historical Vikings with foreign acquisitions.

Hannah Appel (2014, 53) has claimed that the figure of a banker can be seen as lending “imaginative cohesion” to a diverse set of practices, so makes evident the emerging centrality of such figure in an Icelandic conceptualization of the world at a new millennium. This figure is usually male and white (Appel 2014), and his slim and fit body suggests his ability to control (McDowell 1994, 739). In many ways, the figure of the new banker is strikingly different from the banker of old, at least as imagined in the past – dull, dry, unsexy and family-oriented (McDowell 1994). Either way, the Business Viking was an important conceptual touchstone for a project claimed by Icelanders and by the nation as a whole. In this chapter, I discuss how despite its masculine characteristics, the economic adventure, or the ‘Icelandic *útrás*’ as it was commonly referred to in Iceland, was seen in Iceland as a joint project of Iceland and Icelanders. It was conceptualized as reflecting a national Icelandic character, rather than the success of a few men who had joined the ranks of the global elite. Or, as phrased by Aðalsteinn in his interview with me, “the Business Vikings were just [perceived as] fantastic (*æðislegir*) and . . . everyone wants to be like Hannes Smárason. This was almost you, somehow. Everyone is somehow measured as being the best here in Iceland.”

Hannes Smárason, the chairman of the company FL Group at one point and its director at another, was one of a handful of men widely perceived as the embodiment of the daring Business Viking. He was an ordinary Icelandic, a slim, successful and presumably self-made man. As Aðalsteinn points out, Smárason’s allure is that he could almost be “you.” He was Everyman. The long-standing imagination of Iceland as a classless society (Oddsson 2010, 7) probably facilitated the mobilization around the economic expansion, where everyone could see themselves as the next Hannes Smárason. He could almost be you.

Here it is important to note that the Icelandic concept ‘nation’ (*þjóðin*) refers to a population across different classes (Bergman 2014), creating a powerful sense of “us” that speaks to people from different backgrounds.

Naturally risk seeking

In line with growth of business masculinities elsewhere, the economic adventure, *útrás*, was led by men, most of whom were relatively young, despite strong gender equality in Iceland as measured by all indicators (Einarsdóttir 2010, 39). As argued by Mixa (2015, 297), some within the financial sector at the time considered anyone over 25 rather old for an investment banker.

The increased hegemonic power of business masculinities was not limited to Iceland, however, as it was a transnational phenomenon, with some forecasting it would become the hegemonic form of masculinity globally (Connell and Wood

2005, 348; Enloe 2013). Even if it is not the universal hegemonic form of masculinity (for criticism see Elias and Beasley 2009), it is clear that at the turn of the century, businessmen were embodying masculinity in important ways. In Iceland, the masculinity of the iconic Icelander was exaggerated and given a specific Icelandic context through the association with ‘Vikings’ – and thus with pillage and invasion.

This corresponds in interesting ways with the nationalistic discourses that took place during the period when Iceland was seeking full independence, which also relied heavily on men; the strong female characters were left out of references to Icelandic settlement at this time (Matthíasdóttir 2004, 217). Then, as during the boom period, strong Viking women were never mobilized in any degree as nationalist symbols.

The absence of women as historical actors, at least in the dominant narrative, clearly reflects the strong association of Icelandic nationalism in the early 20th century with men and masculinities, with Icelandic men seen as responsible and credited for bringing about modernity while women were seen merely as representing the country’s timeless nature.

The character of the Business Vikings appeared at different spectrums of Icelandic society. They were mentioned in official speeches by the president of Iceland, in reports from government institutions, opinion pieces in the media as well as people’s everyday conversations in different social settings. The concept filtered as well into other parts of Icelandic society, even used to explain the success of Icelandic literature outside Iceland and activities of the Foreign Ministry. One key trait of the Icelandic genius involved this ‘everydayness’ of the celebration of the Business Vikings as shown by Gyða Margrét Pétursdóttir (2011). Her analysis takes as an example how in a popular talk show in Iceland the masculinity of a particular business icon and author was emphasized. His thrill for the game was stressed in the show, as was his exhibition of hegemonic masculine traits (Pétursdóttir 2011).

The reified image of Icelanders as Business Vikings was also actively perpetuated by the foreign media (Loftsdóttir and Mixa 2013) and projected by Icelanders abroad (Schram 2011). Foreign analysts who visited Iceland in large numbers gave speeches reinforcing the notion of the Icelandic economic miracle (Wade and Sigurgeirsdóttir 2011). The international success of Icelandic banks and investors seemed to indicate Iceland was becoming a leading nation in finance and economics, thus a full participant in a global world of sovereign nations (see Figure 5.1). The image of Iceland’s unique national character was actively advocated by Icelanders abroad (Schram, 2011, 2009).

Based on Galbraith’s (1997[1955]) observation that trust is a prerequisite in leaders and for creating the right mood, Mixa (2014) points to the importance of the Icelandic media in creating the conviction that everyone deserved to be rich, thus in a sense making it seem natural and self-evident that the Icelandic economy was booming. Mixa mentions the rise of the tabloid *Séð og heyrt*, which regularly presented news about the luxurious lifestyle of the new Icelandic elite and reported on the mingling of politicians and businessmen

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Figure 5.1 Icelandic Business Vikings on the top of the world

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(Mixa 2014, 39). Icelandic tabloid media dutifully presented the conspicuous lifestyles of the rich and famous in a positive light, and so made these individuals a part of people's everyday life in Iceland (Mixa 2009). The ownership of the media in Iceland was also increasingly moving into the hands of the banks' biggest customers or their owners (Áskelsdóttir 2010; Guðmundsson et al. 2009, 256), where part of the news also came directly from financial companies (Guðmundsson et al. 2009, 265). And in the media in general, men had much higher visibility than women (Einarsdóttir and Hjartardóttir 2009, 19; Loftsdóttir and Björnsdóttir 2005).

The President of Iceland, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, was active in advocating the economic expansion, and gave a speech at the University of Iceland in 2006 that both directly and indirectly positioned the symbol of the Business Vikings and their new business practices with Iceland's past. He stated that "settlement age in Iceland is, in a way, the beginning of this all"¹ – with "this all" referring to the economic miracle. He also proclaimed that one of the leading causes for Icelandic success internationally was that the Icelandic entrepreneurs were inheritors of "a tradition which is rooted in the origin of Icelandic settlement." To be certain that the point came across, he claimed that the settlement of Iceland and the Viking era had thus given contemporary Icelanders a particular role model (Grímsson 2006).² The businessman discussed earlier, Hannes Smárason, similarly stated in 2007 that Iceland's foreign acquisitions can be traced to the energy of the Viking spirit (Schram 2007).

These narratives engaged with and rearticulated the ideas of Iceland's golden age that had been so important in the early 20th century (Gremaud 2010). Ironically, early 20th-century schoolbooks characterize early Icelanders as 'settlers' more than as 'Vikings,' thus portraying them as people moving to a new land rather than pillaging in distant countries (Loftsdóttir 2009b). However, they still focused on, as the Business Viking icon, this essential and inherited Icelandic character. As the male body became once again normalized as the symbol for Icelanders as a whole, it involved a new subject of a naturally risk-seeking Ice-lander, which was well suited for a new neoliberal world, even if it wasn't exactly historically accurate.

This emphasis on 'Icelanders' as a unified subject was reflected in interviews in *Markaðurinn* at the end of the year 2007, where leading CEOs and business people were asked to reflect on the year and the future. Björgólfur Guðmundsson, head of Landsbankinn's board, moves from a discussion of his bank and its bright future in spite of some adversity during the year, toward his reflections of Icelandic characteristics. He states:

Icelanders have more often than once shown that they work energetically during upswings and they tackle the downswings with great skill . . . the nation that got itself out of poverty to affluence within one generation is still on deck processing the catch and creating value.³

(*Markaðurinn* 2007b, 15)

In the same set of interviews, Gísli Reynisson, CEO of Nordic Partners, similarly starts off by speaking of his company as a whole before sliding easily towards a discussion of Icelandic characteristics (*Markaðurinn* 2007a, 15). The same can be said about Halla Tómasdóttir, the Chair of the Board at Auður Capital, whose positive outlook for the future was mainly concentrated on the Icelandic subject. The explanation of the many things Icelanders can be proud of that she offers in an interview with one of Iceland's business journals is interesting not because her words are unique in any sense, but in how well they reflect the atmosphere at this time and the way she conflates the Icelandic national subject and the Icelandic businessman:

and last but not least, here reside great entrepreneurs, people that have shown both a whole lot of tenacity and found ways to adapt and creating here much affluence despite in many ways dealing with harsh conditions. Maybe it is this character of Icelanders that is our most valuable asset. Some even consider us to be a slightly crazy nation, since we decide to engage in activities that others consider impossible, whether it is to sail out in the open sea and rough ocean for fish – fishing, utilize water power from waterfalls or buy business treasures from Danes.⁴

(*Markaðurinn* 2007c, 16)

The business treasures that she mentions at the end of the quote is probably a reference to how the Icelandic businessmen often bought companies that held high cultural significance in Denmark.

Marketing the nation

The aspirations of those driving the economic boom were entangled with strong reification of Icelandic culture, and even though this materialization was seen as natural and unique in Iceland, it is important to recognize that reification of culture has been an important component of neoliberalism. The corporatization of culture through neoliberal ideology is starkly evident in nation branding, where the nation becomes a brand or symbolic referent in a fashion similar to a company trademark (Lavie and Swedenberg 1996, 6). During the boom period, nation branding was not yet a full-fledged, systematic exercise by state and private interests as it would become after the crash. Reification of the nation did, however, actively take place through intense social discourses about Iceland's uniqueness in different media within Iceland, including everyday discussions and important statements by politicians. The branding of the Icelandic nation was strongly directed at Icelanders themselves in celebration of the international expansion of the Icelandic banks.

When I embarked on this project after the economic crash, I told my husband, then a former bank employee whose employer had declared bankruptcy, that it would be interesting to investigate nationalistic imaginaries of the banks from the beginning of the 20th century until the crash. I remembered the brochures that had

been delivered at our home, full of symbols of Icelandic nature, and thought that this was simply a continued discourse connecting past and present.

“No,” he said to my surprise, “That is not really the case.”

He explained: “I worked in Landsbankinn in the late 1980s and what was stressed then was good service to the customer, and the other banks emphasized their special brand of customers from specific professions or areas of the country.”

His assertion seemed worthwhile enough to investigate further. And, as both of us saw when we looked more closely at the history of banking, the publicity material generated and transformed in ways consistent with standard regulations elsewhere while the banking system was becoming more globally integrated. The banks themselves were increasingly interpreted and presented in nationalistic terms as a result (Loftsdóttir and Mixa 2013). The changed perception of banks’ role was first of all reflected in the changes of names of the banks in the 1990s. Prior to the economic expansion, the banks’ names reflected their goal of primarily serving particular communities or interest groups. The Savings Bank of Hafnarfjörður, for example, changed its name to Byr bank in 2006, thus making invisible the connection of the bank to the community of the town (Loftsdóttir and Mixa 2013).

The shift of the banks toward stronger nationalistic imagery can then be clearly seen as reflected in promotional material from the banks, which in the 1980s shifted from earlier emphases on good service toward stressing Icelandic nature or nationalistic symbols, as well as generic promises of money without effort. After initial exploration by myself and my husband, I asked my research assistant, Inga Hrönn Hassler, to go through promotional material from the banks kept at the Icelandic National Library archive. Inga Hrönn carefully went through the material, scanning and listing for me promotional brochures and other material that the banks used to promote their services. Looking closely at this promotional material offers a clear indication of the shifting conceptualizations of the banks’ role. Promotional material published during the 1970s,⁵ for example, emphasizes the importance of saving money in a secure way. A brochure from Landsbankinn from the 1970s emphasizes the importance of putting money aside for the needs of the household, family and for “unexpected expenses.” This view toward saving for security’s sake is strengthened in the message with the use of the slogan “Insurance for the future” (*Trygging í framtíð*) (Sparilán, Landsbankinn, Archives of Landsbókasafn Íslands).

The brochures from the 1980s emphasize the banks’ role as serving particular communities. A brochure from Sparisjóður Hafnarfjarðar (Hafnarfjörður’s Savings Bank) entitled “Sparisjóður Hafnarfjarðar introduces its services” (*Sparisjóður Hafnarfjarðar kynnir þjónustu sína*), features on its front page an elaborate historical discussion on the establishment of Sparisjóðurinn in 1902 by ten businessmen, clearly stating that they all lived in Hafnarfjörður and that their goal was to build a stronger community in the town (Archives of Landsbókasafn Íslands). The key issue highlighted here is safety and service to the customer, as is clearly emphasized in a brochure for the employees of Landsbankinn, published sometime between 1986–1989. The brochure’s title is a grammatical declension

of the word service, “Service, about service, from service, to service,” which echoes verbal exercises for young kids in school.

Occasionally, Icelandic material culture of the past or landscape is referenced in older promotional materials, but such symbols become more evident after 2000. The increased use of this imagery is coupled with changes to the presentation of the role of the banks as serving Icelanders as a whole rather than servicing differentiated communities. In a brochure the archive holds with other materials from 1999 to 2004, Landsbréf – among the first brokerage banks in Iceland, established in 1989 – emphasizes the fact that it is embedded in the international landscape by referring to its foreign offices, investments funds that have English names, and by featuring a photograph from London. The front page shows a reflection on a glass building mirroring a tall ‘modern’ building and another that is smaller and appears to be more historic. Within the brochure there is a beautiful photo of a waterfall flowing from basalt columns (*stuðlaberg*), which locates the brochure in a uniquely Icelandic environment. The text also clearly reflects the goal to service all Icelanders, not mentioning any differentiation in accordance with class, municipality or employment by addressing only “individuals and companies.”

The brochures from this period are professionally produced, with artistic photographs, covers presenting particular reasons one should use this bank (mainly profit) over a clean background, where nationalistic symbols or Icelandic landscapes exist alongside other illustrations. The elegant juxtapositioning of visual references to hyper-modern skyscrapers, traditional Icelandic houses and, as in one brochure, reference to artwork by Kjarval, one of Iceland’s most famous painters, creates an atmosphere of a company heading into the future while respecting its roots in Icelandic history. The promotional material from the biggest banks such as Kaupthing and Landsbankinn is often both in English and Icelandic, which begs the question whether the English text is not primarily for the benefit of the Icelanders themselves to more firmly establish the international characteristics of the bank.

The strongest example that I found of how banks engaged with the ongoing nationalistic discourse is a brochure by an Icelandic bank issued probably in the beginning of 2002. The brochure’s goal is to introduce the main emphasis of Landsbankinn’s future commercials, which, according to the text, are meant to show the Icelandic nation in a humorous light and to remind consumers of the important role of Landsbankinn. The brochure has no discussion of any bank-related issues; instead the topic is primarily who “we” Icelanders are, with an emphasis on each page of Icelanders’ exceptional characteristics in a global economy. This emphasis is made clear in statements such as, “We go to war with an imperial power due to a fish species that we don’t even eat ourselves,”⁶ and “we celebrate the first day of summer in April!”⁷ This brochure is only in Icelandic as far as I know, perhaps because its message carries such a strong notion of “cultural intimacy,” to use Herzfeld’s term (2005), that it becomes almost too embarrassing if translated for non-Icelanders. The last sentence echoes the title on the front, “We know our people – We are Icelandic.”⁸

These ideas about the banks' new role did not take place in a vacuum but were part of and engaged with larger discourses by key politicians, Icelandic celebrities and media – along with everyday conversation in Iceland – about the international successes of Icelandic businessmen and bankers. Media discussion transmitted important information about the banks' operations and successes outside of Iceland. These perceptions were supported by emerging tabloid coverage focusing firmly on the businessmen's extensive consumption and international celebrity status, which was unknown in Iceland prior to that time. Earlier, Iceland had been seen as a society without much class division, strongly emphasizing equality (Durrenberger 1996; Pálsson 1989). Within media discussions and policy discourses, the image of the Viking and Icelanders' essential characteristics became instrumental in public mobilization for the boom period, as well as creating a new and proper neoliberal subject well suited for new global challenges (see Figure 5.2).

In the banks' promotional material from 1999 to 2004, the body of the banker is not necessarily more visible than in the older advertisements. In the older ads the body of the banker is used to show the modern technology of the bank, through methods such as positioning the banker behind a computer, or giving service a friendly face by featuring warm interactions between employees and customers blended with text about service. These older images also often illustrate the gendered division of labor within the banks, with women on the 'floor' assisting the customer with minor issues, while those in power are predominantly men. However, even though the promotional material of the banks did not necessarily highlight the banker at the turn of a new millennium, the media offered plentiful images of bankers and businessmen. They dutifully reported not only on foreign acquisitions and success, but also on the luxurious lifestyles led by the most successful businessmen and women.

In the early 2000s, the super-rich appeared somewhat suddenly in Iceland, usually associated with the new business and finance elite, with extensive consumption practices that were unknown in Iceland at that time (Oddsson 2010, 8). In 1997, some discussion had already begun in relation to the growing difference in salaries in Iceland, reflected in the fact that 82% replied in an opinion poll that they agreed with the statement that there were two "nations" (*þjóðir*) living in the country due to the difference in salaries (Capacent Gallup 1997). The extensive consumption by some included extravagant purchases, such as, "[an] English



Figure 5.2 The investor just relaxes as the money flows into his account. In his hand he has a 'stress ball' imitating a globe. The caption reads "Easier than I thought"

Source: Published with permission from Landbankinn hf

football club, a Formula One racing team, a yacht formerly owned by Armani and England's most prestigious bank, Singer & Friedlander" (Jónsson and Sæmundsson 2014, 30). It is clear that economic inequality grew during this time (Oddsson 2010, 8). And in fact, the businessmen themselves asserted direct associations with the Vikings of the past in several objects of their consumption. Jón Ásgeir, one of Iceland's leading international businessmen, named his yacht Viking, and also displayed a 3-meter-high statue of Iceland's iconic settler, Leifur Eiríksson (often portrayed as Iceland's first settler) in the lobby of his London headquarters (Eliasson 2009).

The Icelandic foreigners

The discourses around the idea of the Business Viking as the embodiment of the Icelandic subject assume that Icelanders, in general, are descendants of the 'Vikings' of a thousand years ago. What did this mean at times when the Icelandic population was changing radically during fast-growing economic migration to Iceland?

When Iceland joined the Schengen⁹ collaboration in 2001, Iceland's labor market opened up for people within the Schengen area but remained mostly closed to others. As Steven Garner (2006) had discussed, the Schengen does not say that non-white subjects are not welcome in Europe but it does still exclude certain populations based on intersecting categories of race and class, where those for example from previously colonized areas have difficulties entering Europe. Before long, labor-intensive megaprojects in the eastern part of Iceland, notably the massive Kárahnjúkar power plant and the building of the aluminum smelter in Reyðarfjörður, would begin to set the tone for Iceland's integration into a global neoliberal economy. When these projects were introduced in Iceland, for example, there was a general assertion that Icelandic laborers would be hired. It soon became evident, however, that that would not be the case.

A report about the effects of these projects in the Eastern part of Iceland pointed out that the international corporations contracted to conduct the work were important in determining from where people were hired, not the Icelandic government (Jóhannesson 2008, 49). The international firm Impreglio was, apparently, not particularly interested in hiring Icelanders and the low salary and difficult working conditions were not appealing for those who had other options (Hallgrímsson 2009, 13). They were thus able to hire temporary workers from different places in the world. At one point in time people from Portugal were the most numerous transitory workers, but at others there were influxes of workers from Italy, Poland and China (Jóhannesson 2008, 50).

However, the key issue in this discussion isn't the nationality of the workers. It is the fact that they represent the idea of bodies that can be used and then disposed of within the globalized economy. They are a 'labor' force with weak rights, brought to Iceland by sub-contractors in a context where the labor of the person can somehow be separated from the person him- or herself. The weak position of these individuals is perhaps reflected in the difficulties Icelandic authorities

encountered in either gaining or processing basic information about the workers for these companies; it became apparent that some had not been registered in Iceland, that many lacked information about their rights, and that the working conditions often were awful (Jóhannesson 2008, 53). As argued by the author of one report addressing this industry, in these complications we see here, “the crystallization of this new reality that becomes apparent when international contractors conduct certain megaprojects”¹⁰ (Jóhannesson 2008, 53). There was certainly criticism and discussion in wider Icelandic society about the deplorable work conditions and rights of these men (Jóhannesson 2008, 53) who were situated somewhere out in the hinterlands, but it never resulted in extensive action from the government.

The idea of ‘foreign’ labor power was, however, not only evident in relation to the megaprojects and the booming building industry. In 2006, new EU members from Eastern Europe had better access to the Icelandic labor market, which coincided with the boom in Iceland (Skaptadóttir 2014, 176). Most migrants came from Poland, due to the fact that salaries were much lower there than in Iceland and unemployment was high (Skaptadóttir 2015, 178).

The extensive need for labor in the booming construction industry pulled first more men than women, but shortly thereafter, women became needed in the service sector (Skaptadóttir 2015). These individuals were commonly reduced to ‘foreign labor power’ (*vinnuafli*) in Icelandic policy and public discourse (Skaptadóttir 2015, 179), where they filled the lowest paying jobs. These jobs did not reflect their skills as much as their weak position in the labor market, a situation frequently found elsewhere in the world (Parutis 2011).

Surveys first conducted in 2005 and again just before the crash in 2008, that measured attitudes toward immigrants in Iceland recorded more negative views in 2008 (Önnudóttir 2009). Negative discussions about immigrants became particularly intense during the height of the boom years, in 2006 and 2007. The rise of the center-right conservative liberal political party, Liberal Party (*Frjálslyndi flokkurinn*), well known for its anti-immigration attitudes (Wojtyńska, Skaptadóttir and Ólafsson 2011, 50),¹¹ reflects receptiveness to these attitudes, while also intensifying them. Prejudice against Polish and Lithuanian workers revolved to a great extent around their association with criminal activity (Ólafsson and Zielinska 2010), where the words Polish, Lithuanian and Eastern European became synonymous with organized crime of some kind. Agnė, a woman from Lithuania, explains to me in an interview that every morning in 2006, she hoped that the newspapers would not carry news stories about “some Lithuanian caught with drugs or something like that,” explaining the sentiment when “you have done all the correct things in your life, you are trying to get education and you do perfectly but suddenly you are part of the category with that person [committing the crime].”

Analysis of the Icelandic media portrayal of migrants between 2006–2010 shows that in fact one-third of the discussion about immigrants in Iceland in 2007 was in relation to crime and police matters (Ólafsson and Zielinska 2010, 77). However, as Eva Heiða Önnudóttir (2009) has shown in her comparative analysis of European surveys, attitudes of people in Iceland toward immigrants were

generally more positive than attitudes expressed by people in other European countries to their own immigrant populations. This does not necessarily mean that prejudice is not significant in Iceland; rather, it demonstrates how extensive prejudice against those defined as immigrants within Europe is in general.

Often, discussions about immigrants in Iceland took the form of what Suvi Keskinen (2013) has called “worrying about the nation.” The phrase captures how some discourses express strong concern with what is perceived as an intense migration to the country and its consequences for the country as a whole, as well as critical discussions about those who are seen as welcoming all migrants.

I was shocked in my interviews with migrants from Lithuania, conducted in 2012 and 2014, by the racism that these people had experienced in Iceland. My research assistant, Þóra Lilja Sigurðardóttir, who was working with me in this part of the research, was outraged as well, even though she had been exposed to racism in Iceland while working on other projects on prejudice and racist attitudes. She captured my sentiments well when telling me thoughtfully after the first few interviews that she had, of course, known that our interview subjects would have encountered discrimination, but she had not realized that it was so extensive.

One woman we interviewed said that her personality was erased because her identity was completely reduced to simply being Lithuanian. When she told us about her experience in applying for a job, she explained:

It was like the door was slammed into our face. It was enough saying I am from Lithuania. . . . I work hard, I don't care what kind of jobs I have to take. But it was sufficient just to ask me: where are you from? Lithuania. Thanks, goodbye and bye.

Another woman interviewed, Victoria, spoke about how, to Icelandic people, all Lithuanians were “criminals and that you have to be really careful, [they are] dirty and all very dark.” Her reference to darkness can both be read as they are seen as darker in a physical sense than the majority population and as their association with something dangerous. In other cases, people explain that things were said jokingly to them, as Dorotjéa who worked as a store clerk in a low budget grocery store. There she was often asked humorously by costumers if she sold drugs. Few times she was asked as well – also jokingly – how much she would cost, which implied the gendered implication where women from Eastern European countries are seen as potential prostitutes. Povilas also pointed out how things were often said humorously, as in his case and other male friends who were often asked if they had escaped from prison (Loftsdóttir 2017).

In a world of mobile labor power moving back and forth across the globe, “the” Eastern European – usually in Iceland referring only to people from Poland and Lithuania – seemed to be positioned at the bottom of the globalization hierarchy. The racialization of Lithuanians in Iceland at this point in time indicates how whiteness is a category that people move in and out of during the process of racialization (Bonnett 1998) and how the media are important in “whitening” and “darkening” certain populations (Fox, Moraşanu and Szilassy 2012, 692). In other

contexts, such as Norway, Lithuanian migrants gain better positions in the ‘hierarchy of migrants,’ where they can position themselves as white (Daukšas 2013). This racism was facilitated by persistent notions in Iceland of racism as being something external to Iceland due to the country’s lack of colonial history (Loftsdóttir 2014). This type of Nordic exceptionalism takes place somewhat similarly across the Nordic countries (Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2012a).

The stereotype of the Eastern European as incompatible with modernity was not new, of course (Dzenovska 2010). Eastern Europeans have historically been seen as Europe’s “internal others” (Kalnačs 2016). At the time of the global economic boom, the migration of people from the East toward the West was often portrayed as a main threat to the imaginary space of Europe in the global media, with people from the East classified with other non-desirable subjects “others,” such as Muslims and refugees (Fassin 2011). So even though most people from Poland and Lithuania seemed to have rather positive experiences when first migrating to Iceland in search of work (Skaptadóttir 2004), their categorization as lesser Europeans could easily be reproduced in Iceland when there was a need to justify their classification as dehumanized labor. In a sense, this fit well with the nationalistic discourse of Icelanders as being exceptionally suited to the new neoliberal environment due to their intrinsic characteristics. It was then intensified by the counter-image, the Eastern European workers, who were seen to be lacking these qualities.

How did the state desire for a ‘disposable’ workforce – a desire marked by a lack of initiative in creating regulatory frameworks and policies as well as an unwillingness to act when it was evident that people were abused and kept in inadequate housing – create a certain environment where wider imaginations of the ‘Eastern European’ as racialized subjects became possible? Dace Dzenovska’s (2010) observation is acute here when she stresses the need to critically move beyond the comparative national context of racism. Rather, she emphasizes the need to move toward analysis of how the modern state facilitates or enables racist thinking and practices.

Discourses about Icelanders’ special characteristics and Viking heritage, which appeared at first glance to be completely separate from discourses in Iceland about migration, carried the unspoken assumption of purity of the Icelandic blood. The ‘immigrant’ was generally nowhere to be seen in these discourses addressing Iceland’s economic prosperity, either in negative terms or as positively contributing to it (Loftsdóttir 2010b; Skaptadóttir 2010b, 319). There was, thus, as in the past, a strong sense of the opposition between foreigners and Icelanders. ‘Outside foreigners’ located in the world outside of Iceland’s geographical boundaries were represented as either envious or highly impressed by Icelandic economic success. In contrast to the outside foreigner, ‘the Icelander’ appeared as a ‘white’ male, endowed with an active, frontier spirit, almost as a modern super-man. The iconographic image of the ‘internal foreigner’ – the foreigner who came to Iceland for work and was often a Polish or Lithuanian migrant worker – was still an undeveloped European subject and remained stuck on the margins of Europe and its entrance into neoliberal modernity (Loftsdóttir 2017). Yes, Icelanders were on the

geographical margin of Europe but, through the body of the Business Viking, they seemed to have entered neoliberal modernity.

Finding useable things in the warehouse

When, in his much-cited book on globalization, Arjun Appadurai (1996, 6) refers to a “warehouse of cultural scenarios,” he is stressing a potential range of identities in a media-saturated world. The phrase is particularly important to understanding how the emphasis on the Icelandic settler as an embodiment of endurance against harsh circumstances in Iceland was mobilized to frame the country’s global integration. The iconic image of the Icelandic settler – or Viking – seemed to be an ideal fit, especially when emphasizing this masculine figure’s adventurous nature and boldness. As argued by John and Jean Comaroff (2009, 26–27), ethnicity in neoliberal times has thus become more commoditized, often involving self-parody but also reanimation of subjectivity. The social narratives referring to Business Vikings were, furthermore, not relegated to occasional statements made by leading politicians but instead were strongly intertwined with people’s daily social fabric. Media stories about the ‘conquests’ of Icelandic companies and businessmen overseas were supplemented by reports of other types of success of Icelanders overseas, such as novelists and musicians (the concept *útrás* also being used over their accomplishment outside of Iceland). The narratives of Iceland’s success in general also fit well with people’s individual successes in the Icelandic stock market, which made it appear as if every investor in Iceland was and could continue earning money by playing the market.

These different social discourses were a part of people’s lived realities and experiences in Iceland during the economic boom. They formed the environment in which they lived, the very air they inhaled every day, connecting powerfully to a historical memory of Icelanders as different from everyone else. The children’s song “My Dad Is Richer Than Your Dad” (*Pabbi minn er ríkari en pabbi þinn*) released in 2008 but written prior to the crash (DV 2008) is, to me, a vivid example of the saturation of these narratives into the most basic elements of Icelandic society. Indirectly, the song refers to an old Icelandic children’s song where two kids fight over whose father is strongest. However, instead of fighting over who has the strongest father, in this version of the song the two children fight over whose father is richest. The lyrics are based on a mixture of children’s fantasies and the business language of equities, derivative contracts, and so on. The song was produced and marketed as a children song, but the goal of the writers, I imagine, was also to create a funny and satirical mirror upon the present. The text humorously describes how one father has bought Eden and redesigned it, while the other father bought an Egyptian pharaoh and kept it in the freezer. While text is meant to be humorous and critical, it becomes especially funny because it is based on a particular experience where the words for technical financial concepts used in the song arguably could have been spoken by children in the social atmosphere that was present at the time.

Notes

- 1 In Icelandic: “Landnámsöldin [er] á vissan hátt upphafið af þessu öllu saman.”
- 2 In Icelandic:
 Í áttunda lagi arfleifðin sem ég nefndi í upphafsorðum, landnámið og tími víkinganna, sem færði okkur fyrirmyndir, hið djúpstæða viðhorf að sá sem heldur á okunnar slóðir verðskuldi heiður, að leggja á hafið og nema lönd færi virðingu og sóma. Athafnamenn okkar tíma eru ærið oft metnir á slíkan kvarða og litið á þá sem arftaka hefðar sem á sér rætur í upphafi Íslandsbyggðar.
- 3 In Icelandic:
 Íslendingar hafa oftar en einu sinni sýnt í verki að þeir vinna af krafti í uppsveiflu og þeir glíma af lagni við niðursveiflu . . . Þjóðin sem kom sér úr örbyggð í allsnægtir á einum mannsaldri er enn upp á dekki við að verka aflann og skapa verðmætin.
- 4 In Icelandic:
 síðast en ekki síst búa hér miklir frumkvöðlar, fólk sem hefur sýnt af sér bæði seiglu og útsjónarsemi og skapað hér mikla velsæld þrátt fyrir um margt erfiðar aðstæður. Kannski er það þessi karakter Íslendinga sem er okkar dýrmætasta eign. Sumir telja okkur jafn vel vera ‘léttgeggjaða’ þjóð, því við látum okkur detta í hug að framkvæma það sem aðrir telja ómögulegt, hvort sem um ræðir að sigla út á opið og úfið haf til fisk veiða, virkjun vatnsfalla eða uppkaup á viðskiptagersemum Dana.
- 5 Often it is difficult to see in detail what year the material was produced. The boxes are generally marked with a ten years’ span.
- 6 In Icelandic: “Við förum í stríð við heilt heimsveldi út af fiskitegund sem við borðum ekki einu sinni sjálf.”
- 7 In Icelandic: “Við höldum upp á sumardaginn fyrsta í apríl!”
- 8 In Icelandic: “Við þekkjum okkar fólk – við erum Íslendingar.”
- 9 Schengen is an agreement between several European countries. It abolishes border checks for those countries that are within Schengen, thus facilitating traveling within the Schengen area, but also results in an intensification of the external borders.
- 10 In Icelandic: “kristallast þar þessi nýi veruleiki sem við blasir þar sem alþjóðlegir verk-takar taka að sér verkefni við stórfamkvæmdir.”
- 11 The party was originally created to protest fisheries policies by the Icelandic government, but in 2006 the party started mobilizing anti-immigration rhetoric (Bergmann 2015). In parliamentary elections after the crash, however, in 2009 it lost all its seats at the Parliament.

6 Probably the best in the world?

Engaging with Iceland's colonial past

What defines the limits beyond which something becomes so absurd that you don't know whether to cry or laugh? The 2007 Business Congress, organized by the Icelandic Chamber of Commerce, begs the question. Called "Iceland: The Best in the World?", the congress brought together prominent business people, the prime minister and other leading politicians, all presumably engaging one way or another with the theme of the congress. The title may have been meant to be humorous, yet the question mark indicates that it was a real consideration to be discussed and taken seriously. Furthermore, the previous year, the same Icelandic Chamber of Commerce stated in their vision for the Iceland of 2015 that "Iceland [should] stop comparing itself to the Nordic countries, because after all we are superior to them in most respects"¹ (Icelandic Chamber of Commerce 2006, 22).

When contextualized in the wider social discourse, the desire to become the 'best' has to be recognized as being intertwined with ideas of modernity and the coloniality of power. The ideas of 'best' and 'modern' clearly capture the sense that in the world there are subjects of greater and lesser importance.

This chapter takes a closer look at the engagement of the Icelandic economic expansion, which peaked in 2008, with coloniality, and how this engagement mobilized not only a collective sense of an exceptional country, but also of Iceland as finally being primed to break away from its colonial past, a belief that itself reveals how deeply imbedded Iceland's history with Denmark is in the country's sense of statehood.

The self-assured feel of the congress's conference title indicates shared aspirations to becoming a more significant country, which, in turn, reflects the conception of, as phrased by Dace Dzenovska, "mature" and "less mature" political subjects (p. 396). Thus, simultaneously, while the contemporary nationalist discourses sought a unique status for the Icelandic nation as apart or distinct from Europe, such discourses were also embedded within a larger European colonial past, sometimes even referencing it directly. This appears awkward in the contemporary context where, as scholars have recognized, European contemporary discourses struggle to keep Europe's colonial past separated from "European political and civilization virtues" (Dzenovska 2013, 397; Lewis 2006). So too do Icelandic desires during the boom period reveal larger matrices of coloniality within European discourses where countries continue to be perceived as less or

more ‘civilized’ – or ‘mature’ – to use Dzenovska’s phrase for how such hierarchies are articulated in the present.

Colonization

The idea of ‘colonialization’ or ‘invasion’ was an underlying theme in the general conceptualization of the Icelandic economic adventure of the mid-2000s. The idea of the Icelandic ‘Business Viking’ evoked not only a particular link with Iceland’s past associations with ‘Vikings,’ or Iceland’s first settlers, but also with colonialism in a very general sense. In Iceland, the economic expansion was referred to by the term ‘*útrás*,’ which directly translates as “outward-expansion” or “sally.” The term became a multivocal symbol for an expansion of Icelandic businesses to other parts of the world, while indirectly referring to Iceland’s presumed past as featuring Vikings raiding other countries. Furthermore, the prefix ‘*út*’ or ‘out’ captures the sense of bounded place from which people leave and to which they go back.

The association with Viking and the term *útrás* was not really hidden. In the business journal *Markaðurinn*, ‘*útrás*’ was, for example, directly associated with the phrase “to go Viking” (*af stað í þann viking sinn*, as the news story phrases it) in reference to a foreign acquisition by Icelanders (Ármannsson 2007). When Landsbankinn began to offer savings accounts in Europe, a story appeared in *Markaðurinn* under the heading “Invasion into Europe” (Helgason 2006). Similarly, when *Viðskiptablaðið* decided to give an overview of Icelandic banks’ foreign acquisitions, the editorial staff felt it appropriate to do so under the headline: “Betting on the whole world” (*Heimurinn er allur undir*) (Jónsson 2007 12–13).

The association with imperialistic conquest was even further intensified – even laid bare – by a map that visually explained the holdings of Icelandic banks of other banks and branches under the title “Colonialism of Icelandic Banks” (*Nýlendustefna íslensku bankanna*). Here ‘colonialism’ is used in a positive sense to underscore the extensive internationalization of Icelandic banks and to directly associate Icelanders with a process of brutally forcing nations and people under European control in the 19th and early 20th centuries (*Viðskiptablaðið* 2007a, 12).

Beyond these journals, examples of politicians and public institutions making uncritical references to ‘raids’ abound. A report by the Iceland Chamber of Commerce about the extension of Icelandic business to London uncritically uses concepts like “Vikings” and “pillage” to describe this transformation (Sigfússon and Þorgbergsson 2005, 21). As discussed earlier, the use of terms such as “colonialization,” “pillage,” and “Viking” also evokes the strong masculine images associated with the economic expansion.

These open references to colonialization insert Iceland indirectly into Europe’s history as colonizers and thus hint at the lingering implication within wider European discourses that being European also means, by default, having a colonial history. Dzenovska (2013) has shown similar attempts to coopt this kind of colonial history in Latvia, where there are attempts to claim a colonial history by revising parts of Latvian history.² As Dzenovska (2013) points out, this selective celebration of Latvia’s past within Latvia and the country’s efforts to do so, ridiculed by

outsiders from others in the global north, also reveals Europe's attempt to gain moral superiority in fields of global politics, where the colonial past is something that is far in the past. As Dzenovska's analysis stresses, Latvians' celebration of a belated colonial past becomes seen in the wider Western context a sign of their 'backwardness.' Wider European narratives of colonialization, as so keenly observed by Dzenovska, are within the European contexts openly condemned while they are also more uncandidly celebrated.

Icelandic attempts to write themselves into Europe's colonial history – albeit in a different way – similarly not only reflect their 'backwardness' to others, in terms of their attempts to claim a history that includes colonialism or colonial power, but as in the Latvian example, indicates the continued importance of colonialism as a part of Europe's identity, where the creation of margins or resistance to being on the margins themselves is seen through the lens of colonial history.

It is also important to note how controversial and contextual the sense of Nordic exceptionalism is in Iceland. In discourse about immigration, there are claims of innocence regarding racism in the present day to Iceland's lack of past colonial involvement. Other discourses focusing on Business Vikings, however, highlight colonialization in positive way and indicate a desire to inject Iceland into that part of European history.

The revenge on Denmark

"Icelanders Still Buying Companies in Denmark," proclaimed daily newspaper *Morgunblaðið* in September 2007:

Department stores, newspapers, hotels, airlines and now a film company. Every day brings news of the acquisition by Icelanders of Danish companies, and now, the European Film Group (EFG) has been purchased.

(Morgunblaðið 2007)

In one of my interviews, a banker from one of the fallen banks reflected with a hint of criticism that he found it interesting that among so many business opportunities existing in the Manic Millennium years, Denmark would be such a focal point. He did not go so far as to say these were necessarily bad investments, but he was obviously indicating that there was something more going on.

Kevin, the Danish banker to whom I referred earlier, used the phrase "Crown Jewels" when referring to some of the Icelandic acquisitions in Denmark. He emphasized the element of proximity, stating that they "bought it at fairly high price, and there was a bit of, I wouldn't say showing off a bit, but also local or like psychological closeness because it was still close psychologically to Iceland." He concluded that Icelanders wanted a small piece of the old boat, Denmark.

A great deal of attention was paid to certain acquisitions. For example, Icelandic investors bought Danish shopping centers Illum and Magasin du Nord, both located on Strøget, Copenhagen's main shopping street. The historical Hotel d'Angleterre, located in the heart of Copenhagen at Kongens Nytorv at the end of Strøget, was

also bought by an Icelandic investor (Gísli Reynirsson). These acquisitions were strongly conceptualized as being in direct reference to Iceland's colonial position, as is clearly evident in an article in Icelandic business journal *Viðskiptablaðið*:

At the time, the acquisitions of Danish crown jewels, especially Magasin du Nord, seemed to get on the nerves of the Danish media a bit, and their stance did not improve *when our countrymen declared an invasion into their fortress* with the advent of Nyhedsavisen.”³

(*Viðskiptablaðið* 2007b, 13; emphasis mine)

A similar expression of Danish envy toward Icelanders is reflected in an interview taken with Gísli Reynirsson, the CEO and main owner of Nordic partners who bought not only the Hotel d'Angleterre, but also the Hotel Kong Frederik and the Hotel Front. In the interview, Gísli explains that he and the other Icelandic investors who bought the hotel had expected the sellers, a Danish family, to have been affected by the negative publicity received in Denmark by Icelanders. Gísli claims that “in spite of certain press getting pleasure from and enjoying bullying Icelanders, this has not been the case with all Danes.” His remark seems to assume a communal knowledge that that most Danes ‘bully’ Icelanders.

Hjálmar, a bank employee in middle management, illustrates the anxieties that Icelanders felt characterized Danish reaction toward them. Hjálmar based his observations on his frequent travels to Denmark at the height of the economic boom. He recounted to me that during that time, whenever he entered a Copenhagen taxi the driver would almost always ask what country Hjálmar was from. When he would tell the drivers Iceland, he told me the reply would almost always be: “What are you going to buy next?” Looking at me, Hjálmar laughed: “Always. And yes, it was fun to say that I had arrived [in Denmark] to buy the Tivoli.”

It is, of course, no coincidence that Hjálmar would use Tivoli when joking with them, the Danish Tivoli gardens being such an important national symbol of Denmark. It is unlikely that he knew about the Colonial Exhibition in Tivoli in 1905, and I failed to ask him that question.

Guðný, who worked for an international organization, not a bank, captures this ambivalent relationship with Denmark. In our interview, she explains that she worked in Denmark for a few years and in that context tells me, “They have, of course, always looked a little down on the Icelanders. That is my experience. [It is] kind of like [they have] colonial attitudes toward Icelanders, Faroese and Greenlanders.” She hesitates for a moment, and then adds,

of course not always, but partly. And yes, we are someone. I think I would, for example, not be able to stand some comments from a Dane in regard to, you know, Icelanders and *nouveau riche* Icelanders. Because I find *nouveau riche* somehow so pathetic.

In referring to Icelanders at the time of the boom, she says, “I find the snobbery and all that disgusting, so I don't want others telling us that we are like that, even though we are like that, you understand?”

Others I interviewed referred to Danes' 'mixed feelings' about Iceland's economic prosperity. Ragnhildur, for example, says that in comparison to the other Nordic nations the Danes were "the grumpiest neighbors" (*fúlastir á móti*), explaining that they behaved like sulking child (*i fýlu*). Some emphasized that in retrospect, they realized how embarrassingly Icelanders had behaved in Denmark at this time of economic exuberance. Baldur tells me of his repeated experience when shopping at Magasin du Nord as emblematic of how Icelanders conducted themselves in Denmark at the time. He heard stories about other Icelanders in the store announcing to the staff that the store was in fact owned by Icelanders. Another story I was told recounts that leading Icelandic businessmen once showed off by buying Danish hot dogs for everyone at Raadhuspladsen, Copenhagen's busiest square. In this story, it was self-evident that this kind of behavior was obnoxious rather than generous, as the act revolved around showing the Danes at the square how great the 'Icelanders' – their former colonial subjects – were doing.

The primary issue here is not the truth of such accounts – many were second- or even third-hand accounts – but the fact that those relating them to me found them credible. As such, they reflect an atmosphere of arrogance in Iceland at this time and demonstrate how the 'Icelander' was embodied in the figure of the aggressive and successful Business Viking. Also, such accounts involve some kind of self-knowledge, an acknowledgment that 'we' behaved badly, even though, as Guðný phrases it in the quote above, 'we' would not want 'others' telling us so.

The intimacy and complexity of the relationship between Denmark and Iceland is furthermore reflected in the fact that the people I interviewed often referred to the relationship between the two countries as one of two brothers. This reference is not unusual in the Nordic countries, as reflected by Ebbe Volquardsen and Lill-Ann Körber (2014)'s discussion of an Icelandic author Hallgrímur Helgason's depiction of the relationship between the Nordic countries. Helgason sees Sweden and Denmark as the parents, with Norway as the glamorous and affluent oldest sister, Finland as the illegitimate child of the family (belonging one point of time to Sweden and at another to the Russian Empire), the Faroe Islands as the bachelor who chain smokes and lives with his mother, and Greenland, the youngest child of the family, as adopted by Denmark, the mother. Iceland, in Helgason's depictions, is, however, the child who went to America as teenager after moving out too quickly (Volquardsen and Körber 2014, 7–8).

As Volquardsen and Körber (2014) point out, there is a tendency in Denmark to use the mother-child metaphor when referring to countries under Danish rule (p. 8). While those I interviewed referred to Denmark and Iceland as siblings rather than child and mother, this familial reference also implies shared bonds and hierarchy. As Aðalsteinn explained, referring to Iceland:

We are really the little brother or the little one who began to act up and pretend to be more than the big brother, and they [the Danes] do not appreciate it. They are, of course, rather polite and modest (*hógværir*), and we had just reached a place that we should not be at.

Aðalsteinn elaborated that the Danes would have been happier for ‘us’ if ‘we’ had shown more humility (*auðmýkt*), and that Icelanders should have demonstrated basic manners. It is interesting how in his assessment Aðalsteinn starts with the word “humility,” which can refer to subordination, but then almost corrects himself with his dispassionate reference to “manners.”

Another person I interviewed, Hjálmar, used a reference to alcoholism to explain the then current relationship of Denmark and Iceland, and to explain why Danes did not immediately assist Icelanders after the emergency laws were passed. He describes Denmark as the ‘sensible brother’ who says to the other: “You have to stop drinking before I give you any money.” The analogue to kinship provides a sense of closeness, while evoking a power relationship between the parties involved.

Kevin, the Danish banker, also used the analogue of two brothers when referring to the relationship between Danes and Icelanders. When asked if it mattered that the purchasers of these Danish companies were Icelanders and not, for example, from the Netherlands, he laughed good naturedly.

I think yes, because Iceland in particular, there are only 300,000 of them. How can they buy all these things from us? What seemed to be good companies? It was big and little; big and little brother. How can the little brother just come and take my girlfriend?

While the first part of Kevin’s reply focuses on the somewhat legitimate concern with the extent of Iceland’s rapid economic expansion, his comment also reflects this notion that it was the generic ‘Icelanders’ who were buying up these companies. It is also worth noting that Kevin also framed the relationship of the ‘brothers’ as one of betrayal. What this possibly hints at that the sense of a post-colonial relationship between Denmark and Iceland was also shared by the Danes themselves, some experiencing as the Icelanders interviewed that Iceland – their former colony – was in some sense surpassing them.

Criticism of the expansion

Iceland’s economic miracle became an object of concern internationally after doubts about the boom’s sustainability were raised in several critical reports issued by foreign analysts. When that happened, the power of the media and the strong mobilization around the economic expansion as a joint project of all Icelanders became quite clear. Critical reports were published in March 2006 by Danish bank Danske Bank and by investment bank Merrill Lynch in the USA. Fitch Ratings had also published critical evaluations during the same year. Furthermore, in 2005 the Norwegian oil fund had started betting that some Icelandic banks’ stocks would fall. These warnings did not raise serious concern in Iceland, where the focus was directed more at the ill feeling toward Iceland purportedly reflected in these reports.

One report in particular was singled out for criticism. In 2006, Danske Bank released a report that was harsher in tone than previously voiced concerns

(Sigurjónsson, Schwartzkopf and Arnardóttir 2011). It claimed, for example, that Iceland looked “worse on almost all measures than Thailand did before its crisis in 1997” (quoted in Sigurjónsson, Schwartzkopf and Arnardóttir 2011, 165). This provoked a blunt response from Iceland’s then Minister of Foreign Affairs, who said there was something “unnatural about the criticism that the Danske Bank issued.” She claimed it had something to do with “the Danes’ self-image vis-à-vis Iceland beginning to develop some cracks” after “Icelanders started to invest greatly in Denmark” (Kristjánsson 2006).⁴

An editorial of *Markaðurinn* in November 2006 reflects such views more candidly, as is reflected in its headline: “The Danes Are in the Mood for Battle and No Mercy to Be Expected from That Quarter: [We] Have to Combat the Lies Ourselves” (Helgason 2006, 12). The ‘lies’ to which the piece refers are the criticisms of the Icelandic economic miracle.

Newspaper editors continued the defense with statements about Icelandic business being under Danish attack – not just an attack, but a Danish one, specifying that the concern and criticism was due to jealousy, prejudice and meanness (Helgason 2006, 12). The CEO of VSB investment bank reacted to the Danish Bank report with a brief allegory in *Viðskiptablaðið*. In school, he explains, there are always ‘nerds’ whom no one noticed but when they arrived back at school after the summer vacation they came back as ‘young and handsome men.’ The others in the school that had presumably previously ridiculed them, would then try to identify any fault possible with them. The CEO states: “The Danish discussion reminds me of this. We were under the Danes and they looked on us as their property”⁵ (Jóhannesson 2006, 13). His words echo so many other comments that I have both heard and read, the concern that we saw in the Colonial Exhibition in 1905 of Iceland as a colony, but also the aspirations that we have seen in regard to the Parliamentary Festival of 1930 to rise above this conceptualization and show the ‘foreigner’ a nation that is well able to modernize in the same way as the more powerful European countries.

These diverse discourses indicate how colonialism is conceptualized differently according to the context: Colonialism is positive when used to contextualize the acquisition of businesses outside Iceland by Icelandic banks and individuals, but is then evoked as something different when used to explain the economic boom as resting to some extent on Iceland’s past relationship with Denmark as colony and colonizer.

Eventually, the Icelandic Chamber of Commerce issued a report to counteract the international effects of the negative reports of the Icelandic economy. When introducing this report in Denmark to banks, embassies and journalists, the Icelandic authors of the report were asked humorously by one of the audience if it was now the time for Icelanders to stop buying Danish companies and to start to ‘buy Greenland’ instead. One of the authors of the report, replied that if the Danes wanted to sell, then that would be considered (Ólafsdóttir 2006). Interestingly, the text of the news story does not say if the Danes wanted to sell ‘companies in Greenland’ but refers to Greenland itself as an object to be owned and sold. As such, this phrasing strengthens the links between business acquisitions

and colonialism as earlier discussed, in addition to engaging with complexities of the past relationship between Denmark, Iceland and Greenland, where those who were colonized are now able to become colonizers themselves. Iceland again appears as the trickster, as halfway between these polar terms, as ambiguous, as it is momentarily able to reinvent itself as the colonizers.

I frequently walk or bike in downtown Copenhagen when I visit Danish archives to collect material on Iceland's colonial past. It is difficult not to wonder how this environment, buildings, parks and streets, must have appeared in the eyes of the Icelanders who studied in Copenhagen at the turn of the 20th century. I pass by one of the pubs frequently visited by some of the most beloved Icelandic nationalistic poets, Hviids Vinstue, located next to Kongens Nytorv Square. The Icelandic poet Grímur Thomsen, born in 1820, was probably on several occasions a customer at Hviids Vinstue – and as demonstrated by literature scholar Kristján Jóhann Jónsson (2014) in his writing on Grímur's life story – Icelanders in Copenhagen were at that time seen as apart from the Danes. Grímur, as Jónsson (2014) shows, spent extensive periods of his life in Denmark but was still never fully accepted as one of them. Even when receiving a position in the Danish Foreign Ministry, Grímur was referred to as 'the *Icelander* Thomsen' rather than by his title (p. 97).

When I look at the pub and other buildings in this land to which I don't feel I belong in any sense, I think about its being strange that lot of Iceland's history has taken place in this city and in this particular pub. It is perhaps one of the ironies of history that on the same square as Hviids Vinstue is located, where Icelandic poets wrote and probably talked passionately about their desire to rise above their status as Danish subjects, stands the beautiful Hotel L'Angleterre: one of the establishments bought and owned by 'the Icelanders' during the boom years. Close by are the Illum department store and the enormous Magasin du Nord, that were also owned by Icelandic Business Vikings at the time.

On another occasion, when walking across the same square with my husband, I glance at the Hotel L'Angleterre and ask without thinking: "Is it not strange that Icelanders were able to buy this?" I am almost still voicing the words when I hear how silly and embarrassing the question is. After having been critically analyzing nationalistic sentiment and the wide mobilization in support of the economic boom, I use the word 'Icelanders' in a general sense as if referring to the Icelandic buyers of the hotel.

Still, the question is not that strange when placed within a particular national Icelandic perspective. Such is the smallness 'we' have internalized, the sense of 'one-ness,' the sense that every Icelander is someone just like us. Thus, just as it would be strange if we ourselves had been able to buy these historical properties, it must be strange that any Icelander – anyone who is like us – could buy it.

When walking in downtown Copenhagen, one is not only reminded of Iceland's and Denmark's historical relationship, but about Denmark's history as a vast colonial empire (Jensen 2012). The imperial architecture of downtown Copenhagen

astonishes me in fact each time I visit this city. These elaborate buildings and monuments give a sense of history; a sense of belonging within this history. These tangible monuments of glory were created from colonial wealth, which now centuries later form a part of people's everyday surroundings even though they don't necessarily think about it consciously in that way. The Tivoli gardens with its architecture engages directly with colonial imaginary, as well as being the site where countless people were exhibited for the amusement and curiosity of others. There little Alberta sat in her cage, dehumanized like countless people from various European colonies. Today, Tivoli is the place of fun for children and adults alike, with this connection silenced, while it reminds of Denmark's glorious history and affluence.

In Iceland, in contrast, there are no large monuments of a shared past in the buildings or parks that go very far back in time. Everything feels small and recent. And I ask myself critically, who wouldn't want to be a part of such grand global history such as the one in which Denmark shares? The glory and power that such belonging demonstrates in a time when the only things that remain visually are beautiful architecture and monuments, while the sufferings of imperial rule and ruinification, in Stoler's sense (2008), are kept well at bay? This Icelandic desire to buy and gain ownership over pieces of Danish history during the boom years – can we not conceptualize it as not only a postcolonial move of getting 'back' at the former colonizers, but also of becoming *almost* as a part of that history?

Notes

- 1 In Icelandic: “Viðskiptaráð leggur til að Ísland hætti að bera sig saman við Norðurlöndin enda stöndum við þeim framur á flestum sviðum.”
- 2 As Dzenovska (2013) explains this takes place through Latvians making a link between Latvian national history and 17th-century colonial involvement by Duchy of Courland.
- 3 In Icelandic: “á sínum tíma virtust kaupin á dönskum krúndjásnum einkum Magasin du Nord fara nokkuð í taugarnar á dönskum fjölmiðlum og ekki skánaði afstaða þeirra þegar landinn boðaði innrás í þeirra vígi með tilkomu Nyhedsavisen.”
- 4 In Icelandic: “sjálfsmýnd Dana gagnvart Íslendingum farin að rispast.”
- 5 In Icelandic: “umfjöllun Dana minnir mig á slíkt. Við vorum undir Dönum og þeir litu á okkur sem eign sína.”



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Part II

After the crash

In the 1970s and 1980s, when I was still a child, I often heard people talk about how unfortunate it was that a visitor's first impression of Iceland was often the strange, barren landscape on the road between the international airport and Reykjavík. Most of the way, there is nothing, except the sea on one side and a desolated lava field on the other, stretching out into what seems to go for ever. As I heard then, visitors must feel like they have landed on the moon.

Seven years after the crash, in 2015, I fly back home with Icelandair, and see an advertisement in an *Icelandair* magazine for a watch that is entitled "Arctic Iceland." I have no interest in watches, but the ad itself captures my attention. It shows a man in a spacesuit, who seems to be walking down this road from the airport. Iceland appears as an exotic place; a place that is as remote as the moon. The advertisement seems to suggest that Iceland is an unexplored territory waiting to be 'discovered' by the tourists, mirroring so many of the colonial European narratives of masculine explorations in the past. The man's spacesuit is probably intended to draw attention to the durability of the watch in difficult and alien environments. The name of the watch – "Arctic Iceland" – clearly seeks to situate Iceland with increased interest in the exotic Arctic as one of the world's last frontiers.

As I study this insignificant advertisement, my mind goes back to the crash, to the feeling back then. What happened to the resistance to Iceland's positioning as the 'Other,' that resistance that the Manic Millennium years seemed to capitalize on? The watch ad reflects a changed imagination of the 'exotic,' where, as we will see toward the end of this part of the book, the 'exotic' has been commercially appropriated by advertising agencies. As we will also see, the story will take us back to where we started: to Iceland's positioning as a place of exotic people living in wild hostile nature.

When Iceland attempted to rise from the ashes after the crash, it was discovered that the association with the lunar landscape had, in current commercialization of the exotic, become positive and desirable. But, first I will talk about what seemed then to be 'the end' itself.



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7 The fall from the top of the world

The economic crash in 2008

Dear Icelanders. I realize that this is a great shock that creates both anxiety and fear for all of us. Under such circumstances, it is crucial that the government, companies, organizations, and parents, and others try as hard as possible not to let daily life be disrupted. If there was ever a need for the Icelandic nation to stand together and show serenity in the face of difficulties, then that moment has arrived. I encourage you all to guard what is most important in each person's life, to guard those values that can withstand the horrible storm that is now taking place. I encourage families to talk together and not to let desperation take over, even though the future looks bleak to many. We need to explain to our children that the world is not ending, and we need, ourselves, each one of us, to find courage within to look at the road ahead¹

(Iceland's prime minister's speech on October 6th, 2008).

In this October 6th, 2008 speech, Iceland's Prime Minister, Geir Haarde, announced on national television the implementation of emergency laws. This implementation underscored the seriousness of the economic crisis, as the laws allowed Iceland's government to liquidate the three major commercial banks – notably, banks that had been privatized only five years earlier (Sigurjónsson and Mixa 2011). Things had happened so fast, as Guðný stated in her interview with me when talking about the rise of the banks. The bankruptcy of Iceland happened even faster. The prime minister's speech stressed serenity, family, national unity and the importance of holding on to hope for the future. This themes in this speech would alone have told anyone that here was a good reason to be concerned.

The day after this speech, October 7th, 2008, I flew to Copenhagen to participate in the Nordic Africa Days Conference held by the Nordic Africa Institute. The week before, I had been uncertain if I should go due to a recent personal tragedy in the family and because everything seemed to be upside down. I had pockets full of money, because it was uncertain – as the bank employee, my husband, pointed out – whether Icelandic credit cards would now be accepted abroad. My mind was not on the conference because it was difficult to believe that this was happening.

The summer before, I was on sabbatical in Copenhagen for a couple of months, accompanied by my children and Erla, my niece, who was there to help with the kids. My husband stayed only part of the time with me, using his summer holidays

from his bank. In Copenhagen, everything had been cheap due to the Icelandic króna's strong position. One day we had a lunch on a sunny day at Café Norden on Strøget, one of Copenhagen's most prestigious and touristic places. My husband – hearing all the Icelandic spoken around us – whispered to me that every other person at the restaurant was Icelandic, obviously not seeing it as a positive sign. Prior to our trip to Copenhagen, he had spent the last months in a state of stress, with customers clamoring for big returns on investments. During the trip to Denmark, his stress intensified even further. On this day, after lunch, as we strolled from Café Norden back to our rented apartment at Nørrebro, we started discussing the big loan we would need to take out in order to finish renovations on our house back in Iceland.

“I know you probably think that I am crazy,” my husband told me, “but I just know that something is going to go wrong. I just know it.” I thought to myself, “Oh, here we go again!” but instead gently said, “Okay, okay,” masking my irritation. “We will postpone that loan and see what happens. We will put the renovation on hold temporarily.”

Even though I managed to smile, I just wanted to scream at him. Surely, he was partly right, but everyone had already bought new cars, bigger houses and seemed to engage in much more extensive consumption than we – even those that had lower salaries. Postponing the loan meant staying in the unfinished, cramped house for even more months when we returned home in mid-September with three little persons running around. We never ended up taking out that big loan. The situation at the beginning of October was actually worse than my husband had imagined. Only later did I think back to this moment and wonder if that discussion on Nørrebrogade in front of *Assistents Cementary* saved us from losing our home.

When I check into the hotel on October 7th, 2008, a big TV screen in the lobby at my conference hotel in downtown Copenhagen lurks over me. For the next few days international news would replay, again and again, selected parts from Geir Haarde's announcement about the emergency laws. At first, it felt strange to see Iceland on international news, because I had never seen it before, at least not like this. Then, after a while, this constant coverage of Iceland's crash echoing in the background of the hotel felt embarrassing.

At the conference itself, the ritualistic performance that characterizes such events was also disrupted by the news of Iceland's meltdown, probably because it constituted the first indicator of a looming global economic crisis. In my mind, I can easily recall several such moments. When chatting with a small group of people at the conference, one woman from Norway pointed at the brand new MacAir computer I had recently received from my university. With a mysterious smile that I had difficulty decoding, she announced to the group: “These Icelanders with all their new fancy equipment – now it is clear where that comes from!” People around us laughed or smiled without saying anything more. I didn't really know what to say. I smiled uneasily, feeling that I should say something clever, but nothing came to my mind.

In spite of my own criticism and scholarship about Iceland's Business Vikings and the economic expansion, I felt a sense of humiliation. Some of the African

scholars at the conference came to me and expressed their sympathy, an act of compassion which was in sharp contrast to the smug comments that I received from some of the Danes. At the end of one of the sessions I attended, a lively discussion started among the Danish participants about the Icelandic crash. People were smiling and laughing, seemingly waiting for my response to their remarks. Some of them even mentioned a mock collection of ‘aid’ for Icelanders that was apparently going on in Copenhagen.

In Iceland, the crash was a social and political collapse extending far beyond the economic realm, creating what sociologist Jón Gunnar Bernburg has referred to as a sense of “collective shared national disaster” (2015a, 74; see also Bernburg 2016a). This chapter explores the shock of the economic crash, based on interviews with bankers and on my own experience, to offer deeper insights into how the collapse was experienced in Iceland. Taking place almost overnight in October 2008, the crash led to the loss of huge amounts of personal savings, unemployment rose from being virtually negligible to 9% and significant cuts were made to all kinds of basic social services. The combined credit losses of the three major Icelandic banks are estimated as the third largest in the finance world’s history (Moody’s 2009), truly making Iceland exceptional, though not in the way that was hoped prior to 2008. The combined credit losses of these three banks were, according to Moody’s estimation, USD 52 billion (Moody’s 2009, 7–8). To contextualize this number, the fall of the Lehman Brothers is the highest default ever in history, with credit losses estimated at USD 120 billion. Enron’s credit losses, widely publicized in the international news were, by comparison, ‘only’ USD 14 billion.

In fact, it was the fall of Lehman Brothers in September 2008, just a month before the Icelandic crash, that led to the freezing of global credit markets and most worldwide lending (Harvey 2010, 2). It was the first tangible sign of the impending global crisis, producing a ripple effect in global finance. Despite this atmosphere of anxiety in Iceland, no one probably imagined that we were about to enter a period of historic economic hardship and a crash so enormous that it would become internationally known.

In the first months after the crash, Iceland became isolated from the rest of the world, to the point of having difficulties in obtaining foreign currency to finance purchases of everyday items. For instance, people such as myself were unable to use their credit cards overseas. These circumstances led to concerns over issues that would have been considered absurd just a few weeks before, such as the food security of the island nation. Many people believed that other Nordic countries or the USA would come to Iceland’s rescue, only to find themselves waiting for months in stasis, not knowing what would happen because the Icelandic government had enormous problems obtaining loans from other European countries.

The realization that Iceland would not be rescued from the crisis by big loans from other European countries consequently led Iceland to seek the assistance of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The Icelandic Parliament established a Special Investigation Commission (SIC) to investigate the fall of the three largest banks. Three years later, in a report by the SIC issued in 2010, the commission

concluded that the collapse of the three largest banks in Iceland was primarily the result of their rapid expansion and size (Flannery 2009, 107; SIC 2010b, 1). The work of the commission also shows that the banks' largest debtors were their largest shareholders and that the banks had invested their funds in shares in themselves (Flannery 2009, 4).

The report also revealed that even when the banking system had clearly become too big relative to the size of the country's economy, key persons in the Icelandic government continued to try to stimulate the growth of the banks and to ensure that the banks' headquarters would remain in Iceland (SIC 2010a, 2). The fall of the banks can be seen as one of the unexpected outcomes of increased neoliberalization of Icelandic society during the previous decade, demonstrating, in line with what has been pointed out by anthropologists, that policies often lead to diverse and unexpected outcomes (Ferguson 1990; Shore and Wright 2011).

After setting the emergency laws, the Icelandic government tried frantically but unsuccessfully to secure loans to save the banks. To make things more complicated, a serious dispute arose in relation to the failed Internet bank, Icesave, a branch of Landsbankinn in Holland and the UK. Earlier, in February 2008, the British media had started raising concerns about the accounts but, aided by the government of Iceland, Landsbankinn was able to lay these concerns to rest (SIC 2010a, 10). The success of Icesave had been enormous: by the end of 2007, the deposits from Icesave funded 20% of the total assets of Landsbankinn (Flannery 2009, 100). While Icesave can be described as one of the early attempts of nation branding in Iceland, its success in the UK and Holland had much to do with customers being offered higher interest rates compared to other similar accounts.

When the crash took place, the British government demanded that the losses of the depositors be compensated by Iceland, as mandated by the European Union deposit guarantee program. In Iceland, however, the cost was considered impossible for the nation of no more than 300,000 to carry, creating lots of anxieties for the future to come. Disputes about Icesave would continue to haunt Iceland's economic recovery, as will be explained in the next chapter, but at this time they made Iceland's position even more precarious because now other countries were even more reluctant to lend Iceland money.

Everyday anxieties for the future were vividly reflected in Icelandic newspapers' speculations about where Iceland could possibly borrow money to rescue them from the situation. In October, the Faroe Islands offered Iceland loans of USD 56 million, which materialized in December 2008, but that was mostly seen as a symbolic gesture of friendship rather than something that could potentially save the country (*Mbl.is* 2008). In October 2008, the Icelandic government announced a pending loan from Russia for the amount of €4 billion – which never materialized (Danielsson and Zoega 2009, 16). In November, Iceland was approved for an assistance package of USD 2.1 billion from the International Monetary Fund. Prior to the economic crisis of 2008, the IMF was struggling to justify its existence (Chorev and Babb 2009), so it probably is not surprising that the organization emphasized later that the “key to Iceland's recovery was an IMF-supported program”²² (International Monetary Fund 2011).

Crisis and imagined global worlds

Even though many people considered the fall of Lehman Brothers in the United States to be the first major warning sign that Iceland was about to become part of a global economic crisis, the speech by the prime minister announcing the crash was for most Icelanders the moment of realization that things had gone terribly wrong. The prime minister's lack of explanation regarding the exact nature of the difficulties contributed to general anxieties and disbelief (Danielsson and Zoega 2009, 16). Most of those working at the banks were, like everyone else in Iceland, caught off guard and struggling to understand what was actually happening (Mixa 2014).

For most people, the defining moment in the speech was not acknowledgment of the difficulties ahead, but Haarde's concluding words: "God bless Iceland." The reference to "God" is probably unprecedented in political speech in Iceland. As a man working in one of the failed banks told me, "Things sounded bad when he was speaking, but when he said these words, I knew that things were going to hell." Natalia explained to me that everything stopped when the speech was shown live on TV in her department at the bank. People stared at the screen, and some started to cry. There was a sense of complete paralysis. In another bank, I was told, someone put on a tune from the soundtrack of *Titanic* after Haarde's speech, expressing with irony and dark humor the general sentiment that this was the end. Another banker told me that he was on his way to an interview for a better job at another bank when the prime minister's speech was aired. He smiled somewhat ironically when he recalled,

I was just driving there when the radio program is interrupted and it is announced that the government would take over Íslandsbanki and there is a speech about the banks being nationalized and so on. And yes, then he [the radio guy] played the song "Highway to Hell."

He added, referring to his job interview, "Then, that was just over."

These voices express powerfully how the economic crisis in Iceland signaled not only sense of loss but also a forceful break between the past and the future. This rupture was expressed in the phrases describing the aftermath of the cash: things "were over" or "going to hell." This sense of disjuncture was simultaneously accompanied by a moment of clarity, especially when contextualized with Ragnheiður's observation that she did not understand at the time of the boom how things really worked. For many, the moment in front of the TV screen watching Haarde's speech was the moment of realization that things did, in fact, not really work at all.

A recent play, *God Bless Iceland (Guð blessi Ísland)*,³ which uses the last sentence of Haarde's speech as its title, captures in a powerful way that common sense of complete collapse referred to by those I interviewed. We hear at the end of the play Haarde's full speech, with his televised image projected on the set itself, filling it so the actors look small as they stand underneath the image. The

projected image of Haarde's lower body, composed of red tie, white shirt and dark-blue jacket stretches out to the set's floor so it seems to formulate the center stripe of the Icelandic national flag. Before the curtain falls, the actors stand naked on the stage facing the audience; they stand in a small group as if to take support from each other and shield their private parts with their hands. The visual image of the Icelandic flag and the naked, vulnerable bodies standing exposed on the stage captures almost painfully the sense of nothing being left and of Icelanders being exposed not only to the world, but also to all its evils.

And it may not be far from the truth. As the 'global' has become a part of most people's imagined worlds, it also has become a realm that is engaged with and acted on as if it was a 'real' thing (Moore 2004, 74). Focusing on these temporal dimensions draws attention to how global involvements looked radically different when reflected upon through the prism of crisis. That is, crisis shifts how individuals imagine the global and their own role within it. Furthermore, imagination creates material actions and conditions where names can be turned into things, as phrased long ago by Eric Wolf (1984), and as things they can be mobilized and acted on with direct consequences for livelihoods and subjectivities. The imagination of a few successful investors as new types of Icelander fitted for the global neoliberal economy, turned the name 'Business Viking' into an object to be celebrated and acted on through even more reckless financial behavior, that animated action and support; the labeling of post-crash Iceland as "crisis" created also solidified sense of particular object that had to be acted upon through specific set of laws and actions, but also through speculations of what kind of Icelandic subject was possible and desirable in this thing called crisis (see Figure 7.1).

These insights on imagination in the current global landscape point toward the need to see crisis as involving a particular way of imagining and engaging with the future. Bauman and Bordoni's (2014) recent conversation demonstrates clearly how the impending sense of crisis that is experienced relates not only to economic crisis (see also Jensen and Loftsdóttir 2014), but also signals more broadly the loss of a particular envisioning of the future. The crisis and the loss of future is intensified by increased sense of precariousness for many people (Muehlebach 2013), with current neoliberal systems eroding within different countries the sense of security and safety due to gradual diminishing of people's rights as citizens and laborers (Sassen 2014).

While the economic crisis in Iceland was articulated in specific ways as a unique event, it thus has to be positioned as embedded in and entangled with wider senses of crisis characterizing the new millennium. The Icelandic economic crisis can be seen as just one more crisis that intensifies further the collapse of modernity – of predictable futures of continued improvements and process – as a conceptual model. Thomas Hylland Eriksen uses the metaphor of "overheating" (2016) to capture this sense of the world out of control, where 'progress' comes to be increasingly seen as a double-edged sword in the sense of creating problems as well as solutions.

As became apparent for many in Iceland, the world did not seem to march steadily ahead toward a new modern future as those present at the *Alþingishátíðin*



Figure 7.1 The large building cranes were in many ways symbolic of the Manic Millennium years. They stood motionless for years after the economic crash

Source: Photo by Kristín Loftsdóttir

festival in 1930 (Chapter 3) probably envisioned. Instead, feelings of precariousness seemed to prevail where there had been optimism in the past. For many it would also awake the anxieties about Iceland's position in the hierarchies of nations, and even fear of Iceland again falling under 'foreign' rule.

The disappointment

Natalía has long, dark hair, and smiles kindly when she meets me at the restaurant where we've agreed to meet. She is in her mid-thirties and started working in the bank in 2006, only two years prior to the crash. Natalía had suggested that we go to a restaurant in downtown Reykjavík where the Business Vikings used "to hang out," as she phrases it. The restaurant was also a popular place for many bank employees to have lunch and informal meetings. Natalía explains humorously that the setting is very fitting for the subject of my interview with her. The selection becomes somehow even more appropriate when I realize the restaurant is almost completely empty; it is almost as though we are entering ruins of something that once buzzed with life.

The interview takes longer than I'd anticipated because, as so often before in my interviews with bank employees, I have difficulties pulling away from the conversation. The pain of this period is readily evident in Natalía's experiences

and vividly shows how the crash was a seminal event in her life. It's also clear that her experiences are not so different from those experienced by me and by others without a work-related connection to the bank industry.

We begin by talking about things relating to the bank and the crash, but slip again and again back to the pain associated with the crash. At one point, Natalía leans back and tells me,

There was probably a week where I was just looking at, you know, the bottom of the shame. I was worried that the pension funds would go, and the state, and you know that I would just watch this go down the drain. I mean there were moments where one was really, really pessimistic.

Her words reflect the intense and widespread concern among Icelanders at the time of the crash that the whole society would simply collapse, with unpredictable consequences. "There were probably one or two weeks where I was really deep down," she continues. "I remember this sense of feeling like, shit, everything is going to hell." Natalía explains that at that time people feared there would be shortages of common goods; and that during this time, when things were at their worst, people just "visualized total wreckage" (*skipbrot*). She is silent for a moment and then repeats distantly, "Total." Natalía's choice of word "*skipbrot*" is not coincidental. The word literally means a ship that crashes on the coast, and has an added layer of complexity due to the fact that Icelandic society is often referred to in popular speech as a boat.

I nod and tell Natalía that I remember this time well myself. "It was really painful," she says, "but it did perhaps not last for such a long time. But this was such a terrible winter, right?" Again, I nod and cannot agree with her more. That period, especially between Geir Haarde's speech and the loan of the IMF, had in fact not been such a long time, but it seemed to last for hundreds of years – years of waiting and waiting and not knowing what would happen.

"Perhaps it is just after the crash," Natalía continues, "you know after the crash you just wake up in a different place and you don't understand, all the old values are just gone." She adds that, at the same time, it became apparent that Icelandic society was corrupted:

One still did not realize that maggots had eaten it up. You know the interiors were rotten. And there are many people that I have talked to, like my friends at other banks, that were not just crying about the money. Trust was gone. . . . The issue was this breakdown of trust.

She continues, "And then people realized that there had been no ethics respected, I think that this was the greatest shock."

Natalía is silent for a moment and I venture to say, "That the society we lived in did not" and she interrupts me by stating calmly but firmly, "It was not what we thought. It was not what it looked like on the surface."

When we finally end the interview and walk outside, the weather is still beautiful. It is difficult not to feel a growing sense of the kind of hope that was so absent during the “terrible winter,” as Natalia phrased it. She starts to laugh and leans towards me, smiling. “You didn’t notice did you?” I shake my head, not understanding. “Jón Ásgeir. He came in while we were talking. He was sitting right behind you.” She laughs again, “I did not know if I should continue or what. This was just rather funny.”

I cannot help but laugh too, again reminded of what a small place Iceland is. Jón Ásgeir was one of the key Icelandic Business Vikings, perhaps visiting his own personal *skipbrot*.

On my radio, I hear the lyrics:

“This was a terrible year,
Living standard gone,
Reputation – oh dear,
What have you done?
We had an apartment
And a Benz,
Everything made sense Christmas will hopefully come with a rising sun,
A bankrupt nation” (My translation from Icelandic)

The Icelandic band Baggalútu, released this song before Christmas 2008, which, even though as a whole is ironical and funny, captures the pain of the time. I remember sitting in the ice-cold car in front of my children’s kindergarten, listening to this song. It was a December winter afternoon, as dark as it can be in Iceland, and as I was preparing to step out of the car to get the kids, I heard it for the first time. I smiled when I heard the sentence “everything made sense,” because it captured so well the sense of ‘normality’ of what we now understand was a crazy situation before the crash. It was a false sense of normality that had been produced so successfully by politicians, media and the banks.

At the same time, tears came to my eyes and I struggled not to cry. We had not taken that loan, so our financial situation was not as bad as it could have been, but people I knew had lost their jobs. They had taken loans in foreign currency that now had skyrocketed, they had lost their businesses and were on the edge of losing their homes. I did not know if my husband would keep his job and there was no way of knowing what would happen next. But probably, ultimately, it was the sense of a loss of a future that I had thought was self-evident that caused the most sorrow. And even though I had criticized what I thought was a fabricated future, it was painful and draining to be without it.

It is difficult to capture the sense of smallness experienced in Iceland right after the crash and how global processes that had brought Iceland seemingly so much

prosperity prior to the crash now seemed threatening. As phrased by Markús, one of those interviewed, Iceland is like a “street in a big city” meaning that it is so small that it is insignificant to others (see Figure 7.2).

The sense of smallness and vulnerability was intensified by the sense of being abandoned by those who many in Iceland thought would come to their rescue. The bankers I interviewed did not seem to hold views that differed in any way from those I encountered when engaging in informal conversations in my daily life or that I saw expressed in the media. Halldór told me that he had expected more kindness from the other Nordic countries, similar to the generosity shown to Iceland by the Faroe Islands. Still, he added, he found it understandable that they did not help more; after all “we” had “walked all over them in our dirty shoes.”

Halldór was not the only one who used this expression to characterize Iceland’s relationship with the outside world prior to the crash. In my interview with Hjálmar, who has worked for an international organization, he made reference to the relationship between brothers. He explains that during the crash, the Danes were acting like a “sensible parent or, uh . . . brother, [when] the child is a drug addict.” Natalia told me she feels both that the other Nordic countries should have helped us more and that they should not have helped. In explanation, she said, “Had we not behaved like idiots? You know, were we to be trusted?” It was, she said, probably a shock for Icelanders to realize that Denmark was not interested in helping.



Figure 7.2 The streets were ready and the light poles but after the crash happened, the area became as if frozen in time

Source: Photo by Kristín Loftsdóttir

Ragnhildur explained what she saw as a harsh reaction to the economic crash in terms of playground bullying – as the Danes picking on the “smallest child on the playground” behaving like they never would to more powerful countries. She added, “it does not mean that they were not right.” Comic artist Halldór Baldursson wrote on his blog in the beginning of 2009 that

Perhaps we feel, these poor souls here in Iceland, as if the rescue boats have left us and we have to drift in the sea in the hope of a miracle. We always thought that our friends would drag us to the coast. Or what?⁴

(Baldursson 2009)

Regardless, in the time that followed the crash, a series of protest-meetings were held, particularly in front of the Icelandic Parliament, where recognized intellectuals and activists gave speeches criticizing Iceland’s political leadership (Bernburg 2015a). Large numbers of people in Iceland attended these events, and the key demands expressed in the protests and in blogs and newspaper opinion pieces were that the current leaders resign and that democratic reforms be initiated (Ólafsson 2014, 8). While leaders in the government continued to blame the crisis on global forces rather than their own leadership, the demands for their resignation became stronger and stronger (see Figure 7.3).

Eventually, these demands escalated into the so-called pots-and-pans protest, which was modeled on South American demonstrations (Bernburg 2015b, 2016a).



Figure 7.3 Protest in front of the Icelandic Parliament

Source: Photo by Páll Hilmarrsson

The number of people protesting – one-quarter of adults in Reykjavík – vividly demonstrates the anger directed at the government (Bernburg 2015b, 246). As Jón Gunnar Bernburg (2015b) has argued in his analysis of the public mobilization, the crisis had undermined the legitimacy of the government that had been in power for quite some time implementing various neoliberal changes. The loss of legitimacy was also due to the fact that the banks had been allowed to take extreme risks. Also, Bernburg (2015b, 236) claims, the general confusion and collapse of the previously understood social and financial realities also pulled people to the public protests. The corruption in the financial sector was seen as having been made possible by the government's failure to regulate it (Ragnarsdóttir, Bernburg and Ólafsdóttir 2013, 6).

On January 26th, 2009, the entire Icelandic government resigned and a temporary government took over. A new government was then elected in the spring of 2009, consisting of more left-leaning political parties (Social Democratic Alliance and the Left-Green movement). The anger toward those who had been celebrated earlier as the proudest sons of Iceland is probably reflected in the accusation from some that the Icelandic Business Vikings and key bankers were guilty of treason against the country and that they should be prosecuted as such (Jóhannesson 2009).

Some of this anger also filtered out to all of those who worked in the banks, such as those men and women who shared their perspectives with me in interviews, but who had, in fact, only a little more knowledge or understanding of what was happening than the general public. In the first six months after the crash, 20% of people working within the banks, or one in every five, lost his or her job. Research has shown that those who lost their jobs in the banks did not necessarily have a harder time after the crash than those who managed to keep their jobs (Snorraddóttir et al. 2015). Those who kept their jobs experienced intense stress and health-related problems – at levels higher than those who lost their jobs (Snorraddóttir et al. 2015). For those who were unemployed, of course, the survey still shows high levels of anxiety and distress over their financial situation (Snorraddóttir et al. 2014).

Is it true?

In the first European Eurovision song contest after the crash, in fall 2009, a young woman in a blue dress represented Iceland. Her remorseful song was entitled: “Is It True?” Even though the song is a love song having nothing to do with the crash, its title and the main line of the text captured the question that probably everyone in Iceland was asking themselves at the time. The lyrics ask: “Is it true, is it over, have I blown it away?” This resonated with the painful questions Icelanders were asking about whether the crash had actually happened and how everything had gone so terribly wrong.

When the singer, Jóhanna, was selected as Iceland's representative by an open vote a few months before the song contest, I thought back to an article that I wrote

in Icelandic in 2006, when another Eurovision song contestant had been selected. The singer, *Silvía Night* – selected by a national vote for the contest in 2006 – was a satirical fictional character, played by an actor. The fictional character was extremely popular at the time in Iceland, arrogant and glamorous. I suggested in that article that this contribution to the European Eurovision song contest was one embodiment of the economic expansion, which was then in full swing. *Silvía Night* was full of her own greatness – as Icelanders were at that time – and as such, she seemed to portray the image of the nation itself as the new mountain woman, thus engaging with earlier iconic image of the country. When entering the spotlight originally in Iceland, on a satirical television show, the character had an Icelandic name, *Silvía Nótt*. But, just as the banks had changed their names to more accessible versions to non-Icelandic speakers, she refashioned her name before Eurovision into the more international “*Silvía Night*.” Her persona linked national signs, such as the traditional women’s costume, with glamor and pop culture, while also highlighting consumerism and boldness. *Silvía Night* was also an embodiment of the conspicuous consumption and high self-esteem of Iceland at that time. She represented the image of a nation that considered itself mature and thus did not have to take itself seriously, even to the point of making fun of Eurovision, which up to then had been almost holy to Icelanders.

This persona was a parody that people would laugh at, of course, but also one that garnered serious reaction but also defended itself, as indicated by harsh reactions to criticism of the character by both many of its admirers and its creators at this time (Loftsdóttir 2007).

In contrast, for *Jóhanna* – also selected by open vote to represent the nation in Eurovision 2009 – simplicity was the key emphasis; *Jóhanna*’s background was blue, with dreamlike animation. The blue color was probably meant to symbolize purity and innocence, and fit well with the main color of the Icelandic flag, linking the blue sea and mountains, as well as with her youth. Her long, modest dress was blue as well, and her hair was worn long and in a simple style.

I never liked the song, and when I saw her singing on Eurovision this symbolism became even more intense, which made the analytical part of my mind instantly activate. Meanwhile, my two little girls were watching *Jóhanna* with admiration. My analytical perspective still did not manage to push aside the heavy feeling in my heart as I watched the song being performed in front of millions of viewers – as I watched ‘Iceland’ on the international stage in the midst of the financial crisis. As others, I was trying to come to terms with this new reality and felt pain in my heart as I listened to *Jóhanna*’s voice echoing the question my mind had been asking for months: was this all actually true?

It is tempting to place both *Silvía Night* and *Jóhanna* within the framework of the mountain woman as embodiments of Iceland. During the boom years, the character of *Silvía Night* became particularly appealing in Iceland and was selected in a national vote to represent the country to the outside world. *Jóhanna*, however, reflects a humble nation. She became a powerful embodiment of a broken nation, on its knees, asking others for help and sympathy.

Notes

1 In Icelandic (my translation):

Góðir Íslendingar. Mér er ljóst að þetta ástand er mörgum mikið áfall sem veldur okkur öllum bæði ótta og angist. Undir þeim kringumstæðum er afar brýnt að stjórnvöld, fyrirtæki, félagasamtök, foreldrar og aðrir sem geta látið gott af sér leiða, leiti allra leiða til að daglegt líf fari ekki úr skorðum. Ef einhvern tímann hefur verið þörf á því að íslenska þjóðin stæði saman og sýndi æðruleysi andspænis erfiðleikum – þá er sú stund runnin upp. Ég hvet ykkur öll til að standa vörð um það sem mestu máli skiptir í lífi hvers einasta manns, standa vörð um þau lífsgildi sem standast það gjörningaveður sem nú geisar. Ég hvet fjölskyldur til að ræða saman og láta ekki örvæntingu ná yfirhöndinni þótt útlitið sé svart hjá mörgum. Við þurfum að útskýra fyrir börnunum okkar að heimurinn sé ekki á heljarþröm og við þurfum sjálf, hvert og eitt, að finna kjark innra með okkur til að horfa fram á veginn. (Stjórnarráð Íslands 2008)

2 The story also emphasizes very strongly that this progress was made in full cooperation with the Icelandic government.

3 www.borgarleikhus.is/syningar/guð-blessi-%C3%ADsland/

4 In Icelandic: “Kannski líður okkur vesalingum hér á Íslandi eins og björgunarbátarnir hafi yfirgefið okkur og við þurfum að láta reka í von um kraftaverk. Við héldum alltaf að vinir okkar myndu draga okkur að landi. Eða hvað?”

8 Even McDonald's has left us

The hierarchies of nations

The move [of McDonald's from Iceland] will see Iceland, one of the world's wealthiest nations per capita until the collapse of its banking sector last year, join Albania, Armenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in a small band of European countries without a McDonald's.

(Ward 2009)

International interest in Iceland during the economic boom was nothing compared to the attention the crash received. Iceland's economic collapse was a major international media event, with thousands of articles published on it within a span of few days. Iceland appeared as a country that was "bankrupt [and] the first casualty of a growing worldwide crisis . . . humiliated and ruined" (Chartier 2011, 11). Iceland became the newest case of "parachute journalism," where journalists flock for a suddenly interesting story (G. Th. Jóhannesson 2012, 140). Some international media proclaimed that the country's international reputation had been destroyed (Chartier 2011, 14), while others described Iceland as "a potentially bankrupt country with its hand out to other countries for short term financing" (quoted in Chartier 2011, 13; from *Le Monde*, Chartier's translation from French). The visual image generated here is a country on its knees, begging for charity.

When the IMF gave assistance to Iceland in 2009, the occasion became one of many for the international media to compare Iceland to the global south. The *Globe* and *Mail* spoke of Iceland needing to ask for "the sort of bailout more typical of the developing world than of a sophisticated Western economy" (Milner 2008). Iceland's soaring interest rates were described as more likely to be seen "in places like Argentina and Thailand [but] not a country that likes to think of itself as closer to Europe" (quoted in Chartier 2011, 208).

After it became evident that Iceland would receive the loan from IMF, Prime Minister Geir Haarde claimed in his statement in November 2008 that Iceland needed now to overcome the difficulties and to "regain the trust and the *standing* among other nations which we enjoyed before the impact of the global financial crisis struck Iceland" (PM Office 2008; emphasis mine). He furthermore asserted in 2008 that he had, during the negotiations, extracted a promise from the IMF that Iceland would not be treated like a third-world state (S. Gunnarsson 2009, 71;

see discussion in Ingimundarson 2010, 67). Haarde's words not only reflect the fear of being thought of as a third-world country, but also the fear of being treated like one.

As the crisis unfolded in other European countries, countries from Southern Europe were also demonized as failing in some way to be fully European. The classification of these countries into one category with the abbreviation PIGS (Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain), offer an image of greedy and irrational national subjects feeding off other European countries (Tsoukala 2013; Bickes, Otten and Weymann 2014). The abbreviation constitutes yet another reflection of the continued hierarchies of people within European discourses – sometimes conceptualized within the idea of nations, in other cases of the world into civilized or uncivilized, south and north, developed and not developed. Within the context of Europe, the question becomes one of 'better' or 'worse' Europeans, greater or lesser Europeans, and successful or failed European subjects.

The newfound anxieties within Iceland regarding the nation's international position are the subject of this chapter. The pride of the Manic Millennium years, of Icelanders having finally succeeded in proving themselves internationally, was replaced by anxieties about Iceland's future that were entangled with earlier angst that Iceland was not positioned correctly in the world system. It also shows how the eyes of the international media continued to be an object of concern to Icelanders. I also examine the departure of the fast food chain McDonald's one year after the crash in order to reflect on a continued sense of things falling apart in Iceland and of Iceland as being on the periphery of the international community. As the quote at the beginning of the chapter indicates, the case of McDonald's captures how fear of future economic marginalization was entangled with the fear of becoming and being treated as 'the other.' As Björk, one of those I interviewed, explained to me after the crash, many Icelanders felt deeply humiliated, particularly in regard to the other Nordic countries: "We were all of a sudden the most boring chick in the party and no one really was interested in speaking to us."

The United Kingdom's use of its anti-terrorism laws¹ to freeze Landsbankinn's assets in relation to the Internet bank Icesave was not only painful economically, it also struck at the country's deepest insecurities because it essentially placed Iceland on the same 'list' as infamous countries in the global south. To be the most "boring chick in the party" as phrased by Björk, got a whole new meaning within the context of Icesave both economically and symbolically. The prime minister's words in November 2008 captured the feeling of many in an interview with *Time*: "We're still on the list – in the wonderful company of al-Qaeda, the Taliban, Sudan, North Korea, Iran and a number of other entities – where we do not belong" (Moody's 2009).

The Indefense advocacy group was established in Iceland soon after the crash. Its work included collecting information on Iceland's economy and the crash, which was made widely accessible and thus engaged with the wide public mobilization for justice and a more democratic society. These efforts will be mentioned as well in the next chapter. Of relevance here, however, is Indefense's successful activation of Icelandic people under the campaign slogan "I am not a terrorist,"

which protested the UK's use of its anti-terrorism laws when dealing with the Icelandic crisis. The campaign involved a collection of signatures, with 83,000 Icelanders signing to protest the placement of Iceland on this list. The signatures were delivered on March 17th, 2009 to the British Parliament by a woman dressed in the Icelandic national costume, in the company of others from the Indefense group (Vísir 2009a). The feminine body was thus, once again, used to represent the country, with the blue color of her dress echoing the country's national flag, just as the dress worn by Jóhanna, Iceland's Eurovision performer that year. Icelandic people were also encouraged to send in postcards of themselves with the text "Do we look like terrorists, Mr. Brown?" These postcards showed pictures of people in their everyday clothing, smiling, with their children, toys or stuffed animals. A professional photographer invited people to come to his studio and to bring with them their "terrorist weapons." The photos were then exhibited in an Icelandic shopping mall (Smáralind) for two weeks at the end of October 2009. These pictures of people holding 'weapons' derived from recreational activities like horseback riding, football or throwing snowballs were intended to draw attention to how ridiculous it was to place Iceland on such a list, but the campaign also emphasized its economically harmful consequences.

In an interview with BBC News at the end of October 2008, a spokesperson for the campaign asked whether the British did not "realize the economic impact on ordinary people of using this legislation?" Furthermore, to stress the direct consequences on Icelandic businesses as a result of this act, he states, "You are labeling a whole nation and actually what has happened is that other companies, such as in the US, are reluctant to do business with Iceland." He elaborates by projecting what the companies in other countries would say: "'Even though we know you are not terrorists, you are on this list so we can't take the risk'" (BBC News 2008). A similar sentiment was brought up by Þórhildur in one of my interviews with people from the banking community. She talked about being "branded as a terrorist."

We see how the photo exhibition involved a particular spectacle where 'the Icelander' was put on display. We can wonder for whom the display served and how; did it serve the international community that it addressed or those seeing themselves as Icelandic?

Even though this does not appear to have been a conscious intention, the Indefense group's campaign can be understood as engaging with wider European discourses of terrorism that became particularly racialized following the 2001 terrorist attacks in the US. The campaign gained much of its power from the alterity of the Muslim terrorist in the imagination of the global north. The postcards displayed light-skinned people in fashionable clothing, often with various consumer items. This meant that the campaign asked the question, "What could be more ridiculous than equating Icelanders with terrorists?" while, at the same time, carrying the assumption that someone visually different from the Icelanders depicted in these photos could well be a terrorist. We can thus read the photos against a background of non-white bodies, with non-Western (read: not modern) clothing, and from an alien world. In my mind, I visualize photos from my friends in Niger

and how Niger could never embark on such a campaign. The bodies of my male friends, with dark skin, turbans and gowns would in priori mark them as the body of terrorists.

One of the key characteristics of racism in regard to whiteness is that it tends to be invisible to those who benefit from it, while painfully visible to those who do not. The listing of some countries as areas of terrorist activities directly associates certain bodies, certain clothing and religions to spaces of terror and thus with an absence of humanity, even if those creating those categories don't see it as racist. Iceland has, as the other Nordic countries, made this claim toward innocence in different contexts, which involves refuting acknowledging racism (see Loftsdóttir 2017). Applying the anti-terrorism act to Iceland initiated, as we see in the quotes above, fears that some of the nasty associations with non-modernity would rub off on Icelanders. In a sense, the spokesperson for Indefense made this point in the interview with the BBC when he stated that listing Iceland in this way would categorize its population in a way that affects their life negatively, without seeming to critically reflect on the fact that this was also a concern for the other countries on the list. Iceland's ambiguous positioning gives it the position of the trickster that can shift between different positions.

McDonald's

It is October 2009, almost a year after the crash. Once again Iceland is all over the international news for all the wrong reasons: McDonald's is closing down. McDonald's had been present in the country from the beginning of Iceland's neo-liberalization, so perhaps it was only appropriate that it would also symbolically participate in the end. The media exposure of the chain's closing started with the owner of the restaurant proclaiming that he had to close down because the devaluation of the Icelandic currency, króna, made it impossible to continue with the business. The raw materials, he said, were bought from Germany and thus he needed to shut down – but he intended to open another hamburger restaurant where only Icelandic products would be used. The owner, Jón Ögmundsson, commented in an interview with the foreign media that, “For a kilo of onions, imported from Germany, I'm paying the equivalent of a bottle of good whiskey” (Batty 2009).

The international media avidly took up the claims that the restaurant had to close down because the raw materials were imported, with many seizing upon Ögmundsson's association between the prices of onions and whiskey. The managing director also proclaimed that another chain would open under the name Metro, where he would be offering almost the same products at the same locations that had formerly housed McDonald's.

There are many things that don't add up in this story. One of the most obvious is that whiskey was imported to Iceland just as onions were, and thus should have remained much more expensive than onions when considering its price had multiplied at a rate equal to the onions. Also, looking through older reports on the restaurant's opening, it was evident that not all ingredients were imported from the

beginning – if they ever were. The newspaper *Morgunblaðið* tells about a press meeting with the director of the restaurant in 1993, where the director emphasizes the quality of the products as following “McDonald’s strong standard on cleanness and freshness”² (Bjarni 1993). Under the subheading “Icelandic Ingredients” (*Íslenskt hráefni*) the article elaborates on where each of the raw materials comes from, stating clearly from which company. When the company is outside Reykjavík the reader is even told from where: The meat from Kjötbankinn in Hafnarfjörður, the chicken from Reykjagarður, in Rangárvallasýsla, the soda from Vífilfell and so on.³ The new restaurant chain Metro, despite using local ingredients, was sold in 2010 and the owner of Lyst ehf, the holding company responsible for the Metro chain, declared bankruptcy the same year (*Viðskiptablaðið* 2013). If mismanagement was the actual reason for McDonald’s to close down the restaurant chain, it was obviously considered wiser to blame the closure on the crash.

Long lines of people wanting to use their last opportunity to get a McDonald’s hamburger formed in front of the restaurant, stimulating intense media interest both in Iceland and abroad. According to Icelandic news reports, it was estimated that between 10,000 and 15,000 people went to the three McDonald’s in Iceland each day during the week in-between the announcement of the closing and until it actually closed. This probably constituted a little less than 100,000 people in total, which was then almost a third of the Icelandic population (*Vísir* 2009b). The *Wall Street Journal* spoke of the “Big Mac’s departure” as a “suggestive economic indicator” (*Wall Street Journal* 2009); as phrased by *Forbes*, the closing is an “illustration of how far Iceland still has to go before it truly hauls itself out of the economic abyss” (Olson 2009). Some of the headlines, such as “McDonald’s Abandons Iceland” (Sinico 2009), “McDonald’s Ditches Iceland” (Olson 2009) and “Iceland Is So Messed Up McDonald’s Is Giving Up and Going Home” (Marco 2009), indicate that Iceland had been rejected in some sense. Others portrayed McDonald’s as one of the “casualties of financial crisis” (*Los Angeles Times* 2009).

In some cases, journalists focused on Iceland’s remote location as part of the problem. These final words in one piece exemplified this by remarking on the “complexity of doing business in an island nation of just 300,000 people on the edge of the Arctic Circle” (Sinico 2009). Here, the “edge of the Arctic Circle” becomes a marker for something exciting and remote. *The Financial Times* emphasizes Iceland’s remoteness by positioning it at the margins of the global landscape:

Iceland edged further towards the margins of the global economy on Monday when McDonald’s announced the closure of its three restaurants in the crisis-hit country and said that it had no plans to return.

(Ward 2009)

The closing of McDonald’s is also discussed humorously. Playing off a famous quote from Thomas Friedman that no two countries that both had a McDonald’s had ever been at war with each other, one commentator stated that Icelanders do not necessarily have to be afraid that “they will soon find themselves in the

midst of armed conflict. Besides, I think that there are faeries that protect them, or something” (Linkins 2010). Here the last sentence capitalizes on the exoticization of Iceland as both interesting in its peculiarity and in the perception that it is also premodern and traditional.

Several international media reports used McDonald’s closure as an opportunity to speculate about Iceland’s status internationally through association with non-Western countries. *Daily News* and *Economic Review* pointed out that the closing “means Iceland will be one of the few Western countries without a presence of the ubiquitous eatery” (*Daily News* 2009). This association with non-Western countries was also indirectly hinted at in *Mail Online*, when it was pointed out that it was not the first time that McDonald’s had “exited a country,” citing departure from Barbados in 1996 and Bolivia in 2002 (*Mail Foreign Service* 2009). Similar sentiments were to be found in the statement from National Public Radio announcer Guy Raz that “Iceland now joins Bosnia, Albania and the Vatican as one of the few places in Europe without McDonald’s” (Raz 2009).

International coverage on the closing was keenly felt in Iceland, as seen in a headline in the Internet version of the newspaper *DV* on October 26th, 2009, “Closing of McDonald’s Stimulates World Interest” (*DV* 2009). Another Icelandic newspaper even remarked that the event had received almost as much media attention as both the collapse of the Icelandic government in the beginning of the year and the Icesave dispute (*Vísir* 2009b). In Iceland, there was a great deal of discussion about the closing in media reports, blogs and everyday conversations. Many people were like me – somewhat surprised that the ingredients had been imported from Germany, and engaged in disputes as to whether it was a good or bad thing that there was no more McDonald’s, whether the restaurant was a sign of American imperialism, listening to debates about the quality of the food that had been served there and speculating on what the closure indicated about how expensive food items were in Iceland. Often, I noticed, the importance of buying Icelandic products was most emphasized. What I see as relevant here is the sense of abjection and the association with the non-West that was occasionally portrayed throughout this situation. Some of the blogs captured the sense of Iceland’s marginalization. Much of that anxiety centered on the idea that the country was somehow going back in time:

But what does it mean that McDonald’s is leaving the country? Does it mean that we have been sent 15 years back in time? That we are a margin that is not worth hosting this famous chain? That we are really becoming more isolated from the rest of the world⁴

(Gunnarsson 2009)

But besides people’s opinion on the quality of McDonald’s meals, hamburgers or salads . . . it is the first step to a journey back to the past. Spring water and *slátur* (blood-pudding) will probably be what lays ahead, homespun cloth instead of visa [cards].⁵

(Velvakandi 2009)

This fear of going back in time – sinking back into pre-modernity – is linked to the emphasis on modernization discussed in the first part of the book, as well as its focus on linear time. At the same time, it is also directly related to being cast out from the international community. Here the reference to the past does not symbolize links to past crises, as was the case in Knight's (2013) analysis of the situation in Greece, which is discussed in the next chapter. Instead, reference to the past symbolizes the destructive power of the crisis, indicating regression and a return to a lesser-developed state. Moving back in time can thus be read as an emblem of Iceland's wider situation and its anxieties of belonging. Such comments can be linked with those of others who see the closing of the chain as symbolic of Iceland's precarious state in general – and in a very negative sense – thus reflecting how the discussion and the disappointment about the closing does not have very much to do with Icelanders' ability to buy a McDonald's burger.

There are not many nations who cannot or do not trust themselves to run a hamburger joint, but Iceland is one of those. A nation that cannot run a McDonalds can hardly run a bank!⁶

(blog comment, Andri 2009)

This is even more forcefully stated in another blog comment, in which the phrase “copies of different qualities” is probably a reference to the new restaurant Metro:

From now on we have to be satisfied with copies of different qualities. A feeling of rejection. Iceland is on the edge of falling out of the International community.⁷

(Hrafn 2009)

Also, as can be seen in discussions about the banks and Iceland's bankruptcy, the concepts ‘we,’ ‘nation’ and ‘Iceland’ are used in a way that captures the closing as concerning not only the failure of the owner or managers of McDonald's in Iceland but as something which tells a wider story about Icelanders. As with the crash of the banks, the closing of a particular restaurant reflects thus on the national character of a collective ‘us,’ the Icelandic people. Within the blogosphere and in my interviews, the collective ‘we’ is used to capture the experience of the closing – the closing affects ‘us.’ ‘We’ are sent back in time and ‘we’ have to be satisfied with different qualities of copies.

One person commenting on a foreign new story about Iceland specifies that he is not Icelandic, but that he finds:

Most foreign media reports on Iceland are patronizing. For example, read the *Vanity Fair* article on the economic collapse. It starts by stating that the writer's friend could not even find Iceland on the map. Because obviously their friend [*sic*] ignorance of world geography reflects poorly upon the value of the nation.

(Njals 2009)

The reader's comment indirectly addresses the continued use of exoticism in portraying Iceland, but also the marginalization of the country as a remote object presented by others in particular ways.

In the fall of 2008, I am going to the 7th Feminist Research Conference in Utrecht. Probably for the first time in my life I feel stressed to be identified as an Icelander. The dispute of Iceland with the UK and Holland due to Icesave is all over the international media and it means something different now to say that I am from Iceland.

I think back to when I was a student in the US in the 1990s. People would generally smile politely upon hearing where I was from and say, without any interest, "Oh, Iceland, how exciting." Even though people had little interest in Iceland, this also meant that being from Iceland was like being a blank sheet of paper. And not just any kind of paper of course, but a 'white' paper – a 'clean' sheet of paper. Being from a 'white' Western European country without a history – at least the kind of history that is unknown to others – gives one a position of innocence in the eyes of others. Being from Iceland thus gave me the sense of not being classified at all, while at the same time being loosely associated with mostly white northern European countries.

Another conference in the UK earlier had opened my eyes to this positioning and how it can work. At that conference, a group of black or non-white activists invited to participate harshly criticized almost every white scholar present at the conference. The exception was me. Quietly, I asked one of the white UK scholars why I had not also been singled out, and he whispered back mildly, but bluntly, "Oh, you come from an obscure country that no one knows anything about."

So it was the interplay of being from a country that was not interesting at the time and which did not carry the stain of having been a powerful perpetrator of colonial history. Despite this, the association with whiteness still allowed me to carry the everyday privileges arising from being categorized as white.

In my presentation in Utrecht, I criticized the reifying nationalistic discourse in Iceland as it manifested itself prior to the crash, but also briefly spoke about its manifestations after.⁸ I used some material that I had presented on previously, before the crash. Everyone in the room seemed to know about Iceland's economic crash and about its ongoing dispute with Holland and UK in regard to Icesave. I did not get the same kind of reaction that I had in Denmark the year before with its somewhat nasty, subtle references. This time, questions were polite and discussions somewhat reserved, as, I believed, people felt sorry for me.

When I was standing there listening to myself analyze the everyday happenings and anxieties in Iceland – while trying to sound confident and secure while I was actually really nervous – something suddenly felt different. Instead of feeling that I was criticizing the pompous exclamations of Iceland's superiority produced by international media and within wider Icelandic discourses as had been omnipresent during the boom, I felt now like I was kicking someone who was already

down. To my own surprise, it felt strange to criticize the discourse taking place on a national level, which now – even though essentially the same – seemed to be something people were relying on as a way of dealing with the crisis. Now, the reified notions of being Icelandic were inspired by sentiments that sought to reassure Icelanders that ‘we’ could – and would – endure the crisis.

Notes

1 As stated earlier, the British government was able to freeze Landsbankinn's assets in London two days after Haarde's speech by invoking the terrorism laws (Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001) that had been set in Britain after the 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001.

2 In Icelandic: “eftir ströngum stöðlum McDonald's um hreinlæti og ferskleika.”

3 The text in Icelandic lists this in the following way:

McDonald's á Íslandi notar eingöngu sérvalið nautgripakjöt frá Kjötbankanum hf. í Hafnarfirði og í það fara engin aukaefni eða krydd. Í fiskréttum er eingöngu íslenskur fiskur frá IFPL, dótturfyrirtæki Sölumiðstöðvar hraðfrystihúsanna í Grimsby, en IFPL framleiðir á annað þúsund tonn af fiskréttum á ári fyrir alla veitingastaði McDonald's á Bretlandseyjum. Kjúklingarnir koma frá Reykjagarði í Rangárvallasýslu. Öll mjólkurvara kemur frá Mjólkursamsöluinni, gosið frá Vífilfelli og grænmetið frá Ágæti. Hamborgarabrauðin og allar umbúðir koma frá Bretlandi vegna þess að viðeigandi tækjakostur er ekki fyrir hendi á Íslandi.

4 In Icelandic:

En hvað þýðir það að McDonald's sé á leið úr landi? Þýðir það að búið sé að senda okkur 15 ár aftur í tímann? Að við séum afkimi sem ekki er þess verður að hýsa þessa frægu keðju? Að við séum í raun að einangrast frá umheiminum?

5 In Icelandic:

En burtséð frá álitni fólks á gæðum McDonald's máltíða, hamborgara eða salatrétta (sem mér þóttu reyndar frábærir), þá er þetta fyrsta skrefið í vegferð aftur til fortíðar. Bergvatn og slátur er trúlega það sem koma skal, vaðmál í stað Visa o.s.frv.

6 In Icelandic: “Það eru ekki margar þjóðir sem ekki geta eða treysta sér að reka McDonald's hamborgarabúllur en Ísland er eitt þeirra. Þjóð sem ekki getur rekið McDonald's getur varla rekið banka!”

7 In Icelandic: “Héðan í frá verðum við að láta okkur nægja misgóðar eftirlíkingar. Höfnunartilfinning. Ísland er á barmi þess að detta úr alþjóðasamfélaginu.”

8 This presentation formed the bases for later published articles such as Loftsdóttir 2010a, 2010b.

9 The iceberg drifting in the sea

Creating a sense of national identity during times of crisis

A powerful comic image by the artist Gunnar Karlsson shows a small piece of ice floating in the open sea. It holds a family of five; the ice is so small that there is barely room for them all. The father, dressed in a suit with his tie loose around his neck, sits with his head bent as if he has lost all hope, while the mother stands, holding a small child in one arm with another two clinging desperately to her. She waves a ribbon with the colors of the Icelandic flag, obviously begging for rescue. It is evident that if they are not rescued soon, the small iceberg will melt completely, leaving them to fall into the dark, deep and cold sea. What the family does not see, however, is a large shark rising directly underneath the ice, ready to swallow them up. The teeth of the shark tell the rest of the story, as they form the letters ICESAVE (see Figure 9.1).

The image of the family on the ice – the embodiment of the Icelandic nation – draws attention to the lingering sense of Iceland's population as a family and of Iceland as having been abandoned by others in time of intense need. The family in the political comic – notably a white, heterosexual one – gives a strong sense of closeness and intimacy, with the mother/wife trying to rescue the family. But the cartoon also indicates the family's impending doom. The image of the strong mother engages with nationalistic post-crisis discourses asserting that women were needed to make things right again in Iceland, which were heard in different places in Iceland at the time. These discourses, which emphasized that women's presumed natural characteristics as mothers and caretakers would be important in leading the country out of the crisis, have roots in the older national conceptions of women discussed earlier (Kristmundsdóttir 1997; Björnsdóttir and Kristmundsdóttir 1995). The teeth of the shark in the comic, however, reflect how the dispute revolving around Icesave was seen as one of the greatest threats to the nation-state in the years following the crisis.

This chapter provides a glimpse into the fashioning of national identity at a time of crisis, where the nation was a particularly meaningful source of identification. The chapter gives, as well, an indication of how the category 'foreigner' became almost a shadow figure, dissolving into the background of the public discourse at the time. Icesave became a particularly salient platform to engage with the ongoing crisis with an already meaningful and pre-existing category (i.e., that of the nation). This worked both to solidify the meaningfulness of national identity at



Figure 9.1 Is no one going to help us? Icesave as shark ready to swallow up the Icelandic nation

Source: Artwork by Gunnar Karlsson

this time of crisis and intense criticism, while at the same time demonstrating that Icelandic national identity was stable land when everything else seemed to have crumbled. Even though the past was critically reevaluated, there was continued reliance on the persistently reified notions of the past that had animated the boom period.

Daniel Knight (2012) refers to “cultural proximity” in his work on the economic crisis in Greece to capture how individuals feel that they can identify with previous crises. Cultural proximity brings events separated in time closer together. This involves an “embodied social memory” that, as Knight (2012, 355) points out, is passed down through generations and which “facilitates collective identification with certain events.” In Iceland, the association with the past was not with specific previous events but with a general and reified sense of an Icelander as a subject capable of enduring. This memory work thus took place through reproductions of an iconic notion of Icelanders themselves as good at persevering through crisis, as the result of earlier generations’ endurance in Iceland’s hostile living conditions. As is indicated by Knight’s (2012) discussion of Greece’s economic crash and social memory, it is too simplistic to see this reified social memory of Icelanders as simply an echo of official or institutional discourses. Rather, it was reproduced both privately and publicly, often through family relations (see Knight on Greece 2012, 355). This memory work is obviously limiting in its portrayal of what constitutes an Icelander, but this embodied social memory highlights the *possibility* of weathering this particular crisis. The meaning derived from the memory work thus differs due to the social context in which it is embedded.

This chapter shows how protest and mobilization around specific events – such as Icesave – involved a strong sense of belonging that was further intensified by emerging positive presentations of Iceland in the international media. Nationalistic discourses were part of creating meaning and coherence in tumultuous circumstances, where the economic crisis seemed simultaneously to have to do with the future of Iceland and its past. The chapter, furthermore, highlights that while the construction of the ‘foreigner’ was an instrumental figure in these social discourses of the crash – as evident in discussions of the terrorist law and closing of McDonald’s – the discourses revolved more around angry discussion about the ‘foreigner’ outside Iceland, while the internal ‘foreigners’ disappeared from view.

Creating the nation in a new Iceland

The abrupt division of time into ‘after the crash’ and ‘before the crash’ was well demonstrated in the collective call for a ‘New Iceland.’ The call carries indirect reference to the great exodus from Iceland in the 19th century to North America and the creation of colonies under the name ‘New Iceland.’ However, while these settlers probably intended to reproduce their society in their new countries, the post-crash ‘New Iceland’ was a call for forceful break with the past.

The voices calling for the transformation of Icelandic society into a ‘New Iceland’ often saw women as the antidote for crisis (as phrased by Chartier 2011),

which signified that the harsh criticism of the economic expansion after the crash also looked critically at the celebration of masculinity during the boom years. Men had caused the crash and women had to fix it. While this focus on women in the post-crash discourses importantly recognized the gendered dimensions of the crash and the need to strive toward equality (Johnson, Einarsdóttir and Pétursdóttir 2013), the discussion of gender still tended to rely on stereotypic gender roles. The dominant metaphor used to argue that the business realm should open up for women was that women needed to ‘clean up’ after the men, and thus relied on a dominant metaphor of women as homemakers.

One of the speakers in the protests in front of the Parliament in 2008 and 2009 exemplifies this popular discourse when she stated in her speech that women “have a key-role in rescuing us from this mess. It will be women who will clean up” (Oddsdóttir 2008). Similarly, a woman working in the financial sector explained in an interview with me that, “women are always needed to clean up after adventures like this.”

Identification of women as intrinsically different and even morally superior to men has had a long history in Iceland (Björnsdóttir 1997). The political party Woman’s Alliance was formed in the early 1980s to give women a stronger political voice. Their feminist discourse often slipped into ideas of women as naturally different from men (Kristmundsdóttir 1997; Björnsdóttir and Kristmundsdóttir 1995). Even though these characterizations of women were originally seen as deriving from an understanding that women’s lived experiences were often different from the experiences of men, they soon became thought of as intrinsic, inherent characteristics. As a result, women were seen as ethically and morally superior to men (Björnsdóttir and Kristmundsdóttir 1995, 174). The image of the mother standing on the iceberg in the comic discussed earlier, for example, engages indirectly with the way that increased political and economic participation of women in a new post-crisis Iceland was seen as part of building a better and more equal society. Here, women appear both as the country and the nation – to refer back to the discussion in the preceding chapters. Women’s bodies are seen as having a particular role in symbolizing the nation, where they are connected with their presumed natural characteristics, such as caring and nurturing. These characteristics coexist, however, with an alternative image of women as harsh and firm disciplinary figures, which engages with the persistent conception of Iceland’s similarly harsh nature as shaping its population through the centuries.

The emphasis on women in post-crash Iceland was also a part of larger, globalized discourses, which in fact often drew from Icelandic attempts to include more women in positions of power. After the crash, women were appointed to key positions in financial sectors in Iceland, such as the new bank director, Birna Einarsdóttir, of Glitnir Bank (which became Íslandsbanki in 2009); the new director at Landsbankinn, Elín Sigfúsdóttir; and a woman on the board of the central bank of Iceland, Lára V. Júlíusdóttir (see discussion in Chartier 2011, 130). Also, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, a left-wing politician, was elected as the prime minister of the new government that took over after the crash.

In international discourses – often drawing examples from Iceland – women were briefly celebrated as the cure for capitalistic crisis (Roberts 2012, 90–91). Referring to this sort of discourse as Transnational Business Feminism, Adrienne Roberts (2012, 88) points out that the narrative seeks “to naturalize and depoliticize capitalist crises as it is presented as both the *cause of* and *way out of* the current crisis.” Feminists’ criticism of the masculinity of the global financial system, as discussed by Roberts (2012), was taken up by media, government officials and corporate interests, but then – as we saw happen in Iceland – it revolved around the need to incorporate women’s intrinsic characteristics, as if women could and should constrain the risky characteristics of men.

Some of the discussion in Iceland can be framed as Transnational Business Feminism in Roberts’s sense, probably best exemplified by marketing material produced by the financial firm Auður Capital, which marketed itself as being based on women’s values while also upholding capitalist values (Loftsdóttir and Björnsdóttir 2018). In Iceland, ideas celebrating women’s essential characteristics were, however, not only used to mask the insecurity of neoliberal practices, but also became a part of radical criticism of the system as a whole, as expressed by the strong protests movements of 2008 and 2009 exemplified above. Also, as critically asked by Johnson, Einarsdóttir and Pétursdóttir (2013, 197), what does women’s increased participation in political and legislative power signify at times of globalization when governments do not have a strong position in making elites accountable when power has moved elsewhere?

Intense ‘moral shocks’ are particularly important in mobilizing new people into protest movements (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001, 16). It is clear for those participating in the January 2009 protests that the sense of a moral collapse and corruption was extremely important (Bernburg 2015b; Ólafsson 2014).

People’s involvement in the protest movement was also shaped by the Icelandic media’s extensive reporting on corruption within the system, which laid out different scandals for the public, and active delivery of news on Iceland’s difficult economic future (Bernburg 2015a, 74). Janet Elisa Johnson’s, Þorgerður Einarsdóttir’s and Gyða Pétursdóttir’s (2013) analysis indicates that the protests did not only revolve around specific bad acts, which global measurements of corruption usually focus on and which characterize the perspective of Transnational Business Feminism, but also on immorality that was seen as systematic and which ultimately constituted a threat to society as a whole.

In particular, Johnson, Einarsdóttir and Pétursdóttir (2013, 185) discuss Transparency International’s ranking of Iceland as one of the least corrupted countries in the world from 2001 to 2006. Transparency International based its rankings on definitions of corruption developed by global institutions, such as the World Bank, and centered mainly on “individual misdeeds.” Such approaches to corruption Johnson, Einarsdóttir and Pétursdóttir (2013) show, do not capture the various forms of corruption that become significant during an era of rapid liberalization, such as “organized extortion by officials or the looting institutionalized into some privatization schemes” (Johnson, Einarsdóttir and Pétursdóttir 2013, 185).

This sense of radically reevaluating Iceland as a whole was also manifested in discussions in different public institutions, such as museums (for example, Grenier and Hafsteinsson 2016) and universities (for example, Jónasson 2011), where these institutions reflected critically on their role in creating the boom atmosphere. Icelandic literature also interacted intensively with the economic crash, often playfully using Iceland's medieval traditions to critically engage with corruption and image of the Business Vikings (Hall 2018).

The general sense of moral discontent in Iceland led to what Jón Ólafsson (2014, 10) calls “experiments with democracy,” where enhancing public participation and transparency became a goal. As one blogger claims in his comment on a news story about one of the protests in 2010, “those who participate in such events are also voting in a certain way” (Steinarsson 2010). Just as the concern with increasing women's active participation in the political and financial system, in trying to understand what went wrong, these experiments with democracy often revolved around reifying discourse of intrinsic Icelandic characteristics. The National Assembly (Þjóðfundur) in November 2009, for example, directly responded to what was seen as an acute need to investigate and rebuild the values of the Icelandic people in a meeting made up of a representative group of 1500 individuals meant to reflect the citizens of Iceland. This was seen as necessary as a part of critically reevaluating how the crash could have happened; how things had been able to go so wrong and what values the Icelandic nation stands for. The meeting solidified and legitimized concerns that a part of the problem was the values of the Icelandic nation. As explained on the home page of the event, the meeting was a “unique attempt to capture the wisdom of the crowd” (Þjóðfundur 2009a), as well as “the initiative of the nation,” which “collectively owns it”¹ (Þjóðfundur 2009b). This phrasing clearly attempts to cast the event as reflecting not only the voice of the nation, but also as involving actions of the nation as one unified body.

The initiative received a great deal of positive attention and provided an opportunity for individuals who wanted to contribute something to Iceland's rebuilding after the crash. The Icelandic government announced that it would financially support the Assembly while a hotel close to the site of the meeting contributed by giving a discount on room rates for those coming to the assembly from outside of Reykjavík (Þjóðfundur 2009c). Even though opinions critical of the event itself were not voiced loudly, the lack of clarity regarding how the event was financed and who was behind it was criticized. Also subject to criticism was the organizing principle – an assumption that there was, in fact, an “essential nature of the Icelandic people” and that citizens, most of whom were not directly involved in the financial missteps that led to the crash, had forgotten their “true values” (see criticism by Helgadóttir and Kristjánsson 2009).

The key point here is that the protests and democratic experiments revolved not only around attempts to change a failed system but also constituted an attempt to understand what it means to be Icelandic. Through the process of trying to find meaning in familiar concepts, the meanings solidified and became fixed. The concept of the nation-state in general was frequently evoked, as discussed by Michael

Herzfeld (Herzfeld 2016), and thus essentialized. This makes the nation-state a permanent fixture in people's lives, where it becomes real through discourses celebrating it as well as discussions that focus on resistance toward the state (Herzfeld 2016, 6). Similarly, the intense discussions in Icelandic society – critical or not – around particular and familiar concepts such as 'nation,' 'women' and 'men' worked toward making these concepts real and solidified. However, as Ólafsson (2014, 10) concludes, and a point to which we will return later, as impressive as these experiments with democracy were, they did not really lead to long-lasting changes within Icelandic society.

A street in a big city – the nation as community in times of crisis

The shark waiting to swallow up the nation – Icesave – became a particularly significant image from which to discuss what it meant to be Icelandic and thus in the process created a forum to imagine “what the nation is,” in Benedict Anderson's (1983) sense. Icesave was still a multivocal sign, in Victor Turner's (1967) sense, standing for various things at once, and was particularly important in mobilizing different sensibilities and emotions on key questions in the crisis years: the future of democracy, the economic viability of the country, the boom years' destructiveness and Iceland's international position. The sensibilities aired in public discourses of the time drew deeply on colonial memory, as I will show, and the persistent categorization of people as either foreigners or non-foreigners.

The creation of Icesave was fraught with difficulty. While the first bill was passed by Icelandic government in September 2009, the UK and Holland rejected it. The revised bill created a huge uproar in Iceland and was wildly unpopular. A petition was signed by great number of people urging the president not to accept it but to let the public vote on it. A referendum was held in March 2010, in which the bill was rejected by 98% of voters. About a year later, the president referred a stalled third bill to referendum on April 9th, 2011, where it was rejected by 60% of voters. Finally it was sent to the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) court for adjudication² (Statistics Iceland 2016b).

It was thus not only the placement of Iceland on the list of terrorist countries that provided ample material for discussions and debates but also the decision of the president's not to sign the bill (leading to the referendums) and the referendums themselves. Hallgrímsdóttir and Brunet-Jailly (2014) stress how Icesave engaged with the widespread sense that democratic deficit was to blame for the crash and that there was a need for more active involvement of the public. Engagements with Icesave became a hallmark of a responsible citizen (Hallgrímsdóttir and Brunet-Jailly 2014, 9). Even though Icesave was a part of the widespread public mobilizations concerned with the future of Iceland and questions in regard to how to rebuild a new, better society, economic concerns were never far away. After all, Icesave had made it difficult for Iceland to get loans from other countries at a moment of intense need, which was widely seen as

seriously contributing to the severity of the crash. Icesave was also seen as having the potential to fully ruin Iceland's economy and the country's prospect of recovery, reflected in the anxiety and fear that Icelanders would have to pay up to 10% of Iceland's annual GDP in order to compensate foreign investors (Ministry of Finance 2009).

The discontent over Icesave felt in Iceland was in stark contrast to the rhetoric about Icesave during the boom years. The CEO at Landsbankinn at that time, Sigurjón Árnason, described Icesave in 2006 as "pure brilliance" (*tær snilld*). It was so successful, to him, that it made his job easy; in terms of making money, the only thing he had to do as the CEO, he said, was "to check at the end of the day how much money came in" (Aðalsteinsson 2007). After the crash, rhetoric about Icesave revolved more around how much money would potentially go 'out.'

Just as with the closing of McDonald's in Iceland, discussions about Icesave reflected the intense sense of Iceland's vulnerability within the world of nations. This vulnerability was intensified by the interconnection of these conversations with Europe's colonial history, particularly Iceland's time as a Danish colony. In the words of a former politician for the Progressive party, Guðni Ágústsson, a sense of defenselessness and a fear that Iceland is on its knees features highly:

A dwarf sized, defenseless nation is taking on a death-burden (*drápsklyfjar*). . . . ESB and the most powerful nations within, have pushed us to our knees due to the mess of a few business-thugs – I don't want to call them Vikings, that is a noble name over heroes in history.³

(Ágústsson 2009)

Shadows of colonialism haunted debates about Iceland's vulnerable position internationally due to its disagreements with the UK and Holland. That history continued to translate into diverse geopolitical power, and it didn't go unnoticed in Iceland:

Of course, the English and the Hollanders should pay their own "Icesave" debt to their own ex-colonies before they demand Icelanders pay an alleged debt to them.⁴

(Þórðarson 2009)

Here we have infamous totalitarian and colonial nations, which would hardly exist if it was not due to their despicable exploitation of resources of less powerful nations and slavery.⁵

(Guðmundsson 2009)

The author of the blog comment adds that this history of domination is the ground for the prosperity of both UK and Holland in the present (Guðmundsson

2009). Similar sentiments were exemplified in the strong words spoken by Iceland's Minister of Health, Ögmundur Jónasson, that the UK and Holland were holding a knife to our throat (*hnífinn á barkanum*). He refers to the two countries as “old colonial powers that know a thing or two about trying to break their victims”⁶ (Staksteinar 2009). The Icelandic government was not exempt from criticism about involvement in colonial behavior; it was accused of working for the old colonial powers and risking Iceland's independence (Bergmann 2011, 22).

Various comments on Icelandic social media proclaimed to the UK that Iceland was “not their colony” and that Icelanders were not their “slaves,” reflecting attempts to understand the present situation by referring to past colonial relations. In many cases, past history and Iceland's vulnerable global position was brought up in relation to the ‘Cod Wars’ – the dispute between the UK and Iceland during the late 1950s and the early 1970s concerning ownership of the sea around Iceland (discussed briefly in Chapter 4).

Within this discussion, however, some still tried soberly to emphasize that the root of the problem was not these ‘foreigners.’ “We have to admit,” wrote one blogger, “that the crooks that set fire to everything were Icelandic”⁷ (Jónsson 2009). But this sentiment was not necessarily so evident in discussions about the relationship of Iceland with the outside world. One of those interviewed from the banking system, Gunnar, comments that the UK would not have treated a bank from Holland in the same way Iceland was treated. “Of course one asks oneself, is this the cod-wars? Are they now finally kicking us or what is it? A small nation that has been very visible, in the UK [we have] probably stepped on a few toes.”

Gunnar's narrative cites what he sees as past and present humiliations for people in the UK in their dealings with Iceland – the Cod Wars of the past and the Business Vikings' business ventures during the Manic Millennium. He imagines that for those in the UK, Icesave provides an opportunity to take revenge for both historical incidents. Markús, another bank employee, makes a similar point when he metaphorically speaks of Iceland, as quoted earlier, as “a street in a big city.” To illustrate, he adds, “We don't have an army, we don't have friends [within the international community].”

This sense of ‘smallness’ is a common thread in my interviews with bank employees. As Sigga, another interviewed bank employee phrased it, “[We] were just so small, and did not have any friends” to explain Iceland's predicament during the Icesave dispute. Discourses of isolation and vulnerability were visible in relation to Icesave for the next few years, where the dispute would in some sense be seen as rooted in unequal relationships between marginalized and powerful countries. As such, Icesave did lay bare this image of differentiated Europe.

Defending the nation

Questions of sovereignty arose in the midst of these references to colonialism and became an important thread running through the Icesave debate. Some claimed

that by accepting repayment agreements for Icesave, Iceland would essentially find itself under foreign rule again (Bergman 2014, 8). As Eiríkur Bergmann (2014) has shown, these concerns were also directly linked to ongoing debates about EU membership, which became particularly intense after the crisis. In this rhetoric, the EU, Bergmann claims, was compared to colonial powers of the past (2014, 12; see also Bergmann 2011).

These debates arose from the perception that there was a solid division between ‘foreigners’ and ‘non-foreigners’ – or that the nation-state was under siege by foreigners. The debates also reflect a world that continues to be organized around different states that are conceptualized as inhabited with solid national subjects sharing similar economic interests. The widespread sense of Iceland as having been abandoned by its friends evokes an even stronger sense of ‘us, the Icelanders’ against ‘them, the foreigners.’ While the nation is an imaginary construction, the rights of people are nevertheless linked to the state in which they live and the prosperity of that state. In Iceland, those rights and that independence was seen as being under threat by the Icesave agreement, which is one reason why opposition to it was so overwhelming.

As with the first referendum, the second Icesave bill was debated in both mainstream and social media outlets. Opinion pieces, blogs, political cartoons and articles were widely published, and intense citizen participation and grassroots mobilization were incorporated into conventional party politics (Hallgrímsdóttir and Brunet-Jailly 2014). Discussions on the referendum of 2011 were, however, characterized by less agreement as the results of the voting reflected, with 60% voting against and 40% voting for the referendum. In Iceland, debate on the bill was widely seen at the time as creating a sharp schism, or dividing the nation into two groups.

What I find significant, however, is how both camps – here simplified into a Yes-camp and a No-camp – found common ground in the idea that Icesave debt should not be paid by Icelandic taxpayers. Instead, the issue dividing these camps revolved more around whether accepting the agreement would be the most sensible action for Iceland at the time⁸ (Loftsdóttir 2016). Those who wanted to accept the agreement often seemed to feel that the Icesave proposal was the most rational choice available in dire circumstances, even if they didn’t believe the Icelandic people should carry the financial burden. It was a deep concern for future security that drove their support for passing the agreement.

Some of the advertisements run by groups who wanted to the Icesave agreement to pass reflect this concern clearly. The Áfram camp, a cross-political organization campaigning for the acceptance of the bill claimed in one advertisement that, “Many of us doubt that we have a legal obligation to pay Icesave. But we are certain that prolonged disputes and legal cases with uncertain outcomes are against the best interests of Iceland.”⁹ Another advertisement, apparently from the same campaign, shows two hands in the game of “rock, paper, scissors.” The heading states that “Rejecting Icesave is an irresponsible bet about our future” (*Icesave er óábyrgt veðmál um framtíð okkar allra*), thus claiming that rejecting



Figure 9.2 Creating a sense of community. Celebrating June 17th, the Independence Day, in Hafnarfjörður

Source: Photo by Kristín Loftsdóttir

Icesave is like playing a children's game where who loses and who wins is up to chance.

The coherent sense of national identity can be seen in how both camps expressed the idea that Icelanders should use their votes to show the rest of the world how a sovereign nation should behave, even under duress. While those in the No-camp claimed that Iceland should be an example for the rest of the world by refusing to take on the debts of others, the Yes-camp emphasized that Iceland should show that it was ready to take on its global responsibilities. One blogger supporting the No-camp writes, "People cheer the actions of Icelanders in standing up to the financial sector and look at the battle of Icelanders as a role model in the battle that has now begun in Europe due to the debt crisis" (Gunnlaugsson 2011), while another one in the Yes-camp claims, "I say yes, because I want that we as a nation treat others fairly and other nations, and that we honor promises and contracts that we have made to you"¹⁰ (Heimisson 2011).

Those supporting the agreement justified their claims also by referring to Iceland's reputation as a peaceful nation in the global community, as phrased by a former president of Iceland (Vísir 2011), the importance of gaining the respect of the international community (McQueen 2011) – or the importance of still being able to be proud to be Icelandic (Leifsson 2011).

One blogger, however, likens the Icesave situation to a football match in order to ironically point out that Icelandic aspirations of showing the rest of the world

how to challenge the global financial system are irrational. “Iceland against the global financial system. Come on, we will win this game! Most definitely . . . yes, *cough*” (Are 2010).

When I voted in 2011, my voting station was located in the school my three small children attended in Hafnarfjörður. My children came with me when I voted. Icesave had become a depressing issue, especially with the second Icesave agreement dominating conversation everywhere. The prospects for Iceland’s future were uncertain, regardless of how the voting would go.

But now the time to vote was here. Outside the school, we stopped several times to talk to friends or other family members who had arrived for the same purpose. Entering the school made the action of voting somehow more personal, more intimate, with many of members of the school staff among those working at the voting station. My children asked what we were voting for this time, and I did really not know how to explain it to them, so I told them about the importance of voting in general. As I spoke, I was struck at the same time by how the action of voting itself creates a sense of community – of belonging (see Figure 9.2). We were all here in the same boat, to use the popular Icelandic reference to sailing. Regardless of whether the boat sinks or floats, we all have same destiny. In this global, differentiated world, this is not true of course, but that was the feeling at that moment.

Those who disappeared

When Iceland seemed like a melting iceberg – with businesses going bankrupt, rapid growth of unemployment, and many native Icelanders trying to find work in neighboring countries – most of those who arrived in Iceland during the economic boom years decided to stay. To many of those from Poland – the largest group of foreign-born immigrants in Iceland – an important part of their decision to stay was the fact that they had settled in Iceland with their families. For other Poles, the fact that the situation in Poland was not necessarily better was a compelling reason to stay. As was true for everyone living in Iceland, the crash had a negative effect on people from Poland, even those who did not lose their jobs (Wojtyńska and Zielińska 2010). Public discourse in Iceland assumed, however, that those who had come in search of work or higher salaries during the boom period would return home after the crash. The most visible effects of the crash on migration were thus ironically not that these new Icelanders returned home, but rather that they disappeared from public discourse and concerns. As shown by close, qualitative comparison of media coverage of migration to Iceland and multicultural society before and after the crash, an extensive, measurable reduction of news stories about these topics in general took place (Wojtyńska, Skaptadóttir and Ólafsson 2011). The issue was not that the papers had only stories about crash-related events. It

was that the numbers of articles focusing on migration and multicultural Icelandic society were considerably reduced.

In this atmosphere of national belonging and mobilization of the nation, where ‘foreigners’ were seen as undermining Icelandic economic livelihoods through Icesave, how was it for these new people living in Iceland, who were defined as foreigners?

Interestingly, Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir’s (2010b) assessment of the situation after the crash, based on her long research involvement with migrants from Poland and the Philippines, indicated that anti-immigration attitudes did not rise considerably post-crash, even though some individual immigrants experienced increased hostility. Wojtyńska and Zielińska (2010) reached a similar conclusion in their research on Polish people in Iceland, and the same result was reported from focus group research with immigrants of 25 nationalities conducted in 2009 (Þórarinsdóttir, Georgsdóttir and Hafsteinsdóttir 2009). As in other research projects investigating conditions for migrants in Iceland, the focus group interviews showed clear examples of prejudices that different groups of foreigners encountered in Iceland, but it was difficult to conclude that this was directly linked to the crash (Þórarinsdóttir, Georgsdóttir and Hafsteinsdóttir 2009, 85). One reason for this may be the fact that many of those from recent migrant populations were struggling with the same issues as others living in Iceland and were generally not seen as the cause of the crisis or as intensifying it. Thus, as the immigrant was nowhere to be seen in discourses addressing Iceland’s economic prosperity prior to the crash, the figure of the immigrant was also invisible in its aftermath (Loftsdóttir 2010b; see also Skaptadóttir 2010b, 319).

My own interviews conducted with people from diverse African countries, Lithuania and Latvia a few years after the crash indicated the same kind of findings produced by earlier research: for most interviewees, there was no significant increase in negative attitudes after the crash and, in most cases, people did not feel that the crash had been instrumental in terms of prejudice. As other scholars to whom I have referred would likely maintain, this does not mean that racism or general prejudice do not exist but rather that the crash did not result in a sharp increase in such attitudes as many had feared. The anger in Icelandic society was directed more at the banks and the Business Vikings. This lingering anger made it difficult for individuals who had worked in a bank during the boom, as many of those bank employees I interviewed testified (see also Snorradóttir et al. 2015). The first research report in 2010 from one of the Special Investigation Committees (SIC), set by the Parliament which was awaited with great anticipation, confirmed quite clearly that the speculations about corruption and mismanagement of the system that had been blooming in Icelandic society after the crash had actual, factual bases.

Perhaps the strongest indication of how little acceptance there was for anti-immigrant sentiments after the crash is reflected in what happened to the Liberal Party (*Frjálslyndi flokkurinn*). The party had been established in 1998 to address inequalities in Icelandic fisheries, but had quickly adopted anti-immigrant rhetoric. In 2009, post-crash, it lost all of its parliamentary seats in elections. In 2013,

however, the Progressive Party elected into government with the Independence Party in 2013, did flirt with anti-immigration attitudes, intensifying after 2014 (Bergmann 2015, 2017). By this time, as elsewhere in Europe, there was a visible increase in discourses portraying Muslims, in particular, as incompatible with presumed European values (Loftsdóttir 2015).

Though explicit anti-immigrant rhetoric was not intense in Icelandic society, higher unemployment among people with immigrant backgrounds was evident after the crash, which shows a clear pattern of discrimination not necessarily captured in interviews. In 2009, 11% of foreign nationals were unemployed, of which 15.6% were from Poland. In comparison, 8% of Icelandic nationals were unemployed. This contrast became even higher in 2010, when unemployment of Icelandic nationals went down to 7%, while up to 14% for foreign nationals, of which Polish people, particularly men, accounted for 20% (Vinnumálastofnun 2016). Unemployment of foreign nationals has continued to be considerably higher than has that of Icelandic nationals (Vinnumálastofnun 2016).

Higher unemployment of people with immigrant backgrounds during the first years after the crash can be explained to some extent by the collapse of the construction industry; this industry had especially high numbers of Polish workers (Wojtyńska, Skaptadóttir and Ólafsson 2011). Their post-crash exclusion from this market was probably intensified due to the fact that some of the companies that remained in the construction industry were family-owned companies, where those who stayed on were the sons and sons-in-law of the owner.

After the crash, foreign nationals were also excluded from jobs due to an increased demand for fluency in the Icelandic language by employers in general (Þórarinsdóttir, Georgsdóttir and Hafsteinsdóttir 2009). University-educated migrants from diverse countries also felt discriminated against in terms of having to prove themselves more extensively as valuable employees (Christiansen and Kristjánsdóttir 2016).

After the crash, Icelandic people themselves became economic migrant workers, seeking opportunities in other countries. Many went to Norway in search for jobs, which was one of the few European countries that felt minimal effects from the global economic crisis (Guðjónsdóttir 2014; Guðjónsdóttir and Loftsdóttir 2016). For many it was a sobering experience. On several occasions, I heard industry workers who had lost their jobs in Iceland humbly referring to themselves as now being like the “Poles in Iceland before the crash.” Some even had to leave their families behind in their search for work. In some cases, these comments involved looking critically on the perspectives of Icelanders prior to the crash, but as Guðbjört Guðjónsdóttir’s (2014) PhD research on Icelanders in Norway has shown, many Icelanders there still try to separate themselves as “better migrants” from other communities of migrants in Norway.

As shown here, even though the anti-immigration discussion did not intensify as many feared, the discussions in Iceland still centered strongly around the division of foreigners and Icelanders. The boom had marked a new configuration of a particular kind of foreigners in Iceland as a disposable workforce for the benefit of Iceland – drawing from images of Eastern Europeans that had not necessarily

been salient in Iceland earlier. Then, with the economic collapse this distinction that was made between foreigners outside and inside of Iceland was intensified. External foreigners were seen as simultaneously the reason for Iceland's harsh downfall and the ultimate source of the country's self-worth, while the internal foreigners remained outside of the sphere of interest. But how did it still feel to live in Iceland at a time of sharp opposition pitting foreigners versus Icelanders and again during the time of the intense nationalistic discourse like that which characterized the Icesave voting? How did it feel to those already in precarious positions, like those from Lithuania and Latvia, whom I discussed earlier, even though the 'foreigners' under debate were more those outside of Iceland? Some of those I interviewed from these two countries knew little or nothing about Icesave. They had, for the most part, arrived in Iceland in 2006 and 2007 and thus stayed for shorter times than those who had arrived earlier in Iceland and held an opinion about Icesave. The lack of opinion of those arriving shortly before the crash is a clear indication of their precarious position and limited involvement with Icelandic society. Here language difficulties must certainly have been at play, but not fully, as Icesave was covered both internationally and intensively within Iceland. Some had heard about Icesave but did not have clear view of what it was about, often merely recognizing the term but not the details.

Those who were familiar with the Icesave debate had in most cases had lived in Iceland since the beginning of the millennium. Before conducting the interviews, I had imagined that these individuals would feel apprehensive toward the strongly nationalistic discourses that were so clearly based on a dualistic positioning of Icelandic versus foreigner, as these individuals are so often positioned as 'foreigners' in Iceland. Like those interviewed from the banking industries, these individuals not only had emotional opinions about Icesave but also fully agreed with the position that Iceland should not pay for Icesave. Leva, who came to Iceland from Lithuania in 2003, asserted that she found it so "amazing that such a small society" refused to pay, obviously taking a pride in it. Victoria, who moved from Lithuania to Iceland in 2001, refers in this regard to the Icelandic president and the fact that he decided to send the issue to referendum, or, as she phrased it, he "told the nation to speak." Leva pointed toward her son and asked me, "Why should I pay a debt collected by five men?" Her opinions add to the echoing, persistent voices in Iceland who often protested that the "nation" should not pay for the high risks of businessmen: "You know that [this] is what [Icesave] is about." Leva puts herself here within the collective Icelandic 'we,' as was so salient at the time.

As Kalnačs (2016, 2) claims, Baltic countries have often positioned themselves alongside other colonized populations, due to their experience as having been subjugated by the Soviet Union. Here the identification with Iceland possibly revolves more around originating from peripheral countries that stand against more powerful entities that were former colonial empires. The "amazing" thing with the case of Icesave, as so clearly expressed by Leva, is the smallness of the country in relation to a more powerful adversary. In the case of Iceland, it was seen by people like Leva as resisting the UK and Holland in the way that Latvia and Lithuania resisted Russia.

These sentiments indicate a more complicated picture of belonging to a nation than one composed of an ‘us/others’ mentality. Instead, it suggests different trajectories of identifications and exclusion. While these individuals from Latvia and Lithuania seemed to experience some sort of identification with Iceland through a shared sense of marginality, they also pointed toward the difference between Iceland and their country of origin in terms of geopolitical power. Victoria claimed in the context of Icesave, “It is not complicated for Icelanders to say such things, and say just that we will not pay. In Lithuania, we don’t have this freedom.” Like others I interviewed, she referenced Russia’s limiting of what Lithuania could do and what kind of risks the country could take.

In various contexts, this shift from a sense of Iceland as a small country toward an emphasis on how Iceland’s geopolitical position differs from Lithuania’s – more freedom, more democratic underpinnings – reflects differently positioned European subjects, partly as a result of Iceland’s geopolitical position in Western Europe as opposed to the position of Latvia and Lithuania as Eastern European states. Thus, while all of those interviewed – migrant workers and bankers alike – draw attention to the different position that countries have within the community of nations, those from Latvia and Lithuania draw attention to further differentiation as reflected in the varying political situations of their countries of origin and Iceland.

Icesave provided Icelanders with a reason to identify the ‘intrinsic character of an Icelander,’ so that the crisis could then be understood through the prism of national identity. To the individuals from Latvia and Lithuania, the emphasis on reifying aspects of Icelandic nationality that was so evident during the first years of the economic crash and especially around discussions of Icesave did not seem exclusionary. Rather, for some the Icesave debate was something that they could identify with as migrants from countries that also felt weak geopolitically. Their experience as non-Icelanders in Iceland thus intersected with their geopolitical status, which they identified in some sense with Iceland’s position. While the discussions of Icesave in Iceland mobilized the sense of ‘us, the Icelanders’ against ‘them, the foreigners,’ these categories still primary revolved around ‘outside’ foreigners – namely, the forces in Holland and the UK that were pressuring Iceland to reimburse foreign investors. As such, it shows that the category of foreigner is complex, resilient and shifting. During struggles for independence, for example, the salient foreigner was the Danish national, an image that was in certain contexts revitalized during the economic boom years as the yardstick against which Iceland should be measured.

Notes

- 1 In Icelandic: “Þjóðfundurinn er framtak þjóðarinnar sjálfar og sameign hennar.”
- 2 The Icelandic government forwarded the case to EFTA Court for adjudication. In January 2013, Iceland was cleared of all charges.
- 3 In Icelandic:

Icesave-málið er versta mál Íslandssögunnar og verður dæmt sem slíkt í framtíðinni af umheiminum. Þar er dvergvaxin varnarlaus þjóð að taka á sig drápsklyfjar. . . . ESB

og þess völdugustu þjóðir hafa knésett okkur vegna óreiðu nokkurra útrásardólga, – ég vil ekki kalla þá víkinga sem er of göfugt heiti yfir hetjur í sögunni.

- 4 In Icelandic: “Auðvitað eiga Englendingar og Hollendingar að greiða upp sínar ‘Icesave’-skuldir við fyrrverandi nýlendur áður en þeir krefja Íslendinga um meintar skuldir við sig.”
- 5 In Icelandic: “Í hlut eiga alræmdar einræðis- og nýlenduþjóðir, sem væru varla til, ef ekki væri fyrir svívirðilegt arðrán þeirra á auðlindum vanmáttugra þjóða og ánauð sem þær hnepptu þegna þeirra í, og er grundvöllur velferðar bæði Bretlands og Hollands.”
- 6 In Icelandic: “‘Við höfum verið með hnífinn á barkanum, Íslendingar, af hálfu Breta og Hollendinga, þessara gömlu nýlenduherra, sem kunna nú sitthvað fyrir sér þegar þeir eru að beygja undir sig fórnarlömb sín,’ sagði Ögmundur Jónasson heilbrigðisráðherra í Speglinum á föstudag.”
- 7 In Icelandic: “En við verðum að fara að viðurkenna að skúrkarnir sem settu allt í bál og brand voru íslenskir.”
- 8 Those who advocated for voting yes to the agreement emphasized the risk in waiting for a new agreement, which could be worse for Iceland than the one proposed. They also expressed fear that an international ruling could be more devastating for Iceland than agreeing to the contract. The name *Afram* (forward) of one of the groups in the Yes-camp captures this sense, by emphasizing that the insecurity had to be ended in order for the Icelandic nation to move forward.
- 9 In Icelandic: “Mörg okkar draga í efa að okkur beri lagaskylda til að greiða Icesave. En við erum viss um að langvinnandi deilur og afar tvísýn dómsmál stríði gegn hagsmunum Íslands.”
- 10 In Icelandic: “Ég segi já vegna þess að ég vil að við sem þjóð komum heiðarlega fram við aðra og aðrar þjóðir og við stöndum við þau loforð og samninga sem við gerum.”

10 The exceptional island in a world of crisis

Reimagining iceland as exceptional¹

In 2012, I visit Brussels to attend a conference. When having breakfast at my hotel, I glimpsed a newspaper that is among the other newspapers laid out for guests to read. On the front page, I see yet again an article about the wonderful women of Iceland who have so successfully rescued Iceland from crisis. I should have cut out the article, photographed it with my phone or at least noted where I could find it again so I could use it for my ongoing research. But at the moment I just felt a sense of annoyance.

It was not the first time I had seen this kind of thing, and, as it turned out, it would certainly not be the last. In the years that followed, similar articles appeared, talking about women as rescuing the system or more generally glorifying how Icelanders ‘stood up’ against the bank and international finance system. During my subsequent international travels, people regularly commented to me quite kindly on how great it must feel to come from a country where women came to the rescue, where all the bankers were jailed, and where the public made the guilty ones pay – where justice prevailed in a world of precarity and corruption.

As texts in the international media addressing Iceland in this way become more frequent, these depictions of Iceland become more natural, and more familiar. They cannot be anything other than ‘true’ because they are heard so often. Iceland thus emerges a few years after the crash as a Phoenix from the ashes: so beautiful, exotic and ultimately different from everything else. Five years later, when I write this book, everyone knows Iceland. Everyone wants to go to Iceland – the exceptional Arctic island, a refuge from a world of chaos and terror.

This chapter focuses on this reemergence of the Icelandic subject as exotic on the international stage. Within different discourses and in quite diverse contexts, a particular image of Iceland emerged that echoes the same kind of exotic imagery from which Icelanders have so long tried to distance themselves. The chapter also examines how the external image of Iceland that began to emerge a few years after the crash was promoted and consolidated through various actors, both in Iceland and outside it. The different discourses that I have referred to here – of women rescuing Iceland, of Iceland as a democratic heaven and, now, Iceland as a tourist location of beautiful landscapes and the women arising from it – nourished one another in particularly potent ways to create a new solidified image of the country. I stress how these discourses aided each other in creating an exceptional subject – which could be mobilized into an exceptional destination for tourists.

The international media took part in ‘branding’ Iceland as quirky and different, a phenomenon I will examine here before looking more closely at nation branding in Iceland itself by the tourism industry (which while taking place in a different space was nourished by international discourses reifying Iceland). While John and Jean Comaroff (2009) emphasize agency as instrumental in these reconfigurations of ethnic identity, they simultaneously point out that those that brand ‘otherness’ and profit from what makes someone ‘different’ in a global marketplace, have to do so in universally recognizable terms (2009, 24). As I show, this took place in Iceland through engagement with long-established ideas of the ‘exotic’ that have gained new meaning at times of global environmental crisis, while also playing in quite specific ways with hegemonic ideas of whiteness and purity.

To understand this change in the perception of Iceland, it is necessary to return to the way in which neoliberalism has affected the idea of culture. As discussed earlier, neoliberalism involves a particular type of rationality, where market values extend themselves to involve all social action (Schwegler 2008, 682). In this process, nations or ethnicities are reconfigured as commodities in a global marketplace, as a ‘brand,’ similar to a company trademark (Lavie and Swedenberg 1996, 6). The language of marketing is exemplified in phrases such as “identity management” and “competitive advantage” (see de Chernatony 2008). John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff (2009) observe that the commercialization of ethnic and national identities involves an “open-ended dialectic” that takes place “under the impression of the market” where “human subjects and cultural objects produce, reproduce and refashion each other” (pp. 28–29). This commercialization of culture, nation or people, they underscore, is not simply imposed on docile subjects. It is a process going back and forth, involving active subjects and a diverse group of actors.

The preceding discussion has shown how the meaning of national identity in Iceland has for a long time engaged with and reflected itself in constant conversations with ‘outsiders’ reflections, where modernity and coloniality have been key to these underlying issues. Prior to the crash, Iceland had always been of marginal interest to most people outside of Iceland. After the crash, as we have seen, Iceland started to feature much more predominantly in the international press and electronic media. As the chapter suggests, the tourist industry expanded rapidly, and tourist encounters with Icelandic nature and culture were directly or indirectly animated by various images of Iceland from abroad and within Iceland itself. It helped that immediately post-crash, the favorable currency exchange rate drew early tourists to Iceland (Jóhannesson and Huijbens 2010, 430). There had certainly existed discourses emphasising Iceland’s cultural uniqueness and which, as Katla Kjartansdóttir and Kristinn Schram claim (2013), often engaged with exotic portrayal of Iceland such among Icelandic expatriots. After the crash, these images become, however, the defining feature of ‘Icelandicness,’ as well as becoming commercially significant and in a sense institutionalized.

Tourism was obviously not new in Iceland, but the sheer volume of tourists visiting Iceland drastically increased, from just 250,000 in 1999 to nearly half a million a year by 2009. Between 2015 and 2016 the number of tourists increased

even more dramatically, from 1.3 million in 2015 to 1.8 million in 2016 (Ferðamálastofa 2016, 2017).

In addition, the ballooning numbers of tourists created a different kind of migrating population, with more than 70% of all tourists coming from the USA and UK as well as other north European countries. In fact, more than half came from the UK and the US alone (Ferðamálastofa 2016, 10). The national airline Icelandair capitalized on this interest by advertising Iceland as a gateway between the US and Europe, inviting passengers to make a “stop-over” in Iceland at no extra cost (Lund, Loftsdóttir and Leonard 2016, 10), thus appealing to populations that were likely to take that route.

The tourists who visit Iceland are thus differently positioned economically and geopolitically than the migrant population during the boom years. The latter consisted largely of people who worked in low-paying construction and service jobs mainly coming due to difficult economic circumstances in their own countries. Within a few short years, and mostly post-crash, Iceland has thus been transformed from a marginal tourist destination into a destination of mass tourism (Lund, Loftsdóttir and Leonard 2016; Jóhannesson and Huijbens 2010). The staging of ‘being’ Icelandic in this fluid social space identified as the ‘tourism sector’ became, furthermore, an important part of Iceland’s economic and social landscape in the post-crash years.

Rebranding Iceland

To indicate the magnitude of what this new situation meant in Iceland, let me recall briefly the atmosphere in Iceland after the crash by citing an editorial in the *Icelandic Review* that appeared in late 2009:

What most people are talking about here is how we can change society: make it fairer, more transparent and just. This crisis has brought loss and difficulty to everyone, loss of valuables and values. Anger and disappointment have been seething underneath. Every single day of the year we have been fed with news of financial scandals, vacuous greed and corruption. Our political system is damaged; trust in financial institutions and the judiciary system is in tatters and the businessmen many believed in are fleeing the country. During this farcical year, we have not known whether to cry or to laugh from day to day.

(Brynjólfsson 2009, 4)

The title of this opinion piece is “Are We Hopeless?” and it certainly captures the mood of the country at the end of 2009, which we saw earlier, for example, in discussions of McDonald’s closing and of Icesave as possibly signaling the ruination of the country. The title of the editorial can be read as signifying either the complete loss of hope for the future, or as a lack of faith that the situation could improve.

In preceding chapters, we have seen how during the year 2009, articles emerged that focused on Iceland’s ‘incredible’ responses to the crisis. Accumulating in the

years to come, these articles would create a tightly woven representation of Iceland as the country of the unexpected and extraordinary and home to somewhat crazy and peculiar people. Before turning to the tourism industry, I will discuss three themes as symbolizing the larger global imagining of Iceland which have combined to create this image: The first one revolves around Iceland's spectacular women, the second about Iceland's exceptional response to the crisis, and the third has to do with Iceland's national character as being admirable and crazy at the same time.

I was not the only one perplexed by the reification of Icelandic women in the international media. When asked about the reaction of other nations to the crash, one of the women from the banking community I interviewed says that what comes to her mind is the intense interest in women shown by the international community. As she phrases it, this interest revolved around "ladies coming to clean up the mess after the boys." For her, the emphasis on women "cleaning up" after men is seemingly not incorrect, but she points to the intensity with which this line of thinking was pursued by those outside Iceland, especially journalists from abroad, who consulted her a few times for stories they were writing. As she explains, she often tried to direct their discussions to something else, but "they always came back to this."

A quote from the *Guardian* in 2009 can be taken as an example of the portrayal of strong women that the foreign journalists had such an intense interest in. The *Guardian* article claims that Icelandic women are more likely "studying the financial news than recipes – and more likely to be thinking about how to put right the mess their men have made of the banking system than about cooking them [their husbands] comfort food" (Sunderland 2009). The trope of women rescuing Iceland is discussed here in relation to a holiday called Husband's Day, which both creates an opportunity to stress Iceland's peculiarity and the idea of women rescuing the men or the country from crisis.

Another text from the same article exemplifies how this portrayal fit with the growing image of Iceland as the site of progressive democratic reforms where things are done differently: "Unlike in the UK, Iceland's women are at the forefront of the clean-up," and that after the government was brought down "the prime minister's residence – which resembles a slightly over-sized white dormer bungalow – is now occupied by Jóhanna Sigurdardóttir, an elegant sixty-six-year-old lesbian who is the world's first openly gay premier" (Sunderland 2009). Here, the reference to the prime minister as a lesbian apparently adds spice to the story, furthermore associating Iceland not just with a progressive political regime, but also a sense of being culturally different: a kind of quirky democracy.

This interest in Iceland's perceived 'quirkiness' relates in some ways to previous interest in Iceland's democratic 'experiments,' discussed earlier, seen in various articles written from the perspective that everything had turned out for the best. In a 2013 article in *Forbes*, for example, Iceland's economic recovery is described as follows: "However unorthodox in its method, Iceland's 'let it fail' policy resulted in jubilation. We can't seek perfection in the years after a global financial collapse, but we can acknowledge nations who persevered with integrity" (Greenstein 2013).

The discussions in Iceland in relation to the Icesave referendum described earlier, where Iceland was somehow an example for others to follow, probably engaged with this sense of ‘integrity’ as important to maintaining Iceland’s positive image in the outside world. Many international articles focus on Iceland’s president at the time, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, who often commented on the Icelandic situation and on his role in the referendum. Businessinsider.com is unabashed in promoting the president, entitling their interview “The President of Iceland Tells Us How He Had the Balls to Stand Up to Britain.” The text, furthermore, explains that “The tiny country is unique not only in its stunning geography but also in its open democracy. This democracy was pivotal in the choice to let three giant banks fail during the financial crisis” (Taylor 2012). The solidification of this image of Iceland as a story with a happy ending is well-captured by the *Independent* in a 2015 article:

Whether nationalizing banks, jailing bankers, imposing controls on the movement of capital out of the country or holding two national referendums on whether or not to pay back foreign debtors, Iceland’s response to their devastating financial crash bucked all trends.

(England 2015)

The article ends by stating that six years after the crash the results are “resounding success” (England 2015). The title itself of the article also firmly locates Iceland as the guiding light for other countries: “Iceland’s ‘Pots and Pans Revolution’: Lessons from a Nation That People Power Helped to Emerge from Its 2008 Crisis All the Stronger: What Can Our Friends in the North Teach Us about Freedom?” (England 2015).

The election of Reykjavík’s new major in 2010, Jón Gnarr, fit well within the emerging hegemonic image of Iceland increasingly embraced by the international media, an image in which the Icelandic population is reified in particular ways. The *Guardian*’s headline in 2011, for example, positions Jón Gnarr and his party as ‘rescuing’ Iceland: “Iceland Brought in from the Cold Thanks to Party of Punks and Pop Stars” (Birell 2011). Public performances, such as Gnarr having his arm tattooed with Reykjavík’s emblem, participating in the Gay Pride parade in drag, or wearing costumes of various kinds at other ceremonies, made it certain that the international press would continue to eagerly print stories about the bizarre but still fascinating things that were constantly happening in Iceland. An article in the *Independent* in 2014 shows again how these discourses link up with Iceland’s sudden importance in the world as a result of its reaction to the economic crisis. The article’s headline asks: “Have You Heard the One about Jon Gnarr, the Comedian Who Saved Iceland from Political and Financial Catastrophe?” Gnarr’s story offers a classical Cinderella tale of the underdog who won against all odds, while directly linking his success to Iceland’s importance to the world. “He was an uneducated, anarchic comedian fed up with politicians. So, he took them on. And won. Could the ‘clown’ who saved Reykjavik now provide the rest of the world with a manifesto for a better life?” (Rentoul 2014).

Many of the articles try to position Gnarr's party as innocent in some sense, as this quote from one of the key people in Jón Gnarr's party (humorously entitled the "Best Party"), illustrates: "We have no agenda and are just fully engaged in trying to do our best. We have no party members and no idea about spin or political punchlines" (Birell 2011). The fact that many party members were tied to Iceland's "punk rock scene" (McGrane 2010), furthermore, strengthens this association with something curious and politically innocent at the same time.

Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson's (2014) discussion of the Phallogological Museum in Iceland is interesting here. The museum, established in 1997 as a joke by one person, can be interpreted as critical intervention at that time into the reifying sense of Icelandicness, as revolving around language, literature and nature. Hafsteinsson demonstrates how the museum's emphasis became then in line with commodification of culture in neoliberal Iceland, feeding into the global media spectacle of Iceland, thus in fact strengthening reifying discourses rather than critically engaging with them. This reflects how certain discourses that are placed forward to criticize nationalistic discourses can simultaneously feed into new types of nationalistic rhetoric as reconfigured by neoliberal sensibilities. The global media's focus on Iceland as a democratic hope for the rest of Europe, seasoned with Iceland's strange customs and cultural progressiveness, was often boosted by descriptors such as "Arctic," "volcanic," "isolated" and "small" – which worked toward positioning Iceland as being unusual in a European context. The BBC News coverage of Iceland's economic recovery in 2013, for example, introduces viewers to country that is a "frozen island on the edge of the Arctic," as well as seeing the "nascent recovery from economic crisis [as a] testament to the Icelandic character." The Viking motif continues in language like, "The people here have for centuries clung to existence on a frozen remote island which is 70% tundra," where "natural challenges have made the people here tough, tenacious, diligent and very hard working" (Lynam 2013). This kind of spin was not limited to post-crash Iceland. Media coverage of the 2008 collapse also played with words such as *Iceland*, frozen assets, etc., using words such as "the north," "Arctic" and "cold" (Chartier 2011, 80). But post-crash, these concepts take on a more positive, exotic tone, with Iceland being a far-off, exciting place – especially in regard to tourism.

These diverse outsider narratives of Iceland as the best country in the world for this and that were also devoured by people living in Iceland. One must therefore ask more broadly: To what extent did these narratives and their partial internalization within a neoliberal economy also shape the perception and performance of being Icelandic?

Tourism to the rescue

In 2010, volcano eruptions in Eyjafjallajökull caused massive air traffic disruption in Europe and stranded ten million European passengers due to volcanic ash, putting Iceland once again in the international news for a disruptive and negative event. At the initiative of the Icelandic government, stakeholders from the tourism industry and from Reykjavík city met to discuss joint efforts to counteract

what they saw as negative image of Iceland which had been generated by the economic crash and the volcano eruption (Pálsdóttir and Haraldsson 2011; Jóhannesson and Huijbens 2010). Taking part in these meetings were the main Icelandic airlines at the time, Icelandair and Iceland Express, various government ministries and representatives from the Icelandic Travel Industry Associations (*Samtök ferðaþjónustunnar*), with over 80 travel-related firms participating (Pálsdóttir and Haraldsson 2011, 22). Using the latest technologies, these diverse agencies designed a publicity campaign that focused on the “unique” characteristics of Iceland as a destination (Pálsdóttir and Haraldsson 2011; see also Benediktsson, Lund and Huijbens 2011).

This emphasis on tourism was a shift from earlier policies in which the tourism sector did not feature prominently (Jóhannesson and Huijbens 2010, 427; G. Þ. Jóhannesson 2012). The main goals of this campaign, and the enhancement of tourism in Iceland in general, were to increase the sheer number of tourists to the country, with tourism being increasingly perceived as production or industry where quantity was a key issue (Huijbens, Jóhannesson and Þorsteinsson 2014; Jóhannesson and Huijben 2010). This emphasis on sheer numbers has softened somewhat, according to Huijben, Jóhannesson and Þorsteinsson (2014), although the approach still utilizes the general idea of mass production, i.e. getting the most tourists to the country (p. 221).

Even though many feared at the time that the Eyjafjallajökull eruptions would be disruptive to the tourism industry, the volcano more likely fed into older perceptions of Iceland as a place of ‘wild’ pristine nature (Benediktsson, Lund and Mustonen 2010). These perceptions were eagerly exploited by the campaign. As Walter Beek (2003) notes in regard to the African continent, the interplay of senses of marginality, danger and the exotic can have appealing pull for tourists (p. 254).

The stage for the commercialization of Iceland through its beautiful landscape had also been set years earlier with the ascendance of new neoliberal ideas of consumerism. A 1994 tourist brochure from the Icelandic Tourist Board was a deviation from previous tourism literature in that it emphasized Iceland’s unique natural landscape while also assuring potential visitors that they can also enjoy fine dining and entertainment. As Gísli Sigurðsson’s discussion (1996) points out, in contrast to earlier brochures, Iceland’s literary heritage and culturally based crafts are downgraded here in favor of providing a tourist “experience,” that is, conceptualized as more exciting and appealing to international audiences.

Seven years later, in 2001, a report on cultural tourism published by the Ministry of Culture, Education and Science emphasized the need to create stronger links between “culture and enterprise,” where neoliberal ideas of culture were articulated (Hafsteinsson 2014, 25–26). The report proclaims that an emphasis on Iceland’s literary heritage should be abandoned in favor of features that could be more easily marketed (*ibid.*). This emphasis on the ‘correct’ type of culture for external consumption recalls the Parliamentary Festival in 1930 where, as earlier discussed, Iceland’s cultural and political elite felt it necessary to create what was supposed to have been there already (see Rastrick 2013). Now, however, the government of Iceland could base its self-presentation on existing stereotypes

of Iceland, enforcing them instead of challenging them, as was the case with the Parliamentary Festival.

Making Iceland 'popular'

Before turning toward discussion of Iceland's highly successful branding exercise initiated in 2010, I will briefly contextualize its success within a larger historical and geopolitical context. While the campaign itself and Iceland's promotion in general as a tourist destination does not necessarily or always explicitly refer to this wider context, it has to be seen as intrinsically embedded within and ultimately as contributing to its success. First, the promotion of Iceland as a tourist destination capitalizes on the perception of Iceland as an exotic destination, which as we have seen in relation to the international media portrayal of Iceland after the crash. As discussed in the first part of this book, dominant narratives of Europe and the West produced through the centuries saw nature and the 'savages' that inhabited it as something that should be conquered and civilized. The mission of the domestication of human beings and natural environments was to be carried out by white European men as bearers of Western enlightened civilization (Soupios 1992, 20–21). In the late 20th century, however, nature increasingly came to be seen as vulnerable and even defenseless against human actions (Worster 1977, 339). The reference to our current time geological era by some as the age of the Anthropocene, for example, clearly indicates a growing sense of systematic and irreversible harm to the earth (Beck 1992, 22–23). In more recent narratives, nature is portrayed as innocent, fragile and vulnerable rather than as something that should be subjected to conquest. It is within such understandings of pristine 'nature' as disappearing, that associations with 'untouched' and wild nature become a powerful marketing tool and valuable asset (see for example Comaroff and Comaroff 2009).

When it comes to the people who inhabit these spaces, the more dignified term 'indigenous peoples' is increasingly used in the place of earlier, degrading language, such as savages or primitives. However, the term 'indigenous' has been criticized for retaining some of the original connotations of the earlier labels, such as the association with pristine nature, innocence and authenticity (Conklin and Graham 1995, 698). Politically these new terms have been extremely impactful for many indigenous groups to demand basic human rights; however, in order to gain rights as 'indigenous,' some groups have had to homogenize their cultural identities to satisfy these historical Western stereotypes and definitions of indigenes (Hodgson 2011, 5). Basing strongly on continued dualism of modern and traditional, exotic or 'untouched' people are often perceived in the global north as symbolizing characteristics that 'modern' people have lost (Therkelsen and Halkier 2004, 7).

In the neoliberal economy, where everything becomes subject to the laws of the market, exotic people and pristine nature become thus particularly appealing as 'products' used to signify the uniqueness of specific countries (Therkelsen and Halkier 2004, 7). This desire for the 'exotic' in the global north has, of course, been

widely recognized by indigenous people all over the world, who stage ‘authenticity’ and exotic traditions for tourist consumption (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). For Iceland, being branded as exotic, strange and exciting thus had a strong commercial component that as we will see became extremely important as a means of recovering from an economic crisis.

Also, this new branding image of Iceland became more salient in a changed political atmosphere worldwide, where ‘crisis’ became ever more prominent as a characterization of the world (Jensen and Loftsdóttir 2014). Increased threat of terrorism in many parts of the world followed Europe’s economic crisis, where tourism from the global north to Africa and the Middle East became seen as too dangerous due to terrorism and war. After 2015, the risk of terrorism within Europe intensified the wider sense of crisis and insecurity within Europe itself.

Together, this intensification of insecurity often associated with ‘exotic’ destinations and a new image of nature in the era of post-modernity made Iceland particularly appealing as a tourist destination within these discourses of the post-crash environment. It was both seen as safe and as something that could be ‘discovered’ by the tourist looking for an authentic experience of a strange people and exotic nature. Iceland, alongside few other places in the far north, was seen as able to retain its character as a place of bold adventures (Bailes et al. 2014, 91), and the intense media interest in Iceland – economic recovery, women’s democratic movements, volcanos, etc. – placed Iceland firmly on the map as a desirable destination for those who wanted exotic and the adventurous experience. What has also to be seen as significant, which I will discuss better later, is the association of Iceland with a ‘white’ space.

Inspired by Iceland

The campaign “Inspired by Iceland,” launched in 2010, employed social media alongside conventional advertising methods, as well as the staging of major cultural events in Iceland (Pálsdóttir and Haraldsson 2011, 4). Edward H. Huijbens (2015) points out that in March the same year, the CEO of the company Time Communications Group was invited to give a keynote at the Icelandic Travel Industry Association’s annual meeting, where he outlined the potential of social media in revolutionizing the tourism industry. With 150 people from the industry and stakeholders in the audience, his talk was particularly influential (Huijbens 2015, 211).

An Icelandic advertising agency worked on the campaign, employing non-Icelandic experts to assist (Pálsdóttir and Haraldsson 2011, 9). These actors within commercial agencies – who were from different backgrounds and were, most likely, themselves shaped by a historical understanding of Icelandic identity – became active in producing the meaning of being Icelandic and selected iconic symbols and objects to become marketed as Icelandic. This approach recalls Comaroff and Comaroff’s (2009) observation of markets as being shaped through “open-ended dialectic” – the production and refashioning of subjects and cultural objects (ibid., 28–29).

The “Inspired by Iceland” commercials could easily engage with earlier international media images of Iceland that had circulated (such as the pre-crash advertisements focusing on the Business Viking, with an emphasis on adventurous and bold businessmen, and the closing of Iceland’s McDonald’s), as well as other depictions of Iceland channeled via stories of Jón Gnarr and the Best Party, or the narratives of democratic reforms. These depictions of a singular, resilient country contributed toward intensive marketing of Iceland as the ‘other.’ Iceland thus appears not only as a site of exciting hope for the rest of the world, but also as a place that is extraordinary – different from the rest of the world.

The “Inspired by Iceland” campaign attempted to create an ‘umbrella’ brand for Iceland that could benefit various commercial agencies (on umbrella brand Therkelsen and Halkier 2004, 1). In a report that aimed to lay out the campaign’s objectives, organizers emphasized that Iceland was to be shown as a place where the tourist could experience something “different.” The report, furthermore, states that the campaign was going to be directed at travelers who wanted to travel like the explorers of the past, an approach that simultaneously portrayed Iceland as a country of purity and mystique (Leiðarljós í markaðsetningu n.d.).

The visual material on the campaign’s website shows panoramic images of Iceland’s wilderness, often empty of people, with the exception of the lone explorer/tourist (Figure 10.1). The beautiful panoramic images of Iceland found on the website underscores the message that the country belongs in the north, that it is part of the Arctic, the kind of place which, as scholars point out, has retained its purity and boldness, while also being home to a virtuous people (Bailes et al. 2014, 91). The situating of Iceland as part of the Arctic by the government in these efforts also contributed, as pointed out by Ann-Sofie Nielsen Gremaud (2014), to the continued association of the country with unspoiled nature. Glacial landscape is highly sought after by tourists visiting Iceland, and images of glaciers are used extensively in branding Iceland (Huijbens 2015, 206).

The ‘explorer experience’ that these images seem to be selling recalls colonial adventures of both a primitive and presumably untouched nature and of untainted people. This also recalls, as was discussed in the first part of the book, how for a long time Iceland was a popular destination for elite travelers from other European countries, where Iceland was similarly positioned as a place of strange people and rough nature.

After 2012, the campaign encouraged visitors to give Iceland a new name, upload their own images of Iceland and, through social media, vote on the variety of suggestions that came in (Huijbens 2015, 212). Suggestions for a new name were, for example, “Niceland,” “Spiritland” and “Volcanicland.” These opportunities allowed both for a stronger connection of the country with wilderness (Huijbens 2015, 212) and a more robust association with colonial explorations of the past, where part of exploration was the power to name things, as Pratt (1990) has discussed in her historical analysis of colonialism and exploration. The association of Iceland with the exotic also recalls the importance of ‘darkness’ itself as a counterimage to European notions of civilization (Edensor 2015). Darkness has, of course, been used metaphorically in history to portray



Figure 10.1 This beautiful image capturing the weather in Iceland was used in the campaign “Inspired by Iceland.” In the advertisement the following text is printed across it: “But we don’t take cover. We Survive, Thrilled to Show What We’re Made Of.” I did unfortunately not get permission from Promote Iceland to print the advertisement but the photographer kindly permitted that I could use his image

Source: Photo Benjamin Stuard-Hardman

the unknown and unexpected in terms of those considered semi- or uncivilized² (see Edensor 2015).

The campaign also set the stage for intimate contact between the local population and the tourists. When the “Inspired by Iceland” campaign was initiated in 2010, the Icelandic Minister of Industry, speaking at a tourism conference, emphasized the hope that “all Icelanders would see themselves as [the campaign’s] ambassadors”³ (Pálsdóttir and Haraldsson 2011, 6), thus indicating what can be seen as a ‘call of duty’ for the population in Iceland to participate in selling Iceland as a product. All Icelanders were, furthermore, encourage to share a Facebook page with friends all over the world that was set up as part of the campaign (see Huijbens 2015, 210) and then later, in 2013, those living in Iceland were encouraged to share with the world-wide community, their ‘secret’ places in Iceland that had not yet been incorporated into the tourist industry in Iceland (see Huijbens, Jóhannesson and Þorsteinsson 2014, 222). So, the character of the Icelandic people was part of the marketing strategy, which must be seen as greatly facilitated by the other ongoing international discourse about Iceland. Thus, the

pure, somewhat eccentric but harmless Icelanders were merged with the wild natural environment to redefine Iceland to the rest of the world.

This combination of folk and nature is clear in some of the images of the campaign, such as images that show beautiful landscapes and people with headlines such as “authentic,” “surprising” and “unique.” The texts beneath these exclamations address the traveler more directly. They elaborate on who “we” Icelanders are, as the following examples show: “we are true to the spirit and character of Iceland,” and “we are the land of the unexpected. A little wild on the outside, but warm on the inside” (Website: Inspired by Iceland; *Leiðarljós í markaðsetningu* n.d.). These images alongside other play on the reification of Icelanders as specific type of people shaped by the harshness of their nature, recalling the long ongoing association between Icelandic people and nature.

The campaign’s emphasis on tourists being able to expect a close and personal experience with the everyday Icelander was exemplified by videos of Icelanders volunteering to open their homes and to even cook and knit for the tourist visitors (Grétarsdóttir, Ásmundsson and Lárusson 2014, 98). These visual approaches to the marketing campaign intensified how the body of the Icelander was a part of the package being offered. This trend, of course, is also visible in tourist promotion elsewhere, where the tourist can purchase an invitation to dinner at the home of a local family, or in the more personal residential arrangements through webpages such as *Airbnb.com* or *Couchsurfing.com*. Here, however, the association is strongly on the Icelander not simply as friendly and hospitable, but on the Icelander as an exotic creature.

A later addition to the campaign’s home page (probably in 2015), entitled “Ask Guðmundur,” illustrates even more vividly how this marketing of ‘the Icelander’ focused on Icelanders as being out of the ‘ordinary.’ The heading “Ask Guðmundur: The human search engine” was the first to be seen when the home page of the campaign was opened. There, the visitor is invited to ask questions about Iceland or Icelanders, or are asked if they want “to know some Iceland secrets.” The emphasis on “secrets” strengthens the association with past colonial and masculine explorations, indicating both intimacy and the right of the tourist/explorer to appropriate knowledge from local inhabitants. The text also highlights Icelandic specificity by claiming that the name Guðmundur is found only in Iceland, while the image shows a goofy but friendly looking man sitting behind a table in the middle of a geothermal area. He looks funny and even a little crazy in these surroundings, as he talks on a cell phone, with a small Icelandic flag situated on a narrow table. When scrolling down the page or clicking on the video, other men named Guðmundur and women named Guðmunda can be seen, all positioned behind tables in unexpected, beautiful places, ready to answer any questions or disclose any “secrets” of Iceland. The fact that they carry all the same names seems to indicate the homogeneity of Icelanders, and the way in which they are positioned within the landscape signifies these bodies’ closeness to nature.

More generally, the campaign also engaged with images of Iceland as a site of luxury, as envisioned so hopefully by the Icelandic Tourist Board in that 1994 brochure mentioned earlier. The campaign’s emphasis on the exotic and strange,

somewhat funny creatures, thus benefits as well from advertisements of Iceland as a place where luxury can be found, with spas, comfortable hotels and modern infrastructure, as clearly seen in the *Icelandair* magazine, distributed free to all passengers traveling on Icelandair planes. The copious number of advertisements for various spa treatments available in Iceland highlights calm, self-contained white women's bodies, set in a pristine environment. If the tourist then looks at the home page of the Blue Lagoon, the famous geothermal bathing place and spa, the concept of a women's body as a source of pleasure and luxury is further intensified (see Figure 10.2). As demonstrated by Pritchard and Morgan (2000), the advertising industry has for a long time strongly prioritized the Western, white, 'male' gaze in creating tourism destinations. Here, it becomes important how Iceland retains its dualistic position as part of the exotic other, while remaining firmly located within the safety of the first world, offering all the necessary infrastructure and luxuries.

The success of a branding like this depends upon already existing stereotypes and conceptions, even though branding is often seen by its advocates and practitioners as having the potential to modify a particular image (Therkelsen and Halkier 2004). The "Inspired by Iceland" campaign did not only become powerful because it rested on pre-existing ideas of Iceland as exotic, but also due to fact that it relies on past marketing efforts that have historically drawn upon sexist imagery. Advertisements during the 1980s from the Icelandic wool company Álafoss, for example, deployed the dubious slogan, "Touch me and take a closer look." A very controversial 1982 ad from *Flugleiðir* (the company which later became Icelandair) featured three young blonde women dressed in one large wool sweater (Jónsdóttir and Johnson 2014, 233). In some versions, only the women's heads can be seen, but in others it appears as though they are nude underneath the sweater. In one version of this ad campaign, aimed particularly at Swedish men, the heading asks in Swedish: "Svana Baldursdóttir, Snorra Brynjólfssdóttir and Freyja Höskuldsdóttir are wondering when you will arrive in Reykjavík?," thus suggesting the three women are readily available. The text beneath the image emphasizes that a "surprise" waits in Iceland, "something that you have never tried before" – thus indirectly referring to the unknown and unexplored, but also a casual sexual relation – or 'adventure.' And if anyone missed the reference, additional text locates the advertisement firmly within such a frame by referring directly to Icelandic nightlife (see Þjóðviljinn 1982, 1). Thus, historically, Icelandic women have been portrayed as sexually available and closely connected to Icelandic nature. These historical representations of Icelandic women are important here due to their potency in engaging with the current image of exotic landscapes.

These approaches did not go unnoticed in Iceland. The Icelandair ad campaign was the subject of critical discussion in the Icelandic media, especially after a Swedish reporter suggested that Reykjavík was being advertised as the "new Bangkok," where unsuspecting Icelandic women were being offered to Swedish men (*Þjóðviljinn* 1982). It has also been said that Iceland's relative success in relation to gender equality during the 1980s was never used to draw tourists to the

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Figure 10.2 Woman's body indicating Iceland as a place of luxury and relaxation in the Blue Lagoon

Source: Icelandair advertising material

country; rather, the emphasis revolved around Icelandic intrinsic feminine beauty and masculine virility (Jónsdóttir and Johnson 2014, 232).

This emphasis continued into the early 2000s, when Icelandair used slogans such as: “Fancy a Dirty Weekend?” and “One Night Stand” in its UK advertising campaigns, with Icelandair’s spokesperson justifying the approach as an appeal to British erotic humor (Grétarsdóttir 2002, 391; Alessio et al. 2012, 27–28). Around the same time, Nordic news media began publishing articles that emphasized Icelandic nightlife and wild available Icelandic women hungry for non-Icelandic men. Iceland thus started to stand for ‘loose’ Nordic women in more globalized imaginary of Icelandic women in the new millennium (Alessio et al. 2012, 28),

Possibly due to the sharp criticism from Icelandic feminists and commentators, such blatant sexism is generally not as visible today. Still, examples abound. An “Inspired by Iceland” video clip, for example, shows a brief shot of a slim, naked woman with blonde hair.⁴ At the beginning of the sequence, she is shown standing up, but then she lies down with a naked man, obviously for intimate relations. The shot of the woman from behind, shows her tanned body which intensifies the whiteness of her buttocks, which would normally be hidden under a bikini bottom, exposing the viewer to a body that is both wild and white.⁴ Even though some of the images emphasizing ‘wild’ nature on the campaign’s website and promotional material show as this video white bodies, they do not necessarily have to do so, as Iceland’s racial composition is already implied through more global understanding of the Nordic countries as ‘white’ countries. As widely recognized by scholars, the power of whiteness lies in how white individuals do not have to define or think of themselves in terms of racial hierarchies (Hartigan 1997). In Iceland, this means that, while experiencing wild nature and natives, tourists that would be socially classified as white would generally not have to recognize themselves as racialized. In Iceland, the encounter with the exotic and marginal can thus be enacted without the reminders of these imperial and colonial histories, as such encounters in other locations, such as the West Indies or countries in Africa, would. In places like Niger, it would be much more difficult for ‘white’ travelers from the global south to forget the colonial and postcolonial conditions that have produced lives shaped by racism and poverty. In addition, travelers are not in Iceland reminded of the contemporary conditions of insecurity and inequality which characterize the lives of many people in the global south. The exotic can be experienced, touched and observed without any of the unpleasant messiness of the present. Going into the ‘heart of darkness’ in Iceland is thus a different kind of darkness in the global economy – more comfortable, consumable and marketable and limited to the darkness of winter or a desolate night landscape while still retaining the sense of exotic adventure.

But it isn’t just the white, female body that is used to evoke the wildness of Iceland. Hegemonic masculinity in the north has also been produced through association with ‘wild’ nature and land (Ridanpää 2010), which can clearly be seen in Iceland through various images of the rugged Icelander (Kjartansdóttir and Schram 2015; Schram 2009). Films in Iceland have, for example, actively focused on rugged masculinity and resilience within harsh nature, themes exemplified as well

in the television series, *Trapped* (*Ófærð*) aired in 2016, which became extremely popular internationally (Loftsdóttir, Kjartansdóttir and Lund 2017).

Taken together, these images rest on a historical imagination of Iceland as the other, and show how ‘otherness’ in itself has changed from being “devalued tokens of difference into scarce, desirable commodities” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, 30), or in the case of Iceland from subject that tried almost desperately to demonstrate themselves as modernizing toward exotic tourist attraction. The images also say something more. Michael Taussig has argued that the dualistic positioning of “good” and “bad” savages, so important during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, continues to play a role in our present world: good savages are represented as “Eden before the fall” and bad savages as signs of a “permanent wound inflicted by history” (Taussig 1993, 143). When seen in this light, Iceland’s ambiguous positioning – as a part of Europe but yet not, as modern but exotic, as inhabiting the edges of the world but still central – can be seen as particularly appealing due to its perceived distance from political questions of power and domination that could evoke the darker side of Europe’s colonial history and relationship with the exotic.

The Nordic countries’ association with whiteness and equality (Loftsdóttir 2014; McIntosh 2015) situates Iceland, furthermore, within a ‘white’ space that can be perceived as being outside the history of colonialism and racism – a space where colonialism, as Gilroy (1993) points out, is generally not perceived as belonging to Europe. The links with racialization are clear here, especially considering scholars’ focus on whiteness in the past. The power of whiteness lies in its unmarked character and privileges that people can more easily access due to their categorization as white (Hartigan 1997, 496). The myth of a post-racial world (Lentin 2014) can thus perhaps be more easily upheld in the exotic landscape of Iceland, rather than in places where racism is somehow more tangible. In some other places, racism as important in structures of people’s lives and opportunities in past and present is more visible, such as in historical sites where people were killed or abused due to racism, where colonial violence is evident in the ruins that people are left with, or where local ethnic and racial minorities provide service to the tourist, while living in poverty themselves.

The way things turned out so wonderfully in Iceland

These imaginaries of Iceland, capturing the aspirations and admiration of many people in the US and several European countries, are surprising for several reasons. First, despite receiving accolades for letting its banks fail, the Icelandic government never made a conscious decision to do so. In fact, the government tried to save the banks with foreign loans but simply could not (Byrne and Þorsteinsson 2012, 144). When the banks could not be refinanced, the only remaining option was to separate the domestic activity of the banks from its international activity. It is therefore misleading to speak of a unique ‘Icelandic way’ out of the crisis, as so often depicted in the international media. It is even more misleading to describe the entire nation as ‘standing up to’ the international banking system. The



Figure 10.3 A comic addressing the sense of nothing having changed in post-crash Iceland. The text in the corner introduces that it is five years and 352 days since the collapse of the wall, referring to the economic crash. The dark site of the wall says “Greed is good” while the text on the other side states that “Responsibility comes with freedom.” The guy says “Well I have had enough of this. Shouldn’t we just come back over?”

Source: Art by Halldór Baldursson

popular protests certainly led to the downfall of the government and new elections (although the two parties that had been in power during the boom years were returned to power a mere four years later). However, at the time of the protests, the banks had already been nationalized.

It is, furthermore, misleading to claim that the Icelandic public did not pay anything to ‘save’ the banks. Massive sums went into saving the Central Bank

of Iceland. The cost of the collapsed banking system was estimated at 2.5 billion euros, or 414 billion Icelandic króna (Stjórnarráð Íslands 2012; see also Matthíasson and Davíðsdóttir 2013). It is estimated that 28% of governmental debt in 2012 was incurred directly due to the costs of rebuilding the banking system (Júlíusdóttir 2012). It is difficult to pinpoint the exact total costs to the nation, but the fact remains that total government debt increased from 22% of Iceland's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2007 to 80% in 2010, eventually reaching a peak of 85% in the following years (Iceland Finance Ministry 2015). This percentage is very close to the threshold Reinhart and Rogoff (2010) contend is a level where the economic growth of advanced and emerging countries slows considerably due to the high costs associated with such a debt burden.⁵

In fact, the demand for a 'new Iceland' and new ways of doing politics that characterized post-crash Iceland did not result in revolutionary changes in Icelandic politics or governance⁶ (Ólafsson 2014, 10). The creation of a new constitution, which the Icelandic Parliament decided was needed in 2009 for this 'new Iceland' instigated, for example, a great deal of optimism and hopes of a more democratic society. Even though lot of work was put into preparing and making a new constitution, mobilizing the Icelandic public in various ways,⁷ the new constitution was never brought to vote in the government. Neoliberalization and increased emphasis on privatization has also continued in terms of healthcare and education⁸ (Dýrfjörð and Magnúsdóttir 2016) (see Figure 10.3)

In this light, it felt strange for me to see articles celebrating Iceland as a "democratic heaven" and to listen to people I met abroad talk about how wonderful Iceland was and how fantastic it was that "the Icelandic people" took matters into their own hands.

Halldór Baldursson's critical comic strips can yet again been used as a mirror to the ongoing Icelandic discussions: A comic strip published in 2014 depicts a man dressed in a business suit walking out of a bathroom. We only see his back, but the bathroom is covered in filth. On the towel-stand next to the sink, a sign reads: "Remember to wash your hands of the responsibility of the economic crash" (see Figure 10.4). The text bluntly reflects the perception that those in power have now succeeded in distancing themselves from their responsibility for the economic crash – it was too costly to investigate the crash; the criticism of the key players was a witch-hunt and it was time to move on. How much of the rebellion that people felt took place in 2008 when the government stepped down, turns out to be a reproduction of the system? As Gluckman's (1954) analysis of 'rituals of rebellion' demonstrated long ago, rebellions can be a way of renewing the system rather than its transformation.

In today's neoliberal media-saturated world, badges of identity are strongly commercialized. Within that space, Iceland is able to stress its peculiarity, claim associations with democratic traditions of the global south, simultaneously as its



Figure 10.4 The comic captures clearly how few years after the crash, there was a sense that political parties, business men and politicians did not want to shoulder responsibility of the crash

Source: Art by Halldór Baldursson

nation branding is based on older European images of the country's subordinate and exotic status. I ask myself if Iceland constitutes, in a sense, an imaginary space for Europe to inscribe particular desires and 'otherness' – now seen as exciting and desirable – because it has been both distant and familiar. Iceland is distant enough to make such imaginaries seem realistic and possible, but close enough for them to say something about Europe or the global north in general. Here again, we see Iceland emerging as the 'trickster': a part of Europe, distant, white, but

still wild, like ‘us,’ but yet not ‘us.’ The notion of Nordic exceptionalism, as discussed by Lars Jensen and myself (Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2012a), has critically addressed how the Nordic countries have sought to set themselves apart from Western Europe and the US in terms of its non-involvement with colonialism. The recent interest in Icelandic exceptionalism, however, is quite different, for it revolves around a powerful projection of the country itself as the ‘other.’

Notes

- 1 This chapter is derived in part from an article “The Exotic North: Gender, Nation Branding and Post-colonialism in Iceland,” by Kristín Loftsdóttir published in *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, copyright The Nordic Association for Women’s Studies and Gender Research, reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd, www.tandfonline.com on behalf of The Nordic Association for Women’s Studies and Gender Research.
- 2 Northern Lights Tourism in Iceland is a relatively recent trend that fits well with this emphasis on nature and wildness, feeding into these generalized notions of Iceland as unspoiled and on the edge of the world by commercializing darkness alongside the Northern Lights (Lund 2016; Jóhannesson and Lund 2017).
- 3 In the original: “Vonast er til að allir Íslendingar liti á sig sem sendiherra þess.”
- 4 I tried to get permission to print the image of this in the book but unfortunately it was not permitted by Íslandsstofa (Promote Iceland) who is in charge of the campaign “Inspired by Iceland.” The video as a whole can be seen here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2QgGoAuwoU.
- 5 Elaine Byrne and Huginn F. Þorsteinsson (2012) claim that when comparing Iceland and Ireland: “It may seem strange to say this, but what seems to be Ireland’s misfortune in this regard is just that the Irish banks were not big enough for policy makers to deem it virtually impossible to salvage them” (p. 144).
- 6 The government taking over after the crash emphasized welfare instead of financialization, but was by many seen as failing to initiate key reforms necessary for a better society, the new constitution, and to change the management of fisheries, Iceland’s valuable resource. These two issues were closely related.
- 7 The government attempted to give the Icelandic public an active role in making the new constitution. The National Assembly in October 2010 (with sampling of 950 individuals) was supposed to gather information on what people wanted to see in a new constitution (Gylfason 2012, 12–13). A national election of representatives for an Constitutional Assembly was held in November 2010 where 523 candidates from wide spectrum of Icelandic society competed for 25 seats (Gylfason 2012, 13; Helgason 2011; Kristinsson 2012).
- 8 The reception of reports by the two Special Investigation Committees established on one hand to investigate Iceland’s Housing Fund (set up in 2010) and on the other the collapse of the Icelandic savings banks (set up in 2011) clearly show how the focus shifted from critical analysis of Icelandic infrastructure and society toward inward-looking discussion of the costs of the investigations. Despite the fact that the committees’ work exposed several criminal and unethical practices – results similar to the first committee of inquiry on the privatization of the three largest banks – the media discussion of the committees’ work focused mainly on how costly they were.

11 All's well that ends well¹

The aftermath of the crash

In 2017, nine years after the disastrous crash, Iceland has become a busy tourist destination. When walking in downtown Reykjavík, I hear only a few people speaking Icelandic. Everywhere people are dressed in sturdy ‘explorer’-style clothing suitable for Iceland’s climate. Most of the store signs are in English, and many international brand stores are prominent. Stores aimed specifically at tourists – often full of items made in China – are clearly visible with the so-called ‘puffinization’ (*Lundavæðingu*) of Laugavegurinn, Reykjavík’s main shopping street. The term ‘puffinization’ refers negatively to the high number of stores specializing in tourist souvenirs, the term drawing from a chain that has a puffin as its logo. On a route of 1300 meters in downtown Reykjavík, a tourist can expect to encounter 30 stores selling products directly aimed at tourists (Guðmundsson 2015). In addition, cafés and restaurants are on every corner, and housing in Reykjavík’s central area has increasingly been commercialized as rented spaces, the inflated rent driving out the original residents of the neighborhood. When I was at Iceland’s international airport at the end of 2017, I was struck by the number of advertisements there as a whole at the airport, that all in different ways emphasizing Iceland’s exceptionalism. When I was entering a flight to the US, one captured me especially. It was an image of a man seen from afar walking on a snow field, the blue-white color of the sky around him signaling that it will snow even more. The large letters printed across the image say, “But We Don’t Take Cover, We Survive, Thrilled to Show What We’re Made Of.” The “we” that is used here must be the ‘Icelanders,’ reifying them as resilient, strong and as one with nature (see Figure 10.1).

Tourism has become one of the most hotly debated issues in Iceland, and while many Icelanders celebrate the increasing diversity of Reykjavík, it goes often hand in hand with strong criticism of the homogenization signified by the term ‘puffinization’ and the ongoing transformation of the downtown space into hotels and Airbnb rentals (see also Skaptadóttir and Loftsdóttir 2016; Þorkelsdóttir 2015).

This isn’t just limited to Reykjavík. In Hafnarfjörður where I live, elves have become one of the favorites in attempts at nation branding. Next to the road that goes through the town and takes people from the international airport to Reykjavík, is a little sign welcoming them to the “Elves-town.” The branding of Iceland as ‘cute’ and ‘strange’ has even hit Hafnarfjörður.

When I walk around Reykjavík or encounter people who are excited to talk about their ‘authentic’ experiences in Iceland’s exotic landscapes and culture, I find myself thinking that the Icelandic people have now become like the WoDaaBe in Niger, where I did fieldwork in the late 1990s. My research, taking place almost 20 years ago, focused on the exoticization of the WoDaaBe through the tourism industry and expatriates, and critically analyzed popular discourses in the global south, where the WoDaaBe were presented as a people still in the grip of their culture, shaped by nature and still closely connected to it (Loftsdóttir 2008). At the time, I did not understand that the growing commercialization of their ethnicity was a part of the neoliberal reconfiguring of the culture concept taking place on a much wider scale, a process that would eventually reach Iceland. When I started the research project on the Icelandic crash, I did not dream that Iceland’s rapid and ongoing change would eventually take me back to where I had started as a scholar. I sometimes joke that I can almost take a chapter out of my doctoral dissertation and replace the term ‘WoDaaBe’ with ‘Icelanders’ and I would have a research paper ready for publication.

The banana republic

The end that seemed to be in sight after the economic crash in 2008 was not of course the end at all. It was neither the end of neoliberalism in Iceland nor the end of Iceland itself. Exoticism as a persistent trope for Iceland in the present and its local embrace in creating an Icelandic subject was vividly reflected when the so-called Panama Papers were revealed in 2016. Before I elaborate on this, let me stress the irony. After all the celebration of Iceland as the exemplary nation in terms of dealing with the crash and as upholding democratic principles, it was revealed that exceptional numbers of Icelanders were keeping money in offshore tax havens, including two ministers, hoping to avoid paying taxes. Once again, Iceland was at the forefront of the international news, perhaps even more so due to the fact that the prime minister from the Progressive Party was caught lying on camera about his own financial holdings. With the interview airing all over the world, Icelandic social and conventional media also broadcasted and dutifully reported on these international representations of Iceland. This time around, even some of my nomadic friends from Niger knew about how corrupted Icelandic politicians were. A friend from Niger soberly and sympathetically explained to me that this was pretty much how it was everywhere – elites extracting profits like before, but within a framework made possible from new global environment.

Like many others, I watched the broadcast regarding the Panama Papers on April 3rd, 2016. Reykjavík Media, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalism (ICIJ) and the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* were key anchors in holding together the collaboration of 376 journalists from 76 countries who worked on the leaked files (Kristjánsson 2016). Particularly shocking was the image of the prime minister, who many saw as vital in rescuing Iceland from the crisis due to his involvement in the Icesave dispute. On camera, he brazenly

denied when asked if he had offshore accounts. His stunned face when it became apparent that the journalists knew all about his holding company, Wintris, was an image that was difficult to forget.

The day after the broadcast, I saw announcements on social media about a protest being organized in front of the Parliament building. The small square in front of the Parliament was also the site of the post-crash 'pots-and-pans' revolution and many other protests after that. It started in the afternoon, and I walked directly there from my office at the University of Iceland. The weather was cold, but it felt like spring, with the sun shining high up in the clear blue sky. I entered a stream of people flowing smoothly into the same direction.

For some reason, I started to think of the news clips about the Parliamentary Festival from 1930, when people walked together during the festival as one coherent body. As people probably felt during the Parliamentary Festival, I felt a sense of 'oneness' and of 'doing something,' both of which ultimately translated into a sense of belonging within a community. It is well known, of course, how protests tend to mobilize powerful feelings and identities, and create forms of sociality (Juris 2008, 63). Jeffrey Juris (2008) uses the term 'affective solidarity' to refer to the amplification and transfer of certain emotions into a sense of solidarity during protests (p. 65). People around me were almost cheerful, and the atmosphere reminded me not only of this past event, the Parliamentary Festivals, that I did not experience myself, but also of the numerous elections and referendums that had been held in post-crash Iceland – on Icesave, on the constitution, on the president – where people meet in their local elementary schools, people who live in the same community, the atmosphere joyful and serious at the same time. I had myself been at my children's school several times to vote on these different issues, meeting neighbors, parents of classmates of my children and family members on those occasions.

While walking to the protest site, I ran into several acquaintances. While some were shocked by these revelations about the prime minister's offshore accounts, most said that they were not surprised. To them, this was just one more piece in the puzzle of endless revelations of continued corruption in Iceland. Still, they protested.

Interestingly, this protest was probably the biggest in Iceland's history, bigger even than the protests related to the Icesave referendums, with 17% of inhabitants of Reykjavík and surrounding areas 18 years and older participating, thus consisting of around 26,000 people (Bernburg 2016b).

When I arrived at the square in front of the Parliament building, many people were already there and more were coming from every direction (see Figure 11.1). People were also standing on the balconies and rooftops in surrounding houses. Many carried signs, some of which appeared homemade while other signs were more sophisticated. Some of the signs demanded the resignation of the two ministers who were in the Panama files: the prime minister and the finance minister, who also heads the Independence Party. Other signs commented on the persistent corruption in Iceland. The texts included the following proclamations: "Tell the truth, and be gone" (in Icelandic), "Leave corrupted government" (in Icelandic),



Figure 11.1 The protest in front of the Parliament in 2016

Source: Photo by Kristín Loftsdóttir

“Will take care of Political Funerals” (in Icelandic), “Prime Minister: Fuck off to Tortola” (English), “Tortola Government f—k off!” (English).

A survey of participants conducted later indicated that most protestors came to speak up against corruption in Iceland in general and to proclaim a lack of faith in politicians in Iceland (Bernburg 2016b). These views reflect the discussion in the previous chapter, that post-crash Iceland contained a lingering sense of corruption – contrary to what the international media reported – that did not end with the crash. The Panama Papers thus seemed to confirm something that most people probably felt they knew already.

Even though people can be motivated to participate in a protest against corruption, participation in a protest does not necessarily mean that people believe that success is likely (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001, 18). Affective reasons are important as well, as I mentioned earlier (*ibid.* p. 18) with the sense of group solidarity, of belonging, being particularly important (Collins 2001, 29). Many people in the crowd held their cell phones in the air, photographing the protest while looking around excitedly. Again, I recall the Parliamentary Festival of 1930 and all the artifacts that were produced to ‘remember’ the event and to commemorate that one was there, that one was a part of that history. Participating in this demonstration, we were perhaps all trying to capture this moment – not necessarily because we saw it as changing Iceland’s future, as people thought at the Parliamentary Festival – but because we felt that we were part of something. Perhaps our participation in the protest has more to do with sense of community – the “affective solidarity” that Juris (2008) talks about, which in this case refers to the

sense of belonging to a nation – whatever the concept of nation really means – than the actual feeling that the protest would change the state of affairs.

At this particular moment, when I stood there sandwiched between people and looking over the crowd, I was not thinking about the corruption in Iceland or the false portrait of post-crash Iceland painted by the international media. Instead, what captured my attention was the sense of the protest as a performance. It was not simply a performance that worked at creating a sense of solidarity for those participating. This particular protest seemed to offer a performance for an audience. As such, it was based on both an interpellation of particular subjects by performers in certain roles within the act, while also making the audience a salient part of the performance. As argued by Goodwin et al. (2001) when talking about protest: “the richer a movement’s culture . . . the greater those pleasures” of the individuals participating, where the word “culture” here refers to rituals within the protest that are familiar to people, songs and construction of enemies (p. 18). The sound of pots and pans ringing on the protest site were, for example, a clear reference to the post-crash protests that brought down the government. Most of the signs I saw were in Icelandic, but many were in English. I wondered if they had been written by English-speaking people or by native Icelanders who knew the protest would receive international coverage and who therefore wanted their messages to be legible to an international audience. In fact, the day before the protests, the Icelandic media had reported extensively on how much interest the international media had shown in Iceland’s presence in the Panama Papers, thus probably stimulating excitement that once again Iceland was in the spotlight of the whole world.

Standing on the square, I heard helicopters flying overhead and wondered if this was someone from the international media or – I imagined – perhaps even one of the rich tourists taking a panoramic helicopter ride that now included a local protest along with the natural scenery. Four individuals who looked like tourists (judging by their fancy cameras, sturdy winter clothing during spring and their curious and hesitant looks) squeezed past me, and I heard people standing next to me talking in Icelandic about how lucky those tourists were. These tourists, the protestors said, were able to witness one of the protests that they had probably read about or seen on TV in relation to the crash. “What a treat for them,” one laughed.

I asked myself to what extent the protest had become a performance of being Icelandic – being able to participate in what had been repeated over and over again about the exceptional Iceland and the exceptional Icelanders. Even though being essentially about protest in a democratic country can this performance also be seen as indicating the submission to the idea of Iceland as exotic and different, just as the Parliamentary Festival was in some sense symbolic of the submission to the idea of modernization? We can refer back to a comment by one of the individuals who completed the National Museum’s questionnaire about the Parliamentary Festival of 1930. He claimed that after the festival, all criticism of ‘Danification’ stopped – i.e. the modernization that Danish subjects brought to Iceland through commerce and industry that was so eagerly taken up by Iceland’s

cultural elite. After the festival, these projects of modernization were apparently seen as intrinsic and universal – as necessary to move Iceland ‘forward’ into the future.

Looking around me now at the cameras, the helicopters, the protest signs in English, the faces looking not only at the Parliament but also checking to see who else is there and what representatives from what media all indicated a playful performance for others rather than a communal act of outrage. Even though people were protesting corruption as they did after the crash, the atmosphere was strikingly different. The post-crash protests always seemed to take place in the dark and cold, partly due to the fact that the most intense protests took place in the middle of the winter. But that it’s the darkness that lingers most in my memory is probably also due to the fact that these protests themselves were characterized by ‘darkness,’ an intense anger, a sense of hopelessness and deep concerns for the future.

The cheerful atmosphere here in 2016 was in sharp contrast with the seriousness of the issue against which people were protesting – government corruption. It could be that the shock was less dramatic than the stunning effects of the crash and therefore not permeated with the same anxieties for the future.

In front of me stood three young men in their early twenties. One held a sign saying “Iceland: Nordic Banana Republic.” I also noted that bananas were distributed to some protestors. After watching the young men for a while, I could not resist asking them if they had made the sign themselves. The young man holding the sign smiled and seemed a bit surprised, as if he found my question a bit awkward. Someone he didn’t know had just given the sign to him, he told me. He gazed at the sign while talking, almost as if he had not read the text before and explained to me, probably thinking I didn’t understand the meaning of the text, that “banana republic” refers to “a shit place” (*svona skítapleis*).

The men’s accidental encounter with this sign was later more clearly demonstrated when they started shouting, joining the various chants and songs of the crowds. They shouted “Banana stjórn,” which is not the Icelandic translation at all. These words they shouted would actually translate as “Banana-government,” which indicated that they did not really understand the meaning of the phrase. I also noticed their shouts were not very passionate. I felt as it was more as if they were participating in an event, which was further demonstrated by how they smiled approvingly to each other after few rounds of shouts (see Figure 11.2).

Protest today bases strongly on media of diverse kinds, as demonstrated clearly by scholars (see Moore 2017), where organizers can be seen as attempting to “‘hijack . . .’ the global media space” (Jeffrey 2008, 62). The signs written in English, the bananas, the association with the earlier ‘pots-and-pans’ protests, certainly indicates a very clever and calculated attempt to capture the attention of the media – which after all, had been predicted as ‘coming’ so eagerly the day before by the Icelandic media.

However, there was also something more going on. The playfulness, the association with ‘banana republic,’ usually identified with the so-called third-world countries, the smiling faces also indicated how the people present all seemed



Figure 11.2 The bananas were distributed at the protest site and featured on many of the signs, probably underlining that Iceland was nothing more than a Banana Republic

Source: Photo by Kristín Loftsdóttir

eager to participate. I referred to Althusser's concept interpellation at the beginning of this discussion. In spite of the concept's limitations, it still reflects how people take up certain subject positions through their interpellation or 'hailing' as different subjects. Interpellation refers to the process in which social representations are accepted and absorbed by individuals as their own representations. As Althusser (1971) describes in his famous essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," if you turn around when someone calls after you – "Hey you there," you are recognizing your interpellation as a particular subject. In this case, the hailing is 'Hi, exotic and strange Icelander.' Turning around signals your embracement or submission within that category assigned to you.

This sense of performance of the exotic Icelander – of an image from which people in Iceland have so long tried to distance themselves – raises many questions. Can we use Michael Taussig's (1993) concept of "second contact," which he developed primarily in relation to colonial subjects? Taussig uses the concept to try to capture the performativity of the reanimation of images and their recognition within colonial contexts. The first contact is the colonial encounter between colonizers and colonial subjects, while the second contact refers to images of the colonizers – animated or not – that are produced by colonized subjects. Taussig uses these concepts when focusing on West African performances of the colonizers, which thus create a certain image of them, followed by the self-recognition of the colonizers in these images. We are obviously not speaking of colonized and colonizers when we speak about present-day Iceland, nor images produced by

those who are subjugated or those subjugating them. Rather, I find intriguing how Taussig's "second contact" concept points toward the reproduction or mimicry of images of oneself created by others, and their performances for oneself and others.

In the Icelandic case, the second contact can be understood as the contact of outsiders with Icelandic reanimation of outsider's images of Iceland. These performances – and the new images that they generate – are mobilized by the helicopter, the media representatives and especially the tourists standing in front of the Parliament, thus physically 'being there.' The tourists probably got – just as one of the protesters mentioned – even more than they could hope for, i.e. the reanimation of the same images or advertisements that they had seen circulating in the global mediascape.

Homi Bhabha (1984) sees mimicry as "the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power" (p. 126). If we follow this insight linking mimicry with gaining power over others, we can observe the power appropriated by the crowd not as the appropriation of the 'Other,' but of 'self as Other.' Has the appropriation of the image of the exotic Icelander, now informed by what has been reappropriated, become an image that can be used by Icelanders for their own purposes? Bhabha's (1984) attention toward ambivalence in this context seems appropriate, as well as his point that the mimicry is almost mocking or excessive, especially when considering how the image of the exotic Icelander suddenly seemed excessive, appearing as it did in different contexts both in Iceland and beyond. It was almost a kind of parody, or self-parody, evoking as well Herzfeld's concept of "cultural intimacy," but in this case a parody staged for others.

However, we should also ask – more painfully – to what extent does the acceptance of this association with the 'other' in Iceland also involve the recognition that 'we' will never fully become the 'other' in economic and political terms due to Iceland's perception (by Icelandic subjects and others) of its 'white' position and geographical location? Using Bhabha's (1984) postulate that "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject that is almost the same, but not quite" (p. 126), we are not talking about the same thing when we talk about Iceland today and racialized postcolonial subjects. But his argument of desire for the Other as the same but not quite still hints at something present in Iceland. Can we assert that the creation of the exotic Icelander is the desire for persistent racialized and colonized ways of relating to the world, but without the guilt?

Concluding remarks

Investigating crisis at Europe's contextual margins brings out the continued importance of coloniality in the present (Mignolo 2007). Iceland's recent economic crisis reveals a hidden transcript of identity-making, where some countries are ranked as more European and others as less. In the first chapters of this book, I showed how wider European discourses of coloniality shaped an emerging Icelandic national identity, as well as informing Icelanders' own perception of their

position as subjects under Danish rule. Here, as elsewhere, we saw how ideas of modernity as singular and overreaching overlapped with categorizations of cultures and people's bodies. As so clearly reflected in the Parliamentary Festival of 1930, cultural politics in Iceland at the beginning of the 20th century strongly emphasized the remolding Icelandic culture in line with Danish and European ideas of 'culture' (Rastrick 2013). For that it was needed both to refer to older ideas or artifacts that could be reshaped as nationalistic (Elgenius 2015) and to create something completely new which was still necessary, such as a national symphony.

As we saw in the second part of the book, nationalistic rhetoric produced during the boom period in the 2000s similarly revolved around acknowledgments of Iceland's status as belonging in the same league as powerful European countries, as well as locating the Icelandic subject as distinct from the rest of the world. These discourses clearly engaged strongly with older nationalistic themes at times when Iceland was undergoing massive changes, with banks and businessmen directly or indirectly mobilizing the past to encourage strong support for the increased financialization of Iceland. The masculine 'white' neoliberal subject was thus formed in a strong dialogue with Iceland's colonial past, as well as engaging with more globalized ideas of masculinities. To understand why a new Icelandic subject was needed, a subject particularly suitable to the neoliberal world, it is useful to refer to the importance that anthropologists have long given to analyzing of how global processes gain localized meanings (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 5). A nuanced perspective on the interplay between the so-called 'global' and 'local' is, however, needed (Tsing 2000), where we recognize how understandings of phenomena seen as global are domesticated, redeployed and resisted within particular localities (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, 305).

Global flows of capital, information and people thus have specific historical and political settings (Gregory 2004, 284–285), with memory and local histories being mobilized to understand the present neoliberal world. We also saw how racialization operated not only through Iceland's positioning in the world but also through the historically potent idea of Eastern Europeans as Europe's "internal others" (Kanlačs 2016), which was quickly adopted in Iceland when a disposable workforce was needed. This racialization of Eastern workers was facilitated and enabled by the Icelandic state's lack of interest in this population and lack of concern for their well-being even when stories of abuses were reported early on by trade unions.

In a changed environment in Iceland after the crash, the concern became more intensively focused on Islam and Muslims as threats. But this racialization of Lithuanian ethnicity at this particular moment in history shows the flexibility and resilience of racism. Furthermore, it reflects racism's reliance on historical categorizations that spread globally while simultaneously gaining specific texture within localized context.

The strong sense after the crash that Iceland no longer held the status of being fully European, investigated in Part II, shows the continued importance of coloniality – constituting one of these historically salient wider contexts – as

international media coverage of Iceland routinely associated Iceland with countries with weak geopolitical power. Pride in Icelandic nationality was soon restored in Iceland through engagements with wider European discourses that celebrated “how well” Iceland had dealt with the crisis and Iceland as the “best place in the world for women.” Such discourses, however, as coloniality indicates, not only failed to reflect the lived effects of the collapse in Iceland, they also echoed European racial division of ‘mature’ political subjects in the north and less mature in the south. Such kinds of discourses reveal the ranking of different countries according to the racialized logic of the past (Dzenovska 2013), while in most cases continuing to be concealed.

Discourses celebrating Iceland’s economic recovery signal the different ways in which the ‘exotic’ has become conceptualized in a neoliberal world of commodified identities where we again see the fixing of boundaries and identities with the use of reified icons of the past. Here notably, while these discourses celebrate Iceland, they do so under the same terms as Iceland has been historically imagined in wider European community, i.e. based on the very same ideas that Icelanders had tried to distance themselves from, thus reflecting Iceland’s liminality. This celebratory depiction of how Iceland dealt with the crash is particularly striking when compared with the extremely negative discussion of southern European countries in the aftermath of the crash (Tsoukala 2013; Bickes, Otten and Weymann 2014). Comparing the international discussion of Iceland with the discussion on Southern Europe in the aftermath of the crisis raises critical questions on the differentiation of Europe as an idea and how certain parts of Europe seem to move in and out of ‘proper’ Europeaness. In Iceland, the celebration of Icelanders’ ostensibly exceptional ways of dealing with the crisis involved still, controversially, the acceptance of depictions of the country and its people as strange and exotic. To some extent, this signals acceptance of the reifying images of the ‘other’ from which Icelanders had so long sought to detach themselves.

At the same time as I attempt to capture some of the racialized logic of the contemporary world, I have tried to flesh out the anxieties and desires of individuals that cannot be reduced to racial dynamics, while rooted in and being a part of particular racialized ordering of the world. Racism embodies historical memory while it is produced and becomes meaningful within local subjectivities and histories. Thus, racism can be entrenched in affective meanings that are not always racialized themselves (Gullestad 2002). Seeing racism as embedded in affective understanding of the past is important to me to understand how racism continues in the present (Amin 2010), not only in racist hatred expressed by extremists but also reproduced and sanctioned through larger structures of power and ways that make the world meaningful in much broader ways. In this book, I have only marginally discussed the racism in Iceland against Icelandic and non-Icelandic subjects, which is a subject that I have covered much more extensively elsewhere (see for example Loftsdóttir 2014, 2015, 2017). Instead, here I have focused more on mapping coloniality and racism, as these are expressed in a constant interplay between Icelandic racialized understanding and large global hegemonic structures. This book therefore positions itself within the growing body of studies

focusing on whiteness in a European context, demonstrating how whiteness in Europe is often strongly conceptualized within ideas of Europe's democratic past, Western superiority and civilization (Ponzanesi and Blaagaard 2011), showing how these ideas of whiteness have become animated within different national and localized contexts (see for example, Essed and Trienekens 2008; Garner 2006, 2014). To say that whiteness and racialization have to be understood in more nuanced ways within different historical trajectories is not an attempt to qualify racism as less prevalent in Europe or in the Nordic countries than in the US. Rather, such understandings attempt to analyze how racism is articulated in different contexts, where the US only constitutes one of many – even though hegemonically important – sites where racialization and racism takes place.

Focusing on coloniality at times of crisis contributes, furthermore, toward this deeper understanding of how racism 'endures' in the present (Amin 2010, 4). Here I want to stress two points: First, racism endures as earlier indicated because it links up to affective meanings that are rooted in people's experiences and understandings of the world, where the nation constitutes one important part of this context. Here, again the complex interplay of global racist structures and memories has to be recognized as it interplays with localized meanings. The current mediascapes and reification of certain histories (history of Europe or the West) allow people to experience themselves as part of various histories of which they have not necessarily been part of (Huysen 2001). Second, focusing on coloniality in the context of crisis reflects the fact that racism endures because racism is not only about migration. Popular accounts and research on racism tend to center closely on racism in the context of migration, which, despite its importance, risks positioning migrant bodies as somehow the source of racism, rather than racism intrinsic to a certain order of the world. By focusing on crisis, this discussion shows how racism endures by being embedded in other discourses. This helps to make racialization meaningful, though not always openly hateful.

The discussion of Iceland's economic crisis also sheds a light on the affective appeal of national sentiments. As we have seen, the rise of nationalism in Iceland in the 19th century and its continued importance cannot be separated from logic of modernity and racialization, while it also created the sense of meaning and belonging within a community that cannot only be reduced to a racist dynamic. Elisabeth Kirtsoglou and Dimitris Theodossopoulos (2010) point out how nationalistic discourse can be a vehicle for expressing wider sentiments of being at the mercy of wider global powers. Their analysis hints toward the complexities of analyzing expressions of nationalism in the present. While nationalism remains rooted in racialized conceptions of modernity, it is too simplistic to reduce nationalist discourse to exclusion or racism toward others. A recent analysis of cosmopolitanism, which in some cases is posed in opposition to nationalism, exemplifies, for example, how racialized and exclusionary discourses can also surface within a cosmopolitan discourse (Theodossopoulos 2010; Edmunds 2013).

We live in a world where increased sense of precariousness characterizes the lives of many (Muehlebach 2013). Kirtsoglou and Theodossopoulos's (2010) discussion of nationalistic discourse during times of crisis reminds us how other

people seek resources and agency from the life they know. Ideas of what constitutes the national are thus a cultural and physical resource that enables people to respond and adapt to changing circumstances. The Icesave dispute, and the pride it generated in some migrants from Lithuania and Latvia, indicates how nationalistic discourses that might seem exclusionary are not necessarily so in all respects. Here we saw how the sense of pride in the way that ‘Icelanders’ responded reflected how individuals from these two countries integrated the nationalistic response to Icesave to their own experiences of battling with nations with more geopolitical power.

This book also indicates that while the ongoing criticism of methodological nationalism is important, it is also necessary to analyze how the idea of the nation has remained salient in the 21st century, despite predictions by scholars that it would die out (Brubaker 2004). Rogers Brubaker (2004) states that we have to be careful not to reify nationalism, but to recognize how it changes with time (p. 121). Furthermore, new forms that link with ideas of nations and engage with nationalism must also be investigated where we see the commercialization of the nation and of national identity. With the growing significance of nation branding and its intersection with people’s identities and identifications (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009), one must ask how Europe’s troublesome past – characterized by racism, colonialization and the devaluation of difference – has shaped this present and the current reifications of difference.

As I stated in the beginning of this book, Icelandic exceptionalism, as in other Nordic countries, has revolved around Iceland’s position as peaceful and around outside historical processes of colonialism. I want to stress that through the historical processes described here, we see clearly how exceptionalism has to be understood within historical trajectories and recognized as engaging with the geopolitical position and global power of coloniality. Otherwise, the concept of ‘exceptionalism’ risks becoming a “blind spot,” as Janet Roitman (2014) warns with the concept “crisis,” which hinders analysis more than aiding it.

When Iceland was seeking its full independence from Denmark, exceptionalism was a strategy to gain recognition for the country as fully independent and to create a sense of a subject that had something in common. This sense of exceptionalism then lingered on, but it took the form of unstable notions that could be stretched in different directions or mobilized for various projects. By distancing itself from historical processes such as colonialism, Iceland could retain a degree of innocence in terms of racism of the past (Loftsdóttir 2014), while in other contexts, a sense of exceptionalism was present in discourses depicting a nation that, despite its smallness, was great, naively animating a sense of pride in belonging to nationality that was marginal globally. These discourses emphasized Icelandic people as different from everyone else – not only from those seen as racially ‘other,’ but also those in general perceived as outside Iceland.

Exceptionalism was very much at work during the economic boom period, but it took on a different texture as Iceland moved from being an uninteresting country for the rest of the world into a much more prominent international position, even a model to be followed. This rhetoric of exceptionalism during the Manic

Millennium years streamlined Iceland's image in a particular globalized sense of business masculinities, allowing a visualization of the Icelandic exceptional businessmen as being almost natural due to Icelanders' exceptional nature, as modern-day Vikings. When a growing number of migrant workers began to settle in Iceland, the exclusionary part of nationalism became particularly acute. Then, in post-crash Iceland, it is necessary to distinguish between a different, unstable and localized affective sense of exceptionalism and the external one that projected on Iceland certain and rather coherent images that engaged directly with the racialized order of the world.

At the same time, this book has also shown how these discourses collide in performances meant to demonstrate what being Icelandic is for a new world of commercialized and marketable identities, where the spectacle of identity performance produced under market conditions also becomes "a vehicle for finding the 'true self'" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, 25). To speak about 'Nordic exceptionalism' is a way of capturing how particular discourses are similar across the Nordic countries – and actually beyond them if we compare them to other works focusing on nations within Europe that were not formal participants in the colonial 'adventure.' However, the phrase does not necessarily refer, as often seems to be assumed, to a vision of the Nordic countries as one whole that is being recognized across the borders of the Nordic countries themselves. In Iceland, the relationship with the Nordic countries has been ambiguous and inconsistent, and in Iceland people have often idealized and identified with the US or continental Europe more than with the other Nordic countries.

Finally, this book's concern with crisis and margins has brought out certain processes – inspired by Lévi-Strauss's reference to the trickster as in-between character of dualistic division – by which the margins are a particularly productive vantage point with which to understand larger processes of coloniality and power. Here the margins have to be seen as historically negotiated and contextual. As a trickster, Iceland has been able to retain the duality inherent in categorization of the world as divided into better and worse, more civilized and less civilized, etc. During times of crisis in Iceland, characterized by anxieties about the future, this dualistic division of the world into hierarchical divisions of nation, bodies and cultures was brought into sharper focus. While the discussions of 'crisis' in this book have in similar ways been more of a means toward an end rather than the primary concern of the analysis, I have still stressed that Iceland's economy has to be viewed within the larger context of the crisis in the global north. This larger context is reflected by the ever-growing array of references to different types of crisis, environmental, democratic, economic, multicultural, which often seem to collide or collapse into each other.

Why is the sense of crisis so salient in different spheres of society? What does it tell us about the social processes of the present? The Icelandic economic crash echoes the common threat in this ongoing talk of crisis. Though articulated in different ways, the crisis constitutes for Iceland and beyond ultimately that of a loss of faith in modernity and its promise for a predictable future. Throughout this book, we have seen the alluring appeal of modernity in different narratives over

time: narratives of the Parliamentary Festival and the Business Viking as embodying the entry into full modernity; anxieties of the Colonial Exhibition and post-crash discussion of being not part of this modernity and the nations it belonged to. The Icelandic economic crash was so shocking because it made evident a broken promise of modernity, where a bright new future seemed to lay ahead of Iceland, through the neoliberal gospel of salvation through the market. This bears resemblance to Galbraith's (1955/1997, 169–170) description of people's willingness to accept and follow certain ideologies: "People must also have faith in the good intentions and even in the benevolence of others, for it is by the agency of others that they will get rich." Ironically, the reinsertion and interpellation of Iceland into the role of the exotic – extremely economically valuable in a neoliberal world – seems to have, at least momentarily, restored Icelanders' faith in modernity and in the country's economic future.

In the lobby of the Bus Hostel, a tourist hostel in Reykjavík, excited tourists can peer through a glass jar to observe what possibly constitutes the last McDonald's hamburger in Iceland. According to the owner, from whom the hotel got it, the hamburger was bought the day before McDonald's closed. The owner – according to his own account in a newspaper interview – tried to give it to the National Museum of Iceland but, after storing it for a year, they no longer wanted it (Clausen 2015). To enhance the experience, the hostel started broadcasting real-time footage of the burger over a special live stream, while also – in line with neoliberal sensibilities of branding and commercialization – encouraging guests to 'drop in' to the Hostel and of course remembering to take a 'selfie' of themselves and the burger (Bus Hostel n.d.).

Now that it is no longer a sign of Iceland's full entry in to the modern world, this hamburger monument remains under a glass jar, protected from the spoilage of the outside world, symbolizing a strange people and their country. When tourists and Icelanders engage with each other through the petrified hamburger, Iceland's exoticism and commercialization have come full circle.

Note

1 My translation of an Icelandic proverb: "Allt er gott sem endar vel."

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