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The Exotic North: Gender, Nation Branding and Post-colonialism in Iceland

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ABSTRACT *This discussion stresses that looking at countries on the margins of European colonial rule can be useful when considering the wider dynamics of the present, reflecting the persistence of colonial discourses and how racism “endures”. Iceland’s colonial experience was characterized by duality, in which the country was an object of colonialism, while actively participating in the racist discourses predominant in Europe at that time. This paper demonstrates how Iceland’s long association with the exotic and its gendered manifestations is currently being perpetuated by the tourist and state industries, under the influence of neo-liberal ideas about nation branding. When contextualized within the larger geopolitical environment, Iceland as an “exotic” destination unravels the racist and colonized narratives still at play within a wider geopolitical context.*

Introduction

A small advertisement in *Icelandair* magazine from 2015 shows a man in a space suit walking down the road that leads from the airport to Reykjavík. The advertisement is for a watch called “Arctic Iceland”: while the name of the brand seeks to situate Iceland within the increased interest in the Arctic as one of the world’s last frontiers, the man’s space suit speaks of the durability of the watch in difficult environments. The image’s placement in a tourist magazine reveals how it is playing on Iceland as an unexplored territory waiting to be “discovered” by the tourists, much like colonial European narratives of exploration, and as such the image can be situated within masculine narratives of exploration, even though we do not see the gender of the explorer. The advertisement draws upon the exotic character of Iceland, suggesting a place as remote and exotic as the moon. It clearly reflects the commercial appropriation of the idea of the exotic by advertising agencies where, within current neo-liberal economies, the exotic and different have become something desirable, rather than devalued tokens of difference. The current inversion of the idea of the exotic is probably most clearly reflected in the fact that the advertisement seems to seek inspiration from an old perception of the area alongside the road from Iceland’s main airport to Reykjavík. Since my childhood, in everyday Icelandic discourses this region has been compared to the landscape of the moon. These discussions typically saw this as negative, suggesting

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that the strange, barren, moon-like landscape would be an unfortunate first impression of Iceland for those arriving from the airport. Within the current atmosphere, however, the association with the moon as a symbol of the exotic becomes positive and is taken up as such by the advertising agency.

Drawing upon the post-colonial and anthropological traditions that have shown European identities to be deeply shaped by the colonial project (Dirks, 1992; Gilroy, 1993), this paper addresses the duality of Iceland's colonial experience, as simultaneously an object of colonialism and actively contributing to racialized and colonial discourses. In the current neo-liberal world of commercialized "ethnicities", as theorized by Jean and John Comaroff (2009), I suggest that this duality shapes Iceland's position in a geopolitical space in the present where it can be projected as simultaneously exotic and safe; as similar to "us" but "peculiar" in a global market-place of nation branding. Scholars have struggled to understand, as Ash Amin puts it (2010), how racism endures in the present (p. 4), with popular discourse often proclaiming that the world is post-racial (Lentin, 2014). Even as racism is "pushed further and further out of sight" (Goldberg, 2009, p. 1714), Europe's colonial past regularly becomes invisible in current discourses (Ponzanesi & Blaagaard, 2011). Racism is usually analysed in relation to immigration, but one part of analysing how it endures is to extend the focus to other ways in which it is articulated in the present (Loftsdóttir, 2014a, p. 453), maintaining and reaffirming the racism of the past. With ethnic and national identities commercialized on an individual level (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009) and by corporate and state actors (Therkelsen & Halkier, 2004), it has to be asked how Europe's troublesome past—characterized by racism, colonialization, and the devaluation of difference—features in this present. I thus see Iceland as "good to think with" when considering the salience of colonial categories and ideas in contemporary Europe, reflecting how the margins of Europe can be useful to reflect on the larger processes taking place. A look at what I have called "the margins of colonialism" (Loftsdóttir, 2012) thus invites us to understand the subtle nuances of colonial and neo-liberal post-colonial subjects in the present and—as widely recognized by feminists—the importance of gendered subjectivities (Stoler, 1995). Gender dynamics were intrinsic to colonialism and imperialism, with European nationalism always articulated within ideas of racism, class, and gender (McClintock, 1995). The discussion also engages with recent critical deconstructions of the idea that the Nordic countries existed "outside" the European colonial experience (Keskinen, Tuori, Irni, & Mulinari, 2009; Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012), which has emphasized looking at the Nordic countries within a post-colonial perspective.

The article opens with a brief discussion of post-colonial perspectives in Iceland in the context of the other Nordic countries. The discussion then focuses on Iceland's multiple and gendered engagements with colonialism, demonstrating the country's ambiguous position in the European imagination as "primitive". Icelandic men, however, tried to situate themselves as the embodiment of the Icelandic nation, alongside other "civilized" European men, whilst positioning women within nature. The last part of the article looks at the role of these historical images of Iceland within a contemporary geopolitics that has been strongly shaped by neo-liberal ideas of nation branding, where exoticism has become a valuable commercial resource in relation to the tourist industry (Therkelsen & Halkier, 2004). Based on an analysis of selected advertisements, I show that, when contextualized within the larger geopolitical environment, Iceland as an

“exotic” destination unravels the racist and colonized narratives still at play within a wider geopolitical context that includes underlying conceptions of “good” and “bad” savages, as well as the continued association of women’s bodies with nature.

Attempting to map out some of the processes unfolding in the present, where racialization is often subtle and difficult to disentangle, the article is informed by data from several research projects. It involves a re-reading of empirical material focusing on the Icelandic economic crash, including an analysis of the gendered discourse on business Vikings in two main business newspapers (*Markaðurinn* and *Viðskiptablaðið*) for the period 2006–2007, data on policy discourse about Iceland as part of the Arctic from 2011–2013, and marketing material in post-crisis Iceland, especially in relation to the campaign “Inspired by Iceland”.

Post-colonial analysis in the Nordic countries

Anthropologists have long recognized Iceland’s subjugation to Denmark as salient in shaping Icelandic identity (Björnsdóttir & Kristmundsdóttir, 1995; Brydon, 1995; Durrenberger & Pálsson, 1989), as well as the ways in which wider European discourses and images of Iceland have shaped Icelandic perceptions of their own nationhood (Durrenberger & Pálsson, 1989). While these works have generally not been concerned with the shaping of Icelandic nationalism through images of colonized people, and did not necessarily frame themselves as post-colonial, they recognized Iceland’s subjugated position as a part of the shaping of Icelandic national identity. More recent interest in post-colonialism in relation to Iceland, as pointed out by Gavin Lucas and Angelos Parigories (2013), often revolves around the question of whether Iceland should be seen as a colony and, if so, in what sense. Even though they are crucial, such questions only capture some of the issues at stake. Regardless of scholarly definitions of what constitutes a colony, many Icelanders in the past and present seem to have based their sense of nationhood and self on their position as subjugated subjects (Loftsdóttir, 2012). Lucas and Parigories (2013, p. 93) also make this point when stressing the significance of recognizing the “colonial experience”, regardless of the extent to which Iceland was administrated as a colony. What can be emphasized further is that Icelandic nationalism was negotiated both from Iceland’s position under Danish rule, and within a global environment of racialized images of colonized people, where ideas of modernity and sovereignty were intrinsically linked to colonialization (Loftsdóttir, 2008a). This means that we have to understand Icelandic nationalism through its engagement with the interlinked ideas of modernity and racialization.

The ambiguity of Iceland’s position within the colonial world—as simultaneously at the centre and on the margins—speaks to the diverse but overlapping histories of the Nordic countries and the risk of conflating them into one blurred experience. Ulla Vuorela (2009) elegantly addresses this issue in her analysis of Finland’s simultaneous centrality and sense of marginalization, when speaking of the sentiment of marginalization that Finnish and Icelandic subjects often feel in the context of the Nordic countries, and thus how the sense of being Nordic is shaped by both interlinked histories and differentially situated subjects. Thus, even though it is crucial that post-colonial analysis in the Nordic countries moves beyond the national context, the power

relationships between these historically constructed categories and the subjects associated with them must also be recognized in order to understand differently positioned and shifting subjectivities.

Iceland in a post-colonial context

Iceland, a part of the Norwegian kingdom from 1300 to 1262, became subject to the Danish crown in 1536 with the dissolution of the Kalmar Union. Denmark was a powerful global empire from the seventeenth until the nineteenth century, with colonial possessions in the North Atlantic, India, the Gold Coast, and islands in the Caribbean. As a part of the Danish kingdom, Iceland was, in multiple senses, part of a vast transnational space. For example, the escaped slave Hans Jonathan made his way to Iceland from Denmark, where he was seemingly able to make a new life for himself removed from the eyes of the Danish colonial power (Loftsdóttir & Pálsson, 2013). The Icelander Jón Ólafsson visited Africa and India while working for the Danish East Indian Company in the early seventeenth century. Árni from Geitarstekk sailed in the late eighteenth century with Danish ships to various parts of the world, including China and Russia. In a wider global perspective, however, Iceland was relatively isolated, with a small population of peasants and no large cities. Even Danish officials did not generally reside in Iceland until the end of the nineteenth century (Folke Ax, 2009, p. 14).¹ In European writings, Iceland was characterized as exotic and primitive, often situated within ideas of the exotic north as a place of darkness and hostile nature. While becoming particularly acute at times when Iceland was seeking independence as a sovereign nation, this conception of the country had dismayed Icelandic intellectuals for centuries, and they dutifully tried at different times to “correct” it (Durrenberger & Pálsson, 1989). European subjects were also differentiated along lines of gender and class, where people from the “lower” classes were routinely described in a similar way as “primitive” populations in distant countries (Pickering, 2001, p. 125), with white European women seen as less developed and closer to the primitive than white European men (Schiebinger, 1990).

European intellectuals’ images of Iceland as wild and uncivilized were also influenced by perceptions of Icelandic nature as characterized by active volcanoes and rough lava fields (Oslund, 2011, p. 59). As such, Iceland was located within dominant narratives of the “wild”, and associated with the exploration and conquest of uncivilized areas of the world, which were largely masculine endowments (Loftsdóttir, 2008a). In Iceland, Icelandic nature was a multivocal symbol—seen as symbolizing the hardship of settlement there (Oslund, 2011, p. 60), while the hostile natural environment was also conceptualized by the early nationalists as giving Icelanders their unique national character (Loftsdóttir, 2014b). The Icelandic intellectual elite strongly emphasized traditional Icelandic culture’s peasant roots, but men within the administrative and intellectual classes of society were nevertheless seen as the inheritors of the “true” Icelandic essence, conceptualized as representing the “true” spirit of the Icelandic nation: bold, daring, and individualistic (Matthíasdóttir, 2004, p. 152). The class elements at play within this hegemonic masculinity in Iceland at that time should be seen as excluding not only women but also certain men (Connell, 1998).

The symbolic figure of the mountain woman, as discussed by Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir (1997), was one of the key representations of Iceland for nineteenth-century Icelandic intellectuals, and she was emphasized as the nation's "mother" and the "sole and ultimate source of her sons' life" (p. 5). Thus she reflected, as feminist scholars have long recognized, the importance of women's bodies in constructing the nation (Pratt, 1990), while generally excluded from direct power and full citizenship (McClintock, 1995, pp. 354–355). The general construction of the nation as a "brotherhood" (Pratt, 1990), however, draws attention to how women are often connected to the nation through their physical bodies, rather than through their actions or ideas. It is thus useful to distinguish between nationalistic notions of Icelandic nature or the country "Iceland" as embodied in the figure of a nurturing woman, and the conceptualizations of the Icelandic *nation*, which mostly seemed to revolve around men from particular classes (Loftsdóttir, 2008b). This emphasis on the nation as composed of men is visible in Matthíasdóttir's (2004) observation that while the nationalistic discourses revolved strongly around Iceland's settlement more than a thousand years before, it only focused on male settlers. Thus, the strong female characters of the settlement period, widely known in Iceland, were never mobilized to any degree as nationalist symbols (p. 217). The absence of women as historical actors clearly reflects the strong association of Icelandic nationalism during the early twentieth century with men and masculinities, where Icelandic men were seen as actors bringing about modernity, while women were seen as representing the country's timeless nature and even the country Iceland itself.

While objecting to Iceland's subjugation under foreign rule was of primary importance during the nationalist movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was generally little sympathy for the brutal colonization of other subjects, even though exceptions exist (Loftsdóttir, 2008a). Colonial images did circulate in Icelandic news material, children's books, and schoolbooks, but there was often a general lack of interest in the colonized populations themselves, symbolized by their absence from most texts (Loftsdóttir, 2008a). European women are also largely absent from Icelandic discussions about colonized people, with European men taking the central stage as agents of civilization in distant lands. Texts by Icelandic authors are almost exclusively written by men, thus defining in writing and political action what it meant to be Icelandic. These texts by Icelandic authors are also—with few exceptions—not based on actual participation in events relating to colonization and "civilization", but were instead retellings of texts written by other European men. In European travel writing, highly popular at the turn of the nineteenth century, African people were portrayed as subjects of imperialism rather than as citizens with rights in the same sense as Europeans (Franey, 2003, p. 6). As Edward Said (1997) reminds us, values associated with Europe, i.e. "noble sentiments" of human dignity and self-governance, were often "left" back home in Europe when colonized or subjected people were discussed (p. 22). These textual reproductions of colonization in other parts of the world allowed Icelandic intellectuals to imagine themselves to be a part of a "brotherhood" of European men (see Pratt, 1990) initiating progress and civilization in remote parts of the world. Icelandic intellectuals were thus not so much concerned with constructing images of "others" as they were with positioning Icelanders as part of the civilized European world (Loftsdóttir, 2008a, 2012). This is particularly interesting when read against accounts relating that, during the early twentieth century, Icelanders were

themselves trying to resist their own placement as ethnographic objects for intellectuals and travellers from abroad. As already mentioned, Iceland was a popular destination for travellers from other European countries writing stories of their travels to be read back home, which often emphasized the rough Icelandic landscape. Ida Pfeiffer visited Iceland in 1845 and, like many others, described the laziness of Icelanders and the filthiness of Icelandic homes (Ólafsdóttir, 1994, p. 28). Another explorer, from a prominent Danish family, Captain Daniel Bruun, conducted several expeditions in the North Atlantic. The Danish participation at the Paris World Exhibition in 1900 was in large part based on clothing and objects from his explorations of Greenland, the Faeroe Islands, and Iceland. Icelanders in Copenhagen strongly criticized the exhibition when it was set up in Denmark prior to the World Exhibition, because they felt that their country was not represented as a *modern* nation (Árnadóttir, 2011, p. 72). Judging from responses to another exhibition held in Denmark in 1905, where one of the key reasons for protest was the displaying of Icelanders alongside “savages” such as Greenlanders (see Loftsdóttir, 2012), it is not unlikely that in 1900 the concern was also the issue of being associated with Greenlanders, another subjected but more strongly racialized group.

The anxieties of Icelandic intellectuals during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of being associated with “primitive others”, indicate that Iceland’s position within European racist and colonial ideas was in no way fully stable (Loftsdóttir, 2012).

The exotic in a new neo-liberal world

This section of the article focuses on the continued imagination of Iceland as exotic in the present day and how this can be linked to wider racialized discourses embedded in current geopolitical power. Of key importance is how the European image of the “exotic” has gone through various transformations since the early twentieth century, closely interlinked with changes in perceptions of humanity’s relationship to nature and perceptions of nature itself. During the age of imperialism and colonialism, nature and the “savages” inhabiting it were meant to be conquered and civilized/domesticated by white European men and culture, based on a long European tradition of positing nature and culture as opposites (Soupios, 1992, pp. 20–21). Women and racialized others were seen as confined to the sphere of nature and were conflated with it within historical narratives and scientific enterprises (Schiebinger, 1990). These groups were conceptualized as ruled by their urges and passions and thus to be controlled and domesticated just like nature itself. A new paradigm of environmentalism arose after the Second World War, in which nature came increasingly to be seen as “defenceless” against human actions (Worster, 1977, p. 339). The first image of the earth taken from space in 1968 (by Apollo 8), in which the earth was seen as “small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence in which it floats” as phrased by one commentator during the same year (Cosgrove, 2008, p. 1874), was instrumental in these changing environmental conceptions. Nature thus came largely to be seen as innocent, fragile, and vulnerable. As Beck, among others, has shown, the current representation has intensified a sense of systematic and often irreversible harm to the earth (Beck, 1992, pp. 22–23). The urgent

issues of the present are thus no longer to make nature useful for mankind, but, instead, to find solutions for the problems that modernity creates, i.e. “risk” currently symbolizing the “self-destruction of all life on earth” (Beck, 1992, p. 21).

The term “savage”, denoting the exotic, also changed after the Second World War and became increasingly replaced by the more dignified term “indigenous”, while retaining some of its original assumptions, such as the strong association with nature, innocence, and authenticity (Conklin & Graham, 1995, p. 698). As anthropologists have discussed, groups have to homogenize their cultural identities in coherence with these historical Western stereotypes in order to gain rights as “indigenous” (Hodgson, 2011, p. 5). The key point here is that, while the older association of the savage or the primitive with nature implied negative values (lacking civilization, culture, and intelligence), newer ideas about indigenous peoples are based on these same associations even while they are seen as having more positive attributes (Loftsdóttir, 2008b). This is not only due to different conceptualizations of nature but is also intensified by the reification of culture as one key characteristic of the neo-liberal economy, meaning that ideas of ethnicity and distinct cultures are being increasingly commercialized in a globalized neo-liberal world (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009, p. 28). Neo-liberalism involves a particular type of rationality, where market values are extended to involve all social action (Schwegler, 2009, p. 682), meaning that even whole nations are reconfigured as commodities in a global market-place, where the nation becomes a brand in a similar fashion to a company trademark (Lavie & Swedenberg, 1996, p. 6). Furthermore, the language of marketing is used, as exemplified in phrases such as “identity management” and “competitive advantage” (see Chernatony, 2008). Within the neo-liberal economy, exotic and pristine nature becomes particularly appealing as a product that marks the uniqueness of countries; the exotic is often seen as symbolizing characteristics that “modern” people have lost (Therkelsen & Halkier, 2004, p. 7). This has of course been widely recognized by indigenous people, who stage “authenticity” and exotic traditions for tourist consumption (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009).

After the Second World War, Iceland received financial assistance to develop its infrastructure and modernize aspects of its economy. There was a sense of moving from harsh survival in difficult terrain towards modernity and affluence (Ármason, Hafsteinsson, Grétarsdóttir, Schram, & Kjartansdóttir, 2014, p. 12). During the mid-1990s, Iceland started gradually to envision itself as an important player in global geopolitics following the country’s neo-liberal transformation. Icelandic companies and businessmen, supported by Icelandic banks, made an important impression globally through their commercial success and buying of internationally recognized companies, which was made meaningful back in Iceland through references to Icelanders’ resilience and unique characteristics. This discourse referred to similar ideas as rhetorically important as when Iceland was seeking independence (Loftsdóttir and Már, 2014). The bankers and businessmen—referred to widely as “business Vikings”—were conceptualized as embodying these characteristics, and standing for the Icelandic nation (Loftsdóttir, 2014b). Here again, women were largely invisible, while the masculinity of elite men was emphasized, with reference to Iceland’s first settlers, and their role in bringing Iceland into a new and brighter future. While the body of the business Viking was the “white” body of a modern man—recalling Appel’s (2014) observation about business masculinities’ association with whiteness—which situated Iceland within narratives of modernization,

the emphasis was simultaneously on features seen as uniquely Icelandic. Thus, this figure could both draw attention to Iceland's compatibility with modernity, and also play on the early nineteenth-century emphasis on Iceland's uniqueness. As indicated earlier, within the neo-liberal reification and marketing of culture, uniqueness becomes not necessarily a sign of backwardness but an essential part of the "product" being sold. The image of Iceland's unique national character was, in a similarly static way, actively advocated by Icelanders abroad and engaged directly—and perhaps not surprisingly—with the previously negative exoticism (Schram, 2011). And as noted by Kjartansdóttir and Schram (2013), this self-parody—where Icelandic actors engage with European images of Iceland as exotic—can be seen as pre-empting criticism or ridicule from others (p. 56).

The volcanic eruption in 2010 that caused massive air traffic disruption in Europe, following the Icelandic economic crash in the autumn of 2008, led to the Icelandic tourism industry and the Icelandic government perceiving an acute need to emphasize Iceland as a positive tourist destination (Benediktsson, Lund, & Huijbens, 2011). Iceland's nation branding thus hit full swing after 2010, with the successful "Inspired by Iceland" campaign that was the result of these efforts (Benediktsson, Lund, & Huijbens, 2011). Attempts at systematic nation branding had started in 2006, with the Icelandic government hiring a specialist and commissioning a report on the image of Iceland (Forsætisráðuneytið, 2008), so important groundwork had already been put in place. Today, commercial agencies and collaborations between the government of Iceland, the tourist industry, and businesses actively engage in branding the nation and, as I show here, strongly emphasize the association with the exotic, from which Icelanders had tried for so long to distance themselves. The few fractured examples I present in the next section, focusing particularly on the "Inspired by Iceland" campaign, reflect how Iceland's ambiguous positioning—as a part of Europe, but still not; as modern and 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 bring up Europe's dirty history. In Iceland, the encounter with the exotic can thus be enacted without reminders of these imperial and colonial histories, or the "ruins" of colonialism—to use Stoler's phrase (2008)—enacted under conditions of insecurity and inequality which characterize the lives of many people in the poorer parts of the world. The exotic can thus be experienced, touched, and observed without any of the unpleasant messiness of the past in the present. The power of these exotic images of Iceland is based on the larger conceptual environment of association with nature and authenticity as a positive and desirable sign during an historical period where cultural and natural diversity has become visibly reduced.

Exotic Iceland

The campaign "Inspired by Iceland" relies on extensive collaboration between the government of Iceland, the city of Reykjavík, and tourism-related companies. It is comprised of a strong emphasis on social media alongside conventional advertising methods, and is responsible for the organization and sponsorship of major events in Iceland (Pálsdóttir & Haraldsson, 2011, p. 4). Thus, the campaign can be said to be an attempt to create an "umbrella" brand for Iceland that is beneficial for various commercial agencies (Therkelsen & Halkier, 2004, p. 1). Its influence makes it a particularly

interesting candidate for insight into the current “imagining” of Iceland. An Icelandic advertising agency worked on the campaign, employing non-Icelandic experts to assist with the design of the website (Pálsdóttir & Haraldsson, 2011, p. 9), which, as argued by Comaroff and Comaroff (2009), further reflects how we see an “open-ended dialectic” where “under the impression of the market, human subjects and cultural objects produce, reproduce and refashion each other” (2009, pp. 28–29). Actors within commercial agencies, themselves shaped by a historical understanding of Icelandic identity, are thus active in producing what it means to be Icelandic and what iconic symbols and objects can be identified as such. The “Inspired by Iceland” commercials also engage with other contemporary international media images of Iceland that have also worked towards positioning Icelandic identity as exotic. These include the discourse of the business Viking mentioned earlier, with an emphasis on adventurous and bold businessmen. The closing of Iceland’s only McDonald’s restaurant after the crash can also be mentioned in this regard, but the closure received a great deal of attention from the media and further identified Iceland as something extraordinary and different from the rest of the world (Loftsdóttir, 2014a).

The campaign’s goals were to emphasize Iceland as a place where the tourist can experience something “different”, and, as claimed in a report from the organizers, the campaign was directed at travellers who wanted to travel like the explorers of the past, furthermore portraying Iceland as a country of purity and mystique (Leiðarljós í markaðsetningu, n.d.). The visual material on the website reflects this through panoramic images of Iceland’s wilderness, often empty of people, with the exception of the explorer/tourist. Images from the webpage are presented alongside key-words such as “authentic” and “surprising”, simultaneously homologizing Icelandic nature and the Icelandic people. Here, the character of the Icelandic people is one of the key products being sold, in addition to the “explorer experience” recalling colonial adventures of primitive nature and people. The text beneath these exclamations addresses the traveller, elaborating further on who “we” are (the “authentic” and “surprising” and unique), then revealing that the “we” refers to “spiritual” and “unexpected” people, the Icelanders, in the following examples: “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” (Leiðarljós, n.d.). The campaign’s emphasis on advertising that the tourists could expect a close and personal experience with the everyday Icelander, exemplified in videos of Icelanders volunteering to opening their homes and cooking and knitting for them (Grétarsdóttir, Ásmundsson, & Lárusson, 2014, p. 98), furthermore intensified how the body of the Icelander was a part of the package sold.

A recent addition to the campaign’s home page, entitled “Ask Guðmundur” further illustrates this marketing of “the” Icelander as someone out of the ordinary. When opening the home page, the first thing that one sees is the heading “Ask Guðmundur: The human search engine” interface. The visitor is invited to ask pressing questions about Iceland or Icelanders or ask if wanting “to know some Iceland secrets”. The emphasis on “secrets” further strengthens the association with past colonial and masculine explorations. The text highlights Icelandic specificity by claiming that the name Guðmundur is only found 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 both funny and crazy in these surroundings, talking on the phone, with a small

Icelandic flag situated on his 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 reply to any questions or disclose these “secrets” of Iceland.² The plenitude of beautiful panoramic images of Iceland that are found on the website stresses the country as belonging in the North, or being of the Arctic—the kind of places which, as scholars point out, have been able to retain their character as locations of purity and bold adventures, as well as the homes of virtuous people (Bailes, Cela, Kjartansdóttir, & Schram, 2014, p. 91). Locating Iceland as a part of the Arctic was strongly emphasized by the Icelandic government after the economic crash due to various political interests that were at stake, while also working towards further associating the country with purity (Gremaud, 2014). This self-parody advocated by the ad agency rests on a historical imagination of Iceland as the other, but Iceland’s “otherness” shows how “otherness” in itself has changed from being “devalued tokens of difference into scarce, desirable commodities” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009, p. 30). Simultaneously, Iceland is also advertised as a space of luxury, with spas, comfortable hotels, and modern infrastructure, clearly seen in the *Icelandair* magazine, which is distributed free to all passengers travelling on Icelandair planes. The generous number of advertisements for various spa treatments highlights calm and self-contained white women’s bodies, set in a pristine environment.

Even though branding is seen by its advocates as having the potential to change a particular image, the success of the branding exercise depends upon already existing stereotypes and conceptions (Therkelsen & Halkier, 2004). Attempts to market Iceland as a tourist destination have historically drawn upon gendered stereotypes in which Icelandic women are 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. Advertisements during the 1980s from the Icelandic wool company Álafoss applied 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 & Johnson, 2014, p. 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 in particular at Swedish men, the heading asks in Swedish: “Svana Baldursdóttir, Snorra Brynjólfssdóttir, and Freyja Höskulsdóttir are wondering when you will arrive in Reykjavík?” thus giving the image of the three women an even stronger sense of intimacy. The text underneath emphasizes that a “surprise” waits in Iceland, “something that you have never tried before”—thus indirectly referring to the unknown and unexplored. And if anyone missed the reference to casual sexual relations, the text below locates the advertisement firmly within such a frame by referring directly to Icelandic nightlife (see “Auglýsingarmennska Flugleiða”, 1982). These attempts to position Icelandic women as a sexual resource for the tourist industry were considerably aided by the selection of Icelandic women as Miss World in 1985 and 1988, as well as the image of masculinity displayed by the charismatic Jón Páll, who won the World’s Strongest Man competition several times from 1984 onwards. These individuals were seen as important in marketing Icelandic products internationally and in introducing Iceland as a destination. Jón Páll’s emphasis on his Viking heritage to the international media even further strengthened

the image of Iceland as an exotic place of strong Viking men and exceptionally beautiful women (Jónsdóttir & Johnson, 2014, p. 232). There was a critical discussion in the Icelandic media about the Icelandair ad campaign, especially after a Swedish reporter critically suggested that Reykjavík was being advertised as the “new Bangkok”, where unsuspecting Icelandic women were sold to Swedish men (“Auglýsingarmennska Flugleiða”, 1982). Iceland’s relative success in relation to gender equality during the 1980s was never used to draw tourists to the country; rather, the emphasis remained upon Icelanders’ intrinsic feminine beauty and masculine virility (Jónsdóttir & Johnson, 2014, p. 232). During the early 2000s, Icelandair continued with a similar emphasis, using slogans such as: “Fancy a Dirty Weekend?” and “One Night Stand” in the UK advertising campaign, with Icelandair’s spokesperson justifying it as an appeal to British erotic humour (Grétarsdóttir, 2002, p. 391).

More recently an advertisement for DesignMarch, a collaborative event between foreign companies and Icelandic designers, recapitulated these images and innuendoes. The text on the English website emphasizes that: “DesignMarch showcases the best of the Icelandic design scene. Fresh, exciting, exotic and under the radar elsewhere” and, in addition to the scene being “small and intimate, you will get up close and personal with both locals and the design superstars”. Below a photo of a young female designer holding a lollipop in her mouth while smiling somewhat shyly, the ad promises that the scene “offers beautiful otherworldly landscapes, amazing experiences, fantastic Nordic cuisine and lively nightlife”. The photo of the designer placed above this text could have been a coincidence, but it can easily be connected with other instances of Icelandic women being reduced to exotic nightlife encounters in commercials.³

The Nordic countries’ association with whiteness and equality (Loftsdóttir, 2014a; McIntosh, 2015) situates Iceland within a “white” space that can be perceived as outside the history of colonialism and racism—colonialism, as Gilroy (1993) points out, generally not being seen as belonging to Europe. Even though some of the images emphasizing “wild” nature on the website show white bodies, they do not necessarily have to do so, because Iceland’s racial position is already implied. 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), which in Iceland means that, while experiencing wild nature and natives, white tourists generally do not have to recognize themselves as racialized. In a video clip from one of the social media campaigns, *Inspired by Iceland*, still directly conflates Iceland with whiteness through moving images of wild Icelanders and beautiful women followed by a brief shot of a slim, naked woman with blonde hair. She is first shown standing up at the beginning of the sequence, and then lying down with a naked man, obviously for intimate relations. The shot of the woman from behind, in which we see her tanned body, intensifies the whiteness of her buttocks, which would normally be hidden under a bikini bottom, and exposes to the viewer not only a white but a white “wild” body.⁴

Conclusion

Focusing on Iceland within a wider European imagining tells us a lot about the salience of racialized categories in contemporary Europe (Loftsdóttir, 2012) and how the

colonial past filters into the present, shaping contemporary global imaginings of difference. As Taussig (1993, p. 143) has argued, the dualistic positioning of “good” and “bad” savages, so important during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, continues to play a role: good savages are represented as “Eden before the fall” and bad savages as signs of a “permanent wound inflicted by history”. Iceland, as an exotic destination in the North, belongs to an “Eden before the fall” where the exotic can be explored without any critical perspectives of unequal power relationships in the world. The perception of some savages as gentle and non-threatening has of course existed in Europe for centuries, with the image of the “savage” always strongly shaped by relationships of dominance by Europeans. Those already brutally forced under European control were seen as noble and innocent in their savagery, while those able to maintain active resistance were constructed as brutal and bloodthirsty (Taussig, 1993). The emphasis on the exotic in Iceland thus tells a larger story about geopolitical power in Europe within the current neo-liberal world: the North has become particularly desirable because it retains its characteristics as unexplored, strange and wild, while some of its parts remain more easily removed from histories of colonization and racism than many other parts of the world, and, importantly, removed from the intense poverty characterizing the lives of so many in the global South.

Women’s bodies are always important to colonial and nationalistic ideologies (McClintock, 1995), and in Iceland women have been consistently emphasized as passive embodiments of Icelandic nature, although in slightly different ways. Men, on the other hand, have consistently been seen as active and progressive in bringing Iceland into modernity, be it the modernization of an impoverished country at the beginning of the twentieth century, or the ushering in of a more global era at the beginning of the twenty-first. The current commercialization of women as sexual objects has thus not been threatening to the vision of Iceland as modernizing and progressive, because women have functioned as symbols of the country itself—its nature—and only partly of the nation residing within it. The embodied association of Icelandic women with the land thus continues with their portrayal as exotic items for sexual consumption—part of the intimate exploration and consumption of the country, advocated not only by foreign travellers, but also by Icelandic advertising agencies. Within a new global world where culture is commoditized through nation branding, exoticism has become a valuable resource, as reflected in the strong emphasis on exoticism in advertisements for Iceland. Ironically, alongside discourses of purity and nature, Icelandic politicians continue to emphasize heavy industries, which, as discussed by Karl Benediktsson (2009; see also Gremaud, 2014), carry a strong affective association with the idea of modernization.

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Notes

- 1 The Danish presence was not questioned in Iceland until the mid-nineteenth century when Icelandic intellectuals started making claims for independence (Hálfðánarson, 2000).
- 2 Inspired.visiticeland.com.
- 3 Accessed 23 February 2015, at <http://designmarch.is/visit/>.
- 4 Video downloaded on 1 July 2015 from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZa4ZSNSg_E.

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