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“Where Are You From?”: Racism and the Normalization of Whiteness in Iceland

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Abstract: Within European and Nordic contexts, scholars have disputed how to understand racism and racialization in a context historically different from the American one. While the analysis below underlines the global characteristics and thus mobility of racist discourse, the article seeks to show how racist classifications are understood in different localities. This article explores, in particular, the intersection of race and national identity in Iceland. The primary data consists of interviews with fifteen adults who are identified as mixed, in terms of both race and origin. The analysis shows that Icelandic identity is strongly normalized as a White identity, with the Icelandic body always assumed to be “white.” Thus, by definition, “non-white” bodies must be from somewhere else. However, the interviews also indicate that while constantly having to explain themselves as non-White, these “mixed-race” individuals did not feel rejected as Icelandic nor strongly discriminated against, which contrasts with experiences from other European countries. Finally, the discussion focuses on Iceland’s outward image and the recent branding of Iceland as a destination by the tourism industry, which works toward further racialization of the Icelandic population as a White population.

Keywords: racism, Whiteness, Iceland, Nordic, identity, gender, belonging

Introduction

This article analyzes the intersection of racialization and national identity in Iceland. We look at Icelandic national identity from the experience of those who are defined as “mixed” in a double sense: with one parent socially classified as White, originating from Iceland, and another as non-White, born outside of Iceland.¹ Our analysis of interviews with fifteen “mixed” individuals demonstrates that Icelandic identity is strongly normalized as a White identity with the Icelandic body always assumed as “White.” The Icelandic subject thus becomes “always, already” a White subject. The interviews also illustrate that, while having to explain their presence as part of the Icelandic nationality, mixed-race individuals do in most cases not feel strongly discriminated against as “mixed.” We show, furthermore, not only that this notion of Icelandicness as White is limited to internal discussions in Iceland but also that the growing importance of the tourism sector and the intensification of images associated with branding Iceland as a destination works toward further racialization of the Icelandic population as a White population, securing Icelandic identity even further as a White identity. We stress, in line with Jillian Paragg, that the constant explaining of one’s existence as a non-White person becomes one way how race is produced in the present, as well as how Iceland becomes implicitly a White country.²

Racism has become an urgent issue in the present, with the uprising of nationalistic populist parties in the global North, strong anti-immigration agendas, and persistent discussions of the “crisis of

multicultural” society, which often is code for racism.³ The concept of “racialization”— the process through which race becomes meaningful in a certain context—draws attention to racism as not only about openly hateful acts or actions but also about embeddedness in everyday categories and understanding of the world.⁴ We find it important to critically analyze how racism is embedded in people’s lives and involves people who do not necessarily identify with or accept the hateful rhetoric of neo-nationalist populist groups.

Our analytical perspective thus emphasizes what has been referred to as “everyday” aspects of racism.⁵ Such everyday expressions of racism coexist with more hateful expressions that the wider society recognizes as controversial. As Anoop Nayak has shown, the same subjects can move between racist and anti-racist discourse, and this is an indication of the “everydayness” of racism and racialization.⁶ We also find it important to stress how certain spaces are identified with particular types of racialization, with Nordic countries generally associated with Whiteness.⁷

Our research is based on qualitative methodology, with a goal to gain a deeper understanding of people’s experiences. Examining how people interpret their experiences gives insights into how they perceive their world. Words are therefore used as data to be scrutinized.⁸ The primary data consists of interviews with fifteen adults who are identified as mixed in terms of both race and origin, while our interpretation is also informed by interviews with other racialized populations and analysis of media and social media discussions on race in other projects.⁹ Both parents of one of the interviewees are Icelandic, but one parent can be classified as “mixed.” All of the interviews were conducted in Icelandic, but quotations are translated by us. There was no single concept that participants used for themselves; while some used brown, light brown, black, dark skinned, or “people of color,” the majority (or ten) self-identified as “mixed.” Some individuals used one concept consistently, while for others concept use was much less consistent.

The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions. Most of the interviews were guided by a list of issues to be explored, but the themes were flexible, with active input by participants in the research.¹⁰ The interviews were recorded and transcribed and then themes identified and analyzed through open coding and discourse analysis. The interviews took place from the spring to the fall in 2016, with interlocutors ranging from eighteen to fifty-four years old, of which six were men and nine women. The interlocutors came from different sections of society, some being students and others working in the private or public sector.¹¹

Participants were reached through snowball sampling. As described by Chaim Noy, snowball sampling is based on the researcher asking interlocutors whether they know someone who might be willing to participate in the study, until sufficient participation has been reached.¹² Snowball sampling was useful for our study, as mixed-race people are not located in any one specific place. However, as one of us (Sanna) could be described as a mixed-race woman, she was able to use her personal network to further access participants. We also base our study on earlier analysis of Whiteness and branding of Iceland as a tourism destination that has taken place since 2010, which is an important indication of how the intensification of Whiteness in relation to Iceland has been strengthened rather than reduced during the last decade.¹³

We start by contextualizing our discussion with theoretical debates on race and then locate it more firmly within the Nordic and Icelandic context. Iceland has always been part of transnational connections, even though Iceland’s small population has been internally cohesive. The recent increase in migration to

Iceland was facilitated by both the Icelandic state joining the EU border control area and ample job opportunities during the economic boom, which started around the turn of the millennium and ended with a massive economic crash in 2008. We then focus more on racism in Iceland, stressing how claims of innocence are a strong component of Icelandic racism. Finally, we discuss the experiences of our interlocutors of being “mixed” in Iceland.

Debating Racism and Mixed Race

Recent developments in the Donald Trump era in the United States clearly show that race in the US is not only entangled with the social categorizations of “Black” and “White.” The presence of Muslims and others who are defined as non-White or non-American also has been strongly problematized, while Blackness still continues to be one focal point of discrimination and dehumanization with Black bodies seen as a “constant threat.”¹⁴ Within Europe, we continue to see the prevalence of “old” racial hierarchies of Black and White, while other forms of discrimination and racism coexist alongside and within those hierarchies, such as Islamophobia and discriminatory practices toward people from eastern European countries.¹⁵ We emphasize the need to understand racism as a global phenomenon that is disseminated through various kinds of mobilities while also engaging with local histories and understanding.¹⁶ Racism, furthermore, as intersectional feminist scholars—a theoretical strand originating in the US—have emphasized, intersects with other categories and labels.¹⁷ Thus, while our analysis underlines the global characteristics and thus mobility of racist discourse, we seek to show how racist classifications are understood in different localities.¹⁸

For some time now, race has been understood as a social construct that became meaningful and solidified through European conquest and science making.¹⁹ This means that racialization does not require specific biological features to identify certain populations as non-White but uses various cultural characteristics (including religion) that are often interrelated with references to biology.²⁰ Understanding race as a social construction does not diminish the social consequences of racism and lived realities of racialization.²¹ In some cases, however, discourses of race as a social construction have been distorted to make the point that race has no social salience or real-life consequences, thus feeding into post-racism rhetoric.²²

Within the European context, race is defined inconsistently and, as phrased by Jon E. Fox, Laura Moraşanu, and Eszter Szilassy, can be “invoked” in regard to particular migrant communities.²³ Racial categorizations thus are linked in multiple ways to ideas of nationhood, where the Black and White binary can be too simplistic as stated earlier in regard to US theorizing.²⁴ Also, as several scholars have pointed out, some bodies can move in and out of Whiteness, meaning that their Whiteness cannot be taken for granted.²⁵ The fluidity of racism as an object of analysis is also evident in how racial terms intersect with other categorizations. Of particular importance here is the geographical destination of racial categories. The term “Westerner” overlaps in some contexts or is a substitute for “White” identities, and similarly, as scholars have shown for a long time, Black people do continue to be perceived as not belonging within the space of Europe.²⁶ Black people thus continue to be seen as an anomaly within Europe, which ignores the long history of Blackness and Black presence in Europe.²⁷

“Mixed race” studies have a long history in the Americas, in particular in the US and Brazil. Many scholars currently emphasize the need to approach the term “mixed” critically as racial categorizations are an unstable consequence of sociohistorical processes.²⁸ Within the Americas “mixed” also has, to some extent, different meanings. In the United States, the one-drop rule designated anyone with African American ancestry as “Black.” The one-drop rule became part of a generalized view toward race in the US between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries but was legally recognized only in the early twentieth century.²⁹ In Brazil, however, being “mixed” has been part of people’s Brazilian identity, even though Whiteness has been privileged, such as through a higher value given to a lighter “racial mixture.”³⁰ The way that the language of “race” entraps all discussions is strongly evident in discussions of “mixed” individuals. Reference to “mixed” individuals uses the language of purity, assuming prior “pure” races or well-distinct racial groups, instead of recognizing race as a social and historical phenomenon.³¹ Here again it is important to assert that the acknowledgment of race as socially constructed is not to diminish the actual lived and felt consequences of it.

“Mixed” can also involve inconsistent references to race, nationality, or ethnicity, sometimes involving a mixture of different identifications.³² Also, while scholars have harshly criticized the reification of race, the material and political significance of race makes it impossible to research race without invoking it. Thus, as G. Reginald Daniel, Laura Kina, Wei Ming Dariotis, and Camilla Fojas indicate in their article, scholars run the risk of further reifying race.³³ Some scholars have pointed out that scholarly reference to “White” and “non-White” automatically prioritizes Whiteness as the norm in every society, while other scholars have stressed that the use of these terms make visible particular power relations where “White” is the dominant term.³⁴ Our analysis here uses this term as it is important to acknowledge cross-cultural similarities and differences in perception of race, while also stressing that the word “mixed-race” is not automatically meaningful to our interlocutors in the same sense as it would be in the US and the UK, for example.

Contextualizing Racism in Nordic Countries and Iceland

Over the last decade, scholars have stressed the importance of rethinking the connection of Nordic countries to racism. Both internally and externally, Nordic countries have been seen as equalitarian societies and not as part of Europe’s colonial and imperial history. As a consequence, racism is not perceived as part of the history of Nordic countries and Nordic countries are even celebrated elsewhere for their anti-racism.³⁵ It is clear that Nordic countries had extensive—even though different in kind and scale—involvement in colonialism. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the everyday lives of people in Nordic countries were, as elsewhere in Europe, in one way or another touched by the reality of colonialization.³⁶ Also, claims of historical innocence in terms of colonialism have meant persistent refusal to acknowledge the presence of racialized Others historically in Nordic countries, that is, the Sámi and the population in Greenland.³⁷ This also means, as Kristín Loftsdóttir has discussed, that within Nordic countries, racism and migration tend to be seen as arriving recently from the outside rather than as part of nation-making as in the rest of Europe. Thus, instead of proclaiming innocence in terms of post-racism, Nordic countries claim it in terms of “never-been-racist” rhetoric.³⁸

Racialized notions of Whiteness have been important in the Nordic region to understand the nation and to generate a sense of belonging.³⁹ Locating Whiteness as the space of the Nordics marginalizes belonging and experience of non-Whites as part of the Nordic region. As phrased by Tobias Hübinette and Catrin Lundström in the context of Sweden, “the idea of being white without doubt constitutes the central core and the master signifier of Swedishness, and thus of being Swedish.”⁴⁰ Madeleine Kennedy-Macfoy draws attention to how Black Norwegian women have started claiming that their experiences are an equal part of “Norway and Norwegian history” as other Norwegians.⁴¹ Classification of people into different racial subjects, furthermore, creates the reality that is being addressed. Thus, as stressed by Anna Rastas, the African diaspora in Finland is greatly diversified and can only be perceived as one group due to their experience of being classified as “being black.”⁴²

While the population of Iceland was extremely small until the twentieth century—reaching one hundred thousand only in the beginning of that century—and geographically isolated, transnational migration was always part of Iceland’s history. It was a Danish colony with Danish merchants, and at different points of time ships also came from England, Spain, and France.⁴³ A runaway slave from Denmark, Hans Jonatan, for example, settled in Iceland in 1800, but he was originally from St. Croix, a colony of Denmark at the time. Iceland was marginal enough that he was able to hide from Danish judges and administrators. As Gísli Pálsson’s historical analysis of archival documents of Jonatan’s life has shown, all sources indicated that he was a respectable member of the small Icelandic community.⁴⁴ At the time, Iceland was populated by only fifty thousand people, living on small farms, and while Blackness certainly features in some of the texts from the time, such as in discussions of Africa, its conceptions are not necessarily negative.⁴⁵

Later, however, ideas in Iceland about race became similar to racial theories produced within the larger Euro-American context where categorization into racial, physical, and intellectual differences became an important part of scientific theories of human diversity. Discussions of Blackness and Whiteness were still entangled with ideas of civilization and modernization.⁴⁶ The eugenics movement arose in Iceland like elsewhere in the global North, and while it never gained a stronghold in Iceland, it was still advocated by notable figures in Icelandic society.⁴⁷ Furthermore, schoolbooks from the early nineteenth century reproduced, in objective ways, the predominant theories of race, further positioning Iceland within the larger narratives of European imperialism and exploration.⁴⁸ A history book republished many times in the beginning of the twentieth century (the last publication that we can find is in 1952) states, for example, in an objective tone, that the Spanish “bought blacks or kidnapped them from Africa and took them to America. They were stronger than the Indians and tolerated work better. This was the origin of slavery in America that lasted for several centuries.”⁴⁹

Closer to the present, the discussion of racism in Iceland has been strikingly similar to discussions in other Nordic countries, where there has been denial of racism as part of Iceland’s history. Earlier research suggests that racism in Iceland is entangled with certain national imagery of the country as “never-been racist,” whereby defending racism in a particular context, people feel that they are defending a view of the nation and its history as innocent and removed from colonial history.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Loftsdóttir’s analysis also shows how racism is trivialized in Iceland, both as not really existing and, when acknowledged,

as not really mattering because people do not “mean” it like that. Or using the circular logic that it cannot be racism because racism never existed in Iceland.⁵¹

Also, in many cases, the trivialization of racism takes place through identifying those who criticize racism as *creating* racism, thus reducing racism to individual opinions of those who “try to” find racism everywhere. As Loftsdóttir shows, this line of argument often overlaps with strong anti-feminist views.⁵² It is not only Nordic countries but other European countries as well that show similar tendencies of ignoring their involvement with colonial history.⁵³

Several factors, such as economic precarity, have affected racism in Iceland. During the massive economic boom in the first decade of the new millennium, many migrants came to Iceland in search of work and were usually hired in the lowest economic positions. Most came from Poland, with some also from other parts of eastern Europe. These individuals were quickly an object of prejudice and even racialized.⁵⁴

“Non-White” Icelandic Bodies

“Where are you from?” was a question that most of those we interviewed were familiar with and felt, in many ways, defined their experience as non-White Icelanders in Iceland. In this first part of the discussion, we focus on this question, its gendered dimensions, and the ways our interlocutors dealt with it. This question was posed in different contexts, at various occasions, and often not only by people they slightly knew but also by strangers. In most cases, our interlocutors told us, their first response was that they were Icelandic, which was often seen as an insufficient answer. They had to specify the origin of their dark skin color. A young woman, Vala, described, for example, that after having replied that she was Icelandic, she received the question “But where are you really from?”⁵⁵ The question implied that her brown body could not “really” be Icelandic. The systematic questioning of “Where are you from?” toward mixed Icelandic individuals can thus be seen as positioning them as “space invaders,” in Puwar’s sense, as imagined outside of the Icelandic national space.

Our interlocutors’ answers differed in how they themselves experienced such questions: some implied that this was racism, others positioned such questions more as curiosity or interest toward them, and some were confused on where to position such questions. Magnea said that being asked the question amused her but then more critically added that it amused her because other people seemed to think that this defined her as a person in some way, when it only explained her dark skin color.⁵⁶ Those who were more critical toward the question and its context recognized how such questions worked toward establishing the status of Blackness or non-Whiteness as the exception in Iceland, where, as some remarked, nobody asked White people about their national background.⁵⁷ One woman, Ragga, said:

I think it’s kind of cute when I see that people really want to ask [about my national background] but they do it really carefully. Like when I was working at..., a man and his wife had a mixed kid... I saw he really wanted to ask me where I was from and that was so adorable... I get upset when people don’t believe I’m Icelandic, it’s like they’re taking away my identity, like I need to prove it to them.⁵⁸

Her phrasing reflects how some of those interviewed interpreted the question differently, depending on how they move between different contexts of where they find it appropriate and where it is not. Helga described an outing with a friend who spoke English. When meeting other people who did not know them, everybody assumed that it was due to Helga, not the White English-speaking girl, that English instead of Icelandic had to be spoken. While Helga thus did not herself see it as prejudice but as something “funny,” as she labeled it, her description sharply reflects the prior assumption of the Icelandic body as a white body.⁵⁹ As one young woman, Berglind, stated: “People never look at me and think yes she’s definitely Icelandic.... More often people think I’m a foreigner rather than not.”⁶⁰

A couple of our interlocutors mentioned that they liked to tease people by telling them answers that they were not expecting, which can be interpreted as a form of resistance toward their racial categorization and position as “space invaders.”⁶¹ But, as scholars have stressed in relation to resistance, resistance is not always conscious or an attempt to change a particular system.⁶² For example, they would refer to what area in Iceland they came from instead of explaining the origin of their non-Icelandic parent. Such responses are playful in their resistance but can also be interpreted as attempts to establish oneself even more firmly as Icelandic. As any other Icelanders would do, they prioritized a regional or neighborhood-based origin. In Iceland, affiliation with a particular place—usually town, village, or part of the country—is often a strong part of people’s identity and something people who are strangers to each other try to position themselves and others in relation to. A young man, Stefán, described that by responding that he was Icelandic he was saying the truth: he was in fact not “from” anywhere else. As others, he commented that there was always this “*but*” that followed, that is, “But why are you so Black?” His stress on telling the “truth” indicates how this reply not only is playful but also forms an important part in him claiming his Icelandic-ness.⁶³

Interviewees also brought up the issue of genealogical relationships. In Iceland, interest in locating people in terms of the towns or regions that they or their parents originate from overlaps with a long-standing interest in genealogy. Our interlocutors described how they were transferred into an imaginary social or biological network based on presumed interconnectivity of those seen as belonging to the same racial group. One interviewee noted how it was thought that she knew every single dark-skinned person in Iceland, another shared how a famous world-renowned Black singer was considered to be her mother, and two interlocutors were assumed related to other mixed-race people residing in Iceland.⁶⁴ Men described how people often mistook them for a famous Icelandic singer, in a band consisting of two brothers who can be seen as “mixed” individuals. They themselves did not see any similarities with him, except that they were both darker than average in Iceland.⁶⁵ This reflects how individuals are boxed in the same category, considered to all look the same or being related to or familiar with one another.

Normalization of Whiteness was also evident in various other informal ways through people’s everyday experiences. Several of our interlocutors mentioned how a particular shade of light peach color is generally referred to as “skin colored” or “face colored” (in Icelandic: *húðlitaður*), which they noted as especially relevant to their feeling of being “different” when they were children. Here they were notably referring to verbal communications with other children and adults about crayons but not to the labels on the crayons themselves. Not only has the reference to particular crayons as “skin colored” in Iceland been significant in creating a normalized sense of Whiteness, as argued by Lorna Roth, but when speaking of

the Crayola crayon, the crayon also “appears politically innocent, because in appearance it’s just a crayon.”⁶⁶ In terms of racialization, this can make the crayon a particularly important symbol in normalizing Whiteness in an everyday context.

The women interviewed brought up other kinds of everyday normalizing of Whiteness. Icelandic stores, for example, generally carry only makeup products designed for light skin color and hair products for straight hair. Furthermore, people invaded some women’s personal space and touched their hair without asking for permission. Also, some of those we interviewed, both men and women, had encountered well-familiar racial stereotypes of Blackness, such as being good at physical activities and rapping.

Gendered Conceptions of “Blackness”

Scholars have shown for a long time the gendered implications of racism, with gender and race intersecting through history.⁶⁷ For our interlocutors, gender played an important role. The women interviewed, for example, much more often were approached by strangers and asked about their national origin. One of our interviewees, Stefán, described how his Black female friends were more often asked by strangers about their national origin. In Stefán’s view, however, if people heard him speak Icelandic, then no questions were asked about national origin.⁶⁸ Another man, Snorri, mentioned that he had hardly ever been asked about his national origin but that his daughter had received such questions. He then added that people probably think it is more acceptable to ask girls those sorts of questions.⁶⁹

In some cases, the women pointed out that their presumed “strangeness” as “non-White” Icelanders was used as an icebreaker for more intimate connections. This indicates how discussions about race are perceived as innocent by many Icelandic people. As Magnea stated, this can be seen as linked to prevailing gender dynamics where both women and men are more likely to give compliments to women than to men. Also, men in general are less likely to be approached by strangers than women. Magnea also noted that boys approached her by saying she was very attractive and trying to find out where she came from, which she suggested they probably thought of as a non-threatening way to start a conversation.⁷⁰ Other women explained that they, for example, had been asked: “I see you have such beautiful eyes, they are not Icelandic are they?” and “Where did you get that beautiful skin color from?”⁷¹ In some cases, people tried to stress it as funny when they viewed someone Black as a non-Icelander: “This one time I was outside waiting for my boyfriend to come pick me up and a guy approaches me and says [in English], ‘Hello, how do you like Iceland, you are very beautiful’ and I just [answered in Icelandic], ‘I’m fine thank you.’ He was so embarrassed.... I enjoy shocking people, maybe because I try to have a sense of humor about myself.”⁷²

Many of the women also were referred to in an outspokenly intersecting racist and sexual way. A man told one girl that he lacked the “black belt,” meaning that he had not had sexual relations with a Black girl, and one woman discovered that she was on someone’s “to do list” as a Black woman (again referring to sexual relations).⁷³ Vala often felt like a new exotic animal in a jungle that men were eager to chase.⁷⁴ The association of Black bodies with animals and hypersexuality can be found in past presentations of Blackness in Iceland.⁷⁵ In some cases, the negative discussion of women’s sexuality was directed at the mother of those interviewed where one mother, for example, was referred to as a “negro whore” (Icelandic: *negrabóra*).⁷⁶

Even though men did not receive questions about their origins as often as women, they were still racialized in different ways. In particular, the men were called racist slurs, often under circumstances where they did not perceive them as threatening or hateful. Two men had the N-word directed at them out of irritation during their participation in sport competitions.⁷⁷ Rather than recognized as part of racism, this slur seemed to be acceptable under these circumstances both by the people who used it and by its recipients. One of the men interviewed, Adam, noted that he had never experienced any straight-out prejudice for being different; he did not see himself as being called the N-word by others as racism.⁷⁸ This captures the ongoing discourses in Iceland that try to separate racism as not relevant to Iceland, by implicitly or explicitly situating Iceland as a non-racist country where acts that are seen as racist elsewhere become by definition not racist in Iceland.⁷⁹

This also includes racial labels that are regularly justified in Iceland by the White majority, thus failing to engage with their own racial position.⁸⁰ Exemplifying how Icelandic discourses try to separate from a racist history of the past is a case in which one young man was differentiated by his friends from another with the same name by the use of the N-word.⁸¹ Another young man, Stefán, pointed out that a recent Icelandic beer was named Surtur. In Nordic mythology, the name Surtur refers to a fire giant, but in his experience a more recent use of the word is equal to the English derogatory term for Black people. His friends had difficulty understanding why he was concerned with the selection of this label for the beer. His concern revolved around both potential invitation to racist comments that the name could stimulate and his own reservation in using a concept that is used as a racist label for Black people in Iceland.⁸² Women also discussed how their racialized experience was belittled by others. Just over half of the women described this attenuation when they, for example, were considered to be making a big deal out of nothing when pointing out that something was racism or to be taking incidents too personally.⁸³

Some of the women interviewed emphasized, to some extent, that they saw “positive aspects” of being different in the homogenous Icelandic community; they felt that being categorized as Black or mixed was an opportunity to stand out from the crowd. Magnea stressed that “we” should not focus on the bad aspects and discrimination “mixed-race” individuals might face but instead on what might be gained from being different.⁸⁴ Other people stressed how, in spite of having to explain their Blackness or mixed-ness, they still felt accepted as Icelandic.⁸⁵ Two women, however, painfully explained that they never felt accepted in Icelandic society.⁸⁶ One of them, Vala, expressed: “Since I was a little girl, I’ve never experienced acceptance from the community, just because I’m not White.” She described her sense of not belonging and exclusion in the following words:

As far as I know I’m Icelandic, because I haven’t experienced anything else and when people try to take those rights away from me then they are basically making me homeless, because I don’t belong to a community, because I’m not White. How is that supposed to make sense?⁸⁷

Her comment clearly shows a sense of marginalization and nonacceptance as a non-White Icelander.

Tourist Mobilities

Recent research suggests that increased tourism in Iceland enforces the notion of Iceland as a White space.⁸⁸ Even though Iceland has always been a part of transnational networks and a globalized community of people traveling back and forth between places, Iceland's engagement with the outside world in terms of mobility has changed significantly over the last thirty years. As mentioned earlier, the economic boom at the beginning of the millennium made the country appealing for people looking for labor opportunities but international adoption has also increased significantly over the last three decades.⁸⁹ Then, more recently, after 2010 new mobilities emerged after a massive campaign by the government of Iceland and interested parties to draw tourists to the country. The number of tourists increased dramatically with an estimated 502,000 in 2008 to above 1,800,000 in 2016.⁹⁰

The tourist industry has led to more diversity in general in Iceland, reflected not only in the higher number of tourists but also in labor-related migration to Iceland with most of the lower-paying jobs increasingly performed by migrants or youth from outside of Iceland.⁹¹ Despite mobility becoming a key characteristic of Iceland over the last decades, there have simultaneously been persistent images both internationally and internally that in different ways have worked toward reifying what it means to be Icelandic. The economic boom years rested strongly on particular articulations of White masculinity and stress on Iceland's semi-mythical past as a "Viking" country.⁹² The association of the North with Vikings is still not limited to Iceland but takes place as part of heritage branding of Nordic countries.⁹³

The massive campaign the government embarked on is also based on images and references to white Icelandic bodies, partly following a long tradition in Iceland of sexualizing female bodies in tourism promotion of the country. Our interlocutors sometimes engaged with persistent views of Icelanders as Vikings, which became extremely salient internally and internationally during the new millennium.⁹⁴ They saw these images as exclusionary to them as non-White persons. As one young woman, Matthildur, explained: Icelanders "don't see me as Icelandic and that's you know, they I don't know, I'm not this Viking girl or something."⁹⁵ In similar terms, another young woman, Helga, stated that she felt she needed to speak out loudly to claim the island of Iceland, just because half of her ancestors came from Iceland.⁹⁶

Speaking and understanding Icelandic has been an important part of the identity of those who identify as Icelandic.⁹⁷ Strangers often addressed our interlocutors in English, which was an important part of not being accepted as someone belonging in Iceland. Some understood this as exclusion from the community, while others excused this behavior by referring to the high numbers of tourists visiting Iceland, making it harder to recognize who was Icelandic and who was not. Twenty-year-old Adam pointed out:

I mean there are so many tourists in Iceland, so many tourists. Especially here in downtown Reykjavík which I think is one of the main reasons for that you never know if you should address someone in English or Icelandic, regardless if the person is white or dark [*dökkur*]. I mean, you never know.⁹⁸

Like him, others interviewed sometimes recognized that due to the high number of tourists, their experience of being mistaken for a foreigner could happen to other Icelanders as well. However, for our interlocutors, as mixed individuals, this identification was more likely to take place. Matthildur mentioned that when she is with a group of girlfriends, she is usually signaled out by tourists as non-Icelandic:

If I am with my girlfriends and there are perhaps tourists that start talking to us they always ask us, “well where are you from?” and my friends reply “oh, Iceland,” and then they look directly at me and say “All of you or what?””⁹⁹

Vala spoke about this more in terms of other Icelanders mistaking her for a foreigner:

It has happened to me that I am speaking to someone in Icelandic and then that person just starts talking English to me. I mean at work ... there are Icelanders who have spoken to me in English, even though I speak Icelandic, I reply in perfect Icelandic ... and they continue speaking English to me, like I’m not Icelandic, as if I don’t know Icelandic. It is just ridiculous.¹⁰⁰

As noted earlier, our interlocutors pointed out that when finding out that they were able to speak Icelandic, those who addressed them in English were often quite embarrassed.

The tourist image campaign strongly associated Iceland with being within a white space, with white bodies.¹⁰¹ A few interviewees also spoke about these outward images of Icelanders, with some pointing out that foreigners sometimes had difficulty recognizing mixed-race individuals as Icelandic, assuming Icelandic people were White, or, as phrased by one person, “we are always showing this monotonous image of Icelanders, then of course, you know, the whole world thinks that this is what all Icelanders look like.”¹⁰² Matthildur described this image of Iceland, which is shared both externally and internally, in the following terms:

There is this image, you know of blond people with blue eyes, really White, very much Scandinavian something. You know that if I go to other countries and tell people, yes you know I am from Iceland, the people just say no, no, no, no, just because they have this image of Iceland. That this is some kind of Nordic society with no diversity or something.¹⁰³

Matthildur acknowledged how the image of Nordic countries as a whole is associated with Whiteness and how her body disturbs this image to outsiders. A similar encounter with this external image of Iceland as a White country was shared by Sigríður when she recounted her travels to the US. People there were quite surprised to learn that she was Icelandic:

I went to America the other day and people were so astonished over the fact that I was Icelandic, they thought I was lying, they didn’t believe me, which is kind of funny, I don’t know, do they seriously think that everyone here is blond with blue eyes?¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

Our interlocutors often had to explain their presence as non-White Icelanders as “out of place.”¹⁰⁵ They generally did not feel hatefulness due to their categorization as “Black” or “mixed” but felt more that they had to continuously explain their existence as brown or Black Icelanders. In addition to associating “race” with “place,” such a persistent need to explain one’s existence, as Paragg has stressed, becomes part of reproducing race in the present.¹⁰⁶

Our interviewees were few and there is clearly more research needed, but the results hint at how racism in Iceland draws from a wider global imaginary of race and also is shaped by particular historical notions. Significantly, these involve the refusal to accept racism as part of Iceland’s history and present. This is made evident in stories about how racist slurs are redefined in Iceland as non-racist, a praxis that is also described in other research on racism in Iceland.¹⁰⁷ Even though most of those interviewed were assumed to be non-Icelandic, in spite of everything, most of them felt accepted as belonging to the Icelandic community by other Icelanders once their other national background had been explained. There was still a notable exception with two women, who painfully talked about never feeling fully accepted as part of the community.¹⁰⁸

Some of our interlocutors discussed the significance of prejudice toward other marginalized groups in Iceland, especially toward Poles, but also mentioned negative views toward Asians and those from Middle Eastern countries, thus drawing attention to the complexities of racism in Iceland, as expressed toward diverse groups often on the basis of dissimilar historical memory.¹⁰⁹ Finally, it is ironic that Iceland’s increased connection to mobility through the escalation of the tourism industry seems to have associated Iceland more firmly with Whiteness.¹¹⁰ Our interlocutors not only have to explain themselves to other Icelandic people but also were assumed to be foreigners by Icelanders and non-Icelanders alike.

Notes

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¹ The exception to this is one non-White “mixed-race” parent, born and raised in Iceland.

² Paragg, “What Are You?,” 279. See also Loftsdóttir, “Exotic North,” 256.

³ Lentin and Titley, *Crisis of Multiculturalism*.

⁴ Garner, *Racism*, 19.

⁵ Essed, *Understanding Everyday Racism*.

⁶ Nayak, “Young People’s Geographies,” 271.

⁷ McIntosh, *Impossible Presence*, 311; Loftsdóttir, “Exotic North,” 256.

⁸ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 5–6.

⁹ See, for example, Loftsdóttir, “Encountering Others in Icelandic Textbooks,” 81–98; Loftsdóttir, “Republishing ‘Ten Little Negros,’” 295–315; Loftsdóttir, “Being ‘The Damned Foreigner,’” 70–78.

¹⁰ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 110.

¹¹ While we recognize the importance of class for our subject matter, we did not analyze the intersection of class for this research. It can, however, be pointed out, in contrast to many other European countries where racially identified

populations are part of the country's colonial history and part of the precarious labor force, this does not apply in Iceland. Also due to Iceland's strict migration law, there is historically no pool of "inexpensive" African labor in Iceland.

¹² Noy, "Sampling Knowledge," 329.

¹³ Loftsdóttir, *Crisis and Coloniality*, 141–59.

¹⁴ Bonilla and Rosa, "#Ferguson," 8.

¹⁵ On "old" racial hierarchies, see Pijl and Goulordava, "Black Pete," 264. On Islamophobia, see Rehman, "Islam, 'War on Terror' and the Future of Muslim Minorities," 833. On eastern European countries, see Fox, Moraşanu, and Szilassy, "Racialization of the New European Migration," 684.

¹⁶ Loftsdóttir, "Republishing 'Ten Little Negros,'" 297.

¹⁷ Phoenix and Pattynama, "Intersectionality," 187.

¹⁸ Wade, *Race: An Introduction*, 3.

¹⁹ Mignolo, *Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 8.

²⁰ Fox, Moraşanu, and Szilassy, "Racialization of the New European Migration," 681.

²¹ Dwyer and Bressey, "Introduction: Island Geographies," 14; Hartigan, "Saying Socially Constructed Is Not Enough," 8.

²² See discussion in McEachrane, "There Is a White Elephant in the Room," 95–98.

²³ Fox, Moraşanu, and Szilassy, "Racialization of the New European Migration," 691.

²⁴ Nyak, "Young People's Geographies," 274.

²⁵ Fox, Moraşanu, and Szilassy, "Racialization of the New European Migration," 692.

²⁶ Bonnett, "Whiteness and the West," 18; Puwar, *Space Invaders*.

²⁷ Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, ix.

²⁸ Daniel et al., "Emerging Paradigms," 8.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁰ Pinho, "White but Not Quite," 40; Wade, *Race and Ethnicity*, 12–14.

³¹ Daniel et al., "Emerging Paradigms," 22.

³² Paragg, "'What Are You?,'" 280.

³³ Daniel et al., "Emerging Paradigms."

³⁴ See the discussion in Paragg, "'What Are You?,'" 279.

³⁵ Loftsdóttir and Jensen, "Introduction: Nordic Exceptionalism," 2. See also on equality Mulinari et al., "Introduction: Postcolonialism and the Nordic Models," 4.

³⁶ Horning, "Insinuations," 297.

³⁷ See discussion in Petterson, "Colonialism, Racism, and Exceptionalism" 31; Fur, "Colonialism and Swedish History," 18.

³⁸ Loftsdóttir, "Being 'The Damned Foreigner,'" 71.

³⁹ Loftsdóttir and Jensen, "Introduction: Nordic Exceptionalism," 7.

⁴⁰ Hübinette and Lundström, "Sweden after the Recent Election," 44.

⁴¹ Kennedy-Macfoy, "Queendom," 43.

⁴² Rastas, "Talking Back," 187.

⁴³ Agnarsdóttir, "Iceland in the Eighteenth Century," 13.

⁴⁴ Loftsdóttir and Pálsson, "Black on White," 47. For more detailed discussion see Pálsson, *Hans Jónatan*.

⁴⁵ Loftsdóttir and Pálsson, "Black on White," 40.

⁴⁶ Loftsdóttir, "Shades of Otherness," 182.

⁴⁷ See discussion in Karlsdóttir, *Mannkynbætur*.

⁴⁸ Loftsdóttir, "Encountering Others," 89.

⁴⁹ Bjarnason, *Mannkynssaga*, 75–76.

⁵⁰ Loftsdóttir, "Republishing 'Ten Little Negros,'" 309–10.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 311.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 306.

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- ⁵³ Lüthi, Falk, and Purtschert, “Colonialism without Colonies,” 1; see also See Pijl and Goulordava, “Black Pete,” 282.
- ⁵⁴ Loftsdóttir, “Being ‘The Damned Foreigner,’” 70.
- ⁵⁵ Vala, interview by authors, April 18, 2016. We use pseudonyms for our interlocutors to protect their privacy. All interviews were conducted in Reykjavík.
- ⁵⁶ Magnea, interview by authors, June 13, 2016.
- ⁵⁷ Vala, interview; Berglind, interview by authors, May 3, 2016; Matthildur, interview by authors, June 14, 2016.
- ⁵⁸ Ragga, interview by authors, August 25, 2016.
- ⁵⁹ Helga, interview by authors, May 1, 2016.
- ⁶⁰ Berglind, interview.
- ⁶¹ Helga, interview; Una, interview by authors, August 8, 2016; Ragga, interview; Stefán, interview by authors, September 12, 2016.
- ⁶² Ortner, “Resistance,” 175; on resistance in general, see also Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*.
- ⁶³ Stefán, interview.
- ⁶⁴ Helga, interview; Matthildur, interview; Una, interview; Ragga, interview.
- ⁶⁵ Páll, interview by authors, September 7, 2016; Stefán, interview.
- ⁶⁶ Roth, “Home on the Range,” 146.
- ⁶⁷ See, for example, McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 4–7.
- ⁶⁸ Stefán, interview.
- ⁶⁹ Snorri, interview by authors, September 23, 2016.
- ⁷⁰ Magnea, interview.
- ⁷¹ Una, interview; Ragga, interview.
- ⁷² Manúela, interview by authors, May 2, 2016.
- ⁷³ Sigríður, interview by authors, September 13, 2016; Manúela, interview.
- ⁷⁴ Vala, interview.
- ⁷⁵ Loftsdóttir, “Leifar nýlendutímans,” 131–32.
- ⁷⁶ Manúela, interview.
- ⁷⁷ Adam, interview by authors, August 17, 2016; Páll, interview.
- ⁷⁸ Adam, interview.
- ⁷⁹ Loftsdóttir, “Being ‘The Damned Foreigner,’” 74.
- ⁸⁰ Loftsdóttir, “Republishing ‘Ten Little Negros,’” 306.
- ⁸¹ Jósep, interview by authors, August 8, 2016.
- ⁸² Stefán, interview.
- ⁸³ Vala, interview; Helga, interview; Manúela, interview; Matthildur, interview; Sigríður, interview.
- ⁸⁴ Magnea, interview.
- ⁸⁵ Manúela, interview; Berglind, interview; Magnea, interview; Una, interview; Adam, interview; Ragga, interview; Stefán, interview; Sigríður, interview; Alexander, interview by authors, September 18, 2016.
- ⁸⁶ Vala, interview; Matthildur, interview.
- ⁸⁷ Vala, interview.
- ⁸⁸ Loftsdóttir, “Exotic North,” 255–56.
- ⁸⁹ See general discussion in Skaptadóttir, “Mobilities and Cultural Difference”; Skaptadóttir, “Integration and Transnational Practices.”
- ⁹⁰ Ferðamálastofa, “Heildarfjöldi Erlendra Ferðamanna,” 2017, <https://www.ferdamalastofa.is/is/tolur-og-utgafur/fjoldi-ferdamanna/heildarfjoldi-erlendra-ferdamanna>.
- ⁹¹ Karlsdóttir and Jóhannesson, “Tourists as Migrants,” 44–45.
- ⁹² Loftsdóttir, “Exotic North,” 248; Loftsdóttir and Björnsdóttir, “Wise Viking Daughters,” 43.
- ⁹³ On the association with Vikings, see Halewood and Hannam, “Viking Heritage Tourism,” 565. On heritage branding, see Loftsdóttir, “Exotic North,” 255.

- ⁹⁴ Loftsdóttir, “Exotic North,” 252–53.
- ⁹⁵ Matthildur, interview.
- ⁹⁶ Helga, interview.
- ⁹⁷ See general discussion on this in Þórarinsdóttir, “Íslensku trúboðið”; Innes and Skaptadóttir, “Icelandic for Adult Foreigners.”
- ⁹⁸ Adam, interview.
- ⁹⁹ Matthildur, interview.
- ¹⁰⁰ Vala, interview.
- ¹⁰¹ Loftsdóttir, “Exotic North,” 256.
- ¹⁰² Ragga, interview.
- ¹⁰³ Matthildur, interview.
- ¹⁰⁴ Sigríður, interview.
- ¹⁰⁵ See discussion in Puwar, *Race, Gender, and Bodies*.
- ¹⁰⁶ Paragg, “What Are You?,” 284.
- ¹⁰⁷ Loftsdóttir, “Republishing ‘Ten Little Negros,’” 306.
- ¹⁰⁸ Vala, interview; Matthildur, interview.
- ¹⁰⁹ Loftsdóttir, “Being ‘The Damned Foreigner,’” 70.
- ¹¹⁰ Loftsdóttir, “Exotic North,” 256.

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