Performing the Nation through Nature: A Study of Nationalism and Cultural Objectification

Stories from Icelandic Northern Lights Tours

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Abstract

Two things are examined in this ethnography. The first regards a local stigmatization of the northern lights tourism industry in Iceland. A stigma, which this thesis argues, is related to a commercial saturation – or, pollution – of Icelandic national identity. The second regards the northern lights and their recent, though continual, cultural objectification, as a result of this commercialization. This will be illustrated with reference to how the northern lights are performed by guides on northern lights coach tours. These two topics will then be analyzed in view of Handler’s (1988) definition of cultural objectification: as the means with which tradition – national identity – is produced. In view of the above, the Icelandic tourism industry has boomed in the last decade. Tourists that come to Iceland desire its advertised pristine wilderness and exotic culture. Against this desire, the northern lights often fail to conform, relative to tourists’ expectations. Drawing from Baudrillard (1998) it will thus be argued that the northern lights are hyperreal and that the Icelandic nation, as a result, has come to acquire theme park like qualities. Taken together, this thesis analyzes the northern lights, and the northern lights coach tours, from the perspective of nationalism and cultural objectification.
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things flatter themselves
in what we flatter them with
we worship them
and we flatter
in what
we find flattering
(Poem from field diary)

The northern lights – or, as they are also called, aurora borealis – circulate in hyperreal fashion across most social media platforms. And so they do across all other social platforms too, be that in the stories told by the guides on the northern light coach tours, in the expectation-ridden stories told amongst tourists who had specifically come to Iceland to experience the lights, or when tourists were told by guides to not stare down their phones or cameras, but to “take in the experience”, as they entailed an experience that escaped the objectifying and reductive (or simply different) gaze of technology. The northern lights are hyperreal insofar as they appear more vivid and real in their pictorial or verbal representation than they do, as it were, in real life (Baudrillard 1998).

Tourists had to be routinely reminded that those images they had seen of the northern lights online, on postcards, and so forth, were images captured using expensive cameras, long exposure times, and after-the-fact image manipulations. These reminders confirmed that the northern lights were hyperreal in the minds of tourists; and that this representational idea had been made manifest even before embarking on the tour. In addition, the northern lights were also embedded in particular ideas about the aesthetics and authenticity of pristine wilderness. With the above in mind, the northern lights tours became performative events against which these representational ideas were tested.

Tourists were told that the northern lights were not something static and passive, but active and alive. The northern lights object fluctuated between animate and inanimate descriptions. Most often the northern lights were described as something to be hunted and captured. As was told by one guide, “Sometimes the hunter returns empty handed”. The northern lights, conceptualized accordingly, infer an adventure additional to their experience.
Unlike the glacier or the waterfall, the northern lights are a phenomenon and object whose experience could not be guaranteed. “They come and they go”, as another guide phrased it. For this reason we should not expect, would the northern lights show, that their display or performance be fantastical; on the other hand, we should not expect them to not be fantastical either. It was on the one hand a matter of randomness, and on the other a matter of how successful the guides were at tracking and capturing the lights. These ambivalent descriptions of the northern lights may be seen with reference to two comments made by yet another guide, “We just follow nature’s roll of the dice”, and “It is like chasing rainbows, you know what conditions to look for”.

One veteran guide, Svanur, importantly informed me that even the waterfall is subject to the same fleetingness as the northern lights, sharing stories about blizzards so thick that nothing could be seen through them. In the end, an island partially made up by active volcanoes is an island that “flows” (Ingold 2012) at a higher rate relative to most other landmasses.

Stories in the shape of anecdotes and animating descriptions repeatedly come our way in the vaguely lit – almost completely dark – coach, taking us away at night from the light pollution cast by Reykjavik. We are told stories about tourists who had come two or three times on the tour without any luck, and then, remarkably, on the third or fourth attempt, the sky had exploded with green lights, dancing from one horizon to the other.

We are told a story about one night when the sky was completely covered in clouds and the northern lights forecasts had predicted little to zero activity. This had prompted for all coach groups to return to Reykjavik. But one guide stood his ground, trusting his gut feeling, and insisted that his group should remain. And sure enough, as the other coaches left for Reykjavik, the most amazing displays of the northern lights unfolded, which resulted in tears, hugs and celebratory cries.

We are told stories about how different cultures perceive and experience the northern lights, not least Icelanders. We are told personal stories from guides about how they first experienced them. And we are told stories about the land and landscape from which we are to experience them on these tours. Culture and nature are woven together, and so too is the night sky woven together with the land. The northern lights are more than a mere natural phenomena and spectacle in the sky – they become performed cultural objects.
The above stories were like mythologies – sacred narratives – imbuing the experience of the coach tours and the northern lights with particular meanings. In these narratives the northern lights fluctuate between the animate and the inanimate realm. This liminality becomes further manifest in tourists’ doubt when faced with unclear and weak northern lights displays in the sky. In other words, as tourists fail to reconcile the hyperreal with the mundane real, as tourists fail to reconcile ideology with reality.

**Research questions**

The northern lights coach tours may be crudely divided into three productive and constitutive events. The first event regards those images and stories tourists are exposed to before embarking on the tour. These are representational ideas and images about what to expect. The second event denotes direct experience of the tour itself with (most often local) guides narrating and contextualizing the northern lights and the methods employed to find them. The third event comprises the experience, or non-experience, of the northern lights and tourists’ attempt to reconcile beforehand representation with actuality; the collision between imagination and reality. This thesis directs closer focus to the latter two events.

The overarching research question asks what it means for nature and culture to be conjointly objectified as national artefacts. In specific, then, it asks what it means for the northern lights, as a *natural* phenomenon, to be *culturally* objectified; and relatedly, what does it mean for the northern lights to take on a national character in the stories told of them by the northern lights guides? Additionally, what can this tell us about nationalism in general and the Icelandic nation in particular?

As the background chapter will discuss more closely, there exists little anthropological, and other, literature regarding the northern lights. I hope to contribute to this small body of literature by examining the northern lights from the perspective of nationalism. It will thus be argued that the northern lights have become construed, as a consequence of the tourism industry and a growing fascination and romanticization of the North, into a cultural and natural object constitutive of Icelandic national identity. The renegotiated meanings surrounding the northern lights, which have sprung from its commercialization, will therefore be forwarded as evidence of cultural objectification – Icelandic identity – *in the making*.

In approaching the northern lights as an object of Icelandic national identity we can better come to terms with issues pertaining to commercial saturation. Though it was not
originally intended as such, the fieldwork that inspired the formation of this thesis quickly became entrenched in local concerns about there being too many tourists, and that local life was changing because of it; most notably with reference to certain parts of Reykjavik. The northern lights tours are an example par excellence of these concerns. It is an industry that has expanded rapidly ever since the economic meltdown struck Iceland in 2008. These concerns, most often related to ideas about authenticity, are not uniform but differ with regards to tourists, guides and locals (see an explication of these categories in the method chapter). The northern lights tours thus function as an instructive platform for discussions to be had on the subject of authenticity.

Authenticity and commercialization will be discussed in view of and juxtaposed against those exotic national (theosophical) tropes and imaginings, such as pristine wilderness, with which Iceland has become associated, and increasingly associates itself with. In marketing Iceland as a non-modernity destination the aforementioned concerns surface ever more clearly. In order to maintain the image of Iceland as such, as one informant remarked, Iceland cannot ever “look like Times Square”. Authenticity, as in true representation, is understandably paramount when selling and staging Icelandic culture and nature, for these national entities, unlike the objects and experiences sold in a theme park like Disneyland, are neither artificial nor fictitious. The perceived vanishing of authenticity resulting from commercialization, such as there being too many tourists on the northern lights tours, or the transformation of Reykjavik, prevalent in local discourses about the outside image and representation of Iceland, is a central theme in this thesis.

Furthermore, when discussing commercialization and commercial saturation and/or pollution this thesis engages with local meanings and experiences of these processes. Locals most often described present changes taking place in Iceland as the effect of commercialization. And as with authenticity the idea behind this thesis is to engage with these discourses and their local productivity. In other words, this thesis did not impose these narratives but rather engaged with them.

Chapters

With the above in mind three ethnographic chapters were fashioned, following from the introductory chapters on background, theory and methodology.
The first ethnographic chapter is introductory and sets the stage for the following two ethnographic chapters. It introduces the aforementioned and observed commercial saturation of Icelandic identity and defines it as a local worry that Iceland is becoming less Icelandic. This is accounted for in part by situating the northern lights tours alongside the Icelandic tourism industry as a whole.

The second ethnographic chapter directs focus elsewhere, though plainly in view of the first ethnographic chapter, and explores what the three northern lights guides, Asthor, Edda and Svanur think of their work as storytellers and performers. This chapter thus connects and nuances the above-mentioned worry of commercial saturation with the stories told on the northern lights tours. Furthermore, in analyzing the stories told on the tours, and what the three guides think of these stories, it will be argued that the northern lights have become a cultural object in the making.

The third and final ethnographic chapter is an experimental and interdisciplinary attempt to broaden academic discourses surrounding the topic of nationalism and the nation. Inspired by Baudrillard it explores his theme park metaphor – related to issues pertaining to authenticity and imaginings – and asserts, though tentatively, that the commercial (hyperreal) northern lights national object may be regarded as evidence of the nation in acquiring theme park like qualities. In conversation with informants it will be argued that we can learn a great deal about the authenticating workings of the naturalized nation by making comparisons with what in many ways symbolizes it antithesis, the theme park. This chapter draws heavily from the discussions in the two previous chapters.

In sum, this thesis is an interdisciplinary attempt at making sense of the northern lights and their renegotiated cultural objectification – in view of the tourism industry – into consumable national artifacts. It explores the contradictions that surface in any discourse related to authenticity – such as the northern lights tourism industry and its participation in the romanticized imaginary of Iceland. The ethnographic chapters are structured such that they follow from one another. As a result, the third chapter can be read as a concluding discussion of, and elaboration on, the previous two chapters.
Background

The aim of this chapter is not to historically account for the cultural significance of the northern lights in Iceland. For they have never truly been regarded as an object constitutive of Icelandic national identity. That is, up until their most recent commercialization. This began roughly two decades ago. This commercial development has opened up for the northern lights to be renegotiated anew; in part, and arguably, as national objects and symbols for tourists to experience and consume.

However, the renewed interest in the northern lights, which followed from strategically marketing them as a natural (and national) spectacle for tourists, is not wholly unproblematic. For the straightforward reason that the northern lights are and have become intertwined in affective discourses around Icelandic nature and culture. These discourses, connected to ideas about authenticity and wilderness, become for both tourists and locals contradictory when the northern lights become too commercialized. That is, when their experience (directly and indirectly) is perceived as inauthentic. I will return to this later on.

In approaching the northern lights through the themes of cultural objectification, nationalism, authenticity and wilderness, I shall first account for why Icelandic national identity is vulnerable to commercial saturation. And in order to discuss Icelandic national sensibilities we must first account for how the Icelandic nation came into being – and the exotic ideas and tropes with which it became and is becoming associated. This will then be accompanied by accounting for (Icelandic) nature tourism in specific and northern lights tourism in general.

The Icelandic character in the making

Iceland was up until 1944 subject to Danish colonial rule. The quest for national independence first began in the 19th century by Icelandic intellectuals, who had lived and studied in Copenhagen. These intellectuals had been educated in the philosophy of nationhood – most notably with regards to Herder, who argued that nationhood and language were interconnected, constituting a national person – and thus sought to justify Icelandic independence on the ground of its language and culture (Matthíasdóttir 2000). This was
justified primarily with appeal to the Icelandic medieval sagas, which were advanced as an authentic historical record, indicative of the Icelandic character (Jóhannesson 2015) – thus as means for a legitimate claim to sovereignty through nationhood.

Icelandic intellectuals thus nation-branded Iceland in view of the European sprung discourse of nation-state formation (Durrenberger & Palsson 2015). This instilled a desire to be recognized as modern, so as to be worthy of independence (Mixa 2015).

Adjacent to the above, Denmark held a colonial exhibition with “exotic and primitive” subjects from different colonies, some of which were Icelanders (Palsson 2016; Lofsdottir 2010; 2015b). This event naturally caused for uproar amongst the Icelandic students in Copenhagen who were working to attain national credibility. They protested loudly against their own peoples’ inclusion in this exhibition (though revealingly not against the exhibition as such). It was argued that they did not belong alongside the Other black colonial subjects, asserting that they were of “noble origins” and “sharpened by hardship” (Lofsdottir 2015b: 246; 2010: 10) – as professed in the sagas.

Grétarsdóttir et al. (2015: 93) makes the claim that the desire to be recognized as modern has been relevant throughout the past two centuries in Iceland, and that it still is. Whether past or present tropes of modernity – this desire seems to contradict the commercial image of Iceland, depicted as isolated, remote, archaic and exotic; as one untouched by modernity. Taken together these non-modernity tropes (Ivy 1995) entail romanticized ideas about preservation, tradition, wilderness and exoticness (Jóhannesson et al. 2010; Lofsdottir 2015a; Gunnarsdóttir & Jóhannesson 2014).

At the same time, it was helpful to adhere to certain survivals – a la Tylor – in asserting national distinctiveness and subsequently independence; such inferred the preservation of longstanding traditions, among which the most important one was the Icelandic language (Jóhannesson et al. 2010). Since language was depicted as instrumental to the existence of a national character it was heralded as having survived despite foreign governance and subjugation. The Icelandic language thus became suggestive of Icelanders’ now historically amassed ethnic fortitude.

Leading up to independence Icelandic history was therefore romanticized as one of greatness, followed by hardship due to colonial subjugation, in spite of which Icelanders had endured, thanks to their superior culture and ethnicity (Jóhannesson 2015: 21). Connections were made between the past, foretold in the Icelandic sagas, and the present
(such as the European sprung standards of nation-state formation), in view of which the past was renegotiated and appropriated.

Lofsdóttir (2015a) traces remnants of this now *national* history, and how it is still being appropriated, with reference to the economic crisis that impacted Iceland in 2008. In the last decade of the 20th century the Icelandic economy was privatized in view of neoliberal reform. This quickly led to an economic boom. Ideas about the superior character of Icelanders resonated with their economic success, rationalized in view of their history, which had at this point become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Lofsdóttir gives an example of how the public discourse in Iceland at the time compared Icelandic businessmen with Vikings. They were described as brave and risk-seeking pillagers (Lofsdóttir 2015a: 5).

The above is an ideal example of how the past becomes a mediator for the present, and vice versa. What is more, the president at the time attributed their economic success as evidence of this superior Icelandic character (Jóhannesson 2015: 20). In addition, Mixa (2015) notes how warnings from economic institutions abroad about the volatility of this economic success were disregarded because they did not take into account the extraordinary character of Icelanders.

However, once the economic crisis was a fact the pride and conviction that had embellished their economic triumphalism was quickly superseded by an “ultimate sense of guilt” (Lofsdóttir 2015a: 4). National ideology had been replaced with dire realism. The crisis resulted in an urgent critical revision of Icelandic national identity. The Icelandic government advised Icelanders to adopt more “realistic, moderate and responsible identities” (Gretarsdottir et al. 2015: 95).

Post crisis Iceland was now committed to an unstable economic reality paved way by their loans from the IMF that were tied to privatizing conditionals (Durrenberger & Palsson 2015: 27). Arguably, this economic predicament and their revised national identity – or, the critical awareness thereof – discloses much about present day Iceland. But eventually this too becomes the past; and this too becomes subject to renegotiation.

The economy is booming anew in Iceland much thanks to the accelerating tourist industry. Since 2010 the number of foreign visitors to Iceland has quadrupled. In 2016 a total of 1,792,201 visited Iceland (Óladóttir 2017). By contrast, in 1993 there were a total of 156,000 foreign visitors. Likewise, among those northern lights guides that I was spending time with, as part of this thesis, most reference 2010 as the year when tourism boomed.
Again, since Iceland made its way out of the economic crisis by means of an expanding and flourishing tourism industry, which is showing no sign of slowing down, this commercial development has become something of a predicament. In jest this predicament can be compared to what Taussig (1980) describes as a deal with the ‘capitalist devil’ – denoting uncertainty, ambivalence and pragmatism. More than that, Iceland has a public politic that is distinctly protectionist and nationalist, owing to its history and recent national independence from colonial rule in 1944 (Lofsdóttir 2010 & 2015b).

Tourism and tourists were discussed daily during my stay in Iceland, without me ever having to impose the subject. As a testament to this, which also reflects the present state of Iceland and Reykjavik, locals (on several occasions) told me of a game that they used to play that were called ‘spot the tourist’ but had now become ‘spot the Icelander’. This thesis’ incessant mentioning of commercialization is thus both to situate Iceland alongside its booming tourism industry – to convey this commercially caused influx of tourists – and to capture the locally argued polluting effects such has on the Icelandic nation.

At any rate, the commoditization and commercialization of nationalism seem to be written in the stars of service-based economies like Iceland, as states continue to cling to their self-acclaimed and self-congratulatory national authenticities. With exotic tropes such as glaciers, volcanoes, geysers, and northern lights, these developments seem only to have been a matter of time (Gunnarsdóttir & Jóhannesson 2014; Jóhannesson et al. 2010).

Nature tourism in Iceland

Most tourists come to Iceland because it is regarded as a place where one can experience “pristine wilderness” (Saerorsdottir 2010). The Icelandic tourism bureau has made an effort to brand Iceland as ‘Arctic’ in order to cater to these desires, since the Arctic invokes romantic ideas about an uninhabited location shaped by time and not by humans (Lofsdóttir et al. 2017). As Pritchard and Morgan (2000) points out, these ideas of wild landscapes can be traced to a particular gaze, defined as Western, white, travelling and male (see also Cruikshank 2005 & Liechty 2017).

The tourist industry thus has clear economic incentives to portray Iceland in view of tourists’ imagination of the north, the most persuasive idea of which being the Arctic. This renders the Icelandic nature in its most reduced and commercial manifestation into an unhistorical site open for exploration (Lofsdóttir et al. 2017: 1238).
However, and as Saerorsdottir notes, “there is no agreement in the tourism literature on how to define nature tourism” (2010: 28). Most generally it regards journeying – as constitutive of exploring (Theodosopoulos 2013) – to natural areas in order to experience and enjoy that particular nature. With regards to the journey as intrinsic to the experience of authentic nature, Theodosopoulos (2013: 342) remarks: “Adventurers in search of the authentic can embark – if they wish – on as many journeys as they please, contaminating the very authenticity they seek!” This is true also of tourists’ ideas of pristine wilderness, having more to do with their gaze than with nature as such. In short, both these points connect back to the classical nature-culture binary, motivated by Cartesian dualist thinking. In other words, it is a Western and historically contingent gaze.

Icelandic nature tourism has until the last two decades been characterized by limited infrastructure and commercialization (Saerorsdottir 2010: 29). In addition, since the Icelandic landscape is often ‘open’ due to being barren, infrastructure becomes difficult to install without impacting tourists’ romantic ideas and expectations of what nature is supposed to look like. According to Saerorsdottir’s study, “there is a considerable variation in tourism in the nature destinations studied [...] opinions of the tourists who visit these destinations vary considerably regarding what qualities a particular destination should possess” (2010: 45). For example, some tourists, whom she labels as purists, desire as little man-made changes to the environment as possible.

Yet most tourists who end up going on the northern lights coach tours would most likely not consider themselves to be purists. Even still, nature tourism in one way or another exploits the idea of unspoiled nature as a valuable resource. And since Icelandic nature tourism is “built on unique nature and an image of unspoiled wilderness” it becomes further apparent that these destinations become organized with the “carrying capacity of each area” in mind (Saerorsdottir 2010: 49). For the guides, locals and tourists that I met, this “carrying capacity” had been exceeded quite significantly. Again, this was a popular topic of concern for all, though for different reasons. For tourists the idea of pristine wilderness was being saturated, for guides it was primarily a logistical problem, whereas for locals it was often both. Of course, these concerns overlapped and shaped each other’s realities.

Armason (2010: 91) notes how landscape has become a category of experience in Western Europe. Varying purist inspired expectations makes for different possibilities in selling this experience. Again, for some tourists the northern lights coach tours came off as inauthentic experiences of nature, whereas for others they did not. With continued
commercialization of Icelandic nature and landscape this so-called category of experience will only become more defined and adaptable, and such will inevitably bring about new forms of objectifications of Icelandic identity and nationhood. Thus, as asserted by Arnarson: “It is already well established that a conversation with landscape is a fundamental feature of the constitution of the nation-form in Iceland, in the formation of Icelandic identity” (2010: 93).

In Schaad’s (1996) study about tourism and its proliferation on national stereotypes he accounts for many travel accounts that shared their disappointment when people or things were not as they had been imagined. Schaad suitably called the “tourist world” that existed online, where people could share their experience of places, as a “world of stereotypes” (1996: 206). But is there any need to distinguish between the online and the offline? The disappointment in the northern lights accounted for above is very much ‘offline’ albeit partly instigated ‘online’. The presumed online world does not separate itself from the offline world, as the social world does not separate itself from the material world; and as such any distinction between the two becomes arbitrary at best.

**Northern lights tourism**

There is not much anthropological literature on the northern lights and there is no research done on the northern lights in view of cultural objectification or nationalism. It is here the purpose to bring to the fore previous research done on this topic so as to situate my own research.

The northern lights have received little attention in academic discourses. However, they were mentioned in the 18th century as a “natural phenomenon and a national icon” (Bertella 2013: 167; see also Friedman 2010). Oftentimes the northern lights are just referenced in passing as a tourist attraction connected to the North (Halpern 2008; Tervo 2008). That is, connected to areas such as Scandinavia, Alaska, Canada, and Greenland. Giovanna Bertella’s (2013: 167-8) thorough summary of past research on the northern lights references articles that do not exceed 18 years of age and oftentimes only regard tourism and photography more generally.

The recently awoken academic interest in the northern lights corresponds to its recent commercialization in Iceland, which occurred roughly two decades ago. Like my curiosity, this interest was spawned by 21st century – very successful – attempts to market and profit from Nordic national tropes (see most notably Lofsdóttir 2012; 2015a; 2015b).
This thesis departs significantly from the above mentioned anthropological research done on northern lights tourism. Instead, this thesis strives to connect previous research on the topic with my own ethnographic experiences to frame it anew in view of cultural objectification and nationalism. Thus, extending the discourse about how the northern lights are consumed by tourists to the process of cultural objectification of Icelandic national identity; in addition, the nationalistic discourses in which the northern lights have become situated – pertaining to a commercial saturation of Icelandicness.
Arguably, there cannot be a consensual definition of the nation that is not so general that it becomes meaningless. For the same reason, there cannot be a consensual definition of culture or of nature. At least insofar as they are all socially mediated and entangled. Indeed, social facts have the tendency of becoming embodied physical realities as physical realities become disembodied social facts (Palsson 2016). Thus, in assuming one overarching theoretical definition we forego these irreducible qualities; in part attributed to them as discontinuous emergent properties of being human, and as entities that transcend their own description (Taussig 2015). The northern lights, approached as ephemeral, fleeting and irreducible, reflect these considerations.

This chapter introduces and discusses those theoretical tools, frames and themes applied in the analyses undertaken throughout this thesis. It is a dense chapter but for good reasons, as it will aid the reader in understanding my analytical perspective when writing about the northern lights as national artefacts. I thus go into some depth with regards to five theoretical themes that are either closely related or that I draw connections between in this thesis. Ultimately, what relates them is their direct or indirect implication in this thesis’ discussions in and around nationalism.

On the nation and imaginings

Does the nation exist? And if the nation is imagined, does that mean that it does not exist?

Hobbes (1651: 106) famously depicted the state – the means with which the nation was brought into existence – as a mortal God. The cover of Leviathan depicts the state in an illustration of hundreds of individuals, which take the shape of one man with a crown on his head, wielding a sword in his right hand and a sceptre in his left. Hobbes thus recognized the state as a mortal God because it was after all but a collection of individuals. At the same time, the illustration is meant to showcase that the state had been individuated so that it could be deified.

Handler (1988: 6-9) understands this individuatedness as fundamental to the contradiction inherent in the nation construct. In his ethnography on Quebecoise nationalism
he defines the nation as an ideology of individuated being and explains it in terms of “boundedness, continuity, and homogeneity, encompassing diversity”. In accordance with Hobbes’ illustration of the state, the nation is individuated because it is projected as pertaining to individual traits and agency paradoxical to being comprised by numerous individuals. It is bounded because we perceive it as a tangible thing; and it is continuous because it is perceived as ahistorical and en route towards prominence. It is homogenous and diverse because it projects the existence of a national character in the image of its national citizens.

Being imagined means that the nation or state only exists as a recognized social fact, and thus has no fundamental reality beyond its socially reified reality (Taussig 1993: 119). And if the nation depends and is contingent on social recognition and reification, then this renders it vulnerable to claims of being imaginary. In other words, the nation does not exist *simpliciter*.

Relatedly, being imagined entails that the nation’s coming into existence is historically relative and contingent (Gellner 1983: 3). In addition, Anderson (1991: 7) asserts that the nation embodies contradictions by virtue of its imagined nature; such as its perceived objective modernity for historians and its subjective antiquity for nationalists. Because the nation is a fundamentally emergent socially recognized and reified fact, and while it is in practice attributed traits of uniformity, continuity, individuatedness and boundedness, it also adapts to changing norms of said social reality. The nation thus changes in view of ruling ideas about its qualities. Handler (1988: 4) referred to this change as constitutive of nations’ discursive justification. That is, to bring into tangible and bounded being that which is ever-changing: one prevalent process of which is cultural objectification.

Anderson’s convincingly accounts for the immemorial past and limitless future of the nation (1991: 11). By employing a Marxist perspective he points out that the nation, despite being only some three centuries old, has already laid claim to the culture, history and nature, designated to its geographical area, regardless of when, how or what (1991: 157). And it is this spatiotemporal appropriation, as noted by Handler, which renders the nation a-historical. Taken together, the above accounted for salient qualities of the nation effectively makes it into a mortal God. No longer an ideological construct but naturalized and objective; no longer an ideological construct but as real as time itself; no longer an ideological construct but as real as the national citizens that lends it its character and personality.

The above describes the nation as imagined – it is a construct, indeed. Yet it is only an imagined construct insofar as all social facts are. Imaginings should therefore be
asserted cautiously. Chatterjee (1993) asks for whom this construct is imagined. Is it imagined by and for Western scholars? He directs a post-colonial critique at Anderson and his postmodernist followers by arguing that imaginings in essence are oppressive and reductive forms of explanation. They are oppressive for the same reason that Theodossopoulos (2013) deems the notion “invented traditions” offensive to local and national traditions. This critique will be addressed in more depth in the final ethnographic chapter where comparisons are made between the nation and the theme park, comparisons that may be subject to post-colonial critique similar to the above. Yet inasmuch as imaginings are used in this thesis they are done so with this critique in mind.

Handler’s definition of the nation will rein supreme in this thesis because his ethnography is in many ways similar to this one. At least, in terms of the social and political context in which he conducted his ethnography, and the context in which I conducted mine. Quebec was at the time establishing its nationness in view of an influx of tourists (and other nations related to its colonized past and present) and thus in view of commercial cultural objectification of what was considered to be Quebecoise culture. Iceland too faces an immense acceleration of tourism, even more so than Quebec, and shares a history of colonization.

Both nations are thus subject to change caused by outside influences. For this reason, alongside the contradiction of the nation, namely that it details “homogeneity encompassing diversity”, it is a contested ideological construct that emerges from competing ideologies. As Kelly Askew put it: “within a single nation (Western and non-Western both), different ideologies compete for recognition and status as the dominant national ideology.” (2002: 10). This is also why Handler emphasizes the negative vision – of disintegration – that runs parallel to the nation and its positive vision of the future as one of prominence. As he notes, and which rings true of Iceland too:

At the center of the negative vision is the assumption that an authentically Quebecois culture which existed in the past has come under attack from outside cultural forces. Authentic culture, the culture of the past, is seen as the original product of a distinctive people, conceived and chosen by those who lived it. (Handler 1988: 50)
This fear of disintegration will be less theatrically referred to in this thesis as worries or concerns regarding unwarranted changes in Iceland. In turn, this can be explicated with reference to Mary Douglas, who notes that, “pollution is a type of danger which is not likely to occur except where the lines of structure, cosmic or social, are clearly defined” (1966: 113). And what is better defined, though necessarily invariably so, than the nation? As such, worries about unwarranted changes taking place in Iceland can be related to the locally perceived polluting effects of tourism.

**On cultural objectification and authenticity**

As hitherto has been mentioned, cultural objectification and authenticity are reoccurring themes in this thesis. It is therefore worthwhile to offer the reader some background with regards to these two deeply interconnected concepts.

In principle, cultural objectification describes the process with which human life in its totality moves from being something one does habitually to being (culturally) objectified in order to be preserved as tradition (Handler 1988: 13-6). As such, it regards a very fundamental human trait, the desire to create continuity out of a necessarily discontinuous existence.

What cultural objectification does reveal, then, is that whatever continuity we construct in nations or other communities is necessarily imagined, first and foremost because the process of objectification is itself one token of change having occurred (Handler 1988: 194). And to this end, discourses concerning cultural objectification become intimately involved with discourses about authenticity.

Cultural objectification does not mean that whatever was objectified had not been objectified before, that whatever was objectified cannot or will not be objectified in the future, or that whatever was objectified was objectified uniformly across the board by all who partake in it or that objectification. And cultural objectification does not infer what can or cannot be objectified. See for instance this thesis and its analysis of the northern lights as cultural objects *in the making*. The addition of *in the making* is an underscoring of the fact that no cultural object is ever uniform, but subject to renegotiation.

Unsurprisingly, the above discussion and its points resemble my previous definition of the nation. In a national context, cultural objectification regards the
manifestation of what is considered to be the inside – or the contents – of the nation; in other words, what comprises national identity; in short, the geography, history and culture unique to the nation (Handler 1988: 154).

Handler (1988: 154-5) puts forward a typology of ten different cultural objects and their specific claims to ownership (authenticity). What this typology lacks however is an acknowledgement, and which I later argue to be true of the northern lights and also of authenticity insofar as it is relative, that several contradictive typologies can be true at the same time. Tourists and Icelanders, in their collective individualities, together with the world at large in which these individuals are implicated, shape the cultural and national objectification of the northern lights.

Prima facie, the notion of invented national traditions is a question about whether such traditions should be considered authentic or invented. On a local level this inventedness seems less applicable; yet in principle there is no real difference insofar as all traditions derive from objectification one way or the other (Handler 1988: 74). At least, that is the argument. And when we make the differentiation between authentic and invented traditions lest we forget that we engage in particular and positional ideas about what are to be considered authentic or inauthentic traditions.

Theodossopoulos (2013) makes very clear that in assuming authenticity to be true we assume – as with imaginings – the existence of an unpolluted pristine reality underneath the social; thus making a claim about what is necessarily true in relation to what is necessarily not true. National traditions are a great example of this because their importance varies greatly and thus so too does its authenticities. Handler puts forward an argument against authenticity similar to the “trap of authenticity” spoken of by Theodossopoulos:

These populist critiques of the mirage of bureaucratic decentralization are well founded, but I would point out that they, like the bureaucratic ideology they attack, represent a never-ending quest to locate authenticity in individuated units at some other level. (Handler 1988: 189, original emphasis)

Therefore, authenticity should instead not be approached in such epistemologically undermining terms but rather be engaged with in their relative and local productivity. This has been the means with which this thesis has related to statements about authenticity from
informants. Theodossopoulos numbered five dilemmas that he associated with the authenticity concept that inspired this thesis’ approach and use of authenticity:

1) The first involves the presupposition that authenticity lies at an inaccessible level below the surface of social life, deep within oneself or among societies “uncontaminated” by modernity, a position echoed by Western philosophers, such as Rousseau.

2) The second examines the “trap of authenticity,” the contradiction emerging from deconstructing (analytically) the authenticity/inauthenticity opposition, while at the same time having to (ethnographically) engage with its meaningfulness on the local level.

3) The third concerns the irony of the notion of invention of tradition, which effectively demonstrates the constructed nature of authenticity in national(ist) narratives, but offends the sensitivities (and inventiveness) of local actors or minority groups.

4) The fourth considers the criteria used to define the authenticity of objects (in particular, their age) and provides solutions to unresolved tensions between constructivist and materialist approaches to the study of object authentication.

5) The fifth dilemma addresses the simultaneity of authenticity, its polysemic parallel manifestation under different conceptualizations within the same processes of authentication, asking the question: is there only one authenticity or many? (Theodossopoulos 2013: 338)

**On performance and storytelling**

If the nation is a social fact recognized and reified into tangible being then this recognition and reification constitute the performances, or “non-performative performances” (Herzfeld 1997) of the nation. These performances of the nation can be described, which Kelly Askew does in her ethnography, *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania*, as “a dominant ideology materialized through its performance” (2002: 2, original emphasis). Performances are interactive and risky since “something can always go wrong” (Scieffelin 1996: 60). In part because performances are fundamentally social undertakings and as such are inherently tenuous: “...its susceptibility to modification, unrehearsed action, unanticipated response, and the contingencies of everyday life – renders it a powerful social force.” (Askew 2002: 5; see also Turner 1986).
This thesis draws from Edward Scieffelin’s assertion that a “performative analysis can contribute to understanding the emergence of consequential realities in the historical world” (1996: 84) – a historical world which Handler accordingly describes as the “lifeblood and conscience of the nation” (1988: 17).

Performance may be defined as another formulation of discursive production (Neale 2017) and the stories told on the northern lights tours will be analyzed as such – as performances or discursive productions of cultural objectification of Icelandicness. To elucidate this one can adhere to Eric Wolf and his point that “Ideas or systems of ideas do not, of course, float about in incorporeal space; they acquire substance through communication in discourse and performance” (1999: 6).

Admittedly, this thesis does not dive that deep into what is a rich ocean of scholarly work conducted on storytelling and performance – or storytelling as a performance. For the most part the notion of performance floats in the background only to surface in the second ethnographic chapter where I analyze stories told to me and tourists on the northern lights tours. Yet, in so doing it is necessary to describe further what performances entail.

Diana Taylor (2003) notes similar to Julie Cruikshank (2005) that stories are acts of transfer and that these transfers contain knowledge. As Taylor concisely phrases it: “Performances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated “twice-behaved behaviour”” (2003: 2-3).

In practice, this thesis employs performance as a methodological tool as it enables events to be analyzed as performances (Taylor 2003: 3). Such as the stories told to me on the northern lights tours, stories told to me in interviews, or in the stories told to me as jokes by Icelanders about tourists. Arguably, performance and/or storytelling are and should be a fundamental part of any ethnography. Not least insofar as we too perform – partake in – these performances in our analyses and when doing field research.

It is relevant to also describe performativity. Butler (1993) understands it as the social series of effects shaped by performances, most famously with reference to how gender identities are produced. Taylor (2003: 5) describes this as often an invisible production because of its normativity, such as with gender. This then seems particularly applicable with regards to national identity – being something that we are by default, as if intrinsic to the self and the world. With this in mind, Taussig (1993) denotes the failure of not belonging to a
state or nation as a literally unbelievable tragedy because of the crisis of meanings that occurs when no such belonging can be performed.

All in all, this thesis will not engage with or seek to expand on debates surrounding the theory and concept of performance and performativity. Instead it will apply these concepts and theories as ‘mere’ analytical tools.

**On the (northern lights) image character and the tourist gaze**

Central to this thesis is the northern lights as an object and by extension a representation. In this sub-chapter we briefly explore theories with which to approach the use and subsequent analysis of images and image-making.

Photography is essential to the northern lights tourism industry, though it does not serve the main focus of this thesis. Photography is a technologically mediated “objective and material” (MacCannel 1976) processual act of experiencing and objectifying the northern lights. Photography is thus one act with which the northern lights become culturally objectified, most often and crucially after having been culturally objectified by guides, advertisements, and in travel accounts on social media.

The northern lights are unlike other objects insofar as they vary greatly in their experience but seemingly not so much in their representation. Indeed, why would tourism providers employ a barely intelligible green shimmer in their marketing when they can employ its fantastic and awe-inducing counterpart? Thus images of the northern lights appearing online and in adverts may contribute to higher disparities between the representational idea of the phenomenon and the experience of that phenomenon. As Bertella notes, “The exposure to the images and the experience of what these represent are clearly interrelated activities” (2013: 171). In this light the representational images of the northern lights and their selected fantastical performances, their selected objectivity, become the object of consumption for tourists (Osborne 2000).

In Bertella’s (2013: 170) own thesis of northern lights tourism in Tromsø, Norway, she discusses the role of photography for tourists as, “the creation of their own memorable experiences”, since, drawing from Wing Sun Tung and Ritchie (2011), “tourism actors cannot create memorable experiences”. She concludes that the northern lights tourism industry utilizes and exploits the authenticating role of photography as an *objective*
objectifying act (2013: 183). Bertella draws, like this thesis, from John Urry’s (1991) definition of (e.g. marketing) images as connecting representation with experience. As noted by Gordon (1986: 140) too, the images taken by tourists, either themselves or in the shape of postcards or other image-specific memorabilia, makes the experience more concrete, and provides it with “an air of authority and finality”.

While tourists are not so much the focus of this thesis, tourism definitely is – being the very context around which the northern lights have been commercialized and objectified. And while the local perspective has been privileged throughout, it is no less mandatory to shed some insights on the topic of tourism and the tourist gaze. Urry in The Tourist Gaze 3.0 (2011) starts his preface with the words, “The world of tourism is in constant flux and tourism theory needs to be on the move to capture such changes.” (xii). In addition, the tourist is an occasional identity, as Brendon (1991: 188) noted, “It’s funny isn’t it, how every traveller is a tourist except one’s self?”

Urry moreover describes the tourist gaze – the construction of the image character – and the banal context around surrounding it; a description that is also applicable to this thesis:

This is a book about pleasure, about holidays, tourism and travel, about how and why for short periods people leave their normal place of work and residence. It is about consuming goods and services which are in some sense unnecessary. They are consumed because they supposedly generate pleasurable experiences which are different from those typically encountered in everyday life. And yet at least a part of that experience is to gaze upon or view a set of difference scenes, of landscape or townscapes which are out of the ordinary. When we ‘go away’ we look at the environment with interest and curiosity. It speaks to us in ways we appreciate, or at least we anticipate that it will do so. In other words, we gaze at what we encounter. This gaze is socially organised and systematised... (Urry 2011: 1)

Similar to cultural objectification, performance and performativity, the gaze is conditioned by previous personal experiences, memories, ideas and the exposure of previous ‘gazes’ produced in circulating images and texts. As Urry emphasizes, this gaze – and the scene it reads – “are not the property of mere sight” and details a “vision constructed through mobile images and representation technologies” (2011: 2). As a result, there is no single tourist gaze,
as there is no single performance or cultural objectification. To conclude with another quote from Urry and one from Merleu-Ponty:

The tourist gaze is increasingly media-mediated. In postmodernity tourists are constantly folded into a world of texts and images – books, magazines, paintings, postcards, ads, soap operas, movies, video games, music videos and so on – when gazing in and upon places. (Urry 2011: 116)

Vision is not a certain mode of thought or presence to self; it is the means given me for being absent from myself, for being present from the inside at the fission of Being only at the end of which do I close up into myself. (Merleu-Ponty 1958: 235)

**On simulacra and hyperreality**

Butler noted on the topic of objectification that “Interpellation thus loses its status as a simple performative, an act of discourse with the power to create that to which it refers, and creates more than it ever meant to, signifying in excess of any intended referent”. In short, this excess is the hyperreal in the making. It becomes more than it is; it becomes the accumulated performative highpoint of what it has been objectified to be. In accordance with this, and to reiterate what was said in the introduction: the northern lights are hyperreal because they appear more vivid and real in their pictorial or verbal representation than they do, as it were, in real life. And something is hyperreal when its representation *appears* more real, alive and authentic, than the actual phenomenon

The hyperreal concept was coined by Baudrillard (1998) as a constitutive and revealing feature of the simulacrum. The simulacrum denotes an experience of reality not as it is but as it has been represented, and then as that representation has been represented in turn. As a result, there is no original underlying reality left similar to how performativity asserts that there is no original at all.

To elucidate and as emphasized by Baudrillard, we always have and always will experience reality in some mediated shape, way or form. This is fundamental to all human experiences of reality and is not what the simulacrum denotes. Instead, the simulacrum details a move away from this into what Taussig (1991) describes as a third-order representation of
According to Baudrillard, the Western world is marked by representations of representations that he notes as hyperreal renderings constructing the simulacrum. In the process reality is rendered neither true nor false – crucially because there is no underlying authentic reality – but artificial, insofar as we now find ourselves in a “simulation of reality”. This is the basic argument as put forward by Baudrillard, and it can be contextualized with reference to an example he gives:

In the same way, with the pretext of saving the original, one forbade visitors to enter the Lascaux caves, but an exact replica was constructed five hundred meters from it, so that everyone could see them (one glances through a peephole at the authentic cave, and then one visits the reconstituted whole). It is possible that the memory of the original grottoes is itself stamped in the minds of future generations, but from now on there is no longer any difference: the duplication suffices to render both artificial. (Baudrillard 1998: 9)

As has been mentioned already, this thesis will relate the notion of the hyperreal with the objectification of the northern lights. Inspired by Alan Bryman and his book The Disneyization of Society (1999) it will then be suggested, in the third and final ethnographic chapter, that the nation embodies theme park qualities. In constructing this argument, Baudrillard and the concept of hyperreality and simulacra will be revisited and critiqued in plain view of the above accounted for theories and debates regarding authenticity, cultural objectification, performativity and the imagined nation.
Methods

The intent with this chapter is to provide a descriptive account of the ethnographic methods employed in the making of this thesis. The aim is to give the reader a sense of the scope of this ethnography, conducted in Iceland between January and March 2018.

The initial research plan was to partake in at least five northern lights tours a week. These plans had to be revised since the weather was so bad throughout that most tours had to be cancelled. Only eight tours took place and I partook in six of those. But things rarely go as planned. And it is safe to say that if future events went as designed then there would be no need for anthropologists to make sense of them; we would be managing deterministic causal chains and would only have to reflect over what necessarily is and what necessarily must be – not what contingently is or what contingently might be. This same critique has been levelled at design anthropology too (Tunstall 2013), which – though not across the board – heralds design to be anything but the curiously inegalitarian and technocratic view that future events can be made manifest and that such requires the work of a designated designer.

At any (future) event, there are obvious limitations to fieldwork that is only six weeks long. Yet it was not my first research conducted in Iceland – having spent a year there between 2015 and 2016 – and this time around I had the benefit of being implicated in an ethnographically rich context already from the start; that is, the all-Icelandic commune in which I stayed. Teresa Caldeira, who has performed decade long urban ethnographic research in Brazil, said in an interview that intimacy is imperative for any type of ethnographic study (Anthropod 2018). It is imperative because it is through intimacy – produced in the encounter between informants and the ethnographer – that we derive our analyses. In a similar vein, Donna Haraway (1988) proclaimed that anthropologists should ideally do research with informants and about topics that they are personally invested in; simply because of this intimacy and the ethically imposed checks and balances such inevitably cultivates.

Field site(s)

The field was and is understood as comprised of multiple sites and connections (Robben & Sluka 2012: 357); as opposed to one bounded self-contained whole.
In turn, these sites included – though not exclusively – the commune situated in the commercial heart of Reykjavik; in other words, downtown Reykjavik, also called Reykjavik 101 (with reference to its postal code). Having daily encounters with informants in this area rendered it the principal site from which I gathered ethnographic data. Additional important sites include the main coach terminal and office of the tourism company, Gray Line, on Klettargardur. Also, the northern lights tours themselves, sold as ‘northern lights mystery tours’, which ended up taking me and the tourists to various places outside Reykjavik. To this extent, the coach became an interesting field site, as were the places that we visited. And the constant interchange of people on each tour – and journeying to destinations that for both me and tourists were unfamiliar – made me ask more fundamental questions pertaining to “cognitive processes and their relationship to culture” (Davies 2008: 286). Indeed, how do people construct and conduct themselves in these unfamiliar places surrounded by unfamiliar people? The final site worthy of mentioning was Vestmannaeyjar. It is a small island situated just off the south coast of Iceland. I went there twice for two extended weekends to live with an informant and his family. It became an instructive contrast to the more urban city life in Reykjavik.

**Ethnographic methods**

Having accounted for what ‘sites’ were essential to this thesis closer focus will now be directed to the actual methods practiced.

Sluka and Robben rightfully argue that “a research design is not imposed on the research subject, but the subject informs and dynamically reshapes the design” (2012: 371). Phrased differently, we are not identical to others – informants – because we are like them, but only so because we could have been them. This sentiment echoes John Rawls’ “veil of ignorance”, first put forward as a method in his political philosophy and treatise *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Lehning describes it accordingly: “The veil of ignorance presents the parties in the original position from knowing how the various alternative principles for ordering our social order will affect their own particular case” (2009: 28). Insofar as the ethnographic method is inescapably political (Davies 2008: 216) this is a valuable method – pertaining to reflexivity – with which I situated myself and my research.

At the same time, one can do without the “social order”, for the same reason that one can do without the field as a clearly demarcated and bounded site. Davies (2008: 180)
accordingly notes that the field cannot be “readily treated as [a] relatively isolated social and cultural” unit of analysis. As ethnographic methods become applied in practice, and as practice turns into ethnographic data, the written analysis – ethnography – is soon to follow. And in writing this analysis I have persistently made sure to nuance my ethnographic data by situating it in a world that is not divided into bounded parts – but where each demarcation seeps into the other, much like tourists traversing the world.

The primary method employed was participant observation, the foundation of ethnographic research. This was conducted in all sites – at times an observer, at times a participant, at times both – but most notably with reference to the northern lights tours, as it had clearly defined roles in terms of guides and tourists. I would start the tours by situating myself alongside the tourists, but as we arrived at the given destination I would engage in conversation and socialize with the guides.

Pushy ethnography (Pink 2013; 2005) was practiced once with one of my main informants, Asthor. It occurred after two weeks of little progress with regards to the northern lights guides. Asthor had been the first guide – though now a driver – that I had met, and I asked him whether I could “ride along” when he was working. Asthor answered affirmatively and after this the northern lights ‘site’ opened up quite significantly. With his blessing I could now start conducting structured interviews with several northern lights guides without them feeling forced. Two brief points can be drawn from this. First, it confirmed the snowball effect (Bernard 2011). Second, it confirmed Bernard’s dictum, “presence builds trust, trust lowers reactivity, and lower reactivity means higher validity of data” (2011: 302).

Furthermore, both structured (Davies 2008: 106) and semi-structured (Bernard 2011: 156) interviews were conducted. In total, seven structured interviews took place, five with guides and two with locals, and each between two and three hours long. The semi-structured interviews, in turn, are too many to count, and comprise most of my field material. I considered the ‘locals’ – often younger than the guides – that I met and spent time with in and around downtown Reykjavik as “marginal outsiders” (Bernard 2011: 167) of a space they had little direct experience of; namely, the commercial northern lights tours. I had a few grand-tour questions; one example of such asked what the informants thought about the future development of Reykjavik and Iceland, in view of the accelerating tourism industry. This was revealing because it allowed for the interviewee to ponder freely about what might unfold in the future, and whether it was all good or bad, and for what reasons. Furthermore, I would structure the interview as if “a joint exploration of the topic of research” (Davies 2008: 113);
some time was thus spent describing and presenting myself (Davies 2008: 113). At several occasions it became clear that the informant was telling me what he or she thought I wanted to hear, which will be discussed thoroughly in the first ethnographic chapter. Certainly, no interview is ever conducted in a neutral space but is shaped according to its particular context; it was therefore necessary to analyze the interviews by means of the discourse produced, the level of interaction, and the level of context (Davies 2008: 110). Indeed, nothing that purports to be of ethnographic significance is exempt from reflexivity.

Netnography (Kozinets 2010) was also practiced. Before travelling to Iceland I proceeded to follow as many travel accounts as I could (on Instagram and Facebook), related to Iceland and Icelandic tourism, including the company’s own accounts and sites. Though none of this data is featured in this thesis it nonetheless inspired it greatly. Netnography was thus practiced in line with what Davies referred to as “supplementary to ethnographic research” (2008: 151). A lot can be noted on the topic of netnography. As previously mentioned, I am of the conviction that there is no ontological or epistemological distinction between the online and the offline; the online refers to a distinct mediated reality no different, in principle, from all other mediated realities.

In addition, three focus groups were conducted. Initially the intent was to bring some locals that I had met, who had expressed discontent with the tourism industry, with me on the northern lights tours; and thereafter have a focus group interview. Yet since the tours were so infrequent and random (being weather dependent) this became untenable to orchestrate. Instead, I conducted three focus groups with locals independent of the northern lights tours. Two took place in downtown Reykjavik, with three locals in each group, and one took place in Vestmannaeyjar with my informant and his family.

**Reflexivity and perspective**

To begin with, I was fortunate to have lived in Iceland for a year before and that I had since then acquired rudimentary Icelandic language skills. On top of this, having informants that went back in time, and being a white male in a white male dominated tourism industry, most definitely helped me gain access to certain ‘rooms’ (Ahmed 2012).

Moreover, it is not easy to conduct ethnographic research on employers of a company. For example, at times the guides that I interviewed acted as if they were answering questions on behalf of the company; that is, as if they were defending the company. I tried to
overcome this by describing myself and situating my research for them; but also by steering away from any questions specifically related to the company. For instance, I told them that the reason for why I was interviewing them, and not tourists, was because I wanted to hear their perspective. Some guides, like Svanur and Asthor, were more vocal and willing with regards to questions about the company. In the end, guides’ inclination to ‘speak for the company’ became a revealing element for what I have chosen to call a stigma associated with the northern lights tourism industry, and their awareness of this stigma. At the same time, and again, no interview, or meeting, is ever without any narrative, context, or biases (Davies 2008: 105).

In an attempt to not confuse the reader with too many different ethnographic voices three main informants were chosen from the northern lights tours: Asthor, Edda and Svanur. These were chosen primarily because I had met them several times. Edda, for instance, had been my guide on the northern lights tours before I approached her. I had met Asthor first, just a few days after arriving in January, and he was the one who led me to the others. Successively, Svanur turned out to have taught both Asthor and Edda in the art of guiding; thus, it all came full circle when choosing these three.

The perspectives of Asthor, Edda and Svanur are in this thesis compared and juxtaposed against what I have chosen to call “the local attitude” towards the tourism industry. Unless ‘guide’ has been explicated in a given sentence, whenever locals are mentioned this references Icelanders around my age from, or who live in, downtown Reykjavik. Their ages range between 20 and 30, most often closer to the latter. To clarify, most guides were also locals who lived in downtown Reykjavik. Thus, the distinction is solely practical in order to distinguish between guides and locals.
It was late evening and I was standing in the smoking area of a bar, restaurant and club, next to the busiest tourist street, Laugavegur, which cuts through downtown Reykjavik. It was me and some informants, all Icelandic, having a few drinks.

While outside a friend of a friend showed up that I had met once or twice before, though we had yet to engage in any kind of conversation. Next to me, my friends, and this friend of a friend, in the smoking area of this bar, restaurant and club, adjacent to Laugavegur, there was a small heap of snow. The new guy takes a draw from his cigarette and observes me. He knows I am not an Icelander. With my attention at his disposal he exhales and takes a few steps toward me. With a stern face he exclaims, “This is Iceland’s most famous glacier” and points with his cigarette at the small heap of snow. “Tourists come from all over the world to see this glacier”, he adds. I laugh hesitantly unable to read him. He continues with the same monotone voice, “They take photos of it, they ski down it – this is the most famous tourist destination in Iceland, and they pay a lot of money to see it”.

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Tinna, the owner of the commune where I stayed, and who also ran an airbnb guest house for tourists, talked to me about her dislike of Laugavegur, “I wish there was a balance between tourists and Icelanders, [and] that you could walk down Laugavegur and not only see tourists”. Tinna pauses briefly and continues, “My friend lives close to Kex [a bar and hostel], and the easiest way home is on Laugavegur – but I avoid it, I try to walk on side streets”.

Stories like these were not unusual but commonplace amongst my informants; especially with reference to the alleged transformation of downtown Reykjavik. And while tourism and tourists may be criticized at times they also make for good entertainment – oftentimes both, as with the small heap of snow example. Often jokes and remarks were made on their behalf.
When I first met Tinna and told her of my research she, like most of my informants, was quick to tell me her experiences of tourists and the northern lights. One story involved an old American couple that she served at Kex. They had bombarded her with questions that “made no sense” and thus annoyed her. Such as, she tells me, “When will we see the northern lights? What is the perfect temperature to see them? What temperature makes them visible?” and “For how many seconds do they last?” As she recounts these questions she rolls her eyes and gives me a familiar look of bewilderment. Mid conversation she receives a call. It is from a tourist asking to rent a room, last minute and for one night, in her airbnb guest house. Apparently heavy wind and snowfall had caused for all flights to be cancelled. “100 Euros”, Tinna says assertively. The tourist agrees.

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During my time in Iceland I noticed a contrast in attitude toward tourism between guides and the locals that I was living and socializing with. But as with Tinna, there is not always a clear distinction there between, since many locals work in businesses that are one way or the other related to tourism. The distinction becomes further arbitrary when both groups employ similar ideas about e.g. what downtown Reykjavik used to be like. As we shall see in this chapter with reference to the three northern lights guides, Asthor, Edda and Svanur, all agree that tourism has brought with it undesired changes to downtown Reykjavik.

And as with the subtle critique about tourists’ unwarranted appropriation of Icelandic nature and culture, embedded in the joke about the small heap of snow; Asthor, Edda and Svanur are all aware that many Icelanders find their profession as northern lights guides somewhat absurd. Thus, there seems to be a stigma associated with the tourism industry – as I observed, particularly if you happen to be a northern lights guide.

Tourism, change and the stigma there related

Asthor opens the door to his Gray Line company car. It is early afternoon. We are in the outskirts of Reykjavik, outside the Gray Line main terminal and office, on Klettargardar. It is a snowy and windy day – like most other days since I arrived two weeks ago. Seconds after
greeting each other his phone starts ringing. It is an emergency. Apparently some tourists had missed their shuttle coach, which was going to take them to the airport. As soon as we are en route, to break the silence, I ask him, “Can there ever be too many tourists?” “Of course”, he replies, almost instantly. But that is all he says. And then we both start laughing.

Asthor is formally an actor, specialized in interactive and improvisational theatre. He has lived and worked for ten years in London; his English is fluent and faultless. Three years ago he moved back to Iceland, where he began to work for Gray Line as a northern lights guide. Before moving to Iceland he recalls seeing an advertisement about the northern lights in the London metro system. He tells me that the idea of selling the northern lights was at first ridiculous to him; an opinion shared by many Icelanders who do not work in the tourist industry themselves. In an interview, two weeks later, I asked him what it was that made him change his mind:

Oh, just a... a friend of mine; my friend who brought me in for the northern lights tours. He suggested them to me. You know, I voiced my concerns, and he went, “No, no, no – this is how it works. There is a 70 percent success rate on the tours in general and people get to go for free again and again”. And I was like, “Oh, that is reasonable. That makes sense”, so yeah.

Edda and Svanur, who work for the same company (though Svanur is now a free contractor) share similar stories about how they became northern lights guides. They had to be convinced.

Again, the Icelanders I was living with and their friends were always amused about what my research was about and I was often asked to explain and describe it whenever people came over. For instance, one such Icelanders, Gísli – whom I first met in 2015 –, told me, with regards to my fieldwork, “There is something really interesting about doing something so stupid as to participate in northern light bus tours”.

My structured interviews, and other encounters, with Asthor, Edda and Svanur reflect awareness with regards to the above; often safeguarding themselves from questions that come off as somewhat critical, at the very least because some questions posed emanated from concerns about the tourism industry that had been confessed to me in the commune and elsewhere. As Edda forecloses:
A lot of people have said – and me myself included before I started this – “why are you doing that, taking money from tourists like that when there is nothing to be seen”, [...] even people I work with at University say that to me – [and once I replied] “it was actually nice last time, we saw some really pretty awesome lights while you were sitting in your apartment building in the city with light pollution and TV in your room; of course you didn’t see it”. There have been evenings of amazing lights when people in the city didn’t think there were any.

Asthor, Edda and Svanur’s inclination to stress that they had been converted, that they had shared the same scepticism as everyone else, came up time after time. As we continue we shall explore further these ‘conversions’ in view of two transitional changes in Iceland, the quest for independence attained in 1944 and the economic crisis that occurred in 2008. That is, in view of national sensibilities there related. In light of the aforementioned critique of the tourism industry expressed by Gísli, Tinna and this friend of a friend, it will also be examined whether Icelandicness can ever become too commercialized.

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I am sitting in Svanur’s living room in downtown Reykjavik, only a three minute walk away from the commune. We got in touch through Asthor, evidence of the snowball effect. I did not know much about Svanur before meeting him, besides what Edda and Asthor had told me, calling him “amazing” and describing him as “very much a storyteller – he is very good at it”. As one would expect, Svanur is self-assured and forthcoming. He was part of the first commercial northern lights tours back in 2002 and has since then been part of its commercial proliferation. He has thus been instrumental to the development of northern lights tourism in Iceland. Svanur is considered an authority on the subject and is often consulted to by tourism companies regarding anything northern lights related. But he is also a lecturer and instructor about guiding – being the person to have taught both Edda and Asthor.

Svanur looks like what one would expect a stereotypical Icelandic man to look like – he embodies a Viking aesthetic similar to what Lofsdottir et al. (2016) writes about in the article Trapped in Clichés – something that he is quick to point out and laugh at himself. His apartment is small, warm and welcoming - my memory recalls seeing red velvet – and for
Once the weather outside is not gripped by heavy wind or snowfall. Svanur’s girlfriend sits nearby and eavesdrops on the conversation, once in a while chiming in with some comments, often objecting to those questions that seem to reduce his stories into performances, which she argues fail to account for their authenticity and emotional realness; yet these need not be mutually exclusive. With that said, on occasion the interview feels a bit like listening to a rehearsed recital, and I am sure he must have discussed some of my questions many times before. Indeed, the first thing he tells me, as the recording starts, is a story about Einar Benediktsson (1864-1940):

Einar Benediktsson - Einar was a great poet. He was a visionary. He was a drunkard. And he was one of the first people in Iceland to realize that Iceland had resources that we didn’t know about. Like the hydro power plants – hydro ability to create electricity. And he sold the northern lights. Somewhere in Italy there is a count that paid a fortune for a piece of paper from Einar Benediktsson, saying that he owns the northern lights [laughing]. He sold the northern lights; and Icelanders they laughed about this for many, many, decades, you know – “how clever he was to sell the northern lights, nobody can sell the northern lights! [...] they belong to everyone!”

As was noted in the beginning and as we hear in this story – there is a stigma attached to the idea of selling the northern lights, as there is a stigma attached to tourism. The ridiculousness of selling the northern lights, it seems, has echoed ever since the time of Einar Benediktsson.

After the economic crash in 2008 Icelanders were advised by their government to revise their national identity. The crash had in part been accredited to the naive conviction that Icelanders were superior (Jóhannesson 2015: 21), and that their national prominence, written about in their re-imagined history, in quest for independence, had been rationalized as one of the reasons for why the crash had occurred (Lofsdóttir 2015a: 4). In sharp contrast to this petitioned critical self-awareness the tourism industry, which proliferates on national stereotypes and exotification (Schaad 1996), boomed in Iceland – and still is. Could the stigma then partly be described by these two contrasting developments? Yet if Einar Benediktsson did sell the northern lights, and if such was regarded ridiculous, he did so before 1944.
With the above said, continued objectification and commercialization of Icelandicness, deriving from unrelenting and accelerating tourism, seem only to reinforce national imaginings for tourists – the outsider’s gaze. If there is an exchange value attached to cultural and natural objects such includes a reification and justification of their presumed origins, in this case Icelandic nationhood and identity. Similar commercialization-provoked reification processes – of the nation and its individuated identity – may be seen with reference to post GDR Germany too (Berdahl 1999; 2005). For this reason the stigma can be partially explained as related to unwanted changes and discontinuity with what is perceived as past traditional life in Iceland and Reykjavik. For there seems to be a growing contradiction between how Iceland is marketed and labelled for tourists, with powerful imaginaries such as pristine, unpolluted, and unchanging wilderness, and with how downtown Reykjavik is changing – with how Iceland was and is supposed to be like.

Edda describes this stigma as one of ignorance, as many Icelanders fail to recognize the scientific methods and rationale that constitutes the northern lights tours. It was also this reasoning that counteracted Asthor’s initial scepticism. And this is true, the northern lights tours are not random affairs, even though they are unpredictable; it is ultimately a matter of more or less calculated probabilities.

However, and from what I observed, the same stigma surfaced with regards to general tourism too. Therefore it has not only to do with the presumed ridiculousness of selling the northern lights. And Edda, like Asthor and Svanur too, share the same concern about the transformation of downtown Reykjavik as the somewhat younger local informants. It is very much a worry of national connotations as it details a perceived “vanishing” (Ivy 1995) of a past place (Reykjavik) that many informants had no prior direct experience of. As such this worry also comprises of a nostalgic element.

The commercialization of the northern lights and the local stigma it entails become but one strategic means with which some Icelanders may express discontent about changes brought on by the tourism industry in general. It seems that the same exotic imaginings that the tourism industry has objectified as Icelandic become turned on the industry itself as e.g. downtown Reykjavik becomes less traditional; in other words, less continuous. It is clear therefore that the stigma associated with northern lights tourism is related to local ideas about the presumed uniformity and continuity of the Icelandic nation and identity.

As a result, perhaps the stigma has to do with unwanted consequences caused by commercialization and over-saturation of Icelandicness; as can be inferred in the joke about
the small heap of snow. This joke was particularly illustrative because it regarded something very transparently stupid; which had then been objectified by tourists into an exotic trope of Icelandicness. Blinded by their romantic ideas tourists were thus unable to see it for what it really was. But this is but one perspective. As the guides will later claim, Icelandic exotic tropes, like volcanoes and glaciers, are rightfully so objects of enchantment.

The stigma becomes further multifaceted since the northern lights are a fairly recent cultural object whose national significance seems to be more so an object for tourists and guides than they are (and have been) for Icelanders historically. At the same time, the northern lights tourism industry become a powerful local nationalist discourse of discontent, as it relates to larger commercial developments in Iceland, and are thus easily framed as yet another feature of tourism-related changes in Iceland. This supposition also supports one of the overall points argued for in this thesis about the cultural objectification of the northern lights; its involvement in nationalist discourses, one way or the other, do reveal its renegotiation and appropriation as a cultural object (Handler 1988: 11).

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Whilst having beer with two informants, Fylkir and his girlfriend, both of whom are poets, we discussed what it might mean for Icelandic culture to be commercialized, sold and consumed. She told me that her initial idea to feature an Icelandic horse in her art installation was abandoned, even though “It was such a beautiful symbol of Iceland and so beautiful in itself”. In her mind the horse had become an object of meanings that she did not relate to or condone. The horse was a national symbol that had been turned into a commodity – a cash cow, similar to the northern lights, referred to by the Gray Line company as their “golden goose”. This story may be regarded as yet another example of the market in becoming a producer of cultural objects and commodities by means of the national discourse, as is, again, the case with the northern lights.

It is important to note that in denoting the northern lights a cultural object in the making it is by no means a uniform object. As with the Icelandic horse, it has certain meanings for Fylkir’s girlfriend and certain meanings for tourists. In sum, the Icelandic horse had become inserted in the same national discourse as the northern lights and downtown Reykjavik. These are but a few examples, but they reveal an overall stigmatization of the
tourism industry in view of its perceived saturating effects on Icelandic identity. For now, these perceived changes will only be noted; yet it is safe to say already that they involve positionally situated ideas of what is considered authentic Icelandic culture and nature, and what is considered authentic means with which to experience Icelandic nature and culture.

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Edda sheds further light on the aforementioned stigma, its pronouncement, and invites us to think about change with relation to the northern lights tourism industry. Again, being very aware of what some Icelanders might think of her line of work:

I mean we can go back and wonder about how [it] was [...] 26 years ago in the last, second to last solar maximum; there weren't any buses, there weren't any places to park buses, not like that really. And then we were hoping, “What if we could bring ten buses to a location and show it to the people”. And then I am sure there was a person sitting there saying “Yeah but then we would lose the awesomeness of being alone in a place and experiencing things, and that is going to be horrible”. And that is the way we do it today and we think it is okay. And it is horrible in a way but it [is] also okay, it is fun.

Edda explains the developments of the tourism industry of the northern lights as both horrible and fun. It is horrible, she suggests, because there are now too many people on the tours, which renders the “awesomeness of being alone” a thing of the past. Again, with obvious reference to nature regarded as wild and distinct to the human realm (Cruikshank 2005). Too many people present affect this dualistic relationship by blurring the conceptual boundary between cultivated humans and wild nature. And it is for this reason that she deems it “horrible in a way” since nature is no longer experienced as it ‘used’ to be experienced and as it ideally ‘should’ be experienced. Romantic ideas of the past, related to both nature and culture, thus converge, with the perceived modernized and unromantic present, in a contradiction.
In another conversation with Edda she pointed out that commercialization carries a lot of unfair negative connotations, “It sounds so negative and bad”. I reassured her, as I did with the other guides, that I had no intention to write of commercialization as if true to those connotations. I am merely interested in the perceived polluting effects with which commercialization has been related, how this relates to present developments in Iceland and the cultural objectification of the northern lights.

The above is important to mention and it brings us back to the beginning of this chapter where I tentatively noted that there was a contrast between (older) guides and (younger) locals’ attitudes toward the tourism industry. Yet I am not sure whether it is worthwhile to pursue this distinction any further. Because in the end, Edda, Asthor and Svanur share the same concerns regarding unwanted changes in Iceland. For example, Edda told me that “Everything always changes”, but quickly adds that, “Those who knew the centre of Reykjavik before all this happened are a bit rude. We kind of push our way through Bonus [a supermarket] these days”. Asthor shared his discontent with the many commercial non-Icelandic bars that have become common on Laugavegur. And Svanur told me about the absurdity of there being more foreigners than Icelanders on the main streets. Therefore, let this distinction, at least for the purpose and remainder of this thesis, instead serve but as a reminder of the multi-vocal field and the complexities underpinning the many voices and perspectives found therein.

**Continuity, uniformity and nationalism**

As has been noted, the idea of continuity and uniformity runs through the above mentioned concerns related to commercialization; such as those about downtown Reykjavik having changed, how nature was and should be experienced, or the appropriation of the Icelandic horse. In the same vein, ideas about commercialization and its supposed negative impact – similar to the impact of modernity – also stem from ideas about the uniformity of the past, and ideas about what that past entails (Hafsteinsson et al. 2014). Indeed, one trademark of the nation is its temporal appropriations; constructing an ideological narrative connecting the immemorial past with the limitless future of the nation (Handler 1988 & Anderson 1981). As Edda importantly noted, downtown Reykjavik will always change, and never has there been a point where it did not.
But evidently not all change is welcomed. Especially not change that seem to undermine national non-modern tropes with modern ones, as continued commercialization seem to saturate the same ideas of unpolluted wilderness proliferated by the tourism industry. This is something that all guides were very aware of. And they would often voice this problem pragmatically in terms of how to make the tours less crowded so as to maintain the feeling of being alone in the wilderness.

Svanur told me, when asked about the sudden foreign interest and romanticization of Iceland, “In a way we were sort of leaving many of the ethics and values of the old age and adopting the way of the world – making money [laughing]”. This comment echoes the idea that Iceland was in a certain uniform way before they “adopted the way of the world” – as in, before the Icelandic economy was privatized and tourism became its primary industry (Jóhannesson et al. 2010; Benediktsson et al. 2010).

It is revealing to contrast present conceptualization of the past in Iceland with reference to Icelanders’ quest for national independence before 1944. At that time Icelanders yearned for modernity and tried to label Iceland as such, understood to be a prerequisite for national legitimacy (Grétarsdóttir et al. 2015). A great example of this regards Icelandic turf houses. Leading up to independence the turf houses carried negative meanings and was depicted as a symbol of shame and backwardness (Hafsteinsson 2010: 266). By the 20th century most turf-houses had been destroyed to signal a modern Iceland in the making. Yet as tourism started to develop in Iceland it was soon realized that past symbols of “backwardness” are today highly desired and valuable symbols of the exotic and indigenous Icelander (Lofsdóttir 2015a). The turf houses were thus revived as cultural objects anew for tourists and Icelanders to romantically gaze at; thus reminding both of what Iceland used to be like – what Iceland is today.

The turf-house example reveals another hitherto unmentioned dimension to cultural objectification in light of tourism. Cultural objectification, for commercial ends, is an undertaking of which Icelanders are certainly aware and that is carried out in plain view of what tourists’ desire and value (Gunnarsdóttir & Jóhannesson 2014). The same point was also underscored by Handler (1988: 61) with reference to Quebec. In the very recent and brilliant book Countercultural Seekers and the Tourist Encounter in Nepal (2017) Mark Liechty too notes the importance of accrediting agency to the local actors that sell and stage their own culture or nature. There are many similarities with how Nepal and Iceland are imagined by foreigners and marketed by locals; e.g., both destinations are marketed as destinations more or
less untouched by modernity. Accordingly, both tourist destinations attract “romantic tourists” (Einarsson 1996) seeking pristine and exotic wildernesses (Liechty 2017: 45).

Conscious re-imaginings of Icelandic culture and nature thus come together in ideas of the uniform and continuous Icelandic past. And once the past is re-imagined so too is the present; crucially, the past is always reconfigured in view of the present (Berdahl 1999; Baudrillard 1998). As Handler remarked (1988: 63) “...the continuity of change has been matched by an equally unbroken attempt to deny its reality”. The informants that make a point of telling me that downtown Reykjavik is changing – thus recognizing change – still maintain an idea of its past continuity in relation to which present changes are made manifest and tangible.

Nationalism finds strength in change since it discloses its inevitable disintegration and inherent contradictions, and therefore needs to manifest itself above and beyond such a negative vision of the future (Handler 1988). It finds strength in its own vulnerability for the same reason that my informants acknowledge some changes but disregard others. Change thus becomes a rhetorical means for nationalist discourses. And the nation, insofar as it is an ideological construct, masks domination by masking contradictions (Abrams 1977). In sum, what better narrative to employ in nationalist discourse than the commercial pollution of Icelandicness; e.g. accredited to the transformation of downtown Reykjavik, or the renegotiated meanings of the northern lights? These are both reminders of change that is provoked by tourism, and which is also somewhat inescapable, as there are few alternatives but to continue the development of becoming a service based tourism economy (Doukas 2015).

Iceland: an escape from modernity?

On the topic of change I asked Edda what she thought would happen to Reykjavik if tourism continues to develop the way it has been:

Iceland is just going to follow the same paths of [what] the rest of the world is doing. I don’t think we are ever going to have a part of Reykjavik, not even Reykjavik 101, to look like Times Square, ever. It is always going to be a few steps behind and people are going to come back and visit us from those places and being
like, “ah it is so amazing to have not a billboard!” and then maybe there will be, but then it is still going to be another level somewhere else.

That Reykjavik is different from other urban cities such as New York is hardly controversial. With that said, it is interesting to note that Reykjavik for Edda cannot conceivably become like Times Square because it would not align with the identity of Iceland as a place, here depicted as embodied in the city architecture. Similarly and in Edda’s view, Iceland will always be one step behind modernity as it unfolds and develops in other modernity-imagined places like New York.

Arguably, the irreconcilability between Reykjavik and New York formalizes in part because tourists do not want to experience “billboards” in Iceland. Instead tourists want to experience something ‘less modern and more traditional’ when they go to Iceland. But what tourists want has already been knowingly objectified by Icelanders. And as Edda stated, it is a matter of Reykjavik reflecting Icelandic identity. This can be explained in part because Icelandic national identity is related to certain non-modernity tropes that must be maintained for Iceland to continue to be an appealing destination for romantic tourists. Reykjavik must remain different from places such as New York because it is partly this difference that makes Iceland unique. Thus, ideas of pristine wild Icelandic nature spill over to ideas about unpolluted and traditional Icelandic culture.

As this chapter has illustrated, the future of northern lights tourism is one of continued prominence, though it is also riddled with insecurities. For example, the possibility of making the experience too commercial, thus domesticating the wild, as it were; or, the worry that Reykjavik, due to commercialization, ceases to be true to the national identity that it is meant to reflect. We have thus far discussed and explored these insecurities in relation to what was described as a stigma attached to the tourism industry and the changes evoked by it.

Recall that Svanur called Einar Benediktsson a visionary for selling the northern lights. Indeed, as with the nation, the inevitable commoditization of the northern lights was written in history – even prophesized in his facetious story. Thus, who better to mythologize the northern lights’ past than Svanur who was part of its modern-day commercialization? With that said, there is a stark difference between how the northern lights are sold today and how they were sold back when Svanur began profiting from them:
I remember in 1986-7, I was speaking to the director of the tourist bureau here in Iceland. [...] And he was always talking about, “We need to lengthen the season, it is like only three months, maybe four months, and then everything closes down – we need to lengthen the season!” And people asked him back, “So what are people going to do here in the winter time?” “Well, they could go maybe up into the glaciers, they would like the snow” – northern lights were not in! They were not in at all! This almost caught Icelanders totally unprepared. And I remember when I did my first northern light tour in 2002-3, I picked up people – maybe 7 people – in a bus, take them out there, and just, you know, driving like bat out of hell all over, trying to find an opening in the [sky]... And if they didn’t see them I had to pay them back. I paid them back [laughing]. I felt so guilty – they didn’t see anything! And before I left I would talk for a long time about [how] it was very unlikely that we should see them, and [that] they shouldn’t get mad and so on. Today – I mean, nobody thinks anything of it. Take 1500 people out on the same spot. They make them pay 6000 kronor a piece. No wonder that the operators [] call the northern light tours their golden goose; you know, because it is all extra. Their cars are just spinning around in the day time, you know, taking people on day tours, and then comes night – everything is full [makes a dramatic sound effect]!

This story relates back to our earlier discussion regarding the very conscious objectification and commercialization of the northern lights undertaken by Icelanders. This aside, I then asked Svanur what differences strike him the most between then and now, which revealed that there is perhaps more to the aforementioned stigma than mere conservativeness:

They were... They were a lot more intimate, and… You see, Iceland in general was not prepared for this mass tourism. They were not prepared for it. And they responded to it – Gray Line grew and grew and grew and grew and grew; [they] bought new buses every year, more buses, more buses, more buses to… you know… It is like producing hamburgers: “Okay we won’t [do] any groups any more, we are just going to do seat – we are just going to sell the seats – we make a lot more money by selling individual seats and taking the whole group” [...] And by letting go of that… moral… sort of, moral in the company, it became more concerned with just breaking the records every day [...]

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Svanur tells us that he felt guilty whenever the lights were not shown and suggests that nobody thinks anything of it today. Even if Svanur refers to the companies and not its working guides, when talking to Edda and Asthor they both tell me that the main issue they had with being northern lights guides was the possibility that there was not going to be any northern lights. Edda, in particular, has a hard time separating herself from tourists’ disappointment, a separation, she argues, is very necessary if you are going to be a northern lights guide. Because disappointment is unavoidable:

I guess it is important to understand that it is not me who brings out the northern lights. And you have to not only know it but also understand it and accept it. And if you are unable to – I mean, my first months on the job I sometimes came home crying.

But let us return to Svanur’s comments. Is there something to this loss of intimacy brought on by commercialization? Was there something lost in the process of mass-producing northern lights tourism, as suggested by Svanur? And may this explain why some Icelanders find the northern lights tours farcical?

Zygmunt Bauman and the now late Leonidas Donskis wrote the book *Moral Blindness: Loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity* (2013). It is a conversation that draws on Levinas’ writings on relational ethics. They argue that the ethical separation that Levinas writes of is defined by a loss of sensitivity, which they later define as a loss of intimacy. In their view this loss of intimacy is in part caused by the capitalist world – modernity – that has killed the subject only to have created the individual, that is, the object.

In contrast to slaves who are commodities by default, this liquid modernity proliferates on our voluntary submission into commodities. Svanur’s reply is very reminiscent of this, as was Edda’s comment earlier about the tours being somewhat “horrible”, as they both hint at something being lost in the process of commercialization. Is something lost – or simply buried – from commercializing and commoditizing what should be considered intimate and sensitive matters, such as nature and culture, and the relation there between?

Alternatively, is the idea of something being lost itself an offspring from a dualistic ontology with which we now relate to nature, culture and their non-modern past and present? Indeed, it seems to do with the same Western ideas that rendered nature to be
perceived as ideally pristine and wild; or similarly, the same ideas with which the Icelandic turf houses were revived as tokens of a more authentic and intimate past unpolluted by modernity. And it was this same idea of the past – though to this day perceived to be alive and well – that prompted for Nepal to become such a lucrative tourist destination for soul-seeking Westerners (Liechty 2017).

Taken together, it was also this romanticized idea of the past as continuous, only to be disrupted and corrupted by the present, that prompted me to think, when I first visited Iceland in 2015 as an undergraduate, that I was lucky enough to experience Iceland before it became oversaturated by tourism.
Ethnographic Chapter II

Stories On and From the Northern Lights Tours

[Storytelling] is not like weaving a tapestry to cover up the world, or, as in an overworn anthropological metaphor, to “clothe it with meaning”. For the landscape, unclothed, is not the “opaque surface of literalness” that this analogy suggests. Rather, it has both transparency and depth; transparency, because one can see into it; depth, because the more one looks the further one sees. (Ingold 2000: 56)

The objectifier looks at a familiar milieu and finds that it is composed of traditional traits, things that he carves out of a hitherto taken-for-granted cultural background and makes over into typical specimens. But to select aspects of a social world as traits, and then to isolate the chosen traits in a new context – to photograph them, inscribe them, perform them on stage, immure them in museums – necessarily changes the meaning that those traits have to objectifiers, trait-bearers and onlookers alike (Handler 1988: 77)

This chapter examines how the northern lights, and generally Icelandic culture, are performed in stories told by guides on the northern lights tours. It also examines what the three northern lights guides, Asthor, Edda and Svanur, think of these and their own performances. Storytelling will be analyzed as a performance (Taylor 2003) and/or discursive production (Neale 2017) of cultural objectification. As such these stories will be presented as evidence of Icelandic national identity in the making; an argument in view of which the northern lights will serve as a reflection.

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Upon entering the northern lights coach I am greeted with the weird and wonderful anonymity that a coach full of people, with whom you have no previous relation, provides. The coach is
not lit and it is dark outside. The time is 7.45 PM. People are a bit quiet. What is going through their minds? At first there is an informational safety speech – we are called upon to put on our seatbelts accompanied by a story about the dangerous weather and climate in Iceland. The guide tells us that “this is called the mystery tour, and it is because we have no idea what is going to happen”. The guide then states that it is a matter of probability and continues by describing the different methods with which the lights are tracked – mentioning weather forecasts and satellite pictures. Thereafter he declares that “nothing means anything” whereby he gives anecdotes about how the improbable have happened on either extreme; fantastic displays despite grim reports, and zero displays despite the most ideal reports. He then tells us that “this is Iceland, weather reports doesn’t matter” because “one second it snows the other second it rains and the other second it is sunshine”. As the guide nears his conclusion he announces that, “it is a mystery – it is out of our control”, and that we should “make a strong adjustment to our thinking; it is [the northern lights] probably not going to happen”. To consolidate those that by now have begun to whisper anxiously with their seated neighbours, he provides us with a story about a woman that had been on three tours without success, but despite this, had enjoyed her stay, quoting her to have said “I like fishing even though I don’t catch any fish”. The microphone then goes quiet as we drive out of Reykjavik.

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It is dark outside and the coach has taken us to the south coast, Gardur, a town situated next to a lighthouse. The conditions are not ideal, because the light projectile from the lighthouse sways back and forth, round and round, causing tourists to complain amongst themselves. Most likely they too had just heard their guides stress the importance of night vision and the spoil of light pollution when photographing – when objectifying – the northern lights. There is no astounding northern lights activity in the sky and nor will there be any throughout the two hours that we are there. Even still, there is some activity, and that is enough for people to swarm outside, mounting their tripods, pointing their hands and devices to the sky, attempting to capture that which they had paid good money to witness.

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Stories told on the northern lights tours

I never partook in a tour twice with the same guide. Most times the guide and the driver took us to Þingvellir, which is only a 45 minute drive inland from Reykjavik. We drove to Gardur on the west coast once, and another time we ended up driving to several different destinations in one night. These places, as the guides revealed, were more or less predetermined, even if described on the tours as if random. The decision about where to go, in view of these predetermined places, was made principally by the allocated “head guide in charge” and often in conversation with other guides and drivers. In turn, this decision was based on the weather forecast – i.e., where it was supposed to be cloud free – and in view of where most other coaches were. Guides and drivers were very aware that tourists preferred to not be situated alongside hundreds of other tourists. Yet that occurred anyway.

The northern lights tours were more than a tour about the northern lights. For instance, the tours inferred an adventure and exploration additional to the experience of the northern lights. We hear this in the above ethnographic accounts about them being mysterious “because we have no idea what is going to happen” or in the comment made about going fishing without catching any fish. The tours thus inferred an adventure that was worthwhile in its own right. We do not do much exploration on these tours, but we think – or at least we are told – that we are.

The northern lights tours were more than a tour about the northern lights because they became an event of cultural storytelling too. Similar stories were told by different guides. The northern lights were thus embedded in a cultural context. Stories were told about cultural or natural landmarks that we drove past, thus connecting the past and present Icelandic nation with the land. The land became a cultural – and I argue national – authenticator by virtue of how the nation is naturalized in being connected and associated with the land (Anderson 1991: 122-3). In the remainder of this chapter we will note these temporal and spatial appropriations as evidence of the nation as an “authenticator” (Theodossopoulos 2013: 346). The intention is to contrast this performed continuity with the perceived discontinuity caused by commercialization, which was noted in the last chapter.

The stories told by guides were meant to be entertaining yet they were also meant to be educational and informative. Some stories were entirely made up. For instance, one story told about what the Japanese think of the northern lights:
Sometimes I don’t always tell [you] about the north Asian lore that is regarding the northern lights. You see in southern parts of China and Japan it is considered that “a child conceived under the northern lights will be blessed with great fortune and a joyous life”

This story was told to me on two different occasions by two different guides. It was part of other stories told about the varied cultural meanings of the northern lights. Coincidentally, in my interview with Svanur, he told me:

And then we invent new ones, new myths, like a total invention that the Japanese think that if you conceive a child under the northern lights it will be smarter, and [that] they like to, when the northern lights come, they find a place to make love. This is a fabrication, Icelandic fabrication, total fabrication, all traced to a single website – I traced it – and a lot of people, a lot of guides that have heard this they think this is actually true. You ask any Japanese person they have never heard this.

Svanur was right, it was a fabrication. And while it is not the purpose of this chapter to proof check each and every story told, it is nonetheless interesting to note how other cultures are being objectified with little or no justification. But storytelling bridges the gap between what is real and what is fiction (Gabriel 2004) – by virtue of it being a performance. And for this reason truth becomes an unfair criterion with which to think about these stories, similar to the concept of authenticity (Theodossopoulos 2013); and taken together the concept of cultural objectification too (Handler 1988).

As I emphasized in the above, these stories were first and foremost entertaining; the above fabricated story was effective and remained in guides’ repertoire presumably because it works. Romantic tourists (Einarsson 1996: 227) want to hear exotic stories about different cultures and their “strange” ways, for the same reason that Iceland markets itself as a destination where one can experience pristine wilderness. Thus, romantic ideas about the past come together in present ideas about national distinctiveness.

I was told another fabricated story that was very similar to the above, this time about the Alaskan Inuit:
[...] But also, if you look at the lore and history; a rating [northern lights forecast ranging between 0-9 activity] as high as 9, 8 and 7, which show a display of lights so strong that you might even spot it from the Mediterranean. As a matter of fact, we do have written records of scholars and artisans debating the nature of the northern lights and this incredible display of colours parading and dancing in the sky. The higher north you go up the more stories unfold in our songs, lore, and for example, well, it differs very much depending on tribe and nation. The Alaskan Inuit felt that the northern lights were a horrible, horrible, horrible, turn of events. And the most heinous sign and [that] should be chased away flinging frozen poo, which i mean, what else is a husky good for?

Ever since hearing this story that one night in February I have not been able to find any evidence of Inuits ever having thrown husky poo to chase off the northern lights. We can only speculate but presumably this story came to life similar to the earlier mentioned story about the Japanese making love under the northern lights.

Other stories about different cultures and their relationships (past or present) to the northern lights can be seen in the below two stories told by the same guide:

In Greenland it gets a little romantic, the northern lights are the passing of souls of animals hunted that day. And it Finland it gets super super romantic, there is this “mystical fox that is dancing around in the sky and he is tracing with his magical fiery tail”

[...] But when you come to Icelandic lore; well, that is where it gets really unromantic. But it gets very very practical. You see, if you see the northern lights in Iceland that is good time to give the birth of a baby because it will hurt less” [...] You see if you dare open your eyes as you are giving birth to your child and look upon the sky and witness the beauty of the northern lights “your child will be born cross-eyed”

Again, it needs to be emphasized that stories like these are told light-heartedly. At the same time, they comprise of supposed cultural and/or national ‘truths’ in view of which discourses they are also made sense of. This can be seen with reference to Western ideas about
untouched and pristine indigenous cultures and wilderness (Cruikshank 2005). These ideas and their discursive contexts thus overlap.

Below features a historical and cultural account, told by one guide in good humour, describing how Iceland became a Christian nation, though long before it was ever considered a nation. It was told as a testament to lingering pagan traditions, thus establishing a narrative between past and present Iceland:

[...] So the king of Norway he sent emissaries to Iceland that were like, “the king of Norway has decreed that Norway should be Christian”. And the people of Iceland were like, “Well that is good for you be we left you for like, what, 120 years ago, we are fine, we are doing great without you guys”. [The king of Norway replies,] “Yeah yeah that is fine, you guys can stay solo, but if you don’t turn to Christianity we have to come here and have a, you know, the stamping of the hedens, so maybe you want to change your mind”. So one of our wise men he considered this and debated it for three days. And after three days he was like, “you know what, sure, but could we make a few clauses and bylaws?” And one of the bylaws was as such: it would not be illegal to be a heden [pagan]; as in to have a heden temple or heden tokens or heden scriptures. So the king of Norway was like, “okay, but you will obey by Christian law”. They [Icelanders] were like “yeah, sure, whatever”. And that is how Iceland became Christian, like, “jao jao just go home king of Norway, we will be Christian”. But when you put something by law surely but surely it takes over so the King of Norway got his in the long run. About 120 years later after the passing of the Christianity of Iceland had its first bishopric in Skálholt and that became pilgrimage point for the Christians in Iceland, and slowly but surely the old hedon ways started dying out. [...]
history. Back in the way way back, during the Viking ages, there was definitely some ways to settle arguments. If you make an enemy of your neighbour there was different ways to dispute it. Either you would, you know, get super dramatic and start killing each other off, and then it would just be very wasteful. And the rule of blood law was ruling the Viking age, “well you killed my nephew so I am going to kill your brother”, “oh how dare you kill my brother, I like him way more than you would have liked your nephew, now we are going to kill you sister” – what? You know, so on and so forth. There was a bizarre pissing contest of men wielding swords. Now if men would agree to let Alþingi, or high congress, [...] make a judgement, they would stop stabbing left and right and go to Alþingi, which was a meeting of all the great chieftains, wise men and major families, in the summer time in our national park Þingvellir. Which is where people would come together. They would speak of the laws. They would discuss new laws. And they would pass judgement [...] 

The above illustrates an objectification of what Icelanders are like today and it is explained in terms of their Viking past – related to the area, Þingvellir, where we stopped to look for the northern lights. By means of the land the story establishes a connection between modern Iceland and pre-modern Vikings. This next story is also connected with the land but this time it is a personal connection that also describes what it is like to live in the Icelandic landscape:

So we just left the town called Hafnarfjörður. Hafnarfjörður is my hometown. And most of Hafnarfjörður is just junks of lava. And the centre of town is a great big rock cliff. So if you ever go to the town of Hafnarfjörður and visit old town you see a lot of the buildings are kind of built next to a lava crevasse and here and there. And all of the older streets are very chaotic because in the old days – well, you just stuff your house in-between the lava field wherever the lava field saw fit. So the old town is peculiar. It has buildings sometimes built into lava walls as well. And it is a fun place to stroll around if you have a lot of time to spend. It is also home to the Viking re-enactment festival. [...] 

Another example of the past and present of the Icelandic land and landscape can be seen with reference to this next story. It was told upon returning from an unsuccessful night out looking for the northern lights:
[...] But it was still fun to run around it the dark in that lovely Icelandic weather. Iceland has always been rather windy and we used to be a country rich in forest when the Vikings came here in the late 800’s. And well, of course, as Vikings do, they chop down the lot and built boats and built some houses and [...] before you know it all the good trees kind of went away. Of course it was not just due to colonization as well. It was not exactly a big, well – how do I say it? It was not exactly a big movement on reforestation back in the Vikings days. Trees were just there and you sort of took what you need and that was that. But in Iceland, being as rough and barren as it is, the best way to survive was to take in some more livestock. That’s right, sheep everywhere. And what do they do? Sheep eat everything.

Amongst the countless stories told on the tours the above eight stories were chosen because they clearly demonstrate how past and present culture and history converge in the land. In other words, how national continuity is created by means of spatial and temporal appropriation. It is through these stories that the northern lights become situated and contextualized. While the northern lights tours are performative events against which tourists’ expectations are tested, the northern lights, in turn, become performed national objects. As noted by Ingold (2011), stories are not mere descriptions but become culturally and socially situated performances in which many discourses collide, not least those which are political.

**Stories told about the stories told on the northern lights tours**

Asthor describes himself as a cynical existentialist with a rational and scientific worldview. He does not buy into “bullshit”, as in people that, “You know, they try and up a little, give something a little more mystique” – a comment he made with reference to guides that portray the lights misleadingly. That is, with reference to guides that portray them as something besides the natural phenomenon that they are. When I asked Asthor about the stories that had been told to me on the tours, with guides at times describing the lights as magical and/or mysterious, he replied:
I agree that it definitely is a part of people’s repertoire. Not for me so much, I – again, cynicism, and very kind of scientific in thought; of course, I will talk about trolls and elves, but purely as folklore, not as some guides who will be like, “oh yes, you can go here and have a conversation with an elf”. But like Svanur for instance, he is very much a storyteller, he is very good at it. Performatively, for me, the performance aspect of it is just...very much kind of [a] service industry performance. [...] But in terms of putting a theatrical spin on what I am saying… Sometimes just embellishing things, make up jokes, or put new elements in a story in order to make it more interesting or funnier, sometimes assuming that they are going to get it as a joke; but maybe some people will go home and go like, “oh you know, somebody actually said this” – no, I didn’t. I was just making it funny.

Certainly, they are guides, it is their job, but they are also performers, entertainers and actors too; these skills intersect and overlap. Thus, they are storytellers as much as they are guides, narrating the experience on the coach – performing the northern lights.

Asthor, Edda and Svanur pride themselves on not having to resort to unscientific particulars in their performances as guides. For instance, they do not portray myths as anything but myths, and they avoid evoking the supernatural. The noteworthy thing here is not that other guides perform the northern lights as if necessarily supernatural. Most utterances of “mystery” and “magical” were used because they were effective means with which to capture tourists’ attention and imagination; and as Asthor told me, sometimes they cannot prevent tourists from taking such portrayals as true statements. Instead, the salient point is that in making the cultural performances of the northern lights distinct from, say supernatural performances, one can learn about the authenticating ways with which the nation is naturalized through reification (Taussig 1991: 119).

As these stories showcased, guides often adhere to the national discourse as part of their storytelling. The Icelandic nation and identity is evoked in stories that place the past and present Icelandic culture, landscape and character, in the land. With this in mind, I asked Edda whether she employed the supernatural in her stories:

I don’t say magical much, I don’t think so. I think I say... I kind of person... I give them a personality. I like to say [that] the northern lights are like cats, they come
and they go when they please. They are like fire, sometimes they burn very slowly sometimes they go wild.

Edda, like Asthor and Svanur, read sagas and folk tales out loud, which she made a point of connecting to the areas that we were driving through. She told me that it is important to not only give hard scientific facts, as such would not make for a fun experience; it is thus necessary to, as she suggested, “Play it up a bit”. When asked about her use of stories connected to the land, she replied:

If I have a lot of driving to do, yeah. And during driving out of the city I tell them “oh, this is where Sigur Ros is from” because there is always going to be one fan on the bus. […] But I don’t go and say “out there in the darkness is a hill where they had a fight during the Viking times” because that belongs to the golden circle or some other tour.

I am pretty sure the other people do that too [read sagas]. And it is also something that needs to be part of the tours, a little bit. But the northern lights tours, in the dark, sometimes waiting for a long time, beg for us to do that, the situation begs for it […]

According to Edda, reading sagas and folk tales are not only an effective way to capture the audience but it is also something that tourists want, and something that “the situation begs for”. Asthor, and for similar reasons, told me that he read ghost stories out loud and that he had a few folk tales ready in hand would there be enough time. He got the idea to tell stories attached to the land from the guides he was working with, emphasizing the “connection” that is important for tourists:

And a friend of mine actually gave for my birthday a couple of years ago a book with folktales, but the chapters were like, “Reykjavik and the surrounding areas”, “the west coast”, “the western fjords”, “the north coast”; and so it would have different stories that took place in those areas. For instance, on the south coast there
was one story that I would always tell when we were driving through a certain area, because it had a connection.

Svanur, who is the most experienced, has a myriad of stories to draw from when guiding, but the most important story is a personal one, and from it one learns the importance of land and its significance to any story – and especially stories that regard culture or cultural heritage (Handler 1988: 34). For similar reasons it is preferable for guides to be Icelandic, which Svanur made a point of telling me, as then such national stories, or personal-national stories, come straight from the horse’s mouth, as it were. As Svanur told me:

The main story, the main sort of – the longest spiel – it is a story of when I first saw the northern lights, because I am born and raised on a farm in Iceland. And my granddad – he was basically my mentor because I saw little of my father – so I talk a little a bit about my relationship with my granddad. And then when he woke me up on my 6th birthday to have a look at the northern lights, you know. And I describe the coldness and then the – and before I start this, you see, I tell them this little story about the elves with the northern lights, to sort of create a magical environment when I ease into the story – coming out there in to the 5 o clock in the morning, you know, and seeing the northern lights for the first time; so it works quite nicely. You should come on a tour [laughing].

Svanur is without a doubt the most aware about the ins and outs of his storytelling techniques. He knows what works and what does not. When I told him about the storytelling techniques used by Asthor and Edda, with their emphasis on the land, Svanur is quick to chime in:

I talk for an hour about Þingvellir, the importance of Þingvellir; why it is considered the most – the most sacred place on earth for Icelanders; both in a secular and spiritual sense. And the history that is behind it, to how people came here like they sort of... to them Iceland was at the time, you know – paradise. [...] So I give them a lot of understanding. So when they come there they do understand the geographical, or geological, significance of Þingvellir; they understand the historical aspect of Þingvellir, and the emotional attachment that Icelanders have to
this place. And this I try to install in order that they may respect the place, not to throw litter, and so on.

This story was not only educational and entertaining but was used also to instil good behaviour. Svanur moreover notes that storytelling becomes an emotional undertaking. And if the stories are personal – such as being connected to the land – they become more emotional:

[...] I found that the more you put into it – the more emotions, the more people respond. And you take them away. You take them away to something that they don’t know themselves. And it is authentic, and it is – it happened to me, and I am there, so... And they completely respond to it. So, and it is, the mythical part of you, sort of, twine into it – you don’t have to – it is not overpowering, you see, but it is just there, suddenly, a hint of it.

**Northern lights as a national object**

The Icelandic nation is evoked each night the tour takes place, as culture, history and nature becomes re-imagined into *authentic* national events and artefacts. And as part of this evocation the northern lights too surface as nationally embedded objects. Handler comes to mind in his realization that national identity “was being played out all around me through the continual “objectification” of what was imagined to be Quebecois culture” (1988: 11).

Authenticity is a notoriously problematic concept because of its socially situated relativity. Yet in practice it is employed as if its meanings and intentions are universal. Theodossopoulos (2013: 338) describes this multifacetedness of authenticity as “the trap of authenticity”. He suggests that to unpack the socially prescribed meanings of authenticity in everyday usages the researcher “...has to fall into the trap – willingly, consciously, and reflexively...” (2013: 346). With this in mind, we will now turn to examine and “unpack” some of the abovementioned stories.

Some stories might come off as authentic even though they are entirely false. This corresponds to the idea of storytelling as neither true nor false. And also with the concept of simulacras as artificial renderings; which Baudrillard (1998: 17) emphasizes does not infer an epistemic judgement. Arguably, if one can suspend epistemic judgement then what one is
faced with in these stories are the banal workings with which culture is being continuously objectified. Handler (1988: 76) defines cultural objectification as involving reinterpretation, which infers a change of meaning; crucially, irrespective if true or false. In addition, some agents have more power than others in this collective objectification, such as the local guides, which are entitled “authenticators” par excellence since they are of the land and culture that they speak about (Warren and Jackson 2002).

With up to twenty coach tours taking place each night, with guides sharing their understanding of Icelandic culture, the renegotiation of cultural objects – the objectification of the northern lights – is thus multifaceted like that of authenticity. Authenticity here surfaces as both instrumental to cultural objectification and as beside the point in our deconstruction of this objectification. As Theodossopoulos (2013: 347) remarked, authenticity is practiced as originality or representativeness for tourists and as “tradition as understood by the locals”. Add to this the visual and oral objectification undertaken by tourists too, and the corporate objectification undertaken by the companies or the Icelandic government in marketing Icelandicness (Lofsdóttir 2015b).

As culture and nature continues to be objectified – performed – indefinitely, new meanings replace old meanings. In so doing the national past becomes paradoxically as ever-changing as the objectification that strives to particularize it. Handler (1988: 77) too mentions the above-mentioned opposition that occurs when different objectifications and authenticities clash: “Thus have the folk come to abandon and even to ridicule those traditions that urban collectors have come among them to discover”.

The above opposition also reminds me of Julie Cruikshank (2006) who writes about foreign exploration and objectification of glaciers among the Tlingit in North America. Cruikshank (2006: 14) explains in great detail how post-enlightenment Western thought concerning nature and landscape contrast with Aboriginal conceptions. National parks have been constructed in places where Aboriginals still live and hunt. She described this Western thought as romantic naturalist ideas of nature; i.e., as “aesthetic landscape”, “endangered wilderness”, “pristine wilderness” and “as a giant jungle-gym for eco tourists”.

One discussion I had with Asthor comes to mind in view of cultural objectification as a constitutive element of the northern lights. I asked him if he thought that nature tourism in Iceland had any effect on Icelandic culture and identity. He told me that the tourism industry has had a positive impact owing precisely to this continual objectification of what is imagined to be Icelandic culture:
[...] some people going – we need to kind of reinforce our roots. Also, through what I talked about, more people getting work in the industry of telling tourists about Iceland and our culture and history, then just more people learn about and then share that knowledge. So, yeah, in terms of national identity and national… awareness of one’s culture and history, it has been a good thing. It has had a positive effect.

I actually think that [being asked questions by tourists about Icelandicness] probably has a beneficial effect on our... national identity, but also our knowledge of our own country. Because I am sure it happens a lot that somebody gets asked a question by a tourist and they don’t know the answer; then they see friends and family and go, “oh this tourist asked me this question and I wasn’t sure” and they go “oh, you don’t know, let me tell you” and then people learn more about their own country through engaging with these questions.

I here recall another meeting that I had with one local, Thorleivur. I had been invited to come live with him and his family on Vestmannaeyjar (the Westman islands) off the south coast of Iceland. It is a small island and fishing village surrounded by volcanic mountains. Thorleivur is from Vestmannaeyjar but has lived in Reykjavik for six years. In a structured interview he remarked that Icelandic nature is for Icelanders nothing special – not as special as tourists think it is, at least. He states that “In Vestmannaeyjar, I don’t notice it anymore. Maybe that is a more intimate relationship – that you are more used to it” but at the same time he contends that tourism has made Icelanders regard their nature differently since “people are beginning to realize Icelandic nature is unique; they celebrate it more nowadays than before”. He then notes that “some people have a problem with how we preserve nature” referencing “building tourist spot attractions” and “building like roads and paths, ruining the nature side of it”.

Edda similarly makes the point that the so-called positive effect of tourism on national identity is mistaken, because most Icelanders do not care for what the tourism industry does. Asthor, who argued for its positive effects, conversely told me that his relationship with the northern lights have not changed since becoming a guide – they just are, and at times they are amazing and awe-inducing. In addition, when discussing my research with a friend at the anthropology department at Iceland University, he comes to the realization
– mid discussion – that he had woken up his child in the middle of the night because there were strong aurora displays taking place outside.

It seems then that the northern lights have changed in meaning insofar as they have become associated with longer standing issues pertaining to how to preserve and stage nature in Iceland. Additionally, the northern lights, as an element of Icelandic nature, have been rediscovered because and in view of tourists that find them exotic, which, as Thorleivur put it, has made Icelanders realize that their nature is unique and should therefore be celebrated. In view of the last chapter, the northern lights have also become part of the national discourse, such as the perceived discontinuity of downtown Reykjavik caused by tourism. They have thus become culturally objectified and contextualized; though the local perception is that nothing has happened to them, because they are but natural entities. And it is relatedly this view of nature as strictly instrumental and inanimate – wild and untouched – that also justified Westerners to ‘explore’ the glaciers that had already been explored by the Tlingit.

Attention will now be turned to the relations between the land, the landscape, and the nation as noted in the aforementioned stories. Kirsten Hastrup (1998) asserted that Icelandic nationalism is deeply embedded in the land. As she writes: “...by fixing the ancestry of Icelandic society in the land, it becomes a timeless reference point” (1998: 117). The previous chapter noted Anderson’s (1991) description of the nation as constructing an immemorial past and limitless future. The temporal and spatial appropriations that we came across in the stories – e.g. Asthor, Edda and Svanur’s emphasis on connecting their stories to the land – create a sense of continuity and uniformity for and in view of the present. In addition, it is this same sense of continuity that is perceived to have been disrupted, as was noted in the last chapter, with the advent of tourism.

The nation is in part naturalized by its state sovereignty corresponding to a particular spatial demarcation (Anderson 1991). This sense of continuity between past and present thus becomes grounded in the national land as a “timeless reference point”.

Though it occurred many times that the northern lights were described as magical or mysterious, Asthor, Edda and Svanur all told me that their performances were more factual than imaginary. Yet they also contend that the stories, and in particular the northern lights, benefited from being portrayed somewhat artistically. In making this distinction the northern lights become a great testament of the naturalized nation insofar as the cultural stories about them became contrasted against the supernatural or inauthentic.
Another testament to the discursive cultural objectification of the northern lights can be seen with reference to tourists’ imaginaries. As has been noted, guides are very aware of what stories capture tourists’ imagination. This was the case with the stories about the Japanese and the Alaskan Inuit. As with the Tlingit, these stories are and correspond to Western imaginaries, which are justified in part by the nation-state system (Said 1978).

For instance, Edda told me that she anthropomorphizes the northern lights by attributing them a personality. And this chapter has come across many other examples of animating metaphors used to describe the northern lights. Arguably, this is intrinsic to how nations are performed as and into individuated collective beings (Handler 1988: 33 & 43). The individuation of the nation and the individuation of the northern lights – which later will be described as the process by which the northern lights are rendered hyperreal – come full circle in stories told on the tours about Icelanders, Icelandic culture, nature, and the relationship there between with the northern lights.

Likewise, as learned from the personal stories, and in the interview with Svanur: storytelling becomes an emotional evocation of the nation as it is being performed through and in relation to the northern lights. In addition, as the northern lights become connected to stories of the land and the people, past or present, of that land – and as these stories are told by people from that land. Thus in relating stories to the land these stories and the northern lights – like the nation – are rendered naturalized and authentic (Handler 1988: 33-34).

To tie the concept of cultural objectification together with the stories told on the northern lights tours; when Handler (1988: 78-79) noted the banal ways with which culture was objectified what else but the understandable desire to install good behaviour, as in Svanur’s story about the sacredness of Þingvellir, to prevent littering, was he referring to? In addition, what else but the desire to make the tours more memorable and entertaining? Therefore, it seems undeniable that even if the tours are about the northern lights, they also include a particular – if varied – cultural objectification of the northern lights.

As a result, the northern lights are not a neutral natural object or phenomenon – and neither have they ever been, which the mythology around them, whether true or false, attests to. The northern light, as the glaciers for the Tlingit, become entangled in many and oftentimes competing discourses. And insofar as the northern lights become means with which to tell the story of Icelandic national continuity, they are ultimately, and as a result, rendered cultural objects performed and actualized in view of the nation discourse. The temporal and spatial appropriations performed may therefore be seen as evidence of the nation
as an “authenticator” (Theodossopoulos 2013: 346-7). In other words, the nation is authenticated by being performed by locals, and the locals, in turn, are authenticated through association with the nation – the nation and the northern lights thus mutually constitute each other’s authenticities.

Again, the northern lights are not a neutral isolated natural object insofar as they have become entangled in political – nationalist – discourses in Iceland. For the same reason that post GDR everyday objects that used to symbolize shame and backwardness, like the Icelandic turf houses, became nostalgic national objects. I often got the impression that the northern lights tours, from the industry’s perspective, were principally about this staged adventure and exploration, where the lights became an added bonus. The best example of this is perhaps the fishing metaphor used by one guide – most people go fishing for reasons that go beyond catching fish. Svanur agreed that the spectacle around the northern lights – in which the aforementioned stories take part – is part of the experience:

There is obviously – I am not going to say [laughter] that this is a substitute; but it is definitely a huge added bonus. To have somebody who can, you see – the objective is always to see the light, that is the objective of the tour, and I just had – I just returned a group to the airport today; Americans who came here almost only to see the lights. And I had a two hour lecture at the hotel where I talked about the lights and so on. They all liked it a lot, and they all said, “Oh my God Svanur” you know, “It was so exciting, I want to experience what you just told us” and so on. “We will come back.” As a guide you can’t ask anything more. You can’t do anything about the bloody weather or the lights [laughter]. So we didn’t see them [...] [B]ut that is success in my head you see.

In every coach similar stories echo in dissimilar unison – in the same paradoxical way that the nation infers homogeneity encompassing diversity (Handler 1988) – only to disappear into the very same night sky that they helped imbue with Icelandicness. The land becomes instrumental in the stories about and around the northern lights. And even if these stories tread the boundary of truth and fiction little does this distinction matter when the land attributes their stories with authenticity and when the stories, in turn, evoke the land as authentically national. This is arguably why stories connected to the land are so powerful and how in the process Icelandicness surfaces as something natural, tangible and continuous. The nation
evoked through temporal appropriations of the land functions as an authenticator for these stories. And when the local guide is the source of these stories the nation as an individuated being comes full circle. As does the northern lights.
We are at Pingvellir and the time is 21.30 PM. About one hour has passed since we arrived. I and perhaps 25 other people have returned to the coach – to our coach, coach number 7 – seeking refuge from the weather outside, unable to find shelter in the busy cafe. All guides are outside, but the driver remains in the coach. I am seated in the front row just behind him, able to see what is going on outside. All of a sudden the guides, noticeable due to their reflector vests, start running amok. Faint screams and blown whistles are heard outside and soon enough our guide enters the coach and informs us that the northern lights are on and that we should hurry outside. Everyone on the coach panics and makes their way to the exit, zipping their jackets and putting on their gloves as they go. It is a very inefficient exit. Everyone wants to get out at the same time, which reminds me of people exiting an airplane. Soon the outside is swarmed with hundreds of tourists yelling and screaming. Amidst this chaos people try and find places from which to photograph the lights, and often with themselves as part of the picture. Several shouts are heard calling for people to turn off the flash of their cameras. But hundreds of people are an unruly mob; flashes go out anyway – for how else are people to capture themselves next to the northern lights? As the flashes go off indistinct crowds of tourists are seen lit up for less than a second, making people out of contours.

It is hard to gauge what is happening. Built up anticipation and expectation seem to culminate there and then in Pingvellir – are people finally going to experience that which they had seen online; that which they had heard about in the stories?

I slither my way through the many crowds in an attempt to soak it all in. What am I witnessing? Is this the collective effervescence spoken of by Durkheim (1995)? Is it perhaps the national spectacle spoken of by Geertz (1980)? What would a complete outsider think? Are they worshipping the capitalist system, of which the northern lights are its flag – the flag of the nation? In my field notes I jotted down that it reminded me of a religious gathering and perhaps so it was; though a secular celebration and worshipping of the hyperreal northern lights commodity and its fetish qualities; evoking the nation in the present of the past.
After much commotion people retreat back to their coaches; the lights were quickly exhausted and are no longer interesting. Has the sacred now become the profane? Did consumption destroy it, a la Arendt (1998)? It is cold and people are tired. Some are comparing photos, some are disappointed that their cameras did not catch anything; that the ephemeral lights refused to be turned into objects – refused to be frozen in time. Is Butler’s idea of disobedience applicable to the non-conformity of the lights, insofar as their performance did not match their hyperreal expectations, and insofar as they could not be objectified anew through the camera lens? Perhaps the northern lights could not be objectified anew because they were never really there. Whatever was did not correspond to what was expected to be.

The northern lights that night were not very spectacular, at least not as on the postcards or in the pictures online. Yet the word spreads quickly and several other coaches start to appear. There are soon 20 coaches parked in the same area. But the collective effervescence has passed. Have hyperreal expectations been contrasted with the mundane display and reality of the lights? Did the fetish – the nation, the lights – not live up to its fetishization?

We are back in the coach, waiting for others to return. One man in his 30’s enters with a tripod in one hand and an expensive looking camera in the other. He shows some people the photos he has taken and exclaims “Success!” He nods proudly and retreats to the back of the coach. Was the northern lights hyperreal for him but not for the others – for those without expensive camera gear? Having all been accounted for and back in their seats, the breathless guide hurries to the front, grabs the microphone, and while standing up, with her body directed at us, she loudly and enthusiastically declares, “The northern lights are not a mystery anymore!” and suggests that we now “enjoy the mystical Icelandic night landscape!”

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The northern lights are not a mystery anymore. But they are not what they previously were. They have changed in the process of being grounded in the mundane and unimpressive realness from whence they came. Like a deadpan lion observed on a safari tour, not moving a muscle while being photographed and objectified, rebelling against its hyperreal expectations of which it is not aware, the northern lights too have become the means for something and
someone else. It is a national object invested with imagined tropes that are neither true nor false, but artificial. It is artificial because the mundane northern lights are not true to the hyperreal northern lights, and vice versa. The hyperreal has thus rendered both artificial. Baudrillard makes the same argument but by means of the outside and inside realness of theme parks. For now these ponderings will but serve as the foundation for the remainder of this chapter as we explore further the hyperreal northern lights and the theme park analogy.

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Worries about tourism and the changes it has and will have in Iceland could be, as Asthor noted, worries about e.g. Reykjavik becoming similar to an “artificial tourist town”. He told me this with reference to a trip he had done as a tourist to the Niagara Falls. His friend who was from Canada had taken him to a particular town nearby where many other tourists resided, believing that Asthor wanted to go there:

I visited a friend of mine... he took me on a road trip and we came into this little town with loads of attractions like miniature golf and wax museums and all sorts of tacky stuff and then he parked in this tourist town. Why do we park here? Past more tacky stuff – what is this? It was nice to tick it of the [bucket] list, though.

In the same conversation Asthor notes that when he travelled to California he ended up going to the Universal Studios, Disneyland, and then Las Vegas; destinations that he called “the most made up places in the world”. Asthor mentions these examples when thinking over the effects of tourism in Iceland. Because, he argued, whatever tourists are guilty of consuming in Iceland – recall the friend of a friend who deemed tourists’ obsession with glaciers bizarre and unfounded – he too was guilty of when visiting other nations. This was a common response heard from most other informants as well; tourists find Icelandic natural tropes exotic simply because they have not grown up with glaciers, volcanoes, geysers, or northern lights. For example, Gudmundur, who lived in the commune, and Thorleivur, who was from Vestmannaeyjar, both tell me that huge forests are exotic for them because they do not have that in Iceland. Asthor accordingly adds:
You walk and you always expect to hear Icelandic. But I don’t mind. How many people are getting work and how much is our nation benefiting from this, right? I met my girlfriend when she was a tourist, having a good time in Iceland. I mean, I am going to places like Iceland.

I would often end my interviews asking whether it was suitable or even relevant to compare Iceland to a national theme park. I would explain the most obvious differences first. For instance, that unlike a theme park Icelandic tourism does not purport to sell something artificial or fictitious but something authentic and real, i.e. culture and nature. Then I would note the similarities, such as that both the nation and the theme park are circumscribed by a border marking a distinction between the inside and the outside. And like a theme park where visitors go through the gate – connecting the outside world with the other inside world – the nation has its visitors pass through the airport border control. Both the nation and the theme park are thus realized in terms of a tangible border that signals a different world of sorts. In other words, that signals the beginning and end of a bounded cultural entity. With these points clarified, I then asked Asthor what he thought of the analogy:

Yeah, I mean... It is a farfetched comparison, as in, you know, we are very very far away from this fabricated world. I don’t think you will ever get close to having anything as made up as Disneyland or the town by the Niagara Falls. Because I don’t think there are that many people who are so superficially minded.

I did not expect this analogy to be received well. But in posing it we learn a great deal about the workings of authenticity with relation to Icelandic tourism and its marketing of culture and nature. And for the same reason we also learn a great deal about the naturalized nation insofar as its contents are presumed to be authentic and true cultural reflections. This regards an irreconcilable dissimilarity between theme parks and nations, which I intentionally left unstated in the above. Indeed, the theme park is knowingly fictitious, whereas the nation can never be. In making this analogy Iceland turns wholly into a commercial enterprise rendering its contents invented. Therefore, a nation can never officially be a theme park as this would undermines its very authentic foundation.
It becomes immensely important when asking and unpacking this analogy that we do not ignorantly fall into “the trap of authenticity” and thus privilege one perspective over the other, as already noted with reference to Theodossopoulos (2013). Neither should we make the mistake of assuming social worlds – like nations – to be imagined if such is understood to be false (Chatterjee 1993). And for the same reason we should not indulge in the idea that present Iceland and its mounting tourism industry has signalled a departure from past more intimate, uniform or continuous times; as if modernity suddenly arrived only to destroy what used to be authentic and true ways of being in the world. Baudrillard (1998) is guilty of the latter, as are Bauman and Donskis (2013), which was noted in the first chapter. Yet I argue that we can hold the theme park analogy and the northern lights as hyperreal to be applicable despite this. And all such requires is that we acknowledge change as intrinsic and fundamental to human life; namely, that we acknowledge change as continuous even in its humanly objectified discontinuous effects, so that we do not make the mistake of assuming one singular authentic reality when asking questions pertaining to the social world.

Edda, as mentioned in the first ethnographic chapter, does not think that Iceland will ever become as commercial or modern as New York. When asked about the theme park analogy she draws connections with national nature parks and then asks me, “When it is so big that you don’t notice the borders are you still going to realize that you are in a theme park, do you think?” This is similar to the argument that wilderness must first be created before it can be preserved (Sæþórsdóttir 2014; Cruikshank 2005). Or by extension, that past more authentic downtown Reykjavik must be created before it can be preserved, which was touched upon in the previous chapters. Edda’s question also captures the purpose and essence of the theme park analogy. Because one trait of the national border is that it is rendered natural and thus invisible (Shapira 2013) – in part due to its performativity (Butler 1993). And the reverse of realizing that you are in a bordered space occurs first when you cannot enter it (Khosravi 2010); when the naturalized national non-border surfaces as a very tangible state enforced and contested demarcation. The arbitrariness of borders is thus equally evident with nation-states as it is with national parks or theme parks.

Edda furthermore associates wilderness with danger. Authentic wilderness for her entails an experience that is not mediated by modern comforts. She had grown up on a farm and had an intimate relationship with the often harsh environment in Iceland. For Edda tourists’ expectations of nature in Iceland were very romanticized and unrealistic; tourists often underestimated what Icelandic nature truly was capable of. If tourists wanted an
authentic experience of nature they would get, she argued, “hypothermia and [would have to] eat noodles for a week, which would not be very funny”. In relation to the above, when I then asked her why some tourists would not want to see the border denoting the national park, she replied:

And if... Yeah, I think if it is big enough you can actually fake the authenticity – remove some dangers, somehow build a theme park so [...] that it is still going to be [an] authentic natural scenario, but you would just somehow exclude the most dangerous rivers with a fence, I don’t know. Because it is always – we lose too many people because they go to close to dangerous things.

To fake authenticity in relation to experiences of Iceland nature means for Edda to make nature look as if it has not been tinkered with. It means to maintain its alluring and romanticized wilderness by making invisible any type of human intervention, such as its borders. Thus, it means to make nature inauthentic by assuring safety while at the same time masking these safety measures so that it appears authentic. Asthor attests to this idea of wilderness:

[...] [L]ast year maybe, there was a petition raised online because they were going to build a visitor centre by Seljalandsfoss. But they were going to build it were like so if you are standing behind the waterfall and looking out you would see the visitor centre there. Build a visitor centre, sure, but you can build it over here where it is hidden by the edge of the rock. And it is not necessarily going “nothing should be built in our beautiful nature”. No, it is progress but with a bit of foresight.

Staged or not, the presentation of wilderness is something that is very important for tourism in Iceland. And it is therefore inadvisable to build a visitor centre in close and/or visible vicinity to popular tourist destinations, like Seljalandsfoss. Asthor’s answer is characteristically pragmatic and reflects the public discourse on the topic of tourism in Iceland (Lofsdóttir 2015b). If we relate this to the theme park analogy then it seems that even if nature and culture tourism proliferate authentic experiences, they do inevitably involve some kind of
staging – which we can relate to the nation as resembling a theme park. However, authenticity is as has been emphasized not a one way street. For instance, in Edda’s suggestion to fake or stage authenticity it is taken for granted what Theodossopoulos described as “the presupposition that authenticity lies at an inaccessible level below the surface of social life, deep within oneself or among societies “uncontaminated” by modernity...” (2013: 337). The same is thus true of nature (wilderness) and culture too, ideas and concepts that are often associated with true-in-and-of-themselves authenticities.

And it seems that this endeavour of mine to make comparisons between the nation and the theme park does reveal what Theodossopoulos details as “the irony of the notion of tradition, which effectively demonstrates the constructed nature of authenticity in national(ist) narratives, but offends the sensitivities (and inventiveness) of local actors...” (2013: 337). It is not strange then that the theme park analogy is met with “an incredulous stare”, as famously worded by David Lewis (1986) in his attempt to convince people of his very counterintuitive “possible worlds” theory.

With the above in mind, and while I have no intention to offend the sensitivities or enterprising inventiveness of local actors, I believe that this hurdle can be overcome, both in spite of and in view of Baudrillard’s philosophy. Thus, to overcome it we must forego his idea that past non-modern times were characterized by more direct experiences of reality and instead note the different ways with which reality is mediated today. In accordance with Theodossopoulos we thus prevent the assumption of an underlying authentic reality.

As has also been noted, Baudrillard does not make an epistemic argument when presenting his theory of the simulacrum. Instead he argues that, citing Ecclesiastes, “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth – it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true” (1988: 1). The argument thus surfaces as a critique against an essential reality altogether; indeed, an argument almost identical to what was asserted by Theodossopoulos earlier. For clarification one can adhere to Baudrillard in text:

There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience; a resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. And there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production: this is how simulation
appears in the phase that concerns us - a strategy of the real, neo-real and hyperreal
whose universal double is a strategy of deterrence. (1988: 4-5)

Theodossopoulos on the other hand does advise against deconstructing authenticity, and
instead advises us to engage with the productivity of its locals meanings. He warns against
this for similar reasons that Chatterjee (1993) critiques Anderson (1991) for his description
of communities as imagined; for whom is it imagined? Against this critique the theme park
example is defenceless and for good reasons. For how do we assert the theme park analogy
without falling into the trap of authenticity; or rather, without falling into the trap of rendering
everything imagined? Yet, unlike Baudrillard I do not employ the theme park as a metaphor
(something represents something else) but rather as an analogy (something is comparable to
something else).

The purpose for why Baudrillard uses Disneyland as an example of the
simulacrum is that it is “presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is
real” (1988: 12). He then goes on to say that “The imaginary of Disneyland is neither true nor
false, it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the
opposite camp” (1988: 13). I argue that the theme park analogy is useful for similar reasons.
The analogy provokes the fact that nations are staged while at the same time being true to
what they are (for what else is there). This is applicable to Iceland where tourists have come –
in periods – to outnumber Icelanders, and where the tourism industry proliferates on selling
presumed authentic national artefacts. It is a massive industry of cultural objectification and
whose objectifications often do not correspond to local – albeit invariably situational and
always changing – conceptions about what is or what is not authentic. Yet amidst this
Icelandicness becomes further real and further reified by its commercial objectifications.

The inside of the Icelandic nation, its national character of which the tourism
industry has become dependent, renders the outside more real in the process; and here I take
the outside to be both the Icelandic nation and the nation-state system as a whole. It is not a
matter of true or false representations but a matter of authenticity, which is relative and
malleable. A great example of this is the northern lights, whose reality has become more real
than reality itself. And it is the northern lights as manifestations of the hyperreal to which
attention shall now be turned.
The hyperreal Disney lights object and the expectations thereof

This sub heading is not a direct reference to Disneyland as it is featured in the theme park metaphor by Baudrillard. Instead, it is a reference to Edda when she was describing tourists’ unrealistic expectations of the northern lights. She accordingly called this an expectation of wanting to see a “Disney performance of Disney lights”:

Most of them have no idea and they are actually hoping to see a Disney performance. And I – we – have to talk down those expectations. There ha[s] been a handful of that.

What most people do not know and which I learned from Svanur, is that the northern lights have periods of varying solar activity, which last for years at a time. And it is with awareness that we are now in a period of low activity that Edda made the following two remarks about those expectations she and other guides had to talk down:

Posting pictures in 2015 [on social media] of those amazing lights and now three years later somebody saw a picture two years ago and started putting money aside for a trip to Iceland to experience the same and they probably won’t because now is not a great time to do this.

Yeah, I feel that the majority of the people don’t realize that they… The expectations for seeing the lights are very high. And I like to… I don’t say this on the bus, but I tell my private friends that, to try and enjoy the whole process. Like, don’t just wait for the orgasm, you know.

Svanur notes similar problems with the northern lights tourism industry. Expectations are often unrealistic. But he does not put the blame on tourists. Instead he told me of a post he had recently written on Facebook that received a lot of attention. In it he critiqued how companies orchestrate their northern lights tours, and in particular with regards to how often the tours take place – despite little likelihood of seeing the northern lights. He had then made a deal with the company where he reserved the right to choose whenever he wanted to partake as a
guide. In other words, so that he would not have to go if he thought there was little chance of seeing the northern lights. This is particularly relevant, he tells me, now that we are in a period of solar minimum:

You can’t have it a mystery tour really, you know; the way it was developed in the beginning it was that there were like 2 buses going off, you know… with little or no information! And basically sort of, the mission was that they were driving you know – they used to have hot chocolate with [them]… and lots of blankets; and we just drive up, you know, and try to find the northern light. This worked, because northern lights were actually quite frequent and a lot stronger and more then… seven years ago. But they have been going draining in strength and now we get more people than ever and the strength of the lights going down.

The northern lights are an especially fleeting cultural/natural object, not least because tourists have such high expectations about what they are going to see. Recall Edda who described them as cats since they come and go as they see fit. On top of this the northern lights are part of the wilderness discourse and should therefore ideally be experienced out alone in solitude, to make for an authentic experience. This takes us back to the previous chapter, but is worthwhile to mention as a constitutive characteristic of the northern lights as hyperreal representations. As Edda told me:

[...] So you are going on a golden circle and you are going to see those things, but you are never going to see them like in the pictures. There are always going to be a 150 people in front of you. Whereas on the picture it looks as if you are going to see a waterfall and there is nobody there. Pictures [are] always... We shouldn’t use the word Photoshop too many times, but they are always taken in circumstances that are perfect.

Edda gave me an entertaining example of when Justin Bieber was in Iceland to record a music video. She refers to a video of him running around in the Icelandic nature as an example of images that constructs unreal expectations of what nature, and the experience of nature, is like. Nobody knows, she tells me, that Justin Bieber “had a team of people with him and that they went to the black sand beach at 4 o’clock in the morning – of course there was nobody
there!” Again, these expectations do not just regard the “Disney performance” of the northern lights, but also the conditions under which they are seen. Thus, insofar as the northern lights are cultural objects their hyperreality too becomes entangled in its nationness.

At the same time, it is not only tourists that come with high expectations, but it is also the tourism companies that play along in these imaginings, which Svanur remarked:

It is a huge revelation when you take the booklets of the 2-3 biggest, 3-4 biggest tour companies, their sales, and you see what they are selling – they are selling exactly the same pictures. They are selling pictures of Skogafoss, picture of Pingvettlir, picture of Geysir; they are selling the same thing all the time. And they are not selling service, they are just selling those place[s], you know.

The northern lights tours are more than what they seem, and at the same time less than what they are presumed to be. In view of these discrepancies or contradictions, Asthor called tourists starry-eyed:

But, they are kind of starry-eyed. They have heard about these northern lights and want to experience them. I think a lot of them will have slight misconceptions about what they are going to see and what their chances of seeing them are.

Most people are starry-eyed when faced with something they have not experienced themselves, but only heard stories or seen pictures of. Asthor emphasized that tourists do not know any better and that they simply “go where they are told to go”. He then stated that the tourism industry does nothing but make things worse by catering to “the lowest denominator possible” – in order to make as much money as possible. It is with this in mind that Asthor called the Niagara tourist town an artificial town, because, “there is no authenticity left in those places”.

The northern lights come and go like cats in the sky. And if we allow ourselves to willingly fall into the trap of authenticity then again we see it employed as residing underneath our mediation and appropriation of reality. The northern lights are hyperreal because its authenticity has been turned on itself only to be evoked anew with an embellished
overstated authentic*ness*; like the nation and its cultural objectification, changing that which it seeks to freeze in time. With regards to these Disney expectations, the northern lights in the sky are authentic to themselves, but not to tourists’ hyperreal ideas of them. And thus both are rendered artificial – if we hold authenticity to be relative.

**The disobedient and fleeting northern lights object and commodity**

Whether we dare denote Western mediated understandings of reality as the workings of simulacras or not, what the northern lights showcases, in their marketed and desired Disney performances, is a tourism industry where representation supersedes reality – where ideology in plain view is and becomes contradicted by reality.

Recall old wolf Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* choked up because in explaining, he claims, we generally reduce the unknown to the known because of our fear of the unknown. Even worse is that this procedure conceals how strange is the known (Taussig 2015: 6, original emphasis).

Is the unknown that which always changes and never is what it once was – or, as with the hyperreal, never is what it was objectified to be? I think we can better answer this question, as with the northern lights and their hyperreal expectations, with the help of Butler (1993). Even if Butler’s writing on objectification regards human subjects with bodies, I argue that it is equally applicable to the northern lights, as it is objectified in the same way with which all bodies are constructed. As Butler put it:

> It is this constitutive failure of the performative, this slippage between discursive command and its appropriated effect, which provides the linguistic occasion and index for a consequential disobedience. (1993: 82)

By adopting Butler’s notion of the disobedient body not only do we acknowledge the northern lights as an objectified body like any other, but we also come to appreciate the spectrum of performances around which this object was forced into hyperreality. This standard imposed
does nothing but enable the northern lights to perform disobediently. And this is what occurred those nights when the northern lights were literally not up to standards. The northern lights can therefore be both an inanimate scientific object governed only by the physical laws of nature and an animate and hyperreal object with a will of its own, disobedient, which enables for their search to be deemed an adventure and exploration.

Additionally, the northern lights can be compared to a fetish because it is an object invested with qualities that presupposes agency of some kind (Taussig 1980: 13). Crucially, this agency is only for us to have fun with, because it is ‘we’ who do the objectifying. This recalls how some guides would attribute the lights a will of their own, only to reinforce a sense of adventure when looking for them. As Arendt argued:

> Only we who have erected the objectivity of a world of our own from what nature gives us, who have built it into the environment of nature so that we are protected from her, can look upon nature as something “objective”. Without a world between men and nature, there is eternal movement, but not objectivity. (1999: 137)

Butler (1993: 81-83) also notes the power-laden process by which bodies are objectified; entitled agency only so far as this does not break the illusion of the uniform object. Do the northern lights have agency then? It is arguably not a question of agency and neither has it ever been. This is similar to the discourse around animal ethics (see Singer 1975). The issue has never been about animals’ lack of agency, only the politics around which this agency has been discredited. The instrumental frame with which the northern lights are objectified is through assumed and forced compliance with or without an implicated agency on behalf of the lights. This process, which rids the object of its moral qualities, is how we have always justified objectification of any kind. The most striking example of which being the justification behind turning humans into commodities – slaves.

To conclude, the hyperreal, fleeting, fetishized, and culturally objectified northern lights object can also be understood as a commodity. This commodity character is evident in the northern lights as hyperreal objects and representations. The northern lights, as hyperreal commodities, are written into the contractual clause of the northern lights mystery tours. Whenever a tour was unsuccessful – either because there was no activity or because there was too little activity – tourists were offered to come again for free. Therefore, the only
commodity that mattered was the hyperreal northern lights objects. Did the northern lights not perform as expected and as desired – even if we did experience them in principle – the exchange was ruled as never having taken place. Thus, the northern lights are hyperreal because that is the only performance by which they qualify as a commodity. The mundane northern lights, the disobedient northern lights, are not true to their hyperreal counterparts, thus rendering them both artificial in the process.
Conclusion

Meditations on Loose Ends

How do you conclude something that details the inevitability of change and which will have changed even at the moment of writing this? The northern lights are no uniform and bounded objects – seen as natural, cultural or national – but they are performed as such. In part, because they are hyperreal; and in part, because they have been culturally objectified. Accordingly, the northern lights are no uniform and bounded objects because they are being objectified by countless actors; whether that is by tourists, tourism companies, guides or locals – or, indeed, anthropologists.

But the northern lights are not objectified ex nihilo. As has been argued throughout this thesis, the northern lights are objectified in view of the naturalized nation and as such become entangled in nationalistic discourses, as much as they are entangled in ideas about pristine wilderness, and together, in discourses around authenticity. And as the last chapter showcased, these discourses overlap and shape each other’s realities. Indeed, the “trap of authenticity” (Theodossopoulos 2013) is prevalent in all three, and I fell into it countless times when writing this thesis. What can be asserted, then, is that the nation is an authenticator par excellence. In turn, the northern lights tourism industry is an example par excellence of cultural objectification. To quote Handler (1988: 11):

At the same time I began to realize that the issue of national identity was being played out all around me through the continual “objectification” of what was imagined to be Quebecois culture.

Handler’s sentence is a reminder that the nation – unless you do fieldwork with and about nationalist interest groups – is evoked and reified in very subtle and banal ways. Phrased differently, it is performed invisibly (Butler 1993). Such as in the joke made about the small heap of snow, embedded in a critique of tourists’ exotification of Icelandic national tropes, or in the story about Icelanders’ cultural survivals from their Viking past, still shaping their national identity to this day. Therefore, I argue that the intensification of tourism that has
occurred in the past decade, and which occurs to this date, has caused for Icelandic identity to become more tangible and meaningful by continually situating it in view of the national past, and in turn, the national land – through continual objectification of what is imagined to be Icelandic culture. The nationalistic northern lights object, accounted for in the second ethnographic chapter, supports this argument. Relatedly, this thesis supports Lofsdóttir’s assertion, made in view of the economic success that led up to the bank crisis in 2008, that “we see intensification of nationalism at times when Iceland is becoming more globally integrated” (2015a: 12). In contrast to Lofsdóttir’s, this thesis draws the same conclusion but in relation to the mounting tourism industry.

Continued and accelerated forms of cultural objectification, of which the northern lights tours have served as a reflection, renders the nation and its contents – Icelandicness – more bounded, more defined, and at the same time, more ever-changing. It is ever changing because it is continually being objectified; certainly, this is the greatest contradiction underpinning any form objectification, and as Butler (1993: 82) argued, inevitably allows for the objectified subject or thing to be disobedient, which this thesis noted with reference to the northern lights and their hyperrealness – condemned, by their objectification, to be disobedient. With this in mind, I argue that the northern lights and their contradictive objectifications are a suitable metaphor for the objectification of culture and nature as a whole – the substance and inside of the nation. The northern lights, whenever disobedient, are simply more honest in their fleetingness and thus appear more ephemeral. In principle both the northern lights and the Icelandic nation are equally ephemeral and fleeting, which their continual objectification attests to. This will serve as a tentative answer to the research question pertaining to what it means for the northern lights, as a natural phenomenon, to be culturally objectified.

Again, continued and accelerated forms of cultural objectification, of which the northern lights tours have served as a reflection, renders the nation and its contents – Icelandicness – more bounded, more defined, and at the same time, more ever-changing. Guides on the northern lights tours perform Icelandicness into boundedness; the nation is thus performed through nature, and vice versa. Yet this boundedness enables the nation, as it did with the northern lights, to be disobedient. It is and can be contested. This affirms Handler’s (1988: 50) definition of the nation as always accompanied by a positive and negative vision of the future. More than that, and as was noted in the thesis with reference to Douglas (1966: 113): pollution generally occurs, as a type of danger, when the lines of structure are clearly
defined. This pollution became the principal focus of the first ethnographic chapter, illustrated by means of the local stigma observed towards the northern lights tourism industry. As was accordingly noted, this stigma was related to unwarranted changes taking place in Iceland, accredited to the tourism industry. It was deemed to be rooted in concerns related to the Icelandic identity undertaking commercial saturation. In other words, its culturally objectified boundedness was in risk of pollution. This was exemplified, to name but two examples, with reference to irreconcilable tropes; such as that downtown Reykjavik, for Edda, could never conceivably become as modern as Times Square; or relatedly, that the northern lights tours used to be more “intimate” before the industry “adopted the way of the world – making money”, as Svanur put it.

Pollution aside, what has been illustrated in this thesis is that cultural objectification is never a uniform process, though it takes place in view of particular discourses, such as the nation. Handler (1988: 77) noted that the culturally objectifying work conducted by urban collectors in Quebec – and the discovery of the Quebecoise culture that such practices inferred – had become turned on its head only to become ridiculed by the locals. The joke made about the small heap of snow is a case in point; indeed, tourists’ exotic objectifications of Icelandic tropes have for some locals become tokens of ridicule. With that said, and as showcased in this thesis, most locals contended that this exotification was natural; either because Icelandic tropes are rightfully exotic and worthy of celebration, or because it is only natural to desire that which you are unfamiliar with. This pragmatic stance can also be seen with reference to locals’ attitudes about the tourism industry in general. On the one hand the commercial development in Iceland is worrisome, and on the other it is good because it creates jobs and made it possible for Iceland to make its way out of the economic crash. It is important to underscore these nuances as they occur in the ‘multi-vocal field’.

Instead of demonstrating sameness this thesis should be read as one which exemplifies the banality of cultural objectification and the complexities thereof. As Askew phrased it: “within a single nation (Western and non-Western both), different ideologies compete for recognition and status as the dominant ideology” (2002: 10). This quote echoes Handler’s (1988: 6) definition of the nation as an individuated being; again, of “homogeneity encompassing diversity”. Thus, cultural objectification illustrates continuous attempts to make the ephemeral bounded, which inevitably renders the nation into one of forever competing ideologies – always under contestation, always changing. In other words, instead of demonstrating sameness this thesis should be read as one which exemplifies differences that
are made to be similar once situated in the nation discourse. This was exemplified with reference to the different perspectives between guides and locals, and how these different perspectives came together in the shared worry that Iceland was changing. As Handler accordingly noted, “like a row of ethnic restaurants, nations and ethnic groups participate in a common market to produce differences that make them all the same” (1988: 195).

The common market has become a producer of cultural objects and commodities by means of the national discourse. This was exemplified with reference to the northern lights and the Icelandic horse. Arguably, the naturalized nation makes for an ideal means with which to sell nature and culture, entitled to it is an authenticator par excellence. This fact, alongside the observation that the northern lights demonstrated hyperreal attributes, resulted in the final ethnographic chapter wherein comparisons were made between nations and theme parks. It was tentatively concluded that the Icelandic nation, and conceivably by extension all nations, embody theme park like qualities. It was a tentative conclusion because in deeming the nation a theme park one immediately undermines its naturalized and objective foundation. Namely, one undermines its authenticity. This is a contentious assertion and similar to Anderson’s (1991) assertion that the nation is an imagined community both arguments are vulnerable to postcolonial critique – such as, whose imagined community (Chatterjee 1993)? This critique was furthered with reference to Theodossopoulos (2013: 338) who advised against deconstructing authenticity with regard to the “irony of the invention of tradition, which effectively demonstrates the constructed nature of authenticity in national(ist) narratives, but offends the sensitivities (and inventiveness) of local actors or minority groups.”

Faced with the above critique it was argued that the Icelandic nation does not equate to a theme park but instead resembles one, by virtue of comprising theme park like qualities. Similar to Theodossopoulos suggestion to engage with the local productivity of distinctive authenticities – e.g. what is considered to be Icelandic culture – the theme park analogy was forwarded as an effective means with which to provoke the fact that nations are staged while at the same time being true to what they are; indeed, for what else is there? Thus, rather than imposing this analogy as true it became productive to think about why it could not be true. In noting the many similarities and dissimilarities there between we again returned to the nation as an authenticator par excellence. To avoid falling into the trap of authenticity – of assuming an underlying authentic reality – it was thus declared that we instead note the many different ways with which reality is continuously being mediated.
In sum, the above issue(s) culminated in the observation that amidst cultural objectification of Icelandicness, performed on the northern lights tours, and which objectifications often did not correspond to local – though inevitably situational and ever-changing – ideas about what is or what is not authentic, Icelandicness becomes further real by virtue of its commercial reification. From this it was argued that the commercial hyperreal northern lights, as a constitutive element of the simulacrum, renders the outside and inside more authentic. Again and in other words, the nation is performed through nature and nature is performed through the nation; in turn, the single nation is performed through the nation-system, and the nation-system is performed through the nation. Thus, and with reference to the temporal and spatial appropriations performed by guides on the northern lights tours: the nation is being authenticated by being performed by locals who are from the national land, and the northern lights – the national sky – are being authenticated by being associated with the land. The nation and the northern lights mutually constitute each other’s authenticities; the nation is performed through nature, and vice versa. The simulacrum is true, as Baudrillard would have put it.

The above was further illustrated by means of the hyperreal northern lights as neither true nor false, but artificial. This was demonstrated with reference to the Gray Line northern lights contractual clause: have the northern lights not been adequately displayed the exchange is ruled to never having taken place whereby tourists can go again for free. The mundane northern lights were therefore ruled as non-commodities. And since neither the hyperreal nor the mundane lights are true to each other, both are rendered artificial. Arguably, this fact supports the applicability of the theme park analogy. Yet as with the theme park this assertion should be made tentatively and with awareness of the fact that the hyperreal northern lights are only artificial insofar as all things are.

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All of the above taken together brings me to my closing point. Throughout this thesis continuity has been discussed and noted time after time. Most often with respect to local worries about tourism caused changes, or in the stories told by the northern lights guides. Certainly, the manufacturing of an “immemorial past and limitless future” is one key characteristic of the nation (Anderson 1991: 11) – whether invented or not. And while it is
easy to be swayed by theoretical ventures pertaining to the nation as imagined, or even a theme park, these ventures – for them to be anthropological – need to be grounded and nuanced. Thus, the accounted for worries about Iceland changing should not be framed negatively as if mere nationalistic concerns about the pollution of Icelandic identity. Because Iceland is changing; and it is changing rapidly, due to the tourism industry. What this change brings is for the future to reveal, necessarily uncertain. Meanwhile, what can be asserted is that these worries reflect a national identity in the making, of which so too the cultural objectification of the northern lights have served as a reflection – most intimately embedded and entangled in these worries.

Finally, it should be noted that what renders the nation seemingly natural, and why the theme park analogy was met with an incredulous stare, is because it is very human. Hence, it is easy to be swayed, in true postmodernist fashion, to think that everything is constructed, therefore artificial, therefore imagined. But I think that this misses the point entirely. Indeed, “imagined communities” is an oxymoron. What the nation does showcase – and which has been showcased in this thesis – is that continuity is necessary in a world of constant discontinuity. The nation, insofar as it is a community, reflects a very fundamental desire to make order out of disorder. For this reason the theme park analogy can only be tentatively true. Allow me to conclude with a beautiful comparison told to me by Edda:

To see a country of three hundred thousand suddenly accepting the ten times the population to visit… I don’t know [sighs]... We do think it is like – actually pretty amazing that it is possible. It shouldn’t be possible. But we just do it anyway. Like a… bumblebee. Do you know that? They can’t fly. [The] ratio between the lengths of their wings and the size of their body – it is technically impossible. They don’t know so they still do it. I think Icelandic tourism is a little bit the same.
Bibliography


