

Banking on Borealism: Eating, Smelling, and Performing the North

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Abstract – This article examines the exotic performances and representations of Icelanders and “the North” (or Borealism) in media and daily life, focusing on food traditions and their practice within intricate foreign–native power relations and transnational folkloric encounters. It suggests a theory for understanding the dynamics, agency, and ironies involved in images of “the North” and the performance of identity amongst “foreigners.” The study looks at Icelandic expatriates and draws examples from media, bankers’ marketing events during the peak of Icelandic business ventures, and the everyday practice of food culture. It explores the roles of identity and folk culture in transcultural performances. In approaching the questions of differentiation and the folklore of dislocation (i.e., among expatriates), the everyday practices of food traditions are studied as an arena of negotiation and performance of identity. Interlinking theory and ethnography, the article examines how expressive culture and performance may corrode the strategies of boundary making and marginalization re-enforced by stereotypes and exoticized representations. Finally, this article looks at the concept of ironic, as opposed to “authentic,” identities.

Keywords – Performance, representation, identity, oral narrative, food tradition, folklore, irony, cultural re-appropriation, image

Introduction

As I stood in the midst of the revelling Viking-helmeted bankers at the 2007 midwinter feast of Glitnir Bank in London, various perplexing thoughts ran through my mind: “Can one draw a line between marketing and tradition?” I thought as a waiter offered me hors d’oeuvres. Detecting a whiff of cured shark in the air, I was reminded of the words of an expatriate Icelander describing the relative abnormality of traditional food in Iceland: “And from an island like this,” she said, gesturing upwards as to the North on a wall map, “way out in the ocean where the natives eat shark and sheep heads.” “Can one base identity on irony?” I thought. Standing there,

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perplexed as I often am during fieldwork, I began to comprehend how both identities and images were being performed ironically and in a transnational context. But who was performing to whom? And why?

The material effects of globalization, tourism, and international capitalism on national and local culture are often all too evident. Conversely, the uses and practices of identity and images in creating such transnational processes are more ambiguous. Yet, as this article argues, tradition-based images and performances of identities are instrumental in establishing the everyday contexts necessary for their practice. Equally elusive, verbal and visual irony play a significant role in the differentiation of groups of people through tradition, performance, and folklore—often on a grand scale. Food traditions have long been a major component in this folklore of differentiation—defining and separating groups from one another. Presented here is a study on the narratives, food traditions, and ironic performances of identity that involve the interaction and merging of groups. Whether on the film and television screen, in the privacy of an expatriate's home, or through organized marketing events—such as the Glitnir midwinter feast—these performances take place in the midst of cultural and socioeconomic developments such as the outstretching of Iceland's financial sector abroad and the following economic crises. Such transnational developments can charge the liminal space of “foreignness” with various shifting dynamics. One of these dynamics involves images of an exotic North (in a word: Borealism) enveloping, among others, Icelanders and their practices abroad.

While remaining relatively obscure to most of the world, Icelanders abroad have been met with a considerable media backdrop of their cultural and economic adventures and misadventures. These include a prolific contribution to film, art, and music but also coverage of aggressive Icelandic business ventures and the disastrous collapse of an overgrown Icelandic banking sector. Research among people in the midst of these processes, such as bankers (the “Viking raiders” or “Venture Vikings,” as they have become known), artists, and students abroad, offers insights into the experience and folklore involved in these developments and the images attached to them. Ironic performances of folk culture and seemingly archaic food traditions are an integral part of this. This article explores these

exoticizing representations and performances of traditional Icelandic food practices abroad as well as the concept of ironic, as opposed to authentic, identity.

Theory, Field, and Method

Folkloristic and ethnological perspectives have much to offer in illuminating the dynamics of images and identities. On top of an emphasis on fieldwork and a critical understanding of tradition, the disciplines' emphasis on cultural context, practice, and performance offers fresh perspectives on the relationship between image and identity and how the latter is formed and sustained. In the wake of numerous adaptations of Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony, a form of dominance through cultural authority, much scholarship on national identity has been focused on its top-down delivery from an emergent nationalistic intelligentsia to "the masses."¹ While making a remarkable contribution to illuminating the processes of nation building, these analyses tend to overlook the elaborate contextual, and in a sense horizontal, identifications in everyday folkloric communication—that is to say, when people of varying social status and cultural capital form or rather negotiate their identities in everyday interaction, for example, while talking, eating, dressing, playing, etc., rather than within the pedagogical environment of a classroom, a museum, or the hegemonic and ordered space of ceremony and festival. Many of these vertical approaches also fail to address adequately the complexities of contemporary transnational communication and commodification of culture and identity. Among these are the interrelationships of media and folklore, the irony or inner and outer meanings of representations, and the expressive bricolage often employed in the practice of tradition. By avoiding such overly hegemonic discourses on the construction of national identity, one may better understand the often ironic representations of Icelanders and "the North" in both the media and daily life and focus on their practice within intricate power relations.

To fully comprehend transcultural performances of this kind, the imbalance of power must be confronted in the analysis and research

¹ See Gramsci 1992. See also an analysis of Icelandic nationalism based on the works of Renan, Anderson, Bourdieu, and Gellner in Hálfðanarson 2001.

models. A prolific model of the force relationships in vernacular practices can be found in Michel de Certeau's monumental work *The Practice of Everyday Life*.² Combining the often isolated research of representation on the one hand and the study of modes of behaviour on the other, de Certeau focuses on the subtle processes of people conducting their lives in the midst of cultural consumption and innovation, or what de Certeau refers to as the art of living. This work of scholarship also includes the study of narration that he describes as being inseparable "from the theory of practices."³ The problem of studying everyday life lies, according to de Certeau, in its "tactical" position: he perceives cultural practices as reactions countering or evading a strategy of authority. He separates these power relationships into strategy and tactics. The former is defined as the power relationships possible when a subject of power and authority can be separated in a given environment, such as a supervisor within a workplace. The latter, tactics, refers to the subject that is without spatial or institutional locality, such as a passerby or vagrant, and therefore "fragmentarily insinuates itself into the other's place."⁴ Applying these terms to autonomous initiatives of everyday performances, as will be done below, is helpful in understanding the processes and power relationships embedded in the various contexts of foreign-native encounters.

Studying everyday performances of identity in foreign-native encounters requires research over an extensive period and field. While the ethnography on which I base this case study is not quantitatively conclusive, based rather on qualitative methods, its range is nonetheless extensive. The field of choice lies in those spaces where Icelanders are met with at least some sort of media backdrop (such as film, advertisement, or product marketing), significant relations of either a historical (e.g., colonial ties) or current nature (tourism, education, business, arts, and culture). The fieldwork began in 2005 and ranges over many northern European cities and various countries across the North Atlantic. Fieldwork that is stretched out over national boundaries has offered an opportunity to study nationality in terms of space. Fieldwork that has spanned over a number of years

² de Certeau 1988.

³ de Certeau 1988: 78.

⁴ de Certeau 1988: 9.

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has, in turn, offered insights into nationality in terms of changing roles and unfolding events. Since my fieldwork began, various seismic, economic, and social developments have affected Icelanders and their image abroad. The liminal space of foreignness that Icelanders abroad inhabit has therefore been charged with various shifting dynamics.

Perhaps the most influential of media reporting has sprung from news coverage of Icelandic business abroad. While Iceland may still be relatively obscure in the minds of many Europeans and North Americans, the coverage of the country's cultural and economic adventures and later misadventures, to say nothing of their effects on foreign depositors, has been considerable. Indeed, since my research began, major news outlets covered various aspects of aggressive Icelandic business ventures as well as the disastrous collapse of an overgrown Icelandic banking sector. Fieldwork among people in the midst of these processes is therefore especially important and can offer insights into experience and culture that preceded these and the images attached to them.

The scope of the ethnographic enquiry involves a lot more than probing the effects of "current events." Much of the fieldwork was carried out in collaboration with fellow folklorist and partner Katla Kjartansdóttir, centring on reflexive participant observation, qualitative inquiry, and audio/visual documentation of how Icelanders abroad conceptualize, perform, and negotiate their identities. While this article draws examples mainly from London and Helsinki during a period of escalating Icelandic business ventures abroad, the larger body of fieldwork explores Icelandic identities in numerous locations and contexts. We attended gatherings and visited private homes in cities such as London, Helsinki, Glasgow, Berlin, Edinburgh, and Copenhagen and interviewed participants who live or have lived in various other locations in Europe and North America. Through interviews and participatory observation we explored self-image as well as self-representation under "the gaze of the Other."

In my analysis special attention is, however, paid to the relationship between the transcultural exchanges of everyday life, e.g., through personal narratives and anecdotes and representations in the media (press, advertisements, film, etc.). Increasingly, representations in the global media make their mark on the transnational and

transcultural encounters practiced in the liminal space of “foreignness” and being “abroad.” Folklorists have effectively turned their attention to the problems of such encounters and the role that expressive culture and performance plays in them.⁵ Going beyond the discipline’s prior emphases on the artistic beauty and skill of folklore, great strides have been taken in examining the processes by which boundaries are drawn and differential identities are solidified through traditional and expressive culture. Folklorists have also gone further in illustrating the negotiable processes rendering people and symbols foreign and marginal. They have also laid bare the latent and overt strategies involved in the manipulation of identity symbols, such as traditional food.⁶ In the study presented here one may see an example on how such exoticizing manipulations are not only a means of solidification and separation but also an elaborate tool of transcultural interaction.

Borealism: Images of the North

In describing the cultural practices involved in exoticizing the inhabitants of the North, I use the term *Borealism*.⁷ Originating in the Latin *borealis* (the North), it is an appropriation of Edward Said’s term *Orientalism* that refers to the ontological and epistemological distinction between East and West.⁸ His study, as do aspects of my own, reveals the assumptions and power relations involved in cross-cultural relations. The image of one’s ethnicity or regional background plays a significant role in the negotiation of power in transnational encounters. So making sense of images of the North in general, or Icelanders in particular, is in many ways a study of relations between the centres and margins of power. This is clearly experienced in the “foreigner’s”/migrant’s/expatriate’s negotiations of power within a host country. Whether in the acquisition of access to or status within new communities or in the corporate acquisition of markets, cross-national power relations reveal the fluctuating agency and

⁵ For overview on performance studies, see Bial 2004.

⁶ See for example Bendix & Klein 1993; Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1994; Abrahams 2000.

⁷ The term *exotic* is here defined as that which is strikingly, excitingly, or mysteriously different or unusual.

⁸ Said 1979.

appropriation that is the experience of people from the margins of regional power bases or the “fringes of the North.”

It is, in many cases, difficult to discern the images of Iceland as they appear through contemporary media from historical images of the North in general. The concept of the North is full of extremes and ambiguities. As revealed in Peter Davidson’s exploration of the concept in art, legend, and literature, two opposing ideas of North repeat and contradict each other from antiquity well into the 19th century. First of all, it is “a place of darkness and death, the seat of evil. Or, conversely [...] a place of austere felicity where virtuous peoples live behind the north wind and are happy.”⁹ From savage dystopia to enlightened utopia, the pendulum has swung back and forth between the civilized and the wild. Researchers have nonetheless discerned patterns in this dynamic construct, claiming for example that the ancient Greeks and Romans and the Christian church associated the North with barbarism while the South was considered the cradle of civilization. During and after the Reformation these roles were in many ways reversed in northern European discourse, and many saw the light of reason and progress shine brightest in the north.¹⁰

From Iceland’s earliest recorded history, and arguably even before its settlement, the barbaric and exotic has been related to the food culture of the remote northern isle. This seems to be the case even within what we now call the “Nordic” countries where, only a few centuries after the settlement of Iceland, its settlers were ridiculed for their consumption of fatty foods and named the *mörlandar* or fatlanders. In the 13th-century text *Morkinskinna*, the eloquent, yet endearingly crass, anti-hero Sneglu Halli called upon himself the wrath of a Norwegian king by spending too much time eating gruel and too little singing the king’s praise.¹¹ The exotic, if crass, food image of Iceland is likely to have been enduring and widespread as suggested by Dutch Captain C. G. Zorgdrager, who visited Iceland in 1699. An illustration based on his description, and published soon

⁹ Davidson 2005: 21.

¹⁰ See for example Clarence E. Glad and Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson in this volume. See also S. Jakobsson, ed., *Images of the North* (2009).

¹¹ Jakobsson 2008.

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after his visit, depicts a bizarre form of cookery in the north of Iceland where, apparently, a leg of lamb is boiled at the end of a rope in a gushing hot spring.



Figure 1. An engraving from C. G. Zorgdrager's description from 1699.¹²

To this day an exotic image of Icelanders is perpetuated, and increasingly so, through the media of photography books, advertisements, and films. Examples of this are the 66° North advertising campaign for fleece clothing by Jónsson & Le'macks (photography by Ari Magnússon) and the books/exhibitions *Icelanders*¹³ and *Faces of the North*.¹⁴ These publications directly evoke images of a characteristically Northern or Arctic culture, concentrating on those who allegedly have not fully crossed the threshold of modernity. Commonly, these eccentricities are ironically expressed through traditional Icelandic food. An interesting example of this is the advertisement for the major Icelandic airline Icelandair: a group of French businessmen are interrupted by their boss while enjoying some Icelandic dried fish after a meeting with an Icelandic business associate. The Icelander, however, is nowhere to be seen, having left with one of the frequent evening flights. He has apparently

¹² Zorgdrager 1723.

¹³ Sigurjónsson & Jökulsdóttir 2004.

¹⁴ Axelsson 2004.

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closed the deal and left a whiff of dried fish in the air, to the disgust and dismay of a late-coming French business executive. He is dismayed, not because of the fine print in the contract, but because of the exotic odour of dried fish in the air—an attack on the senses within the sterile office space.

Icelandic films have likewise done much to exoticize and ironize Icelandic food traditions. In Dagur Kári's critically acclaimed film *Nói Albínói* (Nói the Albino), the preparation of traditional food is presented in a most barbaric fashion. The protagonist, Nói, wearing the signature Icelandic woollen cap, is an outsider who dreams of escaping the country. In a scene where his dysfunctional family prepares blood pudding, the audience is challenged with close-ups of the messy business of fat grinding. The grotesque affair is further highlighted when the hapless Nói fumbles and spills a huge pot of blood all over his family. In another recent Icelandic film, *Mýrin* or *Jar City* by Baltasar Kormákur, an adaptation of the novel by the popular crime writer Arnaldur Indriðason, there is a scene where the protagonist is seen digging into a particularly gelatinous dish of singed sheep's head, or *svið*, meaning something singed. Indeed, in light of the emphasis placed on the protagonist's consumption of *svið*, one would be justified in suspecting that its sole purpose was to catch the othering eye of foreign audiences.

While this traditional dish, consisting of a split, singed, and boiled head of sheep, is still commercially available in Iceland and displayed in the food stores, the dish's everyday status has diminished in recent decades. It has been steadily gaining a place among other traditional dishes such as sour ram's testicles and cured skate, which are rarely seen except at the time of their designated festivities to which they may add a sense of folksy patriotism. Nonetheless, the proprietor of the drive-through restaurant featured in the film claimed a huge boost in sales of this handy and centuries-old fast food after the screening began.¹⁵ Yet at the time, the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, Einar K. Guðfinnson, who was not one to recoil in the face of traditional produce, seemed slightly bemused in his personal blog:

¹⁵ “*Mýrin* hefur mikil áhrif: sviðasala margfaldast á BSÍ” [BSÍ Observes Influence of *Mýrin* as Svið Sales Soar] 2006.

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We know well that many do not like whaling, have reservations to the invasion of Icelandic companies, do not appreciate our dams. And perhaps detective Erlendur feasting on *svið* in Arnaldur's and Baltasar Kormákur's film, *Jar City*, gives a worse image than before; this is, at least, not the image of "gourmet" Iceland—the modern Iceland.¹⁶

The minister seems to be suggesting here that this alleged antithesis of gourmet Iceland has little basis in contemporary reality or that, if it does, then it is not an image to be heralded. Indeed the Icelandic government, at both a local and international level, has invested heavily in the promotion of Icelandic cookery as gourmet and high cuisine and its produce, mainly dairy, fish, and lamb, as "natural" and clean. In that light it is interesting to compare Guðfinnson's statement to a recent comment made by the current Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries. In a speech at the national farmers' congress (Búnaðarþing) on 28 February 2010, the new left wing government's Jón Bjarnason strongly criticized a television commercial that showed young people shunning traditional Icelandic food and opting for pizza. The minister described it as "some sort of humourless 2007 presentation in the spirit of the Venture Vikings where traditional Icelandic national food is belittled."¹⁷ In comparison, the former minister finds the presentation of traditional, rather than modern, Icelandic food an embarrassment. But the current minister speaks in defence of traditional food and puts the mockery into the context of a passé neo-liberal period. The ministers also contrast in the immediacy of their comments. The former minister's comment betrays a certain lack of forcefulness in his concerns for the modern "image" of Iceland.

This ambivalence comes to the heart of the matter. Despite the potentially deprecating effect on the nation's image, depicting it rather as eccentric and peripheral, little protest against these representations was voiced in Iceland. On the contrary, high political figures had openly embraced these eccentricities as a national asset. In an attempt

¹⁶ Guðfinnson 2006.

¹⁷ "Einhverskonar hómorslaus 2007 útgáfa í anda útrásarvíkinga þar sem að gert er lítið úr hefðbundnum íslenskum þjóðlegum afurðum." "Síminn lítillsvirðir ekki þjóðlegar íslenskar afurðir" [Síminn Doesn't Disdain Traditional Icelandic Products] 2010 (my translation).

to illustrate and trumpet Icelandic business successes abroad, the President of Iceland, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, stated in a speech:

Because of how small the Icelandic nation is, we do not travel the world with an extra baggage of ulterior motives or big power interests rooted in military, financial or political strength. No one is afraid to work with us; people even see us as fascinating eccentrics who can do no harm and therefore all doors are thrown wide open when we arrive.¹⁸

This, in fact, also highlights that although this filmed folklore is to some extent local and artistic self-representation, it is also a potentially lucrative transcultural commodity, reflexively aimed at both foreign and domestic consumers. This, at least in part, ironic exposition of Icelanders as primitive and exotic nature-folk seems to have been received with open arms both by Icelanders and the foreign target audience. From *Sneglu-Halli* to *Nói Albínói*, the ironic performance of Icelandic food traditions has played a significant part in Iceland's relations with the outside world and not least through the export of films or literature. In an age of international markets and mass communication, "foreign" commodities are often received and integrated without much political or social turmoil.¹⁹ When it comes to the integration of "foreign" people and culture into local society, the reverse is often the case.²⁰ However, what I wish to bring into focus here through the ethnography is that against a backdrop of media exoticism of the North, many Icelanders living abroad actually embody projected images of eccentricity and perform and exaggerate differentiating folklore in their everyday lives, not as a tool of separation, but of interaction, entry, and access.

Performing the North

Íslendingar erlendis, or "Icelanders abroad," is a term that perhaps connotes a strangely static condition of "Icelandicness" and the idea that their presence outside of Iceland is merely tentative. Somehow a

¹⁸ Grímsson 2005: 5.

¹⁹ Bendix & Klein 1993: 5.

²⁰ See for example Spooner 1986; Appadurai 1986.

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term such as *Icelandic American* or *Icelandic Canadian* has never caught on in the Icelandic language: the descendants of Icelanders who emigrated to North America over a century ago are still referred to as *West-Icelanders*. Icelanders abroad are also often considered to be excessively Icelandic, a reflexivity which Barbro Klein has frequently come across among Swedes when referring to Swedish Americans.²¹ Nevertheless, Icelandic expatriates in any given area rarely form a cohesive community and are usually few and far between.²² Still, many of the largest groups, who live in some of the largest cities of northern Europe and the U.S., gather on festive holidays. In-group congregations such as these are often focused on occasional calendar customs that serve meaningful cohesive purposes. While the performance of tradition has proved an integral part of these in-group congregations of Icelanders abroad, traditions and folklore are not performed exclusively for group cohesion. Rather they prove just as important in the reflexive liminality of foreigner–native encounters in which exoticizing performances are generated.

While exploring the role of identity and folk culture in these transcultural performances, it became clear that many Icelanders perform ironically, and with self-parody, various traditional food customs—often causing dismay or disgust from the target audience in the host countries. This practice reaches its zenith when congregating on the *þorrablót*, a quasi-traditional midwinter feast involving what used to be the last reserves of cured meat and fish in the old winter month called *þorri*. It was this “traditional” food more than others that proved a common aspect of transcultural performances, most of which were humorous and ironic in nature. The many ironic narratives and performances centring on *þorri* food included conversationally embedded personal experience narratives on how ordinary food customs “at home” become exotic performances abroad.

To take a representative example, one of our many informants, Áslaug Hersteinsdóttir, offers an articulate example of how performances of formerly commonplace food customs can serve as a

²¹ Klein 2001: 78.

²² One of the few possible exceptions to this is Denmark, where the Icelandic Embassy reports around 8,000 expatriates.

tactic within transnational relations and integration. Áslaug has built a life for herself in Finland after stays in both Edinburgh and Russia.²³ From her first consecutive years in St. Petersburg and Helsinki, she remembers herself and other Icelanders as very preoccupied with national characteristics. After settling down in Finland, she quickly found herself in the dual role of representing Iceland to Finns and vice versa both through media and in her everyday life. In day-to-day conversations Áslaug would, for example, self-effacingly answer questions about Icelanders. She would stress their appetite for storytelling and tendency for exaggeration. According to Áslaug, this is especially true with regards to Icelandic food although, she asserted, the same does not apply to her. Nevertheless, her conversationally embedded personal experience narratives about the food she was brought up on, and how she later presented it, shed light on how ordinary food customs “at home” become exotic performances abroad. Having initially taken traditional food with her from home, she later sent for shark, and also smoked lamb, which she prepared for her flatmates in the traditional sweet white sauce. Her explanation as to why she did this is quite interesting, as is her regret in losing touch with the tradition:

Áslaug: I did it most likely..., I just decided to distress people. And since then, what’s happened to me is that I see this food so rarely now. I have been to *þorablót*, but I’ve really stopped liking *þorri*-food like I did before. One has become so unused to it. I ate *svið* (singled sheep’s head) as a kid—I’ve often told this story—and the eyes were my favourite part.

Áslaug would later come to participate in many organized *þorablóts*, both in Helsinki and Saint Petersburg. These affairs were often arranged by Icelandic associations in collaboration with temporarily stationed Icelandic businessmen. Áslaug claims that the businessmen were eager to socialize with Icelandic students and through them gain access to the local culture they felt isolated from. Often feasts such as these would take the form of national representations aimed at the host culture. The guest lists would include affluent locals who were presented with hired entertainment or presentations dealing with

²³ This interview was conducted in June 2006. I wish to thank Áslaug, now living with her partner and two children in Helsinki, for her contribution to the research.

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differences and similarities between the respective nations. The expensive imported cured and pungent meat, fish, and dairy products would, of course, be a central part of this representation, and comparable to the exotic fashion in which Áslaug herself presented the food to friends in her private life. This presentation of the traditional food as a curiosity is nonetheless a far cry from its commonplace consumption in Iceland (see above). But what is also interesting is the acute reflexive awareness of how foreigners receive the food and how Áslaug herself has begun to marginalize these traditional food practices in her own life:

Áslaug: I think it [traditional Icelandic food] is very uncommon. That it's not normal. And moreover from an island like this; way out in the ocean (lifts up her hand, pointing, looking up) where the natives eat shark and sheep's heads (heartily laugh).

In this clarification of how she effectively and quite deliberately “distressed” her dinner guests, she elaborates on the archaic and primitive image projected, something further illustrated by her self-effacing laughter and hand gestures as if pointing to the north on a wall map. Iceland's position on the global northern fringe of habitation only further exoticizes (and visualizes) her role and position in these transcultural exchanges. The fact that Áslaug willingly and ironically took on the role of the exotic native from the obscure northern island “way out in the ocean” in her encounter must also be put into context with her successful integration into Finnish society. The ironic performance can thus in fact be considered a stepping-stone in her integration process. Through the bewildering sensory experience and symbolic primitivism she presented, Áslaug upset the strategies within her host locality creating a new liminal space in which to operate and perform. The tactic was further mediated by the jocularity of her dinner guests' strong responses to the exotic narratives of food consumption in her folk culture. Having used this exotic representation as an entry point, she then slowly, and with some melancholy, went on to abandon the food custom on which her performance was based and so widened even further the

distance between the performance and banality, eccentricity and authenticity.²⁴

The Bankers' Þorrablót

While a sense of melancholic nostalgia and self-awareness may be felt in Áslaug's ironic narratives, such sentiments are harder to make out in the kitsch and self-parody of the more formal yet carnivalesque bankers' *þorrablót*. Nonetheless, the fieldwork revealed many other interesting aspects of how exotic representations, commodification, and identities interlink in everyday practice. A case in point is the *þorrablót* of Glitnir Bank or, more precisely, its London branch. Our participant observation and interviews with leading architects of a global Icelandic banking expansion took place in the winter of 2007, a year now synonymous in Iceland with the destructive extravagance of its overblown banking sector. Indeed, the phrase "That is so 2007!" is now widely used in Iceland, connoting excess and garish wastefulness.

Glitnir Bank was born through a merger of Íslandsbanki (literally, *Iceland's bank*) with FBA Icelandic Investment Bank in 2000. According to its first director, the new name Glitnir, an insignificant character name pulled from Eddic prose, fulfilled all the requirements of a good Icelandic name:

It gives a positive message in the minds of Icelanders, has a historical connection, is both Icelandic and Nordic, it is easy to pronounce in most languages and it is spelled with international letters only.²⁵

The positive transnordic yet international message had gone seriously sour by 2008 when the whole Icelandic bank crashed with a heavy foreign debt falling on the Icelandic state. Its reputation tainted with

²⁴ The food narratives of Áslaug Hersteinsdóttir and other Icelandic individuals living abroad are also discussed in another article of mine; see Schram 2009.

²⁵ "Það hefur jákvæða merkingu í hugum Íslendinga, á sér sögulega skírskotun, er bæði íslenskt og norrænt í senn, er auðvelt í framburði á helstu tungumálum og inniheldur eingöngu alþjóðlega stafi." Ármannsson 2000 (my translation).

an image of recklessness, the failed bank was nationalized and its name changed back to Íslandsbanki.²⁶

But in 2007 the bank seemed at top of its game. The annual midwinter party, then in its seventh year, played an extremely important role in the running of the bank and gaining access to the foreign markets and business talent, according to bank director Bjarni Ármannsson. Its cultural context, unlike Áslaug's private dinner party, is therefore to a large degree that of a marketing strategy—although many features of heritage, folklore, and everyday power relations come into play. In our interview, Bjarni stressed the need to get attention, to emphasize the bank's Icelandicness and convey a message of heritage with a sense of the wild. "Fast, smart, and thorough" is the bank's unspoken motto, he claimed. In the *þorrablot* this message was primarily expressed through borealistic imagery playing on Viking kitsch and paraphernalia, as well as ambiguous wordplay and an attack on the senses where the sights, tastes, and smells of the food associated with *þorri* are appropriated in a variety of ways. But the campaign was not contained to the party itself. Initially, prospective clients were sent invitation cards that right from the start sarcastically denigrated the traditions on display. In the feast's first year, when the bank was completely unknown, this involved enclosing a vacuum-packed piece of cured shark marked "Do not open." According to Bjarni, people could not resist and opened the package, letting out a stench that filled the office space containing up to two to three hundred staff members:

Bjarni: And everyone would say: "What is this?!" And throwing it in the trash wouldn't do any good either because the smell was just as strong there. So the first year everyone had heard of the party. The attendance was quite good and we've managed to carry through the concept.

The 2007 invitations indeed suggest an established dyadic or joking relationship. They came in a box containing a sheep's horn on a leather string and a card reading:

²⁶ "Iceland Nationalises Glitnir Bank" 2008.

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Feeling horny? No wonder! The time to grab your shovel, dig up last year's flotsam and roadkill and set about eating it with a narrow selection of Icelandic firewater is upon us again! So, grab your beard/braid your hair (as appropriate) and glimpse Valhalla at Glitnir's 7th London Thorrablot Party on 28th February 2007. On offer will be all the usual ambrosian delights of Viking cuisine, including esoteric parts of sheep, accompanied with some innovative intoxicating liquids from the frozen North. We are delighted to invite new friends, and old, to a party whose popularity over the years has depended on the guests' inability to remember what the food was like the previous year. See you there!

The presentation of food at the party itself was in the same vein. While the standing-room only was showered with fine wine and extravagant finger food, the guests were escorted one-by-one to the back of the room where they were dared to try the various dried, cured, or soured meat and fish. Each dish was marked by its original name, for example "Hrútspungur," followed by its descriptive and literal translation: "Ram's testicles." Each morsel was adorned with a toothpick and miniature Icelandic flag. The grinning of the Icelandic bankers and the grimacing of their foreign colleagues revealed the ironic character of the presentation. The bank director's annual, and evidently much awaited, speech affirmed the bank's annual successes and also played on the food's alleged lack in quality. But this time he turned the joke on his English guests. After giving an account of the bank's investments in Finland the director offered the following anecdote:

Bjarni: Looking at the food here I was thinking what was actually guiding our investment strategy. I was reminded what Jacques Chirac said about Finland: that they made the worst food in the world. Probably worse than the English. So you can see what's really guiding our investment philosophy: we invest in countries where there is bad food.

From this point participation from an otherwise business-like group of guests increased, as did the drinking, dancing, and brandishing of furry and brightly coloured Viking helmets, drinking horns, and the occasional plastic sword. The evening then culminated in the bank director's much-anticipated, seemingly appreciated, erratic and

wild-eyed performance of Steppenwolf's song "Born To Be Wild." So, how may these performances be contextualized and understood? Why has a quasi-traditional food event been practiced with such a display of irony and self-parody? Why, imagologically speaking, has the proverbial woollen cap been abandoned for a furry Viking helmet?

While food culture may be at the centre, these verbal and physical performances play most significantly on nationality. And it is within the transnational context that they gain their irony and ambiguous meaning. In one of the earliest studies of irony, Kierkegaard mapped out a particular way of engaging in public activity through verbal irony. His ironist rejects convention as illusory and acts on his rejection by following it without any true engagement. But by only playing at the practice, the actor gains sufficient distance from the immediacy of the ordinary and awakens his subjectivity and the conception of himself as a subject. He calls this the "infinite absolute negativity" of irony. It negates this or that phenomenon and establishes nothing, because that which is to be established lies behind it. Therefore irony is a qualification of subjectivity but also a suspension within it.²⁷

So are these ironic *þorrablóts* simply an exercise in transcultural subjectivity? James W. Fernandez and Mary Taylor Huber have stressed that in any given situation irony has the power to resist, blur, or redefine preconceived categories. I would suggest that within transcultural identity negotiations irony plays an important part in questioning and corroding categories of inclusion and exclusion. I would also argue that such performances can only lead these individuals, transcending the authenticity of their identity, to an ironical standpoint. But Fernandez, Huber, and others have also questioned the true force of the ironic trope in contexts such as these and whether insubordinate ironies actually do anything to change the objective circumstances of people's lives.²⁸

What is interesting in this respect is Bjarni's admission that the self-irony of the *þorrablót* was designed to attract attention, gain access, and convey a message. While this is viable to a degree, I believe that various other dynamics are in place. Playing on—and in some cases

²⁷ Kierkegaard 1841.

²⁸ Fernandez & Huber 2001.

attacking—the senses, these individuals apply their tactics to gain voice, agency, and leverage in the otherwise firmly set power structures within their host cultures and the liminal relationship between the local and the foreigner. The self-parody of the event may also be seen as an attempt to defuse the tensions and distrust associated with a marginal national culture operating within a new host culture. Through the event, an ironic distance is created towards the “ethnic background”: an identity represented but simultaneously negated. But after these categories have been corroded, what is left other than the commodity, the comedy, and the futility Kierkegaard described as “absolute negativity”? Or can one build an identity on irony—having abandoned authenticity?

Conclusions

Interlinking theory and ethnography, this study demonstrates how expressive culture and performance may corrode the strategies of boundary making and marginalization by tactically re-appropriating them. Embedded in the everyday life of expatriates and pitted against a backdrop of historical imagery and media representations, folklore is not only a differentiating cultural form but also a practice through which one may gain access to, and equal footing within, the perceived host cultures. Not only do emergent media images play on the exoticism of the North, but many Icelanders have themselves become active participants in portraying this perceived northern eccentricity through performances of tradition, “primitive” origins, and seemingly archaic food traditions. These individuals have re-appropriated exoticizing representations, turning them to their own ends. Thus vernacular practices have become tactics to gain access and influence within the strategies of new localities. Their self-representation and identities have acquired an irony as a result of opting for playful exaggeration over authenticity: an ironic, as opposed to “authentic,” identity.

In contemporary times marked by international market forces, tourism, and global media, Icelanders are not simply reluctant receivers of exotic representations but have actually become their active performers. However, unlike the disembodied media images of “the other,” these performances can in fact be seen as a step in the intricate communal processes of identity negotiation embedded in culturally specific contexts and sensory experiences. Turning these

representations to their own ends, individuals have re-appropriated exoticized vernacular practices abroad as a tactic to gain access and influence within the strategies of new localities. Yet through their playful exaggerations, they have also distanced themselves from any sense of authenticity that might be associated with these practices. In effect, they have negotiated new, ironic post-national identities, applying differentiation not to build walls, but to open doors.

Edging back from the brink of a global economic crisis, in which Iceland has had the world's attention as a choking canary in the coalmine, it must be pointed out that these performances go well beyond imagological identity negotiations. They in fact play a significant role in effecting people's objective circumstances: their associations, their status, and their social, cultural, and economic power. If these playful and ironic performances of identity and tradition are indeed an integral part of Icelandic business ventures, as the banker claims, these effects are colossal. In addition to a crashed banking system, Iceland has seen revolt if not revolution in the streets, the downfall of a long-standing neoliberal government, and the election of a centre-left administration set to complete a harsh programme with the IMF and an ominous international dispute on the payment of crushing foreign deposit guarantees that have fallen on the Icelandic state. Within these highly structured contexts of global capitalism it might well be said that these ironic images and performances have proved an unpredictable force both corroding and confirming inequalities of power.

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