AESTHETICS AND CRISIS IN THE NEW "NEW ICELAND"

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ABSTRACT

This contribution asks how Angela Dimitrakaki's 2017 analysis of the New "New Europe" may be adapted to characterise socio-political developments in Iceland since 2008. Guided by a range of aesthetic practices that respond, enact or engage in some way with the realities of what may succinctly be termed the New "New Iceland," the article identifies three initial socio-political parameters to qualify this condition, *The Populist Challenge and the Nativist Front*, *New Frontiers in the Dualistic Colonial Experience* and *The Commoning of Cultural Expression*. With reference to recent scholarship in art and cultural theory, political science, decolonial anthropology and feminist literary theory, it combines qualitative, theoretical and historical perspectives to produce a comprehensive discussion with an interdisciplinary relevance for future research on the paradigm of the New "New Europe."

KEYWORDS

New "New Europe," New "New Iceland," The Populist Challenge and the Nativist Front, New Frontiers in the Dualistic Colonial Experience, Commoning of Cultural Expression

Writing about the prospects of feminist art interventions in 2017, Angela Dimitrakaki suggests the term *the New "New Europe"* to denote the significant challenges felt and perceived across the continent, in the wake of austerity measures imposed on many economically faltering European countries in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis.[1] It is in this context that the New "New Europe" takes shape: a post-socialist condition of crumbling welfare states, artificial scarcity of jobs and resources, European disintegration, increasing inequality and the rise of neo-fascism and xenophobia as convincing socio-political discourses.[2] In my doctoral dissertation, I have applied Dimitrakaki's analysis to the national context of Germany.[3] In the current contribution, I ask how the constellation of the New "New Europe" may be adapted to characterise socio-political developments in Iceland since 2008.

My investigation is guided by a range of aesthetic practices that respond, enact, or engage in some way with the realities of what may succinctly be termed the New "New Iceland." I offer an interpretative account, interlacing Dimitrakaki's critical analysis with recent scholarship in political science, decolonial anthropology and feminist literary theory. In this way, I combine qualitative, theoretical and historical perspectives to produce a comprehensive discussion of the New "New Iceland" with an interdisciplinary relevance for future research. I consider the artworks and aesthetic interventions that guide my analysis certainly representative of the matter at hand–but they are not merely "illustrative." Much rather they are constitutive of my understanding of the current conjuncture, just as the various other historical and theoretical sources I draw on in my analysis.

My argument is structured in the following way: I begin by asserting that Iceland lends itself well to Dimitrakaki's analysis of the New "New Europe," not least because of widespread aspirations for a "New Iceland" in the wake of a devastating financial crisis in 2008 that led to the resignation of a neoliberal conservative government in early 2009 and the introduction of considerable austerity measures in the following years. In the first section of the paper, I briefly summarise the socio-political circumstances that gave rise to such aspirations. In the following sections, I outline three *parameters* I consider important to qualify in relation to a preliminary analysis of the New "New Iceland."[4]

The increasing appeal of neo-fascist and xenophobic sentiments is a central aspect of Dimitrakaki's definition of the New "New Europe." Therefore, it is important to address the fact that far-right populist parties have since 2008 only gained limited ground within the Icelandic political establishment. The first parameter, *The Populist Challenge and the Nativist Front*, discusses these matters in relation to the prevalence of ethnic nationalism or *nativism*, recent domestic mainstreaming of the border politics of Europe's far-right, as well as the rapidly changing demographics of the Icelandic nation.

Another aspect of Dimitrakaki's analysis is an attention to increasing inequality and the artificial scarcity of jobs and resources produced by virtue of late-stage globalised capitalism. This is a growing problem in Iceland, as elsewhere, even if the country exhibited the lowest at-risk-of-poverty rates in all of Europe as recently as 2023.[5] But artificial scarcity is not only exacerbated by domestic poverty but also by the global concentration of wealth. In the second parameter, *New Frontiers in the Dualistic Colonial Experience*, I discuss a representative example, namely how the privatisation of Icelandic fisheries in the 1990s has recently reverberated internationally.

The third and last parameter, termed *The Commoning of Cultural Expression*, picks up on the feminist critique in Dimitrakaki's analysis, and highlights the definitive prominence of fourth wave feminist activism in the cultural landscape of the New "New Iceland." I conclude by suggesting that the commoning of cultural expression may be seen as a response to the shortcomings of conventional politics to realise the "New Iceland" hoped for in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash before briefly synthesising my findings and suggesting prospects for future research on the New "New Iceland" and the New "New Europe."

NEW ICELAND

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Iceland's dominant cultural atmosphere was iconically summed up in aesthetic terms by Ágústa Eva Erlendsdóttir's ironic impersonation of Sylvía Nótt/Sylvia Night, Iceland's representative at the 2006 Eurovision Song Contest held in Athens, Greece. Her parodic anthem *Congratulations* was nothing short of an obscene, inflated celebration of a pumped-up national identity. For the Eurovision semi-finals Sylvía Nótt was clad in a glamorous minidress and feathered headdress, flanked by two male strippers. Her song climaxed with the lines:

So, congratulations, I have arrived
I'm Silvia Night and I'm shining so bright
Eurovision nation, your dream's coming true
You've been waiting forever for me to save you
[…]
Just vote for your hero, that's what you must do
I love you.[6]

Exchange "I'm Sylvia Night" with "I'm Icelandic" and you suddenly have somewhat of a national anthem for early 21st century Iceland.[7]

Here is the necessary context: For some years, Iceland's financial sector had outgrown the local economy in a boom, followed by a catastrophic bust in autumn 2008.[8] Although triggered by the US mortgage crisis, the Icelandic economic collapse was no less the fault of incompetent, or outright corrupt, banking practices and corporate investment coupled with neoliberal deregulation of financial markets.[9] There were other reasons besides, such as the instability of the Icelandic micro-currency *króna* and the fragile balance of its export economies. The initial successes of the so-called *útrásarvíkingar* (*expansion vikings*), as members of the business community were often referred to, was ultimately based on hype, hubris, and market-manipulation.[10] Nonetheless, the boom was championed by figures such as President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson (1996–2016) and overshadowed by a widespread and debt-infused consumerism. Ultimately, the financial crisis took both the general public and the political establishment by surprise, not least because those who had warned against it were publicly bullied in the time leading up to the crash.[11] There was a deep and commonly held desperation as the splendour of the Icelandic economic miracle wore off, prompting a series of mass protests in fall 2008 and a popular demand for new ethics, new politics, a new social contract—and importantly for the present study—a "New Iceland."[12]

But despite initial cultural admonition, the discourse on "New Iceland" quickly became associated with a rather dire outlook, expressed by one journalist writing a year into the economic collapse:

> New Iceland is in severe debt, with a considerable budget deficit, a dramatically expanded tax regime, tendential emigration trends, indebted and compromised businesses, high unemployment, currency controls, the Icelandic króna, price guarantees, inflation, the world's highest taxes in the middle of a deep crisis,

> tens of thousands of defaulted mortgages. […] New Iceland is beset by serious frustrations because of the banking crisis.[13]

Even though the government that came into power in February 2009 was able to stave off some of the most destructive austerity measures suggested by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), significant austerity was still imposed.[14] These measures coincided with an exponential growth in the Icelandic tourist industry from 2010 that brought much needed foreign currency into local markets. However, this growth has also heavily strained critical infrastructures already affected by austerity, such as hospitals, roads and the property market.[15] Despite partial economic recovery, Iceland has faced severe inflation in recent years. According to recent estimates, one trillion króna (€820 billion) are needed to sustain these and other critical infrastructures.[16] However, a notable difference between Iceland and much of mainland Europe since the financial crisis in 2008 is the relative absence of a successful organised far-right political party. This is the case despite—or perhaps because of—the prevalence of nativism in Icelandic cultural consciousness, brought strikingly to the fore in a recent work by artists Bryndís Björnsdóttir and Steinunn Gunnlaugsdóttir which we will now turn to.

PARAMETER 1: THE POPULIST CHALLENGE AND THE NATIVIST FRONT

In April 2022, Björnsdóttir and Gunnlaugsdóttir claimed ownership of a peculiar sculpture, installed in the parking lot of the Living Art Museum and titled *"Carry-On: The First White Mother in Outer Space."* The sculpture was a rudimentary rocket ship, encasing a cast of a statue by sculptor Ásmundur Sveinsson, depicting the figure of Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir and her son Snorri. Titled *The First White Mother in America*, this statue first appeared at the 1939–1940 New York World's Fair, commemorating the fact that Guðríður may have been the first "white" woman to bear a child on the North American continent. And while "Guðríður's story offers a valuable counterpoint to male-dominated and often hyper-violent images of 'Viking' history," argues Christopher Crocker in a comprehensive treatise on the statue's history and its recent fate, "her story also runs the risk of simultaneously reinforcing settler-colonial and white supremacist ideals."[17]

A few days before being encased in the spaceship, the statue had gone missing from its pedestal at Laugarbrekka on the Snæfellsnes peninsula, the birthplace of Guðríður according to the Icelandic

sagas.[18] When the police intervened and removed the statue from its new encasement, the artists were prompted to reveal their identities. They made clear that their intention had not been an attack on the sculptor or the statue's protagonists. The artists also denied any involvement in the theft of the statue but appealed to law enforcement to replace Sveinsson's work in its encasement in front of the Living Art Museum. Substantial news coverage and public debate ensued, but instead of conceding to the artists' request, the police returned the statue to the municipality of Snæfellsbær, where it was reinstalled once again at Laugarbrekka.[19] As Crocker concludes:

> The artists challenged the Icelandic public by presenting a well-known work and a well-known historical figure in a new and provocative way. At the same time, their primary intent was to bring forth a layer of meaning they identified as already present in Ásmundur Sveinsson's work and in the context typically provided for it. This layer of meaning stems from a broad cultural investment in a traditional narrative rooted in racially exclusive historical standards, which […] the artists viewed as necessarily "open to reassessment." As the two artists themselves recognized, this sort of investment is not simply a reflection of individual intent but rather of a larger ideology.[20]

I open my first parameter with Gunnlaugsdóttir and Björnsdóttir's work because what is striking about recent political developments in Iceland is the relatively low electoral success of outspoken far-right parties. And according to a recent analysis by political scientist Eiríkur Bergmann, there are at least three reasons for this limited success.

First, and most importantly, nationalism never became discredited in Iceland as it did in some other European countries in the wake of WWII. After gaining its independence from Denmark in 1944, Iceland's postcolonial national identity was largely predicated on ethnic nationalism. As a result, marginal political parties have not been able to convincingly summon nationalistic sentiments to challenge the political establishment.[21] Second, a direct appeal to Islamophobia, frequently made by Europe's nativist populist parties, has so far found little support in Iceland, where Muslims are relatively few and Arab culture less visible than in many neighbouring countries. Third, populist parties in Iceland have so far been eluded by the charismatic leadership, crucial to the successes of the far-right in Europe.[22]

Here, I might add a fourth potential reason. While Iceland certainly faced austerity measures in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, with about fifteen percent of households still experiencing "great difficulty in making ends meet" in 2013, these austerity measures were relatively mild compared to those of many other European countries, effectively reversing an earlier trend toward increasing inequality. [23] Only three years after the 2008 crisis, the Icelandic economy showed signs of recovery. As Oxfam reported in 2013:

> The government that came into power in February 2009 pledged to be a Nordic welfare government with the aim of sheltering lower and middle-income groups against the worst consequences of the crisis. It also declared that, as far as possible, it would safeguard the welfare state against cuts. That appears to have happened: recent budgets have included a mix of spending cuts in sectors other than welfare, and tax increases have focused on higher income groups.[24]

This is significant because, as Clara E. Mattei has recently argued, there seems to be a strong relationship between the invention of modern economic austerity and the rise of historical fascism.[25] According to Dimitrakaki's analysis, the same holds true for the rise of neo-fascism in the New "New Europe."[26]

Despite the relative moderation of Icelandic post-crisis austerity, several populist protest movements emerged in its wake, and a renewed leadership took power in the historically significant Progressive Party (Framsóknarflokkur). Promptly, the party's rhetoric became expressly nationalist and isolationist. In a manner that has since dovetailed rather smoothly with Brexit and Donald Trump's MAGA ideology, the party railed against foreign creditors, international institutions, asylum seekers, and Muslims. Eventually, the populist leadership parted ways with the Progressive Party and established the Centre Party (Miðflokkur), sustaining this divisive rhetoric.[27] In the 2017 election, a second quasi-populist party emerged, the People's Party (Flokkur fólksins). Upholding *welfare chauvinism*, the party campaigned by opposing social support to the state's services to asylum seekers and refugees.[28]

Both the Centre Party and the People's Party saw considerable electoral success in the 30 November 2024 elections, in the wake of the implosion of a seven-year grand coalition government consisting of the Independence Party (Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn), the Progressive

Party and the Left Greens (Vinstri grænir). Moreover, the 2024 elections saw the establishment of yet another populist party, the Democracy Party (Lýðræðisflokkurinn), alongside sustained attempts to highlight asylum seekers and refugees as the key issues to be addressed. While voters eventually seemed more concerned with mainstream issues such as health and the economy, a certain normalisation of far-right rhetoric has undoubtedly occurred.[29] The main reason for the implosion of the government appears to have been the attempted expulsion of a disabled eleven-year-old Palestinian boy awaiting a decision on his family's asylum application. These events followed developments in the spring 2024 when the government ratified controversial immigration law and the moderate Social Democrats of Iceland (Samfylkingin), leaders of the current government, shifted towards a harsher policy on immigration.[30]

This gradual adaptation of Europe's far-right political agenda—what Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen has referred to as *liberal state racism* in an insightful analysis of the Danish political landscape in 2011—coincides with the fact that Iceland's wealth in the new millennium and its economic recovery since the financial crash have been dramatically produced and expedited by a diverse and multi-national workforce.[31] There has been a rapid increase in immigration since the 1990s, largely driven by strong economic growth and high living standards, as the OECD recently reported. By mid-2023, around 18% of residents in Iceland were foreign citizens and Icelanders with non-Icelandic cultural backgrounds. As OECD researcher Vassiliki Koutsogeorgopoulou points out, "this has brought important economic benefits to Iceland, including by boosting the working-age population and helping the country to meet labour demands in fast-growing sectors."[32]

In line with contemporary demands for decolonisation, there is an urgent need across society to come to terms with Iceland's nativist front.[33] This has been the case for some time, but since 2008 this challenge, which was previously marginal, has become mainstream in the cultural landscape. In my view, some of the most urgent aesthetic critiques of the nativist front have come from artists such as Björnsdóttir and Gunnlaugsdóttir, cited above, or the artist trio Lucky 3. Composed of three Icelandic-Filipino artists, Dýrfinna Benia Basalan, Darren Mark and Melanie Ubaldo, the trio received an encouragement award at the 2021 Iceland Art Prize for their performance PUTI at Sequences X. In the performance, the trio was clad in the white attire of cleaning staff—a role frequently carried out

by employees with non-Icelandic cultural backgrounds. Instead of carrying out their roles in silence, the group aggressively challenged cultural norms associated with cleaning. Since then, Lucky 3 has continued to work with similar topics. In autumn 2024, they collaborated with Ragnar Kjartansson on a performance at Kjarvalsstaðir Art Museum. Here, they assumed the roles of healthcare workers, another role frequently fulfilled by immigrants and Icelanders with another cultural background, while Kjartansson basked in their arms as the infirm beneficiary of their labour.

The work of Bryndís Björnsdóttir, Steinunn Gunnlaugsdóttir, and Lucky 3 are urgent aesthetic attempts to make sense of Iceland's nativist front and the populist challenge it simultaneously implies and impedes. And while Icelandic voters have been fortunate enough to rally around slightly different semantics than many of their counterparts in the New "New Europe," nativist undercurrents have dramatically affected popular discourse in recent years and still disproportionately eschew social mobility and cultural identity in the New "New Iceland."[34]

PARAMETER 2:
NEW FRONTIERS IN THE DUALISTIC COLONIAL EXPERIENCE

In May 2023, artist Odee (Oddur Eysteinn Friðriksson) claimed responsibility for a controversial artistic intervention that spoofed the website of the fishing firm Samherji. Copying the corporate identity of the firm, Odee uploaded a statement titled "Samherji Apologizes, Pledges Restitution, and Cooperation with Authorities." As the *Guardian* reported, Odee's pretend apology related to a corruption scandal known as the Fishrot files.[35] Documents released in 2019 by WikiLeaks and investigations by Icelandic media suggest that Samherji bribed officials in Namibia for profitable trawling rights.[36] According to a report recently published by the Namibian think tank Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), the scandal has had a devastating effect on locally employed fishers, with 90% of ninety former fisheries workers still unemployed since losing their jobs when fishing quotas were reallocated to Samherji. For these reasons, the IPPR report has called on Samherji to "apologise for its role in Fishrot to the Namibians impacted," and called for "full redress to affected individuals and communities."[37]

While the Fishrot files suggest how New "New Europe's" artificial scarcity of jobs and resources is produced and exported far beyond the territorial borders of individual states, such manufactured

scarcity has also been dramatically felt in Iceland since well before the economic collapse. The wealth of the fishing industry is largely predicated on the privatisation of fishing quotas in the 1980s and 1990s, when locally anchored fishing rights were made available through a domestic market, built through a series of neoliberal reforms.[38] While the Icelandic quota system ensured the relative sustainability of commercial fishing, it also led to the dilapidation of many smaller townships around the country and the large-scale loss of jobs.[39] These reforms were part of a larger neoliberal program implemented between 1991 and 2004, which, as Oxfam reports, included reductions in government spending; lower tax rates on labour and capital; privatization of state-owned enterprises; liberalization of the labour and product markets; greater global economic integration; pension reform; deregulation of the financial market; and reform of the public sector. In the years that followed inequality rapidly increased, further gaining momentum from 2003. The Gini coefficient, the indicator for measuring inequality within a country, went from 0.19 in 1993 to 0.24 in 2003, and reached a peak of 0.29 in 2007.[40]

According to a recent ruling by a London High Court, Odee's work will likely not be defended as parody. Instead, the court sided with Samherji, prompting its chief executive, Þorsteinn Már Baldvinsson, to lash out at "the academic institutions that gave their blessing to obvious trademark violations under the guise of artistic expression."[41] However, Sabine Jacques, a senior lecturer in intellectual property law at the University of Liverpool, has expressed her disappointment "that the court did not delve further into the defence of parody."[42] Notwithstanding the specifics of the Fishrot case, or the ultimate court ruling, it represents a more general trend that may be associated with my definition of the New "New Iceland" and its second parameter, *New Frontiers in the Dualistic Colonial Experience*.

Iceland gained its full independence as late as 1944, as noted above, and has, for much of its history, been predicated on postcolonial relations to the wider world. This means that any artificial scarcity of material resources and employment opportunities in Iceland has historically been intrinsically related to its semi-peripheral position within the world system. Kristín Loftsdóttir has recently argued, with great relevance to my analysis of the nativist front in the previous section, that Icelanders are predicated by a *dualistic colonial experience*. As she explains, writing about the years before the economic crash:

> The economic expansion involved direct and indirect references to the memory of Iceland under Danish rule in various ways. One was the way Icelanders in general talked about the business-Vikings which, showing a strong connection to nationalistic discourses in particularly the early 20th century, expressed the desire in different spheres of Icelandic society to demonstrate that Icelanders were stepping higher than - or in front of "the Danes"—in the hierarchy of the community of nations. The economic boom also engaged with coloniality in many other different ways—to use Aníbal Quijano's concept – where economic expansion was portrayed in masculine terms, as conquest and domination. Also, the economic boom drew migrant workers to Iceland in unprecedented numbers especially from Poland but also from other countries such as Lithuania […]. These populations were often referred to in racialized terms as inferior to Icelanders, activating older discourses within Europe between East and West. These different strands can be seen as reflecting Iceland's dualistic colonial experience: First, as subjects of a colonial nation and imperialism and, second, as part of the global north where they have contributed to the reproduction of coloniality. Here, the acknowledgement of Iceland's history as under Danish rule is not intended to reproduce ideas of racial exceptionalism, but rather to acknowledge that Iceland's history has shaped how racist and nationalistic discourses have been expressed in Iceland.[43]

The allegations of Samherji's illegal conduct in Namibia, coupled with a few recent cases such as the illegal dumping of toxic ships owned by the Icelandic company Eimskip on the Indian shores of Alang for dirty and dangerous scrapping, signal *new frontiers* in this dualistic colonial experience.[44] By virtue of a relatively newfound economic prowess, Icelandic firms and corporations are increasingly positioned in such a way that their industrial activity and alleged illegal conduct reverberate not only domestically, but also globally. This fact is brought strikingly to the fore with Odee's 2023 mock apology and is, in my view, a second significant parameter for the New "New Iceland."

PARAMETER 3:
THE COMMONING OF CULTURAL EXPRESSION

On 10 November 2016, a large flashmob formed in front of the district court in Reykjavík. Carrying buckets and holding swabs, the group started enacting the movements of cleaning the street.

Gradually the body language of participants became more intense, and some began shouting and screaming. The commotion grew louder and louder until the group united in silence and walked towards the entrance of the courthouse with their hands raised. More than sixty thousand people viewed a recording of the flashmob that included members of the Icelandic Dance Company (IDC) as well as survivors of sexual violence. Many survivors haven't had their cases heard or justly dealt with by the courts, and it was to them that the work was devoted. It was devised in collaboration with the NGO Stígamót, which provides support to those afflicted by sexual violence and abuse. A few days later, Erna Ómarsdóttir, artistic director of the IDC, and dancer and choreographer Ásrún Magnúsdóttir claimed artistic responsibility for the intervention.[45]

The work can be seen as part of a much larger oeuvre of feminist cultural expression since 2009, that Ásdís Helga Óskarsdóttir associates with the *fourth wave of Icelandic feminism*.[46] In the wake of the financial crisis, feminism, which had been an important but marginalised issue for decades abruptly became much more mainstream, not least because of the gradual suspension of taboos surrounding sexual violence and abuse. Óskarsdóttir writes:

> Safe to say, the feminism now dominant in Icelandic popular discourse involves an awakening of the pervasiveness of sexual violence and the importance for survivors of such violence to "hand the shame back" to their offenders. It also emphasises the right of women to "take space" in various ways, an emphasis apparent on social media. The solidarity of different women and online communities are important in this context which may be seen in direct opposition to the individualism of postfeminism.[47]

These contours of New "New Iceland's" feminism were in many ways prescient of the 2017 #MeToo social media campaign, with the fourth wave both reinforced by the global movement that ensued and actively contributing to its expression in Iceland at the time. Much of feminist aesthetic interventions have taken emphatically collective forms in recent years in direct reference to earlier feminist solidarity movements in Iceland, especially the 1975 Icelandic Women's Strike.[48] The local Slut Walk, modelled on a 2011 rally in Toronto, Canada, is one example. Another would be a collective reading on the stage of the City Theatre in 2017, riding the wave of #MeToo, where dozens of survivors of sexual violence from different

professions and walks of life shared the stage to read their accounts. While not a traditional theatre piece, the performance was aesthetically enhanced by its staging in the theatre.

Another work, intersecting with the feminist fourth wave and emblematic of what I've designated as the *commoning of cultural expression* would be Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson's *In Search of Magic*, a polyphonic musical performance curated by the pair in commemoration of a new constitution for the Republic of Iceland, written by a constituent assembly shortly after the financial crash but still not ratified. Castro and Ólafsson's aspirations to "common" the artwork- that is, to distribute ownership and authorship across a range of participants involved in the production of the piece—both political actors such as NGOs and interest groups as well as artists from different fields speak symbolically to the democratic demands made most iconically by the thousands of people who took to the streets in 2008 and 2009 to protest the government.

Consequently, from the critical feminist perspective of Dimitrakaki's interrogation of the New "New Europe," we can observe how the commoning of aesthetic and cultural expression has served to mitigate political frustrations and the repeated inability of mainstream politics to respond to the contemporary moment:

> The destruction of the welfare state (mentioned earlier as the crucial factor in the rise of neo-fascism) has meant that the commons is summoned to fill the gap of the withdrawing state. Capital, as de Massimo De Angelis has argued, needs to delegate a number of tasks to an economy of the commons, an economy where cash does not flow: capital needs unpaid volunteers to run libraries and refugee centres. Capital needs a cost-free sharing of some resources for society to function. De Angelis calls this use of the commons by capital, especially in a time of crisis—a post-socialist, post-welfare crisis- a 'commons fix'. The use of the commons by capital helps ameliorate situations of social need so acute that they might become explosive if the commons withdrew.[49]

In Iceland, as in many self-identifying "Western welfare states," various material and social infrastructures are currently in disrepair. Amidst this infrastructural crisis, the commoning of cultural expression, as evidenced by the collective performances and interventions outlined in this section, may be seen as a utopian aesthetic response

to a democratic deficit and the deferred social justice utopia that many hoped "New Iceland" would be.[50] As of today, New Iceland only exists as a region in Canada.[51] Whether the New "New Iceland" is a more realistic synthesis is still up for debate.

CONCLUSION

So far, I have offered an introductory analysis of the New "New Iceland," which I hope will be of interdisciplinary relevance for future research. My analysis is indebted to, and may be understood as an extension of, Angela Dimitrakaki's initial definition of the New "New Europe" in 2017. In adapting this analysis to the case of Iceland, I have suggested three separate parameters that integrate certain aspects of Dimitrakaki's analysis. The first parameter, *The Populist Challenge and the Nativist Front,* qualifies the appeal of far-right political discourse in the context of Iceland. The second parameter, *New Frontiers in the Dualistic Colonial Experience,* is devoted to the artificial scarcity of jobs and resources characteristic of late-stage globalised capitalism. As both Dimitrakaki and Clara E. Mattei have observed, there is a strong relationship between the two. The third and last parameter, *The Commoning of Cultural Expression,* relates to Dimitrakaki's feminist reading of the commons fix, as a reaction to contemporary challenges to Europe's post-war welfare states. This leaves two important aspects of her definition of the New "New Europe" unaddressed: her understanding of the New "New Europe" as a posts-socialist condition and her emphasis on European *disintegration*.

Rather than to address these aspects, or fully explore the others, in this analysis, I would like to emphasise that I do not intend this investigation to be exhaustive, but rather preliminary and suggestive. I do hope that other researchers, professionals, students, and critics of contemporary art and culture find my definition of the New "New Iceland" helpful and might even contribute to its critical assessment and development. This might involve defining further parameters specific to the New "New Iceland," comparative studies within and beyond the geopolitical figuration of the New "New Europe," as well as critical historiographies and case studies that could validate or refine my analysis. One particularly exciting line of research would explore the multiple layers of meanings invested in the notions "New Iceland" and "New Europe." While the latter is partly derived from the vocabulary of Marx and Engel's *Communist Manifesto,* it was prominently brought to the fore by Donald Rumsfeld and other hawks of George W. Bush's war cabinet during

the Iraq invasion in 2003. Rumsfeld's reference to the "New Europe" celebrated many of the newly independent European nations that subscribed to the coalition of the willing, including Iceland, while relegating many of the more sceptical European nations to the past as members of the "Old Europe."[52] As military mobilisation takes on central importance once again across the global economy, this history becomes especially relevant.

1 Angela Dimitrakaki, “Art, Instituting, Feminism and the Common/s: Thoughts on Interventions in the New ‘New Europe,’” draft chapter in *Inside Out: Critical Artistic Discourses Concerning Institutions*, ed. Suzana Milevska and Alenka Gregoric (Ljubljana City Art Gallery, 2017). I am grateful to students and colleagues at the Iceland University of the Arts and the University of Bifröst, Jón Karl Helgason, the editors, especially Jóhannes Dagsson and Sólrún Una Þorláksdóttir, and an anonymous reviewer for making generous suggestions for my work.

2 Dimitrakaki, “Art, Instituting, Feminism and the Common/s,” 2.

3 My dissertation, written at the Chair of Art Theory and Curating at Zeppelin University and titled *Infrastructures of the Public Sphere: Socially Engaged Art and Curatorial Practice in the New “New Germany”* is the outcome of a three-year long research project, FEINART, funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement. The project was devoted to the future of European independent art spaces and socially and politically engaged art practices. For further information about the research project see *FEINART*, “About,” accessed August 29, 2025, https://feinart.org/about/

4 My use of the term *parameter* is intentional and refers to how the aesthetic qualities of electronic instruments are shaped. Sound is synthesised by qualifying electronic oscillators with multiple parameters, leading to the emergence of complex structures that continuously feedback and affect each individual parameter. Thus, no parameter is an isolated topography, but rather a dynamic and integrated structure within a broader sonic landscape.

5 Statistics Iceland. “At-Risk-of-Poverty Rate 9.0% in 2023.” January 8, 2025. https://statice.is/publications/news-archive/quality-of-life/at-risk-of-poverty-rate-2023/. However, according to an equally recent report by UNICEF, child poverty has increased by eleven percent in Iceland between the years 2012–14 and 2019–21. The only European country to surpass this rate of development was the UK, where poverty increased by twenty percent in the same period. See United Nations Regional Information Centre (UNRIC). “Mikil fjölgun barna sem lifa við fátækt á Íslandi.” Accessed August 29, 2025. https://unric.org/is/mikil-fjolgun-barna-sem-lifa-vid-fataekt-a-islandi/#. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that poverty is a relative term, and in virtue of Iceland’s high living standards poverty may include factors such as insufficient heating or nutrition but also the availability of new clothing, technological amenities such as phones, or resources to celebrate birthdays or participate in leisure activities. For the full report, cf. UNICEF. “More Than 1 in 5 Children Live in Poverty in 40 of the World’s Richest Countries.” December 5, 2023. https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/more-1-5-children-live-poverty-40-worlds-richest-countries.

6 Ágústa Eva Erlendsdóttir and Þorvaldur Bjarni Þorvaldsson. “Congratulations.” Song, 3:00. Sena, 2006.

7 See also two BA theses written at the Iceland University of the Arts on the matter, Anna María Tómasdóttir, “Hei, þú ógisslega töff — ég er að tala við þig!” (Bachelor thesis, Iceland University of the Arts, 2011); and Bjartur Örn Bachmann, “Til hamingju Ísland: Sylvía nótt og íslenska þjóðin í samhengi” (Bachelor thesis, Iceland University of the Arts, 2022).

8 It is important to note that Sylvía Nótt’s 2006 parody predates the actual financial crash. Jón Karl Helgason and Ásgeir Brynjar Torfason have discussed how aesthetic commentary on the cultural landscape in Iceland before the crash may be traced at least back to the literary works of Þráinn Bertelsson and Sigfús Bjartmars in 2004. See Jón Karl Helgason and Ásgeir Brynjar Torfason, “Hinn (al)þjóðlegi peningaleikur: Einkavæðing ríkisbanka í ljósi glæpasagna Þráins Bertelssonar,” *Skírnir* 195 (Autumn 2022): 319–54. The article was in turn prompted by an extensive review of Icelandic literature in relation to the financial crisis: Alaric Hall, *Útrásarvíkingar: The Literature of the Icelandic Financial Crisis (2008–2014)* (punctum books, 2020).

9 For a comprehensive study of these events, see for instance Paul E. Durrenberger and Gísli Pálsson, eds., *Gambling Debt: Iceland’s Rise and Fall in the Global Economy* (University Press of Colorado, 2015). See also Oxfam, “The True Cost of Austerity and Inequality: Icelandic Case Study,” *Oxfam Case Study* (September 2013), https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/301384/cs-true-cost-austerity-inequality-iceland-120913-en.pdf?sequence=69

10 See for instance the work of Kristín Loftsdóttir: “Vikings Invade Present-Day Iceland,” in *Gambling Debt: Iceland’s Rise and Fall in the Global Economy*, eds. Paul E. Durrenberger and Gísli Pálsson, 3–14 (University Press of Colorado, 2015); and Kristín Loftsdóttir, *Crisis and Coloniality at Europe’s Margin: Creating Exotic Iceland* (London: Routledge, 2019).

11 See especially Ingi F. Vilhjálmsson, *Hamskiptin: Þegar allt varð falt á Íslandi* (Reykjavík: Veröld, 2014); and Jóhann Hauksson, *Þræðir valdsins: Kunningjaveldi, aðstöðubrask og hrun Íslands* (Reykjavík: Veröld, 2011). For a comprehensive list of books that treat the crash historically and ethically, see the excellent conference archive *Hrunið, þið munið*, https://hrunid.hi.is/hrunbaekur/saga-sidferdi/

12 Historian and journalist Guðmundur Magnússon wrote the book *Nýja Ísland: Listin að týna sjálfum sér* (Reykjavík: JPV, 2008); but in his work the term “New Iceland” refers to the 40–50 years preceding the financial crash, rather than the aspirations for what would replace that older “New Iceland.”

13 In other words, as the journalist adds, “New Iceland is in fact Old Iceland.” Jón G. Hauksson, “Nýja Ísland,” *Frjáls verslun* 11 (2009): 42–43.

14 Cf. Oxfam, “The True Cost of Austerity and Inequality.”

15 Cf. Luis A. Gil-Alana and Edward H. Huijbens, “Tourism in Iceland: Persistence and Seasonality,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 68 (January 2018): 20–29.

16 Viðskiptablaðið, "Þúsund milljarða innviðaskuld." August 10, 2024, https://vb.is/frettir/ thusund-milljarda-innvidaskuld/.

17 Cristopher Crocker, "'The First White Mother in America:' Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir, Popular History, Firsting and White Feminism," *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies / Études scandinaves au Canada* 30 (2023): 4. See also Inga Björk Margrétar Bjarnadóttir and Jovana Pavlović, "Fyrsta hvíta móðirin í geimnum: Kynþáttafordómar, hvítleikinn og mörk listarinnar," *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 83, no. 3 (2022): 5–18; and Bryndís Björnsdóttir, "Endurhvítun: Nýja íhaldið og andspyrna í íslenskum myndlistarheimi," *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 86, no. 2 (2025). Crocker relies on the pioneering work of Tinna Grétarsdóttir, "Unveiling the Work of the Gift: Neoliberalism and the Flexible Margins of the Nation-State," in *Flexible Capitalism: Exchange and Ambiguity at Work*, ed. Jens Kjaerulff, 67–92 (New York: Berghahn, 2015). Already in 2010 Grétarsdóttir published a comprehensive treatise in Icelandic on Sveinsson's work: Tinna Grétarsdóttir, "Á milli safna: Útrás í (lista) verki," *Ritið* 1 (2010): 83–104.

18 Her story is recounted in two different sagas, Grænlendinga saga and Eiríks saga rauða, but the birthplace is accounted for in the latter. See *Eiríks saga rauða*, made available in the public domain by Snerpa, https://www.snerpa.is/net/isl/eirik.htm.

19 Crocker, "'The First White Mother in America,'" 20–21.

20 Crocker, "'The First White Mother in America,'" 21.

21 Iceland is traditionally conceived of as a homogenous nation state, and historically national identity has been effectively constructed in ethnic terms. The Icelandic sagas, that in many ways constitute Icelandic historical identity, romanticise the legacy of white Norsemen settling in the 9th and 10th century. While there were no indigenous populations in Iceland at the time, this Nordic expansion may still be understood in settler-colonial terms given the extensive marauding and slavery in the British Isles, Eastern Europe and beyond, that predicated economic progress and ensured social reproduction in the Nordic region. Moreover, Nordic cultural heritage may be seen to be constitutive of certain aspects of settler-colonial identity in the US and the symbols, and semantics of Nordic mythology and cultural identity have long inspired white supremacists in different national contexts. This was nowhere as pronounced as on January 6, as rioters stormed the US Capitol Building in Washington, led by a person wearing skin fur and a spiked horn helmet. See for instance Sólveig Ásta Sigurðardóttir, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Nordic Colonialism in American Literature from Reconstruction to the Immigration Act of 1924" (PhD diss., Rice University, 2022), https://repository.rice.edu/items/37d32149-6812-41ad-9a38-03378308adf3.

22 Eiríkur Bergmann, "Nordic Populism: Conjoining Ethno-Nationalism and Welfare Chauvinism," in *Democracy Fatigue: An East European Epidemy*, ed. Carlos García-Rivero, 240–61 (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2023), 254. See also a broader contextualisation in Eiríkur Bergmann, *Neo-Nationalism: The Rise of Nativist Populism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

23 Oxfam, "The True Cost of Austerity and Inequality," 3.

24 Oxfam, "The True Cost of Austerity and Inequality," 3.

25 Clara E. Mattei, *The Capital Order: How Economists Invented Austerity and Paved the Way to Fascism* (Chicago University Press, 2022).

26 Dimitrakaki, "Art, Instituting, Feminism and the Common/s," 2, 5.

27 As a matter of fact, The Centre Party has, since its establishment by former prime minister Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson, invoked much of US and Europe's far-right socio-political discourse. Its establishment followed the publication of Gunnlaugsson's name in the so-called Panama Papers, that led to his expulsion as prime minister and leader of the Progressive Party. Early in their first parliamentary term, MPs of Miðflokkurinn were overheard expressing misogynistic and derogative views of disabled people in a public bar, which led to a major scandal. Despite these faults, the party has enjoyed increasing support through the COVID-19 pandemic and deepening frustrations with a broad coalition government in power between 2017 and 2024. For a more recent assessment, see Eiríkur Bergmann, "Iceland's Deep-Rooted Nationalism and Recent Quasi-Populism," in *Aufstand der Außenseiter: Die Herausforderung der europäischen Politik durch den neuen Populismus*, eds. Frank Decker et al., 299–312 (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2022).

28 Bergmann, "Nordic Populism," 254.

29 This necessarily brief analysis is further reinforced by the findings of a recently published Master's Thesis at the University of Iceland by Nazima Kristín Tamimi and supervised by Baldur Þórhallsson in the field of International Relations. See Nazima Kristín Tamimi, "Right-Wing Extremism in Iceland: Analyzing the Influence of UK and US Rhetoric on Icelandic Discourse" (Master's thesis, Department of Political Science, University of Iceland, 2024).

30 Cf. Claudia Ashanie Wilson in conversation with Ragnhildur Helgadóttir, "Segir nýju útlendingalögin notuð í 'skipulagða herferð,'" *Heimildin*, November 4, 2024, https://heimildin.is/grein/23126/segir-nyju-utlendingalogin-notud-i-skipulagda-herferd/

31 Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, "On the Turn Towards Liberal State Racism in Denmark," *e-flux Journal* (January 2011), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/22/67762/on-the-turn-towards-liberal-state-racism-in-denmark.

32 Vassiliki Koutsogeorgopoulou, "Immigration in Iceland: Addressing Challenges and Unleashing the Benefits," *OECD Economics Department Working Papers*, no. 1772 (Paris: OECD, 2023), https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-economic-surveys-iceland-2023_b3880f1a-en.html, 61.

33 See for instance Adrián Groglopo and Julia Suárez-Krabbe, *Coloniality and Decolonisation in the Nordic Region* (London: Routledge, 2023).

34 A case in point would be the limited access youth with non-Icelandic cultural background have had to higher education. Cf. Biljana Boloban, "Staða nemenda af erlendum uppruna í framhaldsskólum á Íslandi" (Bachelor's thesis, University of Iceland, 2017).

35 Philipp Oltermann and Rachel Savage, "UK Court Sides with Icelandic Firm Over Artist's Spoof Corruption Apology," *The Guardian*, November 14, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/law/2024/nov/14/icelandic-firm-samherji-artist-odee-fishrot-spoof-court

36 In the wake of these reports, Namibia's justice minister and fisheries minister resigned and were at the time, together with eight others, awaiting trial in Namibia over allegations of fraud, corruption and racketeering. In Iceland, a criminal investigation is still ongoing, but no one has yet faced charges. In 2021, Samherji apologised for "mistakes" in a statement but denied any criminal offences apart from those admitted by whistleblower Jóhannes Stefánsson, the company's director of operations in Namibia at the time of the alleged corruption. Oltermann and Savage, "UK Court Sides with Icelandic Firm Over Artist's Spoof Corruption Apology."

37 Oltermann and Savage, "UK Court Sides with Icelandic Firm Over Artist's Spoof Corruption Apology"; Frederico Links and Ester Mbathera, "'Right Now, I Cannot Survive:' The Legacy Effects of the Fishrot Corruption Scandal on Fisheries Worker's Lives," Institute for Public Policy Research (November 2024), https://ippr.org.na/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Fishrot-HRIA-2-web.pdf

38 Gísli Pálsson and Agnar Helgason, "Figuring Fish and Measuring Men: The Individual Transferable Quota System in the Icelandic Cod Fishery," *Ocean and Coastal Management* 28, no. 1–3 (1995): 117–46.

39 See especially the work of Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir, but her PhD focused on women's labour on the Icelandic seaboard: *Fishermen's Wives and Fish Processors: Continuity and Change in Women's Position in Icelandic Fishing Villages, 1870–1990* (PhD diss., University of Victoria, 1995), file:///Users/au340897/Downloads/_Skaptadottir_Unnur+Dis_Anthro_38.2_1996.pdf.

40 Oxfam, "The True Cost of Austerity and Inequality."

41 Oltermann and Savage, "UK Court Sides with Icelandic Firm Over Artist's Spoof Corruption Apology."

42 Oltermann and Savage, "UK Court Sides with Icelandic Firm Over Artist's Spoof Corruption Apology."

43 Kristín Loftsdóttir, "'I've Come to Buy Tivoli:' Colonial Desires and Anxieties in Iceland in a New Millennium," *Nordics.info*, February 24, 2021, https://nordics.info/show/artikel/ive-come-to-buy-tivoli-colonial-desires-and-anxieties-in-iceland-in-a-new-millennium. In her text, Loftsdóttir refers to Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," in "Globalization and the De-Colonial Option," ed. Walter D. Mignolo, special issue, *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 168–78; and her own earlier work, Kristín Loftsdóttir, "Being 'The Damned Foreigner:' Affective National Sentiments and Racialization of Lithuanians in Iceland," *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 7, no. 2 (2017): 70–78.

44 See for instance *NGO Shipbreaking Platform*, "Press Release: Prosecutor Launches Investigation after Icelandic Journalists Shed Light on Illegal Export of Toxic Ships to India," 25 September 2020, https://shipbreakingplatform.org/breach-eu-wsr-godafoss-laxfoss/ and *Recycling International*, "Icelandic Operator Acknowledges Fault Over Illegal Shipbreaking," 2 October 2020, https://recyclinginternational.com/business/icelandic-operator-acknowledges-fault-over-illegal-ship-breaking/31617/. I am aware that similar instances may precede the period that I have in mind, such as the controversial sourcing of bauxite by multinational aluminium producers with operations in Iceland. The crucial difference between these earlier instances however, and the recent incidents related to Samherji, Eimskip and Samskip is that the global operations of these companies are conducted from Iceland, not somewhere else. For further reading see for instance *Saving Iceland*, "Behind the Shining: Aluminum's Dark Side," 8 October 2007, savingiceland.org/2007/10/behind-the-shining-aluminums-dark-side/3/ and Henry Chu, "Iceland Divided Over Aluminium's Role in its Future," *Los Angeles Times*, 26 March 2011, https://www.latimes.com/business/la-xpm-2011-mar-26-la-fi-iceland-economy-20110326-story.html.

45 I am indebted to Katrín Gunnarsdóttir for introducing me to this work.

46 Óskarsdóttir, Ásdís Helga. "Leiðin er innávið og uppímóti: Fjórða bylgja femínismans og íslenskar kvennabókmenntir." In *"Afsakið þetta smáræði!"*, edited by Guðrún Steinþórsdóttir and Sigrún Margrét Guðmundsdóttir. Special issue, *Ritið* 2 (2022): 5–48.

47 Óskarsdóttir, "leiðin er innávið og uppímóti," 19.

48 See for instance Pamela Hogan's recent documentary *The Day Iceland Stood Still* (2024).

49 Dimitrakaki, "Art, Instituting, Feminism and the Common/s," 5. For De Angelis' definition of the commons fix see Massimo De Angelis, "Does Capital Need a Commons Fix?," *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization* 13, no. 3 (2013): 603–615.

50 My doctoral dissertation discusses the notion of an infrastructrual crisis in more detail, as does a recent article, where I introduce the notion of New "New Iceland" in Icelandic. See Marteinn Sindri Jónsson, "Nýja Nýja Ísland og innviðir skapandi greina." *Vísbending* 43, no. 11 (2025): 40–41. https://visbending.is/tolublod/2025/11/.

51 New Iceland is curiously the name of a region on Lake Winnipeg in Manitoba founded by Icelandic settlers in 1875, early in Iceland's largest wave of emigration (1870–1914) when 15,000 Icelanders, about 20% of the nation, emigrated to Brazil, Canada and the US.

52 Sjá for instance Mark Baker, "U.S.: Rumsfeld's 'Old' and 'New' Europe Touches on Uneasy Divide." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 24, 2003. https://www.rferl.org/a/1102012.html.