The *Lopapeysa*: A Vehicle to Explore the Performance of Icelandic National Identity

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Introduction

I first traveled to Iceland four years ago through an anthropology field course on the cultural geography of Iceland. While considering the impact of the environment on Icelandic culture and daily life, we traveled from the bustling capital city of Reykjavík, circumnavigating the entire country and stopping in villages in East Iceland and the Westfjords. It was here, in the Westfjords where I first encountered the lopapeysa, the Icelandic sweater. I was told by both Icelanders and tourists that if there was one souvenir I should bring back from Iceland, it was the lopapeysa. It seemed to possess strong associations with Iceland’s deep history, and was even heralded as the mechanism by which early Icelandic settlers kept warm and survived in the harsh climate. I was told it was handknit, traditional, and of the highest quality—a true mark of an authentic Icelandic experience.

The sweater I chose was knitted with muted-blue yarn, and finished with black and white incorporated into the traditional circular yoke pattern. The yoke pattern, understood as distinctively Icelandic, appears on the neck, wrists, and hip lines of the sweater. Aside from its beauty and connection to Icelandic heritage, the yoke pattern acts as added insulation, as the design requires the knitter to use multiple overlapping colors to create the yoke. Knitted from the two types of wool fibers unique to the Icelandic sheep, þel, an insulating layer, and tog, a stronger, water resistant layer, the sweater feels both soft and coarse, warm yet also breathable. The functionality and appearance of the sweater become entangled together in the lopapeysa’s representation of Icelandic heritage and national identity.
Returning from Iceland and continuing coursework in the field of cultural anthropology, my mind often returned to the *lopapeysa*. I was still somewhat mystified by the cultural weight of this singular, everyday object, and all that seemed to be figuratively woven within it. I learned that despite common representations, the *lopapeysa* was not a centuries-old Viking tradition, but rather a product of Iceland’s independence proclamation from Denmark in 1944. Thus, the emergence of the independent Icelandic nation coincides with the emergence of the *lopapeysa*. While the *lopapeysa* has transitioned in and out of popularity since its post-independence inception, it saw a significant revitalization after the 2008 financial crisis. Icelanders who I met implied that this revitalization in the sweater was an example of Icelanders “returning to their roots.” This is particularly tantalizing, because the *lopapeysa*’s actual ‘roots’ do not run deep, but
rather are constructed around these important periods in the nation’s recent history. How then does an object become so imbued with cultural and national significance, so much so that it seems to transcend space and time?

To unpack this question, I situate my discussion of the lopapeysa within Hobsbawm and Ranger’s notion of invented traditions, whereby symbols and practices are created or imagined to appear in continuance with a nation’s past (1983). Invented traditions remain in flux, constantly reinvented and reimagined in the context of shifting values. The lopapeysa as an invented tradition is mitigated by the interaction of multiple forces such as tourism and globalization. The lopapeysa thus becomes a material representation of the performance of national identity, a realized product of Icelanders’ negotiated sense of selves. I seek to unravel the intricacies woven within the sweater as an invented symbol of national identity, disaggregating popular and contemporary views of Iceland. How does the lopapeysa perform, imagine, and reconcile ideas of what Iceland has been, is, and will become?

The invented tradition of the lopapeysa can be situated within the larger discourse on nationalism, of which I primarily draw from Anderson (1983), Billig (1995), and Edensor (2002). In Imagined Communities, Anderson (1983) denaturalizes the nation-state by arguing that nations are imagined or constructed by the people who live within them, thereby creating a sense of shared commonality despite the vast number of people never having come in contact with one another. While members of the nation have individual aspirations, their shared belonging to the socially constructed concept of the state creates a certain affinity amongst the group. To locate tangibility within Anderson’s concept, I rely on Michael Billig’s Banal Nationalism (1995) and Tim Edensor’s National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life
Both Billig and Edensor seek to deconstruct nationalism as it exists in the extreme sense. Instead of locating nationalism solely in large-scale battles for independence, Billig asserts value in common, everyday objects that discreetly rather than overtly depict national sentiments and values. Likewise, Edensor argues that the often ignored “habitual performances” of daily life reflect and perform national identities (Edensor 2002: 88). I argue that the production and wearing of the lopapeysa becomes an example of the actual process (the imagining) of Anderson’s imagined communities, constructed through mundane, everyday life.

As I outlined above, the lopapeysa as an invented tradition remains in flux, subject to the forces of globalization, defined by Appadurai as scapes: global flow of ideas, technology, and people that cross borders, and flow between and among spaces (Appadurai 1990). Drawing on the work of Appadurai (1986), and Gupta and Ferguson (1992), I seek to study the lopapeysa and Iceland as part of the global world of “interconnected and interdependent spaces” (1992: 14). I argue, along with Gupta and Ferguson, that Anderson’s imagined communities cannot exist in a vacuum. Therefore, I contextualize my study of the lopapeysa within the framework of Appadurai’s “things-in-motion” approach to material culture (Appadurai 1986: 4). In the world of mass globalization, objects move through changing historical and cultural frameworks, which often result in shifting meanings and values (Appadurai 1986: 4). Therefore, both the ideas of invented tradition and imagined nations must be located in this world of movement and fluidity, within the push and pull of local and global forces.

Likewise, the lopapeysa must also be contextualized within the rapidly growing tourism industry in Iceland. Currently, the number of foreigners who travel to Iceland in a given year exceeds Iceland’s total population. The expected flow of tourists is predicted to reach one
million in the coming years. Tourists then, though not Icelandic, take part in defining and imagining Iceland along with Icelanders. Nature-based tourism is particularly popular in Iceland; tourists are captivated by Iceland’s position as a “place of natural extremes” (Sharpley et al. 2010: 284). They are drawn in by the midnight sun, the aurora borealis, and hot springs, along with romantic images of Iceland’s immaculate landscapes, waterfalls, and vast open spaces, where they are told they can experience perfect silence. For the tourist, as it was for myself, the lopapeysa becomes the portable package of a tourist’s nature-based experience of Iceland, seemingly local, pure, and authentic.

However, in everyday life, Icelanders too act in ways that appeal to tourists’ conceptions of Iceland by engaging in processes of staging or performing their ethnicity. Even by simply wearing the lopapeysa, Icelanders render what is perceived as uniquely Icelandic increasingly salient (Sharpley et al. 2010: 7). To succeed in this endeavor, Icelanders strive to ensure tourists that they have adapted to global forces and are modern people, and yet have maintained their ties to the land, ensuring that there is a “continuity between their glorious past and ever-changing present” (Einarsson 1996: 231). While asserting themselves as modern, Icelanders must also show that they have remained strictly and purely ‘Icelandic,’ often depicted through symbols of purity in food and water. This leads to the ironic contradiction of tourism in Iceland: the act of tourism is one that essentially ‘pollutes’ or changes the very purity that the tourist demands.

After this first visit to Iceland four years ago, I was able to return to Iceland as a student ethnographer (but always still a tourist) for two weeks in January 2016. While in Iceland, I met with and discussed the lopapeysa and articulations of national identity with numerous people and organizations including an Icelandic knitwear designer, members of the Handknitting
Association of Iceland, a woman who teaches knitting to tourists, and numerous everyday knitters. I focused on individuals involved in the actual production (the knitting) of the lopapeysa, those most closely tied with the actual ‘inventing’ of tradition. While my time in Iceland was short, I have relied on the frameworks of hybrid and virtual ethnography to extend and expand my field site. Because social relations are currently performed in an era of the Internet, a virtual site of interaction, individual’s lives are no longer tied to the small circles of people they see every day. Instead, “people live increasingly hybrid lives where the physical and the digital, the real and the virtual, interact” (2009: 181). This is particularly compelling within the field of anthropology, complicating ideas of the field site and even the method of participant observation which has traditionally involved long stays at a singular field site (2009: 181). In the context of my ethnography, I have attempted to stay in contact with key informants after leaving Iceland. Additionally, this time when I left Iceland I chose to bring home Icelandic lopi (wool), rather than a lopapeysa, and have been using it in my own knitting projects. In these small ways, I have attempted to bridge the boundedness of my field site.

In Chapter 1, Bringing ‘Life’ to Inanimate Objects: The Importance of Material Culture and its Connection to National Identity, I provide a theoretical framework on the connection between material culture and national identity. I use primarily literature, upon which my ethnographic data in subsequent chapters builds upon.

In Chapter 2, A Knitter’s Choice: Locating the Individual in Icelandic Identity, I build from the previous chapter’s discussion on material culture and national identity, using fieldwork to explore the relationship between the lopapeysa and national identity in Iceland. While discussing the lopapeysa as a marker of equality and unity amongst Icelanders, the sweater (and
knitting in general) also represents personal preference and individual style, sometimes even calling into question what exactly “counts” as a lopapeysa, given the diversity in knitting style, wool preference/origin, and color choices.

In Chapter 3, Negotiating the Lopapeysa as Tradition in Flux, I breakdown the conception of the lopapeysa as an old tradition rooted the past. By using fieldwork examples that suggest the dynamism, changeability, and ‘newness’ of the lopapeysa, I show the complexity and fluidity of Icelandic culture. Calling into question ideas of ‘true’ or ‘pure’ Icelandic culture, I look at how knitters and knitwear companies have adapted to the growing tourist industry, evoking ideas of imagined or performed tradition, that negotiate Icelander and touristic meanings and values.

In Chapter 4, A Gendered Craft and Nation, I articulate the gendered dimensions of knitting in Icelandic society, particularly relating to the interconnectedness and comradery between female knitters in Iceland, as depicted through intergenerational teaching often between grandmothers and granddaughters. How does the gendered dynamics of the production of lopapeysa created a gendered national identity?

Finally, in the Conclusion, I discuss the future implications for the lopapeysa as a cultural artifact and symbol. How will meanings of Iceland and Icelandic identity be rearticulated as the lopapeysa adapts to changing values, both from within and outside of Iceland?
“Objects surely don’t talk. Or do they?” With this simple but provocative question, Daniel Miller (2008: 2) begins to challenge the apparently dichotomous relationship between humans and things, between the animate and the inanimate. In *The Comfort of Things*, Miller creates ethnographic portraits of thirty individuals living on a single street in South London, analyzing how the everyday objects in their homes inscribe meaning into their lives.

In the chapter titled, “A Porous Vessel,” Miller tells the story of Elia, an animated storyteller whose clothing connects her to her deceased aunt and mother. Many of Elia’s clothes were first made by her aunt, then given to her mother, and finally passed down to Elia. Miller observes that these clothes do more than simply ‘represent’ Elia’s loved ones. Rather, the intricate process in which Elia chooses to wear (or not to wear) these clothes articulates a web of meaning and emotion between Elia and the clothing. Miller discusses the process of Elia first choosing to not wear the clothes (soon after the deaths of her aunt and mother), gradually wearing them around her house, and finally wearing the clothes outside of her home, yet only in specific contexts that Elia deems worthy. When Elia chooses to wear the clothes outside of her home, she describes it as a process of essentially ‘taking’ her loved ones with her. With Elia’s story, Miller thus contends that “objects store and possess, take in and breathe out the emotion with which they have been associated,” suggesting that yes, objects do talk (2008: 38).

Drawing from Miller, in this chapter I seek to ‘bring life’ to the *lopapeysa* by locating its dynamic role in constructing Icelandic identity. The *lopapeysa* becomes both the process and the product of the entangled web of people who come into contact with the sweater. Knitters, sellers,
buyers, wearers, tourists, and Icelanders all inscribe meaning and value within the *lopapeysa*. By disaggregating this complexity, I explore how the movement of the sweater across space and time, through processes of globalization and tourism, informs how people assign value and meaning to the *lopapeysa*. Ultimately, I aim to show that focusing an anthropological lens on the *lopapeysa* provides a useful and important tool of cultural analysis of larger themes including national identity and cultural heritage.

Along with Miller, several anthropologists have emphasized the importance of clothing within the field of material culture (see Hansen [2004], McCracken [1990], and Turner [2012]). Terence Turner uses the term ‘social skin’ to describe the unique duality that clothing possesses as the “boundary of the individual as a biological and psychological entity but as the frontier of the social self as well” (2012: 486). Clothing faces inwards towards the individual, yet also projects the wearer’s identity to the world. Thus, clothing becomes both the expression of the self, yet also a product of socialization and conformity within the context of a person’s cultural surroundings.

Elia’s clothing, passed down from her deceased aunt and mother, is inextricably tied to her innermost feelings of loss, mourning, and ultimately coping. However, her clothing not only reflects these emotions, it will ultimately be perceived and judged by the outside world. Elia chooses to wear the significant clothing only in certain contexts that she deems worthy of her aunt and mother, and in which she believes she will receive favorable reactions. Elia thus *performs* her ‘social skin’ in negotiation with its meaning to her, and its perceived meaning to the outside world. Karen Hansen suggests in *The World in Dress* that every day people perform
this “embodied practice” of negotiating between clothing’s dual quality of being both worn and viewed (2004: 373).

When I was beginning fieldwork in Iceland this January, I went to dinner with my professor and three of his friends, two of whom are an Icelandic couple, Steini and Selma. I had already met Selma earlier that day, but I was meeting Steini for the first time now. As my professor introduced me, the conversation turned to my project on the *lopapeysa*. Steini and Selma were amongst my first Icelandic contacts, so I was eager to see what they would say about my project and hear their immediate associations with the *lopapeysa*.

Steini began telling us about his job working with The Beer Academy to teach tourists about Icelandic beer culture and history. Laughing, Steini remarked, “And I always put on my *lopapeysa* for them!” While the image of Steini ‘putting on’ his *lopapeysa* may at first seem unremarkable, this image is particularly significant in discussing the notion of performing culture through material objects. By stating that he is wearing the sweater “for them,” Steini acknowledges that his ‘putting on’ of the sweater is essentially performative, appealing to touristic preconceived notions of the sweater-as-Icelander. Perceived to always be handknit and made from Icelandic *lopi*, the *lopapeysa* represents for the tourist an Iceland in one of its purest, most authentic forms. By putting on the sweater, Steini seems to simultaneously ‘put on’ his Icelandic heritage and become an image of ‘the authentic Icelander,’ as imagined by the tourist. This interaction lead me to ponder Steini’s own conceptions of the *lopapeysa*, and how they might be changed or negotiated by touristic perceptions. Steini’s wearing of *lopapeysa* represents the important quality of the duality of social skin, in this case not only for Steini as an individual, but as specifically an Icelander. This example forms a visual representation of the staging or
performing of Icelandic national identity that informs the center of my argument. The circular yoke pattern, while borrowed from other Nordic countries, is perceived by tourists as traditionally and distinctively Icelandic. Recognizing this common touristic perception, Steini dresses accordingly by wearing his lopapeysa and perpetuating the tourists’ claims of Icelandic authenticity, as signaled by the yoke pattern.

Material objects not only signal heterogenous meaning, these meanings remain in flux. Miller’s depiction of Elia’s clothing shows the intricacies of material culture shifting and changing over time. Like Elia’s process of mourning and coping with her losses, “the clothes [too] seem constantly in motion, providing different ways she might be—new relationships, possible alterations and alternatives” (2008: 45). Miller was able to develop understanding of Elia’s clothing by viewing its shifting role as it moved from the hands of Elias’s aunt, to her mother, and eventually to Elia. Along with Elia, Miller too recognized the experience of death, mourning, and coping as processes that intersected with Elia’s changing use and relationship to the clothing.

To unpack the cultural meaning and value held in the Icelandic sweater, I rely on a “things-in-motion” approach to material culture (Appadurai 1986: 4). In the Introduction to Empire of Things, Fred Myers argues that the value or meaning of an object can never be truly defined, “but is always involved in global as well as local circuits of exchange, display, and storage” (Myers 1996: 12). This idea is particularly relevant in the context of increasing mass globalization, where objects travel faster than ever, shifting in their “regimes of value” as a result of changing historical and cultural frameworks (Appadurai 1986: 4). Myers discusses how the constant fluctuations in context destabilize constructed categories that have typically defined
objects. For example, the distinctive categories of ‘art’ and ‘non-art,’ and of ‘gift’ and ‘commodity’ become increasingly complex and fluid as objects circulate. Myers and Appadurai problematize these categories, critiquing conceptions of ‘gifts’ that have been solely tied to reciprocity rather than economic value (Mauss 1954) and conceptions of ‘art’ deemed resistant to commodification (Appadurai [1986], Myers [1996]). Now, as material culture circulates more widely across space and time, objects move in and out of these frameworks at an ever-increasing rate. We can use objects then, whether on a personal level through Elia’s clothing, or a transnational level through the lopapeysa, to explore how identities and difference are constructed in a world of constant movement and cultural fluidity.

The lopapeysa’s construction as a “thing in motion” that embodies changing meaning is perhaps most evident in its name. ‘Lopapeysa,’ the term I have used to refer to the wool sweater indigenous to Iceland, is a cultural construction in itself, a product of the forces and flows of materiality and globalization. In Icelandic, lopapeysa can be divided into two words: lopi, meaning wool, and peysa, meaning sweater. Thus, lopapeysa simply translates to ‘wool sweater.’ However, for English-speaking tourists the sweater is most often known as ‘the Icelandic sweater.’ This distinction is particularly important, because it is foreigners rather than Icelanders, who explicitly attribute nationality to the sweater by framing it as Icelandic (Helgadottir 2011: 59). Even the way I refer to the sweater as ‘the lopapeysa’ asserts a particularly singular association, when concrete definitions of the sweater remain ambiguous and varied.

As the lopapeysa’s name shifts depending upon cultural context, its classification as gift or commodity likewise shifts in space and time, reflecting Myers’ and Appadurai’s move to destabilize these categories. For example, I was told by several Icelanders that they would never
think to purchase a *lopapeysa*. Because most Icelanders knit, they will either knit a sweater for themselves, or receive a sweater as a gift from family and friends. Tourists are thus the primary buyers of *lopapeysa*. Two women working at the Handknitting Association of Iceland (one of the most popular shops to buy knitwear in Iceland) confirmed this point by telling me that the distribution of people shopping in the sweater section of the store was about 80% foreigners and 20% Icelanders. One of them said this was completely reversed in the yarn section, thus confirming that most sweaters are bought by tourists, while most Icelanders knit their own sweaters. However, this division does not mean that the *lopapeysa* simply shifts to becoming a commodity when it is bought by tourists. Rather, in many ways the commoditization of the sweater deeply involves and interconnects Icelanders and tourists.

Associations between Icelanders and tourists shape the way the sweater is commodified as outlined in my earlier example of Steini ‘putting on’ his *lopapeysa*. The setting is essentially an exchange: The Beer Academy offers the value of cultural and historical knowledge (cultural capital) to the tourists in exchange for money (economic capital) from the tourists who are paying (Bourdieu 1986). The *lopapeysa* acts to add to the cultural and historical value of what The Academy is presenting to the customers. However, because the customers are paying for this cultural and historical knowledge, the sweater thus indirectly comes to possess economic value, as part of the experience for which the tourists are paying. So, even when the sweater is not explicitly bought or sold, because of the way it seems to authenticate national identity and ‘add value’ to the Icelandic experience, it can still be considered a commodity when it is not directly exchanged.
Within Iceland, the prevalence and value associated with the *lopapeysa* has shifted over time. As I have indicated in the Introduction, while the *lopapeysa* has perceived ties to Iceland’s settlement and early survival, its production can be more directly and accurately tied to Icelandic independence from Danish rule in 1944. While there are great myths about the origins of the sweater, its provenance remains largely unknown. Many of the myths center around Halldór Laxness (a Nobel Prize-winning Icelandic writer) and his wife Auður Sveinsdóttir. They were said to have made a trip to Greenland where Auður saw women wearing yoke-patterned sweaters and sought to adopt the pattern. Ragga, a woman who works at Culture and Craft told me a similar story of the sweater’s ‘invention.’ She recounted that when Halldór Laxness won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1955 both he and Auður went to the ceremony in Stockholm. Auður apparently saw a woman from Greenland wearing a similar sweater to what would become the present day *lopapeysa*. When Auður went back to Iceland, she took with her the idea to create something similar to the Greenland yoke-patterned sweater. After discussing with some of her friends, they came up with a pattern and realized the sweater would be rather easy to knit because the pattern is circular and therefore would not need to be embroidered at the ends.

However, even Ragga admits that this story is a myth; most likely the sweater’s emergence did not originate from a singular event or person. Many Icelanders I spoke with seemed to agree that the ‘Icelandic’ yoke pattern is likely both borrowed from other Nordic nations, and also combined with early Icelandic textile patterns. Since the *lopapeysa*’s emergence post-1944, the sweater’s prevalence has shifted, reviving its popularity at important moments in Icelandic history. The first ‘surge’ of the sweater’s popularity occurred between the 1950s and the 1970s, the period of early Icelandic nation-building (Helgadottir 2011: 61). In the
1980s and 1990s, however, the sweater was not popular at all in Iceland, except as a symbolic tourist commodity. The sweater’s popularity surged again in Iceland following the 2008 economic recession, often cited as part of a larger surge of music and art that came out of the recession, or alternatively a symbol of Icelanders returning to their roots.

Despite the sweater’s shifting meaning and value across space and time, there is no doubt that in recent years, amidst increased tourism and globalization, the lopapeysa has remained incredibly popular for both tourists and Icelanders. As Helgadottir writes in Nation in a Sheep’s Coat, since the last decades of the 20th century, the survival of sweater has been threatened by new textiles, most notably synthetic fleece (Helgadottir 2011: 64). While the lopapeysa has certainly changed and adapted over the years, with knitters using new patterns, colors, and types of wool, in some ways, the lopapeysa has proven resilient to the whims of globalization, nationality and travel. Both Icelanders and tourists seem to unite over their preoccupation with the lopapeysa’s hand-knitted quality. Thus, many stores in Iceland are still selling hand-knitted sweaters, made by Icelanders, from Icelandic lopi. However, some of this ‘resiliency’ is indeed constructed and performed. While new, bright colors are used commonly by knitters for lopapeysur today, the muted ‘traditional’ colors of blacks, greys and white remain the most popular with tourists, seeking perceived authenticity that is out of sync with current Icelandic practices and aesthetics (Helgadottir 2011: 64).

In The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, Walter Benjamin writes that an object’s aura is fundamentally tied to its origin: “its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (1936: 3). The object’s value of authenticity and authority, is thus tied temporally
and spatially to its origin. However, when an object is reproduced, and removed from its origin, the aura of the object becomes threatened (1936: 5).

It is the aura of the lopapeysa, in a world of mechanically reproduced art, that seems to remain intact and deeply connected to its Icelandic origin. The lopapeysa thus at least gives the appearance of authenticity. Tourists purchasing the lopapeysa as a souvenir seek out this aura, searching for the qualities (handknit, undyed) that suggest its origin. Perhaps it is the aura of lopapeysa, appearing to be constructed and intact, that becomes inextricably tied to the aura of Iceland itself. Benjamin claims that this desire “to bring things “closer” spatially and humanly” is representative of the “contemporary masses” in the age of mechanical reproduction (1936: 6). A tourist bringing home the lopapeysa therefore not only seeks out the aura of the sweater itself, but the aura of Iceland that the sweater seems to ‘bring closer.’ The lopapeysa thus becomes a packaged and portable version of the aura of Iceland itself.

However, according to Benjamin, this very notion of ‘bringing things closer’ disturbs an object’s aura. The mystical quality of an object, and thus of the lopapeysa, exists in the distance between the object and observer. However, ‘bringing things closer’ destroys the aura of the object that relies upon this spatial separation: “To pry an object from its shell, is to destroy its aura” (1936: 6). As the lopapeysa shifts from the hands of Icelander to tourist, its authenticity and authority as embodied in its aura, diminishes.

Benjamin’s notion of the aura depicts how an object’s value changes through time and space. In an era of mass production, when even art appears standardized, art objects like the lopapeysa appear authentic and resilient to global forces, captivating tourist audiences from around the world. However, the notion of the tourist removing the lopapeysa from its Icelandic
context, alters the very aura that the *lopapeysa* was imagined to embody. In this chapter, I have depicted the way that the *lopapeysa* remains heterogeneous and in flux, as it shifts from the hands of Icelander to tourist, and migrates around the world. In this dynamic system of circulation, when authenticity seems perpetually just out of grasp, the *lopapeysa* becomes a performance of the uniqueness the tourist is searching for.
Chapter 2
A Knitter’s Choice: Locating the Individual in Icelandic Identity

I met Ragga in the lobby of Hotel Laxness on a snowy morning in Mosfellsbær, a suburb of Reykjavík. It seemed fitting that we met here, a place named after Iceland’s famous Nobel laureate, Halldór Laxness, who (as mentioned in Chapter 1) is often tied to the invention of the lopapeysa itself. Ragga, an experienced knitter, leads workshops through the organization Culture and Craft, teaching tourists to knit with Icelandic lopi. On this snowy day, Ragga gave me a tour of Mosfellsbær, home to Iceland’s famous Álafoss, a former wool factory, which has since then been converted into a popular craft shop.

Throughout her tour, Ragga reminded me that Mosfellsbær was the birthplace of Iceland’s wool industry. The town’s location near a hot spring provided the Varma River (which runs through Mosfellsbær) with significant geothermal heat to contribute to the powering of the Álafoss factory. Ragga told me that “back in the old days,” the town’s population was only 400, and that over half of the town worked in the factory: “The wool industry was the town.” Ragga radiated romantic pride and nostalgia for this previous way of life as she spoke. From the farmers all across the country who provided the raw wool, to the factory workers who made up the town of Mosfellsbær, Ragga’s tour became an epic story of Icelanders struggling together to create the wool industry. Though separated in both time and space from the events she told (Ragga was born much after the factory’s birth in 1896 and lived most of her life in northern Iceland), as depicted by her collective use of “we,” it was clear that Mosfellsbær’s history as the wool center of Iceland was part of Ragga’s unique history as a knitter, but even more broadly as an Icelander.
Towards the end of the tour, after our drive through Mosfellsbær, I tried to get sense of how the lopapeysa fit into this narrative. When I first asked Ragga about these connections she paused. “It’s hard to place,” she answered. However, after a few moments of thought she responded that perhaps the most explicit tie between the lopapeysa and Icelandic identity is the notion that “It shows we’re all equals. Everyone in Iceland can, and does, wear the sweater. Anyone can be anyone. Fisherman wear the sweater and so does the President and his wife. It’s a unifying force.”

When we parked the car outside of Álafoss, Ragga retrieved a lopapeysa from the trunk that had been knitted by her father. As Ragga began to tell me the story of her own life, she used knitting as a thread connecting her to her loved ones and their individual and collective histories. Ragga told me how she had learned to knit from her grandmother at age six, and it was her grandmother who insisted that learning to knit was of the utmost importance. Her first project of choice was a scarf that she knit alongside her grandmother. When Ragga finished her first scarf, her grandmother asked matter-of-factly: “Well, what’s next?” Ragga responded by saying that she wanted to knit a sweater. As she told me the story, Ragga laughed, revealing that her grandmother did most of the work, and that she may have contributed about three or four stitches. Still, it was her first lopapeysa.

For Ragga, as much as the lopapeysa engenders a feeling of unity amongst her fellow Icelanders, so too does it connect her on a personal level to her loved ones. Building on the previous chapter’s discussion of material culture and Icelandic identity, this chapter uses ethnographic fieldwork to explore and complicate the relationship between the lopapeysa and national identity in Iceland. While discussing the lopapeysa as a marker of connectivity and
unity amongst Icelanders as Ragga suggests, the sweater (and knitting in general) also represents personal preference and individual identity, sometimes even calling into question what exactly “counts” as a lopapeysa, given the diversity in knitting style, wool preference/origin, and color choices.

While Ragga might have articulated the connection between the lopapeysa and Icelandic unity most explicitly, many Icelanders with whom I spoke evoked a similar sense of collective identity and national pride when discussing the lopapeysa as well, asserting its deep, though often ambiguous, importance. Tómas, who I met in the daycare break room of Leikskólinn Mánagarður¹ told me, “Some people just own one because it’s part of their identity as Icelanders. Everyone has one.” Tómas’ words reflect a broader discourse in which the lopapeysa appeared to be so enmeshed in the daily lives of Icelanders, that while they asserted the importance of the lopapeysa in broad terms, their association to the lopapeysa became normalized.

When Icelanders spoke about the lopapeysa, their discussions rarely focused on the object itself, and almost never on the yoke pattern which has become so iconic and deeply tied to Icelandic tradition and culture for tourists. Instead, Icelanders situated the lopapeysa around the actual process of its production: the practice of knitting. While I initially went to Iceland to study the lopapeysa, I soon learned that I could not ignore the process of knitting, that seemed to somehow stitch Icelanders together, almost as a material representation of Anderson’s imagined communities (1983). My tour with Ragga is particularly telling in this regard. During our hours in Mosfellsbær, while Ragga did show me specific lopapeysur knitted by her family members, most of our conversation focused on the lopi itself and the process of knitting. This reflects the

¹ Leikskólinn Mánagarður is a daycare center in Reykjavík for young children where I conducted fieldwork. I spent time in the daycare break room, where caretakers snacked, socialized, and knitted.
everyday aspect of the lopapeysa that Tómas likewise suggested, so entrenched in everyday life that Icelanders, such as Ragga, often had to pause and think about its actual meaning.

Edensor (2004) and Billig (1995) discuss the way in which imagined communities are realized through “habitual performances [and practices] of everyday life,” (Edensor 2002: 88). These shared mundane habits and practices can create a sense of national or collective habitus, a national way of being, so ingrained that it becomes seen as natural, rather than cultural (Bourdieu 1984). In this way, Edensor and Billig suggest the relevance of Anderson’s imagined communities. Even in an increasingly global world, the collective habit of knitting and wearing the lopapeysa, shows that a collective understanding of relating to other Icelanders exists through “unreflexive, everyday practices and throughout popular cultural forms” (Edensor 2004: 101). The lopapeysa, as a cultural object, concretizes Anderson’s somewhat amorphous notion of imagined community.

Many Icelandic women I spoke with exemplified this collective, national habitus, describing themselves as simply: “always knitting.” And from my observations, many were doing just that. At Leikskólinn Mánagarður, Anna, described by one of my key informants, Selma, as a ‘crazy knitter,’ kept two projects going at all times, one in the daycare where she worked, and another at home. Whether in the daycare break room where I spent a significant amount of time interacting with and observing knitting, or at the Kolaportið Flea Market where women sold knitted goods, women’s hands were rarely idle. In the breakroom, Icelanders knitted and chatted, their hands making quick movements as they spoke. Jo (an Irish woman who worked at the daycare) and I watched the Icelanders, marveling at the way the women were able to maintain conversation while making complicated maneuvers with their needles. Even after
living in Iceland for ten years, Jo, like myself, considered herself an outsider to this community of knitters. Jo jokingly considered herself an “aspiring knitter.” When she said this I laughed and said “me too,” as I took out the chunky, ill-conceived scarf that I had begun to knit. I made slow stitches, trying to keep up with the conversation that shifted from Icelandic to English and back again. Anna watched me and said, “I just don’t know how you are so slow,” and we both laughed.

In the daycare breakroom women would chat about this and that, floating between topics that often came back to their knitting. In a way, the embodied act of knitting became a shared experience for the women in the breakroom, something their hands, through practice and experience, all knew how to do. In another way, knitting became a shared conversation topic common to all of the women, almost like a language in itself. These notions fit back into Edensor’s concept of collective habitual performance. Though the knitters each worked on their own projects, it was easy to see form a ‘synchronized choreography’ of their actions (Edensor 2002: 91).

When discussing knitting in the larger cultural context of Iceland, Icelanders often referred to the 2008 financial crises. While the Icelanders I spoke with agreed that the period after the crises coincided with a resurgence of both knitting and the lopapeysa as a national symbol, they often had varying ideas about the origin of this return to wool. Many Icelanders situated the revitalization of knitting as part of the larger outpouring of music and art that thrived in Iceland during this time. Practically, people had more time on their hands, and due an increase in unemployment rates and because lopi was (and still is) the cheapest wool in Iceland, Icelanders may have wanted to save money by knitting their own clothes. However, other
knitters at the daycare suggested that the surge in the *lopapeysa* might have been more ambiguous, born out of a desire to just “do something,” as Selma suggested. Similar to way some Icelanders described themselves “always knitting,” knitting to simply *knit*, perhaps out of boredom or idleness suggests how the craft has become deeply naturalized. A knit designer I met with, Hélène Magnusson, mentioned this time period as an opportunity for Icelanders to “come back to their roots” by creating “something very material from their hands.” Thus embedded within the *lopapeysa* is the shared embodied experience of knitting: the same movement of hands that seems to connect Icelandic people together, especially in times of hardship. Knitting provided Icelanders (literally and metaphorically) an opportunity to take the difficult times into their own hands and produce something of value.

Within this sense of collective unity and identity that knitting encourages and reflects, (particularly amongst women) the process of knitting and the *lopapeysa* also evoke individual style and difference between knitters, and thus between resulting *lopapeysur*. In the past, representations of Iceland have often relied upon notions of remoteness and isolation, rendering the Icelandic people as homogenous and unchanging. Therefore, it is important to muddle our notion of a collective habitus, and instead recognize how knitting and the *lopapeysa* produce difference as well.

This sense of individual identity and difference is perhaps best highlighted through an interaction I had with Birna and Birgitta, who I met at the daycare center. In the breakroom Icelanders knitted a variety of items, including socks, sweaters, and hats. Birna and Birgitta proved to be an interesting duo—particularly because they sat next to each other, each knitting a *lopapeysa*. However, the *way* that they were knitting differed from one another entirely, thus
providing me insights into the individuality of each *lopapeysa*. For example, Birgitta started to knit her *lopapeysa* from the bottom, while Birna started her’s from the top. Upon hearing this I initially expressed confusion because I had been told previously that one always starts to knit *lopapeysa* at the bottom. Jo interjected, “Well if Birgitta gets bored she can turn hers into a skirt, and if Birna gets bored she can turn hers into a headband!” Laughing at Jo, Birna and Birgitta explained that the *lopapeysa* is based on individual preference and comfort; “There are no rules,” they told me.

Birna and Birgitta

Birna and Birgitta each knitted with different colors and patterns as well. Birgitta shared with me how she personalized the design of her *lopapeysa*. She showed me the copy of *Lopi* (an
annual publication of new knitting patterns) that she was flipping through, explaining that she was updating the Norwegian pattern depicted in the book. Birgitta showed me the image of the pattern depicted on an Icelandic model: the top of the sweater was knitted into a more traditional yoke, yet the bottom was knitted into checkerboard pattern. Jo though it looked “retro,” mentioning that it looked like someone else’s work whom she knew. However, Birgitta did not like the checkerboard pattern herself, and chose to use a solid color on body of the sweater. These specific and individual preferences often become parts of individual’s identities, that others (in this case Jo) can then recognize. Therefore, the cultural practice of knitting, far from homogenizing Icelanders, instead allows Icelanders to express and form their individual identities in a space that will be recognized because of the collective understanding of knitting.

The Kolaportið Flea Market provided a unique setting to examine the lopapeysa as an expression of individual and collective Icelandic identity entangled together. Located in an old warehouse, the Flea Market opens every weekend in Reykjavik, as rows of vendors pack into the warehouse, selling all different items from trinkets, to hand-knitted items, to food. Small stalls are arranged in lines, creating makeshift aisles out of the large, open warehouse space. The sounds of multilingual chatter along with strands of twinkling bright lights that hang from the ceiling, make the space feel festive. While many vendors remain at their stalls awaiting customers, some leave their stalls to chat with vendors at the stalls near them, creating a sense of affinity and trust amongst the vendors. This became particularly apparent amongst the stalls that sold knitted items, which were primarily headed by women.

Engaging with knitters at the Flea Market proved very different from sitting and chatting with women in the daycare breakroom. The environment of the market, though still social, was
clearly consumer-driven: the vendors were here to sell, and by the looks of it, I was here to buy. When talking to vendors I tried to briefly explain my project. However, the discussion that ensued often still involved the women marketing their products to me as tourist and potential customer. While initially I found the nature of these interactions disconcerting, I soon realized that my role as a tourist allowed me to gain insight into the way vendors marketed their lopapeysur, using the seemingly conflicting ideas of individual and collective identity embodied within the lopapeysa to their best advantage.

In the context of the Flea Market, the women vendors utilized strategies to prove that their sweaters were lopapeysur, attempting to push-back against rumors that suggested lopapeysur from the Flea Market were of lesser quality and not hand-knit. However, at the same time, due to the competition amongst stalls (there were many stalls selling the lopapeysa and other knitted items) the women had to market their products as individual or unique. To the untrained eye of the tourist, the sweaters looked very similar from stall to stall. However, this remains the case because as tourists and outsiders we are unable to recognize specific patterns in lopapeysa in the way that some Icelanders are able to. For instance when I wore my lopapeysa, I was told several times by Icelandic knitters that it was the ‘anniversary’ pattern, recognizing the yoke pattern by sight in a way I would not be able to do. Thus, the vendors often used ‘the unseen,’ the process of the lopapeysa’s production, as a way to assert value in their sweaters for tourists. Many women attempted this by discussing the speed at which they could knit a lopapeysa. Additionally, knitters often claimed that they knit the sweaters themselves, or tried to connect the object with the person who knitted it, by detailing where the craftsperson lived. Several vendors told me they were helping out women who did not live in the area by selling
their items. One women, Guðfinna, was particularly compelling in the way she marketed and advertised her stall. Guðfinna told me all about her farm, how she started knitting when she was five years old, and even the names of her first sheep. She insisted that “you cannot buy this in stores,” referring to her *lopapeysa*, because she blend patterns she sees online with her own designs.

![A young Guðfinna with her sheep](image)

The Flea Market thus provides unique insights into the ways in which Icelandic identity and individuality work together to perform to the tourist. Guðfinna’s shop, amongst others, was deeply personalized, as the photo above shows. The photo depicts a young Guðfinna with her sheep, next to which she displays raw wool from her sheep, which she invited me to touch. On another a wall close by, Guðfinna hung a photo of her farm. In this exchange between Guðfinna, an Icelander, and I a tourist, Guðfinna drew up what she perceived to be my touristic imaginings of Iceland and Icelanders, drawing on images of nature and purity. In the Flea Market, with
twenty other vendors selling a similar product, Guðfinna must make herself stand out. However, to stand out in this tourist exchange, Guðfinna assumed that she needed to perform herself as an ‘authentic Icelander,’ yet also as an individual the tourist could feel some personal connection with. Therefore, Guðfinna used the framed image and other objects and photos to mitigate her position as both an Icelander, and individual, telling me her own personal story—where she group up, the names of her sheep—in way that adhered to both of these notions.
“Slow fashion is about twenty years behind the slow food movement, but we’re ahead of the game in Iceland. The rest of the world is slowly following.” And so, Emma² locates Iceland’s slow fashion movement—represented by the *lopapeysa*—as modern, progressive, and somehow “ahead” of the world. This articulation diverges from common representations of the *lopapeysa* that conjure romantic images of an antiquated, pure Iceland, defined by its perceived remoteness.

Iceland’s perceived isolation and remoteness contributes to its allure from tourists. However, Kirsten Hastrup complicates Iceland’s remoteness by defining remoteness as “a quality of particular social spaces, from which the outside point of view may be ‘far away’ while the insiders do not experience any barrier to the outside world” (Hastrup 1998: 186). Paradoxically, there is actually a “peculiar sense of reachability” to the outer world that comes with being defined as remote (Hastrup 1998: 186). Rather than isolated, places like Iceland possess their own “counter-specification” of their locality, that mitigates touristic representations (Hastrup 1998: 186). This mitigation and adaptability, while often relying on or catering to outside representations, renders Icelanders as agentive, in the way they construct their sense of selves.

As we sat in the corner of the Handknitting Association just after it opened, Emma, like Hastrup, shifted away from the common representations of the *lopapeysa* and Iceland. Emma discussed the *lopapeysa* in the context of the slow fashion movement, explaining that like slow

² I met Emma at the Handknitting Association of Iceland, where she currently works after relocating from Canada a few years ago. The Handknitting Association is perhaps Iceland’s most famous knitwear shop; the knitwear is trusted by foreigners and locals alike to be of high quality and handknit.

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food, slow fashion involves similar values—centering around local and sustainable clothing, in this case instead of food. “Think of Merino wool the way you think of Wonder Bread,” Emma told me. Wonder Bread, one of the first pre-sliced loaves to be sold, invites the phrase: “the greatest thing since sliced bread,” used to invoke innovation. However, in the context of the slow food movement in which Emma situates her analogy, Wonder Bread serves as the epitome of industrial, mass production, not unlike her own perceptions of the ultra-popular Merino Wool. Homemade or small-batch bread, and Icelandic lopi, then function as the respective, locally-sourced antitheses of Wonder Bread and Merino Wool. Emma’s rearticulation of the lopapeysa as a symbol of the future rather than a relic of the past, calls for a reimagination of knitting and the lopapeysa in Iceland.

This chapter mitigates conceptions of the lopapeysa that are traditionally rooted in the past. By using my fieldwork suggesting the dynamism, changeability, and newness of the lopapeysa, I explore the contemporary complexity and historical fluidity of Icelandic culture. Questioning ideas of a ‘true’ or ‘pure’ Iceland, I examine how knitters and knitwear companies have adapted to the growing tourist industry, evoking ideas of imagined or invented tradition (Hobsbawm, Ranger 1983). I argue that the associations of purity and antiquity have become part of the lopapeysa’s value today in and outside of Iceland. The lopapeysa then becomes an example of the value of “heritage and distinction” in an increasingly global world (Helgadottir 2011: 65).

Ingrid Bachmann (2000) relays the common representations of textile production that situate textile work as an “antiquated process,” that embodies “nostalgia and historicity” (367). Textile work often invokes images of gentle, older women operating within the sphere of the
home (2000: 367). Textile production defined in this way, appears to “operate outside of the ‘real’ economy of commodity goods and exchange” (2000: 367). Common depictions of the lopapeysa often fall within this antiquated representation. Presumed by tourists to remain untouched and unchanged amidst global forces, the lopapeysa, represented as always being handknit and made from Icelandic lopi, emerges as a material articulation of Icelandic purity and resilience. Even the lopapeysa’s position as a national symbol “evokes ideas of origin, distinction, and authenticity, and, therefore, the tendency to see the symbol as pure and untouched by cultural influences” (Helgadottir 2011: 65).

The aesthetic of purity is particularly salient in Iceland, intersecting with language, nature, and history (Pálsson 2008: 40). Gísli Pálsson (1989) discusses the relationship between purity and the Icelandic language, arguing that despite evidence of both class and regional dialect differences, Icelandic “appears to have remained relatively uniform and resistant to change” (121). Icelandic language purists have fought against the perceived danger of linguistic change, citing the epic Icelandic Sagas, produced during Iceland’s Viking independence era (874-1262), as emblematic of the vitality of the Icelandic language that needs to be preserved (Pálsson 1989: 122). As typical of former colonies gaining independence, Iceland’s independence in 1944 was marked by a standardization of the language, discouraging borrowed Danish words and instead promoting the “folk” language of the people (1989: 134). This period of nation-building and unity is thus represented by the encouragement of language purity. However, as Pálsson writes: “One is Icelandic so long as one speaks pure Icelandic,” encouraging a specific type—often middle class—of citizen (Pálsson 1989: 132). Purity of the Icelandic language thus alludes to purity in the Icelandic population; however both are not pure by nature, but made or constructed
to be perceived as pure. This constructed nature of purity begins to defy its common romantic associations.

Nature and the landscape in Iceland are deeply tied to the aesthetic of purity as well. Icelandic social theorist Sævar Finnbogason uses the metaphor of a “great polluted river” to describe the resiliency of Iceland amidst alien forces: “During periods of thawing many brooks have joined it from far away, carrying clay and mud, but they have never succeeded in polluting the deepest channels…gradually the dirt has sunk and disappeared” (Pálsson 1989: 123). Finnbogason suggests that, like the lopapeysa, the Icelandic nation has proven resistant to change. Yet perhaps the image of purity is best represented in the source material of the lopapeysa itself: the Icelandic sheep. The Icelandic sheep, known for the unique fibers in its fleece, one type insulating and the other water-resistant, is viewed as inextricably connected to the landscape. In Nation in a Sheep’s Coat, Helgadottir writes that the “Icelandic sheep…mirror our main pride; purity and nature” referring to the connection between sheep and Icelander (Helgadottir 2011: 65). The lopapeysa, the ‘social skin’ (Turner 2012) of the Icelander, and made from sheep’s wool, thus further connects the Icelander to the sheep, and to associated ideals of purity and nature.

While notions of purity are produced locally by Icelanders, so too are they informed and mitigated by touristic perceptions of Iceland. Imaginings of untouched nature inform the value of Iceland as a tourist destination. Tourists are drawn to Iceland largely because of what Olafsdottir defines as “nature-places,” that is, places that are formed without (or with little) perceived human interaction (Olafsdottir 2013: 132). For tourists, Iceland’s landscape appears untouched and thus
fits into the romantic tourist ideology of “getting away” and “slowing down” by entering into nature (Olafsdottir 2013: 135). Icelandic tourists agencies feed into this ideology as well, referring to Iceland as “Pure, Natural, Unspoiled” as the title of a Tourist Board DVD. For the tourist, the lopapeysa is the material representation of this purity, the most authentic souvenir. However, nature-based tourism in Iceland creates a dilemma of both “wanting to increase tourism for economic purposes and still be able to sell the ‘natural’ and ‘exotic’ as the core product” (Olafsdottir 2013: 133). This dilemma complicates our understanding of the way that purity is working Iceland; in this case the idea of purity is essentially being performed for the seemingly polluting force of tourism.

Tourist agencies in Iceland also seek to connect Iceland’s “nature-places” to Iceland’s apparently epic remote past, using slogans such as “Land of the Sagas” to attract tourists. However, as both scholars and Icelanders acknowledge, common representations of Iceland’s history, like all histories, are selected and constructed. In Iceland Imagined, Karen Oslund writes that when she began studying contemporary Iceland, her work was distinctly marginal. Rather than examining current Icelandic culture, foreign students came to Iceland study the ancient Sagas (2011: 5). “Icelandic history, as it is told in that country and elsewhere, is almost exclusively concerned with the remote past,” Oslund writes (2011: 5). One of my key informants, knitwear designer Hélène Magnusson, described a similar notion of selective history. She described the dual touristic and Icelandic preoccupation with Iceland’s remote Viking past to which the lopapeysa has constantly been tied, drawing from the proliferation of the Sagas and folklore in Iceland depicting heroism and independence. However, Hélène went on to tell me that the next time period to garner salience in Iceland’s history is Iceland’s independence from
Danish rule, not until 1944. However, Hélène told me that it is within this ‘omitted history,’ the hundreds years of Norwegian and Danish rule from 1262 until 1944, when knitting was actually brought to Iceland (in the 16th century). Iceland was one of the last places in Europe where knitting was adopted; “everyone—the rest of Europe—was already knitting,” Hélène informed me. While the *lopapeysa* fits into this second era of independence, Iceland’s tradition of knitting does not. Instead, both phenomena, the emergence of knitting and the *lopapeysa*, are removed from their location in Iceland’s history to be understood as much older, and thus more closely tied with local and global imaginations of authenticity and purity.

To locate the *lopapeysa* in this discourse of constructed history, change, and purity, I use Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s (1983) term invented tradition, “taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of ritual or symbolic nature…which automatically implies continuity with the past” (1983: 1). Hobsbawn and Ranger suggest that invented traditions are “responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations” (1983: 3). The *lopapeysa* fits into this narrative, by assuming the symbolism of antiquated, pure Iceland, to appeal to contemporary aspirations of purity in Iceland.

The *lopapeysa*’s development into an invented tradition emerges as the sweater itself, and particularly the yoke pattern, began to signal Icelandic authenticity. We can thus locate the *lopapeysa* within Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism, whereby the materiality of an object seems to become imbued with meaning and value. Theoretically, Marx assumes objects should be easy to understand. Out of necessity, man labors the materials in nature in such a way as to extract the most use out of them (Marx 1997: 1). The value of an object, should thus be in
relation to the human labor that goes into the production of that object, and not the object itself. However, in the reality of capitalist modes of production, Marx employs the idea of ‘fetishism,’ “a mystical character” that becomes attached to objects as they are made into commodities (Marx 1997: 2). The object becomes detached from the human labor involved in creating it and the value of the object appears to resonate from the nature of the object itself. Icelandic imaginings of the lopapeysa connect more closely to the production of the sweater. However, for the tourist the lopapeysa becomes Marx’s notion of the fetish. The sweater appears to be the presentation of antiquity, purity, and remoteness, removing the lopapeysa from both its production, but also the significant social relations of exchange between Icelander and tourist.

The lopapeysa, along with the Icelandic nation, continues to be redefined and reinvented. This adaptive quality of the lopapeysa problematizes typical representations of purity. When meeting knitters in Iceland, they explained shifting practices and innovations in the lopapeysa. The color, shape, material (wool-type), and production of lopapeysa are fluid and constantly adapting to shifting values, and often accompanied by excitement from knitters. This openness to change and innovation complicates ideas about purity, the lopapeysa, and the Icelandic nation.

Many knitters with whom I spoke were excited about the current vibrant, dyed wool used to knit lopapeysa. Knitters in Iceland use the ‘traditional’ blacks, whites, and browns in combination with a vast array of other colors. At the daycare, Jo pointed out children’s lopapeysur that incorporate bright Hello Kitty and Spiderman patterns into the yoke. While these new colors and patterns are often used by Icelanders, tourists still most often prefer the muted, undyed colors natural to Icelandic sheep: black, whites, and browns. These colors, undyed and representative of the natural color of the Icelandic sheep’s fleece, are thus represented as
“traditional,” though truthfully they are often unrepresentative of the lopapeysa current

Icelanders are knitting and wearing. For tourists, dye acts as a polluting force, and dyed wool lopapeysur become detached from the ‘nature-places’ they represent for tourists, seeming less pure, and less Icelandic. Ragga told me how dyed but muted colors, like the grey-blue of my lopapeysa, depict the invention of purity and tradition. Because blue appears more muted and natural, it is viewed as more traditional by tourists, even though it has been dyed just like the brighter colors, conflating and muddying ‘natural’ and ‘traditional.’ For both Icelanders and tourists the aesthetic of purity deeply connects nature with heritage, however these associations are realized in different ways, as the affinity to ‘non-traditional’ colors shows.

*Multi-colored lopi at Álafoss*
Beyond color, knitters and knitwear designers also reinterpret the shape of the *lopapeysa*. The women I met at the Handknitting Association of Iceland informed me that the design of the *lopapeysa* is changing to fit the changing ideals of Icelanders today, with particular concern to women. For example, the yoke pattern traditionally (and still often) appears on the neckline of the sweater, and then again on the wrists and hipline. However recently, as I was told by one of my informants that because “women do not want their hips to show,” the yoke pattern now often only appears on the neck of the sweater, and not on the hipline. Hélène Magnusson, a knit designer, situates herself at the forefront of this movement to make her designs more accessible to women. Hélène’s designs focus on shaping, imagining *lopapeysur* that are more feminine and fitted. Hélène uses a technique of triangular decreases to give the knitter more control over the shape of the sweater, giving the sweater a more streamlined look from the traditional bulky *lopapeysa*.

Even the wool used to produce *lopapeysa* is shifting. While *plötulopi* (unspun wool) is still used to knit *lopapeysa* most commonly—it is the most durable and warm—*léttnlopi* (light wool) is becoming more frequently used. At the daycare, women told me that *léttnlopi* feels lighter on your skin. The textile of wool used to knit *lopapeysa* is changing as well. Many knitters I spoke with told me with great excitement about Einrúm, a new textile that combines wool with silk to create a softer wool. Like colors and shaping, these textiles are used to fit the changing ideals of the Icelanders who knit and wear the *lopapeysa*.

While the aforementioned adaptations have been largely informed by changing attitudes and values of Icelandic knitters themselves, changes to the category of ‘hand-knit’ have proven to be more complicated. In this case, for both tourists and Icelanders alike, the *lopapeysa’s*
quality of being handknit is perhaps most explicitly tied to ideas of purity and authenticity. At the daycare, for example, Icelanders seemed to look down on store-bought sweaters. Most of them agreed that they could generally tell if a sweater was not handmade; it would look “too clean” especially in the way it was finished. However, these sweaters still “counted” as lopapeysa. Ragga held a similar position. When she showed me around the Álafoss store, she could tell if each sweater was handknit by the way the item was finished. If the sweater had a seam, it was machine made. In general, most sweaters at Álafoss seemed to pass the Ragga-test and were deemed handmade. However, some items were a hybrid of handmade and machine made. While Ragga showed appreciation for the handmade knitwear, she also said that even when items were made by the machine they are still being designed by the artists “and that is good,” according to Ragga. Amidst other changes to the lopapeysa, its quality of being handknit appears resilient, even as other textiles like the synthetic fleece prove threatening.

My work aims to complicate the traditional representations of the lopapeysa that—both inside and outside of Iceland—render the sweater as a material representation of the past. By addressing shifting practices in the construction of the lopapeysa, I have shown that like Iceland, the lopapeysa continues to be a product of shifting times, values, and meanings that have been imposed on it, by Icelanders as well as tourists. I have shown that these antiquated representations of the lopapeysa are invented and performed to infuse value within the lopapeysa and Iceland as a tourist destination. In Nation in a Sheep’s Coat, Helgadottir quotes an Icelandic knitter: “The sweater will remain the leader ewe of Icelandic crafts, even if many see it as a scrawny beast that gives no sustenance” suggesting the enduring significance of the lopapeysa (2011: 65). The following chapter will expand upon notions of purity and antiquity, as I discuss
the implications of the gendered production of the *lopapeysa*, as women remain the predominant constructors of this “leader ewe of Icelandic crafts.”
Chapter 4:  
A Gendered Craft and Nation

The film, *Mother India* (Khan 1957), opens on a barren desert landscape in post-independence India, a period marked by nation-building, uncertainty, and change. Radha, the film’s lead character remains still in the center of the image, holding a piece of earth as two tractors cut across the scene behind her. Here, Radha’s grasp on Indian soil represents her position as the ‘mother,’ and thus reproducer, of Indian national identity. As the film continues, Radha embodies the trope of ‘nation-as-mother,’ depicting strength and stoicism amidst the indeterminate formation of India as an independent nation (Stadtler 2007: 187). This ‘nation-as-mother’ image continues to re-emerge cross-culturally, as a nation assumes the figurative role of ‘mother,’ giving life to her citizens, and reproducing moral and cultural values. In times of change or social upheaval, citizens rely upon the ‘nation-as-mother’ trope to maintain social and moral order. These images, often propagated through literature, poetry, or film, demonstrate “a living tradition of national veneration of the feminine,” a gendered production of national identity that is often written out of literature on nationalism (Koester 1995: 575).

Iceland’s own imagined national identity adopts the image of ‘nation-as-mother,’ similar to the ‘Mother India’ representation. Just as ‘India-as-mother’ is materialized through the character of Radha in the film *Mother India*, ‘Iceland-as-mother’ is materialized through the character of the *Fjallkonan* (the Lady of the Mountain). The image of *Fjallkonan* began to proliferate around the 18th century in Iceland (Björnsdóttir 1996: 110). At this time Iceland was under Danish rule, and *Fjallkonan* became an emblem of Iceland’s independence movement. For Icelanders, she depicts the notion that the Icelandic people were born from ‘another mother’ than...
the Danes, an essential validation that the Danish King is not their natural ruler (Björnsdóttir 1996:109). As a mother figure, Fjallkonan is imagined to have the power of “making beings into humans,” representing the shared mother that all Icelanders are born from (Björnsdóttir 1996:109). She is assumed to be the progenitor and protector of Iceland’s linguistic, cultural, and historical purity. Images of Fjallkonan reached Icelanders through literature and poetry that circulated predominantly through the 20th century in Iceland (Björnsdóttir 1996: 109). Icelanders’ reliance on Fjallkonan for momentum in their independence movement challenges the inherently male character of nationalism that Anderson’s presents.

In Chapter 3: Negotiating the lopapeysa as tradition in flux, I situated the lopapeysa in its common representation as antiquated and pure, embodying an aura of authenticity that performs for touristic imaginings of Iceland. The gendered symbol of Fjallkonan becomes a particularly important discussion within this antiquated representation, as she remains essentially “the genealogical link between the land and the people” (Hastrup 1998: 189). As her name, ‘The Lady of the Mountain’ suggests, the image of Fjallkonan explicitly connects nature, and thus associations with remoteness and purity, to the feminine. The image of Fjallkonan that I have depicted, according to Hastrup, “is the image par excellence of the Icelandic world being situated between a timeless nature and a cultural present” (1998: 190). Acting in “both nature and nurture” Fjallkonan becomes “both mother and protector of the nation” (Hastrup 1998: 189). Thus, the highly valued aesthetic of purity in Iceland, is imagined through the visual image of a woman, Fjallkonan.
In preceding chapters, I have argued that the *lopapeysa* becomes a material articulation of the myriad imaginings of the Icelandic nation in flux. Because the production of the *lopapeysa* remains deeply gendered—women are the main knitters of *lopapeysa*—I argue that so too should the production of national identity in Iceland, as depicted by the image of *Fjallkonan*, be considered in gendered terms. In this chapter, I discuss the manifestations of a gendered production of national identity in Iceland, and how it connects to the gendered practice of knitting of the *lopapeysa*.

The nation framed as mother, as woman, or as feminine, challenges the literature written on nationalism that often overlooks discussions of gender, particularly excluding women. Mary Louise Pratt (1990) challenges the “androcentrism” of Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983), appealing for scholarship on nationalism that considers the lens of gender. According to
Pratt, while Anderson does (to an extent) suggest the ways that ethnicity, race, and class mediate national imaginings, gender remains largely absent in his discussion (1990: 6). Instead, Anderson’s focus on “fraternity and comradeship” insinuates a traditionally male character: “the finite, sovereign, and fraternal figure of the citizen soldier” (1990: 6). The absence of gender in *Imagined Communities* is not an exceptional case; literature on nationalism has historically rendered women outside of the production of national imaginings. Rather, “subtle masculinist perspectives of self-help, autonomy, and power seeking have been variously embedded in basic concepts of how nations act and interact,” as if nations and their production of national identity are naturally masculine (Koester 1995: 573). Likewise, discourse on nationalism has been predominantly located in the public sphere, while women and women’s work have been relegated to the private sphere of the home, with the false perception that these spheres do not interact (Yuval-Davis 1997: 2). However, despite these criticisms, I argue that Anderson’s framework should not be abandoned entirely; the idea of communities and traditions as imagined and invented invites us to consider social constructs, such as gender, in the formation of national imaginings where they have previously been left out (Koester 1995: 573).

The image of *Fjallkonan*, while no longer circulating through literature in the way it did from the 18th through 20th centuries, has remained an imagined unifying symbol in the national consciousness of Icelanders. The spirit of *Fjallkonan* became embodied through Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, Iceland’s and the world’s first democratically-elected female president in 1980. While president, Finnbogadóttir performed in the image of *Fjallkonan*, both in her role as president, and in the way she presented herself. Finnbogadóttir’s platform and political agenda reflected *Fjallkonan*’s mother-like character. She was deeply concerned with protecting the
“holy trinity” of Icelandic values: the nation, the country, and the tongue. Her focus thus was largely on children, who were deemed both the “most open and vulnerable to foreign influences” but also “Iceland’s future” (Björnsdóttir 1996: 120). Finnbogadóttir’s performance as Fjallkonan, similar to Indira Gandhi’s representation as Mother India, depicts the interrelation between mother and nation, complicating nationalist theories that ignore gender in nationalist production. As the mother of the nation, producer and protector of Icelandic values, Fjallkonan becomes deeply tied to the aesthetic of Icelandic purity and connection to the remote past, as Finnbogadóttir concern for Iceland’s children denotes.

Finnbogadóttir also performs the role of Fjallkonan through symbolic dress. On a number of festive occasions and national holidays during her presidency, Finnbogadóttir dressed in a skaut, the traditional dress of Fjallkonan. Perhaps most significant, during the 1980 presidential campaign, Finnbogadóttir was given a sweater-dress knitted by an anonymous woman with Icelandic lopi. Finnbogadóttir promised that she would not wear the dress until she after she knew she had won the presidency. Accordingly, when Finnbogadóttir won the election, she emerged outside of her home in Reykjavík, wearing the knitted costume (Björnsdóttir 1996: 121-122). Similar to the everyday “putting on” of a lopapeysa (as depicted by Steini in Chapter 1), Finnbogadóttir’s wearing of lopi dress is significant. Not only is Finnbogadóttir symbolically connected to the anonymous woman who knitted her dress, she remains connected to the anonymity of all Icelanders who she may never meet, but who share a similar conviction of her imagined as their collective maternal figure (Anderson 1983).

The image of Fjallkonan, and the gendered production of Icelandic national identity more broadly, is rooted in the everyday associations of the role of mother in Iceland. Koester (1995)
argues that the role of ‘Iceland as mother’ is deeply connected to the historic domestic sphere in Iceland. Under Danish law, beginning in the 17th century, parents were required to oversee the moral and spiritual upbringing of their children. Patriarchal Danish-Lutheran doctrine sought to establish the father as the ruler of the house, and the Danish King the ruler of all households (Koester 1995: 577). However, in part because the Icelandic economy often involved men working as wage-laboring fishermen (thus men were often out of the home up to 14 weeks a year) women assumed the position on the farmstead, and the role of teacher. During this time period an essential part of Icelanders’ daily lives centered around the kvöldvaka (the evening wake), a time in the evening in which parents, and usually the mother, would read aloud nationalist and religious literature to their children. Thus, the kvöldvaka served as an essential part of everyday life for Icelanders, during which time the Icelandic language and the Icelandic Sagas were reproduced, and passed down from mother to child (Koester 1995: 577-578). “It was women’s roles as social reproducers—that is, as mothers—that places them at the center of nationalistic nostalgia in Iceland” (Koester 1995: 573). Almost like radio or television, mothers became the propagators of knowledge that was considered pure and authentic to Iceland (Koester 1995: 579).

Today, with formal schooling, the institution of kvöldvaka has dissipated from the daily life of Icelanders. However, I argue that the female-dominated, intergenerational teaching of knitting can be thought of as a similar form of gendered nation-making. When I met with knitters in Iceland and asked them how they learned to knit, Icelanders would often cite the fact that knitting is a part of the national curriculum in the Icelandic school system. At my fieldwork site of Leikskólinn Mánagarður (the daycare), while knitters were different ages and thus attended
school at different times, they all remembered that knitting was a part of the curriculum, and that it continues to be so today. However, the Icelanders who knitted on a regular basis agreed that school was not the place where they learned to knit. They told me that learning to knit in school was difficult because it was taught mostly in lecture. Instead, most knitters remarked that they actually learned the process of knitting, the habitual hand movements I observed and marveled at, from female figures in their lives, such as their mothers and grandmothers. As my conversation with Ragga outlined in Chapter 2 suggests, this practice often involved an extended period of time, and multiple increasingly difficult projects. Like the kvöldvaka, this transmission of knowledge and heritage depicts an intergenerational community of women connected together in Iceland, and women-produced national heritage.

Icelandic women have use the traditionally-defined sphere of domesticity as a political tactic, using images of motherhood, the home, and the ‘feminine’ craft of knitting, to subvert hegemonic masculinity in politics. Acts of resistance after the 2008 financial crises show how women have used the private sphere that they have been confined to as a form of resistance. Feminist scholars view Iceland’s conservative Independence Party, whose neoliberal agenda involved the privatization of Iceland’s banks from 1999-2003, as an essential factor that led to the financial collapse in 2008. They consider the largely male-dominated political leadership of the time to be “characterized by greed, recklessness and aggressive competition where young, rich and driven men were idolized as leaders” (Helgadottir 2011: 62). Thus, the pre-2008 era of rapid economic growth in Iceland was considered, though often in highsight, to be deeply gendered. The protests and responses that followed the 2008 collapse of Iceland’s three major banks, similarly invoke gender, as Icelanders used representation of the traditionally feminine,
private sphere to protest. Named the Kitchen Utensil Uprising, protesters marched drumming on pots and pans; in some case even knitting sessions too became arenas of protest. The image of motherhood that *Fjallkonan*, the *kvöldvaka*, and knitting represent were used as “symbolic counterpoints to the extravagances of the preceding era” (Helgadottir 2011: 62). By relying on these gendered images, Icelanders depicted the value in the representation of the nation as woman, not only culturally but politically as well (Helgadottir 2011: 62).

The origin of the Handknitting Association of Iceland tells a similar tale of women organizing politically in Iceland. A woman at the Handknitting Association (who was also a founding member) told me that at the initial meetings that eventually formed The Handknitting Association in 1977, she could have seen the knitters forming a union. 900 knitters showed up, and advocated for “a stake in the business,” of which they were not benefitting enough from. However, the result was not a union, but a store: the Handknitting Association. The main difference between the Handknitting Association and other stores selling knitted products in Iceland became that at the Handknitting Association, knitters received payment for their knitted goods up-front, rather than receiving part of their commission later, and therefore they did not have to wait for their items to get sold. The store’s slogan remains: “Buy directly from the people who make it.”

In this chapter I have sought to explore the way gender factors into both the construction of the *lopapeysa*, and the construction of national identity in Iceland. Symbols of ‘Iceland-as mother’ continue to be imagined, through the image of *Fjallkonan*, and through the practice of knitting itself, creating a gendered sense of national identity in Iceland that can be acted upon culturally, but politically as well. Women use the romanticized image that the domestic sphere
and the *lopapeysa* have come to represent, as tools to push back against male-dominated politics and narratives of nationalism.
Conclusion

The cover of *A Model Society* (Browne 2008) depicts the image of an Icelandic woman with her hands on her hips, looking off into the distance. She stands against a slightly out of focus earthen backdrop, wearing a *lopapeysa*. At first glance this image appears nostalgic, reminiscent of the romantic aesthetic of purity in Iceland, that crosscuts with gendered notions of the nation. Dressed on a woman and close to nature, the *lopapeysa* seems to adhere to its typical representations. However, upon looking closer, stitched into the yoke pattern of the woman’s *lopapeysa* is the world ‘gossip,’ followed by hearts that continue the circular yoke pattern. This cover photograph is one of thirteen similar images in *A Model Society*, each depicting an Icelander against a sublime background, wearing a text-inscribed *lopapeysa*. Loud against the rugged background, these inscribed words disturb the romantic image, interrupting an otherwise picturesque scene.

These images and accompanied patterns are the product of Sarah Browne’s two year artistic project in Iceland, in which she designed and knitted *lopapeysur* for Icelanders. Browne used fragments from her conversations with Icelanders as the text she knitted into each *lopapeysa*. Thus, in most cases the text that appears on each *lopapeysa* represents the voice of the individual depicted wearing the sweater. There is no consistent theme to the words and phrases, however they all in some way developed in response to Browne’s questions about daily life in Iceland and the relationship between Icelanders and the land. In one image, a woman holds a dog with the phrase “rotten politics” knitted into her sweater. The texts appear positive,
negative, and often ambiguous. “Boredom,” “exclusive isolation,” “awesome daycare,” and “no war” are some examples (Browne 2008).

Browne’s project is particularly significant as it unsettles typical representations of the lopapeysa and Iceland, mediating the “construction of seemingly perfect social order” (2008: 39). Amidst backgrounds of nature, the text-inscribed sweaters appear updated, representing the daily imaginings of Icelanders. With irony, Browne’s photos show the perceived timelessness of the lopapeysa, the “seduction of this nostalgia,” while also depicting the everyday life and thoughts of Icelanders that often conflict with the background scenery, and articulations of purity. While still mediated by Browne’s own position as a tourist, this project imagines the lopapeysa in an entirely new way.

When I returned Iceland to conduct fieldwork this January I arrived at the airport in Keflavík unusually early in the morning. Not knowing what to do with myself before I could check into my hostel, I wandered around the terminal. Albeit with the lopapeysa clearly in mind, I became hyper-aware of its presence in the airport. As I strolled through stores I began counting the lopapeysa I saw. Walking through the tourist shops, I became struck by the prevalence of the lopapeysa’s traditional yoke pattern, often removed from the sweater and placed on all sorts of knick knacks and souvenirs including t shirts, mugs, napkins, and magnets. The tourist no longer had to buy the knitted lopapeysa, they could take home other objects that appear distinctively Icelandic, though far removed from the knitting process that is so intrinsic to the meaning of the lopapeysa for Icelanders. Removed from any real or imagined authenticity, everyday objects neither made in Iceland, nor unique to Iceland. became packaging for culture.
These two conflicting examples depict different ways that the lopapeysa continues to be imagined and invented today. The yoke pattern in the first example is updated using the direct language of Icelanders, while the second example removes the yoke pattern from the lopapeysa and places it onto other items that are not indigenous to Iceland. However, both examples show continual reverence and fascination with this dynamic cultural object. Through my discussion of the lopapeysa I have attempted to show how nations are imagined through everyday symbols of national identity and heritage that adapt to the global flows of objects, information, and people. As the distinctiveness or “aura” (Benjamin 1936) of a place begins to seem elusive or intangible, real and imagined symbols perform as authentic, pure representations of the nation. Cultural objects in particular, like the lopapeysa, seem to package and thus make mobile, the aura of a place, culture, or nation. In the context of Iceland, the lopapeysa performs as Iceland itself, inscribed within an object. The lopapeysa thus reminds us of the anthropological weight of everything, even that of a mundane object worn everyday on the surface of the skin.
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