Ghost Stories[1]

Oppression and Disasters in Past and Present Iceland

Auður Aðalsteinsdóttir
Postdoctoral researcher at Queen Margrethe's and Vigdís Finnbogadóttir's Interdisciplinary Research Centre for Ocean, Climate and Society, University of Iceland

Abstract
This article presents a postcolonial-ecocritical reading of the Icelandic novel Lifandilífslækur *(2018) by Bergsveinn Birgisson, arguing that this work can be interpreted as a call for a revision of Iceland's position and role in the colonial system and its legacy which we are still grappling with, especially in terms of climate change and other ecological crises. The novel places an emphasis on the effects of colonialism for Icelanders, and Iceland being a part of a power system based on the notion of man's dominance over nature. Focusing on the role of ghosts in the novel - figures that have obvious roots in Icelandic folklore - a change in focus is noted. Ghosts that once were depicted as relics of a heathen past coexisting with medieval Christianity, and later assigned a nationalist-romantic value, are today considered as potentially important in contemporary environmental debate with its focus on social power structures and toxic hierarchies.*

Keywords
The supernatural in contemporary literature, Icelandic literature, postcolonial studies, ecocriticism, ghosts, folklore, power systems, hierarchies

Introduction

Depictions of natural disasters in contemporary literature almost inevitably invite references to a growing awareness of human transience in the face of global warming, and this also applies to the Icelandic novel *Lifandilífslækur* (Vitality Brook)[2] by Bergsveinn Birgisson. The story, published in 2018, is set against the backdrop of one of the greatest natural catastrophes experienced by Icelanders, the *Móðuharðindi* (Mist Hardships) of the

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[2] The book was published in German as *Quell des Lebens* in 2020, in Norwegian as *Reisen til livsvannet* in 2020, in Italian as *La fonte della vita* in 2021 and in Hungarian as *Elevenéletpatak* in 2021.

eighteenth century, the result of a volcanic eruption that lasted from 1783 to 1784.[3] In Bergsveinn's story, ghosts roam a desolate landscape, turning our attention to the role of ghosts in past and present. In Iceland, their role changed from having a strong religious significance in medieval literature, confirming the power of Christianity over dark, heathen forces,[4] whereas in the nineteenth century, there was a national-romantic emphasis, seen in Jón Árnason's gathering and study of folklore, including ghost stories. Jón focuses on categorizing and preserving the local spirit of an oral tradition which, like the Sagas, is seen as proving that Iceland builds on a tradition of being a "great, storytelling land" (Jón Árnason 1954, XVII). More recently, ghost stories connected with this heritage are re-told and interpreted with a contemporary focus on social injustices (see Ármann Jakobsson 2017; Egeler 2020), including ecological injustice, linking them to a broader scale of planetary power structures and violence. In this article, *Lifandilífslækur* will be read in that way, as an ecological ghost story where the eighteenth-century natural disasters that set the scene correlate with twenty-first century readers' increasing fear of an impending climate catastrophe and other ecological crises while the narrators and characters in the story explore the roots of our problems in colonialism, the scientific revolution, modernization and industrialization.

The article starts with an explanation of Iceland's complex relationship with its colonial heritage, which comprises the background to the story in *Lifandilífslækur* where the protagonist's mission of scientific cartography in the name of modernization fundamentally serves the more sinister, colonialist goal of securing the Danish empire's power over places and people. Attention then turns to the Danish-Icelandic protagonist's liminal position which reveals to him the ghostly dimension of a colonial system that is too complex for a simple division into two distinctive categories of oppressors and the oppressed. After delving into the story's use of Icelandic folklore in an analysis of the social injustice that results from the colonial system, examples are given of how the story underlines the interconnections of oppressive power systems in which the domination of nature goes hand in hand with colonial exploitation and the patriarchal oppression of women, all in the name of modernization. The article concludes by identifying "storytelling" as the main motif of *Lifandilífslækur*, where the clash of viewpoints (between narrator and protagonist, the narrator and his "informants", personal journals and official reports, and even between different viewpoints within the protagonist's soul) brings into to focus the political importance of who tells a story and whose story survives as the "real" version of events while other voices are silenced

[3] For an ecocritical cultural-historical discussion of descriptions of the Mist Hardships and other volcanic eruptions in Iceland, see Atli Antonsson's (2019) comparison of the "eldrit" or "fire chronicles", i.e. volcanic descriptions, of 18th century writers such as Jón Steingrímsson with Gísli Pálsson's descriptions of a 20th century eruption, exploring how contemporary "fire chronicles" fit into a new genre, of Anthropocene literature.

[4] As Ármann Jakobsson (2017, 39) says: "The preoccupation with the shift from pagan religions to Christianity is significant, as paranormal activity tends to be closely identified with the pagan past in the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century historiography of Iceland."

and/or pushed to the fringes of history, becoming folklore for example. The story thus brings to light how selectively we interpret our colonial inheritance—and our reluctance to face the murkier sides of reality.

Colonial Background

Lifandilífslækur is speculative fiction that presents an alternative history starting in the year 1785, one year after the volcanic eruption that shrouded the land in the deadly haze of the Mist Hardships. This is also one year after James Watt patented the steam engine, an event that has been seen as the symbolic start of the industrial revolution, and therefore a date Paul Crutzen has proposed as marking the start of the Anthropocene (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016, 16). Humankind has, in this view of history, just entered the era of acquiring the power of a geological force when the Danish-Icelandic protagonist of *Lifandilífslækur*, Magnús Árelíus Egede, travels through parts of the wild Icelandic Westfjords with the task of taking control over of it by mapping this partly uncharted area for the Danish Realm. As the narrator observes, the world was not fully charted in the 18th century. In Iceland particularly, "there were still nooks and crannies that man had not yet broken beneath his mind and measurements and demonstrated his lordship over" (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 45).[5] However, as early as in the seventeenth century, the development of cartography had revealed a change in man's attitude towards his environment. Michael Kjær has described how the move from three-dimensional topography to two-dimensional paper maps left the world "inanimate as a two-dimensional surface for western man's rationality and feet. A mirror surface upon which the cartographer, in theory, could more or less without restraint project his wishes and needs. Theoretically, but also in practice" (Kjær 2020, 108). This meant a shift in focus, which now turned inwards rather than outwards.

> "In other words, Earth disappeared from sight in the seventeenth century. However, its weight, deep space and topographical diversity appeared elsewhere. Inside the western, enlightened man that was mapping the whole world" (Kjær 2020, 98).

In *Lifandilífslækur*, Magnús Árelíus becomes a representative of this development. He not only drags his shiny technological equipment through the Icelandic highlands and up onto mountains to measure the landscape and chart it on paper, he also carries his journals where he scribbles his innermost thoughts and delves into the dark depths of his own mind.

The underlying aim of Magnús Árelíus's expedition also indicates the more sinister, colonial aspect of cartography. In the story, this mapping is little more than a pretext for the

[5] "[...] þeir krókar og kimar fundust sem maðurinn hafði enn ekki brotið undir sitt skynsvið og mælingar og auðsýnt sitt herradæmi [...]". Translations of quotes from *Lifandilífslækur* are borrowed, with permission of the literary agency Immaterial Agents, from the manuscript of an English translation of the book under the title *Vitality Brook*, by Philip Roughton, which is yet to be published. Other translations of quotes from Icelandic and Danish works into English are mine unless a translator is mentioned in the bibliography.

gathering of material for a report on the miserable state of the Icelandic population. This report, and counterparts from other regions of Iceland, are meant to support a proposal to move all able-bodied Icelanders to Denmark, under a humanitarian pretext, to serve as a cheap workforce in modern factories. Here, it is worth mentioning that historical documents show that the idea of moving some, or virtually all, Icelanders to Denmark had actually been discussed by Icelandic and Danish officials at the time, and that for decades historians have debated how far such plans actually progressed, as well as wondering how this would have changed Icelandic history (Anna Agnarsdóttir 1993, 28; Jón Jónsson 2018, 74). In *Lifandilífslækur*, such a proposal—which Sigfús Haukur Andrésson (1984) has argued was more a myth than reality—is creatively built on to underscore the extent to which Iceland was a part of a colonial structure in which the appropriation of land and systematic genocide or forced displacement of peoples were "a larger ongoing process". "England's colonization of Scotland and Ireland", along with "the early seventeenth-century [...] forced removal of Indigenous Irish from their homelands [which] resulted in the transfer of conquered Scottish populations to Ireland" can, for example, be seen as "the model for English settlement in the New World" (Gilio-Whitaker 2019, 40; cf. Dunbar-Ortiz 2014). Icelanders' particular circumstances did, however, mean that they did not suffer the same fate as Native Americans, but were rather exploited through a trade system. And Icelanders and Danes did share an ancestry, history and culture—which Icelanders themselves deliberately stressed—and that helped them resist landing at the bottom of a "white supremacist system bent on maintaining power over nonwhite, non-Christian people" (Gilio-Whitaker 2019, 56), even if it did not always prevent mistreatment and exploitation.

The protagonist of *Lifandilífslækur*, Magnús Árelíus, represents science and enlightenment, the supposed benefits brought by modern colonial rulers. In his journey through the wilderness of the Westfjords he must, however, also confront the Icelandic side of himself when ghosts of marginalized and impoverished people start to gravitate toward him. These ghosts have stories to tell and the only way to get rid of them is to listen. This process is in line with the message of trauma studies, where bearing witness and listening are seen as essential to healing in the aftermath of violence (see e.g. Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir 2017, 26), in this instance, colonial violence. As Amitav Ghosh (2016, 146) says, "we live in a world that has been profoundly shaped by empire and its disparities" and that has shaped our relations with our environment, indeed, "the distribution of power in the world therefore lies at the core of the climate crisis". As this article is based on the view I have expressed before (Auður Aðalsteinsdóttir 2021, 348–351), that the surprise end of the novel *Lifandilífslækur* calls for an ecocritical-postcolonial reading,[6] it should be mentioned that the use of postcolonial theory is sometimes met with skepticism in Iceland, a country that has based its claims to cultural merit largely on dismissing Iceland's foreign rule in the

[6] Atli Antonsson (2022) has also combined a postcolonial reading of the story with an interpretation connecting it with the economic collapse in Iceland in 2008, pointing out that the reactions of the authorities are described as even worse than the catastrophe itself.

past as a temporary aberration in an otherwise heroic history. The term *hjálenda* (dependency) was coined to describe Iceland's relationship with Denmark, but as Guðmundur Hálfdanarson (2014, 47) has discovered, Danish legal documents also show a parallel use of the words "colony" and "province", both of which were rejected by Icelanders in the nineteenth century as inappropriate and inaccurate when asserting their demands for independence. Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson (2003, 140) comes to the conclusion that Icelanders did not question the colonial system as such but rather demanded that they be ranked with modern, mature nations, not with colonized or other primitive nations. They used the word colony when it suited their rhetoric, however, and Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson (2003, 135–136) describes their position in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century as follows: "Iceland is not a colony but Danes are colonial and treat the country as if it were a colony." Guðmundur Hálfdanarson (2014, 54) agrees with most other scholars in advising people to tread carefully in calling Iceland a former colony, seeing that Iceland was considered part of the Danish Realm and that Icelanders therefore had a different status than the inhabitants of the colonies in the Carribean and Indian subcontinent which Denmark controlled in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (regarding the Danish slave colonies, see Gísli Pálsson 2016). He also points out, however, that denying that Iceland ever was a colony, and later a post-colony, "only tells half the story" (Guðmundur Hálfdanarson 2014, 72). Iceland was often regarded as a colonized nation by Europeans and was both subjected to and participated in a colonial discourse when trying to secure its position as a European rather than a colonized country. Icelanders are among those nations that "tend to focus on a golden age rather than on colonial oppression", deploying "the U-shaped narrative of a glorious (sometimes ancient) past, a dark age of foreign rule, and a bright future", where the "aim is always to be included in the group of the civilized" (Oxfeldt et al. 2020, 44). Ann-Sofie Nielsen Gremaud (2014) has perceptively noted that the term "crypto-colony", which Michael Herzfeld uses to describe the assigned and self-adapted role of countries like Greece and Thailand in the global cultural hierarchy, can also be used to illuminate Iceland's position in a colonial and post-colonial world.

> "[...] 'crypto-colonialism' [means] the curious alchemy whereby certain countries, buffer zones between the colonized lands and those as yet untamed, were compelled to acquire their political independence at the expense of massive economic dependence, this relationship being articulated in the iconic guise of aggressively national culture fashioned to suit foreign models. Such countries were and are living paradoxes: they are nominally independent, but that independence comes at the price of a sometimes humiliating form of effective dependence" (Herzfeld 2009, 342–343).

Crypto-colonies "appear to resist domination, but do so at the cost of effective complicity" and their "high cultural pedestals" ironically "isolate them from other, more brutally material forms of power", Herzfeld explains (2009, 344–345). He also reminds us that the

"reality of colonialism's heritage is that the global hierarchy of cultural value it has created persists long after the demise of the political and military empires" (Herzfeld 2009, 364). The ongoing and often heated debate on appropriate terms to describe Iceland's former status (see e.g. Helgi Þorláksson 2021) reflects, like the novel *Lifandilífslækur*, a need to confront Iceland's past under foreign rule and the nation's specific involvement in colonial discourse. One reason for this is a growing awareness that oppressive systems, such as colonialism, racism, sexism or the exploitation of nature, are interconnected and support each other; threatening our life-conditions and the ecosystem. For decades, various scholars have underlined the interconnection between exploiting "other nations, other races, or simply the 'other' sex" and "manipulating, exploiting, or experimenting upon other animals [and other entities of nature]" (Abram 1997, 47–49; see also Plumwood 1993). In *Lifandilífslækur,* man's dominance over nature, that is the land itself, is indeed interwoven with his dominance over others; more specifically the Danes' dominion over Icelanders is closely connected to and perhaps dependent on their dominance over the Icelandic landscape. In the novel, Magnús Árelíus's report will not only give Denmark more power over uncontrolled places and their rogue inhabitants but also pave the way for the planned emigration of a cheap workforce to the more controlled landscape of Denmark, thus securing further exploitation.

Hybrid Names and Ghostly Territory

Magnús Árelíus is one of "the new men" whom the narrator describes as wanting "to overcome nature with the strict hand of science and tame it with [...] inventiveness and intuition according to the laws of the great clockwork of the Lord" (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 11).[7] But the narrator also implies right at the beginning that this will backfire, saying: "Some of these new men came to learn that the roots of human nature lie deep in the dark, ghostly past, and cannot be pulled up in their entirety at one go—if ever—from human nature" (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 13).[8] This alludes to the idea that in industrial societies, scientific thought has managed to desacralize the world for modern man. As Mircea Eliade (1963, 51, 203) phrases it, man "assumes a new existential situation; he regards himself solely as the subject and agent of history, and he refuses all appeal to transcendence", but is at the same time unable to "wipe out his own history—that is, the behavior of his religious ancestors which has made him what he is today". Thus, "religion and mythology are 'eclipsed' in the darkness of [modern man's] unconscious". But as "a great part of his existence is fed by impulses that come to him from the depths of his being, from the zone that has been called the 'unconscious'", "even the most desacralized existence still preserves traces of a religious valorization of the world" (Eliade 1963, 210, 212, 23). Through what Eliade calls *hiérophanies,* "something sacred shows itself to us", the religious and the mystical irrupts into the world,

[7] "[...] hinn nýi maður sem ætlaði að sigrast á náttúrunni með harðri hendi vísindanna og temja hana með hugviti sínu og innsæi í lögmál hins mikla gangverks Drottins."

[8] "Sumir þessara nýju manna fengu að reyna að rætur mannsnáttúrunnar liggja djúpt í þeirri myrku draugafortíð, hverjar ei verða uppslitnar í einu vetfangi – eða jafnvel aldrei – frá mannlegri náttúru með öllu."

and man gets "the revelation of a reality other than that in which he participates through his ordinary daily life" (1963, 11, 45, 24).

In *Lifandilífslækur*, the ghostly also links the supernatural with man's inner depths; it irrupts into the rational world of Magnús Árelíus through guilt and trauma and reveals a different reality. Ármann Jakobsson, who has studied ghosts, trolls and other supernatural phenomena in Icelandic medieval narratives, considers them to mirror mankind's innermost fears—of death, of others but also of ourselves and the consequences of our actions.

> "The troll you meet in a cave or in your slumber will indeed act as a mirror, whether it is successfully trying to magnify your fears or simply coldly informing you that unyielding relentless payment is due for all of the mischief one commits in life" (Ármann Jakobsson 2017, 92).

Magnús Árelíus wants to "defeat [this] fear and superstition—with education as his weapon" and by "the light of his reason and rationality" (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 96).[9] In his reports to Denmark, he puts on the face of a scientist who redacts every experience that cannot endure the light of reason—or does not fit with Danish politics. But his reporting is interspersed with the highly ironic voice of the Icelandic narrator (or voices, because the narrator says he relies on the ghosts in the story as his sources and sometimes they are allowed to narrate directly in the first-person plural, as "we"). The ironic narrative voice points out the more shameful parts of Magnús Árelíus's journey: his helplessness when it comes to navigating this country, his grudging reliance on his native guides, his exploitation of Icelanders' misery and the power vested in him (he grabs a chance to sleep with a starving woman in exchange for food, coffee and tobacco), or perhaps the most shameful thing of all, his ability to see ghosts. This clairvoyance is closely connected to a receptiveness, a connection to, and sometimes compassion for the Icelandic people which apparently stems from his own half-Icelandic origins. His name, Magnús Árelíus Egede, reflects his in-between status in a colonial world. His given names could point toward Flavius Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus (c. 490–c. 585), a statesman in the period of the Ostrogothic kings in Italy when the Roman empire was at an end. His father's high office in the service of king Theodoric seems to have secured Cassiodorus a career as a public official. Later, he founded the monastery of Vivium, where classical Greek and Latin literature was preserved. He was a prolific writer of official letters and documents, chronicles, theology, and history, who "endeavoured to reconcile two races, the Goths and the Romans [and] laboured with greater success to harmonize the culture of the ancient with that of the Christian world" (Lejay and Otten 1908). Although he is known for being "neither a great writer nor a great scholar" (Britannica 2022), he was "deeply concerned with the preservation of the intellectual heritage" (Pieper 2022) of Roman culture. His *Institutiones divinarum et saecularium litterarum*, for example, "seems to have been designed to preserve knowledge" (Collison and

[9] "Þannig skal maðurinn sigrast á ótta og hjátrú – með upplýsing að vopni. Með ljósi sinnar skynsemi og ratíó [...]".

Preece 2022), although it has been deemed as "an unoriginal catalog of definitions and subdivisions, which (in spite of their dryness) became a source book and mine of information for the following centuries" (Pieper 2022). Early on, however, the Icelandic narrator in *Lifandilífslækur* declares he has decided to write the name Magnús in the Icelandic fashion. It then sounds like the name of an Icelandic official—and, with this spelling of his name, he could even be taken for a common Icelandic farmer.

Magnús Árelíus's family name, Egede, also refers to remnants of colonial rule, not to the subject peoples of the Roman empire but those of the Danish Realm. The Norwegian-Danish clergyman Hans Egede established a mission in Greenland and started colonizing it in the early 18th century, as Kim Leine has described in his novel *Rød mand/Sort mand* (2018). In *Lifandilífslækur*, the narrator speculates that the associations following this family name have secured Magnús Árelíus a place on this mission; a mission unjustifiably glorified by himself according to people around him who tend to think he got this easy job due to his father's position in the Danish chancellery. The fact that his mother comes from an Icelandic merchant's family (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 102) and he therefore speaks a little Icelandic, is never highlighted in this respect and can even be seen to complicate his effort to use this mission to secure himself a position of power in Denmark, as it connects him to this peripheral place within the Danish Realm. As Herzfeld (2009, 366) reminds us, the world has never been divided into "colonizers and colonized alone", and Magnús Árelíus is one of the many who fall into a grey area in a colonial system.

I emphasize the ill-definable position of Magnús Árelíus because it is strongly associated with his psychic abilities. Ármann Jakobsson (2017, 67, 70) reminds us that "it is the nature of the occult to resist utter identification" and experiences of it are often attributed to "liminal figure[s]". The narrating voice of *Lifandilífslækur* tells us a ghost is "a creature on the boundary between light and darkness" (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2017, 109)[10]—which might in one sense refer to the boundaries of enlightenment and an older, fearful reverence for dark or hidden forces—and Magnús Árelíus is described as a peculiar mixture of a man: "God has granted him the gift of clairvoyance, and men, science from big books. It is as if each has been knocked together with the other" (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2017, 165).[11] He is therefore a perfect ghost-magnet, but what kind of ghost story is this? Hólmfríður Garðarsdóttir has argued that it is inaccurate to categorize Icelandic fiction containing supernatural elements as magical realism, which she describes as intrinsically linked to South American culture. The term occultism—or occult(real)ism—would be more appropriate, according to Hólmfríður Garðarsdóttir (2004, 32, 35), when describing works that draw material from a completely Icelandic reality interwoven with Icelandic folk belief and build on a tradition of nature mystique, fatalism, animism, a presumed cohabitation with

[10] "[...]skepna á mörkum ljóss og myrkurs."

[11] "Guð hefur gefið honum skyggnigáfu en mennirnir vísendi úr stórum bókum. Það er sem hvörju sé klambrað saman við hitt, ohhseiojá."

otherworldly entities like elves and ghosts, and respect for the forces of nature.[12] This description certainly seems to fit the literary context that Bergsveinn Birgisson draws from in his novel.

Icelandic ghosts

At first Magnús Árelíus thinks the figures who start gravitating towards him are living people, but the reader is given hints of subtle differences; their skin has a blue tint like that of a dead person and they repeat themselves constantly, both of which Ármann Jakobsson (2017, 44) mentions as characteristic of paranormal beings,[13] and not everyone seems to notice them. These ghosts are decidedly Icelandic and as familiar to Icelanders as the landscape Magnús Árelíus travels through. There are some *útburðir*, newborn babies who have been abandoned outside—either dead or left to die—usually by a mother afraid of being punished for promiscuity. They continue to cry horribly after their death, especially in bad weather, and are even capable of crawling around and attacking passers-by (Jón Árnason 1954, 217).[14] There are also *skottur* and *mórar*, ghosts that often haunt places or families for generations (Jón Árnason 1954, 346), making all kinds of noise and commotion in revenge for the mistreatment that led to their death. Magnús Árelíus also experiences apparitions and attacks from the fog that regularly rises in Icelandic ghost stories when a person travels in mountainous areas but steadfastly remains skeptical toward tales of drowned sailors who return home to chat with (or attack) the living. These and other ghosts roaming the country reflect a history and culture of hardships, cruelty, neglect and injustice.[15] Ármann Jakobsson (2017, 45) talks of paranormal beings belonging "to a past which is evil, savage, and most importantly, has refused to go away as the past is supposed to do". This can certainly be said of the ghosts in *Lifandilífslækur* as one of them affirms and then re-affirms:

> "I exist so that my story is not forgotten, and that which one fears is never forgotten. I am the shadow in the night, which shall never pass on as long as my story repeats itself. I am the true image. Of people's consciences. Of guilt. I live in

[12] Hólmfríður Garðarsdóttir is specifically discussing works by Vigdís Grímsdóttir, labeling them as "a new type of novel" (2004, 35).

[13] Ármann Jakobsson (2017, 33, 219) says Icelandic ghosts in the Sagas are often described as black and blue but "the colour blue and its demonic aspect have yet to be explored in more detail". It is in Norse mythology associated with Hel, the goddess of the dead, who is half blue in color, and later, in the Sagas' Christian context, associated with Hell. To this we might add that in later years, blue-tinted skin is often one of the characteristics of zombies in cinema and television shows.

[14] Jón Árnason (1954, 217) also mentions an older definition of *útburðir*, i.e. "children that died before they had been christened and were not allowed to be buried near holy places" but that would have been an outdated understanding of *útburður* in the eighteenth century.

[15] Matthias Egeler (2020) has pointed out that Icelandic toponyms often reflect such injustices, especially those connected to ghosts in some way.

> people. I live outside of people. [...] Now you are stuck with me. I am a story that can never be forgotten" (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 125–126).[16]

Interconnections of oppressive systems as seen through the lens of the supernatural

Gradually, by listening to the ghosts' stories, Magnús Árelíus can empathize with them enough to admit to himself that condescending plans to "save" the wretched people of Iceland, to decide for them where and how they should live, are, like all colonial "saviorism" (see Gilio-Whitaker 2019, 112, 158; Hurwitz and Bourque 2018), part of a violence that maintains injustice and dominance. Only now in the name of modernity which might be a disease rather than a cure. This is a humbling realization and intricately connected to his experience of the Icelandic forces of nature, where this modern man is often helpless. His Icelandic guide—a seemingly uneducated farmer—helps him face his own arrogance when he asks him:

> "Is it the magister's belief that the Lord created everything for mankind? As a man carves a toy for a child and hands it to him. That all of creation is presented to man in this same manner?" (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 79)[17]

Magnús Árelíus's assistant, a more learned Icelander, then asks him—with good reason—whether he thinks women are also intended by the Creator to be man's toys (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 81), a question that provokes anger which quickly turns into dejection and remorse.

The author Bergsveinn Birgisson thus lets eighteenth century Icelanders not only point out the interconnection of repressive power systems like sexism and the exploitation of nature, but also lets them point towards a world view where man has been decentralized. Early on in the novel (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 10), the narrator refers to the nineteenth century writer Giacomo Leopardi's dialogue between "a poor Icelander" (Leopardi 1982, 185) and an ever-threatening Nature. Leopardi uses the hardships of eighteenth-century Iceland to demonstrate that the destinies of men are only a part of "a perpetual cycle of production and destruction" (Leopardi 1982, 199), and Bergsveinn Birgisson clearly bases the Icelanders' questions in *Lifandilífslækur* on the words of Nature in Leopardi's work:

> "Did you think by any chance that the world was made for you alone? Now let me tell you that in my works, laws, and operations, except for very few of them, my purpose was not, and is not, the happiness of men. When I harm you in any way

[16] "Ég er til svo saga mín gleymist ekki og það sem maður óttast – gleymist ekki. Ég skugginn í nóttinni sem fer ekki áfram meðan saga mín endurtekur sig. Ég hin raunsanna mynd. Af samvisku fólks. Af sektarkennd. Ég bý í fólki. Ég bý utanvið fólk. [...] Þið sitjið uppi með mig. Ég er saga sem ekki má gleymast."

[17] "Er það trú herra magisters að Drottinn hafi skapað allt fyrir manninn? Svona eins og maður telgir leikfang fyrir barn og réttir að því. Að þanninn sé öll sköpunin reidd fram fyrir manninn?"

> and with whatever means, I don't notice it, except very rarely; just as I ordinarily don't know whether I please or help you [...]" (Leopardi 1982, 195, 197).

Michael Kjær has discussed how modern man's blindness towards the fact that he is also affected by the harmful changes he causes in his environment can be traced back to the dominating position he assumed in wake of the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century. Modern man started experiencing his environment as a part of his own self, instead of seeing himself as part of the environment, which led to a traumatic relationship with the world (Kjær 2020, 93, 90). *Lifandilífslækur* explores these effects of the scientific revolution on the relationship between man and nature. In the story, the Mist Hardships hold Icelanders in their firm grip, in stark contrast to the Enlightenment's optimism about man's possibilities and his ever-increasing authority over the forces of nature. The reciprocal relations between man and his environment are humorously illustrated when Magnús Árelíus, the rulers' representative, comes into such close contact with the rough nature he is traveling through that he almost seems to merge with it.

> "Magnús Árelíus had finally begun to feel familiar with his new environment. His clothing had started to blend in with the landscape. It had lost its sheen: his white waistcoat was flecked with brown and a button had fallen off here and there; his cravat and the ruffles on his shirt were brown at the edges. He had blemishes on his face, like most people. [...] He had not put on his toupee-wig since it was trampled into the path at Þorp, and the fatty ointment of his white peruke from Copenhagen had drunk in Iceland's gray-brown Mist Hardships in the prevailing southerlies, turning it as russet as a sheep. His tricorne was the only part of his apparel that appeared unchanged" (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 129–130).[18]

Colonialism not only imbricates with racism, patriarchy and capitalism; the colonial "conqueror model extended to an ideology of human superiority over the natural world; it is an anthropocentric worldview in which the world is there for human taking, manipulation, and exploitation without regard for the consequences to either human or nonhuman life" (Gilio-Whitaker 2019, 57). As Kjær (2020, 94–95) describes, the colonial expansion of western modernity is comparable to the combined extinction of biological diversity and different cultures and people. In *Lifandilífslækur*, however, the humility Magnús Árelíus starts to feel towards nature and other beings affects his relationship with the ghosts that follow him around and helps him accept their existence and feel compassion towards them as victims of social violence who had no voice of their own in an unjust system. It also helps him see the

[18] "Magnús Árelíus var loks farinn að kunna sig í þessu nýja umhverfi. Klæði hans voru farin að renna saman við landið. Þau höfðu misst gljáa sinn, hvíta vestið með brúnum flekkjum og hnappar burtfallnir hér og hvar, hálsklúturinn og kniplingar skyrtunnar orðnir brúnir í köntum. Hann hafði lýti í andliti eins og fólk flest [...]. Hann hafði ekki sett upp toupee-hárkolluna síðan hún gnuddaðist ofan í götuna á Þorpum; tólgsmurning þeirrar hvítu hárkollu úr Kaupinhafn hafði einnig drukkið í sig grábrún móðuharðindi Íslands þegar sunnanáttir voru ríkjandi og var orðin mórauð eins og rolla. Hatturinn þrístrendi var sá eini sem var samur."

possibility of another kind of existence, one where people's respect for nature helps them benefit from its life-giving properties and interact with their environment with the autonomy and dignity they could not expect as workforce on the factory line in Denmark. Because "when systems of responsibility between humans and the land are disrupted through the processes of colonization" (Gilio-Whitaker 2019, 27), this "[e]nvironmental injustice can be seen as an affront to peoples' capacities to experience themselves in the world as having responsibilities for the upkeep, or continuance, of their societies" (Whyte 2016, 165). But in the end, Magnús Árelíus returns to the path of modernity and industrial progress, and drawing from a traditional colonial discourse (see e.g. Michelucci 2002, 128), he compares himself to Robinson Crusoe on a desert Island, surviving by virtue of his reason and inventiveness, getting only pleasant companionship from his native helpers (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 169–170). Sumarliði Ísleifsson (2015, 48, 230) writes that the idea of a paradisiac island was exploited in colonialism, Iceland being among the countries presented as a "primitive utopia", and argues that Iceland's international position was "in many ways similar to the relationship between a colony and a colonial power", so that theories on colonialism can be of use when discussing Iceland's national image. He refers to the term "Borealism", coined by Kristinn Schram (2011, 310), a word which originates "in the Latin borealis (the North) [and] is an appropriation of Edward Said's term Orientalism that refers to the ontological and epistemological distinction between East and West", noting that Icelanders were seen as the opposite of moral degeneration and excess, and therefore as having a lesson to offer civilized people (Sumarliði Ísleifsson 2015, 29, 32, 48, 230). And in the end Magnús Árelíus's experiences in Iceland primarily serve the function of being a "test of manhood" ("manndómsvígsla") (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 102) as his father had planned all along. This leads us back to Eliade (1963, 203, 188), who claims that, as "man cannot help preserving some vestiges of the behavior of religious man", some patterns, like initiation rites, "still survive, although markedly desacralized, in the modern world".

> "Very often the 'struggle for life,' the 'ordeals' and 'difficulties' that stand in the way of a vocation or a career, in some sort reiterate the ordeals of initiation; it is after the 'blows' that are dealt him, the moral and even physical 'suffering' and 'torture' he undergoes, that a young man 'proves' himself, knows his possibilities, grows conscious of his powers, and finally becomes himself, spiritually adult and creative (the spirituality is, of course, what is understood as such in the modern world)" (Eliade 1963, 208–209).

In the case of Magnús Árelíus, it is important to note that "a typical initiatory ordeal", according to Eliade (1963, 135), involves descending "into the depths" and facing monsters—here Icelandic ghosts—as well as a symbolic death and revival to a new life. Magnús Árelíus is indeed saved from the brink of death, after an encounter with a monstrous polar bear. It is, however, the heroic quest of an Icelandic woman, which she embarks on because of her love for him, that precures him life-giving water from the Brook of Vitality. This might be

interpreted as indicative of how degenerate modern man's initiation rites have become, as they are dependent on the exploitation of others. After having succumbed to deadly nature, the reviving sip from the Brook of Vitality in this "primitive utopia" can be seen to make a man out of Magnús Árelíus, and he seems to have acquired sacred knowledge and wisdom, as is a typical outcome of initiating rites according to Eliade (1963, 198). But he also must leave behind the woman who gave him this gift and use his experience to succeed in another, modern world.

> "These were two incompatible worlds, and he was grateful for having been forced into closeness with the commoners, who first came closer when he was alone and filthy. Helpless. They had changed him. It was like a 'warm bath for his heart'—so poetic he could be when he wrote in his journal in the evenings. All of his booklearning had not been able to make him a philosopher. What did, was his experience of the alien life of the lowest class" (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 178).[19]

His speculation on how the simple ways of lower-class Icelanders might entail an authenticity and happiness, a paradisiacal state the modern world has fallen from (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 177), is based on the conviction that this "fall" cannot be reversed; that he can only experience this paradise temporarily, getting the relief and perhaps the energy to continue participating in the new world of constant growth, progress and career struggle: "He knew that he must not yield to such dimensions in his soul. Though he could yield just a bit, all the same. Good to have a little taste" (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 197–198).[20] Again, Herzfeld's (2009, 344, 365) descriptions of crypto-colonies, whose "high cultural pedestals" ironically entail a sharp distinction from "the globally dominant advantages of modernity", seem to conform with the book's analysis of Iceland's role and status in a colonial and postcolonial world.

What is Real?

Listening to the ghosts and acknowledging the injustices they have suffered by dutifully writing down their stories in his journal, does appease them so they go away and leave Magnús Árelíus presumably a better man. Ironically, it is precisely his records, compiled in the name of justice, that finally motivate the decision by Danish authorities to empty Iceland of inhabitants. Although it remains unclear how much of this narrative was actually included in the final report to Danish authorities, and it is uncertain whether the report was even read

[19] "Þetta voru tveir ósamræmanlegir heimar, og hann var þakklátur fyrir að vera þröngvað til nálægðar við alþýðufólkið sem kom fyrst nær þegar hann var orðinn aleinn og skítugur. Umkomulaus. Það hafði breytt honum. Það var sem laugandi bað fyrir hjartað – svo skáldlegur gat hann verið þegar hann nóteraði á kvöldin. Bækurnar höfðu ekki megnað að gera hann að heimspekingi. Það var reynslan af þessu framandi lífi hinna lægst settu."

[20] "Hann vissi að hann mátti ekki gefa sig að slíkum dimensjónum í sálinni. Gefa sig aðeins að því samt. Gott að smakka aðeins á."

"cover-to-cover" ("spjaldanna milli") (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 289), his record not only dispels the ghosts of past Icelanders, it is also part of a process that obliterates future Icelanders. Emilie Cameron (2008, 386) has discussed, in a Canadian context, how popular it is to talk of haunting when describing colonial and postcolonial issues but thinks "risks are involved in [...] figuring Indigenous bodies, voices, and histories in ghostly terms" because that implies "that they have already disappeared", that we can lay them "to rest and an era of 'peace and harmony' might be initiated" even if there are actual people still living with the consequences. Such ghost-stories "manage to 'write out' the bodies and voices of living, politically active Indigenous peoples", says Cameron (2008, 388). In *Lifandilífslækur*, Magnús Árelíus draws a connection between his sensitivity to the sufferings of others and his embarrassing sensitivity to otherworldly phenomena; he recounts that he from childhood has seen people that others neither hear nor see, and how he was never able to pass a prostitute in Copenhagen without sensing her backstory and feeling compassion for the girl from a farm in Jutland who had to sell her body to survive (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 73). But by focusing on the ghost stories rather than the living bodies around him, he manages to do exactly that: "write out" the existence of living people with interests at stake.

Furthermore, these ghost stories will automatically be excluded from official history. History is written by the victors, the saying goes, and the struggle between Magnús Árelíus and the ghosts can be read as a reflection of the eternal problem of whose story will be heard and therefore survive as the "real" history. Ghosts disturb the general agreement on what is real in an enlightened world that has a steadfast belief in science. Their stubborn presence forces the believer in science to reject the evidence of his own senses: it becomes "a lump in the nervous system" that makes itself noticeable from time to time and takes "a great deal of strength to suppress" (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 110),[21] just as some versions of history require that we ignore obviously contradictory evidence. "Philosophers taught that there was nothing in human thought that did not derive from the senses", Magnús Árelíus muses, but "the problem was just with what man did not sense clearly, but only in part, as if in a dream, yet still caught a whiff of, so to speak. Did it exist?" (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 110–111)[22] The Enlightenment's fondness for categorization condemns these non-categorizable apparitions to a sort of non-existence in the dark nook of superstition within the unofficial and unreliable genre of folk tales.

"From his horse's back, the scientist looks over the scene and at us, clad in rags, and the words stream from beneath his tricorne [...] his scientific eyes black and hungry-looking, like a beast's. He is conscious of his authority and the seriousness of his task",[23] says the

[21] "Það var svo sem einn köggull í taugakerfinu sem gerði vart við sig endrum og eins og þurfti að beita kröftum til að bæla niður [...]."

[22] "Heimspekingarnir kenndu að ekkert væri til í hugsun mannsins sem ekki kæmi í gegnum skynjunina [...] vandinn var bara þetta sem maður ekki skynjaði alminlega, bara að hluta, eins og draum, en greindi samt eiminn af, var það til?"

[23] "Vísindamaðurinn lítur yfir sviðið af hesti sínum og á okkur tötrum klædd og orðin fossa undan hinum þrístrenda hatti [...] vísindaaugun svört eins og í svöngu dýri. Hann veit um vald sitt og alvöru síns verkefnis."

narrator, who tellingly defines himself as a ghostly presence when referring to himself as the story's spirit and tries to counter Magnús Árelíus's reports with a more detailed description of events, reasoning that people might want to know what "really happened" ("hvað hafi virkilega gerst") (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 69, 98). This double viewpoint, moving between a Danish and Icelandic point of reference, via different narrating voices but also via changes in the perspective of Magnús Árelíus as the main center of consciousness, creates the irony of the story. It also supports the story's recurrent motif of the importance of fiction—storytelling—in shaping a reality. The narrator says he and "his informants may be viewed as the voice of [an] overlapping area [of the categories of reality and fiction]" (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 98–99).[24] This "overlap of fiction and reality is very different from person to person" (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 99),[25] the narrator states, and it is obvious that reality for most Icelanders, with the exception of a few highly educated people, is different from the reality of the "new man" of the Enlightenment. Because of their unfamiliarity with the land, its history and recent events, Magnús Árelíus and his educated Icelandic assistant draw far-fetched conclusions from the evidence around them, doing so in the name of science and thereby creating their own reality which the local farmers find childish and rather hilarious. In the eyes of the inhabitants of the Icelandic Westfjords, however, the "shades of drowned people" that Magnús Árelíus dismisses as nonsense are "bone-hard reality" and they "cannot drop a plate on the floor or lose a lamb off a cliff without blaming the same drowned shades for those mishaps" (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 99).[26] Instead of pushing the ill-definable ghosts to the edges of the real, categorizable world, these Icelanders are in a state of what Laura White would call "cohabitation" with ghosts. White claims that hauntings in fictive literature invite "the conversation and complex interaction that characterize cohabitation" and points to Anglophone fiction[27] where a character does "not seriously endeavor to silence any of the many ghosts that share his world", but rather has "familiarity with specters and positions them among the multitude of other inhabitants" in their "everyday reality". She proposes that ghosts and other specters in literature "testify to experiences of material and epistemological violence" and emphasizes the importance of how they are dealt with, distinguishing what she calls *ecospectrality*,[28] which entails accepting cohabitation with

[24] "Því mætti líta á þennan söguanda og hans heimildarmenn sem raust þessa skörunarsvæðis [veruleika og skáldskapar] fremur en rödd kategóríanna hvorrar fyrir sig."

[25] "[...] þessi skörun skáldskapar og veruleika er afar ólík frá manni til manns."

[26] "[...] eru þeir skuggar [drukknaðra] beinharður veruleiki ábúendanna, sem mega hvorki missa disk í gólf né lamb fram af kletti nema kenna þeim sömu sjódrukknuðu skuggum um þær ófarir."

[27] White here uses the work *Animal's People* (2007) by Indra Sinha as an example.

[28] White draws on Timothy Morton, who advocates "spectral phenomenology", where "*Spectrality is non-humans*, including the "nonhuman" aspects of ourselves" and claims that "ecological awareness is coexisting, in thought and in practice, with the ghostly host of nonhumans" (2017, 54, 63). As he explains: "Meeting an ecological being is a moment at which I encounter something that is not me such that even if this being is obviously part of me—say, my brain—I don't experience it as part of the supposed whole that makes up "me." Ecological thought is Adorno's ideal of thinking as the encounter with non-identity. When it isn't simply

ghosts as a part of the quotidian, "from approaches to haunting that emphasize a fear of ghosts and seek to put those ghosts to rest" (White 2020, 5–6).

> "Living with specters does not mean ignoring their disruptive potential or the horrors of the past violences that they bring to light. It does mean validating their presence and perspective and letting their insights shape decisions. It requires learning to listen to their demands" (White 2020, 5).

Here, White sees a connection to our general attitude towards our environments and other beings:

> "Literary ghosts vividly return readers to specific scenes of injustice, but analyzing these ghosts with attention to spectrality more broadly as a movement across borders, not only between life and death, but also between human and nonhuman, visible and invisible, allows patterns of injustice to emerge, and it implicates ways of thinking that rely on borders as a connecting feature between sites of injustice" (White 2020, 6).

Referring to "specific histories of exploitation and repression that have actively screened these connections from awareness", White (2020, 7) explains that "the specter as an aesthetic device serves to represent the realities of connections across borders of generations, nations, and species that evade other forms of representation and/or that have been actively repressed in other forms of storytelling". As we have seen, the ghosts in *Lifandilífslækur* are such borderline beings, reminding those who sense them of the blurriness of all borders, and different versions of reality are constantly played against each other throughout the story.[29] But in the end the narrator cannot continue recounting his alternate version of events as his "ghostly historians have fallen silent" (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 286)[30] due to Magnús Árelíus resolving the problem of their existence by compassionately listening to them and laying them to rest by affirming that injustices they suffered were not their fault and that they deserved better. Here, the aforementioned ritual of witnessing often associated with healing in trauma studies seems to take on a rather sinister aspect, facilitating a selective process of forgetting and remembering that secures the "winners'" version of reality where traumatic experiences of the past are seen as atoned for and the victors no longer need to answer for building their dominance on violence and injustice. Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir

pushing preformatted pieces around, thought meets specters, which is to say, beings whose ontological status is profoundly and irreducibly ambiguous." (Morton 2017, 64–65)

[29] Such a narrative in the first person plural can also be found in Jón Kalman Stefánsson's trilogy, *Himnaríki og helvíti* (2007), published in English as *Heaven and Hell* in 2010, *Harmur englanna* (2009), published in English as *The Sorrow of Angels* in 2013, and *Hjarta mannsins* (2011), published in English as *The Heart of Man* in 2015, where the dead tell stories of former generations' battles with the hostile forces of nature and social injustice; bearing witness to traumatic experiences that new generations must hear about.

[30] "[...] vorir afturgengnu sagnamenn eru þagnaðir".

(2017, 10) has discussed how, in cultures dealing with a traumatic past, "commemoration, the remembrance, and the calls to remember are possibly the logical conclusion of a lack of historical consciousness, with the memorials bearing witness to our need to remember but longing [...] to forget our inglorious past". She draws on Michael Sheringham's (1993, 311) speculations that "to bring memories back to the light of day, into the foreground of consciousness, into language and onto the page, is to expose them [...] to a potentially destructive glare" and "that the excavation of memory can have the therapeutic character of an exorcism, that to retrieve something from memory is to draw its sting, to be done with it, to allow it to be forgotten". Quoting James E. Young's (1993, 181) words that "once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember", Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir (2017, 14) wonders if "we need a new aesthetics, a new way in which to retain in our mind the manifold and contradictory effects of the remembering/forgetting category".

> "What I want to emphasise is how a palpable sense of the forgotten is mediated, not just in the sense of something forgotten being unearthed, but as being constantly present whether it is a politically compromised past or in private recollections. It might be made present as an obstacle, hesitation, gap, or even in a marked fluidity of memories; where there is a sense of the forgotten there is *doubt*. Lack of such doubt makes the memory seem overdetermined" (Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir 2017, 15).

This is the kind of doubt Bergsveinn Birgisson expresses in *Lifandilífslækur* through the ironic tone that results from clashes of contrasting viewpoints. Adding an ecocritical view to this postcolonial reading of the book, assuming that this tale of both fictive and actual disasters in the past has some relevance for contemporary readers constantly confronted with looming ecological disasters, the question arises of whether our need to remember mankind's role in creating current environmental threats due to greed and a desire to dominate, and our desire to acknowledge our guilt, is just a way of acquitting ourselves and thereby deterring us from taking action.

In the novel, the entire population of Iceland is deported, and the deserted island becomes a destination for tourists who want to experience nature in its purest form, although much of the Icelandic highlands have been flooded, presumably to harness energy for factories. In *Lifandilífslækur*'s alternative reality, Icelanders thus suffer the fate of forced displacement; their land is not taken over by new settlers but used for nature tourism and industry. These are also modern trends that Native Americans have been confronted with in their fight for decolonization (see Gilio-Whitaker 2019, 60–62, 75–76, 92–95), and this fictive turn of events, that would have been highly unlikely in our reality given Iceland's status within the Danish Realm, seems to have the functioning of underscoring yet again that we are all parts of a postcolonial world and affected by the undercurrents of colonial ideology. This scenario is also disturbingly similar to conditions in Iceland in the twenty-first century,

signaling that Icelanders are not, and have never been, naïve paradisiacal beings. On the contrary, they have shrewdly played the role of the "trickster" in a colonial world, as anthropologist Kristín Loftsdóttir calls it, assuming a status which comes from "not fully belonging with the modernizing nations but yet not belonging with other colonized countries either" and not being above using "racialized ideas" to set themselves "apart from other colonized people but also from [...] neighboring countries" (2019, 28). In our reality Icelanders live on in Iceland, exploit and vandalize part of the wilderness, selling admittance to the rest to tourists and—as Kristín Loftsdóttir (2019, 46–7) has demonstrated—the postcolonial fear of being categorized as a third-world country has spurred us to demonstrate that we can be just as "modern" as the most powerful European states.

Here we might remind ourselves of Ármann Jakobsson's (2017, 163) message that paranormal phenomena such as ghosts usually have "a direct relationship with the inner lives of the humans who experience it" and a more indirect relationship with the society that fosters them. Icelanders, Magnús Árelíus notes in *Lifandilífslækur*, "always turned away when he tried to talk about the so-called wretches—those who had little or no refuge in that pitiless country" (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 249).[31] This is a harsh judgement from the outsider, and its historical accuracy can be debated. As Jón Jónsson (2018, 45–77) has demonstrated in a book on Icelandic beggars and vagabonds, the country's law and social order did, right from the first settlement of Nordic immigrants and throughout the later rule of the Danish kingdom, take into account the dire situation of the poorest and tried to ensure a basic welfare system. Furthermore, many of the more fortunate citizens showed more compassion and generosity than the law required, even ignoring legal provisions that demanded punishments for "crimes" such as roaming the country without steady work. On the other hand, stories of abuse of the disadvantaged, often in the name of the law, abound (see e.g. Jón Jónsson 2018, 31, 37–38) and tend to get more attention as they shock and raise questions like those Magnús Árelíus asked: How can such cruelty be tolerated? Icelanders turning away when a representative of the top echelon of the colonial system tries to discuss the situation can, in fact, be interpreted not as disinterest but as the subordinates' silent anger and shame. The all-to-common harsh destiny of the "wretches" that he tries to discuss hits a sore spot and bears witness to the fact that Icelanders, as one ghost—i.e. one of the victims—notes, have inevitably been caught up in vicious cycles of cruelty and violence which, in the eighteenth century, were still closely interwoven with the power system of colonialism.

> "It is the fear that binds it all together, the fear that governs, the fear is the context. And where fear is in charge, it is never far to disdain, and small men fear what is above them and disdain what is below, and do as they are told and imitate their masters above them. From their masters on high, they learn to hate their

[31] "[...] innfæddir sneru sér alltaf undan þegar hann vildi ræða um þá svokölluðu aumingja – þessa sem áttu líkt og ekkert skjól í því harðbrjósta landi."

> own people. [...] The fear begins with those who own the country, and moves from there to the highest offices of government and commerce, and trickles from there down to the rest of us" (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 250).[32]

This ghostly declaration presents a crypto-colonial view where it is impossible to envisage Iceland and Denmark as a simple binary where one corrupt nation oppresses an innocent one. Icelanders were themselves active participants of this abusive and exploitative power system, also at higher stages, as some of them were officials of the Danish Realm. The importance of facing this colonial heritage is reiterated when another ghost speculates that life in this country will remain unchanged for a long time, "as long as no one wishes to view it as if from the threshold" (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2018, 251).[33] That is, from the vantage point of the marginalized, the ghosts, as "the threshold" is, according to Eliade (1963, 25), "the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds—and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate". If we transfer that message to the ongoing climate debate, we might also ask ourselves if mankind can ever change course when it clings to our hierarchic system of categorization, in which humans can always justify their exploitation and violence against the nonhuman world, instead of accepting the blurriness of those categories and investigating the advantage of a "view from the threshold".

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[32] "Það er óttinn sem límir það allt saman, óttinn sem stýrir, óttinn er samhengið. Og þar sem óttinn ræður er aldrei langt í fyrirlitninguna og litlir menn óttast upp á við og fyrirlíta niður á við og gera eins og þeim er sagt og herma eftir herrum sínum að ofan. Þeir læra af þeim hæstu herrum að hata sitt eigið fólk. [...] Óttinn byrjar hjá þeim sem eiga landið, þaðan til æðstu embætta valds og verslunar og sótast þaðan yfir í okkur hin."

[33] "[...] meðan enginn vill sjá það eins og af þröskuldinum ..."

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