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Inspired by Iceland: Borealism and Geographical Imaginations of the North in Migrants' Narratives

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore the impact of geographical imaginations on mobility and the ways in which imaginaries of the North are used in migrants' narratives. We apply the concept of borealism as developed by Kristinn Schram (2011) as well as anthropological literature on the role of images in producing different forms of mobilities (Salazar 2011; 2013), in order to unravel the ways through which geographical imaginations of Iceland and the North have been created, used and reproduced in migrants' narratives. Based on ethnographical research, we seek to understand how these different representations of Iceland impact the way migrants think about and embody the place where they live, and how they reflect the borealist discourse in their own discourses. We particularly focus on the exotic image of Iceland and understand the authenticity expressed by migrants settling in the Icelandic countryside.

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INTRODUCTION

By a route obscure and lonely,
Haunted by ill angels only,
Where an Eidolon, named NIGHT,
On a black throne reigns upright,
I have reached these lands but newly
From an ultimate dim Thule—
From a wild weird clime that lieth, sublime,
Out of SPACE—Out of TIME.

EXCERPT FROM THE POEM 'DREAM-LAND' BY EDGAR ALLAN POE (2015) [1844]

Poe's description of a gloomy, wild but sublime land, out of space and time, resonates intently with prevalent imaginaries of the North and Iceland that conduce different forms of mobility, as we shall demonstrate in this article. Situated at the margin of Europe, Iceland remains rather inconspicuous in the public imagination of most Europeans. Hence, many migrants in our research, coming from EU member states, only had a vague idea about the destination they were headed to when they moved there. Recently, however, the country has received a lot of attention from the international media, particularly during the economic crisis of 2008 (Chartier 2010) and then again after the volcanic eruption of Eyjafjallajökull in 2010, which caused major disruption to air travel across Europe (Birtchnell & Büscher 2011). Despite the negative impact of the economic crisis on Iceland's international image, the country managed to recover from being perceived as bankrupt, corrupt and broken to become increasingly recognised as an example of an advanced democracy and also for its apparently successful resistance to neoliberal dominance (e.g., Worstall 2015; Birrell 2015; cf. Loftsdóttir 2018). Iceland is also evoked as a feminist paradise (e.g., Heertz 2016; cf. Þorvaldsdóttir 2011), one of the happiest countries on earth (Madden 2019) and one of the safest places to live (Global Peace Index 2019). Significantly, the zealous promotion of Iceland as a tourist destination initiated to help it recover from the economic recession has clearly contributed to the production of the country's image as a manifestation of the exotic Arctic North (Lund, Loftsdóttir & Leonard 2017). While it indisputably resulted in the rapid expansion of tourism, this campaign also inspired significant migration, more than short-term tourism-related labour mobility.

In this article, we employ the concept of 'borealism' introduced by Kjartan Fløgstad (2007) and applied to Iceland by Kristinn Schram (2011), as well as literature on the role of images in producing different forms of mobilities (Salazar 2011, 2013; Thompson 2016) to unravel how geographical imaginaries of Iceland and the North have been appropriated, utilised and reproduced by migrants. We understand borealism as the practice of exoticisation of Nordic and Arctic cultures and regions. We discuss how ideas of exceptionalism, purity and the 'authentic North', as well as the subsequent upsurge in tourism to Iceland, influenced migration to the country, and how it affected migrants' narratives. Based on ethnographic research, we seek to understand how these different representations of Iceland impact the way migrants think about and embody the place where they live, and how they reflect the borealist discourse in their own accounts, including examples from migrants who settled in the Icelandic countryside. We are particularly interested in how images of a 'remote' and

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'authentic' Iceland converge with general ideas about the North, on the one hand, and common representations of rurality, on the other.

METHODS

We build on our individual ethnographic studies among immigrants in Iceland. These were based on participant observation, including formal interviews and informal daily encounters and conversations. Formal interviews were recorded and transcribed. The first author's primary interest has been the experiences of Polish migrants in Iceland, their labour market participation and transnational practices. Her research began in 2003 as a doctoral project (consisting of interviews with more than 70 individuals) and has continued until now as part of various research projects. The participants predominantly represent so-called economic migrants and comprise a diverse group in terms of age, education, length of migration and place of residence in Iceland.

The second author's data come from her doctoral research conducted between 2016 and 2022. The study looked at family practices among migrants from different EU countries who have been living in Northern Iceland. Participants in her study consist primarily of migrant parents who have a trade or a degree, who came to Iceland for professional reasons or to pursue romantic relationships with someone living in Iceland.

Neither of these research projects focused specifically on images of Iceland, but the latter emerged as a distinctive topic in some of the conversations, which were then selected for the purpose of this article. The span of almost 20 years between the first and last interviews allows for a comparative perspective to observe changes in migrants' narratives. We supplement our data with quotations from the blog sites run by Polish migrants and interviews with migrants published in different Polish news outlets. In our opinion, they provide relevant material, because they show how ideas of Iceland are appropriated and further reproduced by migrants into the public imaginary.

GEOGRAPHICAL IMAGINATION AND MOBILITY

International migration is typically explained as a consequence of economic necessity (Hagen-Zanker 2008). However, the motivations to migrate are usually complex and numerous. The decision to migrate often intersects with a variety of economic, social and political motives, and scholars are increasingly looking at culture to explain the movements of people across the world (Thompson 2017; Sirkeci & Cohen 2011). Although the scholarship has devoted a good deal of attention to understand why people migrate, there have been fewer attempts to scrutinise the reasons migrants choose a particular destination over another. Fawcett (1989) argues that the actual migration flows result from prior formal and informal economic, political and historical linkages between countries. Embedded in the past and socio-economic relations, such migration chains and migration networks contribute to so-called 'cultures of migration' that further perpetuate migration from certain places to specific destinations (Kandel & Massey 2002). A culture of migration becomes 'a cumulative factor that produces migratory aspirations when there appear to be few tangible economic and/or social motivations, as the act of migration becomes a rite of passage and/or source of social capital' (Thompson 2017: 78). In other words, a culture of migration exists in places where the idea of migration has become normalized and

anticipated in the local or national imaginary. Such is the case in certain countries such as the Philippines, Mexico (Kandel & Massey 2002) or Poland (Garapich 2013), in specific regions or cities, for instance, Dhaka in Bangladesh (Thompson 2017), or among cosmopolitan elite families (Liu-Farrer 2016; Lei 2010). However, Thompson (2017) argues that cultures of migration cannot entirely explain people's choices of exact migration destinations, and encourages an exploration of 'the impact of geographical imaginations on migration-decision making' (p. 79) to account for the importance of place, for we need to understand *why* people migrate *where*. Geographical imaginations consist of the images we hold of different places, be it landscape, people or cultural characteristics; these images are often over-simplified, but they do impact our experiences of particular places and our life choices, including where to go on holiday or where to migrate (Thompson 2017).

Salazar understands travel to distant destinations as rooted in 'historically laden and socioculturally constructed imaginaries' (2012: 576). The motivations to cross borders tend to be linked to the ability of travellers and their social networks to imagine other places and other lives. As Salazar points out (2012: 577): 'people hardly journey to *terrae incognitae* anymore these days but to destinations they already virtually "know" through the widely circulating imaginaries about them'. Elicited by mass-mediated images and discourses, such representations have modified individuals' relationships with the world around them and their own disposition within it (Salazar 2012; Morley 2000). Imaginaries travel through a multitude of channels and provide cultural material to be drawn upon and used for the creation of translocal connections (Römhild 2002). Referring to Said (1994), Salazar (2013: 234) defines geographical imaginaries as practices relating to 'how spaces are imagined, how meanings are ascribed to physical spaces (such that they are perceived, represented and interpreted in particular ways), how knowledge about these places is produced and how these representations make various courses of action possible'.

If social contacts seem most influential in creating geographical imaginaries (Thompson 2017), Fujita (2004) argues that the consumption of Western popular culture is also a powerful authority that affects the imaginaries of particular places and that if individuals cannot imagine in detail their future migration destination, it is probably because their exposure to images of this country has been far less than their exposure to other places, such as New York, and the US, generally. Chang and Lim (2004) contend that the marketing of particular places into tourist targets is also responsible for creating geographical imaginaries. Accordingly, nation-branding and the development of Iceland as a tourist object in recent years have certainly contributed to the consolidation of imagining Iceland as representing an exotic Arctic North (Gunnarsdóttir 2011; Huijbens 2011; Lund, Loftsdóttir & Leonard 2017). Significantly, both the tourist and the migrant have become recipients of the images used to promote certain destinations, further obscuring the already blurred distinction between these forms of mobility (Skaptadóttir & Rancew-Sikora 2016).

DEFINING NORTH AND IMAGES OF ICELAND

Sociocultural representations of the North have been recently encapsulated as 'borealism', which derives from the name of the god of the North wind in Greek mythology (Kythor 2019). First used by Norwegian writer Kjartan Fløgstad in his essay *Pyramiden* (2007), the term has gained ground in Scandinavian studies and other disciplines to describe preconceived ideas of the North from the outside (ibid.).

Inspired by Edward Said's concept of orientalism, borealism refers to the ontological and epistemological distinction between the South and North, which implies asymmetric power relations between centre and periphery (Schram 2011; cf. Ridanpää 2007). Although primarily used in the writings of South European authors and scholars, the concept has also been re-appropriated by Nordic and Arctic states to articulate their own characteristics (Briens 2016). In the Icelandic context, borealism has been readily applied by Kristinn Schram to analyse the idea of the North and its role in shaping the identities and sociocultural practices of Icelanders living abroad (2011a), as well as how ideas of exoticism and uniqueness are reproduced in contemporary Icelandic media and daily life (2009, 2011b).

As Ridanpää (2007: 12) observes, 'the North is much more than [a] cardinal point', varyingly encompassing the North Atlantic region, and territories from the North of Russia, Canada and the Arctic (cf. Chartier 2018). Moreover, its conceptualisation is far from uniform, depending on which particular geographical location, socio-political standpoint or historical period is being discussed (Ridanpää 2007; Chartier 2018). Still, in Western culture, North tends to represent the world beyond the European ecumene (Chartier 2018), being typically defined through binary oppositions: modern versus primitive, central versus peripheral, rich versus poor (Oslund 2011). The imagined North often evokes ideas of remoteness (temporal and special), coldness, darkness and wilderness, in contrast to the familiar and civilised. Located in the subarctic North, distant and relatively isolated in the past, identified frequently as the mythical 'Ultima Thule', Iceland seems to epitomise this generic idea of the North.

Examining literary representations of the North, Davidson (2005) points out that from European antiquity throughout the 19th century, and to some extent up until now, 'north is reported as place of extremes and ambiguity', imagined as 'a seat of evil inhabited by dangerous creatures' or, conversely, a 'place of austere felicity where virtuous peoples live' (p. 21). The same dichotomy can be found in travel descriptions of Iceland, which have been categorised by Icelandic historian Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson as either dystopian hell or utopian paradise (2015). As summarised by Schram (2011a), during Romanticism, the North was strongly linked to ideas of freedom, purity, unspoiled nature and the sublime. These ideas were largely incorporated into the Icelandic independence movement, which portrayed Iceland as a wild and exotic countryside inhabited by self-reliant, autonomous, hard-working and strong people (Schram 2011: 102; Kjratansdóttir 2009). At the same time, the North was increasingly seen as progressive and advanced in contrast to images of the reactionary, uneducated and inconsistent South. Consequently, although the production of Icelandic narratives and images retained a quality of 'wildness' and being 'close to nature', it simultaneously insisted on dissociating itself from primitive communities and the anthropological myth of the 'noble savage' developed by Rousseau in 1755 (Schram 2011a).

This ambiguity is maintained in contemporary depictions of Iceland and Icelanders. For if inhabitants of the country are portrayed as independent and resilient, they are literate and highly cultured at the same time. While Iceland is typically characterised as peripheral and remote, it is also perceived as liberal and technologically advanced. The austere Icelandic landscape and harsh weather conditions have been equally linked to ideas of sublime and authenticity as to emptiness and inhospitality. Furthermore, Icelandic nature is depicted as having a kind of magical and mysterious power, an unpredictable and powerful force that both gives and takes (Kjartansdóttir 2009). These ideas of the North, as well as Icelandic folktales, have influenced nourishing

a culture of self-production in Iceland such as can be seen in the country's literature, cinema and music. Some of these images have also been vigorously recreated in the promotion of Iceland to tourists.

INSPIRED BY ICELAND

Between 2001 and 2021, the number of foreign citizens in Iceland increased almost fourfold (Statistics Iceland 2021). The sharp rise in the number of migrants over the past few years cannot only be perceived as a consequence of Iceland emerging as a legitimate actor in the global neoliberal economy (Skaptadóttir 2015), but should also be related to Iceland's increasingly widespread visibility as well as its extensive self-branding to energise tourism industry. The turmoil experienced by Iceland during the economic crisis of 2008 was widely reported by the international media (Chartier 2010), disturbing the aspiration of the country to join the ranks of other international players in the global economy and become a rightful member of the modern world (Loftsdóttir 2014). Two years later, in March 2010, the volcanic eruption of Eyjafjallajökull, which caused major disruption to air travel across Europe, made headlines around the world, simultaneously arousing anxieties over the future of Iceland as a tourist destination (Benediktsson, Lund & Huijbens 2011; Jóhannesson & Huijbens 2010). In the space of two years, Iceland had become a symbol of disorder and uncertainty in the international media.

To restore Iceland's damaged reputation on the world stage, the government launched a major marketing campaign in 2010. Investing a total of 700 million ISK (3.7 million GBP), the campaign 'Inspired by Iceland' frantically promoted the charms of the country via commercial and social media, featuring, for instance, foreign celebrities praising the charms of Iceland or Icelanders inviting travellers into their homes to experience 'the real Iceland' (Benediktsson, Lund & Huijbens 2011). Pristine nature, unspoiled wilderness and exotic landscapes are promoted as the main attractions of the country (Saeþorsdottir, Hall & Saarinen 2011). Typically tourist advertising establish Iceland as an Arctic destination to capitalise on the growing interest and political importance of the region (Lund, Kjartansdóttir & Loftsdóttir 2018). Marketing campaigns built on contradictory ideas of Iceland as peripheral yet central included in both European and American Western spaces, distant but accessible, offering all the commodities of a modern 'Western' nation to reassure visitors that their experience will be comfortable and safe as well as extreme and adventurous (Lund, Loftsdóttir & Leonard 2017).

Cultural productions – literature, films and television series – have also entrenched certain geographical images of Iceland as the Boreal North (Kjartansdóttir 2009; Schram 2011b; Loftsdóttir, Kjartansdóttir & Lund 2017; Sigurðardóttir 2020). Scenic landscapes typically play a prominent role in motion pictures produced in Iceland. Frequently, Icelandic artists utilise definite preconceptions of Iceland to promote their work., For instance, Icelandic musicians often try fit to apparently distinctive Icelandic genre that is believed to be strongly influenced by nature and so described as unpredictable, untamed and eccentric (Sigurdardóttir 2020). Already in the 1990s, Iceland had been associated with the alternative music scene and vibrant pub crawl culture of Reykjavik, which were listed as one of the country's attractions in the travel guides and brochures (Oslund 2011). Similarly, critically acclaimed Icelandic films have marketed the perceived quirkiness and authenticity of Icelandic rurality, drawing on the general image of the remote, marginal and exotic Icelandic character (Bjarnason, Thorarinsdottir & Gkartzios 2021).

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IMAGE-INDUCED MOBILITIES TO ICELAND

The number of visitors to Iceland increased from 460,000 in 2010 to 2.3 million in 2018 (Sæþórsdóttir, Hall & Wendt 2020); this shift moved Iceland from a 'once well-kept secret of Europe' (Hewitt 2018) to a highly popular and desired destination. Significantly, the rapid expansion of the tourism industry inevitably prompted considerable labour migration, some of which was directly driven by the tourism sector. Tourism-related employment in Iceland more than doubled between 2009 and 2018. In 2019, foreigners made up 36% of all employees in the tourism sector, of whom 76% were employed in accommodation and catering (Júlíusdóttir & Halldórsdóttir 2020).

Migration to Iceland has been typically characterised as economically driven (Skaptadóttir 2015). Accordingly, the majority of our research participants came primarily to work, often having been directly recruited through employment agencies or getting a job with the help of migrant networks. However, we also met some of the growing number of people who chose to come to Iceland following specific ideas and representations of the country, with zealous nation-branding following the financial collapse clearly intensifying this trend. Compelling images of Iceland, predominantly produced for the purpose of the tourism industry, not only established Iceland as a desired and fashionable destination for leisure trips but also have inspired migrants who are looking for a peaceful and enchanting place to live or work, whether for shorter or longer periods. As the cost of living in Iceland is forbidding to many young people, some of them are even willing to resort to unpaid work in exchange for accommodation and meals to experience this exotic country. As shown by the study of Rafnsdóttir, Einarsdóttir and Klemensdóttir (2020), many of them consider themselves as travellers looking for personal enrichment, and engaging in so-called voluntourism gives them – in their eyes – the freedom and flexibility to explore Iceland.

The considerable price gap between Eastern Europe and Iceland often inclines young people from this region desiring to visit the country to simultaneously seek work to finance their travel. In this sense, the expansion of the EU and opening of the Icelandic labour market to citizens of the new member states enabled different forms of mobility, like those combining tourism and work, which is evident in the account of Maja,[1] a young woman who initially came to Iceland as an au-pair in 2016:

> Iceland has always intrigued me. All this wilderness and living conditions. I was very curious to see how people live here. I wanted to experience the nature. [...] And, I thought it would be an interesting combination [to work and travel]. It would allow me to not to spend too much money, which I did not have. Because after all it [Iceland] is a very expensive country, just to come and see. I mean, really see it and learn something more that in a 5-day trip.

The apparent benefit of combining work and travel – as elaborated in this quote – is that it facilitates lengthier stays and more genuine engagements in Iceland and its unspoiled nature. Similarly, Kasia and Tomek clearly used migration to meet their touristic goals and intention to get to know the country better. They took a year's break from their studies to experience something new and decided to come to Iceland, largely attracted by its acclaimed unique and extraordinary landscape. They

1 All names used in the article are pseudonyms.

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came without knowing anybody in the country yet within a few days they found jobs, a flat and new friends. Every weekend they spent travelling, systematically visiting any possible – more or less obvious – tourist attraction, including following the northern lights or bathing in hot pools in the highlands. Each trip has been meticulously described on their blog and adorned with numerous pictures, further reproducing the Icelandic gaze. In this sense, with the widespread use of social media, migrants are not only consumers of the images, but can also become active agents in promoting Iceland as a destination.

Often the interest in Iceland was spurred by images distributed in relation to the tourism industry, but also by imaginaries inspired by popular culture. For instance, iconic films *Children of Nature* and *Angels of the Universe* by Friðrik Þór Friðriksson or *Noi the Albino* by Dagur Kári, as well as internationally recognised Icelandic musicians like Sigur Rós and, especially, Björk, played a significant role in sparking the imagination and so potentially the desire to visit the country. As one Polish migrant neatly put it on his blog: 'Iceland is Björk and Björk is Iceland'. While Aga explained her reasons for coming to Iceland in the following way: 'Well, in the bar I worked in [in Poland], they constantly played *Heima* by Sigur Rós. And everybody talked about Iceland as paradise.' *Heima* ['At Home'] is a full-length film documenting the band's tour around Iceland, which primarily consisted of open-air concerts. The landscape shots featured in the documentary alongside the atmospheric music constitute Iceland, and especially its countryside, as a somehow remote, old-fashioned, idyllic and authentic place apparently longed for by those disappointed with the corruption of modern cities.

The entanglements between Icelandic music and specific geographical imaginaries of the country are also evident in the account of Stanisław, a young Polish man who first came to Iceland in 2006, already before the extensive touristic promotion of the country. His first visit was mainly motivated by the desire to see the country, but combined with short-term ad hoc jobs. He then came back to Iceland as a long-term resident. This is how he described his first visit:

> My Icelandic beginnings stared from fascination with Icelandic music seeping late in night from alternative radio stations (already before the fame of Sigur Rós). Along with music, came to me pictures of landscape and wonders of the local nature; some documentaries, then feature films. And this is why I decided on expedition to Iceland. [...] So, the first impressions came from hitchhiking around the island. Although the idealised images were sometimes confronted with reality (for example exorbitant prices and commercialisation of the Blue Lagoon), still the nature managed to make impression on me.

The overlapping ideas of geographical remoteness, niche culture and authenticity that seem to create a somewhat nostalgic and romanticised picture of a secluded island, ostensibly away from manufactured tourism, clearly inspired some of our interlocutors to come to Iceland or even settle, in spite some of these images were later challenged by reality. Access to wilderness, unspoiled nature ('we almost live here like in the huge national park'), clean air and water – along with social aspects like personal freedom and lack of violence – were then mentioned as primary reasons why Stanisław decided to come back and continue to live in Iceland. Consequently, his initial touristic journey transformed into permanent migration.

Imagining Iceland as remote, scarcely inhabited, peaceful and free clearly attracts migrants seeking respite from the contemporary rush of densely populated European cities. The country offers an 'amazing space and picturesque roads leading sometimes at the edge of a gulf; high, rocky fjords and empty roads' as depicted by Yazhubal on his blog site (2008). Another time (2009) he explained: 'I am antisocial. I get irritated by the crowd, overcrowded buses,' and continued about his home country: 'One should not cross the street on the red light. It is too hot. Too far from salience and peace.' His description echoes the notions of a free, serene and genuine North framed in opposition to the enlightened but superficial world confined by a myriad of regulations and social rules. Calling oneself 'antisocial', his account somehow represents dystopian images of the Icelandic countryside inhabited by strong, autonomous individuals, sort of outlaws, living in communion with Icelandic nature, as often fashioned, for example, in Icelandic cinema (Schram 2009; Bjarnasson, Thorarinsdóttir & Gkartzios 2021). In some instances, Iceland appears as a utopian place, an out-of-the-way civilisation, offering a simple and fulfilling life in close proximity to nature, as summarised by Anna in the interview for *i-D* magazine: 'I am grateful for everything, because I live in the paradise on earth and I don't remember being happier than now. [...] I walk to work. Everyday. Regardless of the weather. The view of ocean, sky and mountains, which have different colour every day is so wonderful that I don't consider changing means of transportation' (Czyzewska 2017).

We also occasionally find that migrants' narratives stress the ideas of safety, freedom, egalitarianism and (gender) equality often evoked in the foreign media as characterising Iceland. For instance, Justyna, a freelancer and social activist, explained, 'I knew about Iceland only some fairy tales. I expected a society one step away from deliberative democracy. Obviously, it turned to be pipe-dreams, yet compared with Poland, Iceland is truly progressive country and gives space to breath.' Again, the images that provoke coming to Iceland may feel like misrepresentations at the point of the actual encounter upon arrival. Yet, they nevertheless may remain a legitimate reason if we compare the situation in migrants' countries of origin and seem well enough established in the public consciousness to continue to inspire migrants.

NORTH OF THE NORTH AND 'A PLACE BEYOND EVERYTHING ELSE'

While Iceland readily signifies the very idea of the North, Icelandic rural areas, particularly those placed in the north of the country seem especially suitable to fit that image. Marketing Iceland as a tourist destination relies heavily on promoting nature and landscapes outside the capital or urban areas (Gunnarsdóttir 2011). As tourism to Iceland increased, several regions started their own marketing campaigns to draw travellers to remote areas of the country.

If Iceland's capital, Reykjavik, has been constructed as an Arctic tourism destination, intrepid travellers as well as Icelandic inhabitants in the countryside sometimes dismiss it as 'anti-nature' and too urban to reflect the 'true' authentic Arctic North (Lund, Kjartansdóttir & Loftsdóttir 2018). Tourism businesses and municipalities have integrated this idea into their efforts to attract travellers off the beaten track, and intertwine ideas about uniqueness, authenticity and rurality: 'If you want to experience *unique* Iceland, go off season to the *rural* areas' [our emphasis]. For example, the campaign 'Visit Hauganes' is entirely built upon the idea of geographical and temporal remoteness. This tiny village in Northern Iceland draws on its isolated

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location to create posts on social media such as 'a gem where time has stood still' or 'a village so quiet you can hear your inner voice'.

As the majority of the study participants, as already mentioned, came primarily to work, their specific location tended to be determined by the job they received rather than a careful choice. The growing number of migrants settling outside the capital area should be seen as resulting mostly from the expanding tourist sector and the continuing demand for foreign workers in the food processing industry. Increasingly, however, those seeking a 'true' experience of Iceland or a refuge from 'civilisation' deliberately seek work in the rural areas, or specifically in the north of Iceland, as illustrated by Maja, already quoted, who came to Iceland as au-pair:

> Somehow I hoped that my host family would live in the North. My friend was in Iceland before and she told me that north of Iceland is beautiful and she recommends this part. [...] So, north was my preference. I did not want to come to big town that would look like any other town in Europe.

Even if, in many accounts, Reykjavík combines the qualities of a capital city and provincial town, some of our participants believed that rural Iceland in general, and the North of Iceland in particular, was 'closer to ideal'. The idea that the capital area is somehow 'lacking' is quite prevalent even in the narratives of those individuals who did not deliberately look to live in small towns or villages. Once migrants settle in the North of Iceland, they go through a process of re-scaling their imaginaries, and their geographical imaginations change and distort through their experiences, resulting in most of them making a distinction between the North of Iceland and the rest of the country. The north of the country is 'totally Iceland' in opposition to the capital area in particular, as Reykjavík is framed as depreciated by tourism and its accompanying Airbnb and puffin shops. The image of the Arctic as remote, authentic and pure is re-appropriated and localised in the North of Iceland (Lund, Kjartansdóttir & Loftsdóttir 2018).

In many narratives, the image of Northern Iceland incorporates a common idea of rurality: the slow pace of life, calm environment, a safe and peaceful location. Some of our interlocutors spoke about the simplicity of living in the North, which makes for an easy and comfortable life, for example by never being stuck in a traffic jam. The risks and worries associated with towns and urban areas, notably in their countries of origin, disappear amid the peaceful atmosphere of rural Iceland, as exemplified by Angela, a woman from Western Europe:

> It's a much more beautiful country, cleaner and not as noisy and not as... dangerous. I remember when we were playing [in my country of origin] we were not supposed to go in alleys that are dark or something. You don't really have to fear about something like that here. When the kids are playing until eight o'clock at night and it's already dark you don't have to worry.

In other instances, the above qualities of North (cleanliness, quietness and safety) were juxtaposed with the Icelandic capital and associated excesses of the urban modern space such as traffic, noise or crowds. The following example is from Boris, a man from the old Soviet bloc: 'Stress. You have taken this upon yourself when you go to Reykjavík. [...] Traffic and everything. So fast, everyone is moving, so much stress. I have to sort this and this and this ... It's not supposed to be like this.' A certain

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wholesome quality inherent to the North is denied to the South, which is figured as somehow incomplete or corrupt.

The generic ideas of the North also disclose in the ways the social space is conceptualised in migrants' accounts; for instance, the coldness of the climate and social relations. However, if the cold of the climate can be endearing, it can be unpleasant when found in people's character. Although many migrants appreciate the close-knit community feeling supposedly typical for rural areas, at the same time they recognise that it is difficult to create relationships or friendships in this particular place. The distinction between the North of Iceland and the capital city is used again to show that Reykjavík possesses a certain cosmopolitan openness that the north does not. The construction of 'northern' socio-spatial identities impairs migrants' ability to create relationships easily with those who are 'from there', as exemplified by this quote from Tomas, who has lived in the North of Iceland for over 30 years:

> I don't know if they are insecure or reserved, or they don't get the need somehow? It's not the tradition to make friends like this, because the whole culture was based on these close-knit communities which were very interconnected and established. They haven't got a tradition of letting foreigners in, or adjusting to foreigners. I think in Reykjavík it's a bit different, and I think Akureyri is a bit more provincial in that sense. More difficult to get into a social group or make friends. I know that in Reykjavík it's easier.

Evoking provincialism recalls once again the existing gap between North and South of Iceland, and more generally between Iceland and the rest of the world, as we have argued earlier. By describing a place as 'provincial', this man evokes a negative outlook on rurality in contrast to other migrants who enjoy the slow pace of Northern Iceland, which clearly echoes the ambivalence of past travel descriptions of Iceland oscillating between affirmation and contempt (Oslund 2011).

SHIFTING NARRATIVES

'A place beyond everything else' – this is how Antonio, a man from Western Europe, described how he imagined Iceland before his migration, and it echoes a common conceptualisation of the North as placed outside the known world. This description has parallels with those of other informants who did not know anything about Iceland and could neither place it on a map nor even imagine what it was like. Coming predominately to work, the majority of our participants either lacked or had rather vague ideas about their destination. An article in a newspaper, or a relative or friend already living in the country, could provide migrants-to-be with more accurate images about what to expect in Iceland, yet many expressed surprise after their arrival. The preconceived image of Iceland often converged with an image of the Arctic Circle, such as icebergs, polar bears, a harsh climate and rugged landscape with scarce vegetation. Some migrants seemed to incorporate commonly distributed clichés about Iceland, like pristine wilderness or good-looking girls (cf. Loftsdóttir, Kjartansdóttir & Lund 2017).

Most migrants we spoke with arrived before tourism became a central element in the Icelandic economy, and before the Icelandic Tourist Board started its most zealous marketing campaign 'Inspired by Iceland' in 2010. In the earlier interviews

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more often than now, we heard from migrants who expressed discontent with the moonlike, barren, inhospitable and monotonous Icelandic landscape (Wojtyńska 2008), apparently conflicting with the prevailing images of the rich and progressive West among East European labour migrants. Some of the research participants did not even find it worth going sightseeing in the country. This is how Tomek, a middle-aged man living in the North-West of Iceland since 2000, described his first encounter with Iceland when interviewed in 2003:

> So I was very disappointed, because practically speaking: water – terrible cold. Shore – black, ugly, with a lot of stones. Then, [the] fiord is maybe green, but only during the summer and only during [a] few months, when this grass comes out. There are no trees. Only bushes. [...] I saw once a documentary about Norway, so I made such association that it had to be equally wonderful and beautiful here. It turns out it is sad. Houses are worse than in Poland. Rundown, un-plastered, dirty. There are no fences. There is no greenery around. So it is sad, just sad.

The distinctiveness of the Icelandic landscape, its incomparability to anything familiar, is perceived here as hostile, ugly and sad, while the first impression after arrival can be summarised as disappointing. The description provided earlier conflates with the idea of North not only as mentally and spatially remote, but also archaic, poor, underdeveloped and peripheral. However, these kinds of opinions gradually diminished over the years to make way for more favourable accounts. Not only did later migrants seem to know more about Iceland before their arrival, but they were also more likely to describe their first encounter in a more affirmative manner. Some participants in our research spoke about experiencing their arrival in Iceland as a 'big adventure', and marvelled over the wonders of the landscape and Icelandic geology. Some even described their migration to Iceland as a love affair: 'I fell in love with this country [...] I had a strong feeling when I came here that this is the country I belong to', or an addiction: 'I just loved it here. I got addicted to Iceland.'

The expression that Iceland is 'a place beyond everything else' does not only speak of geography or imagination but also to an assumed and promoted idea that the island possesses exceptional qualities, making it a very special place to live. The generic space of the north, with its proximity to nature and outstanding landscapes, is more often now than before presented by our participants as a valued quality rather than obstacle. Even the harsh, changeable and occasionally violent weather, including snow storms, strong winds and heavy rains, typically seen as one of the greatest impediments of living in Iceland, was sometimes evoked in the migrants' narratives as an element of Iceland's unmistakeable charm; as one of our participants concluded his description of the long and dark Icelandic winters: 'I actually like it, I like the storms...'. Another one wrote on his blog, 'Recently, I went to the swimming pool before work. There was a blizzard. In fact, my favourite weather in Iceland is the shittiest one, but I will never admit it publically, one-to-one' (Islandiablog 2015). Disclosing his hesitation to speak openly about his weather preferences, the author clearly disassociates with the majority of immigrants who make Icelandic weather a common topic of complaint. Not only migrants' narratives reflect an exoticised idea of Iceland, but the extreme and sublime images of Iceland seem to be integrated into the practices of migrants' identity performance. For instance, reproducing visions of living in Iceland revolving around constant dealing with ruthless weather conditions and unpredictable forces of nature presents them as adventurous, strong and eccentric individuals, in an analogy

of the popular stereotype of the Icelander whose character has been moulded by the unique Icelandic environment (Schram 2009). This seems to be also suggested by the pictures occasionally distributed by migrants through the social media showing the adverse weather conditions they are often forced to handle in Iceland.

These depictions of Icelandic landscapes certainly echo the Icelandic gaze enforced by marketing campaigns celebrating Icelandic nature and uniqueness, which indicate the powerful role of tourist discourses in influencing geographical imaginaries of migrants, resulting in the rescaling of place, as exemplified in the following conversation with Alina, a woman from Poland:

> *Researcher*: Do you think that the number of tourists coming here may influence how migrants perceive Iceland?
> *Alina*: Yes, I think so. For example, the first year after arrival, I did not appreciate it at all. It was only a place of work for me. But after one year, I started to travel more, and I realised that … that there are sceneries that we don't see in our country. Well, there are some things, obviously, like mountains that we have, but waterfalls, geysers or something like this – is simply no there. And, then one stars to appreciate it. But one needs to start travelling [around in Iceland].

Even if newly arrived migrants are not necessarily aware of the popularity of Iceland as a tourist destination, they can be swiftly captivated by its effects. Observing large numbers of people coming to visit the country, migrants seem to be encouraged to explore and appreciate the acclaimed beauty of the place even if they only came to work without any particular image of Iceland or specific expectations.

CONCLUSIONS

In this increasingly globalised and 'overheated' world where everything is 'too full, too fast' (Hylland-Eriksen 2016), Iceland has managed to capitalise on an incredibly successful nation-branding and promotion campaign highlighting the charms of this secluded North Atlantic island. This success draws millions of travellers to the country every year, tourists and migrants along, which are equally exposed to and affected by the circulating images. Drawing on geographical imaginaries of the 'North' and reflecting on old and new forms of 'Borealism', this article has examined the impact of these ideas on migrants' decisions. It has investigated how images of the North propagated and in some measure created by popular culture, the art industry and marketing campaigns have contributed to the circulation of representations of Iceland, and how these representations have affected different forms of mobility as well as weaved their ways into migrants' narratives.

The portrayal of rural Iceland as an exceptional space has been established both by local and national promotion work and by migrants' discourses in Iceland, who have come to see this exotic space as a resource supposedly unavailable elsewhere. These narratives embrace and embody the cultivation of a timeless and authentic space, somehow removed from the contingencies of modernity and its constraints. Migrants conceive the Icelandic lifestyle, society and sense of place as interconnected, for the socioculturally egalitarian, free, democratic and feminist characteristics of the country seem to be connected to ideas and emotions taken from the landscape. Life in this outstanding space cannot be anything else but exceptional.

This article has contributed knowledge to the existing body of literature on migration to Iceland by expanding on the interconnections between imaginations, mobility and lived experiences of migrants. If we have focused on ideas of the exotic North, which seem largely enriching and positive in the life of migrants, we must also acknowledge accounts of individuals who have felt let down by the supposedly remarkable character of Iceland. Migrants' narratives denying the perfection of the island are legion, and they would have deserved attention because they also mirror a certain idea of exceptionalism. Although these counter-narratives were not the focus of this article, they must be recognised that they do exist. An exploration of these stories is important to situate Iceland and the sociocultural realities of migrants in Iceland beyond the exceptional, which we have explored here.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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