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Claims of White Innocence. Multiculturalism and Exceptionalism in the Nordic Countries [1]

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Abstract
This article focuses on multiculturalism in the Nordic countries, in the context of exceptionalism and claims of innocence. The discussion shows the Nordic countries as participating in conversations about multiculturalism within a large transnational media space, where racial slur and acts become neutralized when re-contextualized within Nordic claims of colonial exceptionalism. Taking Iceland as an example, the discussion demonstrates the importance as well of acknowledging different histories and the ways in which racism and multiculturalism are rendered meaningful in the Nordic countries.
Keywords: Nordic exceptionalism, racism, transnational media, multiculturalism.

Resumen
Reclamos de inocencia blanca: Multiculturalismo y excepcionalismo en los países nórdicos [3]
Este artículo se centra en el multiculturalismo en los países nórdicos, en el contexto del excepcionalísimo y las afirmaciones de inocencia. En su desarrollo se muestra cómo los países nórdicos participan en conversaciones sobre el multiculturalismo dentro de un gran espacio mediático transnacional, donde el insulto y los actos raciales se neutralizan cuando se recontextualizan dentro de las afirmaciones nórdicas de excepcionalísimo colonial. Tomando a Islandia como ejemplo, la discusión demuestra la importancia de reconocer las diferentes historias y las formas en que el racismo y el multiculturalismo cobran sentido en los países nórdicos.
Palabras clave: Excepcionalismo nórdico, racismo, medios transnacionales, multiculturalism.

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[3] La versión en español también ha sido incluida en este dossier. A translation to Spanish can be found in this special issue.

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Introduction: Claiming Innocence through Exceptionalism

When the Danish family drama *Matador* was shown in Iceland in 1988-1989, it instantly gained tremendous popularity.[4] The story revolved around life in a small town in Denmark demonstrating changes taking place during the interwar period and in WWII (1929-1947) and bringing Denmark into the wider transnational engagement. After watching the entire series for the first time in the early 2000s, I was astonished by the portrayal of Denmark as an insular place which – as the series unfolded– was being gradually brought into the modern world. Even more so when considering that Denmark's imperial past was invisible, and nowhere was it ever mentioned that only a little over a decade prior to the time when the series is supposed to take place, Denmark had sold its last colonies in the Caribbean, which were firmly embedded in the history of slavery and transnational trade networks. Karen Fog Olwig's observation on the reinvention of Danish identity in early twentieth century is useful to understand said invisibility. She stresses that the core of Danish national identity became grounded on the imagination of a homogenous ethnic group rather than a globalized, transnational and multiethnic society.[5]

Such notion of an homogenous and isolated nation was an important backdrop more widely in the Global North as is reflected in twenty-first century discourses of "crisis of multiculturalism" where something called multiculturalism was seen as threatening these presumably homogenous nation states.[6] The language of multiculturalism renders European colonialism invisible, as well as that mobility and actual multiculturalism that has always been a part of Europe's history.[7] More recently, as argued by JM. Persánch, the appearance of populist groups signal a call to go back to this imagined past or –to put it in his own words– to "rewind globalization."[8]

This article focuses on multiculturalism in relation exceptionalism in the Nordic countries. As I will show, notions of exceptionalism have worked toward redefining racist acts and slurs as lacking racial significance across the Nordic countries. Thus – unlike the claims toward post-racism that characterized the UK and the US in the beginning of the twenty-first century–[9] the Nordic countries can be seen as divorcing themselves from racism through claims that racism is somehow external to their past and, consequently, to their present. This rhetoric has been facilitated by the Nordic countries strong association with equality,[10] which often lies entangled with ideas

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[4] Matador is a Danish TV series directed by Erik Balling, shown between 1979-1981. See information on Denmark.net. "Matador – The Measure of All Danish TV Dramas." https://denmark.net/matador-measure-all-danish-tv-dramas/

[5] Olwig, Karen Fog. "Narrating Deglobalization: Danish Perceptions of a Lost Empire." *Global Networks*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (2003): 207-222.

[6] Lentin, Alana. "Post-Race, Post Politics: The Paradoxical Rise of Culture after Multiculturalism." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 8 (2014): 1268-1285. p. 1272.

[7] See Lentin, Ronit. "From Racial State to Racist State? Racism and Immigration in Twenty First Century Ireland." *Race and State*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, (2006): 255-273; and Loftsdóttir, Kristín. "An Alternative World: A Perspective from the North on Racism and Migration." *Race & Class*, Vol. 62, No. 4, (2021): 38-52.

[8] See the introduction to this special issue on multiculturalism and the managemnete of cultural diversity in Spanish, as well as that of "Towards the End of the White Guilt Era? The Rise of Nostalgic Whiteness and Magical Populism" (JM. Persánch, Kairos, 2020) in English.

[9] Op. Cit. Lentin (2014).

[10] See Loftsdóttir, Kristín, and Jensen, Lars, eds. *Whiteness and Postcolonialism in the Nordic Region: Exceptionalism, Migrant Others and National Identities*. New York: Ashgate, 2016.

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about the Nordic welfare system.[11] My discussion shows how the Nordic countries have been part of the conversations within a larger transnational media space, but as observed by Alana Lentin, the term "multiculturalism" in the Global North has not only been used to label particular policies of the nation states, but can also be understood as a discursive space to capture as well as to debate various issues relating to diversity along the lines of race, culture, and national identity.[12] When these discourses are re-contextualized within notions Nordic exceptionalism often revolving around colonial innocence, they become particularly powerful.

My approach stresses racism as historically malleable, as well as characterized by intersecting local and global dimensions.[13] Thus, as elsewhere racism in the Nordic countries is deemed to be simultaneously understood gaining its meaning within particular historical conditions, and accounting for racism as a transnational and historical phenomenon.[14] The Nordic countries have been traditionally associated with Whiteness making it particularly important as a form of racialization. Racism is highly situational, meaning that people who in certain geographical context are racialized as white, can in other context be racialized as non-white.[15] [16] The racial imagination of hierarchical difference have thus intersected with Global North-Global South dynamics as well as with the racialization of difference within the European populations.[17]

In the first part of the article, I focus on Nordic exceptionalism and how this translates into colonial innocence and racist exceptionalism. I then give insight into more recent discourses of Nordic countries as multicultural societies and racism in the context of wider European discussion on diversity. Said discussion consequently focuses on populism in the Nordic countries and how notions of the Nordic welfare state in crisis have been used by populist groups to express racism. In the last section, I look closely at a particular Nordic country, Iceland, to show that while the notion Nordic exceptionalism can be useful to seize certain discursive similarities across the Nordic countries– it is necessary not to reify the Nordic countries but to recognize their different power dynamic and histories too.

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[11] Jensen, Lars, and Kristín Loftsdóttir. *Exceptionalism.* New York: Routledge, (2021); Eds. Keskinen, Suvi, Salla Tuori, Sara Irni, and Diana Mulinari. *Complying with Colonialism: Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Nordic Region.* New York: Routledge, (2016).

[12] Op. Cit. Lentin, 2014. p. 1272.

[13] Harrison, Faye V. "The Persistent Power of 'Race' in the Cultural and Political Economy of Racism." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 24, No. 1, (1995): 47-74; See also Loftsdóttir, Kristín. "Dualistic Colonial Experiences and the Ruins of Coloniality." *Scandinavian Studies*, Vol. 91, No. 1-2, (2019): 31-52.; and Persánch, JM. "From Impurity of Thought Toward the Glocalization of Whiteness in Spain." *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, Vol. 8, Issue 2, (2018): 110-137. https://doi.org/10.5070/T482041117

[14] See Persánch, JM. "Neither *Your* Hispanic nor *Your* White: Transitioning Between Whitenesses from Spain to the United States." *The Journal of Hispanic and Lusophone Whiteness Studies*, Vol 1-2020 (2020): 1-28; and Nowicka, Magdalena. "'I don't mean to sound racist but . . .': Transforming Racism in Transnational Europe." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 5, (2017): 824–841.

[15] See Persánch, JM. Blancura situacional e imperio español en su historia, cine y literatura (S.XIX-XX). *Theses and Dissertations--Hispanic Studies*. 26. https://uknowledge.uky.edu/hisp_etds/26

[16] See discussion in Garner, Steve. "Atlantic Crossing: Whiteness as a Transatlantic Experience." *Atlantic Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2007): 117-132. Opt. Cit. JM. Persánch, "Neither..." 2020.

[17] Bilaniuk, Laada. "Race, Media, and Postcoloniality: Ukraine between Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism." *City & Society*, Vol. 28, No. 3, (2016): 341–64.

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Racism, Multiculturalism, and the Nordic Countries

Across the Nordic countries, ideas of exceptionalism have been important for the articulation of racism. Claims of exceptionalism take similar forms across the Nordic countries presumably with colonial innocence playing a central role. Such belief rests upon the notion that the Nordic countries are divorced from the history of colonialism.[18] When the history of imperialism and colonialism is acknowledged, it is often on the premises that the Nordic countries were different kind of colonizers, more gentle or humane.[19] Scholarship focusing on the Nordic countries in the past few decades has actively placed them within the history of colonialism making evident various involvements in imperialism.[20]

In the latter regard, few examples can be mentioned to demonstrate the several important ways in which the Nordic countries engaged with the colonial project. Denmark, for instance, was a colonial empire for centuries and Sweden had colonies in West Africa and the Caribbean.[21] Swedish scholars have actively contributed to racial classifications, hence partaking in a transnational European conversation on inferiority of particular 'races.'[22] Some of the Nordic countries, such as Norway, Iceland, Finland, Greenland, were historically under foreign rule, in addition to changed boundaries of the territory of the Nordic countries. Regardless, countries like Norway, Iceland and Finland engaged as well in coloniality in multiple ways, such as through missionary work, and through producing racist and colonial discourse.[23]

In part, the imagination of Nordic people as existing outside the history of colonialism has been a neglect of addressing Nordic settler colonialism in the Americas and in Scandinavia. The widely held assumptions that the Nordic migrants settled on empty land in North America[24] ignore their complicity in settler colonialism as well as the same policies that expelled American Indians from their lands made them available for Nordic settlers.[25] Many groups of Nordic migrants also accepted the Manifest Destiny doctrine where the indigenous people of North America were seen as destined to disappear –the idea of the "vanishing Indian"– with the then-ongoing

[18] Fur, Gunlög. "Colonialism and Swedish History: Unthinkable Connections?" in *Scandinavian Colonialism and the Rise of Modernity*. 17-36. New York: Springer, 2013.; Keskinen, Suvi, Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir, and Mari Toivanen, eds. *Undoing Homogeneity in the Nordic Region: Migration, Difference. and the Politics of Solidarity*. Routledge, London, 2019.; Loftsdóttir, Kristín, and Lars Jensen, eds. *Whiteness and Postcolonialism in the Nordic Region: Exceptionalism, Migrant Others and National Identities*. New York: Ashgate, 2016.

[19] Naum, Magdalena, and Jonas M. Nordin, eds. *Scandinavian Colonialism and the Rise of Modernity: Small Time Agents in a Global Arena*. 3-16. New York: Springer, 2013. p. 10.

[20] Ibidem.; Kjerland, Kirsten Alsaker, and Knut Mikjel Rio. *Kolonitid: Nordmenn på Eventyr og Big Business i Afrika og Stillehavet*. SAP, Scandinavian Academic Press, 2009.

[21] Op. Cit. Fur, 2013.

[22] Mattson, Greggor. "Nation-State Science: Lappology and Sweden's Ethnoracial Purity." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 56, No. 2, (2014): 320-350; Kjellman, Ulrika. "How to Picture Race? The Use of Photography in the Scientific Practice of the Swedish State Institute for Race Biology." *Scandinavian Journal of History*, Vol. 39, No. 5, (2014): 580-611.

[23] Rastas, Anna. "Reading History through Finnish Exceptionalism," in. *Whiteness and Postcolonialism in the Nordic Region*. 101-116. Eds. Loftsdóttir, Kristín, and Lars Jensen. Ashgate, 2016.

[24] Op. Cit. Fur (2013); Sverdljuk, Jana, Terje Mikael Hasle Joranger, Erika K. Jackson, and Peter Kivisto, eds. *Nordic Whiteness and Migration to the USA: A Historical Exploration of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2020.

[25] Bergland, Betty. "Norwegian Migration and Displaced Indigenous People," in *Nordic Whiteness and Migration to the USA: A Historical Exploration of Identity*. 17-34. Eds. Sverdljuk, Jana, Terje Mikael Hasle Joranger, Erika K. Jackson, and Peter Kivisto. New York: Routledge, 2020.

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process of North European settlement and civilization.[26] As argued by Anne Bonds and Joshua Inwood, it is important to bring together the concepts White supremacy and settler colonialism, as the latter bases on hegemony of Whiteness.[27] Furthermore, northern settler colonialism involves a permanent settlement within a colonized area, meaning that settler colonialism is not a moment in history but an "enduring structure requiring constant maintenance."[28] Northern settler colonialism was also important to those Nordic countries –like Iceland and Finland– that were themselves under foreign rule.[29]

In addition to the failure to recognize settler colonialism overseas, the Nordic Scandinavian indigenous populations has been racialized historically and discriminated against.[30] Gunlög Fur's discussion on the Sámi in Sweden claims that a part of keeping Sweden outside of colonial history was the refusal to acknowledge colonialism toward the Sámi, such as through settlement and legislation regarding Sámi land.[31] In Norway, Sámi people have been "othered" in schoolbooks[32] while Norwegian policies toward the Sámi had assimilation as the goal since the mid-1840s.[33]

In Finland comparable debates have taken place in regard to the Sámi and the relationship between the Finish state and Sámi colonialization, while it has played a role that Finish subjects were also racialized within Nordic narratives as non-White and inferior.[34] Questions in regard to colonialism and the Sámi have intense salience for the present with mining in Sápmi (land of Sámi) increasing its force. Carl-Gösta Ojala and Jonas M. Nordin demonstrate that mining in Northern Sweden – supported by the Swedish state– have been actively contested by Sámi groups, making colonial history and land rights on indigenous people a central issue for the present in Scandinavia.[35]

This relatively recent emphasis placed on Nordic colonial histories not only aims at understanding the history of imperialism and coloniality better. It also revolves around what the "forgetting" of this history means for the present, as it has shaped ideas about multiculturalism in the Nordic countries and, consequently, framed

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[26] Ibidem.; Grav, Hans-Petter. "Good Americans" Born of Good People: Race, Whiteness, and Nationalism among Norwegian Americans in the Pacific Northwestm" in *Nordic Whiteness and Migration to the USA: A Historical Exploration of Identity*. 98-116. Eds. Sverdljuk, Jana, Terje Mikael Hasle Joranger, Erika K. Jackson, and Peter Kivisto, New York: Routledge, 2020. p. 107.

[27] Bonds, Anne, and Joshua Inwood. "Beyond White Privilege: Geographies of White Supremacy and Settler Colonialism." *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 40, No. 6, (2016): 715-733.

[28] Ibidem. p. 716.

[29] Huhta, Aleksi. "Claiming Roots: Politics of Racial Ancestry in the Finish-American Press during the 1938 New Sweden Tercentenary," in *Nordic Whiteness and Migration to the USA: A Historical Exploration of Identity*. 145-161Eds. Sverdljuk, Jana, Terje Mikael Hasle Joranger, Erika K. Jackson, and Peter Kivisto. New York: Routledge, 2020.; Eyþórsdóttir, Eyrún and Kristín Loftsdóttir. "Vikings in Brazil: The Iceland Brazil Association Shaping Icelandic Heritage." *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Vol. 22, no. 7, (2016): 543–53.

[30] See discussion in Fur, Gunlög. "Reading Margins: Colonial Encounters in Sapmi and Lenapehoking in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries." *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 3, (2006): 491-521; Op. Cit. Mattson (2014).

[31] Op. Cit. Fur, 2013.

[32] Eriksen, Kristin Gregers. "Teaching about the Other in Primary Level Social Studies: The Sámi in Norwegian Textbooks." *JSSE-Journal of Social Science Education*, Vol. 17, No. 2, (2018): 57-67.

[33] Spangen, Marte, Anna-Kaisa Salmi, Tiina Äikäs, and Veli-Pekka Lehtola. "Sámi Histories, Colonialism, and Finland." *Arctic Anthropology* 52, no. 2 (2015): 22-36. p. 27.

[34] Ibidem.

[35] Spangen, Marte, Anna-Kaisa Salmi, Tiina Äikäs, Carl-Gösta Ojala, and Jonas M. Nordin. "Mining Sápmi: Colonial histories, Sámi Archaeology, and the Exploitation of Natural Resources in Northern Sweden." *Arctic Anthropology*, Vol. 52, No. 2, (2015): 6-21.

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questions regarding racism.[36] Across the Nordic countries, the use of racist derogatory terms and images have given rise to strong public debates, and often transforming into load media-events where racist incidence are given meaning as non-racist under the premises that racism is somehow external or irrelevant to the Nordic context.

Tobias Hübinette has exemplified the continued use of racist and colonial words in Sweden with debates over the name "chocolate balls." In these debates the criticism on the name "Negro ball" was labeled "political correctness" claiming that the term "negro" is neither racist nor derogatory in the Swedish context.[37] Anna Rastas analysis on the use of the N-word in Finland draws similar conclusions, where its usage is removed from racism while positioning the concept simply in geographical terms as well as to refer to a description of neutral biology. As Rastas discussion indicates, a critical reprisal of this by non-White citizens or migrants elicits strong responses from wider society, which is coupled by the exclusion of non-White youth in Finland.[38] Hübinette and Catrin Lundström have pointed in the context of Sweden that non-White Swedish citizens are assumed to be immigrants or foreign born.[39]

These examples of what can be called "racist exceptionalism"[40] indicate how such discourses strongly revolve around the idea of Nordic countries as somehow outside of colonial history and, therefore, that the use of racist words and symbols is acceptable. These debates reflect complete disregard for the voices of those defined as non-White, as much as what characterizes these claims –in addition to emphasis on exceptionality– is that they are formulated within what Bonds and Inwood called ideas of "neoliberal-multiculturalism and post-racial ideologies," where racism –if acknowledged at all– is to be understood as an "individualized prejudice."[41] Furthermore, it is difficult to observe these media-events and public discourses revolving around racism and national identity as anything else than reflections of White supremacy, tapping into the assumption that Nordic bodies are White bodies and where non-White bodies are rendered suspicious or alien in some sense, or even voices of non-White citizens seem disruptive and irrelevant.

Of salience here is that these media events provide little critical space for reflection on coloniality, Whiteness, and Nordic transnational and imperial history. However, while claims of innocence can be theoretically articulated as Nordic exceptionalism, they do not revolve often about Nordic identity but more –as I examine closely later– around national identity.[42] Also, while the term "Nordic exceptionalism" can be useful analytically, it is important to acknowledge that –though articulated differently–[43] similar claims of innocence can be seen outside of the Nordic countries too.

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[36] Op. Cit. Loftsdóttir, 2019.

[37] Hübinette, Tobias. "'Words that Wound': Swedish Whiteness and its Inability to Accommodate Minority Experiences," in *Whiteness and Postcolonialism in the Nordic Region: Exceptionalism, Migrant Others and National Identities*. 43-56. Ashgate, 2016.

[38] Rastas, Anna. "Racializing Categorization among Young People in Finland." *Young*, Vol. 13, No. 2, (2005): 147-166; Op. Cit. Rastas, 2016.

[39] Hübinette, Tobias, and Catrin Lundström. "Sweden after the Recent Election: The Double-Binding Power of Swedish Whiteness through the Mourning of the Loss of 'Old Sweden' and the Passing of 'Good Sweden'." *NORA—Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, Vol. 19, No. 01, (2011): 42-52.

[40] Op. Cit. Loftsdóttir, 2021. p. 42.

[41] Op. Cit. Bonds and Inwood, 2016. p. 717.

[42] See also Op. Cit. Rastas, 2016.

[43] For example, Wekker, Gloria. *White Innocence*. Duke University Press, 2016.

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Part of such discussion in the Nordic countries have engaged strongly with transnational space focusing on the notion of "multiculturalism in crisis" which became in the early twenty-first century a framing device across Europe.[44] This idea is partly based on claims that there existed multiple, parallel societies of migrant communities that could not, or refused to, integrate.[45] While taking place in different European countries and historical contexts, particular media-events have widely been seen as demonstrating a "shared European crisis" in terms of "multiculturalism going wrong."[46] The "Islamophobic tropes" regularly evoked in different media debates in the Nordic countries thus have to be recognized as trans-European.[47]

The transnational characteristics of these media events make them particularly powerful as they are perceived as demonstrating a particular condition that exists beyond national particularities.[48] Lentin and Gavan Titley contend that this discourse about people that are impossible to assimilate, or were incompatible with European values, was made possible by the idea that neither Europe nor the Global North were today characterized by post-racism (where racism has been overcome and no longer needs to be a concern).[49] Nordic metanarratives of racist exceptionalism and colonial innocence must make such implicit notions particularly strong, or replace them with claims that racism was never an issue.

In Denmark, mediatized events on diverse issues have become framed around questions integration and difference, often involving a move from small, localized events toward proclamations of the nation in danger.[50] These mediatized events involved intense discussions on handshaking, serving of pork, and freedom of speech. As Peter Hervik shows, a missing handshake of one person becomes transformed into an extensive media proclamation of radical Islam in Denmark or, as phrased by Martin Lindhardt, minor acts can become an "emblematic of Danish culture as they are evoked to demarcate boundaries vis-à-vis Islam."[51] As a result, "Danishes" becomes increasingly defined in opposition to Islam.[52]

As Mikkel Rytter and Marianne Holm Pedersen point out after 9/11 preexisting Muslim prejudice was strengthened turning the perception about Muslims increasingly as a threat – in addition to concerns with how well Muslims would "integrate" in Danish society.[53] Denmark then started selecting its refugees in accordance to their potential integration which, in practice, meant that Christian

[44] Lentin, Alana, and Gavan Titley. *The Crises of Multiculturalism: Racism in a Neoliberal Age*. Zed Books Ltd., 2011.
[45] Werbner, Pnina. "Veiled Interventions in Pure Space: Honour, Shame and Embodied Struggles among Muslims in Britain and France." *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 24, No. 2, (2007): 161-186; Op. Cit. Lentin and Titley, 2011.
[46] Lentin, Alana, and Gavan Titley. "The Crisis of 'Multiculturalism' in Europe: Mediated Minarets, Intolerable Subjects." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2, (2012): 123-138. p. 127.
[47] Bangstad, Sindre. "The Morality Police are Coming! Muslims in Norway's Media Discourses (Respond to this article at http://www. therai. org. uk/at/debate)." *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 27, No. 5, (2011): 3-7. p. 3.
[48] Titley, Gavan. "Pleasing the Crisis: Anxiety and Recited Multiculturalism in the European Communicative Space," in *Manufacturing Europe: Spaces of Democracy, Diversity and Communication.* 153-170. Eds. Inka Salovaara-Moring. Göteborg: Nordicom. 2009.
[49] Op. Cit. Lentin, 2014.
[50] Ibidem.
[51] Lindhardt, Martin. "In Denmark We Eat Pork and Shake Hands! Islam and the Anti-Islamic Emblems of Cultural Difference in Danish Neo-Nationalism." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2021); Hervik, Peter. "Denmark's Blond Vision and the Fractal Logics of a Nation in Danger." *Identities*, Vol. 26, no. 5, (2019): 529-545.
[52] Op. Cit. Hervik, 2019. p. 537 Op. Cit. Lindhardt, 2021. p. 6.
[53] Rytter, Mikkel, and Marianne Holm Pedersen. "A Decade of Suspicion: Islam and Muslims in Denmark after 9/11." *Ethnic and racial studies*, Vol. 37, No. 13, (2014): 2303-2321.

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refugees were more likely to be selected than Muslims.[54] In Denmark, this concern with the Muslim presence was strongly shaped by larger events taking place in the Global North which created considerable concern equating Muslims as security issue after 2001.[55]

Populism and the Nordic Countries

The growing traction of populist groups and neo-nationalistic claims have characterized the late twenty and early twenty-first centuries, as it has paved the way for hostility toward those people identified outside the nation's imagination and traditional sense of belonging. Even more open hostility toward migrant groups somehow supplemented earlier claims of "multiculturalism in crisis" in the early twenty-first century while basing their critique on narratives of presumed purity and stability, where the notion of "everyone in their place" –as I have called it elsewhere– is dominant.[56] The Nordic countries have been no exception to these trends.

In general, populists groups can be seen as basing on twofold polarization of "us" and "others" revolving around "us" against corrupt elites, and "us" against migrant communities and/or racialized others.[57] While such polarization is not new at all, hatred against migrants can be seen overtly brought out with more strength of populist groups.[58] While populists parties in the Nordic countries –such as the True Finns in Finland, Danish people party and Sweden Democrats– have different origins, they converge in their ideology emphasizing neo-nationalism, traditional family values, and anti-immigration policies.[59] Persánch has characterized said amalgamation of ideas and populist groups under the name of "magical populism" as a racial desire to go back in time somehow to an era when Whiteness was not problematized. Said imagination, as Persánch argues, bases on construction of "imagined others" which become the scapegoats because

…the ongoing deterioration of multiculturalism as an ideal, paired with the rise of nostalgic whiteness and the alluring nature of magical populism's simplistic solutions to complex problems, has contributed to destabilising the white guilt mindset as the primary source for moral authority in the West, unleashing a nostalgic racial desire to rewind globalisation in efforts to restore the now lost sense of home and security of whites. [60]

In the Nordic countries, however, Populist groups have emphasized what Hervik has labelled a "nation in danger," where Whiteness is rather strongly associated with the nation.[61] In Sweden, for instance, populist groups express such strong desire to

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[54] Ibidem. pp. 2307; 2317.
[55] Ibidem. p. 2306.
[56] Op. Cit. Loftsdóttir, 2021.
[57] Brubaker, Rogers. "Between Nationalism and Civilizationism: The European Populist Moment in Comparative Perspective." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 8, (2017): 1191-1226.
[58] Benson, Michaela, and Chantelle Lewis. "Brexit, British People of Colour in the EU-27 and Everyday Racism in Britain and Europe." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 13, (2019): 2211-2228.
[59] Elgenius, Gabriella, and Jens Rydgren. "Frames of Nostalgia and Belonging: The Resurgence of Ethno-Nationalism in Sweden." *European Societies*, Vol. 21, No. 4, (2019): 583-602.
[60] Persánch, JM. "Towards the End of the White Guilt? The Rise of Nostalgic Whiteness and Magical Populism." *Kairos: A Journal of Critical Symposium*, Vol. 5, N.1, (2020): 120-137.
[61] Op. Cit. Hervik, 2019. p. 534.

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reclaim a particular past, where the idea of Sweden in danger rests upon the notion that said nation is ethnically and racially pure.[62]

Within Nordic debates of multiculturalism, the constructions of Islam as threat to women's rights and gay rights have also been recurring themes, and especially advocated by populists parties.[63] As Bangstad points out, this is ironic given that populists often display hostile stance toward these very groups. In Sweden, notions of the welfare system as (over)protecting the weak and vulnerable has taken central stage. In this regard, populist groups contend that the growth of migrants and people with migrant background is to blame for shrinking the welfare system.[64] As Ov Cristian Norocel argues, populist leaders in Sweden —basing on masculinity and heteronormativity— present themselves as the protectors of those seen as more vulnerable, i.e. the elderly, sick and women. This involves native Swedish women *and* women with migrant background who then must be protected from men with migrant background.[65]

Looking at the Nordic countries for this angle the Nordic countries clearly evidence a persistent presumption of Whiteness, where being White is normalized in different context while racism is silenced and stressed as irrelevant. If we see White supremacy as revolving around teasing out Whiteness as the key aspect in society as well as embedded in its structures,[66] the Nordic countries can be said to base on White supremacy. Bond and Inwood stress in their discussion of the concept White supremacy that the positioning of White supremacy as something belonging to the past, then to particular areas of history like the apartheid area in the US or as views held by extremists outside mainstream society as only part of views of extremist groups, has been important in obscuring its significance in the present.[67]

Here, I want to stress that a particular imagination and practices are not only part of populist groups.[68] For example, Bangstad stresses that anti-Muslim rhetoric is not only confined to populist parties in the Nordic countries but has become mainstream.[69] Everyday practices of deportation and criminalization of particular groups of migrants are one manifestation of the mainstreaming of particular racialized views. The Nordic countries are part of various transnational institutional frameworks, as for example the Schengen Agreement (EU) on immigration, which makes the Nordic countries complicit in practices that reproduce structural racism given that Schengen Agreement revolves around fortification of the outer borders of Europe, while facilitating mobility within the European countries. As scholars have pointed out, this differentiation makes it difficult for countries that have former colonial status to enter the Schengen area. In the context of migration to the UK (before Brexit) Jon Fox, Laura Moroşanu, and Eszter Szilassy had bluntly stated that:

...this]approach does not explicitly invoke racial categories because it does not have to: by favoring migrants from the EU, the UK is implicitly favoring white migrants.[70]

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[62] Thorleifsson, Cathrine. *Nationalist Responses to the Crises in Europe: Old and New Hatreds*. Routledge, 2018. p. 77; Op. Cit. Hübinette and Lundström, 2011; Op. Cit. Elgenius and Rydgren, 2019.
[63] Op. Cit. Bangstad, 2011.
[64] Andersson, Jenny. "Nordic Nostalgia and Nordic light: The Swedish Model as Utopia 1930–2007." *Scandinavian Journal of History*, Vol. 34, No. 3, (2009): 229-245. p. 240; Op. Cit. Bangstad (2011).
[65] Norocel, Ov Cristian. "'Give us Back Sweden!' A Feminist Reading of the (Re) Interpretations of the Folkhem Conceptual Metaphor in Swedish Radical Right Populist Discourse." *NORA-Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, Vol. 21, No. 1, (2013): 4-20.
[66] Jesus, Beliso-De, M. Aisha, and Jemima Pierre. "Anthropology of White Supremacy, Introduction." *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 122, No. 1, (2020): 65-75.
[67] Op. Cit. Bonds and Inwood, 2016.
[68] Op. Cit. Loftsdóttir, 2021.
[69] Op. Cit. Bangstad, 2011. p. 7.
[70] Fox, Jon E., Laura Moroşanu, and Eszter Szilassy. "The Racialization of the New European Migration to the UK." *Sociology*, Vol. 46, No. 4, (2012): 680-695. p. 684.

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As I have posed elsewhere, is it necessarily to ask what the wider effects of regular news about deportations of individuals by the states are?[71] Then, not only on the lives of those in question –which still constitute obviously central significance– but as well on the general depictions in the Global North of people from particular groups that are already racialized. In other words, what do these deportations mean when, simultaneously, there exists a strong metanarrative of the West as "under siege?"[72] Or when contextualized within strong media narratives of refugees as "flooding Europe" and as a "drain" on the resources of the different European countries.[73]

Iceland, the Nordic Countries, and Exceptionalism

In what follows, I provide concise insights into Iceland's engagement with issues of multiculturalism which shows certain similarities and differences with other Nordic countries. Iceland's narratives of exceptionalism have been strongly shaped by its position under Danish rule until gaining independence in 1944. The beginning of the twentieth century was consequently characterized by the interlinked desire to show other European and Western nations the compatibility of Iceland to the "world civilization" and their difference from such "nations in state of nature" (ísl. *náttúruþjóð*), as they were called in Iceland at the time.[74] This was often done through racism.

Therefore, while Icelandic people were often seen as not fully civilized –Iceland being the destination of scientific tourism in late eighteen through early twentieth centuries– they were neither racialized nor brutally subjugated like those colonized farther. Islandic people were still often compared to colonized people and considered marginally civilized.[75] Throughout early and late twentieth century a great deal of discourses on diverse issues in Iceland would revolve around the polarization of "us" and "others" along the lines of Icelandic nationals and foreigners (the rest of the world); but also, along the anxieties of being somehow not recognized as part of the modernizing West.[76]

In the early twenty-first century, Iceland seemed to finally have fulfilled the desired recognition with Icelandic businessmen investing widely internationally to the extreme of being remarked upon as a special breed of businessmen, shaped by the country itself. These increased engagements with larger international business environments were part of global transformations that were taking place in Iceland in conjunction with some global trends such as deregulation of the financial sector.[77] Partly, said changes increased mobility of people and foreign workers to Iceland. Iceland was different from other Nordic countries –which have much longer history of labor migration– with Sweden attracting foreign workers in the 1950s and Denmark

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[71] Op. Cit. Loftsdóttir, 2019.
[72] Hage, Ghassan. "État de Siège: A Dying Domesticating Colonialism?" *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 43, No. 1, (2016): 38-49.
[73] Rosen, Rachel, and Sarah Crafter. "Media Representations of Separated Child Migrants: From Dubs to Doubt." *Migration and Society*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (2018): 66-81.
[74] Loftsdóttir, Kristín. *Crisis and Coloniality at Europe's Margins*. New York: Routledge, 2020.
[75] Ibidem.
[76] Ibidem.
[77] Loftsdóttir, Kristín, and Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir. "Mobility and Transnational Iceland: Current Transformations and Global Entanglements," in *Mobility and Transnational Iceland: Current Transformations and Global Entanglements*. 7-21. Háskólaútgáfan, 2020.; Mixa, Már Wolfgang. "A nation of money and sheep," in *The Routledge Companion to Cross-Cultural Management*. 344-353. New York: Routledge, 2015.

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and Norway one decade later. Iceland, however, was not until the mid-1990s when it became characterized more strongly by emigration rather than immigration.[78] In January 2019, immigrants were 14% of Iceland's population compared to 4.4% in 2005.[79]

As in Europe and the other Nordic countries, there was concern with Iceland "becoming" multicultural society.[80] Some of these discussions closely reflected European debates, for example, about the case of Muslims despite Muslims being a very small and almost invisible minority at the time. Elsewhere, these questions of multiculturalism intersected with issue of racism. Debates in regard to the republishing of the book *Negroboys* in 2007 is witness to how manifestations of racism were usually seen as irrelevant and downplayed by the majority of the population. When racism was acknowledged it was often brushed away by being positioned as individual response and almost abnormal.[81]

An event taking place in a shopping center in 2012 reflects as well the tendency of explaining racism away, or here as belonging to few individuals rather than a feature of society: A man was threatening and using racial slur toward a small group of Icelandic teenagers of Asian descent (accusing them of bringing the Swine flu from China, among other things). The responses to this piece of news were certainly sympathetic to the teenagers, and this was called out as blunt racism. However, in many commentaries on the issue, the man was portrayed as "crazy" or somehow deviant from everyday behavior. Thus, simultaneously as condemning his behavior, many of the comments could reaffirm racism as something external to Icelandic society.[82]

Racism was also articulated in a new way in the twenty-first century and then as directed toward Iceland's migrant population who were predominantly hired for the lowest paying jobs. Largest groups of labor migrants were people from Poland, whose mobility had been facilitated by to the joining of Poland to the EU in 2004 gaining access to the European labor market.[83] During the economic boom years individuals from Eastern Europe, especially Poland and Lithuania who were the most numerous economic migrants, became racialized as inferior as well as a different people.[84]

This racialization had not existed earlier in Iceland but echoed a sense of moral panic which could be detected more widely in Europe due to arrival of new labor migration from Eastern European countries.[85] The negative depictions toward people who were seeking to take advance of globalization processes through mobility, was ironic in the sense that Icelandic businessmen were doing the same.[86] Iceland's more

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[78] Skaptadóttir, Unnur Dís and Ólöf Garðarsdóttir. "Becoming an Immigration Country: The Case of Iceland 1990-2019," *Mobility and Transnational Iceland: Current Transformations and Global Entanglements*. 23-38. Háskólaútgáfan, 2020. pp. 25; 27.

[79] Ibidem. p. 24.

[80] Skaptadóttir, Unnur Dís, and Kristín Loftsdóttir. "Cultivating Culture? Images of Iceland, Globalization and Multicultural Society." *Images of the North*. 205-216. Brill, 2009.

[81] Loftsdóttir, Kristín. "Republishing 'the Ten Little Negros': Exploring nationalism and 'Whiteness' in Iceland." *Ethnicities*, Vol. 13, No. 3, (2013): 295-315.

[82] Loftsdóttir, Kristín. "Útlendingar, Negrastrákar og Hryðjuverkamenn: Kynþáttafordómar í Íslenskum Samtíma." *Ritið*, Vol. 15, No. 1, (2015): 157-178.

[83] Op. Cit. Loftsdóttir and Skaptadóttir, 2020.

[84] Loftsdóttir, Kristín. "Being "the Damned Foreigner": Affective National Sentiments and Racialization of Lithuanians in Iceland." *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, Vol. 7, (2017): 117-139.

[85] Op. Cit. Fox et al, 2012.

[86] Op. Cit. Loftsdóttir, 2019.

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global involvement could be seen as reflected in similar discourse of the 'crisis of multiculturalism' as could be detected in neighboring countries.[87]

These aspects indicate that Iceland has in many ways followed a similar path as has characterized general trends in the other Nordic countries, but Iceland's history as under Danish rule has also shaped how discourses of multiculturalism and race have been formulized and made meaningful in Iceland. Differently from the other Nordic countries, Iceland has never had a strong populist party in power, even though individual politicians have certainly expressed ideas that can be classified as populists.[88] This is in spite of nationalism being strong in political discourse in Iceland but not so much characterized by anti-migration or anti-globalization agenda, but more revolving around independence and romantic visions of Icelandic identity.[89] Here, however, it needs to be recognized that Iceland is a part of Europe's deportation regime with the Icelandic government aggressively deporting most of those seeking international protection, often under the banner of the Dublin convention.

Concluding remarks: The Alternative World of the Nordics

This discussion has teased out how the Nordic countries have for long seen themselves and been seen by others as exceptional due to lack of history of colonialism and imperialism or gentler version of it, which has created particular notions of Nordic Exceptionalism. It also needs to be stressed while in certain context can be useful to speak of the Nordic countries as one singularity, it is also important to recognize different historical experiences that shape how issues concerning multiculturalism and racism are made meaningful. During the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first it is, for example, difficult to understand certain wider processes in Iceland without the context of Iceland being under Danish rule until mid-twentieth century.

More widely the article has shown how conceptions of exceptionalism in the Nordic countries have filtered into notions of multicultural society, where populists have stressed the reclaiming of imaginary past, which is strongly associated with Whiteness. As Bangstad points out in regard to Norway, due to notions of equality being so central to Nordic identity, the framing of islamophobia as only attempt to protect women and human rights of LGBTQ+ people from oppressive ideologies, becomes particularly powerful in normalizing islamophobia as legitimate.[90]

Hervik, furthermore, draws attention to how the notion of a nation in danger often revolves around small events that are blown into large scale issues,[91] often positioned within metanarratives of relations between "Islam and the West" as if these were mutually exclusive categories. The potency of racist exceptionalism in the Nordic countries risks refusal to acknowledge structural racism and White supremacy in the Nordic countries. The repeated and strongly mediatized narratives provide, furthermore, a feeling for what I have called an alternative world resting on image of

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[87] Op. Cit. Skaptadóttir and Loftsdóttir, 2009.

[88] Bergmann, Eirikur. *Nordic Nationalism and Right-Wing Populist Politics: Imperial Relationships and National Sentiments*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017. p. 119.

[89] Ibidem. p. 119; Loftsdóttir, Kristín. "Building on Iceland's 'Good Reputation': Icesave, Crisis and Affective National Identities." *Ethnos*, Vol. 81, No. 2, (2016): 338-363.

[90] Op. Cit. Bangstad, 2011.

[91] Op. Cit. Hervik, 2019. p. 543.

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the past of "everyone in their place" and racial exceptionalism.[92] These motivate a vision of magical populism calling –as indicated by Persánch– for return to an imagined past.[93]

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[92] Op. Cit. Loftsdóttir, 2021.
[93] Op. Cit. Persánch, "Toward the End..." 2020.

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