Arnar Árnason and Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson

DEATH AND GOVERNMENTALITY

Neo-liberalism, grief and the nation form

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UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND PRESS
Reykjavik 2018

This book has been peer reviewed by two anonymous reviewers.
James Gordon Rice supervised the reviews.
We thank our reviewers for their contribution.

Death and Governmentality in Iceland
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Published by the University of Iceland Press

Front cover: Hildur Erna Sigurjónsdóttir
Proof reading: Allan Rettedal and Anna Jeeves
Layout and typesetting: Helgi Hilmarsson
Printing: Litlaprent ehf.
Body text: Electra LH Regular 11,5 p. / 15 p.

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Reykjavík, 2018

U201732
ISBN: 978-9935-23-171-0

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Acknowledgements

This book is the outcome of nearly twenty years of research collaboration between its authors. Dr. Tinna Grétarsdóttir joined our team early on during this project, and together we collaborated on several key publications that appear in this book (Chapters 4, 5 and 6). We want to acknowledge and thank her for these valuable contributions and her congenial collaboration. The results are seen in the following chapters and are also woven into other sections of the book.

We also would like to thank Michael Carrithers, Jay Ruby, Bob Simpson, Jenny Hockey, and Hulda Sveinsdóttir for inspiration and discussion of various topics in the book. Thanks are also due to everyone in Iceland who took time to talk to us. The content of these publications has been presented at various conferences and symposiums throughout the twenty years the project has been underway, and the list is too long to account for everyone individually. In particular we would like to thank the organisers of and participants in the Dromocratic Condition conference in Newcastle. Versions of this paper have been delivered at the University of Aberdeen and at the "Death, dying and disposal" conference in Bath. At those sessions we benefitted from comments and suggestions from anonymous members of the audience, which have been incorporated into this book. We want to thank them for their thoughtful interest in our work.

Financial support for the initial research was provided by Durham University's Research Studentship, aided by a Monbusho Scholarship from the Japanese Government and research grants from the Research Council of Iceland (#010010001 and #050678031). The research was made possible by financial assistance from the National Research Council of Iceland and the School of Social Sciences of the University of Aberdeen. A contribution from the Visiting Scholar Scheme at the University of

Aberdeen greatly facilitated the writing up of our research. Financial support was provided by the University of Iceland Research Fund and assistant research grants from the School of Social Sciences of the University of Iceland. We are grateful for all of this financial support.

The basis for this book has been discussed previously in the following journals and proceedings but has, needless to say, been modified and updated for this work. "The revival of death: Expression, expertise and governmentality" was published in the *Journal of British Sociology*, 2003, 54(1). "Letters to the Dead: Obituaries and Identity, Memory and Forgetting in Iceland" was published in *Mortality*, 2003, 8(3). "New Dawn: Death, Grief and 'Nation Form' in Iceland" was published in *Mortality*, 2010, 9(4). "Washing the Deceased, Labelling the Corpse: Preliminary Notes on Death in Iceland, and how to Treat a Living Human Being" was published in the conference proceedings *Global Perspectives and Local Issues: Medical Sociology in North-East Scotland*. Chris Yuill and Ewin van Teijlingen (eds). Robert Gordon University: Aberdeen (2006). "Acceleration Nation: Speed, Death, and Technologies of Patriotism" was published in *Culture, Theory, Critique*, 2007, 48(2). We want to thank the publication venues mentioned above for permitting us to reprint previously published material.

Chapter One

Introduction

Since the end of the twentieth century, the management and experience of death and grief in Iceland have undergone profound changes. These are changes that can be characterised as involving a greater openness towards death and grief, a willingness to deal with them in a way that accepts death and grief as part of the reality of human life (see Walter 1994). This is certainly how those most directly involved in bringing these changes about would see their work. In support of their assertions they would, amongst other things, point to the establishment of dedicated hospice services in the country and the foundation of associations to counsel the bereaved. As such, the transformations in Iceland mirror, and have indeed been influenced by, similar developments in other Western countries, developments that began to take shape in the 1960s. The rise of the hospice movement internationally, which derives from the work of Cecil Saunders, along with the huge influence exerted by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross' work on the stages of dying and the creation of bereavement counselling organisations, for example the British organisation Cruse, might be cited as evidence for such a change. It has been noted regarding these developments that they took on the taboo which, many have argued, had been placed on death in the Western world. Some would argue that the changes have been so extensive that this taboo has actually been lifted, and that we could even speak of a 'revival of death' (Walter 1994; see Ariès 1974a; 1974b; 1981; Gorer 1965; Tradii et al. in press). Jacobsen (2016) has suggested that a new phase in the history of death, what he terms 'spectacular death', has recently emerged, and Walter (in press) wonders if a new *mentalité* of the pervasive dead has now taken hold. These are hugely important and interesting considerations. However our analysis does not engage with these questions directly, as we go onto explain.

It is our aim in this book to describe, albeit by no means fully, the changes in the management and experience of death and grief in Iceland towards the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. In discussing what we will refer to as the changing regime of death and grief in Iceland, we follow well-established work that describes and theorises the revival of death in the Western world, particularly in the USA and the UK. This work centres on the relationship between death and society and seeks the sources and causes of this changing regime of death, the 'revival' of death, if such it is, in changes in society in a broad sense (see Seale 1998; Walter 1994).

It could be argued, with some conviction and not without justification, that Icelandic society has changed considerably over the last twenty-five years or so. As such it would be reasonable and plausible here to trace the connections between transformations in Icelandic society generally and changes in the management and experience of death and grief specifically. This, however, is not our contention, and it is here that we depart from most of the existing work on the place of death in contemporary Western societies. Our departure could be described in a number of different ways, but it effectively comes down to a different understanding of and a different approach to the two key terms here: death and society. In finding the causes of changes in the way death is understood and managed in changing societies, existing work in the field assumes society as a given, natural and external reality that shapes a similarly natural event, death. Society, in other words, is understood as coming before death and grief and giving them form according to its own parameters. This is a relationship that we seek to reverse. Drawing on the seminal work of anthropologists Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (1982), we want to investigate, not so much how death is shaped by society, but rather how society is constituted through death. In doing this we will not link the changing regime of death and grief in Iceland to broad and general social changes, important as these are, but rather to specific changes in the way in which it has been imagined that the country and its population – as an entity – are governed. More specifically, we propose to link the changing regime of death and grief in Iceland to changing ideas about

the nature of the reality that needs to be governed – to changing ideas about the proper relationship between the government and its subjects as individuals and collectives. Our interest is in the relationship between death and what Michel Foucault (1991; Gordon 1991; Rose 1989 & 1996) and those who follow his reasoning refer to as governmentality or the rationality of government.

In this we are of course using the argument, specifically informed by Nikolas Rose's (1996) account of the genealogy of subjectivity, that changes in governmentality in Iceland, rather than social change in broader sense, are to be understood as the context within which new regimes of death and grief in the country have emerged. Governmental rationality, we seek to demonstrate, constitutes 'society' and 'individuals' as the building blocks of that 'society' in particular ways, as particular governable forms. The changing regimes of death and grief, we suggest, appear in the context of these efforts. In relation to this, we argue that death, grief and memorialisation have become areas in which the possibilities of certain particular subject positions, certain ways of relating to oneself and others, have been made visible. This is not to say to what extent individual people have engaged with and, if we can put it like this, adopted these particular subjectivities. Tracing that specifically lies outside the remit of this study.

The specific changes in governmentality in Iceland that we refer are the advent of neo-liberalism in the country in the early 1990s (see Kristmundsson 2003) and its apparent collapse following the economic and political crisis in Iceland in 2008. Neo-liberalism is of course in one sense an economic doctrine, one that preaches free individual enterprise as the road to general, national economic prosperity. As such, some would say, it is no different from classic economic and political liberalism. However, neo-liberalism is also a political ideology, a political project, and, once in power, a political technology that entails a way of understanding and changing the reality it sees as needing to be governed (see Brockman 2012; Collier 2012; Hilgers 2012; Rose 1989). Seen from this perspective, the cultural, social and historical context that neo-liberalism inserts itself into is significant: as a political project and a political technology,

neo-liberalism is not an ahistorical, unchanging economic and political doctrine.[1]

The rise of neo-liberalism had a number of consequences in Iceland, many of which we will discuss in greater detail later in the book. Of central importance here is how neo-liberalism, generally speaking, and here specifically in the way it played out in Iceland from the early 1990s onwards, posits the free individual as the key agent to which government relates and as the source of national economic progress and prosperity. This is a key feature of neo-liberalism in general, of course, but it is a feature that plays out with particular consequences in Iceland. This is the case because positing the individual as such as the source of economic prosperity inevitably invites questions about the ongoing role and legitimacy of the state – questions that are particularly important and acute if that state has, as was the case in Iceland up to that point, been understood as the central instrument in securing the economic wellbeing and development of the nation. In this way, neo-liberalism undermines the link which, in a world system of nation-states, has been understood to exist between the 'nation' and the state, as Lauren Berlant (1998) has pointed out. Berlant (1998) has argued that despite the undermining of the hyphen between nation and state which neoliberalism brings about, it has remained important to keep the 'nation-form' at the centre of people's collective identifications. Here, we suggest, death and grief and the rituals of memorialisation that they instigate, have, in Iceland, served as important 'technologies of patriotism', to borrow Berlant's (1998) phrase, in securing that very identification with the nation. In some of the chapters in this book, we focus specifically on memorialisation around road deaths in Iceland as a particularly powerful instance of the politics of death, grief and memorialisation.

Chapters Three to Six in this book discuss death, grief and memorialisation in the context of rising neo-liberalism in Iceland. However, the advance of neo-liberalism came to an abrupt halt in the autumn of 2008 with the more or less total collapse of the financial system in the country: a collapse that was quickly, though not without protest, seen as a more fundamental social, political and moral collapse, rather than simply as a

1 This of course applies to liberalism as such.

financial crisis (see Hafsteinsson, Grétarsdóttir & Árnason, 2015). At that point, questions of political legitimacy and concerns about the continued existence of the Icelandic polity came to the fore. In Chapters Seven and Eight we describe how death, grief and memorialisation became implicated in debates over sovereignty and the reconstitution of the moral order. We draw attention in particular to the place that sacrifice was afforded in this process.

This book draws on research that has been ongoing, with some lengthy breaks, since around the year 2000. Our starting point was the realisation that death and grief in Iceland were undergoing quite fundamental changes, which, in important ways, echoed changes that had already taken place in the UK, the USA, and other Western countries. From the outset our intention was to monitor and document the changes and to consider them in relation to wider social, cultural and political changes in the country. Over the years we interviewed key members of the bereavement organisation 'New Dawn', about the work and the history of that organisation. We interviewed hospital and hospice staff in the Reykjavík area, funeral directors, and people who work for the obituaries section of *Morgunblaðið*. We engaged in participant-observation research with New Dawn and hospitals in Iceland. In addition we collected and analysed a huge number of policy documents in relation to death and grief and examples of public discussions relating to these matters in Icelandic newspapers, on television radio programs, and on the internet. We also engaged a large number of Icelanders in informal conversations about death and grief as part of our ongoing fieldwork in the country. All translations, from Icelandic to English, are our own, unless otherwise noted.

While the book thus extends over two quite different periods in contemporary Icelandic history – periods separated by the monumental events surrounding the collapse of 2008 – its thematic centre revolves around the politics of death, grief and memorialisation. Before moving on to the substantive chapters themselves, we will first seek to explain the broader theoretical ideas that have informed our work.

Chapter Two

Death, governmentality and the 'nation-form'

In this chapter we set out the main themes that the book addresses and discuss the key theoretical ideas that inform the analysis put forward here. We begin by discussing the anthropology of death, highlighting in particular the seminal work of Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (1982) which inform our analysis profoundly. We seek to make links between the central insights that Bloch and Parry's work offers and Michel Foucault's (1991; 2008; Gordon 1991; Rose 1996) work on governmental rationality. We do so to in order to establish the connection we see between the changing regime of death and grief in Iceland and the advent of neo-liberalism in the country. Here, then, we take neo-liberalism as a form of governmental rationality. Following Lauren Berlant (1998) we point to the challenge that neo-liberalism poses to the existing hyphen between the nation and the state. We suggest that death, grief and memorialisation play a key role in securing the ongoing identification with the nation.

Death

Anthropologists have been deeply interested in death from the very beginning of their discipline towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Such interest is of course understandable and to be expected of a discipline whose scholarly aim is to understand the human being, both in his universality and in his cultural particularity. Death, we hear often enough, is universal, an event that awaits us all, one of the few things we can take for granted in life. At the same time, death is almost infinitely variable in its cultural manifestations, in the

ways in which it is dealt with differently in different cultures, in the different conceptions of its meanings and origins, and in the expectations as to how mourners are to behave and to be treated. The case could thus be made that death is the anthropological subject *par excellence*. We will have occasion to question the universality of death, but for now we will follow Bloch and Parry (1982) further into the anthropology of death.

According to Bloch and Parry, the classic anthropological interest in death runs in two separate channels (see Bloch & Parry 1982: 6). They point out that the first anthropologists to pay serious and systematic attention to death were interested mainly in mortuary symbolism and sought their material as much in the classic sources on ancient Greek and Roman civilisations as they did in whatever ethnographic material might have been available. This focus is evident in the work of anthropological pioneers like J. J. Bachofen, and more extensively, in the numerous tomes by James Frazer. In 1858, Bachofen wrote in *Myth, Religion and the Mother Right* on the symbolism manifested in the Dionysian and Orphic mystery cults, pointing out the frequent presence of eggs in classical age tombs. Eggs, he suggested, are a powerful symbol of fertility, which makes their presence in this context interesting. He noted that eggs had been painted half-black and half-white, symbolising, he argued, the passage of night into day and the rebirth of life after death (Bachofen 1967; see Bloch & Parry 1982: 1). Bachofen (1967: 39 quoted in Bloch & Parry 1982: 1) concluded that the "funeral rite glorifies nature as a whole, with its twofold life and death giving principle … That is why the symbols of life are so frequent in the tomb…."

The theme of the glorification of nature was linked to Bachofen's concern with mother right as part of the original political formation of human society. As such Bachofen established, perhaps tentatively, a theoretical link between death, mortuary rites and politics. This was an idea pursued further, and arguably with greater impact, by Frazer in his *The Golden Bough*. The central preoccupation of Frazer's book is the practice of killing divine kings and the way that is understood as renewing the fertility of their community (Frazer 1890; see Bloch & Parry 1982: 2). Frazer thus linked political office directly to death, its import being

located particularly in the way killing the king is mobilised in cultural and social processes that seek to secure the regeneration of life.

While this interest in the symbolic or cultural aspects of mortuary rites was prevalent early on in the history of anthropology, it soon gave way to a concern with the relationship between social organisation and death as the ideas of Emile Durkheim gained influence on social anthropology in the first half of the twentieth century. According to Bloch and Parry (1982: 6), Durkheim and his followers saw death as a problem or a threat to society. Death, the Durkheimians suggested, is a problem for society in two related but distinct ways. Firstly, death is a problem for society as it inevitably disrupts the relationships between society's members, and as such undermines society's cohesion. Secondly, death is a problem for society because it threatens to undermine quite drastically and decisively the claim to eternity upon which society's authority, according to Durkheimian orthodoxy, depends (see Durkheim 1965 [1912]; Radcliffe-Brown 1964 [1922]). The question facing the Durkheimians thus became: how can the threat of death be neutralised? The Durkheimians looked to mortuary rituals for answers to their questions.

In his book *The Elementary Forms of the Religions Life*, Durkheim borrows a description from Gillen and Spencer of the reactions amongst the Warramunga of aboriginal Australia as news of a death filters through their camp. We allow ourselves to quote the description at length:

> a piercing cry suddenly came from the camp: a man was dying there. At once, the whole company commenced to run as fast as they could, while most of them commenced to howl … some of the men, scattered about here and there, sat down, bending their heads forward between their knees, while they wept and moaned … Some of the women … were lying prostrate on the body, while others were standing or kneeling around, digging the sharp ends of yam-sticks into the crown of their head, from which the blood streamed down over their faces, while all the time they kept up a loud, continuous wail. Many of the men, rushing up to the spot, threw themselves upon the body, from which the women arose when the men approached, until in a few minutes we could see nothing but a struggling mass of bodies all mixed up to-

> gether. To one side, three men of the Thapungarti class … sat down wailing loudly, with their backs to the dying man, and in a minute or two another man of the same class rushed on to the ground yelling and brandishing a knife. Reaching the camp, he suddenly gashed both thighs deeply, cutting right across the muscles, and unable to stand, fell down into the middle of the group, from which he was dragged out after a time by three or four female relatives, who immediately applied their mouths to the gaping wounds while he lay exhausted on the ground. The man did not actually die until late in the evening. As soon as he had given up his last breath, the same scene was re-enacted, only this time the wailing was still louder, and men and women, seized by a veritable frenzy, were rushing about cutting themselves with knives and sharp-pointed sticks, the women battering one another's heads with fighting clubs, no one attempting to ward off either cuts or blows. (Durkheim 1965[1912]: 435–436)

By relating scenes of such intense emotion, it would appear that the force and direction of Durkheim's argument can only be to demonstrate the unstructured, spontaneous and chaotic nature of grief. It is natural for family members, Durkheim asserts, to feel lessened, weakened by the fact of the death of one of its members, but what happens in the following public rituals, when sorrow leaps from mind to mind, is that other members of society feel a moral pressure to align their behaviour with the state of the bereaved.

This description seems to portray a scene of uncontrolled emotional outburst as it details the gratuitous harm the people in the camp violently visit upon themselves when hearing the news. The impression is very clearly, and as it turns out very cleverly, given that this is a case of unfettered human emotion running riot, and in the process threatening to rip asunder the fabric of society. However this is not Durkheim's intention, and it is not the reality of the situation, as he goes on to show. Rather, the seemingly random and individual expressions of violence, mostly self-directed, turn out to have a very distinct social logic to them. Certain individuals, it emerges, have an obligation to harm themselves, and to harm themselves in particular ways, depending on their relationship with

the deceased. As such, their reactions do not constitute a threat to the social fabric. Rather, by dramatically and violently enacting existing and established social relations, these reactions reaffirm those relations and strengthen the social ties that death might otherwise threaten to rupture.

Durkheim's line of argument is one that has been followed by a number of anthropologists over the years, even if their examples have not often been quite as blood-soaked as his. Both William Douglass (1970) and Jack Goody (1962), in now classic studies, examined how mortuary rites work to redistribute rights and responsibilities, pass on property, and fill social roles left empty by the death of their occupier. Even so, the most profound and the most influential demonstration of this line of thought comes from one of Durkheim's own students, Robert Hertz (1960 [1907]). In his account, Hertz actually went even further than his mentor in demonstrating how society re-establishes its authority in the face of death.

Hertz specifically examined particular Malay societies in which double burials are practised. Here, the deceased is initially buried in an individual but temporary grave, and his bones are later dug up and placed in a communal ossuary. Hertz first highlights a correspondence that is understood as existing between the state of the remains of the deceased, the state of his soul, and the state of those who mourn him. The interesting fact about these practices is that it is only after the flesh has fully decomposed that the bones of the deceased can be transferred to the collective grave. The correspondence, in the first place, is that this is also the point at which the soul of the deceased is ready to join the collective of the group's ancestors, and it is the moment at which the mourners are freed from the restrictions that the pollution associated with death places on them and allowed to re-enter society. This link between the state of the bodily remains, the soul of the deceased, and the mourners which Hertz identified has proved fruitful, as we will come to later. For now, we want to note the importance placed upon the decomposition of the flesh. This is naturally important for Hertz, as flesh signals individuality, in contrast to bones, which are surely not as easily distinguishable as belonging to particular individuals. The relative transience of the individual, as represented by his flesh, compared to the relative permanence of the ancestors, as exemplified by their

bones, is of course the key point for Hertz. Here the ancestors stand for social authority, the collective conscience, or simply society.

The practice of reburial allows Hertz to strongly suggest that death is not simply a biological event but rather a lengthy social process. What is the significance of that assertion? In reaching his conclusion, Hertz argues that society requires lengthy mortuary rituals to recoup and then recycle the work it has invested in stamping its identity upon the deceased individual, and that through that ritual work, the threat of death can be met and the eternal authority of society reasserted. This, he finally suggests, is evident from the fact that it is only those who are fully initiated as members of society that receive this lengthy treatment. Uninitiated children, slaves and foreigners are buried without much ceremony.

Hertz spoke of particular societies and drew his ethnographic examples mostly from Southeast Asia. Nevertheless his argument puts the Durkheimian take on the relationship between death and society in its clearest and strongest form. Since Hertz's work became more widely read – an English translation was not available until a few decades after the original French publication – anthropologists have drawn inspiration from it even though many of them have worked in ethnographic areas and types of societies not mentioned by Hertz at all. Amongst them are Bloch and Parry (1982), who build on Hertz's work, and in the process establish what is for us, 35 years after the book's publication, the most fruitful and interesting theoretical stance in the anthropology of death.

Bloch and Parry (1982) sought to bring together the early interest of anthropologists in funerary symbolism and the Durkheimian concern for the relationship between death and society. They thus focus "on the significance of symbols of fertility and rebirth in funeral rituals" (Bloch & Parry 1982: 1) while "seeing this symbolism in relation to the organizational aspects of the society in which it occurs" (Bloch & Parry 1982: 6). It is, we believe, fair to say that Bloch and Parry start at the same point as Durkheim did, the trajectory of their analysis is from the social to the cultural or symbolic, and not the other way around. Social organisation, to use that term loosely for now, is evoked to explain funerary symbolism, and not the other way around. Even so, Bloch and Parry offer a fundamental break with the Durkheimian orthodoxy, a break in line

with developments in anthropological and sociological thinking about society from the late 1970s onwards (see Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1979; Ingold 1986 & Strathern 1988 for example). In line with these developments, Bloch and Parry seek to do away with the personification of society evident in the Durkheimian tradition, according to which society is not simply a *super*organic entity, that is an order beyond the organic or the biological level of reality, but rather a 'super*organism*' (Ingold 1986: 227), a being in its own right. So while Bloch and Parry share with the Durkheimians "a concern with the social implications of mortuary practices," they do not share "their view of society as an entity acting for itself" (Bloch & Parry 1982: 6) and seek to move away from the personification of society that characterises the classic Durkheimian approach.

But if society is not an organism of some description in its own right, then what is it, and what is the relation between death and society? According to Bloch and Parry, first of all, death is obviously not a threat to society, as for them society does not exist, certainly not in any natural, objective and unproblematic sense. However, it is certainly borne out by the ethnographic record that many people imagine a collective moral order to which they in some sense submit. And so if society does not exist and act for itself, Bloch and Parry continue, then it and its authority must be created, because society, or something akin to it, is clearly part of the ethnographic reality that is definitely encountered in many places. According to Bloch and Parry, death, rather than being a problem, let alone a threat to society, provides an excellent chance to carry out the creation, the very constitution of just such a phenomenon. The relationship between death and society is, they say, "not so much a question of [Durkheim's] reified 'society' responding to the 'sacrilege' of death, as it is of the mortuary rituals themselves being an occasion for *creating* that "society" as an apparently external force" (Bloch & Parry 1982: 6). Death is not so much a threat to society as an opportunity to mobilise symbolic resources, particularly those that reference fertility and the regeneration of life, to create that society.

Bloch and Parry's de-personification of society has some far reaching and dramatic consequences for the anthropology of death. If society is not "an entity acting for itself" (Bloch & Parry 1982: 6) then the act of

creating it must be carried out by some of its members, making it possible to pose some genuinely political questions about the mobilisation of death in the constitution of the collective moral order and the processes whereby people come to identify with and submit to that order. How, for example, are different bodies differently positioned and empowered to engage in the constitution of society?

Bloch and Parry suggest that their theory – that death and its associated rituals are an occasion for the creation of the social order – is most applicable, if not restricted (Bloch & Parry 1982: 15) to societies characterised by 'traditional authority' in Max Weber's sense (1978). According to Weber, traditional authority "is represented as being a part of an eternal order grounded in nature and/or divinity" (Bloch 1982: 223). He contrasts it, of course, with charismatic and bureaucratic authority, which he claims is based on the charisma of a dominant leader, on the one hand, and the reference to general, accepted and established rules and regulations – to due process – on the other hand.

Drawing on Hertz's (1960) reflections on the importance of the symbolic associations attached to flesh and bones respectively, Bloch and Parry pay particular attention to how men and women are differently employed in mortuary rituals in societies where authority is based on tradition. Speaking specifically of the Merina of Madagascar, studied by Bloch, while also drawing on other examples from contributors to their book, they argue that men are symbolically associated with dry bones while women become associated with wet and rotting flesh. Thus women's role in the death rituals in these kinds of societies tends to place them in a position to receive, to take on the pollution that is understood to be attached to death. Meanwhile the rituals themselves enact a distinction between flesh-individuality-transience-sexuality on the one hand and bones-collective order-eternity-life giving fertility on the other. Through their different places in the rituals and their distinctive associations with bones and flesh, men come to stand for life-giving collective authority while women represent life-threatening individual sexuality (Bloch & Parry 1982; Bloch 1982). In that the social order is thus created through mortuary rites as a collective moral order, it is simultaneously created as a gendered order.

It is this aspect in particular, the politics of the mobilisation of death in the construction of society, to which Bloch and Parry draw our attention, but which the traditional Durkheimian approach obscures. And this is the line of thought that we pursue in this book. At its centre is the question of how death is mobilised, or at least becomes implicated in the constitution of social or political orders. We suggest, contrary to Bloch and Parry (1982: 15) themselves, that their view can be fruitfully applied to a Western context, even one where the ideology of the unique individual is extremely strong (see Durrenberger 1996). To do so, we need to consider the Foucauldian idea of governmental rationality, neo-liberalism and the 'nation-form' (Berlant 1998).

Governmentality, neo-liberalism and the 'nation-form'

Governmental rationality, or governmentality, was the central support of the conceptual framework around Foucault's research from the 1970s until his death in 1984. While appearing to encroach upon the territory of political science and political philosophy, his approach was unsurprisingly and characteristically quite different. In the lectures that he delivered to the Collège de France in 1978–1979, Foucault addressed the 'birth of biopolitics' and explained his approach to the study of government (Foucault 2008). There he says that he "wanted to study the art of governing, that is to say the reasoned way of governing in the best way, and at the same time, reflect on the best possible way of governing" (Foucault 2008: 2). He adds that he sought "to grasp the level of reflection in the practice of government and on the practice of government. In a sense, I wanted to study government's consciousness of itself" (Foucault 2008: 2). Thus he sought to "determine the way in which the domain of the practice of government, with its different objects, general rules, and overall objectives, was established so as to govern in the best possible way" (Foucault 2008: 2). This Foucault suggested would be called "the study of the rationalization of governmental practice in the exercise of political sovereignty" (Foucault 2008: 2). In the words of one of Foucault's most influential commentators:

> A rationality of government will thus mean a way or system of thinking about the nature of the practice of government (who can govern; what governing is; what or who is governed), capable of making some form of that activity thinkable and practicable both to its practitioners and to those upon whom it was practised. (Gordon 1991: 3)

A particular approach – which Foucault refers to as method, but which surely amounts to a fundamental theoretical stance – is involved here, one that distinguishes his approach from existing work on government and related issues. Thus, focusing on the art of government is, for Foucault, a method problematising 'the universals' employed by sociological, historical and political philosophical studies, such notions as "the sovereign, sovereignty, the people, subjects, the state, and civil society" (Foucault 2008: 2). By starting from government as practice, the art of government, and how this practice reflects on its own work, Foucault sought to "show how certain things – state and society, sovereign and subjects etcetera – were actually able to be formed" (Foucault 2008: 3) rather than taking them for granted as aspects of objective reality. The similarities to Bloch and Parry's approach to death and society are, we hope, clear.

Foucault thus understood government to mean a form of activity "aiming to shape, guide or affect the conduct of some person or persons" (Gordon 1991: 2), activity that furthermore is constitutive of the very objects and objectives at which it is aimed: subjects, the state, society. While Foucault's (2008) work in the lectures cited above was specifically aimed at government in relation to political sovereignty, government as activity "could concern the relation between self and self, private interpersonal relations involving some form of control or guidance, relations within social institutions and communities and, finally relations concerned with the exercise of political sovereignty" (Gordon 1991: 2–3). Indeed, "Foucault was crucially interested in the interconnections between these different forms and meanings of government" (Gordon 1991: 2–3).

Another way of formulating this is to say that government refers to "the conduct of conduct – that is, to all those more or less calculated and systematic ways of thinking and acting that aim to shape, regulate, or manage the comportment of others" (Inda 2005: 1). These others might

be "workers in a factory, inmates in a prison, wards in a mental hospital, the inhabitants of a territory, or the members of a population" (Inda 2005: 1), or indeed those facing death or experiencing grief at the death of loved ones. Here then government "designates not just the activities of the state and its institutions but more broadly any rational effort to influence or guide the conduct of human beings through acting upon their hopes, desires, circumstances, or environment." (Inda 2005: 1). Indeed, we might suggest that government here not only draws our attention away from the state as the agent of government, but is rather a way of explaining precisely how the state, and other 'universals', such as subject and society come into being, how they are able to come into being.

The literature on governmentality is already so extensive as to fill libraries. However, with the necessary simplification, it seems justifiable to follow Inda (2005) and his suggestion that three key analytical categories, themes, or foci if you wish, tend to emerge from this work: reasons, technics, and subjects. The analytical category of reasons is thus a way of drawing out "the changing discursive fields within which the exercise of power is conceptualized, the moral justifications for particular ways of exercising power by diverse authorities, notions of the appropriate forms, objects and limits of politics, and conceptions of the proper distribution of tasks among secular, spiritual, military and familial sectors" (Rose & Miller 1992: 175). Reasons, in other words, have to do with the "intellectual machineries that render reality thinkable in such a manner as to make it calculable and governable" (Inda 2005: 7).

The analytical category of technics invites us to think about how government takes on a pragmatic or technical form. Here we might think of the surveys, statistics, charts, guidelines, reports, and performance targets that are mobilised in the performance of government and the monitoring of governing itself. The theoretical aim here, as Inda (2005: 9) suggests, is to draw "attention to the importance of technical means in directing the actions of individuals and populations. Without such means, the government of conduct cannot take place."

Finally, the category of subjects here invites us to think of how "forms of person, self and identity are presupposed by different practices of government," as Dean (1999: 32) has it. Even more importantly this focuses

attention on the question of the transformations these practices aim to achieve (Dean 1999: 32). What is expected of those who govern, or in other ways exercise expertise and authority, in terms of their "statuses, capacities, attributes and orientations" (Dean 1999: 32). What is expected of those who are to be governed? "How," as Dean (1999: 32) concludes "are certain aspects of conduct problematised? How are they then to be reformed? How are certain individuals and populations made to identify with certain groups, to become virtuous and active citizens?" The notion of subjects thus asks us to pay "attention to how governmental practices and programs seek to cultivate particular types of individual and collective identity as well as forms of agency and subjectivity" (Inda 2005: 10). The broader point here is the extent to which government is involved "in making modern subjects" (Inda 2005: 10). The argument is that "through attaching individuals to particular identities, through getting them to experience themselves as specific kinds of beings with certain kinds of capacities and qualities – government is able to mould human conduct in such a way as to bring about individual and collective wellbeing" (Inda 2005: 10). Death and grief, we hope to demonstrate, provide a terrain upon which individuals can be encouraged to experience themselves as specific kinds of beings.

Foucault usually refers to the form of governmentality that gradually emerges in Europe after the Renaissance as biopower. He contrasts it with the concern over sovereignty and the relations between the sovereign and territory that characterised the preceding form of governmentality (see Agamben 1998). Biopower, in contrast, is not concerned as such with sovereignty or territory. Rather, it is "power exercised over persons specifically in so far as they are thought of as living beings" (Gordon 1991: 4–5). It is a form of power that engenders politics "concerned with subjects as members of a population, in which issues of individual sexual and reproductive conduct interconnect with issues of national policy and power." (Gordon 1991: 4–5). Commentators sometimes draw a distinction here between two forms of biopolitics. On the one hand, there is the biopolitics of populations that primarily takes the population as its target as it "attends to the biological processes of the collective social body." (Inda 2005: 5) It is important to note that statistics are important

as a tool for this management, their goal being "to optimize the life of the population as a whole." (Inda 2005: 5). On the other hand, there is the "anatomo-politics of the human body or simply discipline" (Inda 2005: 5). Biopower in this form centres on the individual body, "taken as an object to be manipulated. The goal of discipline is to produce human beings whose bodies are at once useful and docile" (Inda 2005: 6). Here we can think of the examples such as the army, the school, or the factory as environments in which individuals are encouraged, engendered, persuaded, or even coerced to discipline their own bodies. Biopolitics is then a form of governmentality that is also concerned with the body "imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary" (Foucault 1980: 139).

It is important to stress here that this form of governmentality is, according to Foucault, fundamentally not primarily a repressive form of power. Rather, it is a positive, productive or creative form of power. To understand the workings of this form of governmentality, we are not helped by assuming natural and universal human capacities, needs or rights and postulating power as an external agency that works by repressing these naturally given qualities. Rather, in this form of governmentality, or from this particular perspective, power works by creating and making available certain positions, possibilities, identities for people, and by persuading people to adopt these positions, to assume those identities. Foucault expresses this most forcefully and most famously in his analysis of the history of sexuality. For Foucault, sexuality is not a naturally given quality of humans that power has at various times attempted to suppress or direct in certain ways. This is not to suggest, contrary to those who see him as a determinist, that Foucault has a voluntarist and romantic view of the power of the individual. The point is not that sexuality is something that has achieved freedom in contemporary Western societies, as is often claimed. Rather, sexuality is a way of understanding oneself and others as individuals; it is a way of drawing out particular aspects of being as particularly important. Power works by persuading individuals of the importance of those identities. Foucault's approach is thus simply to

emphasise the particularities of a distinct form of power, one that works through rather than against the capacities of those to be governed. Gordon puts it thus:

> Foucault saw it as a characteristic (and troubling) property of the development of the practice of government in Western societies to tend towards a form of political sovereignty which would be a government of all and of each, and whose concerns would be at once to "totalize" and to "individualize". (Gordon 1991: 3)

According to Gordon, Foucault finds it both "fascinating and disturbing" that "Western governmental practice" has developed "a kind of power which takes freedom itself and the 'soul of the citizen', the life and life-conduct of the ethically free subject, as in some sense the correlative object of its own suasive power." (Gordon 1991: 5).

In some of the lectures he delivered to the Collège de France towards the end of his life, Foucault noted a further shift in the rationality of government in the Western world with the emergence of neo-liberalism (Foucault 2007). The issue of neo-liberalism, and in particular the impact of neo-liberal policies – often termed 'reforms' – in a globalised world has been widely discussed in a variety of disciplines in recent years (see Harvey 2007; Ong & Collier 2005). The stability and the universality of the category 'neo-liberalism' is, for example, quite heavily debated, as is the extent to which neo-liberalism should be understood as an ideology and the extent to which societies might be characterised as neo-liberal (see debates in the journal *Social Anthropology*, in particular in 2012). One key question at stake in these debates is the relationship between the state and society in neo-liberalism and the effect that neoliberal policies have on the state. As a political and economic ideology, neo-liberalism is of course characterised by a firm belief in the efficacy and indeed the justice of the market. As such, neo-liberalism may appear very similar if not identical to classic liberalism.[2] However,

2 We might add here, as an aside, albeit an aside that will gain some importance later on, that in the aftermath of the collapse in Iceland in 2008, voices could be heard that claimed that neo-liberalism had never existed. It is true to say that the advocates of neo-liberalism in Iceland from 1979 onwards spoke of *frjálshyggja*, liberalism, rather than *nýfrjálshyggja*, neo-liberalism. It was their critics who were more likely to use the latter term.

neo-liberalism is of course more importantly a political technology and a political project. Once in power, neo-liberalism also entails a particular rationality of government, a way of understanding and changing the reality that it sees as needing to be governed (see Brockman 2012; Collier 2012; Hilgers 2012; Rose 1989). This informs our take on neo-liberalism. Our approach, our interest here, is primarily ethnographic and historical: how has neo-liberalism as governmental rationality played out in Iceland, and what its articulations with emerging regimes of death and grief in the country might have been. Without denying the similarities between classic liberalism and neo-liberalism, we suggest that important differences exist, certainly when it comes to the Icelandic case. It might be argued that the key difference is simply historical. That is to say, neo-liberalism and those who advocate it, explicitly, clearly and importantly, understand this ideology as arising at a time when society and individuals have been thoroughly conditioned by the policies and the practices of the social democratic welfare state. The entrepreneurial spirit, which classic liberalism perhaps sees as the natural capacity and proclivity of individuals, is seen by neo-liberalism and its advocates as something that may have to be re-awakened in individuals, who are too accustomed to relying on the care of the welfare state (see Rose 1992). Hence much of the effort of neo-liberalism was directed at finding ways to educate individuals in entrepreneurship and personal responsibility. Herein lay key links with the changing regime of death and grief in Iceland, as we will discuss throughout the book.

The rise of neo-liberalism had a number of consequences in Iceland, most of which we will discuss in greater detail later in the book. Of central importance here are the consequences of neo-liberalism in general and the way it played out in Iceland from the early 1990s onwards in particular, positing the free individual as the key agent to which government relates and as the source of economic progress. As an ideology, neo-liberalism clearly advocates curtailing the role of the state in economic affairs and indeed in other areas as well. Neo-liberalism would apparently and inevitably lead to a very deliberate, and for its advocates welcome, weakening of the state. That effect would be further heightened by the neo-liberal desire to not only minimise the impact of the state upon society

in general and the market in particular, but also the wish to introduce, wherever possible, market principles into the running of those activities that do remain with the state. However, such an effect is by no means clear, conclusive or universal. A number of scholars have pointed out how neo-liberalism has the effect of strengthening the state through the regulative mechanisms that are necessary to ensure the fair and free running of markets. Others point out how neo-liberal economic 'reforms', with the social unrest they frequently entail, has ensured the strengthening of the security arm of the state apparatus (see Bockman 2012; Collier 2012; Hilgers 2012; Peck & Theodore 2012; Wacquant 2012).

These concerns are both interesting and significant. At the time of final writing, we might note the arming of the police in Iceland as an instance of the securitisation of the state under neo-liberalism, a development which is coming to the fore precisely at the time that the role of the state as provider of collective welfare is being minimised. However, our main focus here is somewhat different. The positing of the free-enterprising individual as the generator of economic progress and national prosperity changes the conception of the relationship between the individual, the state and society; it changes the articulation between individual, the state and the 'nation'. The shift inevitably invites questions about the ongoing role and legitimacy of the state, in particular if that state has, as was the case in Iceland, been understood as the central instrument in securing the economic wellbeing and development of the 'nation'. In the struggle for independence from Danish rule, the location and the role of the state in securing progress, *framfarir* in Icelandic, was paramount. Starting in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Icelandic intellectuals argued that the lack of progress in Iceland was the result of a lack of understanding of and a lack of interest in Iceland on the part of the Danish government. Progress could only be made if the state apparatus, as it related to Iceland, were actually located in the country itself – if it were Icelandic. As political power was gradually transferred to Iceland in the course of the first half of the twentieth century, culminating in full independence in 1944, the state and individual municipalities took on a central role in promoting and securing economic development. This is of course an arrangement that neo-liberal ideology and practice problematises and

seeks to change, but further consideration is necessary in order to grasp the extent of the problematisation.

The very central position that the state assumed, on reflection rather easily, as the instrument of economic progress for the 'nation' stems from the force and speed at which state and nation were brought together ideologically in Iceland. While the first decades of the twentieth century in the country were characterised to some extent by class struggle in an emerging capitalist economy, some claiming – in line with classic Marxist analysis – that the state was in fact an instrument of the ruling class, as the move toward full independence gained momentum, even left-wing intellectuals increasingly emphasised the solidarity, primacy and distinctiveness of the 'nation', the Icelandic 'nation' as a collective. The previous assertions that class divisions were a more important aspect of reality than the unity of the nation largely disappeared. In the process, the 'nation' – here as elsewhere an imaginary construct (Anderson 1983) – became ideologically established as the most important form of collective identification (see Berlant 1998). At the same time, the state was conceived as the representative and instrument of the 'nation' as a whole in its quest for progress. This too was challenged with the advent of neo-liberalism, when doubt was cast on the role of the state as an instrument of the 'nation'. In neo-liberal rhetoric, the state is portrayed as a hindrance to the advancement of the 'nation', a dead hand that stifles the innovation and progress that innovation entails – innovation that can only have its source in the enterprising spirit of entrepreneurial individuals.

Neo-liberalism thus problematises the accepted role of the state. However, its challenge is even more fundamental. For most of the twentieth century, Iceland was dominated by a political rhetoric "in which the nation form trumps all other images of collective sociality and power" as Berlant (1998: 174) puts it, referring to the United States. But since "the only thing the nation form is able to assure for itself", as Berlant (1998: 174) observes, "is its past, its archives of official memory, it must develop in the present ways of establishing its dominion over the future." This is particularly relevant to Iceland, given the importance of loss in its historical consciousness. As we will discuss later, Icelandic history highlights at least two episodes in the nation's history when its very existence was un-

der serious threat due to a combination of natural disasters, unfavourable trading conditions, poverty and isolation. This threat, furthermore, is one that was evoked again in the wake of the collapse of 2008, in particular when educated young people were seen leaving the country in alarmingly large numbers. In light of this history of loss, Icelandic nationalists have historically been acutely aware of the difficulty of establishing the contingent character of any dominion over the future. In Iceland, the apparatus of the state has proved to be a very important tool in securing such dominion. In its economic role, it has owned banks and bakeries, factories and fishing boats and been directly involved in the running of commercial enterprises. Through the collection of statistics (Hacking 1975 & 1991) on the population and economic output, the state has kept an eye on the nation; and through welfare provisions, with their interference in reproductive heterosexuality and the family, it has sought to ensure the future of the nation. The state has furthermore created, sponsored and supported memorials and rituals celebrating the 'nation'. It has been directly involved in the publication of numerous books on the history and culture that form the basis for legitimising independence. It could be argued that Iceland is characterised by what Brian McVeigh (2000: 11), speaking of Japan, terms 'statefulness', in that "modern, centralized political structures and projects have penetrated into everyday life and produced individual subjectivities." Similarly, it could also be argued that Iceland is characterised by 'statism', "the ideology of deliberately disseminating statefulness and its acceptance by [the] populace" (McVeigh 2000).

This state of 'statefulness', as set out above, was the situation until recently. Here we arrive at two historical 'moments' that frame our discussion in this book. The first moment can be located in 1991. Following general elections in Iceland that year, a decidedly right-wing government came to power, one that explicitly, at least at times, sought to 'reform' the Icelandic economy and Icelandic society along the lines of neo-liberal doctrine. While there were changes in government in the following years and decades, the political party that was the chief advocate of such 'reform' remained influential, and the same broad policy was

pursued unchanged, if anything even gaining force. Attempts were made to curtail the influence and interference of the state while expanding the territory of the free market and the ferocity of competition. State enterprises in Iceland were privatised, and bakeries, factories and fishing vessels systematically sold off. Of key importance here was the privatisation of two large banks which had, until that time, been under public ownership; both of which later played a central role in the financial crisis and the economic collapse of 2008. In line with this trend, the dominant political rhetoric in the country rarely concerned the state and the nation, but rather the free individual and free enterprise. The purpose of the state was not that of guiding the development of the nation and individual citizens. The state's purpose was increasingly presented as that of establishing the general legal framework within which free individuals could compete in pursuing their own legitimate interests. This, the political rhetoric insisted, was the path to future welfare and development.

Undermining the nation-form as the paramount image of collective sociality and power clearly has implications for the ways in which people and government relate, the ways in which populations are, in other words, governed. Here, we follow what Lauren Berlant writes when he suggests that the neo-liberal "attempt to shrink domestic government' has the effect of hacking away 'at the hyphen between the nation and the state" (Berlant 1998: 174). However, as Berlant continues, it has nevertheless remained important for neo-liberal projects of social transformation to secure people's continued identification with the 'nation-form', to secure a situation in which the 'nation-form' trumps other collective identifications, for example class identifications. Achieving this identification has, according to Berlant, "required the development of new technologies of patriotism that keep the nation at the center of the public's identification while shrinking the field of what can be expected from the state." We suggest that the recent changes in the regime of death and grief in Iceland can be understood as 'new technologies of patriotism'; that although not devised with this intention, their impact, implications, and effects do suggest identification with the nation. Emanating from voluntary activity and existing beyond the state, the new regimes of

death and grief nonetheless offered means by which grieving individuals could relate to, understand and govern themselves as subjects in ways that are allied to the imagined history and future of the nation.

A fundamental change then took place in this imagined history and future with the collapse of the Icelandic financial system – some might say the economy, politics and society as well – in the autumn of 2008. This is the second historical 'moment' that frames our discussion. Many have seen the collapse of 2008 as the consequence of the neo-liberal politics of the preceding decade and a half. While that history is now an intense political battleground, we think it safe to say that the political imagination associated with neo-liberalism did lose ground, at least initially, and has been replaced by concerns that have more to do with questions of political legitimacy, justification of the state, justification of a specifically Icelandic state, and questions relating directly to sovereignty. Thus, in the last two main chapters of this book, we seek to investigate the implication of death and grief in the re-emerging politics of sovereignty and political legitimacy that came in the immediate aftermath of the collapse in Iceland.

Our point of departure here is the anthropological interest in the ways in which death and grief are mobilised in the construction of what we might call collective identities, or indeed 'society'. We suggest that these are concerns that take on particular interest when aligned with Foucauldian investigations into biopolitics and governmentality, in particular in a context of the 'neo-liberalisation' of politics and society. In the first few chapters our key focus is on the constitution of 'society', the collective identification of the 'nation form', as Berlant puts it, and the place of changing regimes of death and grief in such a context at a time when neo-liberalism has undermined the hyphen between the nation and the state.

Chapter Three

A revival of death
Or, how to treat a living human being

> What happens when someone dies here? Well, we call for the doctor to confirm the death. Usually close relatives will be present by the death bed, and they will be given a moment with the deceased. Then we ready linen for the dead body in order to prepare it for the journey 'from here' [*búa fyrir brottförina héðan*]. We try to treat the corpse as if it were a living human being. It is washed, and we pay particular attention to the mouth. We use a special collar to make sure the mouth looks right. We put cotton in the anus in order to prevent leaking. All extraneous apparatus – tubes and so on – are removed from the dead body. Jewellery is removed. Men are shaved and their nails cut. If the deceased has a wound we try to close it so that it doesn't 'stab the eyes' [*stingi ekki í augun*]. It can be difficult to close the eyes, and if so, we use wet cotton balls. The corpse is then wrapped in linen and labelled. We put a name tag on the leg and on the linen.

These are the words of Hallgerður, a nurse at the National Hospital of Iceland. Hallgerður works at a recently established palliative care unit, and in this role she is at the forefront of changes in the ways people in Iceland are conditioned to manage and experience death and grief – changes that have been ongoing since the mid-1990s or so. Explaining their work, Hallgerður and her colleagues speak of the necessity of greater openness towards death and grief. They talk about people in Iceland needing to be, and gradually becoming, more accepting of death and more open about the emotions it triggers. They suggest that the old Icelandic solution of 'locking death away in a drawer' is being replaced by a healthier option of 'dealing openly' with death and grief.

The changes taking place when it comes to death and grief in Iceland appear to mirror or follow changes that some would argue started to happen in Britain and America some fifty years ago. We are talking of the processes that Tony Walter (1994) has so aptly labelled 'the revival of death'. In this chapter, we discuss practices associated with death and dying in a hospital setting in Iceland in the context of the revival of death. This will require quite a lengthy discussion of the taboo of death and the revival of death-theses. Drawing on the theoretical discussion in the preceding chapter, we will articulate an argument here that challenges the revival of death thesis. In particular, we will seek to examine the ways in which death, the body and in particular the dying and recently dead human body are implicated in the processes whereby 'society' is created and re-created. However, to do this, we need to start with a discussion of the taboo and the revival of death.

Death as taboo, the revival of death

It is a longstanding belief amongst scholars that the way in which death is managed has important consequences for the well-being of both individuals and society (see Gorer 1965; Walter 1999). For some time now scholars – chiefly historians and social scientists – have asserted that death in the West had been repressed, that it had become an embarrassment that was to be avoided, something people sought to hide themselves away from as best they could (Ariès 1974a; 1974b; 1981; Gorer 1965; Illich 1976). Since the 1960s at least it has sometimes appeared as if scholars and social commentators were competing with each other to claim in the strongest terms possible that death in the West had, unfortunately, become a taboo (for example Ariès 1974a; 1974b; 1981; Gorer 1965; Illich 1976; see Simpson 1987). The 'death as taboo' thesis is well rehearsed, and there is thus no need for us to reiterate the arguments in great detail here (see for example Hockey 1990; Seale 1998; Simpson 1987; Walter 1994 & 1999). However a short description of the main ideas regarding how death, allegedly, came to be a taboo, may be useful in understanding the practical responses that have sought to lift the taboo on death, for example in Iceland. This is also a necessary discussion

before we discuss the claim that death has, more recently, undergone something of a revival.

Scholars have put forward a number of reasons for death becoming, as they see it, a taboo in the modern Western world. Anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer (1965), in many ways the initial proponent of the death as taboo thesis, placed great emphasis on the impact of the First World War. Gorer's thesis does in fact build on a contrast he draws, in important ways through personal reflection, between practices surrounding death in Britain before the First World War and then around 1950, when his thesis starts to take shape.[3] What drew Gorer's attention to this contrast was the anxiety he observed around death, and in particular around bereaved people in 1950s Britain. It was, he observed, as if people did not know how to act around bereaved people any longer, and so in order to avoid the uncertainty and the attendant anxiety, they tried to ignore them instead. Gorer argued that this was the case because there were no public, well-established, and known rules to guide people's interactions with the bereaved. This, Gorer argued, was in sharp contrast to the situation before World War I, when detailed and shared rules set out acceptable behaviour for people in mourning and the proper conduct of friends and acquaintances around them. Books on etiquette stated when bereaved people could socialise again following the death of their relative. Advice was similarly given on how soon after death friends and acquaintances might call on bereaved people. A further example was the so-called widow's weeds, the black clothing widows were instructed to wear after the death of their husbands, which publically and visibly marked their status. Through these means, the interactions and relationships between bereaved people and others were formally structured in such a way that people knew how to act in their encounters with bereaved persons.

According to Gorer these rules gave way under the sheer weight of the loss of life in the First World War and the political necessity of not undermining the war effort by too extensive participation in mourning. As the rules fell out of use, Gorer continued, the knowledge of how to in-

3 Gorer's reflections were first published as a journal article in the mid-1950s. There Gorer spoke of the 'pornography of death' a phrase many have used since. The book, which details the argument much more fully, appeared in 1965.

teract with bereaved people, and the security this knowledge provided, disappeared. Security was quickly replaced by anxiety in interacting with bereaved people, as there were no longer any established and accepted guidelines to fall back on. The effect of this, furthermore, was to drive a wedge between bereaved people, and to some extent the dying on the one hand, and the rest of society on the other. The distance thus created then heightened the anxiety associated with this interaction even more, driving the two groups farther apart in a vicious circle that became ever more difficult to break out of.

While Gorer sees the First World War as a turning point, the French social historian Phillipe Ariès (1974a; 1974b; 1981) sees the contemporary death taboo as the culmination of a long historical process. Whereas Gorer is somewhat polemical, Ariès is, at least initially, the exemplary cautious and measured historian. Ariès (1974a) draws a sharp contrast between a premodern approach to death, which he terms 'tame death', and the modern approach which is now 'wild'. Tame death was marked by an acceptance of death as an inevitable part of life. The view that people took of death involved looking for signs of its approach in order to give themselves the chance to prepare for its imminent arrival. People looked for signs of death approaching in order to have the time and opportunity to put their earthly and spiritual houses in order. The ideal was that a dying person would only pass away once he had made his peace with God, man, and woman. Tame death thus involved an acceptance of one's fate. It existed within a religious framework, held in place to some extent by a belief in an eternal afterlife, which was available to the worthy as their reward. The extent to which people achieved tame death could in some ways be seen as an indication of the kind of afterlife awaiting the deceased. Wild death, by contrast, is seen as an alien intrusion into life, something to be fought, avoided, and if all else fails, ignored. Calm acceptance that sought to prepare the dying for their death has thus been replaced by wild anxiety and a fear that can only be managed through avoidance.

The reasons for the transition from tame to wild death – a transition that in Ariès' (1974a) longer work is portrayed as taking place through a number of distinct stages – are complex. Even so, Ariès (1974a) appears

to place particular emphasis on the two distinct but related processes of secularisation and the rise of individualism. As established religion is undermined, and with it the promise of eternal life, a fundamental support for tame death has fallen away. As the individual then emerges, in a distinct but related historical process, as the source of value in Western culture, his death – as a loved one or as an individual – becomes ever more problematic, ever more terrifying. It is the anxiety around the demise of loved ones and the self, without the hope of a reunion in an afterlife, that drives death wild, making it an unbearable eventuality that has to be ignored as long as possible. Instead of being understood and accepted as an intrinsic part of life, death increasingly comes to be understood as a problem. More precisely it comes to be seen specifically as a medical problem, one that will hopefully be overcome in each individual case, and indeed eventually for all human beings (Illich 1976).

The death as taboo thesis has gained widespread public acceptance. It is frequently cited as the motivation behind efforts to transform practices associated with death and grief in the Western world over the last few decades (Walter 1994), Iceland included. Much of this work is understood by those carrying it out as involving a reversal of the taboo on death. This of course stems from the general view, which has spread in society at large, that the alleged taboo on death is unhealthy and unhelpful (see Walter 1994). Thus people who work in this area frequently speak of their attempts to make people generally more accepting of death and grief. Hospices attempt to move away from what they see as the medicalisation of death, seeking to return it to a more holistic, more spiritual process, not unlike Ariès' tame death. Bereavement counsellors see the isolation they say bereaved people now find themselves in as one of the key reasons and justifications for their own existence. While bereavement counsellors may not agree with Gorer when it comes to the reasons for this taboo on death, or indeed even be aware of his argument, they often seem to share his view of the current state of affairs. Many bereavement counsellors tell stories that echo those told by Gorer about bereaved people who, as they see it, are ignored by acquaintances, because the latter do not know how to act around grief.

While the death as taboo thesis appears to be generally accepted, in

the last twenty years or so, a growing number of social scientists have claimed that death is currently undergoing something of a revival (Walter 1994; 1996; 1999; Seale 1998; Simpson 1987; see Hockey 2001; Small 2001). The main proponent of this thesis, Walter (1991 & 1994), remarks pointedly that in Britain hardly a day passes without death and dying being discussed on television, radio or in a major newspaper. Curiously, the message is almost invariably that death has become hidden, a taboo. When Simpson (1979) amassed his bibliography of publications in English about death, he remarked that it is such a badly kept secret that "there are over 650 books now in print asserting that we are ignoring the subject" (Simpson 1979: vii).

Walter (1991) suggests that if death is indeed a taboo, then it is only so amongst certain sections of society. Walter (1994) goes further, arguing that death has, in the last few decades, undergone something of a revival. He argues that people in the Anglo-Saxon Western world, at least, now deal with and discuss death much more openly than they did during the interwar years and immediately after the Second World War. Hospices and bereavement counselling are widespread institutions and practices; funerals have, in some cases, become more personalised; terminally ill people are now informed of their impending fate and allowed something of a say in the way it is handled; and all these things are, as noted above, discussed freely and frequently in the media.

In an argument that clearly responds to Ariès, Walter asserts that the roots of the revival of death lie in a conflict between modern, rational, bureaucratic medicine and the ever-increasing individualism of our age. He (1994: 22) concedes that modern medicine has allowed ever greater control over death but adds that these achievements arise from medicine's bureaucratic and rational manner of operating, which in turn serves to deny us what is most precious to us: our individuality. Walter points out that 'modernity' – in this context the period evoked in the 'death as taboo' thesis – involved a fundamental split between the public realm of work and reason and the private world of family and emotion. This gap, Walter (1994: 23) adds, is evident in the modern way of death, which has been "stripped of its public spectacle" and "become a private, family experience". Yet, public discourses about death do exist

in the form of medical texts, public health regulations, life insurance policies, the management of cemeteries and so on. These are, however, "impersonal and unrelated to the private experiences of individuals who are dying or bereaved … private experiences and public discourses do not tally" (Walter 1994: 23). It is from this contradiction between private experience and public discourse that the revival of death emanates: its aim is to bridge the gap by making private experiences of death part of public discourse about death (Walter 1994: 24).

Here Walter draws a distinction between a late modern and a postmodern revival of death. The late modern revival links the public and the private by the establishment and dissemination of knowledge that seeks to account for and explain private experiences. In this way, the late modern revival, Walter argues, is an attempt by experts to control the private experiences of their clients. In bereavement counselling, for example, the trained expert, a representative of the public, acknowledges and legitimises the feelings of the bereaved while at the same time protecting the public from these feelings by offering a secluded and private haven inside which they can be explored and expressed (Walter 1994: 39–40; see Walter 1996). According to Walter, the late modern strand is thus driven by contemporary experts of death – palliative nurses and bereavement counsellors, for example, who seek to replace medical control over death with a more psychological approach. Grief, both that of the terminally ill and of the bereaved, previously dealt with largely by dosing out sedatives and anti-depressants, is now faced more squarely through talk therapy (Walter 1994). Key influences here include the seminal work of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross with the terminally ill, the hospice movement instigated by Cicely Saunders, Cruse Bereavement Care established by Margaret Torrie, and the theoretical work in grief counselling from Eric Lindemann to John Bowlby, Colin Murray Parkes and William Worden. The impetus behind this revival, Walter argues, is that experts have come to believe that they understand the stages and processes through which dying and bereaved people pass. Experts thus think they have uncovered the needs the dying and the bereaved have at each stage of their journey and are confident that expert advice can help them on their odyssey toward an adequate resolution.

In contrast to this, the postmodern revival, Walter argues, is driven by ordinary people, the dying and the grieving themselves. It rejects the late modern exposure of neat stages and precise processes of dying and grieving. Instead it celebrates what it takes to be the enormous variety in individual experiences of death and bereavement and demands that people be allowed to die and grieve in their own ways and express their emotions as they see fit. So the postmodern strand, Walter (1994: 40–44) argues, invites private feelings onto the public sphere; they are not to be reined in by expert control but expressed freely and taken seriously in their own right. The diversity of these feelings, in turn, can only serve to fragment the public discourses and challenge expert authority even further.

As a consequence, Walter (1994: 2) asserts, death is increasingly shaped not by the "dogmas of religion" or "the institutionalized routines of medicine, but by dying, dead or bereaved individuals themselves". He (1994: 2) links this development to "a culture of individualism that values a unique life uniquely lived". In a culture like the one we live in, Walter (1994: 2) continues[4]:

> the good death is … the death that we choose. The good funeral is the funeral that uniquely marks the passing of a unique individual, and psychological manuals that prescribed stages of grief for mourners to pass through are now being discarded for an awareness of the infinite individual variations in the way people grieve.

Walter's notion of revivalism has received support and application in Clive Seale's (1998) analysis of *Constructing Death*, amongst many other places. Seale's (1998: 1) central argument is that "social and cultural life involves turning away from the inevitability of death, which is contained in the fact of our embodiment, and towards life". This is achieved through the use of a number of 'resurrective practices' that often involve people claiming membership in imagined communities. Seale (1998: 4)

4 Walter (1999) takes a different track and offers a Durkheimian account of bereavement in modern Western societies that centres on the concepts of integration and regulation. Walter's (1999: xvi) point of departure is that every 'society needs institutionalized means for integrating its members and for regulating their passions. This is particularly true of the dead and those who grieve for them'. Walter (1999) discusses bereavement counselling under a section on policing grief and sees its primary objective as that of regulating emotions.

suggests that revivalism, in the form of hospice care and bereavement counselling, is an example of such resurrective practices. Revivalist counselling discourse thus "enables individuals in late modernity, faced with bereavement and death, to engage in practices (such as psychotherapy) that involve claims to membership in an imagined human community of anonymous others". Seale (1998: 62) suggests that psychology can be seen as offering "the self as an object of worship to people in late modernity, and the continuation of reflexive projects of self-identity even to the end of life enables some people to imbue their deaths with meaning". Seale continues (1998: 93) that "people appropriate psychological ideas, often with the aid of techniques such as therapy, as cultural scripts for understanding the tribulations of the inner self and its relations to others".

It seems safe to suggest that the process Walter speaks of as the postmodern revival of death has, if anything, gained momentum since the publication of his original thesis now some twenty years ago. If anything, the demand for an individual, personal seal to be placed on the process of dying, the experience of grief and practices of mourning, has grown even stronger. Some might argue that the influence of the internet as a place of publicly staging private grief, has been paramount here (see Christensen & Sandvik 2014; Walter et al. 2011; see Pearce 2016).

We suggest that something akin to a revival of death has been happening in Iceland since around the early 1990s. This is for example evident in the work done by Hallgerður, the nurse whom we met at the beginning of this chapter, and a number of others whom we will discuss later in the book. The type of revival we discuss in this chapter is closer to that which Walter (1994) describes as late modern. It is a revival of death driven by professionals who seek to change dying and grieving through and because of their professional expertise rather than personal experience. In the next two chapters, we discuss forms of revival that are closer to Walter's (1994) postmodern revival of death. While we will frame the discussion that follows in terms of the revival of death, we suggest that in order to appreciate the real significance of the revival of death, we need to move beyond the theoretical formulations that were suggested by Walter (1994) and taken up by Seale (1998). We echo Walter's curiosity,

which in turn echoes Simpson's (1979 & 1987) surprise over a taboo on death being an endless topic of discussion. However, we do not agree that the solution is simply a revival of death, as we will explain below.

According to Walter, bereavement counselling, as an example of the late modern revival of death, is a means to control private experiences and emotions. The postmodern revival, on the other hand, celebrates these private experiences, forces them onto the public stage and demands that they, in all their diversity, be tolerated. Seale (1998: 93) similarly asserts that "people appropriate psychological ideas, often with the aid of techniques such as therapy, as cultural scripts for understanding the tribulations of the inner self and its relations to others". The assumption here is that people have the capacity and the need to experience and give meaning to their feelings, and that potentially oppressive practices like counselling may seek to repress those capacities. In this, the 'revival of death' thesis shares certain fundamental presumptions with the 'denial of death' thesis. Both involve a certain naturalisation of death and a certain naturalisation of the self as a subject that experiences death and grief. In both the denial of death and revival of death theses, society then appears as an *external* force that encourages, allows or restricts, as the case may be, people's engagement with the *natural* phenomena of death and grief. This, we suggest, is not theoretically the most fruitful way out of the conundrum: how can death be a taboo when everyone is loudly proclaiming that it is a taboo? We suggest that both death as taboo and the revival of death theories might need to be expanded on in order to gain a firmer grip on the relation between death, grief and society.

In taking our cue here from Foucault's (1979) writing on sexuality – where he discusses a remarkably similar conundrum – we suggest moving away from both the naturalisation of death and the naturalisation of the subject experiencing death and grief. Foucault talked about Victorian repression of sexuality and the 1960s revolution that was said to have set sexuality free. Foucault observed that the alleged Victorian suppression of sexuality was accompanied by a great many treatises on sexuality and the dangers associated with it. This sense of danger was largely eliminated in the 1960s. Foucault draws attention to how in this narrative, sexuality is naturalised – established as something that exists outside his-

tory, society, culture and power. The same thing takes place, we suggest, in accounts of the taboo on and the revival of death. We suggest, in line with Foucault's take on sexuality, that we should look to the discourses and practices according to which death is constituted as natural, and the human individual constituted as a subject in need of experiencing death and grief in certain ways. This is in keeping with the view of death drawn from anthropology that we articulated in the previous chapter. In line with this, society does not appear here as a context which, in one way or another, conditions the ways in which naturally existing individuals can cope with the natural event of death. Rather, discourses and practices around death – for example claims that death is a taboo that needs to be opened up for discussion – constitute society and the self in the process of naturalising death and people's experiences of death and grief. In this chapter we are particularly interested in how the body is implicated in these processes. With this in mind we return now to Hallgerður, her colleagues, and the hospital.

Washing the corpse, confusing the corpse

> Two nurses are working together to wash the corpse [the corpse being an elderly man who has just died]. They are both wearing orange coloured coveralls. The corpse has lost a lot of colour. It seems strangely yellow in places, strangely blue in others. Particular attention is paid to the face. It is washed, eyes closed. Even more attention is paid to the mouth which is washed thoroughly and then closed. Similar attention is paid to the anus. Cotton is inserted there.
>
> The nurses wash the hands with a cloth paying particular attention to the fingers. Then they wash the feet. The toes have turned almost completely blue. The nurses don't say anything while all this is going on. They dry the body and the body is wrapped in linen. As they leave the room one of the nurses makes the mark of the cross with her right hand over the body. Flowers and candles have been placed on a table beside the body.

The above is from notes one of us took in the course of our research. Explaining all this to us, one of our interviewees, Bergþóra, a nurse herself not involved in the scene above, said:

> When people die they sometimes start leaking urine and faeces a short time later. The body stiffens, but then after a while the muscles relax again. To prevent urine or faeces from leaking, we put cotton in the vagina and anus of women, and in the anus of men. We insert two layers. First we put in cotton that soaks up and does not emit any smell. Then we add just regular cotton. We wash the mouth, because there is often quite a lot of mucous in the mouth. That's why we wash the mouths, for example we remove dentures and wash them. All of this is done to prevent the corpse from smelling. It would be quite awful if the body smelt very badly of urine or faeces during the wake.
>
> Some of the old nurses don't go to all this trouble. They just put anything in and do things the old way. The rest of us follow the rules we've been set. Of course people die in different places. I can remember once, it must be twenty-five years ago, I had to wash the body of an old man. He smelt awful and he was all blue. We had to wash him three times to get the smell off him. He'd died at home and of course that's where many old people die. Funeral directors and doctors often encounter people who died at home and who smell bad.

This detailed attention to the corpse is of course not unusual. Ideas that link a particular and proper treatment of the dead body with the fate of its soul and the state of the mourning relatives are widespread, as we have related already (Hertz 1960; see Bloch & Parry 1982). The idea that the dead body has a particular kind of social agency is, furthermore, well-established in the literature (see Hagerty 2014; Harper 2010). For now we want to note that this attention to the corpse is not new in Iceland. This can, for example, be seen from the work of one Jónas Jónasson (1961 [1934]), a country vicar who wrote on the customs of the Icelanders in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. He (1961: 301) says this about the treatment of the recently deceased:

> As soon as the last breath had escaped the dying person, it was deemed necessary to take out the window closest to the deathbed and leave it open for some time to allow the soul to leave the house. It was considered wise to put the window back in the wrong way round, since otherwise the soul could get back in. But it could of course never be completely guaranteed that the soul would not return and want to get back into the body, use it in some way and become a ghost [walk again or *ganga aftur* is the Icelandic expression used, from which the noun *afturganga* as one word for ghost is drawn]. … When the person was dead … their eyes and mouth were closed, and their nostrils too if possible. The body was … placed on its back and arms folded crosswise over the chest.

We could offer further examples of the way the dead were treated in Iceland of old, and we could offer comparative examples from other societies where similar practices have been reported. It was, for instance, an element of funeral processions in some regions in Japan to take the dead body on a particularly twisted and tortuous route from the house to the grave to ensure that it would not know its way back. We could, moreover, comment upon some of the continuities and similarities in the ways in which the recently dead were reportedly treated in Iceland of old and how they are treated now, the closing of eyes and mouth for example. But our interest here is in emphasizing discontinuities and dissimilarities, in order to better pinpoint what we see as most significant in current practices and their part in the so-called revival of death. So allow us to say a few words about the living and the dead.

The living and the dead

It appears to us that the practices Jónas Jónasson describes frame death, perhaps not terribly surprisingly, as the moment when the soul leaves the body. He (1961: 301) says: "The dying take three breaths as they die. When they have taken the third one, they are surely dead but no one should believe anyone who has not taken more than two." This potential separation of the body and the soul does not appear to be a concern

in contemporary nursing practices. The individual is rather framed as an integrated whole who continues to be such, at least immediately after death. This framing is of course embedded in a medical system that frequently does precisely the opposite: it fragments the perceived integrity of the body. Now, for example, people can be kept alive long after certain vital organs have ceased to function independently, undermined by illness or accident, their integrity now interrupted with technology (see Bjarnason 2000). And of course such medical and other biomedical interventions – genetic research or engineering, stem cell research and new reproductive technologies – are often met and resisted through means that re-emphasise the integrity of the body, which they are seen as threatening (see Pálsson & Harðardóttir 2002).

We note the concern with establishing death expressed by Jónas Jónasson. Determining death is of course a major element of current medical practices as well and is made more important and problematic due to the technological advances alluded to above (see Bjarnason 2000). But what we seek to single out here is the importance of successfully establishing the separation of the dead body and the soul that Jónas Jónasson talks of – the effort to ensure that the soul understands and accepts the death of the body, and the precautions that are taken to prevent the soul from returning and 'walk again'. While we have only offered the example provided by Jónas Jónasson, a plethora of Icelandic ghost tales tells the same story. In sharp contrast, the current regime stipulates that the deceased should be treated as a living human being even beyond death.

The practices recorded by Jónas Jónasson were customs that varied by region and were apparently not subject to any general, formal system of justification or rationalisation. In contrast, current practices, even though they are largely based on tradition, do have the support of a formal system of rationalisation, the *Guidelines* for health care workers published by the Icelandic Directorate of Heath in 1999, for example. They state, amongst many other things, regarding the treatment of the recently deceased, that:

> all tubes, syringes and other foreign objects should be removed. The body should be straightened. … The deceased is washed as normal,

> hair washed if necessary and combed, men shaved and women made up in accordance with the advice of relatives. … Cotton wool is put into the anus. … Hands should be positioned so that they can be touched. … Disposable gloves should be used and attention paid to hygiene. If the deceased suffered from communicable diseases, the same guidelines apply after death as before.

These are of course the rules that Bergþóra says she follows. We can also hear their echo in what Hallgerður had to say at the beginning of this chapter. Both Hallgerður and the *Guidelines* express the same curious mixture of concerns: you should treat the deceased like a living human being, but this also involves wrapping them in linen, labelling them, putting a name tag on their foot and potentially stuffing their anus with cotton wool. According to the *Guidelines* one should position hands so that they can be touched. All the same, disposable gloves should be used. And if the deceased suffered from a contagious disease, proper care should be taken to ensure that the disease does not spread, even after death. We will continue by exploring these apparent contradictions somewhat further, first asking some questions about the character of the *Guidelines* quoted and the associated practices, and then by asking why these practices are being promoted, adopted and applied. To do so, we have to say a little bit about dead bodies and the bodily constitution of society.

Bodies, dead bodies, and 'society'

For some time, social scientists have commonly, if not universally, asserted that *reality* is socially constituted. They might for example argue strongly that the categories through which we understand reality – possibly even the very distinction between reality and fantasy – are given to us as individuals by society. They might add that such is the power of the categories of thought given to us by society that it is meaningless to refer to an independent reality existing outside them. What is real, then, varies from one society to another. This was of course the implication of the claim put forward by Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss in their classic work *Primitive Classification* (1963; see Durkheim 1965 [1912]). Social

scientists nowadays might object to the personification of society inherent in the Durkheimian view (see for example Ingold 1986), and they might object to it being portrayed primarily as an intellectual order, as it is in Durkheim's later work, where it hovers over and above its individual members, directing their thoughts and actions (see for example Csordas 1994). Yet, most of them would still argue that the constitution of reality is a social and not an individual process. But if the constitution of reality is commonly seen by social scientists as a social process, it is now, by many and perhaps most people, understood as an embodied process. Societies are partly made up of individuals; individuals are embodied beings whose bodiliness is inherently implicated in how they operate in the world (see Csordas 1994). And so the challenge for social science becomes that of examining how precisely bodiliness is implicated in the constitution of society and reality in a more general sense.

We seek insight from these developments in social thought in order to address the significance of the treatment of dead bodies, and what that treatment tells us about the revival of death in Iceland. To that end, let us elaborate a little further. When suggesting that reality is constituted through an embodied process, we draw on the work of American anthropologist Thomas J. Csordas (1994). Arguing against strictly symbolic theories of culture, Csordas claims that embodiment is the ground on which culture, self, and a sense of identity are formed. Embodiment is a term that takes us away from the Cartesian mind-body dichotomy that has informed so much social theorising due to the extensive influence that neo-Kantian philosophy had on social thought (Rose 1979). Embodiment is thus an attempt to move away from the notion that thought, albeit socially constructed thought, determines being; that the body is a machine that simply enacts instructions derived from the socially informed mind. This involves rejecting the established notion that the body is the receiver of sensations, of experiences, but that it is only through socially constituted categories of thought that people can make sense of those experiences. The notion of embodiment suggests that the body is both the locus and the agent of experience. For Csordas (1994: 7), influenced partly by the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), embodied being-in-the-world is the fundamental basis on which

everything else – sense of self, culture or society – is built. This embodied being is preobjective says Csordas, i.e. that "our bodies are not originally objects for us. They are instead the ground of perceptual processes that *end* in objectification" (Csordas 1994: 7). A sense of identity, culture as a system of representations, is what we get as the result of a process of objectification.

While embodied experience is thus preobjective according to Csordas, it is nonetheless informed by society through bodily habitus. This latter concept comes from one of Csordas's (1994) other main influences, Pierre Bourdieu (1977; 1984). Bourdieu (1977: 72) defines habitus as:

> systems of durable, transposable *dispositions* [footnote omitted] structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively "regulated" and "regular" without in anyway being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them …

Habitus is thus a bodily disposition to act in certain ways, and to produce certain kinds of representations. The link here with the notion of embodiment is clear. However, what Csordas seeks and needs from the idea of habitus is a way of accounting for cultural or social difference. The notion of embodiment suggests a universal, a given experiencing embodied being-in-the-world (see Wylie 2009). If that is the case then how can we, on the basis of embodiment, account for the cultural and social differences so evident in the world? This is precisely what the notion of habitus addresses. Bourdieu's (1977) contention is that the habitus of a social group is characterised by the material conditions of the life of the group in question. Exercised by the classic Marxist problem of accounting for the reproduction of social inequalities, Bourdieu argued that society is reproduced as a divided but apparently natural order through socially constituted but deeply ingrained and taken-for-granted embodied ways of behaving and relating to the world. This entails a certain form of bodily posture, a certain gait, a certain bodily way of being in the world, which, in a phrase, goes without saying because it comes to

people without saying. That is, bodily posture is not so much the result of deliberate education and learning as the accumulated consequence of habitual bodily practices. That in turn marks and distinguishes people's class status and plays a part in the continuing reformulation of society in such a way as to work against social change. Society is produced through a bodily process. Its reproduction, according to Bourdieu, is made all the easier precisely because the process is embodied, habitual, and hence a process that is not so easily brought to conscious and critical reflection.

There is a correspondence between these ideas and the arguments we developed in the previous chapter regarding the deathly constitution of society. In cementing the link, we draw on Katherine Verdery (1999) who has examined the political lives of dead bodies, in particular the role of the bodies of the famous dead in post-socialist reconstitution. She argues that earthly remains make for potent symbols. She (1999: 27) adds that bones and bodies have this potential partly because they are material things that are 'indisputably *there*'. "A body's materiality", she says, "can be critical to its symbolic efficacy". At the same time, however, the symbolic efficacy of bones and bodies rests on their "ambiguity, multivocality, or polysemy. Remains are concrete, yet protean; they do not have a single meaning but are open to many different readings" (Verdery 1999: 28). Dead bodies have the further advantage that:

> they evoke the awe, uncertainty, and fear associated with 'cosmic' concerns, such as the meaning of life and death. For human beings, death is the quintessential cosmic issue, one that brings us all face to face with ultimate questions about what it means to be—and to stop being—human, about where we have come from and where we are going. For this reason, corpses lend themselves particularly well to politics in times of major upheaval (Verdery 1999: 31–32).

Bearing these ideas in mind, we will seek to make sense of the practice of treating dead bodies as if they were living human beings. However, there is one further point we need to establish before returning to the treatment of corpses in Iceland and the revival of death.

While Csordas and Bourdieu are important here, we are thinking mainly of Foucault, whose influence is perhaps more apparent here, not

least because of his insistence on particularising and historicising what others sometimes seem to regard as universal. As Hardt and Negri (2000: 27) point out "Foucault argued … that one cannot understand the passage from the "sovereign" state of the ancien régime to the modern "disciplinary" state without taking into account how the biopolitical context was progressively put at the service of capitalist accumulation". As Foucault (cited in Hardt & Negri 2000: 27) himself put it: "The control of society over individuals is not conducted only through consciousness or ideology, but also in the body and with the body. For capitalist society biopolitics is what is most important, the biological, the somatic, the corporeal." Here, the importance of the body and embodiment for the way society is constituted and reproduced is not seen as being effectively and simply universal, as Csordas and Bourdieu seem to claim but rather is firmly located in a particular history and a particular context. It is with these ideas in mind that we ask concerning recently dead bodies in Iceland: how are individuals as embodied beings-in-the-world implicated in the constitution of society?

The universal and the individual

For Foucault, government is a form of activity "aiming to shape, guide or affect the conduct of some person or persons" (Gordon 1991: 2–3). Government as activity "could concern the relation between self and self, private interpersonal relations involving some form of control or guidance, relations within social institutions … and, finally relations concerned with the exercise of political sovereignty" (Gordon 1991: 2–3). Indeed, "Foucault was crucially interested in the interconnections between these different forms and meanings of government" (Gordon 1991: 2–3).

Now if this is Foucault's general take on government, then according to him, it is specifically "a characteristic (and troubling) property of the development of the practice of government in Western societies that it tends toward a form of political sovereignty which would be a government of all and of each, and whose concerns would be at once to 'totalize' and to 'individualize'" (Gordon 1991: 3). What does this really mean? Foucault seems to accept that from the point of view of contem-

porary Western government, individuals are all unique. This is a point worth stressing, as Foucault's ideas have sometimes been dismissed from the study of death on the basis of them denying people agency (see Seale 1998). So it is important to keep in mind here that for Foucault, "power is only power … when addressed to individuals who are free to act in one way or another. Power is defined as "actions on others' actions": that is, it presupposes rather than annuls their capacity as agents" (Gordon 1991: 5). Contemporary Western government, then, assumes the agency of individuals who then have to be persuaded to act in certain ways. It is in relation to this that Gordon observes that

> what Foucault finds most fascinating and disturbing in the history of Western governmental practice and its rationalities is the idea of a kind of power which takes freedom itself and the 'soul of the citizen', the life and life-conduct of the ethically free subject, as in some sense the correlative object of its own suasive power (Gordon 1991: 5).

We believe we can see in the treatment of recently deceased bodies in Iceland some of the characteristics that Foucault has described for modern governmentality. The *Guidelines* and their associated practices are geared first of all towards guiding the conduct of others (in order to then, as we will come to, influence the conduct of yet another set of others), most immediately nurses and other medical staff. Secondly, the *Guidelines* are totalising: everyone is to be treated in broadly the same manner, with some variation between men and women, but with the same end result in mind. Here individuality does not matter. At the same time, the *Guidelines* and the practices they stipulate place great emphasis on recognising individuality: men should be shaved, unless they were in the habit of wearing beards, and women made up in accordance with the advice of relatives. Everyone is to be treated as a unique individual.

In addition, the *Guidelines* emphasise restoring and guarding the boundaries of the individual. Syringes and other 'foreign objects' that penetrate the surface of the individual are to be removed; the mouth, the organ that most dramatically opens the insides of the individual to the world, is washed carefully; the anus and the vagina are stuffed to prevent leaking. Wounds are stitched up. The boundedness and integrity of the

individual, an important factor in many Western notions of personhood (see Busby 1997; Geertz 1984), is thus reasserted. It is interesting to note here what Julia Lawton (2000) argued in her work on an English hospice: the degree of autonomy and personhood that patients are afforded depends significantly on the extent to which they are deemed continent of faeces and urine, that is the extent to which they can be seen as in control of their borders, their bodily integrity. The practices we have described can then be viewed as an attempt to maintain the integrity of the body of the deceased, and thus to postpone the disintegration that allegedly accompanies death. The issue of smell is important here as well, the careful management of bodily odours being an important aspect of adulthood. A particular kind of selfhood, and a society of beings of such selfhood, are being constituted through practices around dead bodies.

Allow us to reiterate: the recently deceased is not simply being treated here as an individual, a being characterised by boundedness and integrity, a being who cannot be divided any further. Rather, the demand and the declaration is that every one of them is and should be treated like subjects, subjects of conscience and dignity, worthy of the same respect as any living human being. Each is to be treated as an individuality, someone who habitually wore a goatee and purple lipstick, or sideburns and mascara, as stipulated by relatives. In these ways the body of the deceased is perhaps made to embody and enact powerful notions of what it is to be a person in Icelandic society where everyone is "a special case" (Durrenberger 1996).

It is reasonable to ask here why it might be deemed necessary to treat a deceased body in this way, a body that quite possibly will soon be cut open in a post-mortem examination; a body that was quite likely connected to all kinds of machinery just a short time ago; a body that may have been subjected to intensive attempts at resuscitation before being finally surrendered to death? Maybe the answer is: it is necessary precisely in order to resist the medical fragmentation of the body. However, we think the answer lies, at least in part, elsewhere, with the bodies to which the recently deceased was and is most intimately linked, and with those very linkages themselves.

Subjects and subjectification

In a brochure entitled *On the death of a loved one* that relatives of those who have died at the National Hospital of Iceland are given, it says:

> The death of a loved one is an experience that can have profound and varied impact on bodily well-being, emotions, thoughts and the behaviour of the bereaved. When grieving, it is important for us all that this impact is acknowledged and that we are given the chance and the time to share this experience with those close to us and others who are willing to help.

In another brochure from the same hospital but directed specifically at the parents of stillborn babies, or babies who die very soon after birth, it says:

> Parents will have to deal with emotions that are in most cases alien to them. … Experience has shown that parents can manage their grief better if they look death in the eye, instead of avoiding thinking or talking about this fact of life or pretending that the baby never existed. The fact is that parents never forget, nor do they want to forget, that they had a baby, even if the life of that baby was confined to the womb. Everybody experiences grief and loss when a loved one dies, albeit in different ways. We have to let grief have its course in order to adjust to the loss we have suffered. For most people, this process of grief is more prolonged than they expected. It simply takes a long time to get over the loss of a loved one.

Here death and grief have been problematised, that is they are constituted as something that has to be dealt with, worked through, something that cannot simply be ignored. Grief is a natural reaction to the loss of a loved one that should be accepted, shared and expressed. For many people the tendency may be to ignore grief, hide it away, or hide themselves away from grief. In Iceland this problematisation of death and grief has happened in the last twenty five years or so, a process we describe further in next chapter. Death and grief are here problematised in relation to a particular vision of the workings of the human psyche and in relation to

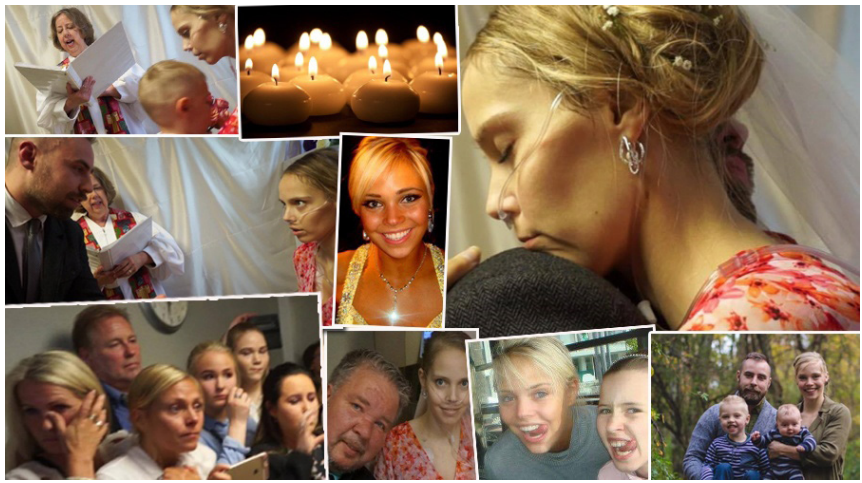


FIGURE 1. Collage of video stills of 28-year-old Ester Eva and her family. She married her husband three days before she passed away on 2 June 2017. Her story of fighting cancer was published in the newspaper *DV* (web edition) on 13 June 2017. *Courtesy of Gunnar Gunnarsson.*

a concern with ensuring the psychological well-being of individuals. As such, we can see this problematisation as an example of what Nikolas Rose (1996) calls 'subjectification', an instance of the different ways in which human beings are encouraged to relate to themselves and others as particular kinds of subjects.

How should the problem of death and grief be dealt with under this regime? What means have been invented to fashion human conduct in the directions desired in this case? What 'technologies', to use Rose's (1996) vocabulary again, have been adopted to try to ensure that bereaved people engage in open grieving? In the *Guidelines* for health care workers published by the Icelandic Directorate of Heath, it says that: "The death of a loved one is followed by grief and loss. The care of the bereaved at the time of death can be crucial for their grieving process." The *Guidelines* go on to say that:

> Reactions to the loss of a loved one are variable and individual … Normal reactions in the circumstances can be sadness, anger, self-accusation, anxiety, loneliness, tiredness, helplessness, loss, longing, relief,

> and emptiness. These emotions have to be understood. … The care of the deceased is a very important part of the grieving process of the relatives. The deceased should always be treated with respect.

The *Guidelines* add that relatives will often want to be involved in the care of their loved one, and that this should be encouraged. Physical closeness and touch are helpful in the grieving process, it says. Hence, the body of the deceased is to be laid out so that "hands can be touched". Our interviewees at the palliative care unit of the National Hospital all argued that it was important for relatives to be with their loved ones as they were dying, and that they should be given plenty of time with the deceased. Parents of stillborn babies and babies who die immediately after birth are specifically "encouraged to see their baby, touch it and hold it."

So, grief is a natural phenomenon that should be expressed and shared, and intimate links with the body of a dying and recently deceased relative are an important part of negotiating the grieving process. Such links are facilitated by the bodily care given to the deceased (banishing bad smells for example), by restoring their boundedness and integrity, and by treating the deceased as a living human being, with dignity and respect. Anything less and the danger is, according to this regime, that the bereaved will be trapped in anger at what has happened and the treatment their loved one has received.

What kind of a life, a human life, is the ideal, the aim of these "practices for working upon persons" (Rose 1996: 27); in this case the persons of the recently deceased and their loved ones? What are the kinds of beings, the kinds of subjects, the forms of life intended by the practices we have described? Let us start to answer these questions by noting that in the work we have been talking about, general stress is placed on emotions, as opposed to thoughts or actions. As such, this work depends on the categorical distinction made in Iceland, and in much of the Western world, between reason and emotion (Kristjánsson 1994; Lutz 1988). Bereavement is portrayed as primarily an emotional turmoil (*tilfinningalegt umrót*), rather than, say, a social or an economic hardship. An article by one of the most prominent death workers in Iceland provides a telling example (Ásgeirsson 1991: 8–10):

> Many will agree that the most powerful force (*sterkasta afl*) of human existence (*mannleg tilvera*) are the bonds of love (*kærleiksbönd*) that bind loved ones (*ástvini*) together. When these bonds break, for whatever reason, it causes great pain (*sársauki*) which reaches into the deepest parts of the human consciousness (*dýpsta vitund mannsins*). Such threads (þræðir) are invisible because they are emotional in nature (*tilfinningalegs eðlis*) but make themselves felt in various and often dramatic ways. At both happy and unhappy times.

While grief is constituted as an emotional trauma, it is not necessarily understood to be a wholly negative experience. Rather, the successful resolution of grief is seen as an opportunity for personal growth (*persónulega þroska*), a chance to cultivate your inner being (*rækta sinn innri mann*). It is possible to emerge from the trauma of grief as a more rounded, more fully developed person. The article cited above (Ásgeirsson 1991: 8–10) states further:

> If things go badly, grief can have very serious consequences, consequences which can lead to terrible unhappiness (*vansæld*) even illness (*veikindi*). If everything goes well, it can turn into consolation (*huggun*), personal growth (*lífsþroska*) and increased personal strength (*styrkur*). At best, grief can develop into reconciliation (*sátt*) and inner peace (*innri friður*).

This is the aim of death work: to help people deal with and work through grief, and to achieve personal growth and strength. It aims to help create persons who can handle, understand and express the emotional traumas life hands them and derive continued strength from them. In grief literature and practice in the English language, the phrases commonly used are 'deal with' and 'work through'. Both phrases, of course, suggest that grief is something that has to be attended to, acted upon; it is not something that will simply run its course. In Icelandic the formulation tends to be *að vinna úr* as the verb compound and *úrvinnsla* as the noun. These are quite close to the English 'work through', and as in English, they are words that can be applied to and indeed come from a different context. Thus, *úrvinnsla*, or *vinna úr*, is something that people do with

information, data, *vinna* being the general term for work in Icelandic. This *vinna úr sorg*, working through grief, is then partly achieved by involving the bereaved in the bodily care of and bodily engagement with their dying and recently deceased relatives. Hence the importance of not simply establishing, or re-establishing the integrity and boundedness of the body of the deceased, but of paving the way for bodily links and contact by the bereaved: hands should be positioned so that they can be touched.

There is no denying the profound, and no doubt often very positive effect that this can have. One of the people interviewed for a film, *Corpus Camera*, directed by one of the authors of this book, is the daughter of a woman who died at home after a long illness. The daughter says of her experience of attending to her dying mother: "You experienced a return to the symbiosis with the body of the mother, taking showers with her and cuddling in bed, even when she was largely out of it." The woman's husband says: "We were allowed to have her with us. We were told that this was something new, a little bit like the old days. We were allowed to have her with us until ten in the evening, she died at midday. A lot of family came by to say good bye. It was very important for us."

FIGURE 2. Post-mortem photograph of Áslaug Káradóttir, 17th February 1998, taken by her late husband Erlendur Lárusson. *Courtesy of Úlfhildur Dagsdóttir.*

We would like to stress that we do not seek to question in any way the efficacy of the practices we have talked about or people's testimony to that effect. Neither do we wish to make a moral judgement regarding the death work we have described. The point we want to make is the role that the body of the deceased is made to play here in the reconstitution of the bereaved – the importance it is assigned in that process. The body of the deceased is implicated in a process whereby the bereaved person is meant to achieve a particular kind of selfhood. And that implication, in turn, is important because beings with such selfhood constitute the building blocks of 'society', the reality that government sees itself in the business of governing.

Conclusion

Why is it deemed important to help people deal with grief, work through it and achieve personal growth and strength? Answering this question in a roundabout way, we want to emphasise first the constructed nature of what is going on here: the work that has to be done and its difficulty. And we want to do so by identifying two points of potential tension that inhere in this endeavour. First of all, there is the tension between an insistence on treating the deceased as a person and having to deal with the dead body as a corpse. The deceased should be treated with respect. Yet the movement from living human individual who is to be respected to a deceased body that might constitute a danger and has to be managed, is swift, as we have seen. Secondly, there is tension between efforts to avoid hiding 'the reality of death' and the temptation to create comfortable surroundings in which relatives can say farewell to their loved ones. Relatives should therefore be encouraged to have physical contact with the deceased, in part because that impresses upon them the reality of their loss. However, attempts are made to make the deathbed surroundings 'homely and tidy', for example when the palliative unit places the deceased's head on a pillow inscribed with the words: 'Sleep tight'. The washing of the corpse, the closing of the anus, mouth and vagina to prevent leakage and control smells, is also relevant here. The disintegration, the leakage, and the smells that some might argue are the essence of

death, are all carefully kept at bay, and this is done under a regime that sees, as its main aim, that of increasing the openness about death and bereavement, this 'fact of life' as one of the brochures calls it.

How then is this work, these "procedures for regulating the capacities of persons", as Rose (1996: 28) puts it, "linked into wider moral, social, or political objectives concerning the undesirable and desirable features of populations, work force, family, society?" We have already noted how the body of the deceased is made to embody and enact powerful notions of what it is to be a person, a bounded subject worthy of dignity and respect. As such this helps reinforce ideals of citizenship, democracy, individual and human rights, and private property. Its presence and its form are mobilised to constitute a 'society' of such bounded subjects of dignity and respect.

But something more is going on here: why this emphasis on the personal growth of the bereaved? The changes in the management of death and grief in Iceland have largely taken place over a more than a fifteen-year period of unbroken right-wing government in Iceland. This government has sought to follow a quite strict neo-liberal regime, with the privatisation of many previously state-run enterprises and a rolling-back of the welfare state. Privatisation was preceded and has been accompanied by a rhetoric that emphasises self-reliance, personal responsibility and individual initiative, private enterprise and personal improvement. We suggest that the changing regimes of death and grief, including the treatment of the recently deceased and the promotion of their links with the bereaved, should be placed in this context. The privatisation of state enterprises and the downsizing of the welfare state constrain and limit the ways in which the state can be mobilised to govern populations. Thus, many of the tools that were available to the social democratic, corporatist state in Iceland have, from the late 1960s onward, been deliberately thrown away or abandoned. Of course government has to go on, and individuals have to be educated to govern themselves as subjects with liberty and responsibility (see Rose 1996). The current regimes of dying and grieving help turn this process into a personal endeavour. The bereaved, here with the help of the body of the deceased, is encouraged to achieve personal growth and strength akin to that promoted by the rhetoric.

The ongoing biopolitical enterprise is thus served by emphasising the creative, self-improving capacity of the individual – and productive grieving is one way of achieving that. The bedside rituals proscribed by the *Guidelines*, which are practised and advocated by the nurses we spoke to, are examples not simply of the body of the deceased being mobilised to enact powerful notions of personhood and the constitution of society. It is a ritual through which death is mobilised to promote the creation of a society of self-governing and self-improving individuals. Hence the care for the deceased, the insistence on treating them as a living human being. But that biopolitical object is of course also linked to a concern for the well-being of the population: hence the need to label the deceased, possibly to cut them open, and to handle them with disposable gloves, as they might constitute a public health danger even as they are being treated as living human beings.

It is clear that the processes we have described above can be characterised as a revival of death. Such a description would not be alien, we think, for the people at the forefront of these changes in Iceland. However, the wider social and political implications of these changes are, we contend, at risk of being lost or ignored if we take the view suggested by the revival of death thesis. Here we have argued, in contrast to the revival of death thesis, that a way forward might be found in the insights offered in the works of Foucault on biopolitics and governmentality. This work speaks to and broadens the anthropological conception of the deathly constitution of society. These are points that we develop further in the next chapter when we discuss what might be termed a postmodern revival of death in Iceland.

Chapter Four

New Dawn
Death, grief and the nation-form

In the previous chapter we described contemporary practices around dead bodies in a hospital setting in Iceland. We discussed these in the context of a late modern revival of death (Walter 1994); a revival of death led by professional experts. In the process we articulated a theoretical take on the revival that is different from the one advocated by Walter (1994). In place of the naturalisation of death inherent in the revival of death thesis, we sought to link discourses and practices around death and grief with governmentality, with the way particular forms of selfhood are constituted, and the way individuals with such selfhood are constructed as the building blocks of 'society' as a governable entity. In this chapter we develop this discussion further, looking at practices that might be termed a postmodern revival of death in Walter's (1994) terms. We focus here on the work of *Ný Dögun* (New Dawn), an Icelandic organisation that supports bereaved persons and those who work with the bereaved. This organisation was established by people who had themselves suffered bereavement, rather than individuals who had any particular professional expertise in this area.

As before, we seek inspiration from theoretical takes on the ways in which death is harnessed for the construction and maintenance of cosmological and political orders (Bloch & Parry 1982). However, building at the same time on the analysis begun in the previous chapter, we seek to broaden our scope here. Drawing on the work of Lauren Berlant (1998) we suggest a focus on the links between death and grief and the fluctuating fortunes of the 'nation form' in Iceland. Berlant speaks of the 'nation-form' in order to denaturalise the notion of the nation and make

it easier to analyse the link between the nation and the state, and we follow that practice here.

Specifically, we suggest that it is interesting and instructive to examine the work of *Nýi Dögun* in the context of changing relationships between the nation-form, the state, and the individual in Iceland. To this end, we describe and analyse the work and history of *Nýi Dögun* in terms of Rose's (1996) notion of a genealogy of subjectification. This genealogy invites five basic questions. The first of these is 'problematisation'. Rather than seeing it as natural that concerns should rise over the management of death and grief, we ask with Rose – but here in relation to death and grief: "Where, how, and by whom are aspects of the human being rendered problematic, according to what systems of judgement and in relation to what concern?" (Rose 1996: 25). Second, the notion of 'technologies' directs investigation towards the means that have been invented to fashion human conduct in desired directions (Rose 1996: 26). 'Authorities' relates to the question of who is "accorded or claims the capacity to speak truthfully about humans, their nature and their problems?" (Rose 1996: 27). 'Teleologies' invites us to ask: "What forms of life are the aims, ideals, or exemplars for these different practices for working upon persons"? (Rose 1996: 27). "Strategies", finally, allows for an investigation into how the "procedures for regulating the capacities of persons [are] linked into wider moral, social, or political objectives concerning the undesirable and desirable features of populations, work force, family, society?" (Rose 1996: 28).

We are eager to stress that by relying here on Rose's expansion of the genealogy of subjectification, we take no stance regarding the overall applicability of the Foucauldian corpus to the work of *Nýi Dögun*. We find the notion useful because it helps us problematise and question the taken-for-grantedness that surrounds many accounts of death and bereavement work. This deconstruction, if you will, is necessary in order to investigate how death and grief are implicated in the fortunes of the nation-form in the context of neo-liberal politics. But before we move on to *Nýi Dögun*, we wish to provide what is admittedly a brief and deliberately plotted account of loss and the changing relations between the nation-form, the state, and the individual in Iceland.

Loss, the nation-form, state, and the individual

Berlant (1998) writes on the fate of the nation-form in the United States following the advent of neoliberal ideologies and politics, which are usually seen as beginning with the presidency of Ronald Reagan. At the heart of Berlant's (1998) discussion of the nation-form in the United States is a puzzle that can be articulated crudely like this (Berlant offers a more sophisticated version): How is it that the officially most liberal regime in the world, the regime that goes furthest in tying its legitimacy to the protection of individual freedoms and liberties, shows such concern for the sexual activities of its citizens, activities which one might assume are matters of individual freedom and liberty? Why is this concern heightened when the sexual activity in question is not heteronormative and reproductive?

Berlant's answer has to do with the relationship between the nation-form and the state in an era of neo-liberalism. Thus, she says, neo-liberalism inevitably undermines the hyphen between the nation and the state. Its economics and politics advocate the withdrawal of the state from social life, the state's abdication of its previous role as the driver of social progress. In neoliberalism, the work of the state is deemed counter-productive, if not positively harmful for economic and social progress, as it is likely to interfere with processes that on the one hand have their origin in human nature and on the other hand obey universal laws of economics. If the inherent human propensity to maximise – which neo-liberalism speaks of – and the universal economic laws of supply and demand together secure economic development and prosperity, then the actions of the state that interfere with these processes in the name of social equality, national progress or suchlike surely only threaten to undermine the aims of good government. But if that is the case, then there is no justification for the coinciding of the nation and the state that is currently the dominant form in the international arena. However, Berlant (1998) says, neoliberal 'reforms' depend for their success on people's continued subscription to the nation as the dominant form of collective identification. Or rather, neoliberalism depends on preventing people's identification with other collectives, and in particular with class and

gender, from overriding their identification with the nation-form. Thus neoliberalism enacts a transformation that insists on the political bond between the individual and the state, rather than a bond with any collective, while stressing people's emotionally charged sense of belonging to the nation. Concerns over individual sexual activity are tied to this project and amount to what Berlant (1998) refers to as "technologies of patriotism". These concerns, in effect, do not have to do with sexual activity as sexual activity; they are rather a mechanism for raising worries about the future of the nation, and in that way strengthening identification with it as the most important collective form.

Our suggestion is that in the era of neoliberalism in Iceland, sexual activity has not assumed the role of technologies of patriotism. Rather, we argue that the effect that concerns about sexual activity has had in the United States in terms of keeping the nation at the heart of collective identification has been secured in Iceland in relation to death and grief. This might be due to the particular importance of loss in Icelandic historical consciousness (Koester 1990). This importance is linked to the way in which Icelandic history is constructed into meaningful epochs (see Hastrup 1999). Thus Icelandic history, as it has been taught in schools and portrayed in books aimed at the general public, speaks of the period of Iceland's settlement during the Viking age as a heroic past, a golden age. It is a past that is glorified and identified with the Icelandic Sagas, written during an era when Iceland was an independent commonwealth. This history relates how this 'paradise' was lost due to internal strife and the interference of foreign powers. The subsequent thirteenth to twentieth centuries are portrayed as the dark ages of Icelandic history, during which the country was exploited and humiliated by a foreign power and suffered immeasurably from natural disasters and plagues. According to this narrative, conditions deteriorated so much that on at least two occasions, the very existence of Icelanders as a nation came under serious threat (see Árnason & Simpson 2003; Karlsson 1985). This history of loss, the constant possibility of loss, and the always uncertain future of the nation, forms a backdrop for the relationship between the nation-form, the state, and the individual in Iceland.

FIGURE 3. Chest of drawers depicting a funeral procession. The chest was owned by Erlendur Jónsson, a vicar at Hrafnagil (Eyjafjörður, North Iceland) from 1754–1803. Akureyri Museum (#1986-5257). *Photo Hörður Geirsson.*

It is by now well-established that the notion of the nation in Iceland predates the modern idea of the nation-state (Durrenberger 1988). Nevertheless, it is important to stress here as well how entrenched the notion of the nation-state, as distinct from the idea of the nation as such, has become in Iceland: the idea that the boundaries of the nation and of the state should coincide with each other. Iceland's struggle for independence from Denmark was initially inspired by romantic nationalism that assumed the existence of nations and claimed them the proper source of political legitimacy. Thus Icelandic independence was struggled for, justified, and has since been maintained on the basis of claims that Icelanders are a separate nation in possession of their own distinct, even unique language, culture and history (Skúlason 1994). Iceland was for most of the twentieth century dominated by a political rhetoric "in which the nation form trumps all other images of collective sociality and power" as Berlant (1998: 174) puts it referring to the United States. This important status of the nation form was supported by the apparatus of the state, which created, sponsored and supported memorials and rituals celebrating the 'nation'. The state was directly involved in the publication of numerous books on the history and culture used as the basis for legitimising independence. For most of the period since Iceland became independent in 1944 the state was also heavily involved in economic activity in the name of national interest, national development, and the collective destiny of the nation. It has owned banks and bakeries, factories and fishing boats, and been directly involved in the running of commercial enterprises

This was the situation until 1991. Around that time, political life in Iceland started being increasingly influenced and shaped by neoliber-

alism, the ideologies of the new right, and their attempts to curtail the influence and interference of the state, while expanding the territory of the free market and the ferocity of competition on it. Many state and other publically owned enterprises in Iceland were privatised. The political rhetoric spoke increasingly of the free individual and his enterprise as the mainspring of economic and social progress. The purpose of the state, in turn, was no longer portrayed as that of guiding the development of the nation and its individual citizens. The state's purpose was simply to put in place the general legal framework within which free individuals could compete in pursuing their own legitimate interests and to remove any 'unnatural' interference in that competition. This, political rhetoric insisted, was the path to future welfare and development. The strength of this rhetoric can be gauged by two events: at the opening of the Icelandic Parliament in the autumn of 2003, Minister of Agriculture Guðni Ágústsson, then vice-president of the Progressive Party (*Framsóknarflokkurinn*), which has traditional links to the once powerful co-operative movement and derives most of its electoral strength from rural areas, declared that Iceland's transformation during the twentieth century from poverty to prosperity was due to free individual initiative and enterprise. In addition, the Independence Day celebrations in Reykjavík on the 17th of June 2003 were, tellingly, sponsored by a private company (see Árnason, Hafsteinsson & Grétarsdóttir 2003: 281–282).

Undermining the nation form as the paramount image of collective sociality and power clearly has implications for the ways in which people and government relate, the ways in which populations are, in other words, understood as governable entities. Even so, it has remained important to keep the nation form at the centre of people's collective identification. The 'right's attempt to shrink domestic government and thereby hack away at the hyphen between the nation and the state', has in Iceland, no less than in the United States Berlant (1998:174) speaks of, "required the development of new technologies of patriotism that keep the nation at the center of the public's identification while shrinking the field of what can be expected from the state." We suggest that the recent changes in this management, the regimes of death and grief, in Iceland can be understood as 'new technologies of patriotism'. Emanat-

ing from voluntary activity and existing beyond the state, they nonetheless offer means by which the mourning of grieving individuals can be related to and allied with the imagined past, history and future of the nation. By this we are not suggesting that the work of *Ný Dögun* should be understood as caused or willed by the state or the ideologies, politics and governmental practice of neoliberalism. Rather, we suggest that the demise of the 'hyphen' between state and nation offers a context in which to examine and understand particular implications of the emerging regimes of death and grief in Iceland. It is a context that simultaneously highlights some interesting and important fallout from Icelandic – and we would hope – other death work as well.

A new dawn: a genealogy of subjectification

Ný Dögun was established in Reykjavík, Iceland, in December 1987. It is a voluntary organisation whose origins can be traced back to a chance meeting between two bereaved women who, feeling the lack of support for bereaved people, decided to put together a self-help bereavement group. That group, around ten people, men and women of different ages, met for the first time in the autumn of 1986. The meetings became regular, the number of those attending grew, and this enabled and in some sense required the establishment of a formal organisation. Since its establishment, *Ný Dögun* has grown immensely in scope and importance. The organisation has been instrumental in changing the landscape of death and grief in Iceland, and it is now central to discussion, debate and initiatives in this area in this country.

Ný Dögun's aims are to support bereaved people and those who work for the welfare of the bereaved. *Ný Dögun's* work involves supporting all those who are suffering (*eiga um sárt að binda* literally: those who have to dress a wound) due to the loss of a loved one, as well as providing general education and public lectures on grief and reactions to grief. In this way *Ný Dögun* problematises death and the reactions that the death of a loved one provokes. Death and grief have to be dealt with, they have to be worked through, they cannot simply be ignored. Grief is a natural reaction to the loss of a loved one, the price we have to pay for loving.

Through the problematisation of death and grief, *Ný Dögun* targets three distinct groups of people: the bereaved themselves, professionals who will likely be called upon to support the bereaved (for example doctors, nurses, ministers, funeral directors), and the general public. In explaining and emphasising their mission, people involved with *Ný Dögun* sometimes speak about the 'old Icelandic solution' (íslensku lausnina) to grief. According to these people the 'Icelandic solution' is "to work excessively, try to forget, not complain, carry your grief in silence (*bera harm sinn í hljóði*), put grief away in a drawer (*loka sorgina ofan í skúffu*), to cry alone," as we were told during interviews with people from the organisation. *Ný Dögun's* adherents see this as a non-solution, as a hindrance to the proper way of dealing with death and grief. Grieving is something the bereaved person has to do, and something no-one else can do for them.

It is clear that *Ný Dögun* is correct in saying that as a result of the organisation's work, people in Iceland now deal with their grief differently, some would say more 'openly', than before (*Ný Dögun* 1997: 11). They say the general public in Iceland is more aware of the 'nature of grief' than it was, and that those whose professional responsibility it is to support the bereaved, are better able to offer appropriate and systematic help than before. Dealing with death and grief in hiding was problematic. Death and grief have been brought out in the open where they should be. The 'Icelandic solution' is not simply a reflection of matters as they stand; it is a state of affairs that justifies strategic intervention to change it.

Technologies

Ný Dögun seeks to achieve its aims by providing information and education about grief to the general public, to bereaved people and those whose professional capacity involves them in caring for the bereaved. It does so by establishing support groups for the bereaved; by enhancing contact between bereaved people and supporters (e.g. ministers, doctors, nurses); and by running training courses specifically for supporters of the bereaved. Most of the devices *Ný Dögun* employs in its work can be seen as simultaneously targeting all three of these groups. The organisation

operates a website (www.sorg.is) and a Facebook page that carry information relevant to these different parties. *Ný Dögun* also publishes a newsletter that includes information for the bereaved and their relatives, advice for those who support the bereaved, personal stories of bereavement, and enlightenment for the general public.

As related above, *Ný Dögun* clearly sees opening people's eyes and increasing their awareness of death and grief as a crucial part of its mission. A stunning example of this can be found on the back cover of the organisation's newsletter from 1997. It shows a photograph from a graveyard with a beautifully evocative gravestone in the foreground. Superimposed on this are two stanzas from a poem 'Sleep my little darling' (*Sofðu unga ástin mín*) by the late nineteenth century poet Jóhann Sigurjónsson. The first stanza is a very well-known and a much-loved nursery rhyme – something fathers and mothers in Iceland will sing for their small children as they go to sleep. The second stanza, which is in fact the third and last one of the poem, is less well known and usually not included in any bedtime song. It concludes with the words 'people love, lose, cry and miss' (*mennirnir elska, missa, gráta og sakna*), which against the homely familiarity of the nursery rhyme and together with the image of the gravestone brings the reality of death and grief into stark relief.

Regular seminars and lectures, aimed at the general public and bereaved persons, and perhaps most directly at those involved in supporting the bereaved, have been a big part of *Ný Dögun*'s work from the very beginning. Following common seasonal patterns in Iceland, *Ný Dögun*'s work begins in the autumn. It has tended to start with general lectures on grief and grief reactions and then to move into more specialised areas, such as the loss of a partner, loss through suicide, or the loss of a child, which are three prominent themes.

Ný Dögun places clear emphasis on Christmas as a particularly difficult time for bereaved people. This is, of course, not uniquely Icelandic but is particularly noteworthy given the central place that Christmas has in the lives of Icelanders (Einarsson 1996). The winter in Iceland is very long and extremely dark. Christmas is represented in the country as a welcome relief from the cold and the darkness and is referred to, amongst other things, as 'the festival of the light' (*hátíð ljóssins*). A candle

was a traditional Christmas present for children, and Icelanders decorate the outside of their houses extensively with Christmas lights. Christmas is also known in Iceland as 'the children's festival' (*hátíð barnanna*) and 'the family's festival' (*hátíð fjölskyldunnar*). Many families have their own Christmas traditions as regards food and festive activities, which they carefully maintain. In Iceland, nothing is considered sadder than a person being alone on Christmas, when everyone should be in the bosom of the family (*faðmi fjölskyldunnar*), and families that are missing one of their members at Christmas feel the loss acutely. In recent years Icelanders have taken to decorating family gravestones with the same kind of Christmas lights they adorn their own houses with. Visits to the graves of loved ones, most often on Christmas Eve when the festivities start in Iceland, is an important part of the Christmas celebration for many people. The tone of these visits is one of inclusion, incorporation, of trying to make the dead participants in the Christmas festivities.

Other *Ný Dögun* activities are aimed directly at the bereaved themselves. *Ný Dögun* has run a telephone helpline which mainly targets bereaved people, and one of the most important factors in the group's early operations was its weekly 'open house' (*opið hús*). Volunteers would meet with bereaved people, offer them coffee[5], talk with them and share experiences. People associated with *Ný Dögun* place significant importance on the power of self-help. "Talking to and being with those who have experienced the same thing is an opportunity for immense growth" as Sigfinnur Þorleifsson, a former chairman of the organisation, puts it in an article (Þorleifsson 1997: 3).

According to people who were there from the start, and whom we interviewed in the course of this research, between twenty-five and thirty people attended each of the open houses discussed above. An effort was made to ensure that the bereaved visitors would be met by a volunteer who shared a similar experience of loss, for instance the death of a spouse. The volunteers were almost all bereaved themselves, and were often people who had attended these meetings. Most of the visitors and volunteers were women. At the end of each meeting, a prayer would

5 The Icelandic phrase 'hella upp á kaffi' has some of the same connotations as the English 'put the kettle on'.

be said, the organisation having arranged for the Protestant ministers in Reykjavík to take turns doing this[6].

Ný Dögun has also organised and run mutual support groups (*nærhópar*). As an example, widows met once a week and discussed certain aspects of grief, like anger or guilt. Six to eight people were assigned to each group, and a rule was established that at least six months had to have passed since their loss for people to enter the group. The reason for this, as it was explained to us, was that it soon became clear that the very recently bereaved found it very difficult to participate in the discussions. The group's aim was to facilitate emotional expression. Explaining this further, *Ný Dögun* participants say that early on, bereaved people can be very self-centred and find it difficult to 'give of themselves to others' (*gefa öðrum af sér*) which, they claim, is limiting for both group work and the grief work of the recently bereaved persons themselves.

Nærhópar were thus based on a principle of mutual giving and receiving, gift-exchange (Mauss 1990) as it were, through which bereaved people give of their experience, the expertise they had acquired through their experience, that they give literally of themselves. As such the mutual sharing of experiences in the group work, as gift-exchange generally (Mauss 1990; but see Strathern 1988), can be seen as instrumental in creating social relationships and social persons. This provides an interesting counterpoint to the remark frequently made by *Ný Dögun* people that the experience of the death of a loved one is like having a part of yourself torn off (*slitinn burt*) (see Ásgeirsson 1991: 8–10). Grief is thus likened to the loss of physical, bodily integrity; it is portrayed as akin to having a piece of yourself cut off. At the same time, the mutual sharing of such experiences in the support groups is described as giving of oneself; these are formulations that reflect the notion of the bounded individual in interesting ways (Geertz 1984; see Busby 1997).

It is worth noting here that the Icelandic word *nærhópar* is composed of the two words *hópar*, groups (singular *hópur*), and *nær*, meaning close, giving it a somewhat different connotation from the English 'mutual support group'. To be close to someone is to be *nákominn* them, *ná* be-

6 Iceland is very predominantly Lutheran and the Evangelical Lutheran Church is the national church of Iceland.

ing another form of *nær*. A close relative is *nákominn ættingi*, giving the groups the flavour of something akin to fictive kinship. Being sensitive and understanding toward other people's feelings is, furthermore, being *nærgætinn*, while intruding into other people's affairs is being *nærgöngull*, literally 'going close, too close'. A trauma can *ganga nærri* (go close to) the sufferer, and someone who works too hard can *ganga of nærri sér* (go too close to himself). The bodily and spatial metaphors used here are again also noteworthy.

One unusual aspect of *Ný Dögun's* work deserves particular mention here. In the very early stages of their work, *Ný Dögun's* founders would visit people whom they knew were recently bereaved, bringing them flowers, but in Iceland, flowers are very strongly associated with death and funerals in particular, as in many other places (see Goody 1993). In our interviews with them, *Ný Dögun*'s founders refer to these occasions as visits to 'houses of grief' (*sorgarhús*). While the visits were, it seems, always welcome, they were unsolicited. *Ný Dögun's* founders relate now how a psychiatrist who became involved with the organisation objected quite strongly to this practice as possibly being too invasive for the bereaved and definitely far too taxing for the visitors. The purpose of these visits is now met, to some extent, by the open general meetings that the organisations holds.

While most of *Ný Dögun*'s activities are aimed simultaneously at all three of its target groups, a slight difference in emphasis can be detected depending on who the main target is. Thus, in addressing the general public earlier on in its history, the organisation was eager to open up a discussion about death and grief. In speaking to those involved in supporting bereaved people, the aim is to inform them of the specific needs of the different categories of bereaved people. And in reaching out to bereaved people themselves, the purpose is to encourage and facilitate the expression and sharing of experiences and emotions.

We emphasise these points about technologies in order to stress how the emphasis of *Ný Dögun's* work, in general and in its specificity, is directly derived from the organisation's problematisation of death, from its depiction of the 'Icelandic solution' of shutting grief away and not dealing with it, and from its aim of offering a new solution.

Authorities

Through the technologies it employs, *Ný Dögun* recognises two distinct types of authorities: bereaved people themselves, and professional experts such as ministers, doctors, nurses, funeral directors, psychiatrists and psychologists. In *Ný Dögun*'s rhetoric, bereaved people are portrayed as knowledgeable about the actual experiences of loss and grief (see Þorleifsson 1997: 3). They know what it feels like to be bereaved. From this recognition stems the importance *Ný Dögun* places on having bereaved people meet other bereaved people at the open houses and in the mutual support groups where the expressing and sharing of emotions and experiences is the primary aim. Here those who have already travelled some of the way might perhaps be able to offer guidance to the more recently bereaved; they can show the recently bereaved the opportunities for growth that Sigfinnur Þorleifsson (1997: 3) speaks of.

Ný Dögun postulates two limits to this form of authority. Firstly, personal authority like this is seen as being potentially loss-specific. A widow may know what it feels like to lose a husband and thus understand what another widow is going through, but she may be no better placed than anyone else to understand what it feels like to lose a child. Indeed, issues specific to her loss might cloud her understanding of the experience of losing a child. Secondly, this form of authority is said to be possibly time-limited. Thus one of our interviewees, a person involved with the organisation from very early on, describes how she decided to withdraw from the mutual self-help groups, the *nærhópar*, because she had started to "feel my distance (*fjarlægð*) from the loss". She describes how this affected her discussions with the bereaved. "I was starting to work on a very different level, more like a social worker or a psychologist, really just like an expert even if all I had was the experience of what happens." *Fjarlægð*, it needs to be added, is the opposite of *nær* or *nálægð* as in *nærhópar*, and here distance from one's own loss is clearly construed as hindering the sharing of that experience.

In contrast to this, experts are seen as having a generalised knowledge of loss, as knowing what emotions most of those who have suffered a loss are likely to experience, and knowing how these emotions can be

dealt with, and what complications they likely involve. Furthermore, while bereaved people are presented as being able to support each other mutually through the sharing of experiences and emotions, giving each other of themselves, professional experts are seen as being more likely to possess the specialised techniques needed in order to engage with those bereaved people who might find it difficult to share.

Ný Dögun does not rank these different forms of authority, even though it in some ways, understandably enough, extols the self-help expertise from which the organisation itself sprang. The distinct forms of authority are seen as different but equally valid in their own ways, and through its work the organisation has striven to combine the two whenever possible. We were told that *Ný Dögun* had always tried to man its telephone helpline simultaneously with someone who had experienced grief and an 'expert', a psychologist, psychiatrist or a minister of the church. The idea has been that in this way the bereaved caller can both share his experiences with someone who had been through the same things, and seek the advice of someone particularly knowledgeable about grief. Similarly, in the lecture series mentioned above, *Ný Dögun* has tried to mix together psychological knowledge and actual personal experiences of grief. This has be done in two ways: by having a bereaved person relate their experiences after each lecture, or by attempting to attract lecturers who have not only studied grief as an academic subject, but also have personal experiences of it themselves.

Teleologies

Ný Dögun teaches, as we have mentioned before, that grief is a natural (*eðlileg*) reaction (*viðbrögð*) to loss. This understanding is clearly expressed in the following excerpt from a *Ný Dögun* article (Ásgeirsson 1991: 8–10):

> When a loved one dies it is as if a part you is torn off (*slitinn burt*), taken away and it cannot be changed. Our reactions appear in the grief (*sorg*), which is usually a long, painful (*sársaukafullur*) and difficult (*erfiður*) process. Grief is normal and not defined as a disease (*sjúkdómur*).

Ný Dögun also teaches that how we grieve varies with different individuals. Grieving is individually variable (*einstaklingsbundið* or *persónubundið*). At the same time it teaches that grief is a process (*ferli*) that bereaved people have to go through at their own speed. Another article from *Ný Dögun* (Þorleifsson 1991: 13–17) explains:

> It has been said about grief that it is the price (*gjald*) we pay for loving (*þykja vænt um*) other human beings (*manneskjur*). The weight (*þyngd*) of the emotions (*tilfinningar*) is determined by the content (*inntak*) of what is lost. What has been written about grief can never be applied wholesale to the experience of those who lose a loved one. For that we are too different (*ólíkur*) and our experiences too personal (*persónulegur*) and unique (*einstæður*). Still, the guideposts (*leiðarsteinar*) erected by scholars to mark the path of grief (*sorgarganga*) are helpful as long as we treat them as descriptions of a dark path (*myrkur vegur*) rather than prescriptive account of how people should feel.

Thus the two forms of authority are linked to the different aspects of grief and to different kinds of knowledge. Experts know grief as a natural, universal reaction to loss. Bereaved people know grief as a personal and unique experience. The metaphor of the path (*vegur*) is strikingly appropriate here and works to contain the tension between grief as a general phenomenon that can be mapped and known from the outside, as it were, and grief as a unique personal experience that can only be understood as you travel through it. While the path may be the same for everyone, individuals travel along it in their own way.

There is in the work of *Ný Dögun* a general stress on the emotions, as opposed to thoughts or actions, and on bereavement as primarily an emotional turmoil (*tilfinningalegt umrót*). Again, the article cited above provides a telling example (Ásgeirsson 1991: 8–10):

> Many will agree that the most powerful force (*sterkasta afl*) of human existence (*mannleg tilvera*) are the bonds of love (*kærleiksbönd*) which tie loved ones (*ástvinir*) together. When these bonds break, for whatever reason, it causes great pain (*sársauki*) which reaches into the deepest parts of human consciousness (*dýpsta vitund mannsins*). Such threads

> (*þræðir*) are invisible because they are emotional in nature (*tilfinningalegs eðlis*) but make themselves felt in various and often dramatic ways both at happy and unhappy times.

Similarly, readers of *Ný Dögun's* publications are informed that feelings are not right or wrong, they just are, and they are primary, that is they come before thoughts and rationalisation. In this *Ný Dögun* is in line with similar organisations in other countries, for example Cruse Bereavement Care in the UK (Árnason 2001). At the time of writing, the organisation's website (www.sorg.is) gave people whose friends may have suffered loss the following advice, amongst other things:

1. Do not give advice. The best thing to do is to listen, don't talk. People have to go through the grieving process at their own speed (*fara í gegnum sorgarferlið á eigin hraða*), it only makes matters worse to try to speed it up or expect everybody to react in the same way.

2. Be ready to see tears. Remember that crying is a natural expression (*útrás*) of loss (*missir*). So be happy if your friend can cry with you.

3. Listening to your friend is the best and the most import support you can offer. The better you understand your friend's feelings the more support you can give.

The emotions that *Ný Dögun* lists as common to grief are familiar from the grief therapy literature: shock, a feeling of not being there, pining, guilt, anger, depression, resolution and reconciliation. The language used to describe these emotions frequently carries connotations of battles and in this way echoes to some extent the language of the Icelandic Sagas. Grief is, for example, referred to as *óvægið högg*, a merciless blow, against which the bereaved person is *berskjölduð*, without protection, literally without a shield. Whereas the emotions of early grief are often described by British bereavement organisations as 'raw', 'forceful' 'wild' and 'powerful', *Ný Dögun* describes them primarily as 'painful' (*sárar*) and 'heavy' (*þungar*). To be *sár* is to be hurt or wounded, for example in a battle. A wound is *sár*. It is thus not surprising to find in *Ný Dögun's* publications references to grief as a wound that may heal, but which will always leave a scar (*ör*).

To *Ný Dögun*, grief is not necessarily a wholly negative experience. Rather, again in line with grief therapy literature generally, the organisation speaks of the successful resolution of grief as an opportunity for personal growth (*persónulegur þroski*) and a chance to cultivate one's inner being (*rækta sinn innri mann*). Here grief is seen as sharing aspects of such practices as meditation, and its potential outcome is described in language that could also be used to describe such practices. Thus, having been through the trauma of grief, the person is depicted as emerging, potentially, as a more rounded, more fully developed individual. The article cited above (Ásgeirsson 1991: 8–10) states:

> If things go badly, grief can have very serious consequences, consequences which can lead to terrible unhappiness (*vansæld*) even illness (*veikindi*). If everything goes well it can turn to comfort (*huggun*), personal growth (*lífsþroski*) and increased personal strength (*styrkur*). At its best, grief manages to develop into resolution (*sátt*) and inner peace (*innri friður*).

And this is the aim of *Ný Dögun's* work: to help people deal with and work through grief and achieve personal growth and strength. It aims to help create individuals who are not necessarily experts on grief, but who can handle, understand and express the emotional traumas life hands them and derive continued personal strength from them.

Strategies

The English phrase 'emotion work' applies to at least two components, two tasks, in bereavement counselling. It encompasses the process of seeking an understanding of your emotions, the emotions you are actually experiencing and where they come from; and it entails expressing these emotions. The same two connotations can also be found in the work of *Ný Dögun*, but it appears to us that the emphasis here is more on expression rather than understanding – which may reflect the origin of the organisation as fundamentally a mutual self-help group. Thus the two phrases commonly used by the organisation to indicate 'emotion work' – *útrás* and *framrás* – do not carry the connotation of understanding. The former

has the meaning of relief or outlet. You can seek *útrás* for your emotions but also for your frustrations or even your excess energy. The idea is one of expulsion, of bringing something out of oneself. *Útrás* was also used as a term for the expansion of Icelandic businesses, especially the financial institutions, into foreign markets during the huge expansion of the Icelandic economy from the early 2000s until the collapse in 2008. The *út* here is out (and is indeed pronounced like the Scottish out) and is found in many combinations for example *útlönd*, abroad or literally foreign countries.

Framrás, on the other hand, commonly refers to the draining of moor land. This gives an unmistakable flavour of a fairly simplistic release of emotions but *framrás*, and its verb form, *ræsa fram*, has further connotations. A large part of the modernisation of Iceland – substantially and symbolically – was the extensive draining of moorland to allow for the more profitable growth of grass for haymaking and hence the ability to raise more livestock. As mentioned above, *Ný Dögun* speaks of the successful working-through of grief as a chance to cultivate your inner being (*rækta sinn innri mann*); it is an opportunity for growth. *Rækta* means to cultivate, for example turning moorland into fields, and new fields that are obtained through draining are referred to as *nýrækt*, new arable land. So if in the past the cultivation of new fields was instrumental in the development and modernisation of Icelandic society, now the cultivation of your inner being following the death of a loved one is portrayed as a possible path to personal growth and development. Symbolically a link is being made between the history of Iceland's modernisation and personal grieving in the present.

This linkage between *Ný Dögun's* work and Iceland's history is further reinforced when it comes to the organisation's name. The name is seen as highly significant, and the organisation is very eager to publicise its meaning. The idea behind the name is explained in the organisation's newsletter thus:

> Night is the time of darkness and death. But the night has to flee from the dawn. To begin with, the dawn is but a tiny light in the east, the direction of the resurrection and new life. The dawn also is a new beginning. At dawn our forefathers went out in their small boats to provide for themselves and their families.

> For the bereaved person, the night is long and the light of hope is far away for a while. But we still live through the days … And the days pass, although we experience them as if in fog and darkness. Then we live a new dawn when the long walk through the long night of the soul comes to an end and we start to detect a tiny light. But we do not control when this happens. There is a season for everything. The night has its time and the dawn has its time.
>
> The dawn is also a time for battle, as for our forefathers. But in grief, in grief work, we go out in our boats and look for our provisions. … We hope that the Organisation will be a new dawn for bereaved people.

This explanation is repeated in a number of the organisation's publications. There is a clear reference here to the Bible, the Resurrection, the Psalms, and a verbatim quotation from the Icelandic translation of the book of *Ecclesiastes*, which serves to legitimise the organisation's teaching that grief has to run its course, that there is a time for grief as there is for everything else.

The reference to 'our forefathers' is significant too, aligning the struggles of bereaved people in the present with the battle of the Icelandic people for survival in a quite inhospitable environment throughout the centuries. The formulation here is clearly, if unintentionally, gendered. It is forefathers who went out to sea, risking their lives to provide for the nation. At the same time, the unintended suggestion may also be that women are the ones who bear the brunt of grief, just as the widows of the fishermen of yesteryear who were lost at sea did. At the same time, this emphasis on battling a very harsh environment at the edge of the habitable world with only basic equipment like small boats, is an important part of the Icelandic national historic consciousness (Brydon 1996; Koester 1990; Vasey 1996). The battle of bereaved people for survival is metaphorically likened to the battles of the Icelandic nation for survival. This implies the possibility that the future survival and prosperity of Icelanders might depend on, or at least be enhanced by, bereaved people's battle through grief, just as the current affluence of Icelanders has generally been portrayed as the result of their collective struggle for survival in the past.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have speculated on the links between death and grief, the fluctuating fortunes of the 'nation form' in Iceland and the changing relations between 'nation', 'state' and 'individual'. In this we have been influenced by existing theoretical concerns regarding the ways in which death can be harnessed for the construction and maintenance of cosmological orders, orders that we take to be inherently political. The rise of *Ný Dögun* and other allied changes in the regime of death and grief in Iceland have largely taken place during a period of unbroken right-wing government in Iceland, government that has sought to follow quite a strict neoliberal regime (Barry, Osborne & Rose 1996). While the nation form remains an important image of collective sociality and power in Iceland, this period has seen the privatisation of many previously state-run enterprises and the rolling-back of the welfare state, accompanied by a rhetoric of self-reliance, individual responsibility and initiative, private enterprise and personal improvement.

While we do not argue that the establishment of *Ný Dögun* and allied changes in the management of death and grief in Iceland were driven by the changing ways of governing the country, we do suggest that the work of *Ný Dögun* has to be placed and understood in this context. The rolling-back of the state, the privatisation of state enterprises, the downsizing of the welfare state, all limit the ways in which the state can be mobilised to govern populations and persuade individuals to implicate themselves in the fortunes of the nation form. At the same time, it remains important to secure people's identification with the nation form. *Ný Dögun* is a voluntary organisation, an organisation that makes the actions of turning yourself into a subject of liberty and responsibility a personal endeavour, an ongoing private project, while linking that project with the struggles of the Icelandic nation through the ages. To grieve in a certain way becomes a patriotic act, allied to the future prosperity of the nation without making undue demands on the shrinking state. The rise of *Ný Dögun*, we suggest, is part of wider transformation in the way in which people in Iceland are encouraged to govern themselves as subjects in an ostentatiously democratic and liberal regime.

Chapter Five

Letters to the dead

Obituaries and identity, memory and forgetting

The writing and reading of obituaries has for some time been something of a national obsession in Iceland. Every day the biggest national newspaper, *Morgunblaðið*, devotes up to ten pages of its rather precious space to obituaries. Many Icelanders spend a significant amount of their time reading what has been written 'after' (*eftir*), as they put it, about people they did not even know. Many Icelanders also cite obituaries as their favourite newspaper reading material. The obituaries published in *Morgunblaðið* differ from those published in national newspapers in most, if not all other countries. In Iceland it is people who knew the deceased who, at their own initiative, write obituaries 'after' their friends, colleagues or family (Koester 1995). Obituaries are not commissioned by the newspaper and people do not have to pay for their publication.

Koester (1990; 1995) has provided very insightful accounts of the Icelandic obituary as it existed until around 1990. But since the late 1980s, obituaries in Iceland have undergone quite fundamental changes. 'Traditional' obituaries, if we can call them that, aimed at describing the biography and character of the deceased, were rarely if ever written by very close relatives, and were characterised by a certain degree of reserve and what we might call emotional moderation (Koester 1990; 1995; Thorsson 1999: 17). Contemporary obituaries, in contrast, are frequently written by very close relatives, as well as others; they very often address the deceased directly, and they focus very much on the emotions the writer is experiencing following the death of their loved one.[7]

7 Professional obituary writers have been known in Iceland, but it seems most people choose to write the obituaries that appear in their name themselves. As far as we understand, professional writers would only be enlisted to write traditional obituaries. The modern obituary is fundamentally a personal statement.

Our aim in this chapter is to describe contemporary obituaries in Iceland. We emphasise particularly the changes that have taken place in recent years. Two questions are suggested here as meriting particular attention. First, why have Icelandic obituaries become more emotionally expressive, more centred on the author expressing his emotions in relation to the death of the subject? Here we offer as a possible explanatory context the wider transformations in the management of death and grief in Iceland in recent years. These changes apparently promote emotional expression, as we have discussed quite extensively in the previous two chapters of this book. This context may help to explain the increasing focus on emotional expression evident in Icelandic obituaries. But this does not offer an answer to the second question: why do obituaries in Iceland now frequently take the form of letters to the dead? To provide what must be regarded as no more than the broad context in which such letter writing might make sense, we discuss the prominence and acceptance of spiritualism in Iceland (Pétursson 1980; 1983; 1984; Swatos & Gissurarson 1997) which allows for a similar contact between the living and the dead. That context, however, only takes us a step towards what we regard as the real importance of obituaries here. That import has to do with memory, forgetting and the construction of collective identifications. Obituaries are clearly an attempt to memorialise. More importantly they are a means of memorialisation, we suggest, that revolve around a particular mode of remembering and forgetting, a mode that changes with shifting obituary styles. It is commonly observed (Connerton 1989; Anderson 1991; Carsten 1995; Gay y Blasco 2001) that collective memory is fundamental to collective identity. Recently, anthropologists (Battaglia 1992; Taylor 1993; Carsten 1995; Gay y Blasco 2001; Kristinsson 2013) have argued that forgetting can play a positive role in the formation of identity. This interplay between memory and forgetting is what is at stake in changing obituary styles.

Character and biography

Morgunblaðið, one of the main newspapers in Iceland, is published by an independent company but it offers broad political support to the In-

dependence Party of Iceland (*Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn*). The Independence Party is a broadly right-wing party that has dominated Icelandic politics for most of its independent era. The newspaper advocates liberal, democratic, and free-market values, as well as freedom and individual responsibility. The obituaries published in *Morgunblaðið* differ from those published in national newspapers in most, if not all other parts of the world in that they are written by people who knew the deceased, and who write at their own initiative (Koester 1995). Obituaries are neither commissioned nor written by newspaper staff. Their publication is also free. Financial means are thus not a factor limiting obituaries only to the wealthy, as is the case in Nigeria (Togunu-Bickersteth 1986; Lawayi 1988; 1989; 1993). 'Ordinary' people in Iceland have obituaries written 'after' them, whereas in other countries it tends to be the powerful, wealthy and famous who are remembered in this way. In this particular aspect, obituaries in Iceland share the democratic, popular ideal of the 'In Memoriam' notices in local newspapers in Britain as discussed by Davies (1994).

The number of obituaries published 'after' each individual depends on the number of people submitting obituaries about her or him to the paper. *Morgunblaðið* does not reject any obituaries as long as they conform to standards of propriety and length. The paper is now quite adamant on the length of published obituaries, but longer versions can be placed in the online version of the paper. On some days, quite a significant proportion of the paper is dedicated to obituaries. These are not printed until the day of the funeral, at the earliest, which is usually about a week after death. While attempts are made to find space for all obituaries for a particular person in the paper on that day, this is not always possible and some will appear later. Sometimes people write obituaries on the birthday of the deceased, or on the anniversary of his or her death. Sometimes an obituary will be written about a couple only after both of them have died. Obituaries are now almost invariably published with a portrait of the deceased individual or couple. Surveys conducted by *Morgunblaðið* amongst its readers, as related to us in interviews with people working in the obituary section of the paper, suggest that obituaries are amongst the most popular material in the paper and one of the reasons people

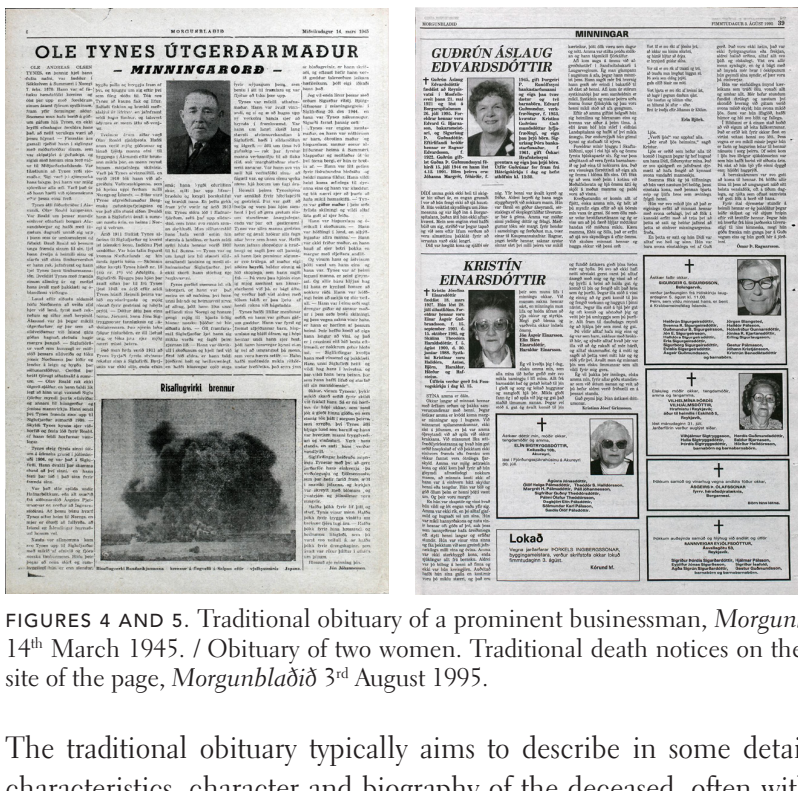
subscribe to it. The obituaries are also a favourite topic of conversation amongst Icelanders. People devour and discuss obituaries, not only those about their relatives, but also those concerning wholly unrelated persons. People ask each other whether or not they have read a particular obituary; whether they have ever seen the subject of the obituary about town; whether they knew who the person was; whether they knew their kinsfolk; whether they knew how they had died, and so on. Judgements will be made and some obituaries described as beautifully written (*fallega skrifað*), a judgement that extends both to the obituary as a literary text and to the expression of sentiment it may contain.

Morgunblaðið has been published since the First World War, when it was established to provide Icelanders with news of the Great War. Obituaries, in one form or another, have been part of the paper for most of this time and have changed somewhat during this period. What most Icelanders would recognise and describe as the standard traditional form of the *Morgunblaðið* obituary was in place by the 1960s at the latest and persisted throughout the 1980s. Since then, wide-reaching changes have taken place. These are changes that people who work for *Morgunblaðið* see as having, in a sense, been forced upon the paper by the obituary writers themselves. In fact, interviews with the newspaper's staff reveal the extent to which they feel obituaries are now outside the newpaper's control[8], and how they are understood as being almost the property of the 'nation'. What can be referred to as the standard, traditional obituary was typically written:

> by friends, work or club associates, relatives separated from the deceased by at least two connecting links (marriage, generation, etc.). They are not, except in unusual cases, written by the deceased's spouse, parents, children or siblings; nor are they authored by someone personally unacquainted with the deceased (Koester 1990: 303–304; see also Kristjánsdóttir & Þorgeirsdóttir 1996: 74; Koester 1995; Thorsson 1999).

8 Unstructured but in-depth and taped interviews were conducted with the current and former editors of *Morgunblaðið* and with three other members of staff previously or currently in charge of the obituary section. In addition, informal interviews were carried out during 1999–2016 with a number of Icelandic people.

These compositions were furthermore characterised by a certain respectability, reserve and moderate emotion (Thorsson 1999: 17). They would frequently begin with a statement like: "I would like to remember (*minnast*) Jón Jónsson whose funeral takes place today", and would almost invariably end with a message of condolence (*samúð*) to the close family of the deceased (Koester 1990).



OLE TYNES ÚTGERÐARMAÐUR

– MINNINGARORÐ –

Risaflugvirki brennur

MINNINGAR

GUÐRÚN ÁSLAUG EDVARÐSDÓTTIR

KRISTÍN EINARSDÓTTIR

Lokað

FIGURES 4 AND 5. Traditional obituary of a prominent businessman, *Morgunblaðið* 14th March 1945. / Obituary of two women. Traditional death notices on the right site of the page, *Morgunblaðið* 3rd August 1995.

The traditional obituary typically aims to describe in some detail the characteristics, character and biography of the deceased, often with the aid of amusing and telling anecdotes. Adapting slightly from Kristjánsdóttir & Þorgeirsdóttir (1996: 74–75) three categories of personal characteristics can be distinguished here[9]:

(1) Constitution (*atgervi*): Traditional Icelandic obituaries are replete with descriptions of people's appearance, how they presented themselves, their build and their bodily comportment. In the sample of obituaries that Kristjánsdóttir & Þorgeirsdóttir (1996: 74–75)

9 Differences in descriptions of men and women can be discerned in all three categories.

analysed, women were said, for example, to be slim (*grannvaxin*), blond (*ljóshærð*), to have sky blue eyes (*augun himinblá*), to be beautiful (*fönguleg*), bright or pure (*björt yfirlitum*). Men were more often described with reference to their health and bodily comportment, for example as healthy (*hraustur* although this can also mean 'strong') or quick (*léttur á fæti*).

(2) Intellect and abilities (*gáfur, hæfileikar*): In traditional obituaries people are, for example, described as contemplative (*hugsandi*), intelligent (*vel gefin*), very sharp (*bráðgreindur*), able to tell good stories (*sagði vel frá*); good with numbers (*talnaglöggur*) (Koester 1990: 278; Koester 1995).

(3) Character, disposition (*karakter, lundarfar*): Finally, in traditional obituaries people are described as trustworthy (*traust*), good-natured (*dagsfarsprútt*), conscientious (*samviskusamt*), generous (*gjafmilt*), hospitable (*gestrisið, rausnarlegt*), upright (*reisn*), mentally strong (*andlegur styrkur*), true (*sannur*), courageous (*hugrökk*), steadfast (*ákveðin*), easy going (*rólyndur*), happy (*glaðlyndur*). Furthermore, people are said to smile a lot (*broshýr*), be young at heart (*ungur í anda*), and kind (*góður*) (Kristjánsdóttir & Þorgeirsdóttir 1996: 74–75; Koester 1990: 278).

While describing the character of the deceased in this way, the traditional Icelandic obituary would simultaneously aim to trace his or her personal history. Thus, the deceased's birth, upbringing and education—or lack of it—would be described. Work life and hobbies would be explained and accounts given of marriage, children and any grandchildren they might have had. We offer here as an example of traditional obituaries excerpts from one written quite recently 'after' an eighty-year-old farmer from the south of Iceland who had died quite suddenly in his home.[10]

10 We have chosen a fairly recent obituary to stress the point that traditional obituaries are still being written. In Iceland a person's second name is his or her father's first name, or the mother's first name, or occasionally a combination of both – the first name with the Icelandic equivalent of daughter or son added to it. In Iceland people are referred to by their full name, or more commonly, only by their first name – never by their second name alone. The farmer in the obituary is therefore called Ari, the pseudonym we have chosen as his first name. While obituaries are of course matters of public record, we felt it was right to use pseudonyms here and not provide any exact dates.

The obituary was written by the deceased's son-in-law and exhibits all the classic characteristics of the genre.

> Many memories surface [now that Ari is dead] as the man was an enormous personality, formed by a difficult childhood; Ari lost his father when he was only five years old, the oldest of four siblings. Of course Ari had to start working very early and perhaps this experience shaped the way in which he made great demands on his family when it came to work. In the year 19xx Ari lost his wife, who had stood like a rock at his side for almost thirty years. This was clearly a severe blow for Ari, but he suffered his grief in silence (*bar harm sinn í hljóði*). … "I am Iceland's battle," Ari said once on a happy occasion, and he certainly was the battle of Iceland, although the battlefield was not one where people get killed. It was the field of dreams and achievements of a man who, with optimism and courage, was instrumental in developing agriculture in his region, from turf houses to modern buildings. Ari built many houses in his time, for himself and for other people in the region, and he was a fantastic builder, renowned for his skill and resourcefulness. He was also famous for his hard work, and it was as if three shovels were being used when he was digging, and three hammers when he was hammering. Ari was renowned for his helpfulness, and the bigger the favour asked, the quicker he was to respond. … I offer Ari's children and relatives my deepest sympathy. Iceland has now lost one of its best sons. Rest in peace.

The traditional Icelandic obituary has obvious predecessors in earlier Icelandic literary genres (Koester 1990: 303–304; Thorsson 1999: 16–17). In the early nineteenth century the journal of the Icelandic Literary Society *Skírnir* published death announcements for prominent people along with basic biographical information (Koester 1990: 293). Life memorials (*æviminningar*) were also popular during the nineteenth century. Central to this literary form were character descriptions – literally 'descriptions of men', (*mannlýsingar*), where an attempt was made to provide definitive accounts of particular persons. These could range from rather trivial descriptions of appearance, habits and quirks to more ambitious attempts to reveal the hand of fate in people's destiny or the

workings of the law of human nature in an individual life. What characterises these writings is the way in which the intrinsic character or nature of the person being described is taken as given; it does not change or develop during the account. Rather, the aim of the account is to reveal the underlying character of the person (we are here indebted to Thorsson 1999: 16–17). In this way the Icelandic life memorials are like the pre-Dostoyevsky work of fiction analysed by Bakhtin (1981): they are spoken with one authoritative voice about a subject whose nature is given, unalterable, and knowable.

Letters to the dead

It appears that even into the 1960s, obituaries were mainly written for rather well-known personalities in Iceland, but since then, a process which some of our interviewees refer to as 'democratisation' has taken place, and now almost everyone who dies in Iceland has an obituary written for them. "Someone has to write 'after' (eftir) her or him" people say (Thorsson 1999). It is as if a life has been allowed to pass unnoticed unless somebody writes about the deceased after death – as if an obituary were a mechanism for overcoming at least some part of the finality of death. Honour, renown and name were important values in the Icelandic society described in the Icelandic Sagas, a source people in Iceland often refer back to when searching for their origins and their essential nature as a people. Even so, in the Sagas honour and renown were available only to a few, and the process of 'democratisation' of obituary writing has intensified since the 1980s in that now many people have any number of obituaries written 'after' them, rather than perhaps one or two as was the case before. In consequence, on any given day, a fairly ordinary person may, through obituaries, occupy more space in the paper than accounts of the country's political, economic or cultural scene. There is something of an unofficial competition going on here, and readers do notice if a person has particularly many or maybe just the one obituary written about them. One of our interviewees has noticed that when a grandparent dies, at least one grandchild from each branch of the family will almost invariably write an obituary. In many cases, a great deal of

discussion and debate takes place amongst relatives and friends as to who should write about the deceased and how it should be done. These discussions have a moral content, and many people definitely feel this it is expected of them; that they are under an obligation to write an obituary 'after' a relative or a friend. In line with this, the volume of obituary writing in *Morgunblaðið* has increased dramatically over the years. In 1994, during an economic downturn in Iceland that was accompanied by declining advertising revenue, *Morgunblaðið* made a change in obituaries that was aimed at reducing the space they occupied. The paper requested that all obituaries for one person be preceded by a short introduction giving the basic biographical facts on the deceased. Repetition of these facts was to be avoided in the obituaries themselves, so when more than one obituary was written about a particular individual, a certain amount of repetition could be avoided.

When introducing these changes, *Morgunblaðið* relaxed its guidelines in some other respects. The most important change was that people were now allowed to address the deceased in the obituary. People were in effect allowed to write a letter to the deceased. This change was made, according to our interviews with staff at *Morgunblaðið*, because of the pressure they met from those members of the public who submitted obituaries. Our interviewees at the paper told us that for many years, the paper had turned away distraught relatives who wanted nothing more than to address their dead loved ones in their obituaries. The newspaper had asked them to rewrite their obituaries and speak of the deceased in the third person. Staff at *Morgunblaðið* admitted that they found this very difficult and felt themselves to be callous and cold in the face of people's trauma. It was nonetheless deemed necessary to do this, as it was not considered appropriate to address a deceased person in this way, particularly in a national newspaper.

In conjunction with, and possibly to some extent as a consequence of this development, two further transformations have recently occurred. First, it has become very common for very close relatives to write 'after' their loved ones. Now children write about their parents; parents write about their children; and spouses write 'after' each other (Kristjánsdóttir & Þorgeirsdóttir 1996: 74; Thorsson 1999). The social logic that Koester

(1990; 1995) unearthed in studying who writes about whom, according to which the distance was almost invariably two connections, no longer operates. Secondly, obituaries are now much more emotionally charged than they were before, with the author describing his or her feelings towards the deceased and his or her grief at the loss. The typical traditional obituary was an emotionally moderate account of the deceased's life and character written by a fairly distant relative, colleague or friend, referring to the deceased in the third person. The typical contemporary obituary is a letter written by a close relative addressed to the deceased and heavily focused on the feelings of the bereaved person.

We reproduce here fragments of two short obituaries written recently by two daughters of a man in his late fifties who died very suddenly. These fragments are vivid examples of the modern obituary.

> My dear Dad, how can one understand this? You, so young and fit, are torn away from this earthly life just like that. We who still had so many things to do together. I know, man proposes but God disposes. Dear Dad, I miss your kind words and your hugs terribly. As long as I can remember you have always made my wellbeing your priority. You were not just my Dad but my best friend too. Nothing was too good for me. The memories accumulate, and they would fill a whole book. This summer, which now draws to an end, we had the chance to be together even more than usual. The two of us spent most of it together and every day you'd say "How shall I spoil you today darling?"
>
> My dear Dad, I know you are with God and that we will meet again, but until then I'll seek solace in warm memories and in the prayer you taught me [a well-known Icelandic prayer is reproduced]. Your loving daughter,
>
> Dear Dad, I'm sad that you died, and I have cried a lot. I remember clearly when we were together and did many fun things together. We went fishing, to the cinema, to visit Grandma; we went traveling, camping and many other things. You told me a lot about Iceland and what places, rivers and other things are called, and you taught me a lot about the animals, what they eat and what their young ones are called.

The last time you called me in Canada you talked about God and said that I could always talk to Him if anything was wrong. That's what I do now because it's difficult to lose you, my dear Dad. But I know that you are with God now and that you feel fine. I wish I could have seen you again, and I miss you a lot. I will always love you, my dear Dad. Your daughter,

The traditional and the modern obituary are ideal types, and it must be stressed that a significant proportion of the obituaries written today adhere to the traditional style. Yet unmistakable changes have taken place, and they have not gone unnoticed by people in Iceland. The new obituaries are somewhat controversial both inside and outside *Morgunblaðið*. Some people at *Morgunblaðið* wonder whether such personal letters to the deceased belong in a national newspaper. They point out that the tra-

HEIÐAR ÞÓRARINN JÓHANNSSON

† Heiðar Þórarinn Jóhannsson fæddist á Akureyri 15. maí 1954. Hann lést af slysförum sunnudaginn 2. júlí síðastliðinn og var útför hans gerð frá Glerárkirkju 11. júlí.

Enginn veit hverjum klukkan glymur fyrr en á ógurstundu. Þetta á svo sannarlega við um það þegar hann Heiddi fór í sína síðustu hjólaferð.

Það er alltaf erfitt að kveðja einhvern sinna sinni sem manni þykir afskaplega vænt um. Hann Heiddi var nefnilega enginn venjulegur maður. Hann var stórmenni.

Heiddi var einn af þeim mönnum sem hafði áhugamál sitt sem forgangsatriði í lífi sínu. Mótorhjól af öllum gerðum voru hans líf og yndi ásamt skemmtilega mannlífinu sem þeim fylgir.

Heiddi hafði mikinn auð að gefa öðru fólki. Sá auður fólst ekki í Dow Jones-vísitölu eða peningum, heldur mannkærleika og lífsglöðu. Svo mikið er víst að fæstir muna eftir því við hvað fólk starfar í sínu jarðnesku lífi, en kynslóðir munu svo sannarlega muna eftir því hvað Heiddi aðhafðist „utan vinnutíma".

Ég reyni að hugga mig við það að hann Heiddi kvaddi þennan heim við að gera það sem hann elskaði. Fyrst hann varð endilega að fara svona snemma, er ég viss um að hann hefði sjálfur kosið þessa leið til að komast á sléttu himnaríkis.

Þegar við félagarnir fórum að hjóla á Trial, Enduro eða götuhjólunum, þá verður þú alltaf, alltaf með okkur í hjarta Heiddi minn. Ég og fjölskylda mín sendum öllum aðstandendum Heidda okkar dýpstu samúðarkveðjur.

Far vel kæri, kæri vinur.

Orðspor þitt gleymist aldrei meðal okkar.

Heimir Barðason.

Elsku Heiddi. Þú varst algjör ódemantur, þvílík perla, gull af manni.

En ég sagði þér það áðan, og nú er það of seint.

Allt í einu ertu farinn, hrifinn á brott í blóma lífsins. Þá er svo auðvelt að vera eigingjarn og spyrja, af hverju þú? Þú sem varst svo góður, vildir allt fyrir alla gera, traustur vinur.

Þú varst alveg ótrúlega skemmtilegur sögumaður og hafðir alltaf frá svo mörgu að segja.

Sem betur fer var ég nýlega búin að hitta þig og þú sýndir mér stoltur hluta af hjólunum þínum og sagðir mér ákafur fullt af góðum sögum sem eru svo dýrmætar núna, og allt sem var brallað í þá gömlu góðu, það rifjast upp og yljar manni.

Minning þín lifir.

Ég vil senda fjölskyldu og vinum innilegar samúðarkveðjur.

Hvíl í friði, kæri vinur, og Guð geymi þig.

Gullveig Kristinsdóttir.

Það voru sorgleg tíðindi 2. júlí þegar mér var tjáð að Heiðar Snigill nr 10 hefði látist í bifhjólaslysi í Öræfasveit.

Heiddi, eins og hann var ævinlega kallaður, var á heimleið af landsmóti Snigla sem í ár var haldið í Hrífunesi.

Að festa svefn að kvöldi 2. júlí var verulega erfitt því Heiddi kom ævinlega upp í hugann í sínum fyrsu myndum og í gegnum tárin kom einstaka sinnum bros, en brosið fór eftir því hvort tennurnar voru uppi í Heidda eða ekki, en þegar Heiddi fékk sér í glas átti hann það til að bregða á leik með tennurnar sínar og þeir sem sáu þessa tannleiki Heidda gleyma þeim aldrei.

Á þessum rúmu 20 árum sem við höfum verið samferða í lífinu höfum við ýmislegt brallað og öfáa mótorhjólatúrana höfum við tekið. Við fengum okkar aðalstign innan Snigla sama daginn þegar stjórn Snigla gerði okkur að heiðursfélögum sumarið 2002.

Ef Heiddi var beðinn um hjálp eða að taka eitthvað að sér var hann alltaf fús til að gefa af sér í svoleiðis, en Heiðar var í öfáum nefndum á vegum Snigla og saman sátum við í 10 ára afmælisnefnd Snigla 1994. Í þeirri nefnd kynntist ég því hversu skipulega Heiddi vann og með mikilli festu. Eftir þessi kynni mín af Heidda nýtti ég mér oft skipulagssnilli hans þegar ég var að skipuleggja eitthvað fyrir mótorhjólamenn eða var með hugmyndir að einhverju er tengdist mótorhjólum og þar þær ævinlega fyrst undir hann.

Flestir landsmótsgestir á landsmótum Snigla hafa smakkað sérlöguðu landsmótssúpuna hans sem hann hefur eldað síðustu 19 ár á öllum landsmótum síðan 1988. Sennilega er ekki til sá Íslendingur sem hefur eldað ofan í eins marga mótorhjólamenn og Heiddi, en oft tók hann að sér að elda fyrir hæði götu- og torfærumótorhjólamenn á hinum ýmsu uppákomum og ferðalögum hjólasmanna.

Fyrir tæpum tveim árum tók Heiddi sig á og breyttí um lífsstíl, tróð tappanum vel í flöskuna og fór í kjölfarið að safna mótorhjólum fyrir alvöru og síðast þegar ég frétti átti hann 27 og hálft mótorhjól. Heiddi var eflaust einn reyndasti bifhjólamaður landsins og keppti í hinum ýmsu keppnum á mótorhjólum og meðal annars var hann Íslandsmeistari í sandspyrnu og samkvæmt mínum heimildum hefur enginn náð að slá met hans á mótorhjóli í sandspyrnu. Heiddi keppti í nokkur ár í Íslandsmótinu í meistaradeild í þolakstri og var ævinlega langelsti keppandinn í þeim keppnum, en besti árangur hans var 12. sæti á móti þeim bestu. Hann keppti líka á jeppa í torfæru og varð Íslandsmeistari í götubílaflokki 1986.

Fyrir rúmu ári var haldið upp á 100 ára afmæli mótorhjólsins á Samkörkróki og þar var Heiddi að sjálfsögðu mættur með hluta af hjólaflota sínum, en af fimm keppnum sem voru á hátíðinni tók Heiddi þátt í þrem keppnum og sigraði tvær þeirra.

Í tengslum við þessa hátíð datt mér í hug að láta gera gera minnisvarða um fórnarlömb bifhjólaslysa. Það kom aðeins einn maður upp í hugann þegar smíða og hanna átti verkið. Að sjálfsögðu var það Heiddi sem fenginn var í verkefnið og fallegra listaverk er vandfundið. Þetta listaverk Heidda stendur við Varmahlíð og heitir Fallið og er til minningar um fórnarlömb bifhjólaslysa og var afhjúpað á 100 ára afmælisdag mótorhjólsins 19. júní 2005, en er það kaldhæðnislegt að listaverksmiðurinn og hönnuðurinn sjálfur sé orðinn eitt af fórnarlömbum bifhjólaslysa. Heiddi verður sárt saknað meðal bifhjólamanna um ókomin ár. Ég vil votta fjölskyldu Heidda samúð mína á þessum erfiðu tímum.

Hjörtur (íkllegur Snigill nr 56).

Ég á, eins og við öll, fullt af sögum og minningum um kappann. Margar tengjast því þegar við vorum að elda saman eða í einhverju öðru matarstússi. Það var mjög gaman að vera honum til halds og trausts á fimmtugsafmælinu, þá flutti ég bara til hans og stússaði í matargerð alla daga þegar hann var í vinnunni og þar sem hann hafði mjög ákveðnar skoðanir á því hvernig matur á að vera þá teiknaði hann upp fyrir mig uppskriftirnar, þá teiknaði því að þetta átti allt að fara ofan í pottana á ákveðinn hátt.

Heiddi var einn af stofnendum Vélhjólafjelags Gamlingja, sannur og trúr fjelaginu alla tíð. Ég hef verið Leiðtogi Gamlingja síðan 1998, átt stuðning hans og hjálpsemi vísa í einu og öllu. Fjelagið og gömlu hjólin voru stolt hans og yndi. Hjólasafnið einstakt. Þvílíkt skarð sem hoggið hefur verið. Vélhjólafjelag Gamlingja verður aldrei samt.

Núna undanfarið ár þegar við höfum hist eða hringst á hefur aðalumræðuefnið verið að skipuleggja og viðra hugmyndir um mótorhjólasöfn, hann sitt fyrir norðan og ég mitt í sveitinni. Eitt af því síðasta sem við ræddum á Landsmóti var einmitt þetta sameiginlega áhugamál okkar.

Heiddi, þín verður minnst um aldir alda, heill sé yður Höfðingi. Gamlinginn skoðar steininn. Takk fyrir allt. Þín

Dagrún.

Kæri Heiddi, mér tekur það sárt að þurfa að kveðja þig, kæri vinur, allt of snemma. Margar minningar sækja á hugann. Við höfum brallað margt saman gegnum tíðina, ótal ferðir á hjólunum, um landið og erlendis. Við höguðum okkur eins og sannir hjólamenn með tilheyrandi glasalyftingum, hlátri og sprelli. Þú varst alltaf góður félagi og stóðst með mér í hvívetna. Á aðalfundi Snigla í mars sl. léstu alla heyra það sem þurftu að þú værir ekki sáttur við þá framkomu sem mér hefur verið sýnd á undanförnum árum. Það var mér mikils virði að þú skyldir verja æru mína. Þú varst sannur vinur vina þinna og það var heiður að fá að vera þér samferða í gegnum tíðina.

Deyr fé,
deyja frændur,
deyr sjálfur ið sama;
en orðstír
deyr aldregi,
hverin er sér góðan getur.
(Úr Hávamálum.)

Elsku vinur, takk fyrir allar okkar samverustundir og hefði ég viljað að þær hefðu fengið að vera enn fleiri. Ég vil votta vinum og ættingjum mína dýpstu samúð.

Þinn vinur,

Gunnar Eymarsson (Gunni brems).

FIGURE 6.
The deceased addressed in a newspaper obituary, *Morgunblaðið* 14th July, 2006. One writer states: "It meant a lot to me that you [the deceased] stood by me and defended my honour. You were a true friend to your friends and it was an honour to travel with you through life."

ditional obituaries were in many ways important social historical documents. In fact, clues about certain political intrigues in Iceland's history have sometimes been revealed in obituaries written about important players in the island's politics. Yet *Morgunblaðið* is highly aware of the importance of the obituaries in its relationship with the 'nation' and is as such reluctant to enforce changes it fears would be unpopular.

Many people outside the paper we have interviewed said they feel that with the increased volume of obituaries, the standard of writing has gone down. They find obituaries too sentimental now, almost cloying, and some people see them as an example of what they describe as the American sentimentalisation of Icelandic society. At the same time, some modern obituaries are acknowledged as very beautifully written. One particular obituary written by a mother to her young child has already passed into urban legend and is widely recognised and referred to as a minor classic of contemporary popular Icelandic literature. The legendary status of this obituary is evident in the fact that descriptions of it vary greatly from informant to informant.

Transforming and transcending death and grief

We have briefly described Icelandic obituaries, emphasising in particular the changes that have taken place recently. But why did these changes take place? Why are Icelandic obituaries now emotionally charged in a way they were not before, and why do they now commonly take the form of a letter to the deceased? We will not pretend to be able to offer anything resembling exhaustive answers to these questions – and we recall that people at *Morgunblaðið* see them as the consequence of long-standing demands from obituary writers. What we offer is a particular context within which, we believe, these changes at least begin to make sense. Why, then, is there this increasing emphasis on the emotions of the obituary writer? We believe these changes in obituary writing can be placed in the context of more wide-reaching transformations of death and grief in Iceland.

As evident in our discussion of *Ný Dögun*, similar emphases on emotion and emotional expression are to be found in attempts to change

the way people in Iceland deal with death and grief. The organisation's work is said to "involve support for those hurting (*eiga um sárt að binda*) because of the loss of a loved one". The organisation has offered a few 'healing' (*græðandi*) 'pearls of wisdom' (*gullmolar*) for those who seek to help bereaved people in their grief. The 'pearls' suggest that:

> the simplest and best thing we can do is to show that we care […] Contact the bereaved as soon as possible. The best thing to do is to visit and give of your time. Keep in mind that bereaved persons often find it difficult to take the initiative and contact you. […] Respect yourself and your limits. The key word is empathy [*samhyggð*], to be there, acknowledge the grief and the loss of the bereaved without losing yourself in the grief. It may be beneficial for the bereaved to talk about how they feel. You do the right thing by listening. Allow your own emotions to guide you, not some formulas you have learnt beforehand from others. A touch or a hug can say more than many words. […] The best thing to do is to listen, not talk. People have to go through the grieving process at their own speed, it only makes matters worse if you try to speed it up, or expect everyone to react in the same way. Don't say "I know how you feel": you don't, "Everything will be better tomorrow", maybe it won't […]"It could be worse", you are the only one to think that. Don't tell the bereaved person how they should feel. They know perfectly well how they really feel without your help.

Similar emphases on emotions and emotional expression are found in *Ný Dögun's* newsletter, which combines accounts by bereaved people of their experiences and advice on how best to deal with grief and help the bereaved. The stories and the advice invariably speak of the importance of emotional expression. While *Ný Dögun*'s work cannot be said to explain the changes in obituary writing, we suggest that their work is a context in which the increasing emotionality of obituaries begins to appear more natural. Indeed, some of our interviewees describe how they have been chastised for writing about their loved ones without proper emotionality.

The transformations in the management of death and grief may help account for the increasing emphasis on emotions in obituaries, but they

do not explain why they now so often take the form of letters to the deceased. This practice, we suggest, can be seen as evidence of the relative closeness between the living and the dead in Iceland. As such it can be related to the enduring and significant popularity of spiritualism in the country (Pétursson 1980; 1983; 1984; Swatos & Gissurarson 1997). Since the early 1900s, spiritualistic beliefs have been endorsed by important members of Iceland's dominant and state-run Lutheran Church (Pétursson 1980; 1983; 1984). So prominent was the practice that Swatos and Gissurarson's (1997) central thesis – in some ways an extension of Weber's famous treatise – is that spiritualism was integral to Iceland's development towards modernity.

This institutional status of spiritualism appears to be mirrored in Icelanders' belief in psychic phenomena. In 1974 Erlendur Haraldsson (Haraldsson et al. 1977; Haraldsson 1978; see also Swatos & Gissurarson 1997: 226) conducted a mail survey into psychic experiences and religious beliefs in Iceland. In a sample of 1,132 people randomly chosen from the National Registry, 902 (80%) responded to the 52-item questionnaire: 425 males and 477 females. 32% of the respondents had attended a séance with a medium, while 30% had been to a meeting with a psychic. Some 55% of those who had attended a séance said that they were in no doubt that they had had contact with deceased persons, whereas another 22% suggested it was possible they had been in such contact. An international Gallup study carried out in 1985 (Haraldsson 1985) found that 41% of respondents in Iceland reported "a personal experience of contact with the dead" (Swatos & Gissurarson 1997: 227), significantly higher than in other Western countries. This data, Swatos & Gissurarson (1997: 227) suggest, "does not give any reason to think that spiritualistic interest and phenomena are on the wane in Iceland". They point out that since

> two of the pastors in Reykjavík with spiritualist inclinations, Sigurður Haukur Guðjónsson and Þórir Stephensen, were called upon for as many as half the funerals in the city in the recent past, while constituting only 10% of the pastors, there is at least some reason to think that those who turn to the church at this time of family crisis may expect

> to continue to find ministers who are at least sympathetic to spirit phenomena. (1997: 187)

Sigurður Haukur Guðjónsson and Þórir Stephensen have now both retired and do not appear to have obvious successors as champions of spiritualism within the Church of Iceland. Nevertheless, the Icelandic Society for Psychical Research (*Sálarrannsóknarfélag Íslands*) is growing, there is 'renewed interest' in the Society's work (Swatos & Gissurarson 1997: 187), and ordinary newspapers in Iceland carry numerous advertisements and announcements from mediums and spiritual healers who offer the living medical care provided by the deceased. One medium has his own radio show, where people can call in and take part in a séance while on air.

Davies (1994) argues that 'In Memoriam' notices in local newspapers in Britain offer people the chance to communicate with their dead loved ones, a chance otherwise denied them by organised religion. It could be suggested that the modern Icelandic obituary plays a similar role, even though organised religion in Iceland is apparently more tolerant of such practices than it is in Britain. However the enduring significance of spiritualism in Iceland cannot of itself explain the recent emergence of letters to the dead in the way that the recent rise in spiritualism might do. We recall that the people at *Morgunblaðið* described how obituary writers had persistently demanded that they be allowed to write such letters. But we suggest, nonetheless, that spiritualistic beliefs and experiences of contact with the dead provide a context in which writing letters to the dead makes sense, or is at least not seen as unnatural.

Memory, forgetting, identities

Writing obituaries is obviously an act of memorialisation (Davies 1994). It is an act that seeks in one way or another and amongst other things, to fix – in the double sense of that word – the memory of the deceased. Memory, more specifically social memory, has recently emerged as a topic of interest in anthropology and other social sciences (Connerton 1989). Researchers have pointed out the importance of memory, indi-

vidual and collective, for the constitution and maintenance of collective identities (Anderson 1991; Gay y Blasco 2001). This is important, as the production, circulation and consumption of written texts has for a long time been seen as vital to the continuous creation and maintenance of Icelandic identity. Indeed, Iceland's is an identity heavily reliant on language, literature and literacy (Pálsson 1995). In the nineteenth century, for example, the distribution and reading of written material of various sorts was crucial in establishing the political and cultural nationalism in Iceland that led to the country's independence (Björnsdóttir 1989; Pálsson 1995). Furthermore, Icelandic identity is intimately, indeed intrinsically bound up with notions of remembering and continuity. Maintaining continuity with the mythologised foundation of Icelandic society during its settlement around 870 C.E., has long been important for Icelandic identity. The account of the settlement and the wider exploits of the settlers are recounted in the Icelandic Sagas, written mainly in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Ideologically, the claim is made that Icelandic history was written down almost from the beginning. It is also claimed that the language in which this history was written has remained relatively unchanged, so that Icelanders can still read the accounts of their own genesis in the original. These factors – even if we are dramatising them to some extent here – are amongst the fundamentals of Icelandic identity (Björnsdóttir 1989; 1996; Pálsson 1995). Icelandic historical consciousness is divided into the 'golden age' of the Viking era with the settlement of Iceland, when freedom, heroism and prosperity reigned; the Dark Ages of colonial oppression from 1262 to 1944; and the 'bright future' of the newly independent republic, established in 1944, when Icelanders regained their dignity, freedom and prosperity (Hastrup 1998; Karlsson 1985). In line with Anderson's (1991) observation about the importance of printed news in imagining the national community, *Morgunblaðið*, with its wide circulation, has definitely played its part in making the imagining of the Icelandic nation in the twentieth century possible by allowing contributions from many individuals who would not otherwise have access to a public forum. *Morgunblaðið* calls itself 'The Newspaper of all Icelanders' (*Blað allra landsmanna*), and many believe its special place in the nation is to some extent attributable to the obitu-

aries it prints. People in Iceland certainly do discuss obituaries to an unusual degree, particularly after the recent changes in them. Letters from readers to *Morgunblaðið* also frequently debate obituary writing (see for example *Morgunblaðið* 28/4/2002 and 13/9/2002). The issue is clearly important to many people in Iceland.

But what is memory? And what is remembered? The writer Milan Kundera (1996) argues in his *Testaments Betrayed* that the common dichotomy between memory and forgetting is an illusion. He points out that remembering always and inevitably involves a process of selection whereby certain things are retained, remembered, and others are let go, forgotten. Remembering is not a faithful collection of images of the receding present kept for future use, but rather a particular and skewed construction of the past. While not directly influenced by Kundera, a handful of anthropologists (Battaglia 1992; Taylor 1993; Carsten 1995; Gay y Blasco 2001) have asked similar questions of the dichotomy between remembering and forgetting. More specifically they have argued that rather than being simply a negative loss, forgetting may in fact be a positive process that is fundamental to both individual and collective identity formation. This point has been made by Battaglia (1992) with reference to the mortuary rites of the Sabarl of Melanesia, by Taylor (1993) regarding the mortuary rites of the Jivaro of Amazonia, by Carsten (1995) in connection with migrants in Malaysia, and by Gay y Blasco (2001) with reference to the Gitanos of 'Jarana', Spain. Carsten (1995: 318) thus describes how active forgetting is intrinsic to identity formation for Malays of the island of Langkawi, which she links to "widespread demographic mobility in the region" and "the historical context of state systems in Southeast Asia." The Jivaro, meanwhile, as described by Taylor (1993: 655), "have neither ancestors and tombs nor elaborate mortuary rituals, and they strive fervently to erase all visual or verbal traces of the dead." Still, the dead are not dissolved into anonymity or "consigned to a collective social category", they "remain absolutely individual". But although individual, they are "never transformed into heroic figures … because nothing remains of them on which memory might rest, neither name nor recorded biography. All that is left of them, in effect, is sheer singularity, the trace of an unmemorable but unique person." Still, it is

from the 'disremembered' dead "that the Jivaro acquire singular identity. They inherit from them a unique shape taken from the closed, unchanging set of faces and names that constitute 'mankind'" (Taylor 1993: 653).

We want to take the insights offered by Battaglia, Carsten, Gay y Blasco, and Taylor and apply them to Icelandic obituaries. Obituaries are clearly built on a process of selection, a process whereby certain things are emphasised and other things are ignored. The significant point here is how this process is differently manifest in the two different types of obituaries. We note first that the undertone of many traditional obituaries is the deceased's achievements in the face of adversity – adversity in the form of poverty and lack of opportunities and education. In this way the stories of the individuals being told are made to reflect, embody and exemplify to some extent the history of Iceland in the twentieth century: the story of a nation working its way out of oppression and poverty towards freedom and prosperity (Vasey 1996). At the same time, the deceased individual is located as a participant and contributor to what are seen as the spectacular development and transformation of the country during the twentieth century (Koester 1990). This is very clear in the obituary written 'after' Ari, which begins by emphasising the adversity Ari faced in his early years. Ari "was an enormous personality formed by a difficult childhood. Ari lost his father when he was only five years old, the oldest of four siblings. Of course Ari had to start working very early". Later Ari is quoted as saying "I am Iceland's battle". The obituary writer agrees and continues "he certainly was the battle of Iceland […] [on] the field of dreams and achievements of the man who with optimism and courage was instrumental in developing agriculture in his region."

We noted above how the traditional obituary derives from the literary genre of life memorials. In some regards, these and the traditional obituary can be said to derive from the Icelandic Sagas where character descriptions occupy an important place (Durrenberger & Pálsson 1999). A central motivating force in the Sagas is honour (*heiður*) and the safeguarding and enhancement of honour. Similarly, traditional obituaries are clearly dedicated to the honour of the deceased. Their very aim is to honour (*heiðra*) the memory of the person being written 'after'. Indeed, many of the adjectives and phrases used in traditional obituaries, as well

as the older life memorials, can be found in the Icelandic Sagas. Thus it says in our example that

> Ari built many houses in his time, for himself and for other people in the region, and he was a fantastic builder, renowned for his skill and resourcefulness. He was also famous for his hard work, and it was as if three shovels were being used when he was digging, and three hammers when he was hammering.

The shovels and the hammers evoke the description of Gunnar á Hlíðarenda, the most renowned of all the heroes in the most famous of all the Icelandic Sagas, *Njála*, even if in Gunnar's case the weapon was a sword rather than the more mundane shovel or hammer. In this way, the deceased who are memorialised in obituaries are, if only in a small way, likened to the heroes of the time construed as the golden past, the golden age of Iceland, the time when the Icelandic identity was forged, the birth of the nation (see Pálsson 1989). Through this process, in the traditional Icelandic obituary, the deceased is simultaneously offered a place and located in the most celebrated periods of Iceland's history: the 'golden past' of the time of the Sagas and the 'bright future' being built in the newly independent Iceland of the twentieth century, when shovels and hammers have replaced swords as the weapons of choice (Karlsson 1985; Árnason & Simpson 2003).

What the traditional obituary ignores, what it forgets in the sense that it does not become part of the public record that the obituary is, are the emotions of the writer. Memories of the deceased and sympathy (*samúð*) towards the close family of the deceased are the only personal experiences of the writer that are commonly mentioned. So, in our example the obituary writer makes no claim to a sense of personal loss himself. Rather, Iceland has lost one of its 'best sons', a loyal servant in the nation's battle. And while the emotions of the obituary writer are thus ignored, the voice of the very close family, their experiences, is also forgotten. The deceased, moreover, is spoken of in the third person, which objectifies him to some extent. What the traditional obituary forgets are precisely the things the modern obituary foregrounds and celebrates: the emotional experience of the obituary writer himself, who is commonly

a very close relative of the deceased and addresses the deceased directly. All of these characteristics are very clear in the two examples of the modern obituary we quoted above. The deceased is very much a singular, unique person, a hero even, but he is also a unique and heroic person in relation to the bereaved obituary writer. What the modern obituary forgets to provide is an independent account of the character of the deceased. His or her character is revealed only in relation to the bereaved obituary writer and his or her emotions. Similarly, the deceased is not afforded a place in the history of Iceland. His contribution was not made to 'Iceland's battle' but rather to the life, well-being and personal development of the obituary writer. The identity of the deceased is narrowly constructed around his or her relationship with the obituary writer. His or her identity is privatised.

We would now like to sketch out part of the larger social and political context within which the changes in obituary writing have occurred and to suggest – and we emphasise the suggestiveness rather than the assertiveness of what we are saying – how it might be linked to the transformations we have traced. Following a period as an independent commonwealth – a period glorified in the Icelandic Sagas and in historical consciousness in Iceland as the golden past – Iceland was, for almost 700 years, first a colony of Norway and later of Denmark – these were the dark ages in the island's history. Icelandic nationalism first arose in the sixteenth century. Informed by developments on Continental Europe, it took on a more political edge in the mid-nineteenth century when it quickly gained significant popular appeal in the country, not least through the circulation of printed material. The struggle for independence and the struggle for economic and cultural development during the immediate post-independence period – full independence having been won in 1944 – gave Icelandic society and its more powerful discourses quite a distinct corporatist character. This corporatism was frequently debated and negated, undermined and resisted, but even the quite fierce class struggles of the 1920s and 1930s were eventually overshadowed by an insistence on the common Icelandic struggle for independence and development.

This is the battle that Ari fought, and this is the discourse into which the traditional obituary taps (Karlsson 1985; Árnason & Simpson 2003). This corporatism manifested itself in extensive government support for economic development and activity, local governments frequently becoming involved in running businesses, for example fish factories, and the central government providing guarantees for business ventures of various kinds. This changed with the general election in 1991 and the coming to power of a decidedly right wring government which introduced the ideology of neo-liberalism into governance in the country. With that, state sponsorship of economic activity was deemed economically and indeed morally wrong, because it skewed competition and was considered economically wasteful. Previously state-run businesses, most famously and with the most profound consequences the banks, were privatised. These changes were accompanied by a quite powerful discourse of individual initiative, responsibility and freedom. These so-called virtues were foregrounded and presented as the driving forces behind further economic development, over and above those of corporatist co-operation. We suggest that changes in the writing of obituaries reflect these changes. Or, rather, the changes in obituary writing are part of and constitutive of a more general process of moving away from corporatism and towards general privatisation. In saying this, we are not suggesting a direct causal relationship. Rather, what we have in mind is something akin to the Foucauldian notion of the discursive effects of power and government at a distance (Foucault 1991; Gordon 1991). In speaking of privatisation in this way, we are taking up the argument of the Icelandic writer Guðmundur Andri Thorsson (1999), who has talked about the transformation of obituaries in terms of the 'privatisation of the text'. This privatisation comes into sharper focus if we recall the things the modern obituary forgets: the place of the deceased in 'Iceland's battle' and the corporate co-operation that had been seen as part of that struggle. The modern obituary writer makes no claims regarding the deceased's part in the development of Iceland, only as regards his and the deceased's development as persons. The privatisation of the Icelandic economy, we suggest, requires at least partial forgetting of the co-operation and corporatism that had been seen as instrumental

to the country's development. The modern obituary, we believe, is part of that forgetting.

Conclusion

We have traced how Icelandic obituaries have changed in recent years – from emotionally moderate accounts of the character and life of the deceased written by someone at least twice removed from them, to an emotionally charged account focusing on the experiences of the bereaved writer who is commonly now a close relative of the deceased, an account that addresses the deceased directly as in a letter. We suggested that the wider transformations of death and grief in Iceland might provide a context within which the increasing emotionality of obituaries makes sense. We have suggested that the popularity of spiritualism in Iceland might help explain how it could make sense to write letters to the deceased. Evoking anthropological work on memory and forgetting we suggested finally that the transformations in obituary writing in Iceland could possibly be understood as part of a wider process of privatisation where individual initiative, experience, autonomy and responsibility are emphasised through a process of simultaneously forgetting an earlier emphasis on cooperation and corporatism. As Renan (translated and quoted by Carsten 1995: 317) notes "the essence of a nation is that all the individuals hold many things in common, and also that all of them have forgotten many things".

Chapter Six

Acceleration nation

Speed, violence and technologies of patriotism

In the last chapter we discussed obituary writing in Iceland. We drew a distinction between what we referred to as traditional and modern obituaries. We spoke of modern obituaries as the privatisation of the text (Thorsson 1999) and linked their rise to the emergence of neoliberalism in Icelandic politics, government and economic management. We suggested, to put it briefly, that the rise of the modern obituary was part of a process whereby economic, cultural and social development is construed as the consequence primarily of the actions of enterprising individuals rather than the collective effort of the 'nation'. This is an issue we pursue further in this chapter. We do so by taking up a point made most forcefully and insightfully by Lauren Berlant (1998). For most of the twentieth century Iceland was characterised by a political rhetoric "in which the nation form trumps all other images of collective sociality and power" as Berlant (1998: 174) puts it with reference to the United States. This has changed with the advent of neoliberalism, as we have argued in this book. However, Berlant suggests that the hacking away at the hyphen between nation and state, enacted by neoliberalism, requires the development of new technologies of patriotism, technologies that keep the 'nation-form' at the heart of people's collective identification while justifying the shrinking role of the state in the life of the 'nation' and its members. In this chapter we argue that death and loss offer a particularly powerful tool in that effort, not least in a society where loss, the possibility of national extinction, is part of the national historical narrative. In contemporary Iceland, we suggest, this work happens not least around deaths on the road and around the acute ambivalence attached to speed in the country. In making this argument we engage with the critical phi-

losophy of the French-Italian thinker Paul Virilio. His work offers us a way into the arguments we seek to make.

Speed and politics

At the heart of Paul Virilio's writings is the attempt to demonstrate "how technologies alter our sense of space, time and the body, and have an impact on social, political and human life in destructive ways" (Kellner 2000: 104). Of critical importance here are, on the one hand, the links that he traces between technology and acceleration, and on the other hand Virilio's (1998 [1986]) insistence on the central role of speed and acceleration in social change. Thus Virilio identifies the importance of his own work as highlighting what he claims previous theorists of social change have overlooked: "the role of speed … in the organization of civilizations and politics" (Kellner 2000: 105) and how "speed is crucial … to the production of wealth and power" (Kellner 2000: 105). Virilio maintains that speed was accelerated significantly during the nineteenth century with the invention of the combustion engine and later electric telegraphy. These two technologies allowed for a much speedier transfer of people, goods and information than had previously been possible. Thus both transportation and communication were drastically accelerated to the extent that "the generation of modernity involves transition from the age of the brake to that of the accelerator … as intensification of speed generates new economic, political, social and other forms" (Kellner 2000: 105). So for Virilio "the political revolution of modernity could itself be understood in terms of increasing mobilization" (McQuire 2000: 144).

We agree with Sean Cubitt (2000: 139) that "Virilio is extremely informative" when it comes to transportation, traffic, and in particular the private automobile. As Cubitt (2000: 139) argues with suitable outrage:

> The car instils in its driver and passengers that sense of right and invulnerability that is responsible for so many deaths. It inscribes in the motorist the expectation of surveillance. It travels faster than the human sensorium can cope with. Few people would batter an animal to death

> in cold blood, but roadkill is considered an acceptable by-product of the right to speed.

Accidents, catastrophes, sudden changes and upheavals are vital components of what Virilio calls 'the dromocratic condition', especially in relation to technology (see Armitage 2000: 26). Virilio argues that every technology, "produces, provokes, programs a specific accident" (Virilio & Lotringer 1997: 38). The car and the road gave us the car crash, the airplane gives us the plane crash.

We find Virilio's ideas, his emphasis on acceleration and the importance of accidents in particular (Virilio 1986; Virilio & Lotringer 1997), extremely fruitful, and we would like to suggest here that they are helpful in understanding how deaths on the road have taken on the particular importance that we claim they have as technologies of patriotism in an era of neoliberalism. However, for Virilio's ideas to be useful in that way, certain qualifications are necessary. We must note first that Virilio writes from the perspective of the experiencing subject, the human perspective of what Pierre Bourdieu (2003) has called 'phenomenological egology'. Thus he (1997: 38) says in *Open sky* that: "We might recall in passing that there is no true presence in the World – in one's own world of sense experience – other than through the intermediary of the ecocentration of a *living present*; in other words, through the existence of one's own living body in the here and now." Indeed, at the heart of Virilio's despair over the detrimental impact which he believes technology has, is the observation that as technology accelerates the flow of people, goods and information "one loses anchorage in one's body, nature and social community" (Kellner 2000: 111).

Our objection to this is not philosophical. We suggest that while acceleration and accidents are arguably important aspects of modernity, their articulation has to be explored within their specific social, political and cultural context, as we attempt to do here. Virilio's is a universal story – universalism itself of course being the peculiar parochialism of European modernity (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992: 20) – of increasing speed and acceleration, of progress, or more accurately in fact destruction. Here specifically we want to address the complexities of speed and

acceleration in Iceland in connection with death on the roads and road safety, cars and car crashes, and in their articulation with modernity and history, the 'nation-form' (Berlant 1998), neoliberal governmentality and what Berlant (1998) has termed 'technologies of patriotism'. The argument that unfolds suggests that victims of car crashes become a key focus for technologies of patriotism that seeks to keep the 'nation-form' at the heart of people's collective identification as the link between nation and state is being undermined. In order to establish this argument, we need to revisit Icelandic history in order to explain how in this country, acceleration became crucial to the quest for modernity, understood here as an ethnographic phenomenon.

The three ages of Icelandic history

Any account of the complexities of speed and acceleration in Iceland has to pay due attention to the peculiarities of the country's history, or indeed even more importantly, the dominant local construction of that history. Of particular relevance here is the fact that Iceland was for seven hundred years ruled by Denmark. It achieved home rule in 1904, sovereignty in 1918, and full independence in 1944, after one hundred years of almost entirely peaceful struggle. It is well-established in Icelandic ethnography, as we have already mentioned in previous chapters, that the country's history is commonly divided into three distinct periods that have provided the underlying structure for the way in which history has been taught in Icelandic schools (see, for example, Hastrup 1998: 26; Árnason & Simpson 2003). The first period, the age of the settlement, runs according to somewhat mythologised accounts from 874 AD to 1262. This period is understood as the golden age of Iceland, the era of the heroic Vikings who are glorified in the Sagas, the time during which Iceland was an independent commonwealth, a free and prosperous land. This golden past is seen as having been lost, like any other Paradise, through a combination of foreign interference and internal strife, in consequence of which Iceland eventually became part of the Danish Realm. The centuries that followed are seen in

Iceland as the 'Dark Ages' (Hastrup 1998: 27), a time of humiliation and desperation, a time when the very future of nation, even its sheer physical survival, was seen as repeatedly in serious danger. The third period of Iceland's history is the post-independence period, the age of a bright future "seen as a period of progress," to quote Hastrup (1998: 26) again, "of increasing technological sophistication and wealth".

The anthropologist Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir (1989) has pointed out how Iceland's struggle for independence was justified partly with reference to the uniqueness of Icelandic culture, heritage, and history, along the lines of arguments developed more generally in romantic nationalism. As such, the claim to independence drew on the same kind of 'essentialism' that Clifford Geertz (1973) spoke of in relation to the 'new states' that emerged in the struggle against colonialism. At the same time, there was an awareness in Iceland that real independence required economic and political independence which could only be guaranteed through economic progress: a somewhat more pragmatic nationalism, or 'epochalism' to once again use Geertz's terms (1973). The aim and justification for independence was securing the kind of progress for Icelanders that would guarantee the physical survival of the nation. Indeed, in Icelandic discourses, the Independence period is portrayed as making the physical survival and well-being of the nation more secure. Having taken matters into their own hands, Icelanders could finally embark on the necessary modernisation, the necessary social, cultural, political and economic progress.

There is no denying that during the course of the twentieth century, Iceland was transformed from a desperately poor rural society to an affluent post-industrial society (see Hálfdanarson & Kristjánsson, eds. 1993), but the exact processes by which that happened (and the extent to which political independence was important in this) are beyond the scope of this chapter. What concerns us is the aspect of Iceland's modernisation that concerns enhancing the 'dromocratic condition' (Virilio 1986) of the nation. Thus, during the twentieth century, successive Icelandic governments invested heavily in

speed and acceleration and the infrastructures and technologies for achieving this. In 1895 state funding for road building was increased significantly, and a programme of improving transportation began. It focused particularly on bridging some of the wider rivers in Iceland, which had been significant and hazardous obstacles to travel (Magnússon 1993: 178–179). Nevertheless, even after 1920, horses remained the main means of transport in the country. Plans to build railways were put forward in the 1920s, but with increasing imports of cars coupled with difficult terrain and the small population of the island, they never came to fruition. The main emphasis in Iceland's transportation policy was, and has arguably remained "paving the way for the car" (Magnússon 1993: 179). In 1927 there were 1300 km of roads in Iceland (the island is roughly 300 km north-south and 300 km east-west). By 1990, that figure was 12,500 km of which 2300 km were asphalt roads. In 1924 the number of cars in Iceland was 300. It was 2100 by 1940, 21,600 by 1960 and 134,200 by 1990. In 1990 private cars numbered 121,100 (Magnússon 1993: 179). Today the combined number of all cars and motorcycles in Iceland stands at roughly 200,000. The number of inhabitants is around 330,000.

The physical transformation of Iceland in the form of roads and bridges, and in the pursuit of modernity and affluence, also has a more symbolic dimension. In Icelandic, *vélaöldin*, the age of the engine, is a common term for modernity and *vélvæðing*, mechanisation, a common term for modernisation (see Ásgeirsson 1988). Indeed, along with ships propelled by engines, which transformed Icelandic fisheries (see Pálsson 1991), and the tractor, which transformed the work of ploughing and working fields, and hence agriculture more generally (see Durrenberger 1996), the motor vehicle is one of the most potent signs of the arrival of modernity in Iceland. And the car's way continues to be paved. Currently plans are being discussed to build a highway through the mountainous area in the centre of Iceland in order to drastically shorten the distance between the capital Reykjavík and the biggest population centre in the north, Akureyri.

Thus the situation in Iceland would, at least as far as traditional transportation is concerned, appear to conform to Virilio's (1986) speculations on the dromocratic condition. Yet, a particular ambivalence surrounds speed and acceleration in Iceland, an ambivalence that is, we argue, best understood in the articulation of speed and acceleration with modernity, as understood locally, and with history, the 'nation-form' (Berlant 1998), and 'technologies of patriotism'. We think that some of this ambivalence is embodied in the sculpture in the photograph below, which we now turn to with the help of a few rhetorical questions.

Of deaths, both tragic and routine

FIGURE 7. Death sculpture at Suðurlandsvegur, 16th June 2017. The number on the cross states the number of deaths on Icelandic roads since 1st January each year.
Photo: Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson.

What can we say of a nation which, for the sake of road safety, erects along one of its busiest routes a sculpture so stunning, so eye-catching, that passing motorists could be forgiven if they complained that they were in danger of losing: a. sight of the road; b. control of their vehicles; c. their lives? What can we say of a nation that has for decades urged its farmers to rid the countryside of 'graveyards' of rusting cars and disintegrating agricultural machinery, only to go to some considerable expense and effort to put on public display the mangled wrecks of crashed cars? What, finally, are we to make of the constant juxtaposition of speed, life and eternity on Icelandic road safety signs?

The road safety sculpture on the photograph above is the joint product of the Icelandic Transport Authority (*Umferðarstofa*), an independent but government-funded organisation that exists to provide traffic education and promote road safety, and Icelandic insurance companies. The Authority occupies a significant place in the lives of many Icelanders. One of the first letters people of our generation received when growing up was from the Authority's predecessor, welcoming them to the 'Traffic School for Young Children', which gave lessons in such things as how to cross roads safely at traffic lights. More recently, the Authority has been noticed for a series of powerful and quite controversial television ads that use graphic visuals of violent accidents to catch people's attention and promote road safety.

The aim of the sculpture and the signs is at any rate clear: to reduce speed, increase road safety, and reduce the number of car accidents, particularly fatal mishaps. And road safety and car accidents are important in Iceland. Traffic accidents, major and minor, are frequently reported in the national media. On the day of writing, for example, the front page of the internet version of *Morgunblaðið*, Iceland's leading daily newspaper, contained no less than four items that referred directly to car accidents. News of drivers who have been apprehended for speeding, drunk driving and the like are similarly a prominent feature in the Icelandic media. A strong current of moral judgment runs through these reports. Thus, those who drive recklessly are sometimes called *ökuníðingar*, even on the news programme of the national radio which usually strives for measured neutrality. *Öku* refers to driving but *níðingur* is a strongly loaded

term referring to those who carry out particularly reprehensible acts. For example: in Icelandic, paedophiles are *barna* (for children) *níðingar*. Great speed is sometimes called *ofsahraði*. *Hraði* is speed but *ofsi* can be rage (as in *skapofsi*) or a storm as in *ofsaveður*: in either case the connotation is that of an uncontrolled, even uncontrollable and dangerous natural force. In the summer of 2005, not long after the London bombings, at a time when the media in Iceland were quite preoccupied with terrorism, it was reported that an *ökuníðingur* (singular) had driven at *ofsahraði* while drunk through the centre of Reykjavík. Interviewed on national radio, a spokesperson for the Transport Authority referred to this as an act of 'terrorism', claiming that in its disregard for innocent people, this was equivalent to planting bombs in the middle of the town. The association between being an *ökuníðingur* and criminality is further reinforced in an advertising campaign from the Traffic Authority where a driver is depicted taking aim at a family with his car key.

If road safety is a matter of concern, car accidents are often a matter of great attention and discussion. In the autumn of 2002, to give just one example, it was reported one Sunday afternoon that a car had been swept off the road on the Vestfirðir peninsula by the winds that regularly batter that part of the island. A mother and her two daughters were left critically injured and fighting for their lives in hospital. Word quickly spread as to their identity, and in a small nation connections were easily made with friends and relatives (see Pálsson 2002) so that their condition quickly became a personal concern to many. The nation obviously felt united in its hopes and fears, a unity forged by the anticipation of grief. The following week, the Icelandic nation stood vigil by its radios as every news bulletin carried further news – effectively no news – on the condition of the mother and daughters, until the week's end when all three passed away, or moved on, 'travelled beyond the great mist' (*ferðast yfir móðuna miklu*) as the Icelandic phrase goes, which is itself of course, a dromocratic condition. After that, or more accurately at that point, the three became a statistic, part of the records kept by the Transport Authority on the number of car accidents and the statistics kept by the state on the number of deaths – accidental deaths and deaths related to traffic accidents – which are dutifully reported by Statistics Iceland and the Icelandic media on a yearly basis.

We now return to the above photo and note, in passing if you will, the banner that adorns the sculpture and the way in which the number (7 in this case), the embodiment of the statistic, is superimposed on the cross, the symbol in this context of pain and loss, death and grief and perhaps the hope of resurrection and eternal life. Thus the number, the routine, the impersonal, is articulated with the deeply personal, the possibility of death or intense grief at the loss of loved ones. Through the sculpture and its banner, the prevention of accidents, here specifically road accidents, is turned into a project that is simultaneously personal and political. Statistics, the science of the state (Hacking 1975), are of course part of the apparatus that was adopted by governments in Europe as the 'population' became the focus of their attention and the target of their improvements in the incipient stage of biopower, as described by Michel Foucault (Foucault 1991; see Barry, Osborne & Rose 1996; Gordon 1991; Inda 2005) amongst others. In that context the tragic death of a young mother and her two daughters is utterly unremarkable, routine. It is just one statistic amongst other such statistics. Accidental, these deaths clearly work against the government's efforts to maximise the strength of the population, one of the major aims of modern governmentality according to Foucault (1991; see Gordon 1991). As such their perceived effects would be the same in every population, heightened further in any small population. But the anxiety surrounding these deaths may also relate to an enduring sense of the vulnerability of the Icelandic nation. On at least two occasions, during Denmark's rule of the country, the population, or so the stories go (see Árnason & Simpson 2003), was down to the bare minimum necessary for survival, and it was not expected to recover.[11]

The anxiety felt during the autumn of 2002 has, in itself, nothing specifically to do with the fact that these deaths were caused by a traffic accident. Nevertheless, what we want to suggest here is that road safety

11 Significantly, at the height of the well-publicised controversy surrounding the Icelandic genome project, DeCode, opponents warned against the potential consequences for the future of the nation in handing over information on its genetics to a private international company. There were even warnings from the President of Iceland that the life of the nation was perhaps being handed over to trolls (see Pálsson & Harðardóttir 2002; Árnason & Simpson 2003). It would appear that the survival of the nation is still not considered guaranteed, that the fear of extinction can still be mobilised in political struggles.

and traffic accidents produce a particular kind of anxiety in Iceland. Not necessarily any greater anxiety than other forms of death, at least not accidental deaths, but still a special kind of anxiety, one that we can begin to capture by going back to the photograph of the sculpture above.

The violence of speed

The inscription, '7 látnir á árinu' means five dead this year. Of course it is a warning, the kind of warning you see on road signs in many countries and the kind of warning you see in different forms along all major roads in Iceland. But we find it difficult in this age of advertisements not to see this inscription simultaneously as a declaration of achievement: 'Seven dead and counting!' Explaining the efficacy of the sculpture and the banner, a Transport Authority spokesperson told us:

> I understand from a lot of people that they find this very effective. They're maybe driving up to their summer houses on a Friday evening and see a particular number and then when they come back on the Sunday maybe one, two or three have been added to this number. It hits people, makes them think. This is what I've heard.

The higher the number, it would seem, the more effective the sculpture is; the greater the addition, the greater the jolt it gives people; the more impact it is likely to have, the more it will strengthen the work of road safety. All of that is understandable, but we believe that the sculpture, the banner, and Icelandic road signs with their constant references to speed, life and eternity, attest to an acute ambivalence. As mentioned before the car is one of the most potent signs of modernity in Iceland; it is clearly understood as such locally. Its arrival, albeit gradually, made travel at speed available to humans. The motor vehicle became an invaluable aid to the economic development that nationalism in Iceland portrayed – and still portrays – as necessary for national survival, its increasing speed accelerating development in the process. People in Iceland took to speed with relish and being able to drive between different towns in the shortest time has been a matter of comparison and competition, perhaps particularly amongst younger drivers. Many people in Iceland say that no

one here drives at the legal speed, and that it has become something of a sport in its own right to judge the greatest speed at which you can travel without being caught by the police and their speed guns. Most highways in Iceland have an upper limit of 90 km an hour, but it seems to be a commonly-held opinion that you can get away with driving at 101 km an hour. Here speed, the rapid movement of people and goods, is explicitly linked with a thriving and growing economy.

At the same time, speed has become a metaphor through which people talk about and comprehend Icelandic society. People frequently complain that everything is so fast in Iceland; that things and people are constantly moving at great speed. *Allt á fullu* is the commonly heard phrase. Sometimes people see and represent this positively: there are so many things happening in Iceland, they say, there is so much energy there fuelling the economic growth in the country. When Icelandic entrepreneurs appeared to be well on their way to taking over most businesses in the UK and Denmark, if not the whole world, in the years leading up to the collapse in 2008, they were celebrated in some local discourses for the speed with which they made and implemented their decisions. They were, it was said, fast and decisive. At other times people complain of a sense of bewilderment, a feeling of lack of control, stress, and anxiety brought about by everything moving at such speed. In these discourses, speed is frequently constructed as the enemy of the family and of children specifically, children who on special occasions are often referred to as 'the future of the nation'.

The construction and improvement of roads to facilitate speedier travel became and remains an important project in Iceland, as mentioned previously. In 1974 the nation marked the 1100th anniversary of the island's settlement by, amongst other things, finishing the ring road around the island. At that time almost all roads in Iceland were gravel tracks cutting through the land. Now, all important roads are asphalt highways built up on the land. The gravel roads were, and still are seen as both slow and dangerous, the loose gravel (*lausamöl*) surface often causing cars to spin out of control. Drivers in Iceland spoke of wrestling with the highway (*glíma við þjóðveginn*), as a popular song went, echoing the notion of struggling (successfully) for survival in a harsh environment that is so im-

portant to national identity (see Brydon 1996; Lerner 2013; Vasey 1996). *Möl*, gravel, has also served as a reference to urban areas in Iceland. Living on the *möl*, or growing up on the *möl*, is used to refer to those growing up or living in Rekjavík and other towns, as opposed to those living on or growing up on a farmstead. In this context *möl* has frequently, but of course not always, carried connotations of moral and spiritual degradation and poverty, which is seen as caused by a lack of contact with the centre around which Icelandic identity is built, the independent farmer and his (the gender is deliberate) farmstead (Hastrup 1990). The moral poverty that has been attached to the notion of *möl* is furthermore linked to the way towns and urban settlements in Iceland tend to be seen as more closely linked to things outside the country than to the farmstead. There is ambivalence here too. With the rise of tourism in Iceland, an increasing number of those who die on the roads are foreign tourists. Locally people speak of these tourists as struggling with the particularities of roads in Iceland, the gravel roads in particular, which in this context become particularly and acutely Icelandic, something Icelanders know how to negotiate whereas foreigners do not.[12]

Modernity, with its speed and its acceleration, may open up a road that can lead to destruction, just as it can, at least in Iceland, offer hope of redemption following dark ages of struggle for survival. But slowness can be dangerous too. In Iceland, busy holiday weekends are enjoyed while listening to frequent radio reports from the Transport Authority. These not only describe road conditions, traffic jams, road works and suchlike; they also include advice and exhortations on how to drive safely and responsibly. The traffic jams that occur because some motorists drive too slowly are seen as particularly bad, as they lead to overtaking, which is seen as extremely hazardous on roads that are almost all single carriageway. When lorry drivers in Iceland slowed down traffic in order to demonstrate against rising taxes on fuel during one particularly busy weekend, a spokesperson for the Transport Authority expressed fear that the frustration regular drivers would be feeling might lead them to speed up once they were out of the area where the demonstration was taking

12 We might add that *lausamöl* has claimed several lives in traffic in Iceland, most of the victims being foreign tourists.

place. Similarly, political voices warn that the country has to keep up with the speed of change in the outside world or risk being left behind, to *daga uppi* (petrify) like the trolls who are surprised by the dawn. Speed is thus both necessary and good and at the same time dangerous. To be slow is to be like a troll, but resistance to roads and speed comes from a different quarter.

Of hidden people and their resistances

There are also human-like beings, other than trolls, that gather around roads in Iceland. A number of ghost stories in the country speak of hitchhiking passengers in cars who suddenly vanish. A number of other similar stories exist in which the theme is ghostly presences on routes of travel. In this, the stories are a continuation of older Icelandic folktales at the same time as they echo the widespread stories of the 'vanishing hitchhiker' that Brunvand (1981) documented. Together these stories speak of the dangers of the road, the losses suffered there, and indeed further dangers resulting from those losses. This is not an unusual theme. Anthropological work emphasises the danger that roads both present and symbolise for many people. One association that much of this work makes is between roads, modernity and the dangerous encroachment of an outside world. For example, Mark Auslander (1993: 170), has written on modern Ngoni witch hunts as a response to encroaching modernisation, and notes:

> Senior men claimed that economically independent market women were bringing AIDS into the village from 'roads' originating in South African gold mines and rural slums. Women, in turn – in ritual and oratory – decried men who travelled 'aimlessly' on the region's roadways. Female dominated *vivanda* clubs of affliction sought to restore biological and agricultural fertility by fabricating complex spiritual provinces in which all traces of motor vehicles and roadways were excluded.

While the dangerous road may thus be a topos associated quite widely with engagements with modernity, there is, we believe, something specifically Icelandic here, and it is worth stressing, as it relates to the place

of the land in the national identity. Hastrup (1998: 116) has noted that the 'Icelandic landscape is spoken of in terms of what happened during … the age of settlements, or the First Times, in a way that is not totally unlike the way the indigenous Australian landscape is referred to as the Dreaming.' The "'song-line' created by the ancestral past and transmitted in words", she adds, is important. Many place names in Iceland, for example, have their origin in, refer to and are explained by events in the Sagas. Other place names are drawn from the folk stories of trolls and 'hidden people', which we will come back to in a moment. Many rocks house hidden people, other rocks are petrified trolls, as their names attest.

Given the importance of the 'First Times' in the construction of the Icelandic landscape, and the importance of landscape in Icelandic identity, there is, perhaps not surprisingly, a certain tendency in the symbolic appropriation of Iceland to deny, or at least underplay the disorderly impact of humans on the land. In Icelandic iconography, humans in the landscape are often only acknowledged as minor figures whose existence and photographic presence serve merely to underline the majesty and permanence of nature. Furthermore, while Iceland, in indigenous geological discourses, both lay and professional, is portrayed as a young and energetic country, it is simultaneously described in ways that carry connotations of a primordial place. With its geological activity, Iceland is thus portrayed as representing the time when the earth was coming into existence, long before humans, let alone culture or society, had appeared. The effect, often enough, is that of a place outside of time.

The point we have been driving at is this: in contemporary Icelandic iconography and discourses, the land is made to mirror either the golden past or the bright future of Iceland's history. It is supposed to reflect the energy of a young country, or the timelessness of the primordial. The in-between time is wiped out. Related to this we can note that ruins as a "sign of loss, of absence", so beloved of the English, as Nicholas Dirks (1998: 8) reminds us, have not, at least not until very recently, had a positive place in Iceland. While there are currently signs of the emergence of a certain ruin-fetish in this country, the previous disinterest in ruins is in some ways curious, given the importance of loss in the national his-

torical narrative in Iceland, as we have suggested. The story of ruins in Iceland is markedly different from that of ruins in Scotland, even though both share a national historical narrative of loss and subjection (see Basu 2012). In Iceland, it would seem, at least until very recently, a ruin has only spoken of the deprivations and humiliations suffered during foreign rule and the dark ages of cultural stagnation and economic deprivation. The houses that the majority of people in Iceland lived in until the early part of the twentieth century, and sometimes into the 1970s, were turf huts. These have almost all been razed to the ground now. Those that have not been destroyed, have been renovated and turned into museums (Hafsteinsson & Jóhannesdóttir 2015).

What is the place of roads in this scheme of things? Driving off-road and leaving marks of one's travel on the land is seriously frowned upon in Iceland. Indeed, it is an offense that people are occasionally prosecuted and punished for. It is an act which, even if it escapes legal prosecution, is morally censured. In contrast, the road, a well-built road, is in most ways an example of the orderly impact on the land that bespeaks progress. Still, not everyone is that enamoured of roads. Amongst the different kinds of human-like beings that populate Iceland are the hidden people (*huldufólk*, also referred to as *álfar*), who have made their homes in large rocks and hills around the country – many of whom are in consequence called *huldu*-something or *álfa*-something, as mentioned previously. While Hastrup, one of the key ethnographic authorities on Iceland, is ambiguous about their current status, and indeed refers to them as 'metaphorical humans', the ethnologist Valdimar Tr. Hafstein (2001) reminds us that for many people in Iceland, hidden people are still very real and still very much around.

Now road construction is in principle, if not always in practice, a modernist, rationalist pursuit. It is deemed important for the sake of both expediency and safety that roads should be as straight as possible. Extensive traffic disruption happens most summers in Iceland as significant sections of the main road are 'straightened' as this work is called. But if roads are supposed to be straight and wide, then they, on occasion, inevitably encroach on the homes of *huldufólk*, located in a rock or a hill. What sometimes happens then is interesting, but in order to prolong the

suspense, let us first say that there is a tradition in Iceland that places that are understood as belonging to hidden people are left untouched: hay is not cut there, fishing is not done there, nothing is moved. Many folk stories relate how important it is to follow this rule, and of the dire consequences visited upon those who fail to do so. In being left untouched, the places thought to belong to the hidden people represent, according to Hafstein (2001: 200), untamed, untransformed nature within the cultivated fields of culture or society. Hafstein notes that every year hidden people make the news in Iceland in connection with building projects that take place near their homes. Projects run into trouble, machinery breaks down mysteriously, or workers suffer injury (Hafstein 2001: 200) in cases that some might refer to as elfish terrorism. The result is sometimes roads being delayed and rerouted, often around the "homes" they threatened, and many an otherwise relatively straight road in Iceland has been constructed to both narrow and swerve around a rock known to be the home of hidden people.

Hafstein (2001: 204) points out that disturbances caused by hidden people – disturbances from out of the mist, as one Icelandic authority called them, although it is not clear whether this is the same mist beyond which the dead are sometimes said to travel – tend to happen where urban areas are being expanded, and in particular where roads are being laid. This is significant, he adds, as roads and the traffic system are a key symbol and indeed an embodiment of modernity. Traffic is a precondition of modernity; traffic systems are a necessary precondition for modernisation, as Virilio (1986) notes. Road networks spell the reorganisation of space and time. Their effect is fundamental, monumental. The hidden people, Hafstein (2001: 205) continues, appear as the guardians of "the traditional Icelandic farmers' society" — the language, the culture, the Saga(s) that all revolve around the independent farmer and together constitute the major symbol of Icelandic national identity according to Hastrup (1990; 1998). The hidden people, we might say, lead a resistance movement against the encroachment of modernity. They draw attention to the possible losses that accompany the speed of modernity. Hidden people

have emerged as the guardians of tradition and resistance to modernity.[13] However, our analysis suggests that the place of the hidden people in the Icelandic conceptual framework has shifted. Previously they represented untamed nature as opposed to the farm and tilled farmland. Now, however, they represent the cultured, cultivated and traditional agricultural society of Iceland, as opposed to untamed and foreign modernity with its motors, roads and speed. And that shift attests the importance of speed, acceleration, roads, and in particular deaths on the road, as technologies of patriotism, at the same time as the link between state and 'nation' is being undermined in an era of neoliberalism.

Conclusion

Iceland's struggle for independence was, as mentioned before, justified partly with reference to the uniqueness of Icelandic culture, history and language: a uniqueness that is seen as secured by the Sagas as accounts of the genesis of the nation. At the same time, real independence was seen to imply economic and political independence, which could only be guaranteed through economic progress, a somewhat more pragmatic nationalism. There is a potential contradiction here (see Björnsdóttir 1989): progress, as many see it, can only be achieved through participation in international economic processes. Such participation inevitably involves opening up the country, something which in turn is likely to be seen as threatening the uniqueness and the stability of the culture, and thus undermining identity. This leads to the question: why secure economic independence only to lose the uniqueness that justifies independence in the first place? This contradiction is not simply logical or conceptual, and neither is it uniquely Icelandic (see Ivy 1998). During the early part of the twentieth century, the Icelandic Progressive Party, essentially a farmers' party, considered its role to be that of protecting the interests of rural areas and their access to 'world civilisation' by establishing telephone connections, through roadbuilding and radio broadcasting, as

13 The latest example of their role as guardians, emerged in Bolungarvík in 2011 in relation to a road tunnel that has now been completed. (See '*Álfadeila í Bolungarvík – bæjarstjórinn kemur af fjöllum*' 2011).

Ólafur Ásgeirsson (1988: 114) has described. The party acknowledged that isolation, weather conditions and the difficulties of travel disadvantaged Icelandic farmers significantly. But "through their efforts to connect rural areas to "culture" the Party undermined the values of farming life and made the farmers, in turn, more dependent on the global market than before" (Ásgeirsson 1988: 114). And this contradiction is not simply an issue of the past. The links between culture and political independence, and the possible undermining of them through global market and technological processes, have been discussed in the work of influential philosopher and former rector of the University of Iceland, Páll Skúlason (1994). And if we accept that Virilio (1986) is right in pinpointing acceleration as integral to modernisation; that the wealth of societies is founded on their dromocratic condition; that the faster societies accelerate their citizens, commercial goods and communication, the more political and economic power they have, then that serves only to sharpen the contradiction even more.

Now, the potential contradiction we have spoken of was, we believe, managed to some extent by the central role that the state, the *nation*-state, had played in Iceland since independence. For most of the twentieth century, Iceland was characterised by a political rhetoric "in which the nation form trumps all other images of collective sociality and power" as Berlant (1998: 174) puts it with reference to the United States. But since "the only thing the nation form is able to assure for itself is its past, its archives of official memory, it must develop in the present ways of establishing its dominion over the future" (Berlant 1998: 174) Amongst other things, the state colonises space and time, and as such exerts some influence on speed and acceleration. It builds roads and directs traffic, sets speed limits and funds campaigns on road safety. Moreover, the apparatus of the state in Iceland has created and supported memorials and rituals celebrating the 'nation' and its 'culture'; for the sake of national interest and economic development, it has been heavily involved in economic activity. Through the collection of statistics (Hacking 1975 & 1991), the state has kept accounts for the nation, recording its accidents amongst other things, "and through welfare provisions, with their interference into reproductive heterosexuality and the family, it has sought to

ensure the future of the nation" (Árnason, Hafsteinsson & Grétarsdóttir 2004: 331).

This was the situation until 1991. Then political life in Iceland became increasingly influenced and shaped by the neoliberal ideologies of the new right and their project of minimising the influence of the state. Many of the enterprises formerly under the ownership of the state or the nation were privatised, as stated in previous chapters. Linked to these developments is the way in which political rhetoric in Iceland, at the same time, spoke increasingly of the free individual and his enterprise, rather than the state or the collective effort of the nation as the instigator of future development in the country. The state's purpose was no longer portrayed as that of steering the development of the nation. Rather, its role was now seen as "putting in place the general legal framework within which free individuals can compete in pursuing their own legitimate interests" (Árnason, Hafsteinsson & Grétarsdóttir 2004: 330–31).

But what happens when limits of this kind are placed on the state? How then can the anxiety over culture and identity, heightened by speed and acceleration, be managed? In looking for answers to this question, we have followed Berlant when she suggests that hacking away at the hyphen between nation and state requires the development of new technologies of patriotism. Death, or loss, offers a particularly powerful tool in that effort, not least in a society where loss, the possibility of national extinction, is part of the national historical narrative. Those who perish in traffic accidents become the sacrifice made to speed. Indeed, in the summer of 2005, one national newspaper carried on its front page photographs of all the Icelanders who had died in car crashes that year under the heading: 'Heroes'. Together with the sculpture, such headlines can be seen as sites for the mediation of the contradictions that stem partly from Iceland's history and partly from its particular engagement with speed and acceleration, contradictions that are no longer kept at bay by the state. They are sites where people can engage in the work of mourning that is both private and political; the work of mourning that helps keep the 'nation' at the forefront of people's collective identification.

Chapter Seven

Death on the roads

In this book we have been concerned with the links between death and grief and their attendant processes and politics. Thus we have addressed how death is mobilised in political projects, the role it can be made to play in convincing people that they are particular kinds of beings with particular kinds of responsibilities who belong to particular kinds of collectives. Being interested in the neoliberal 'hacking way' at the hyphen between the nation and the state (Berlant 1998), we have discussed specifically how death is implicated in efforts to secure people's ongoing identification with the nation-form (Berlant 1998). Death, grief and memorials, we have tried to demonstrate, can become 'technologies of patriotism' (Berlant 1998), tools for securing people's identification with the nation as the state is withdrawn from its public role.

In the preceding chapter, we spoke of the importance of roads and speed in the Icelandic national project: the effort to build what was seen as an affluent and advanced society in the wake of independence during the first half of the twentieth century. We spoke of the ambivalence and the anxiety associated with roads and speed in Iceland, and how that anxiety crystallises around a particular concern with road deaths. This concern, we suggest, expresses a particular ambiguity about the national project in Iceland, which the memorialisation of road deaths, to some extent, seeks to keep at bay.

In this, the penultimate chapter of the book, we stay with death on the roads. We will approach the topic here through the sociological and the geographical literature on automobility as a way to centre questions of roads and governmental regimes. First, we hope to demonstrate further how grief and concerns over road deaths were mobilised to further the neoliberalisation of Icelandic politics, economy, and society more generally. This mobilisation came to a halt only because of the economic col-

lapse of Iceland in the autumn of 2008, *hrunið* (literally the collapse) as it is now more or less universally referred to in the country. This discussion then helps set the scene for the final chapter of this book, where we discuss the implication of death in the post-economic collapse, the post-neoliberal political context of Icelandic society. It is a context in which the issues of monitoring financial institutions and the state's responsibility to provide care take centre stage. Here, we will start with a discussion of automobility.

Automobility

Considerable scholarly attention has been paid to the phenomenon of automobility in recent years. Much of this attention is theoretical, rather than ethnographic and, understandably, dwells on the place of cars, roads and the movement that they afford in social development. Thus, automobility is commonly associated with modernity as "one of the principal socio-technical institutions through which modernity is organized" (Böhm et al. 2006: 3). The speed commonly associated with modernity (Virilio 1986) is not least attached to travel by car. Automobility, furthermore, is seen as implying a set of political institutions and practices that "seek to organize, accelerate and shape the spatial movements and impacts of automobiles" (Böhm et al. 2006: 3). Its ideological formation embodies "ideals of freedom, privacy, movement, progress and autonomy, motifs through which automobility is presented in popular and academic discourses alike, and through which its principal technical artefacts – roads, cars etc. – are legitimized" (Böhm et al. 2006: 3). It is seen to entail "a phenomenology, a set of ways of experiencing the world which serve both to legitimize its dominance and radically unsettle taken-for-granted boundaries separating human from machine, nature from artifice and so on" (Böhm et al. 2006: 3). At the heart of automobility lies the curious mixture of autonomy and mobility (Böhm et al. 2006: 4). Auto can refer "reflexively to the humanist self … On the other hand, "auto" refers to objects or machines that possess a capacity for movement, as expressed by automatic, automaton and especially automobile" (Urry 2006: 18). As John Urry (2006: 18), arguably the most important and

most prominent writer in this area, concludes: "This double resonance of "auto" is suggestive of how the car-driver is a "hybrid" assemblage, not simply of autonomous humans but simultaneously of machines, roads, buildings, signs and entire cultures of mobility".

Urry (2004 & 2006) argues that we should understand automobility as a "self-organizing non-linear system". There are six elements to this system according to Urry (2006: 17–18). To begin with, it is "the quintessential manufactured object produced by the leading industrial sectors". Secondly, it is "the major item of individual consumption after housing". Thirdly, it is "an extraordinarily powerful machinic complex" and, fourthly, the predominant global mode of "quasi-private" mobility. In fifth place, automobility is a key aspect of "the dominant culture that sustains major discourse of what constitutes the good life, what is necessary for an appropriate citizenship of mobility". Finally, automobility is "the single most important cause of environmental resource-use resulting from the range and scale of material, space and power used in the manufacture of cars, roads, and car-only environments" (Urry 2006: 17–18). As Stefan Böhm and colleagues add, automobility is patterned and structured in such a way as to make "the widespread use of automobiles both possible and in many instances necessary" (Böhm et al. 2006: 5).

As we discussed in the previous chapter, road building was, and indeed remains, a hugely important aspect of the national project in Iceland. Modernisation and progress in the country has been strongly associated with road building, and then later the improvement of roads. The ideological and cultural implications of automobility, which both Böhm and colleagues (2006) and Urry (2004 & 2006) speak of, are of enormous significance in Iceland. With no railways in the country, low population density and a relatively poor public transport system, we can say that "a range of social developments have operated to reinforce each other, making the widespread use of automobiles both possible and in many instances necessary" (Böhm et al. 2006: 5) in the country.

While powerful, and as it stands applicable to Iceland, the notion of the system of automobility has its limitations. As Böhm et al. note (2006: 5), speaking of a system "tends to underplay collective human agency in the production of automobility and to avoid the political questions about

the shaping of the automobility 'system'." That is, put more broadly, the idea of a system tends to suggest a self-sustaining order where individual parts work to maintain the system as a whole. The functionalist metaphor of the organism is rarely far away from the idea of a system, reinforcing the temptation of taking the system as such for granted. Hence, Böhm and colleagues seek to move away from the idea of system. In its place they want to speak of the regime of automobility. Here Böhm and colleagues follow Foucault in his emphasis on the "relation of regimes of truth, power and subjectivity" (2006: 6). Signalling truth as an important part of the equation draws attention to the production, circulation and consumption of knowledge of and around automobility. This might be knowledge of road use, road design and road-making, road safety and the efficacy of automobility itself. These arguments are, for example, frequently seen around proposals for road building and Böhm and colleagues argue that automobility's "regimes of truth operate to (re)produce the taken-for-granted character of car driving" (2006: 6). Cars are portrayed as efficient, convenient, cheap, stylish, modern or progressive, and democratic (2006: 7).

Speaking of power highlights the interests and capacities that need to be lined up to maintain and extend the reach of automobility and the ways in which automobility enhances the reach of power, for example, through rules and regulations regarding road use and appropriate driving practice. Relations of power are thus enacted through the government of automobility, which has "entailed a plethora of regulatory schemes, regulating speed of travel, the places of travel, direction of travel, where one can park, orders of priority of movement, all designed to regularize the forms of movements in cars" (Böhm et al. 2006: 7). Drivers are disciplined and encouraged to direct their attention to the operations of the car, the road and other cars around them, and away from other things, the landscape for example. They are expected to accept forms of surveillance promoted in the name of road safety. "Automobility, exemplifying freedom, has thus gone hand in hand with a deepening of state power" (Böhm et al. 2006: 7; see also Merriman 2006).

Finally, automobility entails a regime of subjectivity, expectations of a particular way of being, of a particular sense of self against which self

and others can then be measured and judged. Discourses of automobility are clearly and forcefully entangled with those of individualism as Urry (2004 & 2006) highlights in drawing attention to the multiple and ambiguous meanings of *auto* in automobility. In this automobility embodies, expresses and enhances particular politics. Liberalism, both in its classic formulation, and even more so in its present version of neoliberalism, formulates the subject as a self-motivating, a self-authoring entity, as a being naturally seeking autonomy from external control (see Rose 1992). The liberal and neoliberal subject is, or should be, "self-moving as opposed to the victim of external influence" (Böhm et al. 2006: 8). Hence automoblity may serve to normalise and naturalise a specific and politically inflected liberal or neoliberal subjectivity. As Böhm and colleagues (2006: 8) note, through the regime of automobility, a "chain of equivalence is constructed whereby to drive is to embody a modernist subjectivity … and to be in favour of such a subjectivity is to regard driving as unproblematically legitimate. Such a chain of equivalence creates at the same time a normalization of driving and car ownership – that car driving is what normal people do" (Böhm et al. 2006: 8). In passing and by way of example we might recall one of Margaret Thatcher's many profound declarations here: her statement to the effect that those who find themselves having reached the age of thirty and still travelling on the bus, can safely consider themselves a failure in life.

We follow Böhm (2006) and his colleagues in speaking of the regime of automobility rather than the system of automobility (Urry 2004 & 2006). We believe, with them, that the notion of a regime allows us to more easily ask questions about the politics of automobility, than does the notion of a system. And so in this chapter we will expand on our concerns from the previous chapter. We are particularly interested in investigating the uses of accidents in relation to automobility and the national project of Iceland. In the literature much is made of the human cost of automobility and the extent to which that cost is ignored. Here the case of Iceland stands out as an exception, but an exception that may only work to tighten the grip of the regime of automobility even further and to promote the particular politics that it tends to be associated with.

Roads, death, government, nation

While roads have of course long featured in the stories that anthropologists tell of their arrival in and departure from the field, only recently have they emerged as a topic of anthropological investigation in their own right. Here they are discussed as a particular material manifestation of modernity and of the reach of the state. Roads are furthermore seen to engender a particular kind of relationship with the environment through structured movement, a particular phenomenology sometimes construed as the opposite of journeying and wayfaring (see Harvey & Knox 2012; Argounova-Low 2012; Árnason et al. 2015).

Before going any further, we want to lay down two markers of how our interest in roads relates to but at the same time departs from most approaches in anthropology. First, we consider roads here as a space of death. That is to say, the aspect of roads that we are primarily interested in for our present purposes is the fact that from time to time deaths occur there. This warrants a further observation. Road deaths in Iceland are somewhat at odds with other deaths in the country, as indeed they may be in many other places. Road deaths tend to be sudden and violent. They leave bodies rather obviously and visibly mangled, the cause of death more apparent than in the many other forms death can take. They are more public than most deaths, the witnesses to them more likely to be there by accident than with most other deaths.

The above applies to road deaths more widely than in Iceland although the extent to which they are the dominant form of violent and public deaths is perhaps more pronounced in Iceland than elsewhere. Road deaths engender a great deal of public concern in Iceland, more so than in many other countries, it appears (see Böhm et al. 2006); they are widely reported in the media and are a subject of discussion between people in everyday life. And these deaths now always occasion investigations, as a consequence of which blame may be distributed and criminal proceedings instigated. These investigations, furthermore, are always aimed at the prevention of further accidents and the improvement of road safety.

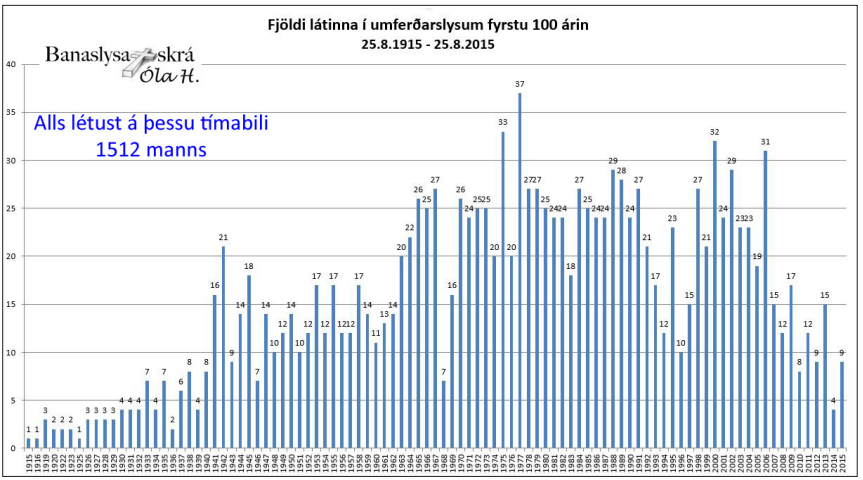


FIGURE 8. Statistics of deaths on the road in Iceland, 1915–2015.
Courtesy of Óli H. Þórðarson.

The second marker relates to our broader interest in the politics of death: in how death, here specifically road death, is mobilised to persuade people that they are particular kinds of beings, particular kinds of subjects, and that they belong to particular kinds of collectives, for example. In line with the work on automobility, our ideas here are obviously influenced by Foucault's thinking on government, so some further discussion of these ideas may be called for.

Foucault understood government as being a form of activity "aiming to shape, guide or affect the conduct of some person or persons" (Gordon 1991: 2–3). Government as activity "could concern the relation between self and self, private interpersonal relations involving some form of control or guidance, relations within social institutions and communities, and finally relations concerned with the exercise of political sovereignty. Foucault was crucially interested in the interconnections between these different forms and meanings of government". (Gordon 1991: 2–3). For Foucault then, government refers to

> the conduct of conduct – that is, to all those more or less calculated and systematic ways of thinking and acting that aim to shape, regulate, or manage the comportment of others … workers in a factory, inmates

> in a prison, wards in a mental hospital, the inhabitants of a territory, or the members of a population. Understood in this way, "government" designates not just the activities of the state and its institutions but more broadly any rational effort to influence or guide the conduct of human beings through acting upon their hopes, desires, circumstances, or environment. (Inda 2005: 1)

One of the key interests here for Foucault and those who follow him are "the diverse types of selves, persons, actors, agents, or identities that arise from and inform governmental activity." (Inda 2005: 10). "What forms of person, self and identity are presupposed by different practices of government and what sorts of transformation do these practices seek?" as Dean (1999: 32) asks. "How are certain individuals and populations made to identify with certain groups, to become virtuous and active citizens?" (Dean 1999: 32). Thus this aspect of Foucauldian analytics directs

> attention to how governmental practices and programs seek to cultivate particular types of individual and collective identity as well as forms of agency and subjectivity. It is to emphasize how government is intimately involved in making modern subjects … The importance of such subject-making is that through it – that is, through attaching individuals to particular identities, through getting them to experience themselves as specific kinds of beings with certain kinds of capacities and qualities – government is able to mould human conduct in such a way as to bring about individual and collective wellbeing. (Inda 2005: 10)

While drawing largely on Foucault's work on government, we are in addition influenced here by Benedict Anderson's (1991) seminal work on nationalism. The genius of Anderson's work lies in a very straightforward and deceptively simple question that he poses: how is it that people become convinced that they belong to a nation, or indeed any other collective, along with a great number of other people whom they will never meet and with whom they share few characteristics and possibly no other interests apart from their national affiliation. This question is of crucial importance in Icelandic ethnography as the nation remains by far the most important form of collective identification.

For us, the work of Foucault and Anderson in these areas comes together in the ideas put forward by Lauren Berlant (1998). Berlant (1998) is interested in the processes whereby the 'nation-form', as she refers to it, is kept at the heart of people's imaginings and their collective identifications despite neoliberal attempts to undermine the hyphen between nation and state, as we have discussed already in this book. Speaking of the United States, she points out that neoliberal politics have involved the withdrawal of the state from economic life and welfare provisions. This undermines the link between the nation and the state. At the same time, however, Berlant adds (1998) that it is important in neoliberal politics to keep the nation-form at the centre of people's collective identifications. The nation should trump other possible collective allegiances, such as ethnic identity, gender affiliation, or, even more importantly, class position. Berlant (1998) speaks of the importance of the processes of (possible) procreation to this end, drawing attention to the anxiety surrounding what are otherwise portrayed as private concerns in the United States, sex and sexuality.

We are looking at death with the same questions in mind here. How does death, specifically road death, work to keep the nation at the heart of Icelanders' collective identifications? We thus effectively carry on along the path cleared by Berlant, but with one addition. Berlant writes from a historical and political moment of neoliberal dominance of the political agenda. The same applied in Iceland until the collapse in 2008, but following the collapse, neoliberal ideas retreated from their former public dominance (even if more recently they once again appear to be in the ascendancy). This chapter is situated at a juncture in both time and space when Iceland's briefly celebrated economic boom, fuelled by neoliberal politics, reached its height and then collapsed, a collapse that has once again changed the question of the collectives people come to believe – and are encouraged to believe – that they belong to. The story we relate here initially points in the direction of the completion of the neoliberal political programme in Iceland, but which then signals its halt, if not its collapse.

Panic on the streets of Iceland

Road deaths have for a long time been a matter of great concern in Iceland, as they have been in many other countries.

FIGURE 9. Front page of the newspaper *DV* 2nd July 2005. The headline reads: "Casualties on main roads: Let us honour the memory of the thirteen that have died in traffic this year."

The front page from the newspaper above was, for example, published in 2005 when concern was clearly growing over the number of people perishing on Icelandic roads. Even so, this unease reached new heights in the summer of 2006 which was marked by something like panic over the number of people being killed on the roads in Iceland. That panic called

for reactions. And so, amongst other things, campaigns were started to end road fatalities, supported by the government-funded Transport Authority, insurance companies and citizens' groups promoting improved road safety (see Árnason 2010). One of the more striking examples of the reactions was the erection of 52 white wooden crosses along the relatively busy Suðurlandsvegur that connects the capital of Iceland, Reykjavík, to the agricultural and now tourist areas in the south of the country. The crosses are striking in and of themselves, but they are even more noteworthy for how they came about and the consequences they had, or at least the result they nearly had a hand in bringing about.

The initiative was private, coming not from the government, the local authorities, road safety agencies, insurance companies or the police. Rather, according to reports at the time, it originated with the greenhouse farmers Hannes Kristmundsson and his wife, Sigurbjörg Gísladóttir. In a newspaper interview given when the crosses were unveiled, Hannes Kristmundsson said:

> I have thought about this for a long time, how it could be highlighted just how many people are injured on this route. I'm always shocked

FIGURE 10. The wooden memorial crosses along Suðurlandsvegur.
Photo Tinna Grétarsdóttir.

> when I hear on the news that there has been an accident there. You see, each accident affects so many people. We received a lot of support from various directions when we floated the idea.

We do not wish to examine the couple's motivation beyond what they themselves have made public. We take the view that the impact and the significance of the crosses is associated with their reception in society, rather than any meaning that might have been attached to the campaign initially by the couple themselves. In that spirit, we might stop here momentarily in order to flag a few points. First, while it is clear that the initiative started with the couple, Hannes Kristmundsson and Sigurbjörg Gísladóttir, it came about in a context of widespread concern about road safety. Irrespective of where and how the initiative originated, we are interested in its potential impact and how it might work. So we note here, secondly, how news of an accident is said to induce shock, and how accidents are understood to affect many other people. We emphasise how the accidents and the fact that each one affects so many, are cited together as motivation; as something that moves people to action. They moved the couple to take action, but these accidents as such were not enough to motivate others to take similar action. For that, an additional reminder, the crosses themselves, is needed.

Each of the 52 crosses represents a life lost on the road, the news reports tell us. One report adds that: "Over the last 16 years there have been 2576 accidents on this road, with 1222 people injured." In his interview Hannes explained that according to the plan, the crosses would only be temporary; that one permanent memorial would replace the crosses once the road was finished. Is the road not finished, someone might ask mischievously? No wonder there are accidents there. The answer rests on what is meant by a road being finished. Again Hannes explained that

> I want to see this turned into a dual carriageway with proper lighting. Sjóvá has suggested ways in which that might happen. It is our hope that the crosses will stir our politicians and the public in general to think about this issue. A lot is to be gained by the prevention of accidents.

The road will be finished when it is a dual carriageway and properly lighted, presumably like urban streets tend to be. By this, the responsibility for the 2576, or whatever the current figure is, accidents over the years is firmly placed on the road and, by extension those responsible for building and maintaining the road: those who should make sure that it is 'finished'. This is of course where political leaders, the guardians of the public purse, enter the picture as the most important audience. Responsibility is, in this way, and in one fell swoop, moved away from drivers, even those that may have paid scant attention to the conditions under which they were driving or the rules of highway travel. Responsibility is also lifted from car makers who make cars capable of driving much faster than most humans can cope with. The effect the crosses have in distributing, or redistributing responsibility is of course hugely significant and intensely political. These are points that we will come back to. But here too, we want to note here how the crosses and their intended effects work to reinforce the regime of automobility. as Böhm and colleagues (2007) note. The response to the negative effects of automobility is to further enhance one of its key features.

We want to finish this part of the chapter by briefly explaining why Sjóvá has suggestions for improving the road. Sjóvá is an insurance company. As such it obviously has a major interest in reducing the number, or at least the cost of traffic accidents, although perhaps not people's perception of the threat they pose. Sjóvá will assume centre stage in our tale a little later, but for now we want to note the following: *Sjóvá* means danger at sea. While ship insurance may have been the original purpose of this enterprise, by the time our story takes place, it had for a long time been operating as a general insurance company. The relevance of the company's origin is that in Iceland, a country with no military forces, fishermen lost at sea have sometimes taken the place, in modern Icelandic mythology, which fallen soldiers occupy in the collective memory of other nations. Their bravery in fishing under treacherous weather conditions on icy and violent seas was instrumental in securing the economic progress of Iceland, a contribution alluded to by New Dawn as we mentioned earlier in this book. The contribution that fishermen made and continue to make is celebrated in many towns and villages in the coun-

try in an annual 'Day of the fisherman'. A significant feature of these celebrations is the reminder of the all too frequent sacrifices that fishermen make through the memorialisation of those lost at sea. But in recent years, as mentioned above, people who die in traffic accidents have, at times, apparently usurped the place of Icelandic sailors: they have become the heroic sacrifices to the speed of movement that is the requirement for further economic growth and prosperity.

We return now briefly to the main reports of the unveiling of the crosses. The reports emphasised the number of different people present at the ceremony and the way they worked together, their promises of cooperation. Amongst those present were, according to the reports: "school children from a neighbouring village, local councillors, members of parliament, mayors, the minister for agriculture, the mayor of Reykjavík." The minister is reported as saying that the issue will be discussed in the cabinet. The mayor of Reykjavík declared his support for road improvements, because the road was important for the capital. In the weeks and months that followed, the transformation of Suðurlandsvegur was a frequent and important topic in public debate in Iceland. At this time, the economy in Iceland was by all accounts booming, and most people apparently believed it was destined to do so for the foreseeable future. Icelandic businessmen, celebrated for the speed and decisiveness of their actions, a trait attributed to their Viking forbears, were buying up high streets in both London and Copenhagen, or so it seemed. The government in power in Iceland was proud of its neoliberal credentials, particularly its fiscal prudence, the government's favourable financial position having been achieved to a large extent by privatising state assets like the banks that would eventually go bust. In 2007, and increasingly in 2008 as plans for road improvements were being made, there were murmurs, rumours, that the economy was overheating, that inflation, the bogeyman of economic management in Iceland for decades, was said to be on the rise again. A lot of money had been spent building a large hydroelectric power plant to provide energy for an aluminium smelter in the east of the country. The government was determined not to overspend, not to overheat the economy. At the same time, other areas of Iceland, those perhaps not so densely populated, were crying out for road improve-

ments, often in the form of extremely costly tunnels. In these areas, questions of road safety soon bled into concerns about rural development and the viability of remote settlements.

Even so, we learned a little later that plans were afoot to turn Suðurlandsvegur into a dual carriageway, or at least a so called 2+1, meaning two lanes in one direction, one in the other. News reports told us that enormous pressure was being applied to ensure that a dual carriageway was built. That very weekend, we were told in the same report, two people had died in an accident as two cars coming from opposite directions collided while one was overtaking. We have here then an example of a powerful mobilisation of death and grief, a mobilisation of the fear of accidents: a mobilisation that drew together private agony and public policy implementation. There were also additional angles: and that brings us to Sjóvá as promised, after something of a detour.

Walking against traffic accidents

"Summer is the season that those of us who work in hospitals, the police and clergymen, dread the most. Accidents happen all year round, but the summer is a particularly difficult time for us. We want to make ourselves heard in this way", said Soffía Eiríksdóttir, a nurse at the National Hospital of Iceland (*Landspítalinn*) in a newspaper interview in early May 2007. She was being interviewed as the prime motor behind a march against traffic accidents that the nurses at the hospital had organised. "We can't talk about individual accidents, but during the walk, a number of professions whose work is affected by traffic accidents will come together to show unity and remember the victims of traffic accidents, both those who survived and those who died," Soffía added. "Every accident impacts not only those who were actually in the car", she goes on to say, "the impact is multiple, and many people are affected by traffic accidents." Welcoming everyone to join the walk and participate, Soffía said: "Mjólkursamsalan (Iceland Dairies) will provide ice cream and Sjóvá water and energy bars for everyone."

What we have here then is another example of an initially private initiative to combat the curse of traffic accidents in which private companies

later become involved, in this instance the insurance company Sjóvá. In 2008, the second year the march was held, it concluded with a speech by the minister for health, thus drawing politicians as well into the mix of interested, engaged parties. As in the story of the crosses, it is the impact, the effect of traffic accidents – the large number of people each accident touches – that is seen as moving people to action. We draw attention to the way the walk is supposed to be an opportunity to simultaneously demonstrate solidarity with those whose work brings them into contact with the consequences of road accidents and to remember the victims of these accidents. The Icelandic flag was visible at this event, as it often is at funerals, flying at half-mast until the ceremony is concluded, and then being raised in celebration of the deceased's arrival in heaven. The discourse around and during the walk also made reference to *landsmenn*, the people of the land, thus evoking the presence of the nation, þjóðin, at the proceedings.

Some 5000 people participated in the walk the first year, news reports tell us, and people gathered again in the spring of 2008 to march against traffic accidents. Again the timing of the walk was strategic, placed as it was just before the first busy travel weekend of the summer on the roads in Iceland. One of the spokespersons for the walk, the nurse Bríet Birgisdóttir, explained in a newspaper interview that the march was intended as an expression of sympathy for the victims of accidents and their families, and a wakeup call (*vekja til umhugsunar* is the Icelandic used) to the general public to make people think about traffic accidents and their serious and extensive consequences. She added that these accidents have serious effects on health workers and others who witness the accidents. "We can't discuss individual accidents of course, we are bound by confidentiality, but many of us find it very hard, having seen terrible accidents and looked after the people caught up in them, not to be able to talk about our experiences. The walk is a way for us to come together and feel our togetherness in this."

In the same news report, the funeral director Rúnar Geirmundsson explained the serious impact traffic accidents have on those who work in his area. "Many of those who perish in traffic accidents are young people, and when that happens we become very close to the family," he

FIGURE 11. Nurses at the University Hospital in Reykjavík initiated 'A walk against accidents', 26th June 2007. *Courtesy of Soffía Eiríksdóttir.*

explains. "That has considerable effect on us," he added. "This plays on our minds" (*við tökum þetta inn á okkur* [we let this inside us] is the Icelandic phrase he uses) because it is quite different to bury a young person as opposed to someone from the old people's home who has died tired of life (*saddur lífdaga* [having had their fill of life], is the Icelandic here, a phrase frequently used in the Icelandic translation of the Old Testament). "We have to prepare bodies that have been horribly mangled, been thrown out of the car, the car then landing on top of them. It has a huge impact on us to do this year after year and then have to witness the families' grief. I dread every weekend in the summer, in particular if I hear a helicopter or an ambulance," Rúnar said at the end.

According to the accounts of the walk in 2008, the aims of this demonstration were extended further. Not only was it to be an expression of unity and sympathy for those who work with traffic accidents and an occasion to remember the victims of these accidents, the aim was also to encourage people to think about the consequences of traffic accidents. Now the explicit aim was also road safety. Crucially, that aim is interwo-

ven with the original objectives of expressing unity amongst those who work with traffic accidents, sympathy towards those affected by them and the memorialising of those lost in road fatalities. But now, road safety will not be improved through road construction; that is no longer the demand here. Rather, the responsibility is firmly placed on the people who travel; ordinary drivers, and perhaps their passengers. If they keep the impact – the effect and consequences of traffic accidents – firmly in mind, then maybe road safety can be improved and the number of accidents reduced. Now it is the impact that the accidents have on their victims and on those who have to attend to them that is mobilised as an exhortation for drivers to slow down and drive more carefully. This is quite clearly a different way of distributing the responsibility for road deaths and their consequences than that embodied in the campaign around the crosses discussed earlier. Even so, this distribution does not entail any greater questioning of the regime of automobility itself. Rather, we could argue, placing the responsibility with drivers and linking their responsibility to the effect their actions may have on the emotional well-being of individuals, draws attention even further away from the regime itself: the economic and social pressures which mean that people often have very little choice but to travel on roads in cars at considerable speed. And it was of course speed that was the hallmark of the new Icelandic entrepreneurs, including those who ran Sjóvá, as we will come back to.

Bríet Birgisdóttir explains that the route the march was supposed to take in 2008 is 'symbolic'. "We will start by the National Hospital and walk from there towards the Emergency Centre in Skógarhlíð where ambulance drivers and firemen will form a guard of honour. They will have fifteen black balloons to remember the fifteen people who died on the roads in Iceland in 2007. Nurses will carry 166 red balloons symbolic of the serious road accidents in Iceland last year. We will walk from the Emergency Centre past the graveyard in Fossvogur and stop at the helicopter pad by the hospital in Fossvogur. There the balloons will be released."

Again we draw attention to the mingling here of private and public initiative, political concern and private enterprise. We draw attention, too, to the mixture of expressions of sympathy and unity, of memorialisa-

tion and road safety campaigning. Here, questioning road safety, given the way the walk is organised, would be tantamount to questioning the remembrance of those who have perished on the roads. We note again how the impact of accidents is constructed as moving people to action.

Sjóvá: the privatisation of roads

Towards the end of 2007/beginning of 2008, around the time the crosses were unveiled and pressure was mounting to improve the Suðurlandsvegur road, the idea was aired that private enterprise might perhaps undertake the road improvement work. This suggestion was encouraged by the insurance company Sjóvá and its managing director, Þór Sigfússon. Others were happy to contribute. A campaign of sorts was launched at a public meeting in the village of Selfoss, which would be connected to Reykjavík by a dual carriageway. We were there, and so was, somewhat more importantly, the finance minister, a member of the right-wing Independence Party, which had instigated the neoliberal reforms in Iceland. The managing director of Sjóvá is a known party supporter, and his company has also had a long association with the party. The minister explained the virtues of private funding for road building, how it would help keep inflation down, as public funds would not be spent on the project.

No objections were raised to this idea at the meeting. It was clear that those present thought the road system was in desperate need of upgrading, and that privatisation was the way forward. Questions were raised regarding the ownership of the road. The managing director of Sjóvá explained that the road would be owned by the company, at least for thirty years. The company would recoup its investment, either through road tolls, or more likely so-called 'shadow pricing' whereby the government would pay a specific amount for each car that used the road. All of this provoked very limited discussion. What struck us was the way and the extent to which the discussion was geared towards road safety and the necessary improvements promised by this endeavour. A specialist in road safety, who was amongst the presenters at the meeting, explained that the focus in road safety was no longer primarily the driver, but rather the car

and the road itself. This contrasted considerably with what road-accident analysts in Iceland were emphasising at the time: the role of speed in a number of fatal crashes that summer. It is of course tempting to read this as a subliminal comment on the speed of the Icelandic economy at the time. That temptation grows even stronger when you note that since the economic collapse in the autumn of 2008, warnings against not using seat belts, on the one hand, and intoxication on the other, have become more prominent, particularly when the causes of serious crashes are discussed in public. Even so, it is more important to note the financial implications, the interests involved in linking road safety to road improvements rather than the driver's responsibility for accidents: a reassignment that the crosses certainly aided. If the main responsibility for traffic accidents lies with the driver, then the solution probably does not lie in significant road improvements and the huge investment of public funds that entails, but rather in educating drivers, something that needs public funding perhaps, but nowhere near as much as road construction. But here the deficiencies in the road are the issue that is highlighted, and interestingly enough, by those who in so many other contexts have stressed the importance of individual responsibility.

The economic collapse in Iceland has been accompanied by determined attempts at reform. Past actions have been scrutinised and shady dealings unearthed and made public. A newspaper in Iceland, *DV*, revealed email conversations between some of the bigger players in Sjóvá early on in 2006, before any crosses had been erected or public panic had intensified to the degree it did later. Þór Sigfússon, then managing director of the company, talked about it being 'good business' if the company were to take a role in improvements to Suðurlandsvegur so that it would own the road and be able to charge the so-called shadow fees. In the email, this is described as both good public relations for the company – ostensibly taking the lead on road safety measures – and it was of course also potentially extremely lucrative. This was confirmation, if such were needed, that death and grief were being mobilised to further corporate gain. That is no surprise and no great mystery either; there was no tangled web of meanings to be unravelled. Corporate greed and measures taken to satisfy it are pretty old hat. But the mystery here is how

people allowed themselves to be mobilised in this way. The answer, we believe, has something to do with Iceland, something to do with roads, something to do with death, and something to do with deaths on roads. We will say a few words about each in turn.

During the economic boom in Iceland it was part of the dominant public discourse to suggest that Icelandic entrepreneurs were infallible. Their praise was sung loudly by the president of the country, amongst others. They were portrayed as embodying in contemporary form the qualities that the Vikings who allegedly settled Iceland had possessed, and which had made it possible for them to prosper in such a harsh environment. The entrepreneurs were portrayed as the source of progress in Iceland, taking over the role that the state had previously had. Furthermore they were seen as bringing progress through essentially national qualities.

Second, the proposal was persuasive to people because of the role that death, in particular road deaths, had assumed as a technology of patriotism, as we have discussed above. This was particularly important at a time when the unbreakable connection that had been assumed to exist between the nation and the state was being swept away. Third, roads have, since the beginning of the twentieth century, been seen as the embodiment of progress in Iceland – the progress made possible by political sovereignty. Further improvements, now made possible and necessary by further economic progress, were in turn portrayed as having been made possible by the neoliberal unleashing of the Icelandic Viking-cum-entrepreneurial spirit. Thus deaths on roads were particularly important as a technology of patriotism in this context.

Conclusion

We began this chapter by reviewing some of the literature on automobility. We took up the points made by Böhm and colleagues (2006), speaking of the regime rather than the system of automobility, with its emphasis on power, knowledge and subjectivity. We have sought to emphasise in particular the uses of Foucault's notion of government in understanding discourses around road safety in Iceland in the early twenty-first cen-

tury. Those uses are further enhanced by linking that idea with Berlant's (1998) work on the effect of neoliberalism on the hyphen between the nation and the state. The road Suðurlandsvegur in Iceland was not privatised, but really only because of the economic collapse in 2008. If the Icelandic economy had not collapsed until 2010, the road would very likely have been reconstructed by a private company, the concern over road deaths helping make private anguish a public, political issue. But the economic collapse undermined the neoliberal project in Iceland. The question of the responsibility of financial institutions and the government came to the fore. There were calls for a new Iceland. We conclude this book with a brief discussion of how death and grief were mobilised, both to demonstrate the moral bankruptcy of Iceland before the collapse, and in calls for the constitution of a new Iceland.

Chapter Eight

Death, crisis, suicide
Toward a conclusion

Death, surely, is an example of what anthropologist Michael Carrithers (2009) recently referred to as the vicissitudes of life. Individual deaths and mortality in general frequently demand a response, an attempt to account for what has happened and make sense of it. This is indeed the line taken in much academic writing – anthropological, sociological, and historical – on death. The argument is advanced most strikingly perhaps in the celebrated work of Zygmunt Bauman (1992) who claims that the attempt to make sense of mortality is the source of human culture. Our approach in this book has been somewhat different. Rather than seeing death and mortality as a threat to meaning, we have sought to trace the links between the state of death and grief in the contemporary Western world, in Iceland specifically, and certain permutations in 'governmental rationality' (Foucault 1991; Gordon 1991). In the preceding chapters we have aimed to describe a link between death and grief in contemporary Iceland and the rise of 'neo-liberal governmentality' (Shore & Wright 1999). In speaking here of neoliberal governmentality, we have referred in particular to the machinery by means of which modern citizens are enjoined to govern themselves (Rose 1989 & 1996; Cruikshank 1993 & 1994).

We have argued that death, grief and memorialisation, not least in relation to road deaths, have in contemporary Iceland been implicated in processes of 'subjectification'; the "processes and practices by means of which human beings come to relate to themselves and others as subjects of certain types" (Rose 1996: 25). We have argued that death, grief and memorialisation have emerged as areas in which the possibilities of certain particular subject positions, certain particular ways of relat-

ing to oneself and to others, have been made possible and visible. We have not defined the extent to which individuals have engaged with or, if you will, adopted these particular subjectivities. However, from 1991 to 2008, political life, economic policy, and society in Iceland were increasingly influenced and shaped by the ideologies of the new right and their attempts to curtail the influence and interference of the state while expanding the territory of the free market and the ferocity of its competition. This required in Iceland, as elsewhere, the production of enterprising subjects (Grétarsdóttir, 2010). We have argued that changes in the management and experience of death and grief in Iceland were implicated in this production. This has been, we argue, of great significance for the emergence of neoliberalism in Iceland.

However, being implicated in the making of enterprising subjects has not been the only way in which death and grief have been linked with neoliberalism in Iceland. As part of the neoliberal programme, state enterprises in Iceland were privatised, banks and bakeries, factories and fishing vessels systematically sold. This was accompanied by a marked change in political rhetoric in Iceland, which now rarely spoke of the state and the nation, but more often of the free individual and his enterprise as the source of economic, cultural and social progress. So during the neoliberal economic reforms of the last two decades, the state's purpose was no longer portrayed as that of guiding the development of the nation and its individuals. Development and progress were to be driven by enterprising individuals. The state's purpose was presented as that of simply putting in place the general legal framework within which free individuals could compete in pursuing their own legitimate interests. This, the political rhetoric insisted, was the path to future welfare and development.

One effect of this process was the undermining of the link between nation and state that Berlant (1998) speaks of. However, as Berlant pointed out for the United States, it has remained important in Iceland to keep the nation-form at the heart of people's collective identification. And because of this, the undermining of the link between the nation and the state has required the development of new technologies of patriotism to secure people's identification with the 'nation-form'. Death,

loss and grief, we have argued, are a particularly powerful tool in that effort, especially in a society where loss, the possibility of national extinction, is part of the national historical narrative (see Árnason, Hafsteinsson & Grétarsdóttir 2004). In the last two chapters, we have focused in particular on those who perish in traffic accidents, as their deaths have been specifically mobilised for the purpose of promoting national unity. These deaths have been construed as sacrifices to speed. In the summer of 2005, one national newspaper carried on its front page photographs of all those Icelanders who had died in car crashes that year under the headline 'Heroes'.

The collapse of the Icelandic economy in October 2008 interrupted, but did not end the regime of neoliberalism in the country. Although such claims were naturally debated, many suggested that neoliberalism and the greed it had legitimised were directly responsible for the collapse. People also pointed out the often very close links between businessmen, bureaucracy and politicians as a factor in these events. Others claimed that the economic collapse had in fact been preceded by a much more fundamental, much more troubling political, social and moral collapse. The attempt to precisely identify the causes of the collapse has in turn fed even more anguished endeavours to rearticulate and rebuild what have been seen as the moral foundations of Icelandic society and the legitimacy of its political order. This is evident, for example, in the protracted and intensely controversial efforts to rewrite the country's constitution, and in the debates that have taken place around the office of the president and the powers that should properly belong to it. In the effort to rearticulate the moral fabric of the country and reestablish the legitimacy of its politics, references have frequently been made to 'Old Iceland', the Iceland of the years leading up to the collapse. These are almost always accompanied with references to a 'New Iceland', an Iceland that is now, perhaps for most people, only the hope of a better society that would allow more of its members a better life. And for many people, 'New Iceland' is perhaps no longer even a hope. There has been frequent talk of a struggle, a battle, even a war when it comes to realising the New Iceland.

Death and grief have become key terms in this new rhetoric (Carrith-

ers 2009) of the reconstitution of a moral universe, the establishment of a new society. Death and grief feature here, on the one hand, as territory upon which to demonstrate the moral bankruptcy of the earlier regime, and on the other, as a way of articulating a more moral society. We would like to discuss here two examples of this new rhetoric in relation to death and grief.

In December 2009 an Icelandic newspaper carried the story of one Ólafur Jón, a truck driver who had taken his own life. His story, and other similar suicide stories, had been circulating amongst people in Iceland in the aftermath of the collapse, but Ólafur Jón's story made the headlines of one of Iceland's largest newspaper, and thus his fate in particular became the focus of public attention. Ólafur Jón was just over sixty years old when he died. He was a self-employed truck driver. Following the collapse in Iceland, he had fallen into debt with the finance company that had given him a loan to buy his newest truck. He had taken the loan in a foreign currency, as many people in Iceland had in the years before the collapse when the Icelandic *króna* was strong. With the collapse, the Icelandic currency collapsed as well, and the amount of Ólafur Jón's debt doubled or even tripled, more or less overnight. At the same time, construction work in Iceland came to a near standstill and Ólafur Jón found it impossible to get any work. The financial company gave notice of repossession of the truck, which seems to have been the last straw for Ólafur Jón.

Before taking his own life, Ólafur Jón left a note to his family in which he explained all this and wrote that he could not see any way out of the dreadful circumstances he was caught in, except suicide. The family made this story public. Interviewed in one of the national newspapers, the family said this tragedy need not have happened. They claimed that if the finance company that had lent Ólafur Jón the money for the truck had given him more leeway in the negotiations and shown him some sympathy, he would not have been driven to take his own life. This was of course quite an extraordinary claim to make in such a public forum, and one that provoked strong reaction. There was some debate in the blogosphere on whether it was right to publicise stories like this. Many people responded by stating that they wanted to hear these tragic sto-

ries, that they were an important reflection of what was happening to a large number of people in Iceland at the time, and that the stories should therefore not be silenced. Implicit, and sometimes explicit in these demands was the claim that Ólafur Jón's and other similar suicides could not be explained by reference to mental illnesses. It was claimed that Ólafur Jón's suicide was directly related to the lack of sympathy, concern, or care on behalf of the banks and other finance companies which were aggressively seeking to recover loans that they had only been too happy to provide before the collapse. Some of the blame was also levelled at the government of the country; it was faulted for inaction, for not doing anything to lift the burdens of those who had fallen into huge debt as a result of the collapse. One online commentator claimed that the banks and other financial institutions were clearly responsible, saying of the suicide victims, 'their blood is on your hands.' Thus, a fate which before the collapse would have been construed as a personal tragedy was now something that the banks and the government were deemed directly responsible for. Suicide had become a political act rather than simply an individual and private tragedy. In a way, suicide was seen as a sacrifice that highlighted the moral bankruptcy of high finance and the state, the collapse of society as a moral community.

Highlighting the lack of concern on the part of the banks and the government was not the only use that death and grief were put to in the aftermath of the collapse. They were also mobilised to articulate a new moral order, a new society, a new Iceland. A few weeks after the suicide discussed above, on 16th December 2009, a small fishing boat with two men on board, a father and his son-in-law, sank off East Iceland. The incident was immediately reported in the media, as accidents at sea usually are in Iceland. This time, however, the incident received an unusual amount of attention, particularly when two Church of Iceland ministers, a couple, used the story in a sermon and published a blog about the event. They told the story of the accident in great detail. The story ran something like this: The two men were trapped inside the boat after it had been overturned by a huge, towering wave. While inside the boat, with their heads just above water in the pitch dark, the men prayed together. The young man described to his father-in-law how he was look-

ing forward to spending the upcoming Christmas with his wife and their new-born son. The older man responded: 'Then go live!' and pushed his son-in-law under the water and through a snug hole inside the boat. The younger man eventually got out and was rescued. The older man was trapped and drowned.

The story, as told by the ministers, caught the immediate attention of the nation. The death of the older man was quickly characterised as altruistic and heroic. Towards the end of the year, there were claims that he deserved the title 'Man of the Year'. Commentators agreed that the man had been courageous in saving the young man's life, and the notion that he had sacrificed himself became paramount. Thus the ministers' blog framed the death of the older man very clearly as a sacrifice. This they then linked to the upcoming Christmas holiday specifically and Christian theology generally. They said: "If any family in Iceland knows and feels now, this Christmas, how valuable a sacrifice life is (*dýrmæt fórnargjöf*), it is the family of Magnússon. Life itself – its deepest essence is the gift of sacrifice (*Í dýpsta eðli sínu er lífið fórnargjöf*) … and the best way for us to live is to be thankful."

The discussion of this death, very explicitly framed as a sacrifice, was clearly intended as input in the debates and discussion in Icelandic society just over a year after the collapse. The selfless sacrifice of the father-in-law was set against the greed that was believed to have characterised Icelandic society in the years leading up to the collapse. What is more, the selfless act was implicitly contrasted with the uncaring attitude of those who were hounding people who found themselves hopelessly in debt after the collapse. But something more was going on here as well. The ministers mobilised the story not just to make a critical point. They held aloft the selflessness shown by the father-in-law as an example for people to follow in the constitution of the new Iceland. Here the timing is important too. The story takes on its significance, at least in part, in the context of the Christmas story and in Christian theology in a more general sense. Christmas in Iceland, as in so many other places, as we have already discussed, is fundamentally understood as a family celebration. It is recognised as a particularly difficult time for bereaved individuals and families, precisely because of this construction of Christmas as a

family affair. Here, the father-in-law's sacrifice enabled the young family, his daughter, her husband and their newborn son, to be together. This is highly significant, because the family, as in so many other contexts, is a powerful metaphor for the nation-form. It might not have been intended, we cannot claim that it was, but it is difficult not to think of Christ's sacrifice as an example here. If Christ sacrificed himself for the salvation of humanity, then the selflessness shown in the father-in-law's sacrifice is an example – perhaps one for others to follow – that will ensure the salvation of the Icelandic nation, the reconstitution of the moral fabric of their society.

It is a longstanding argument in anthropology and related disciplines that ideas and practices around death and grief will reflect the organisation of society. In this book we have advanced the argument that death and grief do not reflect society but rather are constitutive of society. Thus, we have argued, the changing regime of death and grief in Iceland that emerged in the 1990s was constitutive of the society of neoliberalism that emerged at the same time. At the end of that period, with the collapse of 2008, death and grief were mobilised again for the constitution of a new moral order, a new society, a new Iceland. It can be debated how successful this mobilisation was. The Iceland that will emerge from the collapse is still in the making, although many would argue that the country is in fact moving back in the direction it was going before the collapse. What role *precisely* death and grief will play in the constitution of the new Iceland – whatever that new Iceland will be – remains to be seen. What is clear is that death and grief will play a role. Documenting it will be the topic of another work.

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This book is a contribution to debates concerning the state of death in the contemporary Western world. Taking up the argument that death there has recently undergone a revival, the book problematizes the idea that this revival is caused by general trends in society for example rising individualism. The book describes a link between the revival of death in Iceland and neo-liberal governmentality, in particular the machinery by means of which modern citizens are enjoined to govern themselves.
The book draws on extensive ethnographic fieldwork on the changing regimes of dying and grieving in Iceland since the year 2000. The ethnography reflects how the old Icelandic solution of 'locking death away in a drawer' is being replaced by an allegedly healthier option of 'dealing openly' with death and grief. The changes in the management of death and grief in Iceland have taken place in the context of a neo-liberal governmentality. The rise of neo-liberalism has been accompanied by a rhetoric that emphasises self-reliance, personal responsibility and individual initiative, private enterprise and personal improvement The authors suggest that the changing regimes of death and grief should be placed in this context. The book reflects on linkages between death and grief, the fluctuating fortunes of the 'nation form' in Iceland and the different ways in which political power can be legitimised through the changing relations between 'nation', 'state' and 'individual'.

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"I found Death and Governmentality to be compelling from beginning to end. Well-written, clearly argued, and historically situated, the book takes on the subject of grief and death in the context of recent socio-economic shifts in Iceland. The book is a wonderful achievement, taking on a subject that is at once timely and important, and giving it a treatment that is theoretically and ethnographically sound."

Anne Allison, Professor at Duke University.