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Mothers Who Matter
:
Young Icelandic Women
and the Inclination to Combine
Parenthood and Studentship

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Abstract

This paper is about the factors that compel young Icelandic women to combine parenthood and studentship. By analysing the testimonies of three Icelandic women in the light of established scholarship on mothers and Icelanders, we learn that these women conceive of reality in a way that cannot be represented by conventional dualistic models which divide the world into two opposing and easily gendered domains. As such, mothers who are “not just moms” are understood as unproblematic because they are never “out of place,” whether in their homes or behind the schoolbooks. Moreover, the undertaking of higher education is perceived as a means to the end of obtaining a job, and family policies and welfare services work as important incentives for parenthood when studying. However, the reason why motherhood figures so importantly in the minds of particularly Icelanders must be sought by looking at the elevated symbolical position of the mother in Icelandic culture. In turn, this permits us to understand motherhood as a cultural form that Icelandic women may have recourse to in order to assert themselves as significant. All in all, the educated female parent is not just a significant woman, but a mother who matters in Icelandic society.

Keywords: social anthropology, Iceland, motherhood, higher education, young age

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1.0

Introduction

In an interview with Björk, arguably the single-most famous Icelander, an *Observer* journalist suggested that the artist was awfully young to have her first child at the age of twenty, a comment to which she replied: “Not in Iceland! Most people have ‘em when they’re about 16. It’s rural out there” (The Observer: 08.07.2007). The claim that the average Icelander becomes a parent at the age of sixteen should, however, be taken with a pinch of salt. Neither statistics nor a stroll about in Reykjavík, Iceland’s capital city in or around which two thirds of the country’s population live, would support Björk’s statement. However, I would find it peculiar if the attentive eye failed to notice the indicated truth of the mentioned assertion: it does appear that Icelanders in general have children at an earlier age than their Nordic cousins, and, moreover, that it is not so uncommon to *combine* especially motherhood and higher education, instead of postponing childbearing until significant educational and professional advances have been made. The ensuing pages will address the question:

Why do Icelandic women choose to become mothers when relatively young and, significantly, to combine parenthood and studentship?

I intend to provide an answer by solving a series of smaller riddles. The phenomenon in question renders these women incomprehensible if we hold on to traditional anthropological scholarship on women and Iceland, and it seems that an answer to the superior research question must begin with a modification of dualistic and gendered models of society in a way that makes it easier to see why the combination of parenthood and studentship is conceived of as unproblematic. How do these women understand themselves and what ideas conspire to compel them to choose motherhood at a time when they are also students? How can they claim that this time is a “perfect time” for motherhood? In order to answer these questions I will look closer at how Icelanders understand themselves and the societies in which they move, how they understand and conduct parenthood and studentship, how they relate to welfare policies, and cultural ideas surrounding the mother and motherhood. Now, however, I devote the rest of this introductory chapter to situate Iceland in a larger Nordic context.

1.1

Contextualising Iceland

This contextualisation is done for several reasons, the first one being that the women who were interviewed in relation to this project are Icelanders who currently live and study in Sweden. Moreover, these Icelandic women conceive of themselves as different from Swedes and other Nordic people, perhaps especially with respect to motherhood. This will become evident throughout this thesis. As such, I consider it important to already now lift forth some elements that form a background against which differences between Icelanders and other Nordic people – particularly Swedes – may be perceived. Two such dimensions are the fertility patterns of Icelanders and the family policies of Iceland and Sweden, which will also be the explicit focus of chapter 5.2.

Over the past decades the mean age at which women first have children has been steadily increasing in all of the Nordic countries. One of the explanations for this development is that children do no longer represent economic resources, but are rather considered valuable in themselves. Additionally, it is also the case that sexuality has become radically liberalised, that access to contraceptives has increased, and, importantly, that gender and family ideals have changed significantly, as reflected in the strong trend of women attaining higher education and careers (Ostner and Schmitt 2008: 19; Tydén et al. 2006: 181-182). Indeed, the male breadwinner and female homemaker model has more or less been replaced by a dual-earner model (Ostner and Schmitt 2008: 11-12). Decreasing fertility rates are typically explained in terms of the increasing agency of women, and in all of the Nordic countries are welfare policies designed with the partial aim of boosting birth rates (ibid.: 9).

Of specific concern here, however, is the somewhat special case of Iceland. The mean age of women at first birth has been and is consistently lower among Icelanders. It is furthermore the case that the fertility rate is significantly higher in Iceland than in other Nordic countries (ibid.: 19-20). Indeed, Iceland is the only Nordic country in which fertility rate is so high that the population size increases with each successive generation (ibid.: 14). And this in spite of the fact that Iceland lacks explicit pronatalist policies (Eydal and Ólafsson 2008: 112). However, it is nevertheless the case that family policies represent an important factor which alleviates the “burdens” of parenthood, a fact which makes it even more interesting to note differences between Iceland and other Nordic countries. Iceland’s expenditures on child benefits and supplements have consistently been markedly lower than

the expenditures of the other Nordic countries (ibid: 110). In Iceland, there are universal benefits for all children under the age of seven, but between that age and the age of sixteen, child benefits are income-tested. This is not the case in Sweden, the most relevant comparative example, where child benefits are also significantly higher (NOSOSCO 2011: 50-51). Moreover, it is not the case that all children in Iceland have the right to day care services, whereas in Sweden this is not just a right, but there is also a possibility of getting such services for free (ibid: 58). In Iceland, parents pay approximately 30% of the cost of day care services (Eydal and Ólafsson 2008: 120), in addition to after-school care, school meals and leisure activities when their children pass kindergarten-age (ibid.: 116). Also, parents in Sweden enjoy months longer paid parental leave than parents in Iceland (although the Icelandic parliament passed significant changes to this model in December 2012) (ibid.: 123; Björnberg and Dahlgren 2008: 51).

Another relevant point is that *Félagsstofnun stúdenta*, the service company for students at the University of Iceland, runs three day cares for university students with room for 182 children (*Félagsstofnun stúdenta*, webpage accessed 21.05.2013). By comparison, Lund University's *Studentkår* runs only one day care with three departments (Lunds kommun, webpage accessed 21.05.2013), which serves 54 children (Carl Håkansson, day care manager, personal communication). Considering the fact that there are approximately 30 000 students at Lunds University, whereas the University of Iceland has only about 14 000 students, these data seem to underscore the suggestion that Icelanders tend to combine parenthood and studentship to a larger degree than, for example, Swedes.

So far we may conclude that incentives for motherhood and women's participation on the labour market exist in all of the Nordic countries in the form of various family policies and welfare services. However, when the relatively better welfare policies of Sweden are compared with those of Iceland, it seems paradoxical that the fertility rate of Icelanders is consistently higher than that of Swedes and other Nordic nations. This indicates that Icelanders relate to parenthood and studentship in unique ways, a point which is reinforced by the fact that day care facilities connected to Lund University, which is twice as big as the University of Iceland in terms of student numbers, have room for less than three times fewer children of studying parents than the day care institutions run by the Icelandic student service company. The significant question thus becomes: why do Icelandic women have children so comparatively earlier than women of other Nordic countries, at a time when they are also university students?

2.0

Theories of “Undeferred” Motherhood

An eclectic body of theories have been chosen, explored and applied in order to answer the superior research question of this thesis. Soon after the initiation of the project it became evident that the phenomenon at hand is a multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be adequately explained by reference to, for example, only welfare policies and governmentality alone. Rather, the theories informing this paper are those which emerged as relevant when I attempted to understand and analyse the testimonies of the interviewed women in the light of previous research about mothers and Icelanders.

The main part of this thesis is divided into two parts. The first part is slightly shorter than its successor and attempts to develop a theoretical framework that captures the perceived societal reality of the Icelandic mothers. This is done for two reasons. Firstly because I believe that we need a theoretical understanding of social reality that better represents the lives of contemporary mothers than older and conventional theoretical frameworks. And secondly because such a theoretical understanding – more in line with how actual women comprehend and live their lives – permits us to see why the combination of motherhood and studentship is understood as unproblematic by the women I focus on. I see this as a necessary prelude to the next main part, whose chapter titles come from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* due to their metaphorical aptness, which deals even more explicitly with the issue of why these women regard it a “perfect time” to become mothers when they are also young students.

Traditional philosophical and anthropological scholarship as represented in the writings of Simone de Beauvoir (1997), Sherry Ortner (1974) and Michelle Rosaldo (1974) have dealt with the theme of the universal subordination of women. They have attempted to explain this order by looking to women's role in social and biological reproduction. These authors suggest that women, due to their biological make-up and social roles as mothers, are seen as closer to the species; to nature, and therefore relegated to the domestic or private sphere of the home, which is conceptually subordinated to the “cultural” spheres of the larger society. Although I recognise that theories of women's universal subordination are largely outdated, I revisit them in order to put them up against ethnographic material about Iceland and the empirical data I have gathered myself. Contrary to the theory just recounted, Kirsten Hastrup (1985, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c, 1998) argues that Icelandic women are associated with the “social,” or culture, instead of nature and the “wild.” This, however, does not make it

easier to understand contemporary Icelandic women although they are no longer doomed to immanence in their homes. Neither does it seem to resonate with the way Icelanders themselves conceive of the world in which they live. Therefore, I deploy Donna Haraway's (1991) notion of the cyborg, which represents a theory of social reality that destabilises dualistic conceptual schemes and refutes any easy distinctions between social domains such as the "domestic" and the "public." This model of the world, I argue, makes it easier to see why Icelandic women find it unproblematic to combine motherhood and studentship.

The ensuing chapter places the subjects of this project in the context of larger societal changes. This is done in order to come to grips with their understanding of motherhood and studentship. How is the maternal role exercised and what ideas surround higher education? Zygmunt Bauman (2005) suggests that we live in a "liquid modern" world in which education is the solution to a constant demand for change, and that children in this world represent valuable assets that preclude consuming parents' fulfilment of other needs and desires. In the same vein, Helen Brembeck (1998) argues that contemporary motherhood is "postmodern" in the sense that mothers of today wish to have several identities and be "not just moms." Perhaps these "grander theories" cannot account for *all* aspects of the Icelandic case, but I assert their continued relevance and argue that they do advance an explanation for why young Icelandic women wish to undergo higher education and have children while doing so.

The subsequent part explores the effect of family policies and welfare services upon the lives and choices of young Icelandic women. This is done in order to achieve a greater understanding for why the "perfect time" for motherhood is the time when one is also a young student. Michel Foucault (1990) once suggested that power no longer operates in a purely repressive manner, but rather works through processes of normalisation and may thus be "productive" of behaviour. In his footsteps, Emily Martin (1997) points out how the anthropology of policy provides a theoretical framework for understanding how individuals internalise discourses and manage their selves in specific ways. Policies may be analysed as techniques of government by others and of selves, and this is a crucial insight to an understanding of why the "perfect time" comes relatively early in the lives of Icelanders.

The last subchapter deals more explicitly with why motherhood figure so prominently in the minds of Icelanders. With aid from Eric Wolf's (1956, 1958) analysis of the Mexican master-symbol, the Virgin of Guadalupe, I attempt to understand the independent mother not just as a symbol of strength, but also as a "cultural form," or expected pattern of behaviour, that Icelanders may resort to in order to assert themselves as significant women in Icelandic society.

3.0

Methodology

In this section I present the methodological and epistemological approach which has guided my study. I begin by explaining how I got in contact with Dís, Gýða and Sigríður, the informants of this project, before I describe how I gathered information and discuss this process in relation to the epistemology found in the writings of Charlotte Davies (2008) and Donna Haraway (1991). In the end, the two last subchapters present the informants of this project, first by looking at who they are and then by contrasting them with two other mother identities.

3.1

“Accessing the Field”

Interest in the topic of this paper was first sparked when I lived and studied in Reykjavík for two academic terms in 2010/2011. At the University of Iceland I typically spent lunch breaks and time between classes in the university cafeteria. I was immediately fascinated by the frequent presence of young women who had a stroller and a baby with them to school, and when my teacher in a course called Icelandic Culture one day encouraged my class to have children while young and studying (as he and his wife had done) I became certain that Icelanders have notions about parenthood that differ quite significantly from the typical ideals of many others. Though I have everywhere come across people who have children at the time when they also undergo higher education, I had never before and never since come across active encouragement or widespread practice of this phenomenon outside Iceland.

At the time I was deciding upon a topic for this thesis, I had the pleasure of getting to know an Icelandic girl with whom I discussed my observations and hypotheses. She was and is herself without children, something that she, with tongue in cheek, defended by stating that she is doing it “the Swedish way” – that is, waiting until she had completed her education – in contrast to the other Icelanders she knows in Sweden, who either have children or are soon to be parents. I asked her whether she would be able to help me get in touch with a handful of women who had the experience of combining parenthood and university studies, as I would have liked to look deeper into the ideas and conceptions that made this such a widespread

phenomenon among Icelanders. I was kindly told that she would “mail the girls” and a few days later I was presented with a list of sixteen studying mothers who had responded by saying that they would like to be interviewed. I was astonished.

3.2

Obtaining Ethnographic Data

Due to time limitations, ethnographic or semi-structured interviews became the method of preference in order to obtain meaningful data about these women. As such, I cannot claim to represent all Icelandic women, not even all Icelandic mothers. Therefore, when I use this vocabulary I refer to those women I do have knowledge of; primarily my informants and the women I have gained knowledge of through the interviews (cf. Willerslev 2007: xiii).

I have taken certain measures to comply with standard ethical codes. When I first made contact with the women, I assured them that they would be able to participate on their own conditions, meaning that they would of course be able to withdraw themselves or certain information from the project at any time. I have also attempted to anonymise the women by giving them pseudonyms and sometimes even changing certain biographic information.

Since I knew that ethnographic interviewing is time-consuming, but nevertheless wanted to transcribe the interviews and work more than superficially with the material, I decided to contact four women and conduct four interviews. The reason why I decided to contact these particular women is random because I did not know anything about them except from the facts that they are Icelandic, mothers and currently live and study in Sweden. Although I had decided to do four interviews, one of the contacted and responding women chose at one point to withdraw from the project. Therefore, the testimonies of only three women represent the data I use.

These women are Dísá, Gýða and Sigríður. Dísá was interviewed at a university cafeteria, whereas both Gýða and Sigríður were interviewed at a downtown café. I reasoned that such scenes would entail less “clinical” atmospheres than, say, an empty room at the university’s sociology department, and thus alleviate a pressure some might expect from interview situations. In order to avoid that the interviews assumed the character of, for example, an employment interview, I began by explaining the nature of the ethnographic interview (Davies 2008: 121), a strategy which seemed to work the way it was intended. Each of the three women were initially given the same set of questions that functioned more or less

as “conversation starters.” This means that a certain topic explored in one interview may not have been equally explored in another, although I strived to stick to themes such as motherhood, studies, children and “Icelandicness” in each interview.

3.3

Approaching Ethnographic Data

The premise upon which the above argument about “meaningful data” rests is the merge of the epistemological orientations advocated Davies and Haraway. To begin with the former, Davies explains that the critical realist approach to social scientific methodology rejects the idea that any narrative may be an entirely correct representation of social reality, but also the idea that the same narrative should be regarded a complete construction of it (ibid.: 109). This implies that critical realism attempts to go beyond the opposition between positivism and extreme postmodernism. This is done by conceiving of society as existing independently of individual conceptions of it, at the same time as it is seen as dependent on the action of individuals; actors and society are interrelated and influence each other. This idea encourages the exploration of individuals’ understandings without reducing social structure to individual interpretations or vice versa. An objective social reality beyond the individual may be known, but we have to acknowledge that all perspectives are partially related to that reality and that any representation of it is influenced by the researcher’s presence (ibid.: 18-23).

In my view, this philosophy may be successfully combined with, and perhaps reinforced by, Haraway’s notion of situated knowledges. Like Davies, Haraway is interested in talking about “reality,” but in a way that accounts for the particular historical positioning of any knower and knowledge claims while also retaining a “no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world” (1991: 187). She argues that the solution to this problem is the recognition that all knowledge is situated knowledge. The concept of situated knowledges insists on the embodiment of all vision, which means that the idea that any knowledge may be produced outside a “marked body” by a “conquering gaze from nowhere” is firmly rejected (ibid.: 188).

When informed by the perspectives of Davies and Haraway, we may see interviewing as a relevant way to gain access to the social reality outside the interview context because there is a connection between the interviewee’s statements and a greater social reality. When that is said, however, it is also important to recognise that both the interviewee’s and the

interviewer's perspectives are positioned, or situated, which means that I would have obtained slightly different data if I had interviewed three different Icelandic mothers. Moreover, it is also important to acknowledge that interaction is always affected by social differences that grant different access to power in the greater society (Davies 2008: 110). For example, "it is absurd to assume that the sex of the fieldworker passes unnoticed" (Hastrup 1998: 60). Without assuming that sex/gender is more fundamental than other socially differentiating principles, I do think that especially this factor conditioned the knowledge I obtained, as it is my experience that gender differences tend to make a greater difference than, say, minor age discrepancies or the fact that my informants and I have different Nordic ethnicities (this point is somewhat underscored by the empirical data presented in chapter 5.3.1, which shows that Icelandic women tend to conceive of men and women as two fundamentally different cultural groups). However, this should not be taken to mean that social differences are counteractive of communication, and, consequently, the production of knowledge (Davies 2008: 111). It would be impossible to pinpoint *exactly how* the information I was given was affected by our different genders, ages, nationalities and sexualities (to mention a few influencing factors), in addition to the immediate interview contexts. But it is an indisputable fact that these and other factors conditioned the knowledge that came of the interviews. Therefore, the cautions just raised should be kept in mind when presented with anything that may count as knowledge, including the information presented in this text.

3.4

Dísa, Gýða and Sigríður

Although Icelanders represent a small nation and tend to explain socio-economic inequalities in terms of personality differences instead of structural differences (to the effect that Iceland is commonly thought of as a largely classless society) (Durrenberger 1996: 176), I recognise that Iceland is not egalitarian, and support the idea that the experience and accomplishment of both biological and social reproduction is differentiated and stratified according to different social, economic and political circumstances (Colen 1995: 77). However, I want to caution already at this point that social class will not be a main theme to be dealt with in this paper, although it is briefly brought up in chapter 5.1. Judging by their higher education and family backgrounds, the women whose narratives represent the main empirical data to be analysed belong to the same (middle) class. It is rather their difference from their Nordic middle class

cousins, among whom having children between the ages of twenty and twenty-five is typically considered very young (Brembeck 1998: 18; Nilssen 2007: 41), which is constantly kept in mind throughout this thesis.

When that is said, however, Dísá, Gýða and Sigríður were all between the mentioned ages when they first became mothers. Each of them has come to Sweden to pursue Master's studies, and they are all unanimous that the child benefits offered by the Swedish state have provided an important impetus for temporarily leaving Iceland. This does not imply that Swedish welfare policies in themselves represented a primary incentive for parenthood among Icelanders; the women became mothers long before the issue of Sweden ever dawned on their horizons. However, both Dísá and Sigríður were twenty-three when they had their first child, whereas Gýða was only twenty years old. Today, Sigríður is a mother of two, whereas both Dísá and Gýða each have one child. Gýða told me that she and her husband are now trying to have a second child. Gýða and Sigríður are married, whereas Dísá lives with her boyfriend. These men are the fathers of the women's children. Only Gýða lives without her partner in Sweden. This is because her husband is not Icelandic and has to stay in Iceland in order to obtain a residence permit before he can move after her.

They all told that they received positive reactions at the time when they told family and friends about of their first pregnancies. None of them had planned pregnancy when it happened, but in retrospect they all consider it to have been perfect timing. Both Dísá and Gýða stated that they have always been certain that they would one day become mothers. This is not the case with Sigríður, who said that she was "devastated" when she eventually became pregnant at the age of twenty-three, but that everyone around her "did agree it was a good time." Despite her young age, Gýða had also received encouragement. Particularly interesting, however, is Dísá's experience. Upon completing her Bachelor's degree at the University of Iceland, she had been in a stable relationship with her current boyfriend for four years and was experiencing pressure from friends and family to have a child. When she finally got pregnant, she recalled, everyone around her said that "this is the best time! This is a perfect time!" Indeed, none of the girls are capable of explaining why Icelanders consider it to be great timing to have children when relatively young, but they all seem to agree that this, in the words of Sigríður, is the "classical Icelandic pattern."

Another crucial point is that the three women have always wanted to study and did never consider motherhood to be incompatible with the lifestyle that higher education typically entails. Although they know that a lot of people go other ways, they all seem to agree that it has become a norm to undergo higher education, at least in the sense that it is regarded

a natural and responsible thing to do. Upon my inquiries about whether they represent some kind of “exceptions to the rule” by combining motherhood and university studies, they all stated that they have Icelandic friends and classmates who also follow this pattern. Dísá, for instance, said that all of her nine closest friends are university students, and that five of them, herself included, have children. And in her Bachelor’s program, all of the female students had a child or were pregnant upon graduation.

This is of course to paint a picture in which Icelandic women who do not become mothers at all, after the age of twenty-five, or not when undertaking university education, go unportrayed. These women exist in great numbers and do not represent something abnormal in the Icelandic context. Gýða, for instance, has three older sisters who all became mothers in their thirties. And that is not considered odd in any way. When that is said, however, she contrasts Icelanders with Swedes by pointing out how none of her Swedish friends have children. Neither does she know of any Swede in her own age that has. The same goes for Dísá, who is to her knowledge the only student at Lund University’s Department of Physics who is a mother. This may or may not be the case, but it seems evident that among Icelanders, both the practice and the idea of becoming a mother when undertaking higher education figure more prominently. In a revealing statement articulated by Dísá:

Here [in Sweden], sometimes when I say I have a child, people look at me as if I am seventeen and have a child. Like in Iceland, if someone is seventeen, I would say “oh, poor girl!” because that is not the best time. So I think that here, if you’re twenty to twenty-five or so, then it’s similar to someone in Iceland being seventeen to twenty, or in the high school years. I think that in Iceland, if you are finished with high school, then it’s becoming a good time [to have children].

Why is this so and how are we to conceive of these women? In the subsequent pursuit of an answer, the voices of Dísá, Gýða and Sigríður will appear every now and then to indicate the usefulness of the theoretical frameworks explored in order to direct the text towards a conclusion that may, hopefully, shed a stronger light on the phenomenon under investigation. Before that, however, I briefly consider who these women are not in order to reinforce the idea we already have of them.

3.5

“I can’t say *þetta reddast!*”

Identity construction also works through opposition to and rejection of other identities (Butler 2011: 77). As mentioned, none of my informants were teenagers when they first became pregnant, and I argue that they represent a somewhat different phenomenon than teenage motherhood. For who is the typical teenage mother? It seems that she is commonly someone who is not married, who comes from a family-background of a low socio-economic status and who has parents with low educational attainments. Moreover, it seems typical that she herself achieves poorly in school and that she is not consistent with the use of contraceptives. To be the daughter of a mother who herself became a teenage parent also appears to be a significant factor (Kiernan 1997: 411-421). I do not know enough about my informants to assess each of these factors. However, by considering the way they spoke about teenage motherhood and by investigating literature on teenage motherhood among Icelanders, I stick to the above claim.

Sóley Bender (2008) has looked into the decision-making processes of Icelandic teenage mothers. Among the findings that are significant for our purposes is the one that the young mothers of her study were explicitly or implicitly (mostly the former) encouraged to have abortions when they first became aware of their pregnancies (Bender 2008: 867, 869, 872). Among other things, this was often related to the idea that parenthood during adolescence would impede future educational opportunities (ibid.: 875).

These points stand in stark contrast to the experiences of Dísá, Gýða and Sigríður. As mentioned, some of them were actively encouraged to have children and even when this was not the case, people around them considered it to be good timing to become pregnant when they first did. Furthermore, they were all quite conscious of the fact that they represented something different than teenage motherhood. The Icelandic expression “*þetta reddast*” may be directly translated into something like “it will all be alright.” Similar to Dísá’s words in the previous section, Gýða said that no one would actively encourage someone in high school to become a mother. And finally, Sigríður stated that adolescents who become pregnant frequently hear that everything will be alright. Yet she added: “But it doesn’t always *reddast!* I mean, it’s a child and... The mother is only thinking about herself when she chooses to have kids when she doesn’t have a job, money, a home, support or a boyfriend. [...] I can’t say *þetta reddast!*” It appears, in other words, that it is alright in another manner when motherhood becomes a fact during adolescence.

A last point to be stressed is the fact that the women of my study were and are in stable, heterosexual relationships. Anthropologists have observed that “[b]eing a single mother is not looked down upon in a fishing village, or in Iceland in general. It is not only socially accepted to have a child outside of marriage at a young age, but women are encouraged to have children irrespective of their marital status” (Skaptadóttir 1995: 195). The observation that single motherhood is not stigmatised among Icelanders has been supported by Kris Kissman (1989: 78), who nonetheless points out that single mothers are at times chided for “being a burden to society” (ibid.: 83). Therefore, it appears that *active encouragement* to become a young mother is partly contingent upon one’s relationship status. Each of my three informants consented to this interpretation. This implies that the “perfect time” is only “perfect” and not just “good” if you have completed high school and are in a stable relationship. Thus, this paper is not about motherhood *per se*, but about the conditions that make a mother matter in the Iceland society.

4.0

Conceiving of Contemporary Mothers

Like the anthropologists behind the “classical monographs” (Ardener 1972: 1), Kirsten Hastrup is someone who has attempted to “crack the code” of the Icelandic society, but without making the mistake of ignoring women. Hastrup suggests that Icelanders conceive of women as aligned with culture and men as aligned with nature: “women seem to be *unambiguously* associated with the human world (and culture), while the men are *ambiguously* associated with the non-human (natural) world as well” (1990b: 278, my emphasis). These associations, according to Hastrup, are not novelties but rather something that may be traced to the beginning of Icelandic history. By suggesting this she constructs a theory that apparently contradicts classical theories in which women are associated with nature and denied “transcendence”¹ due to their biology and role as mothers. These are Simone de Beauvoir’s ideas about women. Her principal philosophical work, *The Second Sex*, is widely recognised as one of the most important works on women in modern history, and its value as an ethnography about middle class women in particular should not be undermined even though it is not an anthropological essay (Okely 1986 in Moi 2008: 123). More important here, however, is the fact that Beauvoir’s ideas greatly informed the theories of the anthropologists Sherry Ortner and Michelle Rosaldo. This chapter will first explore this scholarship, which represents the backdrop against which Hastrup formulates her theory. I will then proceed to investigate how Hastrup reaches her conclusion about Icelandic men and women. Partly with aid from Hastrup’s critics, I subsequently attempt to “resolve” the ostensible contradiction between Hastrup’s argument and the arguments of Beauvoir and Ortner. In the end I take inspiration from Donna Haraway and suggest that we need to reconsider models of the world that present cultural reality in terms of dualistic and easily gendered domains if we are to understand and explain the ways of contemporary Icelandic women.

¹ In existentialist philosophy as represented in the writings of Simone de Beauvoir, the concept of “transcendence” is used to denote a way of life in which a person extends outwards towards an extended social universe. The transcendental person is actively engaged in productive and creative projects. This person stands in stark contrast to the immanent person, who is passive and quiescent; not engaged in projects that allow for personal development and social aspiration (cf. Moi 2008: 232). In the following, the concept of transcendence is used to refer to those who obtain an education, are working on a career, or in some way or another are “out there,” that is, not resigning themselves to a life in domestic seclusion.

4.1

female:male::nature:culture

Contemporary gender theorists may wish to see the abolishment or subversion of gender (Rubin 1975: 102; Butler 2006: 201), but this was not the case with Beauvoir. She did not view the feminine *gender* itself as problematic and argued rather for the recognition of “woman” as a very real identity that has to be taken for granted if the situation of women is to be altered (Beauvoir 1997: 14). In a similar vein, Toril Moi has “appropriated Bourdieu” and argues that women *are* women if they are socially constructed as such (1991: 1034). Her point is that this recognition is crucial for feminist enterprises; I argue that the same realisation is a necessary precondition for any anthropological project that touches upon the theme of gender, which this paper on motherhood inevitably does.

When that is said, let us return to Beauvoir and account for her theory. Beauvoir was breaking new ground when she asserted: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (1997: 295). She argues that women are negatively defined in relation to men and thus come to represent and embody the values, attributes and characteristics that men are seen to lack. Whereas men are typically allowed to be transcendent, women commonly wallow in immanence. For Beauvoir, however, this does not eclipse the fact that every woman is essentially “a free and autonomous being like all human creatures” (ibid.: 29).

Beauvoir finds women’s immanent existence to be greatly connected to their biological make-up and their roles as mothers. Women are, in Beauvoir’s words, more “enslaved” to the species than men due to their reproductive functions (ibid.: 54). She sees repeated menstruations and pregnancies as features which enslave women to the species until they reach menopause and at that moment are “freed” in certain respects (ibid.: 62-63). A crucial point for Beauvoir is that the biological facts of women do not assign them to a “fixed and inevitable destiny” (ibid.: 65). She reasons that in the case of human beings, an individual is not condemned to immanence due to her anatomy and hormones, but rather because of her socio-economic position, or “general situation” (ibid.: 67, 356). Beauvoir concludes, however, that even social and economic factors conspire to assign women to immanence, mostly because they are the ones to bear children (ibid.: 148).

In an influential essay, Sherry Ortner (1974) turns the theme of women’s universal subordination into an anthropological concern by putting forth the argument that women in most cultures are seen as inferior to men due to a common conception of women as closer to

nature, while men are conceived of as wholly associated with culture. Ortner is decidedly inspired by Beauvoir, and constructs her theory upon a reading of Beauvoir and the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss. He suggested that all human beings conceive of the world in terms of a fundamental symbolical opposition between nature and culture, although the meaningful content of each conceptual category is culturally relative (Ardener 1972: 5).

Ortner asserts that proofs of her theory are omnipresent, but that the ultimate evidence must be searched for in the torch light “of other universals, factors built into the structure of the most generalised situation in which all human beings, in whatever culture, find themselves” (1974: 71). She goes on to argue that every culture downgrades what it defines as “nature” and that the universal subordination of women is a consequence of the fact that women are seen as closer to this domain. This is due to women’s physiological make-up and reproductive functions, which first serve to engage them in “species life” (read: “non-cultural” activities), then to assign them less esteemed social roles than men, and, lastly, to engender in them a different psyche, characterised by “personalism” and “particularism,” which is also seen as closer to nature (ibid.: 73-74). When that is said, Ortner is not oblivious to the fact that women all over the world are also engaged in highly “cultural” activities, such as the socialisation of children, and that they therefore function as mediators between nature and culture. She therefore concludes that women are never seen as analogous to nature, but occupy an intermediate position between nature and culture, which is nevertheless a position that is subordinate to men’s, who are entirely situated in the cultural realm (ibid.: 84-85).

The implication of Ortner’s theorisations is that women everywhere are subordinated because of their reproductive functions and maternal roles, which are disregarded as less “cultural” than, for instance, being involved in politics or undergoing higher education. A similar way of reasoning has been demonstrated by Michelle Rosaldo (1974). She asserts the universal relevance of a distinction between “domestic” and “public” spheres, and the association of women with the former and men with the latter (Rosaldo 1974: 23-24). Her argument is that it is men’s separateness from the domestic sphere, the small institutions and activities concerned with mothers and children, that allows them, contrary to women, to be “sacred” (ibid.: 27).

It is doubtful whether Ortner’s ideas (which are also reflected in the writings of Beauvoir and Rosaldo) are universally valid. It is not true that women are always the primary caretakers of children and that parenting, or motherhood, is everywhere devaluated (which is what I interpret to be the essence of Ortner’s essay). This, however, is a point to be revisited, as I now wish to draw attention to Ortner’s final assertion, because it leads to the exploration

of the anthropology of Kirsten Hastrup. Indeed, Ortner closes her essay by saying that women's ambiguous position between nature and culture leaves us better equipped "to account for those cultural and historical 'inversions' in which women are in some way or another aligned with culture and men with nature" (1974: 86). And Iceland, according to Hastrup, represents such an "inverted" case.

4.2

female:male::culture:nature

Kirsten Hastrup has produced an extensive body of ethnography about Iceland. She began this scholarship with the identification of medieval Icelandic systems of classification that supposedly turned the early Icelandic social reality into a meaningful reality (Hastrup 1985: 13). She suggests that across a range of semantic domains in medieval Iceland we may discover the presence of a vertical and a horizontal conceptual model. The former refers to how reality was conceived of in terms of a centre and a periphery, and the latter refers to the presence of categories and boundaries (ibid.: 238).

Like Ortner, Hastrup is clearly inspired by Lévi-Strauss' structuralism and identifies the "conceptual opposition between nature and culture to be a fundamental human issue" (ibid.: 136). In Iceland, she contends, these conceptual domains exist(ed) as an opposition between the "wild" and the "social." The former would be the uncontrolled, lawless and asocial space *outside* the controlled space of social relations (ibid.). In the medieval Icelandic cosmology, to take one example, this was reflected in the horizontal division of the cosmos into Miðgarð and Útgarð: the former, it was believed, was inhabited by men and gods, whereas the latter, the space found "beyond the fence," was occupied by various non-human beings (ibid.: 147). Although Icelanders officially accepted Christianity in year 1000, Hastrup makes the claim that this horizontal model persisted in their minds because it was also very much a part of lived everyday experiences, as seen, for example, "in the spatio-legal notions of *innangarðs* ['inside the fence'] and *útangarðs* ['outside the fence']" (ibid.: 151).

In her second book about Iceland, *Nature and Policy in Iceland 1400-1800: An Anthropological Analysis of History and Mentality* (1990a), Hastrup opens with the rather provocative claim that up until the nineteenth century "the Icelanders were actually imprisoned by their own mentality" (1990a: 4). She suggests that the Icelanders failed to adjust their conceptual apparatus according to the changes their society underwent, which created a

situation in which the Icelanders' current reality was embedded in the past to an unusual degree (ibid.: 10).

Iceland was first settled due to the island's riches in land and fish. This has made farming and fishing important and complementary modes of subsistence throughout history. However, Hastrup claims that farming has occupied a privileged position in the minds of Icelanders (ibid.: 46), and that the household has for centuries been "the pivot of social organisation, in relation to which more peripheral orders were 'measured'" (ibid.: 48). Due to the low density of the Icelandic population, the farmsteads existed as oases in a desert as they were enclosed by fences that separated *innangarðs* from *útangarðs*, or, in Hastrup's words, the "social" from the "wild." The household was the primary unit of production and consumption, and Hastrup's argues that it has continued to represent the genuinely Icelandic (ibid.: 77). As the centre of the social universe, the household was also the centre of entertainment and education. From the early medieval period up until the twentieth century, entertainment took place through the social institution of *sagnaskemmtun*, meaning "saga entertainment," in the context of the *kvöldvaka*, which was a designated time in the evening when the family gathered to listen and learn. Hastrup claims that this institution is much to blame for the reproduction of specific images in the Icelanders' conceptual frameworks (ibid.: 190). Indeed, she is firm in her assertion that the conceptual models of Icelanders, characterised by the fundamental distinction between the "outside" and the "inside," the former conceptually subordinated to the latter, has survived until today (ibid.: 289).

As she moves on to consider the positions of fishing and farming, nature and culture, and men and women in the present-day Icelandic society, Hastrup finds evidence that confirms her theorisations. She argues that contrary to the seaside and the fishing villages, the countryside "is celebrated as Iceland proper" (Hastrup 1990b: 270), the place where true Icelandic culture is supposedly found. For the previous period, Hastrup noted that masculinity was associated with occasional lapses into the wild due to a division of labour where men fished and gathered stray sheep, whereas women's efforts were rather concentrated in the domestic sphere (1990a: 288). After having conducted fieldwork at a farm in the Icelandic countryside, in a fishing village, and also in Reykjavík, she concludes that the same holds true in modern times. For example, her experience of being anything but a "honorary male" at a ram-exhibition (ibid.: 271) is put forth as an incident that illustrates of how women do not belong in Icelanders' "wild." In other words, "nature" is men's domain in Iceland. Women, on the other hand, belong to the "inside" of the social system, or "culture" as represented by

the household. In this domain women are supposedly anything but “muted” and assume the responsibility of a range of tasks (ibid.: 276).

The practical implication of Hastrup’s theory is that Icelandic women are associated with the home, the “domestic,” but that this sphere and those who move within it are not devalued because they are not associated with the “wild” or “nature.” Although it would seem that this model of social reality permits us to appreciate the ostensible valuation of motherhood in Icelandic society, I argue that it does not suffice because, as will be demonstrated, it does not fit with the movements of contemporary women and mothers across a range of societal domains.

4.3

Re-Conceiving with Cyborgs

To recapitulate, Ortner suggests that women are seen as ambiguously placed between nature and culture due to their biological and social reproductive functions, whereas Hastrup argues that Icelandic women are unambiguously associated with culture, or the “social” as opposed to the “wild,” which she identifies as age-old Icelandic conceptual categories. However, if we attempt to penetrate their sophisticated theoretical schemes, we detect that they are not in reality making contradictory claims about the actual social roles of women. As noted, both Ortner and Hastrup are conscious that the semantic content of the conceptual categories of “culture” and “nature” is culturally relative. Therefore, the suggestion that Hastrup’s Icelanders represent an “inversion” of the order outlined by Ortner would hold true if evidence were provided that Icelanders conceive of biological and social reproduction as fundamentally cultural activities, unequivocally disassociated from the natural. But there is no evidence of this in Hastrup’s writings. On the other hand, by looking at scholarship about the Icelandic women’s movement (see chapter 5.3.1), we have to recognise that Icelandic women have in fact been historically excluded from the “cultural” sphere and relegated to what Rosaldo calls the “domestic” sphere, which Ortner places closer to “nature.” Indeed, it seems to be the case that the social reality of Icelanders could be described in both Ortner’s and Hastrup’s terms, and that either portrayal would appear plausible, depending on how various cultural elements are interpreted in the light of a specific theoretical bias.

It appears, then, that the issue of whether “male is to nature what female is culture” in Iceland, could be effectively settled by paying more attention to the indigenous’ own point of view. Do they or do they not align women with culture and men with nature? Niels Einarsson (1990), a “native” anthropologist of Iceland, represents one of several voices that have disputed Hastrup’s theorisations. He argues firstly that Reykjavík, and not the countryside, represents “Iceland proper” to the common Icelander (Einarsson 1990: 72). With a more or less adversarial tone, he goes on to accuse Hastrup of downright “structural reductionism,” and reproaches her for suggesting that contemporary Icelanders are governed by the same conceptual tools that she discerned for medieval Icelanders (ibid.: 75-76). If this is the case, Hastrup’s easy distinction between the “social” and the “wild,” and the association of women with the former and men with the latter, is no longer that relevant. Similar points have been made by Gísli Pálsson (1995), who has called Hastrup’s interpretations problematic, particularly those dealing with the reality of contemporary of Icelanders. He turns down Hastrup’s claim that women were excluded from fishing and the “wild” in previous times, and argues that today “the inside [has] lost its spatial connotation and the spatial inside and the social are no longer coincided” (Pálsson 1995: 63-64). If this holds true, Hastrup’s theories do no longer seem plausible.²

Without necessarily agreeing that Hastrup’s ethnography on Iceland may be seen as “theoretical dogmatism” (Einarsson 1990: 70) or “neo-Orientalism” (Pálsson 1995: 69), I would certainly consent to any view that refuses to analyse society and individuals in terms of simple dualisms. How are we to best conceive of the complex social reality in which Icelandic women do naturally become mothers but also students, perhaps presidents or prime ministers, and where Icelandic men are increasingly taking responsibility within the household, but without relinquishing powerful political position in the greater society? Neither men nor women who act like this seem to be reproached as anomalies for transgressing any crucial symbolic boundaries (Douglas 2002: 47-48). What is culture and nature, “inside” and “outside,” and male and female in such a world? It seems that the dualistic conceptual models recounted above are neither relevant in conceiving of modern Icelandic society, nor that they represent categories by which Icelandic women understand their reality. We are thus in need

² Hastrup has defended herself on several occasions. Although her counterclaims will not be comprehensively explored, it is interesting to note that she first defended herself by asserting her authority as an anthropologist by claiming that “[t]here would be no point in doing anthropology if the natives know better [*sic*]” (Hastrup 1990c: 81), and later by remedying the reductionism of her former theorisations by stating that “categories are not mental prisons, they are ‘summaries’ of practice” (Hastrup 1998: 159).

of other theories that can better aid a representation of this contemporary reality. And such a theory, I suggest, may be the one developed by Haraway through her notion of the cyborg:

The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence. No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the *oikos*, the household. Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other. The relationships for forming wholes from parts, including those of polarity and hierarchical domination, are at issue in the cyborg world (Haraway 1991: 151).

Haraway's cyborg is of course a metaphor and Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* has the explicit political agenda of creating a new theoretical ground upon which battles against oppression may be fought in the current world order. The argument is put forth that the conception of the world in terms of dualisms has been vital to the logics of domination of everyone that has been defined as others (ibid.: 177). Cyborg politics, on the other hand, is about the rejection of essentialisms and recognition of unity through affinity. In this scheme, women cannot unite behind the claim that they are all women and share in on whatever radical feminists denote by the concept of "women's experience." Women, Haraway argues, are all firmly integrated into the system of unequal distribution of oppression and there is no natural source from which solidarity flows (ibid.: 170). Binaries and boundaries are at issue in Haraway's cyborg world, and to draw a clear line between parts of dualisms such as nature and culture, male and female, and private and public is perhaps a fun theoretical activity, but not so relevant if we are to understand modern societies.

Relevant here, however, in a text about young Icelandic mothers, is not the nature or distribution of oppression or how to best forge alliances against injustices. Rather, I would argue that Haraway's cyborg metaphor is useful in the sense that it is "good to think with" about contemporary society and contemporary women. This is how Haraway presents women's positions in highly developed countries (a category to which Iceland would belong):

If it was ever possible ideologically to characterize women's lives by the distinction of public and private domains – suggested by images of [...] gender into personal and political realms – it is now a totally misleading ideology, even to show how both terms of these dichotomies construct each other in practice and theory. I prefer a network ideological image, suggesting the profusion of spaces and identities and the permeability of boundaries in the personal body and in the body politic (ibid.: 170).

As will become evident, this representation of social reality seems to be a better way of conceiving of contemporary Iceland and women. At this point, however, we may ask whether it is relevant or even possible to distinguish between nature and culture as separate semantic domains and argue that a similar distinction between men and women, and the association of

the former with culture and the latter with nature (or vice versa, as in Hastrup's case), creates a suitable – or worse – explanatory model of contemporary social relations. Indeed, none of my informants regarded mothering to come more natural for them than their desire to undergo higher education. As already recounted, both motherhood and education were thought of as natural steps to make in the course of a woman's life. This implies that the daily movement of bodies across what we would have earlier called *separate* domains is common to the extent that any clear gendering of and distinction between them becomes difficult.

A “typical” day, Gýða explained, is commonly organised so that she eats breakfast and spends some time with her son in the morning before she takes him to school. Then she goes to the university where she studies until the afternoon, when she picks up her son again. Evenings are commonly spent in the company of her son, but it happens that she takes to her schoolbooks. From this example we are able to see how both parenthood and studentship is carried out in both the “private” and the “public,” and that Gýða's social life cannot be understood simply in terms of a movement across these domains because they are continuously overlapping and tapping into each other. Moreover, although she is engaged in what anyone would recognise as “cultural” activities (the pursuit of university studies and childrearing) the association of the woman Gýða with the cultural, or the “social,” becomes nonsense because there exists no *socially relevant* semantic counterpart – no “nature” or “wild” – that she or her husband can move within and (not) be associated with. The structuralist scheme thus becomes redundant when it cannot be used to explain anything interesting on the level of social organisation. (This is indeed an argument which reflects my tendency to sympathise with materialist explanations for cultural phenomena (cf. Beauvoir 1997; Scheper-Hughes 1992).)

However, as I turned off my computer with which I recorded the interviews, Gýða told me that it is today very common for fathers to stay at home with their children and perhaps also postpone education and a career so that their girlfriends can go ahead and pursue one. This did not seem to render them more “female” or homemaking and childrearing more “masculine,” but neither did this latter domain stand out as significantly “feminine” in spite of traditional patterns. Obviously, the distinction between the “domestic” and the “public” and the association of the former with women and the latter with men do not loom large in the heads of my informants. In line with Hastrup's critics, I agree that there is a problem with the way she represents the conceptual and social universe of contemporary Icelanders. And in line with Haraway's theories, I believe that this universe has to be “pleasurably disassembled” and “responsibly reassembled” in a way that theoretically confuses conceptual boundaries

(Haraway 1991: 150) if we are to understand contemporary Icelanders. Most significantly, however, this is necessary if we are to account for the social phenomenon this paper deals with. The women who were interviewed subscribe to a “cyborg-likening” model of social reality in which domains are ambiguously gendered and the boundaries separating them are permeable or sometimes even non-existing. This understanding of reality partly accounts for their choices to combine motherhood and studentship. When a woman’s place is no longer in the home, education is no longer for men and childrearing is no longer something that a child’s mother has to be solely responsible for, a mother can pursue both motherhood and studentship in combination without risking negative sanctioning from others (or herself). To once again invoke a familiar anthropological vocabulary: this woman is not reproached for being anomalous because she is seldom “out of place” (Douglas 2002: 50). Had this been the case, the combination of parenthood and studentship would in most cases be foreclosed already at the conceptional level. Therefore, I argue that the analysis inspired by Haraway’s cyborg metaphor represents a necessary move which makes us better prepared to understand why Icelandic women see the combination of parenthood and studentship as *unproblematic*, and we may thus proceed to explore why the “perfect time” to become a mother in Iceland is also when you are a university student.

5.0

Conspiring Incentives for Young Motherhood

At this point there seems to be an acute need to explicitly acknowledge that Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is about the condition of French women in the '40s and that Ortner and Rosaldo wrote from the vantage point of American women in the '70s. Several decades and women's movements later it is an undeniable empirical fact that society has changed and that all women are no longer "doomed to immanence" because of motherhood, as they might have been before (cf. Moi 2008: 41-42). In all of the Nordic states the right to abortion is old news; contraceptives are little controversial and are more or less commonly used; public childcare facilities are widespread; both men and women may take parental leave; and it is common for women to educate themselves and "assume independent work on their own," to once again quote Beauvoir (1997: 493) on what she claims to be a precondition for the emancipation of women. The list could be longer but should be sufficiently elaborate to validate the claim that sixty-four years after the publication of *The Second Sex*, many things have changed and often for the better. This chapter, then, will explore various dimensions of contemporary motherhood and seek to understand why Icelandic women have children at a relatively early age and choose to combine parenthood with studentship. I will do this in three turns. The first subchapter entitled *The Window* sheds further light on the phenomenon under investigation by situating Díska, Gýða and Sigríður in the context of larger societal changes. By looking at motherhood and education through such a wide frame we gain insights about parenthood and studentship that we otherwise might have overlooked. The following subchapter, *Time Passes*, explores family policies and welfare services that explicitly and implicitly influence the Icelandic women to choose to become mothers at specific times and to conduct motherhood in specific ways. As we shall see, these women argue that parenthood becomes financially more burdensome with the passing of time. Indeed, motherhood seems to dawn earlier on the horizons of Icelandic women as compared with other Nordic women, but it is still unclear why this is so. An explanation for this is sought in the last subchapter, *The Lighthouse*, by exploring the independent mother as a symbol of strength, but also as a "cultural form" that Icelandic women may have recourse to in order to establish their significance in the Icelandic society. ("Independence" should here be taken to mean something more similar to "autonomous" rather than "single.")

5.1

The Window; or, Motherhood and Education in “Non-Modernity”

It seems that consensus prevails about the idea that contemporary Western society finds itself in a state, an era, that is significantly different from the state we call “modernity.” The suitable name of this state is debated and will not be of concern here. Rather, I will introduce two scholars who have written about themes such as education, motherhood and self-experience under the current conditions in order to shed further light on the phenomenon at issue. How do the subjects of this project conceive of motherhood and studentship, and can their conceptions be seen as expressions of larger societal changes?

Zygmunt Bauman (2005) would probably respond with a positive answer. “Liquid modernity” is his label of choice for the current state of things. This is a society in constant flux. Life here is characterised by a relentless series of new beginnings (Bauman 2005: 1-2). The “consumerist syndrome” (ibid.: 9, 83) is endemic and individuals are enjoined in a constant orgy of self-criticism and self-scrutiny, which in turn compels a perpetual pursuit of individuality, of identity (ibid.: 23). In this world, Bauman claims, your identity cannot be captured by single word – “I am a *mother*” – if you wish to render yourself comprehensible to others (ibid.: 86). In this world, education is seldom a goal in itself, but emerge as the solution to the constant pressure for change. It is life-long and enable choices (ibid.: 12, 125), the choices we make to lead meaningful lives and fulfil needs. And in this scheme, children are typically seen as opposed to transcendence: as they are no longer necessary for the sustainment of the household, parents have come to view them as costly assets that compel them to postpone the fulfilment of other costly desires and projects (ibid.: 103-104).

Helen Brembeck (1998) is a Swedish ethnologist who has devoted more attention to the institution of motherhood in this society. Her label of preference for the current societal condition is “postmodernism.” She is particularly concerned with how the notion of the self has changed (Brembeck 1998: 16), which in turn has critical consequences for the institution of motherhood. She argues that certain societal groups are closer to the “core of change” than others, and identifies academically educated women to be an obvious reference group (ibid.: 17). As such, we would expect to find important similarities between Brembeck’s informants and the women I have interviewed in relation to this project.

The mothers of today's mothers, Brembeck argues, understood themselves as undividable subjects with a "true" identity that remained unchanged through time and space (ibid.: 33-34). Motherhood tended to become these women's identity, a tendency which may be captured by the image of the self-sacrificing woman who lives first and foremost for her children (ibid.: 50). In contrast, so-called "postmodern" mothers do not regard motherhood to be their entire identity. They are certainly aware of the hegemonic ideas about the "good mother," but instead of yielding to an endless effort to realise such ideals, they relate to it as a myth and experiment with other ways of living (ibid.: 150). To these women, a mother and her child(ren) are seen as separate individuals and there is nothing "magic" in their relation (ibid.: 179). A woman is seen as a subject in her own right and the fact that she is a mother is only one of several identities that her person, her self, consists of (ibid.: 71). "Postmodern" mothers, according to Brembeck, "vill inte alltid vara med barnet" (ibid.: 198).

If the societal diagnoses of Bauman and Brembeck are accurate, may we analyse the lives led by Díska, Gýða and Sigríður as "liquid lives"? Are they "postmodern" mothers? May their notion of the "perfect time" be understood as an Icelandic solution to the constant demand for change, for multiple identities, that should come sooner rather than later? Like typical working-class women, my informants tend to have children relatively early (Brembeck: 104; Gullestad 1984: 116, 334). Unlike working-class women, however, they do not refrain from higher education and do not seem to transform motherhood into their sole identity (Brembeck 1998: 112; Gullestad 1984: 123; Nilssen 2007: 61). Certainly, the Icelandic mothers are "not just moms," to use Brembeck's epithet for "postmodern" mothers. They are also daughters, sisters, girlfriends or wives, friends and university students, just to mention some of the terms they used to describe themselves. Sigríður, for example, stated unambiguously that motherhood has not become her identity. She is not the "classical mother type," she told me, but prefer to foster her children to become independent; to make it on their own without constant support from their mother. At the same time, however, she emphasised that she never disregards the fact that she is a mother of two.

Moreover, it is also the case that these women enjoy the moments they are freed from the responsibility of taking care of children. Díska, for example, told me about the occasional weekend when her boyfriend takes their son with him on a visit to Iceland, thus leaving Díska alone in Lund. She described such times as "the best thing in the world," and it was impossible to fail to notice her sincerity when she talked about how delightful it was to listen to loud music, to lay in bed and eat ice cream and watch TV, and to stay up the whole night just because she had the opportunity to sleep the entire next day. When that is said, however, she

was quick to assure me that although she appreciates such moments, she never does or wants to forget that she has a son, that she is a mother.

The anthropology student Torbjørg Nilssen (2007) has studied urban middle class mothers in Oslo. She argues that however appealing the concept of “postmodern” motherhood seems, reality does not qualify to bear that name. She concludes that although her informants at times expressed frustration about being reduced to “pregnant women,” a so-called “modern” self-understanding is still valid (Nilssen 2007: 98). And it seems that I would have consent to this conclusion. In spite of the fact that my informants enjoy spending time alone every now and then, and never beat themselves up over the fact that they do not devote all their attention to their children or the household, they stressed that they are always themselves – mothers *and* students *and* otherwise – not mothers *or* students *or* otherwise depending on the situation.

When that is said, however, I do think that Díska, Gýða, Sigríður and their equivalents are better understood if analysed as subjects of a “liquid modern” or “postmodern” world. This is not to argue that Icelandic women are more “non-modern” than other Nordic women, but to assert that larger societal changes have affected the institutions of motherhood and studentship in ways that different people relate to differently. And in the Icelandic case, this is partly seen in the phenomenon of combining parenthood and studentship. The first affirmation of this is to be detected in the ease with which they temporarily part with their children, which is also a factor that permits them to go to school while also being mothers. And as already recounted, these women relate to motherhood as an unproblematic fact when it becomes a fact sometime in their early twenties, at a time when they are naturally also university students. It appears that these ideas are initially enabled by the way contemporary Icelanders conceive of society (see chapter 4.3), but also the way they conceive of studentship in itself – a conception which must be understood as a feature of a “non-modern” society. Indeed, it seems that the notion that the “perfect time” for motherhood is when you are young and studying is very much related to an appreciation of student life’s entailments. Each of the three women emphasised that by combining motherhood and university studies they could fulfil their “duties” as mothers towards their children in way that would be impossible if they pursued transcendence through employment. The words of Sigríður are illustrative:

The first one to three years of a child: they get quite sick. And they get everything! And I have two years between them so I was a lot at home. But I could always go to school, and then study at home when they got sick, you know. If both [my husband and I] had been working it would have been much more trouble taking the days off. In Iceland you get like twelve days for your kids when they're sick. Not *per* child, but just twelve days. [...] So imagine, twelve days are not enough for a one to two years old child. They're always sick. It's just like that. If you're in school, you can always... I mean, in *Háskóli Íslands* [the University of Iceland] you go to class for two hours and you get someone to babysit.³

These words are more or less representative for all of the three women who were interviewed. Gýða also added that university lectures are typically not mandatory, so if you have to stay at home with a sick child every now and then you do not necessarily lose out on anything vital that cannot be retrieved by asking a friend who participated in the lecture(s) you did not attend. We do also see the recurrent importance of welfare arrangements to the conduction of parenthood. More importantly, however, this suggests that the Icelandic women do not consider the undertaking of “education” to be the same as “working.” That is, education is not necessarily seen as less industrious than a job, but it is seen as something qualitatively different. And this is a difference that makes a critical difference when it comes to the decision of becoming a mother soon after high school. As mentioned, Nordic women in general combine parenthood with transcendental projects, but only Icelanders perceive of this particular time as ideal. An important part of the explanation for this is that Icelanders regard transcendence through education to be quite different from transcendence through a job.

Dísa, Gýða and Sigríður were quite happy that their children will have grown bigger and more independent by the time they graduate and seek employment, which was seen as the natural next step after graduation. With respect to contemporary Iceland, Kirsten Hastrup has suggested that a medieval code of honour has been transformed into a notion of respectability, which is achieved through demonstration of skills and proficiency in the labour market (Hastrup 1998: 168-169). Whether this is true or not is difficult to assess, but the observation that a degree of respectability is achieved through individual achievements on the labour market seems to be right. Recall Bauman's theory that education is today seldom pursued for the pleasure of it alone. For most students “education is first and foremost a gateway to jobs” (Bauman 2005: 28). It is not surprising, then, that Icelandic women wish to undergo higher education, and this fact cannot be divorced from the “liquid” context in which the lives of contemporary mothers are led.

³ These “someone” could be anyone from grandparents to simply just a friend. It is quite easy for a mother living in Reykjavík to get someone to babysit, I was repeatedly told. This is because most people consider it unproblematic to take care of a child every now and then, but also because the distance between potential babysitters and a mother and her child is seldom very big. As recounted, most Icelanders live in the Reykjavík metropolitan area, which is, for example, more than eight times smaller than the Stockholm metropolitan area. Due to space limitations, however, this theme will not be further investigated in this paper.

5.2

Time Passes;

or, the Role Played by Family Policies and Welfare Services

Laws and policies may work *outwardly* in the sense that they can be understood as instruments employed by political bodies wishing to position themselves in relation to others (Kulick 2003: 209), but they may also work effectively *inwardly*. An insight that has recently dawned upon the anthropological horizon is that there is no longer any aspect of social life which is not in some way or another affected by policies, and that policies represent a style of governance which has the effect of shaping the way people fashion themselves and conduct their lives (Shore and Wright 1997: 4). Therefore, to speak about policies is to speak about power. Although I agree that it is impossible to “explain the complexities of contemporary power” (Butler 2011: xxvi), it should be safe to state that power operates in many ways and allow this acknowledgement to justify the rather specific “inward-looking” focus of the following account.

Michel Foucault is famous for chronicling how power has been exercised throughout history. He identified the modern era as one of “bio-power” (Foucault 1990: 140). This type of power typically operates through normalisation processes and is “productive” in the sense that norms function to guide behaviour and sanction that which is deemed undesirable ways of conduct (ibid.: 144). Emily Martin (1997), however, poses the question about what kinds of power operate to regulate the bodies of today, decades after Foucault’s famous scholarship. With reference to the writings of Jaques Danzelot, she suggests that we live in a world where “continuous retraining” is required (the parallel to Bauman’s theories should be obvious). This may be detected in the changing attitude towards change, which is no longer seen as pervasive (Martin 1997: 187-188). In our “liquid modern” or “postmodern” world, which is also a “post-panoptical” world, she argues, the individual represents a body of potentials and capacities that change according to the context, and new modes of power operate to manage these. Policies are singled out as important techniques of governance, and Martin demonstrates how the message of a policy may be internalised by individuals so that they manage themselves in desired ways (ibid.: 189-192). Policies are not just guides to action, but may or may not entail coercive sanctions, which in turn serve to constitute the “new flexible, continuously changing, self-managed person” (ibid.: 184). Moreover, policies may be analysed as manifestations of certain discourses (Shore and Wright 1997: 14), and with that knowledge in mind there is no possibility for not understanding official family policies, for example, as

expressions of very specific ideas about parenthood. But it does not seem to be the case that we live in a society which is entirely “beyond” Foucault’s theorisations. Discourses, he suggests, may be revealed by what goes unsaid and can thus to be detected at the most concrete levels of reality (Foucault 1990: 28). He mentions the distribution of dormitories as a way to speak without speaking about the sexuality of children in the eighteenth century. In a similar vein, we may identify day care institutions to be concrete manifestations of discourses which communicate that parenthood is ideally achieved by full-time working or studying parents in contemporary society.

On the basis of what was mentioned in chapter 1.1, we may confidently argue that both the Icelandic state and the Swedish state provide parents with child support so that they may go to school or work, but that the latter state encourages this pattern to a larger degree. Indeed, this was something that figured importantly in the minds of my informants. In unison they admitted that they would have reconsidered their decision to become mothers at the age when they first did had it not been for governmental child support services. It becomes more burdensome to have small children when you are older and working, they reasoned. You receive less financial and other help the more you earn. The mentioned fact that these women chose to become mothers in Iceland before the issue of studies in Sweden first became relevant, suggests that Icelanders and Swedes evaluate the costs and burdens of parenthood somewhat differently. When that is said, however, it was certainly the case that my informants were very much aware of the relative differences between the Icelandic and the Swedish welfare systems. Gýða spoke of Sweden as a “really kid-friendly environment,” and for each of the women had Swedish child support arrangements been important incentives for pursuing studies here, but not for becoming parents in the first place. In other words, welfare services in general represent important reasons for why these women find it manageable (not to say “ideal”) to become mothers while also studying. This is not only the case for Icelandic mothers who move to Sweden, I argue, and refer to what has been said about my informants’ friends who follow the same pattern “back home” and the number of children that day care institutions for students in Reykjavík as compared to Lund have room for.

Considering all of this, why does it seem that the philosophical point made by Beauvoir – that motherhood is not necessarily incompatible with “transcendence” – has not taken roots in the minds of contemporary Nordic women? Indeed, research shows that those who opt for transcendental projects such as higher education or a professional career tend to postpone motherhood until education is done with, the house is bought and certain advances has been made on the career front (Nilssen 2007: 129; Tydén et al. 2006: 182-184). The young women

of this investigation, however, seem to represent quite different tendencies as they regard it to be a “perfect time” and “classical Icelandic” to become a mother while studying. To what has already been pointed out we may now add the insight that various family policies and welfare services provide important impetuses for motherhood at particular times in life. This is not to argue for a simple cause-and-effect relationship between state policies and women’s behaviour. Rather, family policies and welfare arrangements can also be seen as expressions of discourses about how the ideal parent or mother should be. Concomitantly, these discourses seem to be internalised so that women themselves come to see certain ways of conducting motherhood as appropriate and direct their behaviour accordingly. Instead of subscribing to a negative view of power that sees it as always repressive and undesirable, we should understand it as an omnipresent agent that resides everywhere (Foucault 1990: 93). And if “policy now impinges on all areas of life” (Shore and Wright 1997: 3), this becomes no less true even if we are talking in Martin’s terms about a kind of power that operates somewhat differently from the normalising bio-power identified by Foucault. By acknowledging this, we are enabled to better appreciate why young Icelandic women decide to combine motherhood and studentship. Policies and welfare arrangements are concrete incentives for motherhood before one embarks on a professional career, but they also represent agents of power that make women manage their (maternal) selves in ways that conspire with specific notions about society, education and motherhood to constitute the time when they are naturally also university students as the “perfect time.”

But why is it that particularly Icelandic women, and not Swedes, choose to become mothers at this time? When I posed this question to Gýða she took to pondering and eventually replied with a decidedly less confident tone: “maybe it’s not a part of the [Swedish] mentality.” This reply must be read as an answer which implicitly postulates that the “Icelandic mentality” concerning motherhood represent something unique, something different from the mentality of Swedes and other Nordic people. The ensuing and last subchapter will therefore pursue the question about why motherhood is such an important part of the “Icelandic mentality.”

5.3

The Lighthouse; or, Abstract Mothers and Actual Lives

“History has turned into a myth the Icelanders live by. And by being lived by, it influences present-day practice in the liminal time-space that is the now” (Hastrup 1998: 182). These are the words of Hastrup towards the end of her latest monograph about Iceland. Contemporary Icelanders live a myth, she claims, as supposedly ideas about the past loom large on their horizons and inspire current agency. This is what Marshall Sahlins (1985) has referred to as “mythopraxis.” From his writings on Polynesian conceptions of the human condition, we learn that Polynesians believe(d) that men must sometimes kill their gods in order to live themselves (Sahlins 1985: 112). Hence, the death of Captain Cook at the hands of the Hawaiians who perceived him to be the god Lono emerges as a “historical metaphor of mythical reality” (ibid.: 106). Mythopraxis is the appropriation of current events according to an established cultural scheme. In a resembling way, Bruce Kapferer argues that a myth can have the power to condition agency according to its logic: “It comes to define significant experience in the world” (1999: 47).

Considering this, it would certainly go well with established scholarship about Iceland if we concluded that the practices of concern in this thesis represent a type of mythopraxis in which the ways of women like Dís, Gýða and Sigríður may be explained as the appropriation of an already existing cultural scheme – perhaps derived from images of strong and independent ancient Icelandic women; images that have been transmitted from the sagas (Hastrup 1998: 160). Certainly, at this point we are left with an impression of Icelandic mothers as capable and strong mothers. And if we believe that “context-bound formulations are merely contingent representations of the cultural scheme” (Sahlins 1985: 103) – that is, the “structure” – then the mythopraxis-analysis becomes plausible. However, although I am liable to agree that we all “live in the past” because all experience is understood through already existing concepts (ibid.: 151), I am doubtful that such an analysis would shed the right light on the phenomenon at display if we are to capture important details in a final representation. This is mainly because there exists no Icelandic myth (to my knowledge) with any logic that may engage or be engaged by the everyday reality of contemporary Icelandic mothers.

When that is said, the notion of the strong and independent Icelandic woman as influential to the practices of concern seems undeniable. This is supported by the fact that

recourse to motherhood has aided both the Icelandic independence movement and the women's movement in their political struggles throughout history. By looking at these examples we come to see that the mother occupy a somewhat elevated symbolic position in Icelandic culture. And by acknowledging this, we immediately recall Eric Wolf's (1985) analysis of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Mexican master symbol, which gives a theoretical framework for understanding the phenomenon under investigation. Wolf considers the Virgin of Guadalupe in terms of her wider meanings and significance in the context of the lives of Mexican citizens. He reaches the conclusion that the Guadalupe is a multifaceted symbol that connects important dimensions of Mexican social life, and that it therefore "provides a cultural idiom through which the tenor and emotions of these relationships can be expressed" (Wolf 1958: 165). Although this seems to imply that the Guadalupe symbol is relevant to all Mexicans at all times, Wolf takes care to assert that this is not the case. Instead of understanding such symbols as something that provides a recipe for action to all nationals, they should rather be understood as "cultural forms" that the members of a national social complex can draw upon in their interactions with one another (ibid.: 161). Indeed, cultural forms should not be confused with function, but regarded as expected patterns of behaviour (Wolf 1956: 1075). With this knowledge in mind, I will now turn to consider the symbol of the mother in Icelandic culture before I close this chapter with a discussion about her relevance to the practices of contemporary Icelandic women. At the end of this discussion it will hopefully become clearer why Icelandic women pursue motherhood.

5.3.1

Mother Heroic

In 1262, "the freedom-loving Icelanders" (Hastrup 1998: 31) swore allegiance to the Norwegian king, and the country was not to become entirely independent until several centuries later. On the 17th of June 1944, the "dark ages" of Iceland come to an official closure when Iceland became a sovereign republic. The significant events of the process towards independence will not be recounted here, but I will note that unlike elsewhere, the only weapons in the Icelanders' struggle for independence were words and references to their glorious past (ibid.: 45). And in this war did the symbol of the mother play a significant role.

David Koester argues that the historical and cultural bases upon which Icelandic nationalism is built "give considerable weight to the feminine domain and have provided a powerful symbolic resource for political argument from women's perspectives" (1995: 572).

Notably, the early leaders of the Icelandic independence movement created the poetic image of *Fjallkonan* (literally “the Mountain Woman”), which was to become the national symbol of the Icelandic nation. She was created as a counter symbol to the Danish king, and reflected the idea that Icelanders were of a different “mother” than the Danes (Björnsdóttir 1996: 109). Similar to the Guadalupe symbol, which “is important to Mexicans not only because she is a supernatural mother, but also because she embodies the major *political* and religious aspirations” (Wolf 1958: 163, my emphasis), *Fjallkonan* represents an independent mother who embodies the uniqueness and beauty of Icelandic culture and nature.

However, Koester argues that particularly women’s roles as mothers, as social reproducers, facilitated their centrality on the Icelandic nationalist stage (Koester 1995: 573). He suggests that the answer to why mothers figure so prominently in Icelandic nationalism must be sought by looking back to the 1550 Reformation of Iceland, which created a situation where Lutheran doctrine commanded the moral education and civilisation of the Icelandic people (Hastrup 1998: 41; Koester 1995: 577). This had important effects upon the roles of parents, and due to the social organisation of Icelanders at the time, education of children had to be conducted by mothers within the independent household in the context of the mentioned cultural institution of the *kvöldvaka*. The mother thus became associated with moral and educational authority (Koester 1995: 578). Moreover, the *kvöldvaka* institution did later become the medium through which the nationalist movement operated to install an Icelandic national identity. From Denmark, nationalist propaganda was disseminated in the form of journals that were designed to be consumed as *kvöldvaka* entertainment. If we also consider the fact that that the “poetic imagery of Iceland as woman and mother [*Fjallkonan*] subsequently became a central symbol in the various publications emanating from Copenhagen” (ibid.: 580), we begin to understand why women as mothers have become a symbolic resource that Icelanders have recurrently had recourse to.

The Icelandic independence movement is obviously a relevant example, but so is also the nation’s women’s movement. The Icelandic case underscores the idea that women may be empowered by stressing their difference from men in a positive manner (Rosaldo 1974: 38). Indeed, an important reason for the Icelandic women’s movement’s many victories has been the tendency to see women as “outsiders” to the authoritative “inside” of Icelandic society, as pointed out by Sigríður Kristmundsdóttir (1989: 96).

A specific focus in Kristmundsdóttir’s writings is the women’s movement’s notions of cultural separateness of the sexes. She states that the struggle of the first women’s movement was fuelled partly by the awareness of strong and independent women of ancient Icelandic

times and the idea that women, with their “loving *mother’s* care” (ibid.: 83, my emphasis), were culturally different from men and therefore had something special to contribute within society. This was not the case with the successive wave of redstockings in the 1960s and 70s, but Kristmundsdóttir argues that their denial of feminine characteristics as positive was a factor contributing to their disintegration (ibid.: 86-87). This point has been underscored by Inga Björnsdóttir, who claims that Icelanders did not readily accept the idea that women should become equal to and the same as men because “the central configuration of the mother in nationalist discourse empowered women and helped them win some crucial political and social rights” (1996: 118). The last phase of the Icelandic women’s movement, however, revitalised the view of men and women as different groups with different values, but held on to the claim that the “social and cultural entity ‘woman’ was to be valued equally with the social and cultural entity ‘man’” (Kristmundsdóttir 1989: 91). It is also significant to note that the political party the women of this latter phase established, *Kvennalistinn*, consciously drew upon the symbol of *Fjallkonan* and won support for their case through identification with mothers (Gurdin 1996: 133).

Although *Kvennalistinn* disappeared in 1998 when it merged with two other parties to form *Samfylkingin*, it is important to note that Icelandic women have repeatedly carved out political space for themselves by sticking to the idea that motherhood is something dignified and worth its fair amount of respect. In a similar vein, we have seen how the Icelandic nationalist movement has appropriated images of the mother in their fight for independence. It is perhaps true that living heroes are unintelligible in our times (Bauman 2005: 47), but it seems that the maternal symbolically denotes heroism and permits women to be “sacred” in Icelandic culture. And furthermore, like similar symbols elsewhere, the mother can be understood as representing a cultural form that Icelandic women may resort to in discourse and practice in order to assert themselves as intelligible and worthy.

5.3.2

From the “Sacred” to the “Profane”

When we contemplate the position of the mother in the symbolic dimension of Icelandic culture, motherhood emerges as something Icelandic women can take pride in and use rather than something they should shun in order to make achievements. Despite this, however, it has to go recognised that Iceland is no longer an island in any sense except from the literal

(Pálsson 1995: 175), and that romantic nationalism has ceased to be a particularly relevant in the everyday life of the common Icelander (Durrenberger 1996: 183). Nationalism is certainly not dead in Iceland (a fact we may verify by simply pointing out that the women I spoke to consider themselves to be “Icelandic” and wish to “go home to Iceland” upon completing their education in Sweden), but it does not seem plausible to argue that contemporary Icelandic women choose to become mothers due to any feeling of obligation towards the “Icelandic nation.” Indeed, Gýða is married to someone who is not Icelandic, and never did she (or the other informants, for that matter) indicate that this was problematic.

We may, however, analyse the symbolically elevated position of mothers in Iceland in a vein similar to Wolf’s analysis of the Guadalupe symbol. By analysing the independent mother as a symbol of strength, but also as a cultural form that can be represented by the image of *Fjallkonan*, we may develop a theory that acknowledges the exalted position of mothers *and* the lessening relevance of explicit nationalism in Iceland, but without suggesting a simple cause-and-effect relationship between the “sacred” and the “profane.” After having discussed various dimensions of motherhood as manifested in the lives of Dísa, Gýða and Sigríður, we are indeed left with an image of capable women who aspire towards transcendence – to once again use the vocabulary of Simone de Beauvoir – not in spite of but rather because of their successful management of motherhood and studentship. Although the assertion that all Icelandic mothers are socially able-bodied does not reflect reality, it seems to be the case that a notion that motherhood signals strength and significance lingers somewhere in the back of Icelanders’ minds. Indeed, the independent mother may be seen as a salient cultural form among Icelanders.

In Iceland, adulthood is legally achieved at the age of eighteen, but that does not ascertain your maturity in the eyes of people around you. As Sigríður put it: “you can meet an eighteen years old person that is an adult and you can meet a thirty years old person that is not an adult.” The latter one, she continued, would not be “taking control over his own life; living at his parents’ home, not working, not studying, not doing anything; playing computer games, sleeping. Be unemployed.” By logical inference, we may suggest that Icelandic women too achieve adulthood by obtaining an education or pursuing a career. But this is not the entire truth. “In fact it can be argued that in Iceland becoming a mother is more important in becoming a grown up woman than the marital status,” says Unnur Skaptadóttir (1995: 195). Considering these arguments it seems safe to assert that to “transcend” as a person is a valued orientation towards life in Iceland. Taken together with the facts that motherhood represents a prerequisite for adulthood to women and occupies a worthy place at the symbolic level in

Icelandic culture, we may in the end understand Icelandic women's combination of motherhood and university studies as a subliminal strategy to become significant women. The Icelandic woman who remains uneducated and childless will mature with time, but the social status of adulthood and the respect it entails will perhaps never be fully accorded to her. It is therefore possible to discern a status hierarchy for women. On the extreme low end we find those women who are childless and uneducated. These are directly opposed to Dís, Gýða, Sigríður and their equals, the educated mothers, whose compelling ideas about the "perfect time" assured their significance soon after legal adulthood was obtained. Indeed, it certainly seems that parenthood and higher education function as symbolic capital – assets conferring the "right to speak" (Moi 1991: 1022) – for Icelandic women in the greater context of the Icelandic society.

6.0

Conclusion

Problems are things that are difficult to deal with or understand. Both motherhood and education, let alone a range of other endeavours a woman may embark upon, are problematic from time to time, but that does not necessarily imply that anything is conceived of as fundamentally so. To young Icelandic women, both parenthood and studentship is seen as unproblematic in the sense that both are thought of as natural parts of a woman's life.

This paper has asserted that Icelandic women, in contrast to their Nordic cousins, are inclined to become mothers when relatively young; after high school and adolescence, but before the completion of higher education. A consistent argument has been that the combination of motherhood and studentship is viewed as ideal rather than unfortunate and this claim is powerfully underscored by their tendency to regard this time a "perfect time" for motherhood. It is of course true that many Icelandic women follow other trajectories without being condemned. However, considering the painless effort it takes to encounter a young Icelandic mother who is also a student, and the fact that Icelanders themselves conceive of this practice as "classical Icelandic" as opposed to, for example, the "Swedish way" of postponing parenthood until higher education is completed, it seems valid to suggest that Icelandic women exercise and think of motherhood in a very specific way. This means that Björk was obviously exaggerating when she said that most people in Iceland have children at the age of sixteen, but she was nevertheless right when she implied that Icelanders do not reproach anyone for being "unsalvageable" due to childbearing at relatively early ages. As we have seen, however, motherhood is perhaps not encouraged in the same manner if a woman is single or too young; that is, a teenager.

Icelanders do not live a myth anymore than you and I. But that does not mean that specific conceptions of the world do not conspire to render motherhood desirable earlier in the eyes of Icelandic women. It goes without saying that young women who are habituated to seeing other young women becoming mothers when they are university students may not think of this phenomenon as particularly strange or problematic. However, the ambition to account for why this is compels us to go beyond the reductionist answer that it is simply a matter of imitation. The foregoing investigation has thus jettisoned established models of the world that keep seeing it as consisting of dualistic and complementary domains that *either* men *or* women are associated with. Today it is difficult to draw clear lines between nature and

culture, male and female, and private and public, to mention the dualisms that have been at issue. As a fundament upon which further inquiries could be exercised, I argued that it is necessary to appreciate how Icelandic women do not consider themselves to be “out of place” whether outside or within their households, and that this conception represent a vital precondition for their combination of parenthood and studentship. Furthermore, if we attempt to look closer at these institutions by situating them in the context of larger societal changes, the empirical record reveals that contemporary Icelandic mothers always regard themselves to be mothers, but not in the sense that they are “just moms” who cannot endure temporary separation from their children. It is perfectly okay to be a mother and a student at the same time. Education, moreover, is commonly conceived of as not the same as “work,” but rather something that will eventually lead to it. And if respectability is achieved through advances on the labour market, it is not so odd that higher education is desirable and considered “a natural step” for the average Icelandic woman who plans to obtain a job sometime in the future. In turn, the idea that higher education entails much more flexibility than a typical job is one of several important factors that encourage motherhood while being a student. But family policies and welfare services cannot go unmentioned. As women are accorded less money and time off to take care of children when they are employed, they come to consider motherhood as something potentially more burdensome as time passes. When that is said, policies and the discourses that bred them should also be regarded as techniques of government that may be materialised in society and internalised by citizens. In this way we see how women themselves can reach the conclusion that motherhood is properly combined with their pursuit of transcendental projects, be it higher education or a career.

In Iceland, the independent mother has continuously been elevated as a symbol of strength to which Icelanders have had recourse in order to assert themselves and make achievements. This has been true in the cases of Icelandic nationalism and the Icelandic women’s movement. We may furthermore argue the competent mother represents a cultural form that Icelandic women are confronted with and may resort to in order to assert themselves as significant. Taken together with the fact that motherhood is a precondition for adulthood for Icelandic women, we can see why it is common for Icelandic women to become mothers when relatively young, but also why they choose to combine motherhood and higher education. In the end, I think, we may properly analyse this phenomenon as a cultural strategy to not just become a significant woman, but more accurately as a strategy to become a *mother who matters* in the greater context of the Icelandic society.

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