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Trapped in Coloniality: (S)extocization of Africa in Season 2 of The Icelandic Crime-Series *Trapped*

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Abstract

This article explores how the popular Icelandic Nordic Noir series, *Trapped* Season 2, provides a nuanced perspective on the deeply rooted concepts of Icelandic and Nordic exceptionalism and homonationalism in popular culture. It offers a complex discourse on the portrayal of the foreign other through representational practices that exoticize individuals from the Global South. In the series, Iceland is depicted as a cosmopolitan utopia for others (such as Africans), while simultaneously maintaining a narrative of undesirable foreign influence that reinforces an exclusionary view toward the Global South. We employ the notions of Nordic exceptionalism and homonationalism to illustrate the dichotomies present in Season 2 of the series and to examine how popular media can reinforce harmful and exclusionary discourses.

Keywords: Iceland, Africa, exceptionalism, homonationalism, popular culture, media

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Introduction

Achille Mbembe (2001) writes in *On the Postcolony*:

> [it] is now widely acknowledged that Africa as an idea, a concept, has historically served, and continues to serve, as a polemical argument for the West's desperate desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world. In several respects, Africa still constitutes one of the metaphors through which the West represents the origin of its own norms, develops a self-image, and integrates this image into the set of signifiers asserting what it supposes to be its identity. (p. 2)

In the case of Africa, Mbembe's quotation highlights how the West constructs the Global South as an exotic other. This serves to shape the self-image or identity of the West as developed and modern. Through exoticization, the West creates a positive image of itself while simultaneously portraying the (exotic) other as inferior or different. In this sense, the West dissociates itself from the other by portraying Africa, for instance, through dystopian imagery, as ravaged by war, disease, and poverty, which in turn masks its colonial legacy under layers of historical amnesia and selective remembrance (Kiernan 1995; Mohamed 2024). This image of the exotic other also feeds into Western narratives of superiority and exceptionalism (Loftsdóttir 2015; 2022). 'Far away' cultures and places in the Global South become the object of Western fetishism and (sexual) desire. Ulrike Schaper et al. (2020) have argued that this dynamic operates at the intersection of exoticization and sexual objectification, coining the term sexoticization. Thus, the mechanisms of exoticization/sexoticization not only sustain and reproduce Western superiority and dominance but also draw attention to the coloniality of power and the power imbalances between those who are the object of sexoticization and those who are doing the sexoticizing.

Our paper contributes to the growing understanding of how the exotic other is portrayed in popular culture in the Global North and South (Loftsdóttir 2015; Martynuska 2016; Loftsdóttir et al. 2017; Meghani and Saeed 2019; Huggan 2020), focusing particularly on the sexual objectification of the exotic male other (Berghahn 2021). In this paper, we examine how the discourse of Nordic exceptionalism is maintained and constituted through the representation of the exotic other. This exceptionalism intersects with the narrative of the White saviour and the portrayal of a Western utopia regarding civil rights, especially those concerning LGBTIQ+ rights and gender equality. We draw upon the Icelandic crime series *Trapped*, directed by Baltazar Kormákur, Börkur Sigþórsson, Óskar Þór Axelsson, and Ugla Hauksdóttir, to illustrate the dynamics of sexoticization and exceptionalism in Icelandic media. Reviewing Season 2 (2018), we investigate contemporary discourse surrounding the exoticization of individuals from the Global South.

Kristín Loftsdóttir et al. (2017), primarily focusing on the series' first season, demonstrate how Iceland is presented to the outside world. They highlight the depiction of Iceland and its people as exotic. This self-exoticization serves to brand Iceland as an appealing destination, portraying Icelandic society as advanced and modern while showcasing its exotic qualities, such as its 'unspoiled' and wild nature alongside its strong and resilient inhabitants. However, the mechanisms of (s)exoticization concerning the other from the Global South are also evident in the series, particularly in the second season. It can be argued that the exoticization of Iceland aims to present it as liberal and 'civilized' in terms of sexual rights, while depicting the Global South as a region that is uncivilized, underdeveloped, and conservative concerning sexual rights.

We adopt a decolonial/postcolonial perspective to analyse the workings of sexual exoticization/sexoticization in media narratives and how these contribute to the discourse of exceptionalism and homonationalism (discussed in the theoretical section). Our focus is specifically on the intersection of ethnic background, gender, and sexuality, illustrating how various colonial tropes are reproduced in media narratives and how they contribute to the creation of Iceland as an exceptional place regarding gender equality and sexual diversity. In doing so, this paper aims to explore how popular culture perpetuates and reinforces colonial discourses (the coloniality of power) by constructing Iceland as a modern, progressive, and strong nation. Simultaneously, the (s)exotic other is objectified, depicted as uncivilized, and, particularly in the context of LGBTIQ+ rights, portrayed as in need of rescue.

The (s)exotic other, exceptionalism, and homonationalism

The concept of exceptionalism is rooted in a narrative of superiority. This narrative is closely tied to modernity and progress in the Global North, influencing the economic and technical spheres, as well as the attitudes and civil rights of various groups (Maldonaldo-Torres 2004, 243). The portrayal of modern and cosmopolitan societies is therefore based on a Eurocentric and Weberian understanding of modernity, which posits that modernity originated in the Global North and subsequently spread to other cultures, acquiring universal significance (Mignolo 2021, 1–7). Thus, it establishes a dichotomy between 'us' in the Global North and the 'rest' in the Global South regarding modernity and progress, e.g., in terms of human rights and civil society. Discourses originating outside the Global North, particularly those concerning identity and subject formation, should be viewed as fundamentally distinct from the dominant modern discourses. This distinction is framed as a 'centre-periphery relation', with modernity and complexity at the centre and tradition and simplicity at the periphery. In other words, through the discourse of exceptionalism, European and Western societies are depicted as modern and progressive, and thus perceived as superior to the 'rest' in the Global South (Kjaran and Naeimi 2022, 25–28).

In recent decades, the Nordic region has been discursively constructed as exceptional, being represented as more democratic, modern, progressive, non-discriminatory, gender-equal, inclusive of LGBTIQ+ people, and freer from racism than the rest of the world (Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2016, 1–11). Furthermore, in the Nordic region, particularly in Iceland, the discourse on exceptionalism has been associated with a perception of historical innocence regarding colonialism. For instance, the prevailing narrative in Iceland portrays the country as a victim rather than a beneficiary of European colonialism, given that Icelanders did not directly engage in the European colonial project (Hálfdanarson 2005). Until 1918, Iceland was under Danish rule, which has been interpreted in public discourse as a form of colonialism, although Iceland was never a formal Danish colony (Hálfdanarson 2000; Loftsdóttir 2011, 2014, 2015; Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2016). This perspective has led to a discourse of exceptionalism in Iceland, based on a historical narrative of innocence and a disconnection from the colonial project (Loftsdóttir 2022, 201–203). This discourse has highlighted the resilience and ability of its inhabitants to transform the country from a 'primitive' rural community into a progressive and modern, high-income, cosmopolitan society (Loftsdóttir 2020, 53).

Cosmopolitanism has traditionally been understood as openness to foreign others and cultures, characterized by a sense of transnational engagement and belonging as part of a 'global citizenry' (Kendall et al. 2009). In the digital platform era, the proliferation

of streaming platforms such as Netflix, as Benjamin Han (2023) argues, "allows the emergence of cosmopolitan – beyond local and domestic – audiences, who consider culturally specific television programs more authentic and their consumption as expressive of their progressive views and investments in diversity" (p. 2). This dynamic produces cultural specificity in our collective cultural memory, which speaks to an illusion or anxiety about valorizing the self in terms of progress while valorizing the specificity of other cultures through the lens of exoticization and backwardness. In this context, one might argue that cosmopolitan discourses of modernity and progress contribute to the formation of exceptionalism.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, however, cosmopolitanism constitutes an issue of institutionalized and embodied forms of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1983) that include "bodily and mental predispositions and competencies (savoir faire) which help to engage confidently in such [transnational] arenas" (Weenink 2008, 1092). In the global expansion of the neoliberal politico-economic environment, characterized by hierarchies and power imbalances, capital shapes individuals' habitus, embodied skills, and capabilities, reflecting their social position within a global competition for dominance. A cosmopolitan individual must be strategic in adapting certain bodies of knowledge (Kendall et al. 2009), sociocultural norms (Binnie et al. 2006), everyday life practices (Plummer 2015), and a requisite level of education (Binnie et al. 2006; Kendall et al. 2009) to develop predispositions and competencies that offer them "propensity to engage in globalising social arenas" (Weenink 2008, 1091). In this sense, "cosmopolitanism, which appears to be desirable at first glance, may in fact perpetuate stratification, an unequal distribution of power within a population" (Igarashi and Saito 2014, 224) that gives rise to exclusion as well as inequalities due to the unequal distribution of capital and resources rooted in the neoliberal agenda. Thus, while cosmopolitanism and exceptionalism are both represented as particular attitudes toward difference, these attitudes produce politics of inclusion for 'some' while simultaneously excluding 'others'.

In the Icelandic context, these exclusionary politics determine who can be included or excluded as an Icelandic subject within the exceptional national body, mediated by whiteness and fluency in the Icelandic language (Pálsson 2013; Rawlings et al. 2020; Kjaran and Halldórsdóttir 2022). In 2004, the image of a Black African woman in Icelandic national costume caused an uproar on social media because she did not fit the social imaginary of an Icelandic woman (Grapevine 2023). As Sara Ahmed (2007) has argued, whiteness "orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they take up space and what they can do" (p. 149). Through such placement, whiteness is institutionalized by systemic habits and bodily orientations, as well as proximity to particular objects, which provide a sense of 'familiarity' and 'belonging' for certain bodies, while conversely producing 'strangeness' and 'exclusion' for others in an exceptional, cosmopolitan society. Thus, the case of a Black woman wearing the Icelandic national costume draws attention to whiteness and how it is institutionalized, allowing some bodies to be perceived as part of the national image while excluding others. The other, when positioned within the dominant White space, elicits feelings of 'strangeness' and 'unfamiliarity', while at the same time becoming an object of (s)exoticization. As the front-page image of Sheba, an African woman, wearing the Icelandic national costume demonstrates, it disturbs the conception of whiteness in the imaginary of the national costume, whilst at the same time objectifying the woman as an (s)exotic other. This draws our attention to the thin line between disrupting dominant White spaces through the tokenistic inclusion of Black bodies and (re)production of the discourse of (s)exoticization.

In *Orientalism* (2003), Edward Said argues that the exoticization of the other – those from non-Western societies – pervades Western popular culture and discourse, constructed and presented through the lens of its own hegemonic culture. In this respect, hegemonic culture utilizes othering to establish distinctions between sameness and difference, thereby reinforcing its own cultural identity (Grove and Zwi 2006; Dervin and Simpson 2021). This othering occurs through language and experiences at individual, societal, and institutional levels (Dervin 2015), reinforcing Western notions of normality (Grove and Zwi 2006, 1933). In this context, othering sustains and produces hierarchies of bodies (Dervin 2015), where certain bodies are objectified or exoticized and stripped of subjectivity through hegemonic discourses of normality. As Kristín Loftsdóttir (2022) points out, within the Nordic/Icelandic context, non-White bodies predominantly encounter (sexual) objectification and othering. They also face constant pressure to validate their inclusion in the Nordic context, as the hegemonic discourse frames them as the foreign (exotic) other, thus excluding them from the Nordic narrative of exceptionalism.

These processes of othering and exclusion intersect with the discourse on equality and civil rights, particularly in relation to gender equality and sexual diversity. The equality discourse of the last few decades has defined Icelandic national identity and promoted the image of Iceland as being a 'modern' (cosmopolitan) nation. For instance, the immigrant other is often perceived as 'primitive' and 'lacking' in terms of gender equality, which serves as a racist othering tool. This also applies to LGBTIQ+ rights and 'tolerance' towards sexual diversity, which Jasbir Puar (2007) has framed as homonationalism. According to her, homotolerance in the West has been mobilized in racist discourses, producing homonationalism – a narrative of progress for LGBTIQ+ rights that includes some members of the LGBTIQ+ community in the national imaginary while excluding those from other racial, ethnic, or religious backgrounds. Accordingly, homonationalism has become part of nationalism and nation-building in the Global North over the last few decades, where LGBTIQ+ rights are used to construct an image of modernity and tolerance. Consequently, homonationalism is linked to Western exceptionalism and cosmopolitanism, starkly contrasting with the 'rest', primarily Muslim-dominated societies, which are portrayed as intolerant and repressive regarding sexuality and gender equality. Thus, the protection and human rights of LGBTIQ+ individuals, particularly in Western Europe, serve as markers of alleged modernity, tolerance, and progressiveness, establishing boundaries between the homotolerant self and the homophobic (immigrant) other. Homophobic discourse in the Global South is used to bolster or promote the self-image of the Global North as a bearer of human rights, an exceptional region regarding sexual diversity and gender equality. Similarly, through the mechanisms of homonationalism, the promotion and defence of LGBTIQ+ rights have become a crucible of othering discourses, particularly concerning Africa and the homophobic 'rest'. Homonationalism, thus, can be viewed as a trope of (neo)colonial discourse that constitutes both the colonized other and the colonizer.

Drawing on a utopian imaginary of gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights, Iceland is frequently portrayed as a beacon of gender and sexual diversity. According to reports and maps from ILGA (the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association), Iceland has consistently ranked among the top ten countries in terms of legal and civil rights enactment for LGBTIQ+ protection (ILGA Europe 2023). These indices and international rankings reinforce and sustain the narrative of exceptionalism while failing to provide an intersectional lens that accurately reflects the realities faced by queer individuals with

intersecting identities, particularly those who are queers of colour, migrants, and refugees, who encounter racism, exclusion, discrimination, and various forms of othering (Held 2022; Ammaturo and Slootmaeckers 2025). Íris Ellenberger (2017) argues that in recent years, the image of Iceland has become linked with the concept of a 'gay utopia', or a 'safe space' that is built upon a homonationalist discourse. This image, she contends, is rooted in racism and anti-multiculturalism, which together act as technologies of othering to exclude individuals from different racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Highlighting Icelandic exceptionalism and the racialization of LGBTIQ+ issues, Guðmundsdóttir and Skaptadóttir (2017) demonstrate how queer migrants, in their attempts to cultivate belonging within Icelandic queer communities and the broader Icelandic society, "potentially face multiple discrimination, for example, regarding the politics of belonging, being non-White or a 'foreigner,' or in connection to language fluency, and relating to the performance of the 'correct queerness'" (p. 59). Thus, exceptionalism is intertwined with processes of othering and (s)exoticizing those perceived as coming from the 'outside'.

Data and methods

This article examines eight episodes of the second season of the Icelandic crime series *Trapped* (Ófærð), which aired on Icelandic national television in 2018 (March and Zimmermann 2018). It continues from the first season, also broadcast on Icelandic national television in 2016, and follows rural police officers as they investigate murder cases in a small fishing village in Iceland. The investigation intersects with the story of an African (presumably gay) male migrant worker who is in a relationship with a blonde Icelandic man. The *Trapped* saga can be viewed as a character-driven crime drama. It can be categorized as belonging to the Nordic Noir genre, distinguished by bleak settings, morally complex characters, and a socially critical undertone (Hill and Turnbull 2017). Furthermore, as Anne Marit Waade and Kim Toft Hansen (2017) argue, the Nordic Noir films/series are "place-space orientated", with places and landscapes playing an essential role in structuring the narrative and being central to its effects. In that respect, *Trapped* showcases the stunning landscapes of Iceland and takes place in a remote fishing village, blocked for days due to a heavy snowstorm, which contributes further to its mystical and bleak settings. The series was well received both internationally and in Iceland, having been broadcast on the BBC and released on Netflix. It can be argued that the series represents Iceland on a national level while also connecting with diverse cultures within global communities.

To analyse the data, the authors viewed all episodes from the second season, taking field notes and making self-reflections regarding the topic under investigation. These were then organized into themes and sub-themes for further analysis and discussion. Subsequently, the focus was on two main themes presented in the findings, which were then reanalysed using critical discourse analysis of representation from a decolonial perspective (Passada 2019). The decolonial perspective acknowledges how classifications and qualifications from the Global North perpetuate material inequalities and critically examines the theoretical and epistemological frameworks employed in the analysis (Ahmed 2020, 144–145). It provides a critical framework for analysing and dismantling the power dynamics inherent in traditional knowledge production, fostering a more equitable and inclusive understanding of social realities. In this respect, discourse analysis from a decolonial perspective is particularly useful for interpreting and critiquing messages and meanings, both implicit and explicit, embedded in various cultural texts and media, thereby highlighting the ongoing impact of colonial legacies in contemporary society.

Our positionality also influenced our analysis and interpretation of the data. Two authors are from Iceland, while the third author hails from the Global South, having immigrated from Iran to Iceland several years ago. All of us have long engaged with feminist, queer, and colonial theories in academia and possess extensive experience teaching students from diverse backgrounds. Regarding sexuality and gender identity, the first author identifies as gay and non-binary, the second author as non-heterosexual and cisgender, and the third as cisgender gay. These varied positions enabled us to engage more critically with the data and analysis. They also became an essential analytical tool in our discussions, creating, borrowing from Freire (2000), a space of critical consciousness.

Findings

The (s)exotic others and exotic natives

The second season of *Trapped* opens with a man immolating himself and a government minister in front of the Icelandic Parliament in Reykjavík. The man is protesting the expansion of a geothermal power plant that will pollute his neighbourhood area. The power plant is owned by foreigners reputed to be Muslims. From the outset, the plot establishes a stark division between the locals, who live in harmony with nature and wish to protect the environment, and the (Muslim) foreign others, who come to spoil and pollute the land. In this context, pollution originates from the outside and is facilitated by Icelandic politicians who are more concerned with creating jobs and garnering votes than caring for the environment. In one scene, the car of a local female politician is vandalized with the word "múslimasleikja", which could be translated as 'Muslim licker'. The sexual undertone of the word 'licker' also serves to draw attention to the gendered aspects, as it is aimed at a female politician who is working with Muslim foreigners. This suggests the racialized and exoticized fear and disgust of the White man towards Black and Brown bodies (see, e.g., hooks 2015, 45–46). The external source of environmental pollution by implied Muslim investors can be understood symbolically as representative of the 'cultural' pollution of Islam (Muslims) in Europe. Such a social discourse has been upheld and proclaimed by populist right-wing political parties, feeding into the Islamophobic discourse in European societies (Engy 2017; Bayrakli and Hafez 2017).

In contrast, throughout the second season, the xenophobic and Islamophobic rhetoric is rejected. The characters espousing such views are portrayed as simplistic, peculiar, and exotic nativists. In this regard, they are excluded from the dominant narrative of Icelandic and Nordic exceptionalism, which encourages individuals to embrace diversity and become global or cosmopolitan citizens (Pálsson 2013; Loftsdóttir 2019). For instance, Hanna Stína, the female leader of the right-wing nativist group *Thor's Hammer* (Hamar Þórs), is depicted as fanatical and simplistic, belonging to a group of Icelanders who believe in the purity of Icelandic culture and language. This is illustrated in the following dialogue between her and one of the main protagonists, Andri, the big-city police detective brought in to investigate a series of murders that have occurred in the small fishing village:

> Before we know it, we will be speaking English within the walls of our homes. What are we going to do then? We will become a minority in our own country, and then we cannot do anything. We can merely watch the ruins. We cannot communicate in our language, and nobody seems to fucking care about it. I will never become a property of some fucking foreigners. Never!

(Hanna Stína, Season 2, Episode 4, 00:38:24)

Hanna Stína's concerns about becoming a minority in her 'own' country and losing her cultural roots have been prominent discursive themes in right-wing nativist rhetoric across Europe (Wodak 2015, 105–110). This discourse reflects a fear of the unfamiliar, but it is also perceived as a loss of power, whether manifested in cultural identity, language, or epistemic superiority (Maldonado-Torres 2004, 244). Therefore, for members of *Thor's Hammer*, preserving Icelandic culture and language is crucial, as they are at risk of being polluted by the rising influx of migrants.

In that sense, the political agenda of *Thor's Hammer* centres on preservation and homogeneity, contrasting with the dominant narrative of exceptional national imaginary. The group employs Nordic symbols and mythology; for example, Thor's Hammer refers to Thor, the Nordic god of thunder, symbolizing strength and protection. By using such symbolism, they construct a bridge to the glorious golden era of the *Sagas*, emphasizing their agenda of protecting their cultural heritage from polluting foreigners. The group are portrayed as exotic (outside of the normal Icelandic understanding of the sagas) and naïve nativists. This perception is then reinforced by Andri, the police inspector, when he says to his colleague, Hinrika, the main female protagonist: "Terrible when people use mythology and even the Icelandic Sagas to fabricate this kind of bullshit" (Season 2, Episode 3, 00:31:17). Andri positions himself as critical and modern, implying primitiveness in how the members of the right-wing nativist group utilize cultural symbols and themes from the past to support their cause. Throughout the series, he and Hinrika are presented as tolerant and cosmopolitan. Andri is a seasoned police officer from the big city, while Hinrika, as the police chief in a small village, is depicted as a resourceful and resilient female. She embodies the strong Icelandic woman, underscoring the narrative of Iceland as a feminist utopia that has achieved full gender equality (Einarsdóttir 2020).

Alongside migration and foreign investment, sexual diversity and homophobia are significant themes in this season of the series. Víkingur (the name means 'a Viking') is in a romantic and sexual relationship with Ebo (a relatively common West African name), a Ghanaian who works with Víkingur at the geothermal power plant. Víkingur is open about his sexuality, while Ebo must conceal his relationship with Víkingur from his brother-in-law and co-workers at the factory. Throughout the season, homophobia is depicted as something foreign, either situated in Ghana or Africa, or among the foreign workers (mainly from Poland) at the plant. In comparison, most local villagers are portrayed as quite tolerant towards sexual diversity. In that respect, one could argue that the contrast between the tolerant locals and the homophobic foreigners contributes to the discourse surrounding Iceland as an exceptional place regarding sexual diversity. In other words, homophobia in this season is contextualized within the homonationalist discourse, which serves as a crucible for othering discourses, particularly concerning Africa.

In the episodes, Africa is essentialized and depicted as a dystopian place regarding attitudes towards sexual diversity. This representation draws on dominant media narratives in the Global North, which often highlight the criminalization of same-sex sexual activity in African countries, such as Ghana, through a lens of selective remembrance and historical amnesia that obscures the role of Western colonialism in the original imposition of these

laws.[1] Same-sex relationships were historically present across African societies prior to colonial intervention, which introduced legal and moral laws aimed at criminalizing same-sex relationships (Tamale 2011; Ngwena 2018). In fact, 'sodomy', which includes same-sex consensual sexual acts, is criminalized in 31 out of 54 African countries (Amnesty International 2024), and the majority of these laws are direct remnants from colonial-era legislation. For example, in Ghana, through the British Criminal Code, anti-sodomy laws were introduced in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Section 104 of Ghana's current Criminal Offences Act (1960), which criminalizes "unnatural carnal knowledge", is a direct legacy of British colonial law (Ako 2023), modelled after the British Offences Against the Person Act of 1861 and its revisions (Atuguba 2019). However, constituting Africa as 'homophobic' and dystopian with regards to sexuality and gender diversity can also be harmful for the local queer community. Ashley Currier (2018), writing about the Malawian context, has, for example, demonstrated that external criticism from the Global North, amongst other things from former colonizers, has sometimes had the reverse effects and strengthened what she defines as "politicised homophobia" (p. 242). Furthermore, this kind of narrative which draws on homonationalism, reproduced in the series, depicts Africa as backwards in terms of LGBTIQ+ rights, while queer livability can only be imagined outside of the continent, i.e., in the Global North. In that respect, sexual minorities in Africa are often (mis)represented in the Western media discourse and reduced to their experiences of homophobia, criminalization, and discrimination. The same reductive practices are then frequently applied to its inhabitants in general: they lack names or identities and are merely referred to as 'from Africa'. This becomes evident in one scene when Víkingur is having dinner with his family (Season 2, Episode 5, 00:46:15):

> Víkingur: Do you know where to apply for a residence permit?
> Stefán (family member of Víkingur): That can be rather difficult. It would be much easier if he were from Europe.
> Víkingur: Yes.
> Stefán's mother: Is this because of the African boy?

In the dialogue, Ebo is reduced to a mere object through the racist tropes and assumptions of the other, who neither speaks nor has a name. He is merely the "African boy", representing an entire continent without a name or country of origin. Africa thus becomes a symbol of the mistreatment of sexual minorities, portrayed as uncivilized and barbaric (Epprecht 2008). It can therefore be argued that these portrayals reflect the subtle influences of colonial discourse, which has infantilized black men to control them through domestication and humiliation. In fact, as bell hooks (2004) argues, the white supremacist patriarchy has applied both demonizing and domesticating strategies to disempower the Black male bodies. They are seen as a threat, depicted as 'bestial animal' and 'hypermasculine', and as needing to be contained through the "process of fetishization that renders the black masculine 'menace' feminine through a process of patriarchal objectification" (p. 75). Furthermore, in the dialogue initiated by Víkingur, the "African boy" needs rescuing, as he comes from a place where gays are persecuted and must live their lives hiding from their 'authentic' selves. However, as Stefán, Víkingur's family member, points out, this may prove difficult, as Ebo is not from Europe, highlighting the strict migration regimes that

[1] Some scholars have referred to these colonial legacies in criminalizing same-sex sexual acts as 'unfinished decolonization', which have in the last decades been increasingly enforced, for example in Uganda and Namibia (see, e.g., Amusan et al. 2019; Currier and Gogul 2020, 103–107).

limit the mobility of migrants from outside Europe/Schengen, as discussed by Jón Ingvar Kjaran and Brynja E. Halldórsdóttir (2022) in the context of migrant women in Iceland.

So, what purpose does including the character of Ebo as Víkingur's boyfriend serve in the script? Why does Víkingur, who is blonde, blue-eyed, and masculine, not have a local boyfriend? As suggested earlier, Ebo represents Africa, a dystopian place for LGBTIQ+ individuals. In that respect, he highlights the contrast with Iceland, a modern and progressive society in terms of sexual diversity. Furthermore, as we will discuss in greater detail in the next section, the series implies that Ebo's future happiness can only be realized in Iceland, where he can live openly without fear of persecution based on his sexuality. Iceland is therefore presented as a haven for queer migrants. Thus, the (s)exotic queer other is introduced in *Trapped* in ways which align with the established narrative of Icelandic exceptionalism, fostering a national imaginary of tolerance and inclusivity. This image is rooted in racist ideology, anti-multiculturalism, colonialism, and the exclusion of queer immigrants and refugees (Ellenberger 2017; Guðmundsdóttir and Skaptadóttir 2017).

In some intimate scenes between Víkingur and Ebo, Ebo is depicted as a symbol of the (s)exotic other (Season 2, Episode 3, 00:25:15; Season 2, Episode 3, 00:26:05). Lying next to Víkingur, Ebo's naked black body highlights the contrast between them, not only in terms of bodily entanglement and intimacy but also regarding culture and their differing experiences. Ebo reveals how he witnessed his first boyfriend (Season 2, Episode 3, 00:25:15) being brutalized and nearly killed after his father discovered he was gay/non-heterosexual.[2] Although it is later revealed in the series that Víkingur has faced homophobic remarks, he has never experienced anything as traumatic as Ebo's story. The series emphasizes that local homophobia operates at an individual level, perpetrated by a homophobic minority, rather than, as the series portrays it in Ghana, at a societal level. Furthermore, the positioning of the two men in the scenes depicted below underscores the contrast between them. In these intimate images, Víkingur is portrayed as nurturing and caring, although positioned below or behind Ebo, thus drawing attention to the contrast and exotic beauty of the Black male body. Ebo becomes a visual object of the White gaze, which, as Keith Harris (2012) has demonstrated, has become a strategic way to exert visual power over Black male bodies. They are to be seen, contained, and visually enjoyed, portrayed as aesthetically beautiful but at the same time perceived as hypermasculine and 'bestial'.

In need of being rescued

The story of Ebo gradually unfolds, and viewers learn more about his life in Ghana. He is portrayed as suffering an inner conflict, missing his wife and children back home while simultaneously yearning to be with Víkingur, his Icelandic 'boyfriend'. He also fears that his brother-in-law will discover his relationship with Víkingur. This existential dilemma becomes one of the subthemes in the series, leading to conflicts and arguments between Ebo and Víkingur. Ebo's story, particularly

[2] In Ghana some members of the LGBTIQ+ community use the indigenous word *sasso* as an identity category for gay/queer men, predominantly for those seen as effeminate and/or as transgressing strict gender binaries in their appearances or behaviour (see, e.g., Otu 2022, 2–4). In that respect, it is important to highlight the context-specific adoption of identity categories in order to understand better how sexuality and gender diversity are experienced and embodied in local contexts. The friend, Ebo mentions, might thus have identified as *sasso*, and not as gay, an identity label that has come to be understood in the Global North as encompassing a variety of subject positions amongst gay men. In other words, as Otu (2022) reminds us, Western experiential as well as existential / ontological frames in terms of sexuality and gender are not universal and should be interrogated when applied to the African context (p. 5).

his portrayal as being in the closet and having to maintain a heterosexual façade – not only in Iceland but also in Ghana through marriage – serves to highlight the situation of gays and lesbians in Africa/Ghana. In fact, the series suggests only two solutions to Ebo's dilemma: either to continue fulfilling the societal heterosexual role expected of him or, as is presented as the preferred option, to emigrate to Iceland, where he can live freely and openly in the presumed queer paradise. At the same time, homophobia is depicted as foreign, practised in countries beyond the 'civilized' boundaries of the West. The so-called 'backward' and 'uncivilized' countries in the Global South thus serve as a reminder to the audience of how progressive Iceland is in terms of LGBTIQ+ rights. Even in the small, remote fishing village where the story is set, being gay or lesbian is not regarded as an issue, and those few locals who express homophobia are portrayed as either naïve or simply malevolent. Consequently, Ebo's narrative and his existential dilemma are infused with a homonationalist rhetoric, depicting Iceland as an exceptional place where same-sex sexuality is entirely accepted.

Ebo's narrative not only constructs a binary contrast between homophobic Africa and exceptional Iceland but also draws on the theme of the White saviour. This theme echoes Gayatri Spivak's suggestion in the context of the British colonialization of India, where control and domination were justified by the notion of saving Brown women from Brown men (Spivak 1988, 297). In this respect, Africa, symbolized here by the character of Ebo, needs to be rescued. This is assumed to be important for Ebo to become his true self, out and proud. It is therefore assumed that Ebo is unhappy because he must repress his inner 'gay' (non-heterosexual) self, although his 'gayness' is never discussed. Ebo is shown talking to his wife and two children in Ghana via Skype, expressing his love and care. This presents a dilemma for Ebo, since it is implied that his marriage was a forced choice, suggesting that he is, in fact, gay or at least not heterosexual. Thus, aligned with the rescue narrative, Ebo needs to be saved from his own culture to end his victimization based on his perceived sexuality.

In this context, Víkingur is presented as the White saviour, who asks Ebo to stay with him in Iceland and promises to assist him in every respect. However, Ebo is never granted the space to express himself and articulate what he truly desires. It is, however, presumed that Ghana is a perilous place for gay individuals and people like Ebo. This is highlighted at the end of the final episode in a dialogue between Víkingur and his mother. His mother inquires what happened to Ebo, and Víkingur responds that he returned to Ghana (Season 2, Episode 8, 00:35):

> The mother: Oh. I thought it would be so dangerous for him [to go back to Ghana].
> Víkingur: Yes, it is.

The (queer) migrant, as in the case of Ebo, has no future outside of Iceland, as expressed in the dialogue between Víkingur and his mother. In that respect, building on and queering Frantz Fanon's (1967) conception of the Black man as the 'other', one could argue that the queer migrant serves as an inverted other who affirms the subjectivity of (often White) queers in the Global North. At the same time, countries in the Global North are tightening their laws and regulations regarding migration (asylum seekers and refugees), which the series does not discuss in detail. Thus, on the one hand, the Global North seeks to be perceived as a queer utopia, open to everyone fleeing persecution, thereby creating an image of Iceland as a queer haven. On the other hand, Icelandic migration regimes limit those who can move freely and impose strict rules and regulations regarding the process of gaining refuge/asylum in the supposed queer paradise. In one scene in Episode 5, Víkingur proposes marriage to Ebo

in the hope of 'saving' him from returning to a culture depicted as hostile to Ebo's way of life (Season 2, Episode 5, 00:27). Here again, the focus is on the exceptionalism of the Icelandic context and the backwardness and savagery of the other culture, where homosexuality is not accepted, and even criminalized and punished, as we previously discussed.

Conclusion

The Icelandic Series *Trapped*, Season 2, offers a complex view of how Icelandic and Nordic exceptionalism, along with homonationalism, are deeply ingrained in popular culture, providing a nuanced representation of the foreign other. In the series, Iceland is portrayed as a cosmopolitan utopia for the foreign other, while the undesirable consequences of foreign influence that reinforce an exclusionary view towards the Global South are highlighted. These themes are embodied by the sophisticated, worldly police officer who welcomes the changes brought by the foreign other, in contrast to the naïve, simplistic rural resident who fears foreign influence. At the same time, the show portrays foreign others as showing little concern for the environment, while local Icelanders go to great lengths to protect nature and the country's national and historical aspects. This creates a conflict regarding the need to preserve Iceland's pristine, undisturbed image from foreign intervention.

Additionally, within this rural context, the love affair between Víkingur (an Icelander) and Ebo (a Ghanaian man) is presented as acceptable within the local community. Homophobia is portrayed as an exceptional aberration to the norm. Simultaneously, the homophobic views of the foreign others, including Ebo's brother-in-law and their coworkers, are depicted as both national and global attitudes. Ebo is thus presented as a victim who is persecuted in his home country, lacking agency, and in need of rescue. Furthermore, the second season of *Trapped* presents a reductionist view of Africa in discourse, such as through the term "African boy" and the suggestion that violence against homosexuality is the norm in the Global South.

As outlined in this article, the lens of Nordic exceptionalism and homonationalism has been utilized to examine how popular media perpetuates discourses and representations that reinforce an epistemology in which the Global North is positioned as morally superior, environmentally conscious, and sexually progressive. Meanwhile, the Global South is rendered as regressive, violent, and in need of Western rescue. This image matters because, as already discussed, in the digital era, streaming platforms such as Netflix play a role in producing and perpetuating this image in the collective cultural memory on one hand and, on the other hand, legitimizing exclusionary politics and subtle forms of cultural imperialism under the guise of tolerance and cosmopolitanism.

As such, *Trapped* does not simply depict social tensions within a progressive society; it actively participates in shaping and sustaining the ideological boundaries of belonging, progress, and otherness in contemporary Iceland. In other words, this media-memory-politics nexus naturalizes structural inequalities by embedding them within familiar and emotionally resonant narratives and symbols, thereby making them more difficult to challenge or resist. For us, as readers and viewers alike, the risk lies in the normalization of a world in which a culture remembers itself as centred on the universal standard of modernity and virtue. At the same time, those who do not conform to this vision are symbolically and materially marginalized. Therefore, attending to these dynamics is essential, not only for understanding the cultural work of media but also for challenging the global hierarchies it sustains through images, symbols, and ideologies.

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