

Paths of Friction: Intoning Societies, Identity, and Nature in 21st-Century Iceland

KONSTANTINE VLASIS

Abstract: During the early 20th century, traditional music practitioners in Reykjavík, Iceland gathered together to form the Iðunn Society of Intoners and Versifiers to preserve indigenous music practices such as rímur. Since then, numerous other societies have organized, many within recent years. Drawing from Tim Ingold's process of "wayfaring," Anna Tsing's analysis of "friction" in globalized space, and ethnographic research, I consider how traditional music practices sonically represent the lived experiences of past and present intoners (Ingold 2011; Tsing 2005). I further examine how both music and nature shape cultural identity by using the idea of pathways and path formation.

Résumé : Au début du XX^e siècle, les joueurs de musique traditionnelle de Reykjavík se rassemblèrent pour constituer l'Association Iðunn des psalmodieurs et poètes, afin de préserver les pratiques musicales autochtones telles que le rímur. Depuis ce temps, de nombreuses autres associations se sont créées, dont un grand nombre au cours des dernières années. À partir du processus du « cheminement » de Tim Ingold, de l'analyse du « frottement » faite par Anna Tsing dans l'espace mondialisé, et d'une recherche ethnographique, je considère la façon dont les pratiques de musique traditionnelle représentent en sons les expériences de vie des psalmodieurs du passé et du présent (Ingold 2011; Tsing 2005). J'examine en outre de quelle façon la musique et la nature façonnent l'identité culturelle à partir de l'idée des chemins et de la formation des chemins.

Paths are created through a process of friction. Constant and consistent force between a body and the earth carves indentations onto landscapes. Each footprint along a pathway represents an inscription of individual experience within a collective whole. And the more often we travel such pathways, the more established they become. The creation of physical pathways represents the movement, experience, and history of people and place. Yet, we can

also extend the concept of path formation metaphorically to include other domains of study such as music. Just as constant and consistent forces engrain marks within topography, similar actions surrounding musical practice entrench aesthetics, traditions, and identities within both sonic and social environments.

Specifically, the movement of the indigenous Icelandic tradition of *rímur* (rhymes) has traversed many paths throughout history and continues to form new routes today. *Rímur* began in the 14th century as monophonic, versified epic poetry, and remained the main form of entertainment in Iceland for almost six centuries. I provide a more detailed historical and structural explanation of *rímur* below. Although this tradition was originally an exclusively solo art form, it has become established within participatory practices of *kvæðamannafélög* (societies of intoners and versifiers; intoning societies).¹ Members of these societies *kvæða* (intone) melodies and texts that are ages old, linking the experiences and histories of past intoners to the contemporary world.

Like the *rímur* scholar Ragnheiður Ólafsdóttir, I translate *að kvæða* as the action, “to intone.” Intoning is not the same as singing or chanting, which often include connotations to popular musics or religious idioms. *Kvæðandi* (intoning) exists somewhere outside of art music norms and serves as a key characteristic of *rímur* and *kvæðalög* (*rímur* melodies set to shorter poems) performance. While a timbral examination of intoning practices and their specific use within these societies is intriguing, I am primarily concerned with a broader movement. Most notably, how and why intoning societies have seen a steady growth in population and dispersal across Iceland in recent years.

In this study, I relate the significance of intoning societies, as centres of Icelandic indigenous and traditional music practices, to environmental elements in Iceland surrounding ecotourism industries, topographies, and natural forces. Within this context, it is clear that both music and place serve as mediums through which cultural identity is formed, and I assert that the increase of intoning society activity in the 21st century relates to both national and international influences of globalization. By initially providing a historical overview of the *rímur* tradition in Iceland, I demonstrate how the formation of intoning societies is primarily a 21st century phenomenon and represents a significant footprint within a continuously forming pathway of cultural development. I explore the intersection between music, place, and identity through Timothy Ingold’s concepts of “wayfaring” and “meshwork,” Anna Tsing’s notion of “friction” caused by increased globalization, and research surrounding the study of soundscapes and ecomusicology (Ingold 2011; Tsing 2005; Pedelty 2012; Allen and Dawe 2015). In addition, I draw upon my own ethnographic interviews with intoning society members and folk music

practitioners, which I conducted over the course of three years from 2015 to 2018.² Finally, I examine the relationship between intoning societies and natural elements in Iceland, and elucidate how the study of music and place might provide insight in traversing other global issues and stressing our global connectedness.

Although this study incorporates concepts dealing with globalization, tourism, and history, I am primarily concerned with the relationship between music and place, and how both form notions of identity in Iceland today. Moreover, this research also provides new perspectives on existing Icelandic and Nordic music studies. Many scholars have undertaken research on the history of Icelandic music, such as *rímur* and other traditional genres, but much of this existing corpus focuses on the history, structure, or composition of such practices (Aðalsteinsson 2014; Faulkner 2013; Ingólfsson 2003). From some sources, we begin to contextually understand traditional music practices as historically practical and relevant, while often overlooking their current significance. In my own research, I focus on these historical traditions alongside present-day happenings, and characterize the actions of intoning societies as momentous. Furthermore, there has been little research completed on the collective practices of intoning societies — including their origins, formation, and future plans. It is my hope that the research presented herein will serve as a platform to re-examine past works of Nordic and Icelandic music studies, inspire collaboration between various institutional and scholarly domains, and form new paths of research aimed at music and nature in Iceland.³

Plotting Paths

The study of *rímur* is complex. When I first began discussing this tradition with society members and expressed my interest in its contemporary practice, many stated that *rímur* no longer exists. Separated from its original 14th century context, many do not consider *rímur* as a tradition that is currently practiced today. However, I argue that this tradition remains alive and active, partly through the efforts of intoning societies.

The earliest intoning society was concerned with the preservation and continuation of the *rímur* tradition (Ólafsdóttir 2011). Early *rímur* were essentially epic poems in versified form (47). Stanzas composed of two, three, or four lines comprised the narrative, which often retold famous stories from *Eddas* or *Sagas* (Magnússon 2010). Each line could contain a maximum of twelve syllables, depending on the metre, and were based on the long and short syllables of rhythmic modes. *Rímur* follow strict compositional techniques

utilizing devices such as rhyme, alliteration, and assonance (Aðalsteinsson 2014; Ólafsdóttir 2011: 42). A single *rímur* was comprised of multiple *ríma* (rhymes), which served as chapters within a larger story. Early performers used shifts in metre to match differing melodies, and to delineate between the various *ríma* (Ólafsdóttir 2011: 43-44). The full performance of *rímur* was described as *rímnaflokkur* (*rímur* cycle), and would contain many *ríma*, melodies, and metres that helped progress the story. Often, a *rímur* cycle began with an introductory section called a *mansöngur*, which usually provided information about the performer or current social happenings (Hreinsson, interview, July 28, 2016).

During cold Icelandic winters, family members would gather in the *baðstofa* (living-room) for an event called the *kvöldvaka* (evening-awakening) and would sometimes listen to a *rímur* performance (Hopkins 2000: 402). A single performer would *kveða* melodies for hours or days depending on the number of *ríma*. In early Iceland, intoning *rímur* served as the primary entertainment for communities and families, and remained almost unchanged for six centuries until later influences began to shape public perspective and impact the length, performance context, and frequency of *rímur* performances (Hopkins 2000: 401; Faulkner 2013).

Some of these changes occurred in the mid-19th century, as poets began to use the strict rules of *rímur* composition to write shorter rhymes and poems that consisted of only 10 or 20 stanzas (Hreinsson, personal communication, July 15, 2016). Because these poems used the same metres and rhyme schemes as earlier *rímur* texts, performers could simply adapt pre-existing melodies to these shorter songs. In part, the slow recycling of the same melodies for newer poems also reflected certain socio-political happenings in Iceland throughout the 19th and 20th centuries (Ólafsdóttir and Dibben 2019: 42-45). These shorter poems are distinct from the 14th-century *rímur* practice, and are called *kvæðalög* (intoning/folk songs) (Grímsdóttir, interview, August 7, 2016).

During the early 20th century, families tired of agrarian systems began to travel to urban spaces in search of better work and opportunities, bringing with them their musical traditions (Ólafsdóttir 2008: 18-20). Intoning verses and telling stories became a way to express cultural and familial histories, and eventually led to a collection of folk tunes compiled in the late 19th century and to the first recordings of *rímur* melodies in 1903 (Ólafsdóttir 2011: 51-52, 60-74; Þorsteinsdóttir, interview, August 6, 2016). Over the next two decades, as communities grew and expanded, numerous other recordings began to accumulate, and traditional music enthusiasts organized. In 1929, the first intoning society, *Kvæðamannafélagið Iðunn*, was founded in Reykjavík (Ólafsdóttir 2008: 104). In part, the early members of *Iðunn* attempted to

control the *rímur* tradition by implementing specific rules and regulations concerning performance practices (Ólafsdóttir 2011; Ólafsdóttir, interview, January 2017). However, the formation of *Iðunn* became “the main reason why the [*rímur*] tradition did not vanish completely,” revealing their efforts to control the practice of *rímur* as the primary means of preserving the tradition (Ólafsdóttir 2011: 77). Similar to this original mission of *Iðunn*, many contemporary intoning societies maintain a proclivity toward the preservation and continuation of traditional music practice.

Most intoning societies are similar in function, purpose, organization, and mission. They bring together practicing intoners and cultivate community interest in traditional music practices. Most intoning societies meet once or twice a month to practice various national and folk musics. Some societies emphasize techniques or genres such as *rímur*, *kvæðalög*, *tvísöngur* (twin-songs), or the composition of *vísur* (verses).⁴ Societies generally embrace group performance and communal music-making, although solo intoning also continues within societies, as well as in the mainstream. Individuals including Steindór Andersen and Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson are known the world over for their intoning performances (Ólafsdóttir 2011: 193). However, the recent explosion of activity within the intoning society scene in both number and location across Iceland reflects *rímur* and folk music traditionalists’ advocacy of participatory practices.

Vatnsnesingur was founded in 2004 in the northwestern region; *Gefjun* was founded in Akureyri in 2005; *Árgali* organized in 2010 in Selfoss; *Ríma* was founded in 2011 in Siglufjörður; *Gná* was established in 2015 in Sauðárkrókur; and the *Snorri í Reykholti* was founded in 2016 in Reykholt (Cannady 2015; Ólafsdóttir 2011; Ólafsdóttir and Dibben 2019: 53-54; Hjartarson, interview, January 3, 2017; Anna and Kristín Sigtryggisdóttir, interview, January 13, 2017; Grímsdóttir, interview, August 7, 2016) (see Table 1). Although *Iðunn* and

Society Name	Founding Year	Town/City	Region
Kvæðamannafélagið <i>Iðunn</i>	1929	Reykjavík	South-western
Félag ljóðaunnenda á Austurlandi	1996	Near Egilsstaður	Eastern
Kvæðamannafélagið <i>Vatnsnesingur</i>	2004	Near Hvammstangi, Vatnsnes peninsula	North-western
Kvæðamannafélagið <i>Gefjun</i>	2005	Akureyri	Northern
Kvæðamannafélagið <i>Árgali</i>	2010	Selfoss	Southern
Kvæðamannafélagið <i>Ríma</i>	2011	Siglufjörður	Northern
Kvæðamannafélagið <i>Gná</i>	2015	Skagafjörður	North-western
Kvæðamannafélagið <i>Snorri í Reykholti</i>	2016	Reykholt in Borgarfjörður	Western

Table 1. Society name, founding year, and location. Table by author.

Félag ljóðaunnenda á Austurlandi were established in Iceland during the 20th century, six out of the eight intoning societies were founded in this century. When asked about this phenomenon, Þórarinn Hjartarson, a founding member of Gefjun, stated, “I can’t really figure out the reason for it, maybe it’s a sort of reaction against globalization, in general ... people get so lost in globalization that they realize we must find what really belongs to us, to ourselves” (interview, January 3, 2017).

If we consider the historical development of Reykjavík as an industrial and urban space, we should also view the formation of Kvæðamannafélagið Iðunn as it relates to expanding political, economic, and global forces, as well as to nationalistic aesthetics of Iceland in the early 20th century (Oslund 2011: 201; Cannady 2015: 13). If one considers the formation of Kvæðamannafélagið Iðunn in 1929 as related to globalization, nation-building, and the preservation of traditional practices, we can explore the possibility of similar forces animating the development of numerous intoning societies in the more globally connected and ever-expanding Icelandic nation of the 21st century (Hall, Dibben, Ingólfsson, and Mitchell 2019). For Hjartarson and others, societies of intoners have organized in recent years to reclaim a specific identity and to experience a form of cultural belonging. And although it might be difficult to argue that global forces such as tourism in Iceland are the direct cause of intoning society activity, both have experienced concurrent and continuous growth.

Recent tourism industries in Iceland partly emerged from an economic crisis, when the Icelandic *króna* collapsed in 2007 and the three largest banks in Iceland failed over a period of several years (O’Brien 2015). Interestingly, Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura, a reporter for *The New York Times*, argues that Iceland’s booming tourism industry emerged in part out of economic necessity, but also due to happenstance, since the 2010 eruption of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano was felt around the world (2016). Although it may be far-fetched to relate the rise of tourism in Iceland to the Eyjafjallajökull eruption, tourism in Iceland does largely focus on natural phenomena including volcanoes, waterfalls, glaciers, and wildlife. Scholar Kirsten Hastrup argues nature has always been an important facet of Icelandic lifestyle and culture (2008). In the summers, days are endless; in the winters, the sky is dark. Weather constantly shifts from mild to extreme, and the interior highlands make travel across the country difficult. Cities and towns were often named after geographic phenomena or natural elements, such as Reykjavík, which translates to “Smoky Bay” (Sowen 1985: 67). While traveling around Iceland, certain topographic formations were pointed out to me by friends as having specific stories and histories. These natural elements are woven into the daily existence of Icelanders and become ontologically significant. As the number of visitors continues to increase each

year, these natural elements also become woven into global experiences through outdoor and ecotourism industries, asserting nature as a means to identify Iceland and the Icelandic experience.

Paths of Friction

Developments surrounding nature and intoning societies in 21st-century Iceland foreground the relationship between music and place. Concerns with preservation and conservation also implicitly emerge when studying traditional music and nature concurrently. This project was originally inspired by ecomusicological work, not only as “the critical study of music/sound and environment,” but also “change in time and space,” alongside the growth, decline, and adaption of environments (Allen and Dawe 2015: 2, 12). My primary use of concepts as “eco” musicological stem from literature surrounding ecomusicology and sound studies, rather than the ecological sciences or environmental studies

that are directly linked to ecology. To this end, terms including nature, landscape, topography, geography, and environment are not to be misconstrued as synonyms for ecology, and are more so used to engage with the concept of soundscape — an acoustic field of study that examines our sonic environment through sound, setting, and significance (Schafer 1994 [1977]: 9; Shelemay 2006: xxxv; emphasis in original).

Within this context, I use the concept of soundscape to align natural elements in Iceland with the actions of intoning societies and to understand how both nature and music negotiate forms of Icelandic identity. Mark Pedelty states that “how we

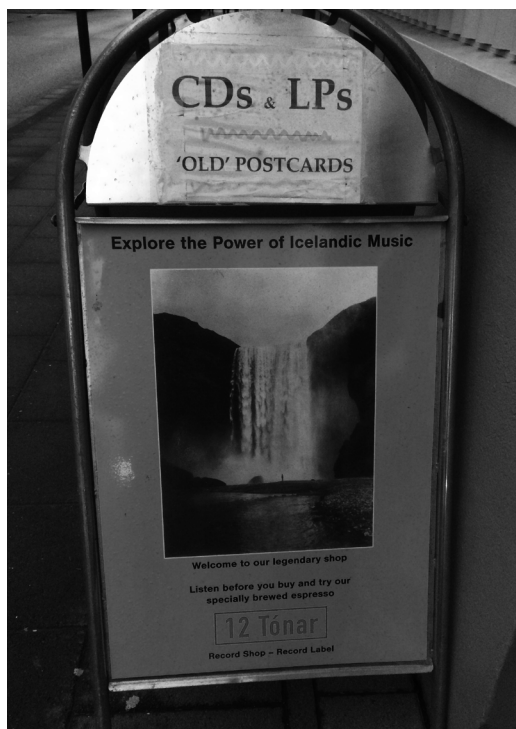


Fig. 1. Poster outside of 12 Tónar record store in Reykjavík highlighting music and nature (January 2017). Photo by author.

make music is related to how we interact with the rest of the living world,” and further states “it is not a matter of simple, linear cause and effect, but rather complex, reciprocal, and systematic relationships among social, cultural, and material factors” (2012: 118). Therefore, the relationship between nature and the practices of intoning societies reveal tangled knots of connectedness, as well as how “purely musical forms, dynamics, structures and movement both mirror and embody contours of the landscape” (Mitchell 2009: 179) (see Fig. 1).

Following this idea, Bára Grímsdóttir, musician and current chairwoman of Iðunn, described the voice of her grandfather as having a great deal of vibrato and “almost sounding like a sheep” (interview, August 7, 2016). Other forms of mimesis include participatory intoning as a form of sound synchronization. In nature, sound synchronicity often manifests as a means of defence or survival among wildlife species (Titon 2015: 76). Crickets, frogs, and other organisms will sonically sync their calls and sounds to distract predators, or at least to make it more difficult for a predator to isolate prey. Similarly, traditional performances of rímur melodies featured a single performer, but today many intoners combine into a single collective voice through group practice. While sound synchronicity in wildlife has developed for species survival, group intoning instead represents a survival of musical genres. When asked about the practices of Gefjun, Þórarinn Hjartarson stated:

We do a lot of intoning together. That’s not what rímur was meant to be, there were not people performing together, just one performer usually. But some of those tunes are better suited for collective intoning. We almost always perform together. (interview, January 3, 2017)

One can also foreground the historical element of intoning and intoning societies by juxtaposing the concept of echoes. Echoes are created by specific environments. The existentialist writer, Henry David Thoreau, describes the allure of an echo as a conversation with nature. He states:

There comes to me a melody which the air has strained, which has conversed with every leaf and needle of the woods. It is by no means the sound of the bell as heard near at hand, and which at this distance I can plainly distinguish, but its vibrating echoes, that portion the sound which the elements take up and modulate — a sound which is very much modified, sifted, and refined before it reaches my ear. The echo is to some extent an independent sound, and therein is the magic and charm of it. It is not merely a

repetition of my voice, but it is in some measure the voice of the wood. (qtd. in Titon 2015: 76)

In Thoreau's view, an echo is not merely one's own reflected voice, but includes the sonic commingling of multiple experiences, environments, and objects. This aspect of echoes gains greater significance when considering the claim that "an echo is nothing if not historical," and is rich with latent meanings and histories of the people and places with which they resonate (Smith 2015: 55-57). Similarly, contemporary intoners perform melodies of past intoners, metaphorically echoing the experiences and sounds of multiple generations. Through this metaphorical process of echoing, intoners are reconstructing an imagined past, experiencing a deep sense of nostalgia, and creating a specific topophilia — "an emotional attachment to a particular regional landscape, including its flora and fauna" (Ingram 2015: 228).

The concept of soundscape can be further extended through the work of Tim Ingold, who considers sound as lived experience and a primary feature of being alive (2011: 136-137). Ingold challenges a simple concept of soundscape by asserting that sound is a medium through which we listen, instead of an element within a landscape. Ingold uses a visual example of light and illumination to contest the idea of "scaping" sounds:

The scaping of things — that is, their surface conformation — is revealed to us thanks to their illumination. When we look around on a fine day, we see a landscape bathed in sunlight, not a lightscape. Likewise, listening to our surroundings, we do not hear a soundscape. For sound, I would argue is not the object but the medium of our perception. It is what we hear *in*. Similarly, we do not see light but see *in* it. (138; emphasis in original)

For Ingold, this medium in which we hear pervades the world in which we live (136). For him, sounds are not primary features of a soundscape, but are constantly in fluctuation and movement because they are interacting with the landscape, not conforming to it. Here, Ingold states that sound "is neither mental nor material, but a phenomenon of *experience* — that is, of our immersion in, and commingling with, the world in which we find ourselves" (137; emphasis in original). Imagining sound as lived experience suggests a constant shift between multiple experiences, which illustrates the depth of the rímur tradition; melodies were echoed from generation to generation in Iceland and are now practiced within a more globalized context. The imagery surrounding rímur melodies as echoes from the past reinforces an Icelandic

imaginary as an archaic, mythical, untouched landscape. These ideological perceptions of both past and present exist within 21st-century Iceland as ways to phenomenologically engage with people and place.

Following Ingold further, I draw upon his metaphorical concept of pathways and “wayfaring.” Ingold argues that humans do not move across surfaces, but instead move along lines of lived experience (2011: 87). These lines create specific paths of movement, which he describes as a process of “wayfaring.” To Ingold,

lives are led not inside places but through, around, to and from them, from and to places elsewhere. I use the term *wayfaring* to describe the embodied experience of this perambulatory movement. It is as wayfarers, then, that human beings inhabit the earth. (2011: 148; emphasis in original)

Ingold argues that “*wayfaring* is our most fundamental mode of being in the world,” and that our existence relies on our movement and role as “wayfarers” (152; emphasis in original). In further defining “wayfaring,” Ingold states:

The wayfarer is continually on the move. More strictly he *is* movement.... It is a line that advances from the tip as he presses on, in an ongoing process of growth and development, or self-renewal. As he proceeds, however, the wayfarer has to sustain himself, both perceptually and materially, through an active engagement with the country that opens up along his path.... To the wayfarer, the world is not presented as a surface to be traversed. In his movements he threads his way *through* this world rather than routing *across* it from point to point. Of course the wayfarer is a terrestrial being, and must perforce travel over the land. The surfaces of the land, however, are *in* and not *of* the world, woven from the lines of growth and movement of inhabitants. (Ingold 2011: 150-151; emphasis in original)

Ingold considers a wayfarer’s “presence on the land as the ever-growing sum of his trails,” whereas the idea of transportation is merely a point-to-point connection between destinations, decontextualized from movement or personal inscription along paths (2011: 152).

As we walk the paths of others, we indirectly lay trails of our own experience, connecting movements and forming knots of significance that Ingold calls a “meshwork”: “a tangled mesh of interwoven and complexly

knotted strands. Every strand is a way of life, and every knot a place” (151). As paths of “wayfaring” intersect and tangle, knots act as important sites of cultural interaction and development.

Here, I consider Ingold’s “meshwork” to be webs of significance that facilitate cultural meaning in a society (Geertz 1973: 5). If we consider sound to be lived experience, *rímur* practice metaphorically becomes a form of “wayfaring.” Echoes of melodies that were performed centuries ago can still be heard by traveling along the “meshwork” of experiences today. Intoning societies serve as knots within this “meshwork” and stand as sites of cultural significance. Whereas a meshwork is the tangling of paths of lived experience by wayfarers, a “sonic meshwork,” in my definition, exists as the sounding of lived experiences and cultural histories through sonic and auditory practice. As members of intoning societies walk the sonic paths of past generations, these routes become more deeply engrained within the Icelandic soundscape. New paths are also created through “friction,” as they intersect with global forces in the 21st century.

Anna Tsing’s concept of “friction” helps me situate intoning societies, nature, and identity within a more global context. For Tsing, “friction” exists as “the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” (2005: 2). In her work, Tsing describes the destruction of rainforests in Indonesia by multinational consumer corporations and states that “Indonesian forests were not destroyed for local needs; their products were taken for the world” (2). Similarly, the topography, landscape, and geographic phenomena of Iceland have become marketed commodities through outdoor tourism for the increasing number of visitors each year, while simultaneously serving local needs as well. Tourism is indeed beneficial for the Icelandic economy, and it raises awareness of conservation and ecological efforts. Many Icelanders simply enjoy domestic outdoor tourism just as much as foreign visitors.

Tsing argues that “all human cultures are shaped and transformed in long histories of regional-to-global networks of power, trade, and meaning” (2005: 3). These changes do not necessarily make Iceland a victim of globalization, but they are the product of global and local differences. In fact, intoning societies may not have formed if it were not for increasing globalization, for local traditionalists mobilized at least in part as a response to globalization.

Tsing explains the metaphorical power of “friction”:

A study of global connectedness shows the grip of encounter: friction. A wheel turns because of its encounter with the surface of the road; spinning in the air it goes nowhere. Rubbing two sticks

together produces heat and light; one stick alone is just a stick. As a metaphorical image, friction reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power. (2005: 5)

In this view, “friction” is not only characterized as a form of resistance but also as a way to ignite, spark, and kindle cultural change. The recent activity of intoning societies across Iceland, the growth of outdoor tourism industries, and the negotiation of an Icelandic identity represent a cultural shift. Further action is set ablaze from developments in ecotourism and its movement to preserve Icelandic geography (Hoyt 2005: 141). In her study, Tsing describes environmental preservation efforts as flourishing only through “the instigation and support of global movement” (2005: 2). For me, sentiments surrounding the preservation of both music and place in Iceland simultaneously represent a preservation of Icelandic identity — one that is negotiated through global “friction.”

Future Paths

The study of identity is problematic. It often involves generalizing or selecting subjective qualities to represent selves, communities, or nations. In fact, there is not a specific translation for *identity* in Icelandic. The closest word, *sjálfsmynd*, literally translates to “self-image.” While examining the process of identity formation, it’s important to consider that even within a small and defined community, such as an intoning society, there are multiple forms of identity. Every individual has a unique history, background, culture, and identity, which serves as a form of self-expression. Thomas Turino explains the relationship between *self* and *identity*, stating:

Nowadays people use the word *identity* as if it means the same thing as *self*; yet it is important to differentiate the two terms conceptually because of the ways individual and collective identities function in the social world. The *self* is the composite of the total number of habits that determine the tendencies for everything we think, feel, experience, and do. In contrast, *identity* involves the *partial* and *variable* selection of habits and attributes that we use to represent ourselves to ourselves and to others, as well as those aspects that are perceived by ourselves and by others as salient. (2008: 101-102; emphasis in original)

Through this process of representation to ourselves and others, the term *sjálfsmynd* and the idea of self-image become more relevant.

Members of intoning societies embrace a specific *sjálfsmynd* that centres on the practice of traditional music, which they attempt to carve more deeply and permanently into the national Icelandic social space. When asked about the future of *Gefjun*, Anna and Kristín Sigtryggisdóttir, two of the society's co-founders, argued for the importance of intoning societies, intoning, and raising awareness of these practices by community members. They stated:

[Anna] We hope to see societies like *Gefjun* grow bigger and for many more to form. We hope that more people show interest in this kind of music and use the songs. We hope that people will be interested and show this music respect, because we think we are showing it respect by doing it like our grandmother did it, not changing it or singing it.

[Kristín] There's a big difference between singing and *kveða*. (interview, January 13, 2017)

For Anna and Kristín Sigtryggisdóttir, a type of authenticity emerges from the practice of traditional music. Þórarinn Hjartarson describes Anna and Kristín, and their mother, Anna Fornadóttir as

genuine disciples of the tradition. They are very genuine. I knew that this was how it was done really [from their example]. I had just come from outside and learned it [intoning *rímur* melodies] when I was grown up, so I will not be as good a performer or as genuine. (interview, January 3, 2017)

Hjartarson's use of the term "genuine" implies a type of authentic intoning. The idea of authenticity problematizes the practices of intoning societies today, because the meaning of authenticity shifts alongside positionality. The continuously expanding definitions of authenticity stem from positions of relativity: "The problem is that there are multiple subject positions available to anyone and multiple interpretations and constructions of those positions" (Taylor 1997: 21). Therefore, describing an "authentic" intoner or way to intone becomes unique to each individual, group, or context, and further tangles the formation of identities and self-images surrounding intoning societies.

In an increasingly global existence, identity becomes ever-changing and encompasses countless contexts and settings. Chris Foster, a folk musician and member of *Iðunn*, describes the sense of ownership that past

intoners cultivated around rímur and other folk traditions, compared with contemporary gigging musicians in Reykjavík who play multiple genres and styles of music:

I think the ownership thing is really crucial. And I think there are a lot of people nowadays ... and it's part of this musical world in this country, being the size it is with its population. There's a lot of gigging musicians — one minute they're playing jazz, the next they're in the symphony orchestra, then they're playing a gig at [Café] Rosenberg as a singer-songwriter kind of thing. But in the [rímur] tradition these people, this is what they did, this is who they were, and they owned it totally and they owned it for a lifetime. And that's another social shift. Today, people are just not invested. (interview, August 3, 2017)

Foster insinuates a shift between past and present. His discussion of the rímur tradition in the past tense not only suggests differences between early Icelandic agrarian life and a more urban 21st-century Icelandic culture, but also suggests how best to situate traditional music practices and understand cultural identity today. For him, music-making in all genres and styles can exist as part of an Icelandic identity, revealing how interests in various musical styles further tangles the idea of a *sjálfsmýnd*.⁵ In a continuously changing global environment, identity formation through music begins to transcend time and space as “an active, fluid process of production, creation and construction, not a question of mere reflection of nation state, place, landscape or environment” (Mitchell 2009: 187). Therefore, just as the rímur tradition has changed alongside political, economic, and social influences in Iceland, the particular *sjálfsmýnd* embraced by many traditionalists has also adapted to a more globalized and inclusive society today, further revealing how practices of intoning societies are considered contemporary.

For members of intoning societies, rímur, *kvæðalög*, and other traditional practices relate to distinct forms of identity, and act as links between music and place. Kristín Sigtryggisdóttir exclaims, “You have to know your story. You have to know how Iceland was in the old days,” in contrast to how Iceland *is* today (interview, January 13, 2017). For Sigtryggisdóttir and others, intoning melodies serves as a medium through which to know oneself, and to understand what it means to be Icelandic. As a participatory practice, intoning creates a “belonging and social identity, because performance competence *is both a sign and simultaneously a product of* shared musical knowledge and experience” (Turino 2008: 43, emphasis in original). Moreover, the sense of *knowing* that

Kristín Sigtryggsdóttir describes is not only linked to the history of Iceland and intoning traditions, but also ties the experiences and lives of past intoners to future intoners. Bára Grímsdóttir explains the stewardship of future generations, stating:

We must hope that the next generation takes over and performs this stuff their own way. It would also be good if they dug in and learned about their roots. We are very pleased that Rósa Jóhannesdóttir's girls always come to [Iðunn] meetings and I always say, "This is our future." (interview, August 7, 2016)

Part of this musical and cultural revitalization not only centres on the performance of traditional music but also focuses on the unification of community members and educating others in intoning and traditional music practices. Þórarinn Hjartarson says that the founding members of Gefjun wanted to "create an environment for those who knew [intoning practices] already, and make it known to others as well" (interview, January 3, 2017). Each meeting begins with group intoning of a particular text written by Hjartarson, which outlines the mission of Gefjun as an organization. Additionally, intoning society members have begun to perform abridged versions of rímnaflokkur at festivals and even at contemporary music venues for educational and entertainment purposes.

While discussing rímur performances during the Vaka Festival in Akureyri in 2015 and 2016, Chris Foster explained that "We have to lift it up and put it into a different social environment. And we have to make it work" (interview, August 7, 2016).

Þórarinn Hjartarson further comments on rímur performances at the 2015 and 2016 Vaka folk festivals, arguing that these traditions thrive in today's world:

I originally thought that rímur performance was not really possible today. I thought that people would not accept it and be fascinated. But I changed my mind at [Vaka Festival 2016], and I found that it was possible and actually makes sense today. (interview, January 3, 2017)

Bára Grímsdóttir explains that Iðunn members performed abridged versions of rímnaflokkur at Kex Hostel, and composed new ríma for a performance at Café Rosenberg:

For the past two years now, we have had a kind of entertainment concert at Café Rosenberg in January. And at Kex Hostel, we performed the full rímur from the Vaka Festival. But a lot of the Rosenberg ríma are funny. People write them about modern topics and try to really make them funny, while also following the rhyme form and composition rules. But those are the sort of things we have had at Rosenberg, and it was a very good turnout last time with around 100 people or more. (interview, August 3, 2017)

While some of these performances are for entertainment purposes and galvanizing community awareness, some educational efforts are led by figures such as Rósa Jóhannesdóttir, a musician and active member of Iðunn. A few days before the actual Iðunn monthly meeting, Jóhannesdóttir teaches a class focusing on the intoning and performance of kvæðalög, where members and visitors can practice kveðandi (interview, August 7, 2016). More recently, some members have begun to lecture on Icelandic folk music at the art academy in Reykjavík. When asked about her own institutional involvement and educational efforts, Grímsdóttir stated:

It [traditional music and rímur] should be an integral part of what goes on in both ordinary schools and music schools. That's really crucial, I think. Both singing and instrumental music are part of education systems in some places. We do lecture at the art academy but not every year. It's not enough. (interview, August 7, 2016)

For individuals such as Ásta Soffía Þorgeirsdóttir, these classes have been paramount to her development as a musician. Þorgeirsdóttir explains her first detailed study of folk traditions in Iceland, which partly inspired the formation of one of her music ensembles:

It was not until I was in my second year in the Icelandic Academy of Arts that I took a course called Íslensk þjóðlög (Icelandic National Music) and I really began thinking about Icelandic folk music. Before that I always took the Icelandic folk music for granted, that it was just there, and I did not think more deeply about it ... It opened my eyes to how lucky we are to have this beautiful folk music which is so connected to us and our heritage. I then became interested in Icelandic traditional folk music, became inspired by it and realized that it has to grow with us. (interview, November 28, 2016)

Reflecting on Þorgeirsdóttir's comments, we can begin to understand how future generations might embrace a *sjálfsmýnd* built upon traditional music practices without it seeming anachronistic. According to Turino, "in realizing our own identities, we tend to foreground aspects that are regarded as important by the people around us" (2008: 102). For members of intoning societies, the advocacy of traditional practices may inspire others to understand indigenous Icelandic music as culturally significant.

Sonic Meshwork

As discussed previously, the study of identity includes multiple subjectivities, contexts, and positionalities. Therefore, *sjálfsmýnd*, as self-image, must be understood as consisting of two parts: individual-self and collective-self. I consider individual-self as belonging to each member of intoning societies and their own personal voice and sense of identity, which Tim Taylor describes as a "true self" (1997: 21). In contrast, I use collective-self to include numerous individuals, where the combined voices and identities of individual-selves unite in a form of group identity. Just as Hastrup (2008) describes geographic phenomena as having histories, characters, and meaning, Chris Foster states, "voices have real personalities" (interview, August 7, 2016). Intoning together combines the voices of many individuals and reveals how "sounding together in a group creates a direct sense of *being* together and of deep-felt similarity, and hence identity, among participants" (Turino 2008: 43; emphasis in original). This collective identity mixes personalities and experiences within a "sonic meshwork" — a metaphorical tangling of sonic pathways. These paths are not engrained into a landscape, but they are engrained into the minds and hearts of individuals to enhance their sense of cultural identity.

In terms of identity formation, individual and collective selves are best negotiated by examining intoning societies on a national scale. Hjartarson states that in the early 21st century, there was some form of national advocacy for traditional music, but the timing was not right to mobilize: "We tried to start something on a national level, but it never came to be anything. It never managed to. We were spread all over and there were only a few of us" (Hjartarson, interview, January 3, 2017). Today, with numerous intoning societies across Iceland, well-established festivals, and internationally known figures, intoning societies have been able to unify under a single umbrella organization called *Stemma*.⁶

As a two-day annual meeting and workshop where members from intoning societies across Iceland gather, *Stemma* represents how individual-selves can

conjoin to form a collective-self on a national level (Ólafsdóttir and Dibben 2019: 54). Here, intoning societies serve as knots within a “sonic meshwork” of Iceland, where individual-selves become collective-selves, embracing a specific cultural identity, and existing as part of the Icelandic sonic environment. Although the literal movement of music across history and place is complicated, and ultimately impossible to precisely trace, the “sonic meshwork” of intoning societies link the past and present through the sounding of rímur melodies, intoning practices, and other types of *þjóðlög* (national/folk songs).

Additional pathways physically emerge onto the Icelandic landscape as global forces solidify and blaze hiking trails, roads, tour routes, and other “wayfaring” ventures. The juxtaposition of a metaphorical “sonic meshwork” on to actual pathways of movement represents a larger meshwork that further tangles happenings in Iceland, concepts of local and global, and the relationship between music and nature. By examining this specific case study and its complexities — the role of music and place within an increasingly globalized world — we might better understand how the intersection between music, nature, and identity permeates our everyday existence and, in turn, manifests new values and perspectives. As Stephen Feld argues, “a way of hearing the world comes from interacting with it, but also has to do with appreciating it, imagining it as one’s very own” (qtd. in Mitchell 2009: 188). Expressing this sentiment toward Icelandic culture, in general, Guðrún Ingimundardóttir states:

The remote areas of the northern periphery are endowed with a unique and fragile acoustic environment. Our sonic environment is linked with the creation, perception and national characteristics of music, and as such should be valued, researched, catalogued and preserved to the same extent as is our air, water and soil. (qtd. in Sturman 2009: 9)

I share these ideas to reflect on our own sjálfsmynd, to recognize the footprints of our own “wayfaring,” to navigate the complexities and powers of “friction,” and to find a place for our individual-self within a global collective-self.

When I first travelled to Iceland, I noticed numerous piles of rocks that were stacked across varying distances. Through conversations with acquaintances and friends, I discovered that these rocks were ways for early travellers to mark paths and roads (Hastrup 2008: 61-63) (see Fig. 2). As individuals pass across these piles of stones, they often add stones to the existing pile, affirming their own experience as essential to moving and making pathways. In describing the process of path formation, Kirsten Hastrup states:



Fig. 2. Fellow traveller, Drew Streip, examining stone piles near Þingvellir National Park (May 15). Photo by author.

Paths create relationships and the more people have walked there, the greater the significance attached to the relation. The paths created by generations of people structure the experience of subsequent walkers, and the historical marks left by predecessors form the conceptual space of present-day travellers. (2008: 62)

Tsing's notion of global "friction," Ingold's paths of "wayfaring," and work surrounding ecomusicology help situate Icelandic nature, the practices of intoning societies, and Icelandic identity in the 21st century. Members of intoning societies metaphorically walk along paths made by the experiences of past musicians, poets, and Icelanders, echoing melodies within a contemporary context. These paths span across Iceland, highlighting the intimate relationship between sound and place, and begin to carve new trajectories as they blaze fresh paths through "friction." We should acknowledge how often these paths are traversed and consider where they might one day lead. 🌿

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Notes

1. For clarity purposes, I use the English translation (intoning societies) of *kvæðamannafélög* throughout the remainder of the text, unless referring to a proper name such as *Kvæðamannafélagið Iðunn*.

2. For ethnographic research of this project, I conducted thirteen formal interviews (eleven of which are referenced in this study), attended *Gefjun* and *Iðunn* meetings, observed public performances, travelled to important cultural sites, and attended several folk festivals in Iceland. All interviews were conducted in English, with the use of a translator on only one occasion.

3. There are numerous texts within the corpus of Icelandic and Nordic studies that are written and published in Icelandic, English, and other languages. This study is primarily limited to texts written in English. Reflecting the author's current language facility, a translator was utilized when referencing Icelandic literary and musical excerpts.

4. *Tvísöngur* is a type of polyphonic genre where two or more performers intone in parallel intervals of a fourth or fifth.

5. As a non-native Icelander who did not grow up with *rímur* and *kvæðlög* traditions, Chris Foster's advocacy of traditional Icelandic music is an example of the same shifting individualities that he describes. Foster's own positionality challenges conventional understandings of ownership of these traditions, and reveals additional complexities surrounding notions of authenticity and identity.

6. Guðrún (Rúna) Ingimundardóttir spearheaded the *Stemma* project. Ingimundardóttir also helped organize *Kvæðamannafélagið Ríma* in *Siglufljörður*, has studied the *tvísöngur* tradition extensively, serves as deputy director for the music school in *Akureyri*, created and continues to monitor the *þjóðlög* website, works as project director of the North Folk Database Project, and holds a doctoral degree in composition and a minor in ethnomusicology from the University of Arizona (Sturman 2009).

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