However, I cannot help but wonder if we do not lose a little something of the emergent nature of climate change if we readily accept it as a stable object of inquiry, lose something of the curiosity about what it is, what it was, what it could be that we get within adjoining conversations on the Anthropocene in which the dating of an era has produced a surprising wealth of insights into how we conceptualize a shared planet. This new anthropology of climate change, while politically astute, historically nuanced, and ethnographically rich, does not allow for instability within its own concepts and commitments, although such instability is in the nature of its object of inquiry. For instance, there is the commitment to holism that I pointed to earlier, with holism indicating an aspiration for a view of a whole—that climate change will hurt everyone—when in reality its effects are far more fragmented. Some people will suffer, some places will be wiped out. Others in other places might prosper and thrive. There is also an implicit commitment to the concept of culture, as in the title *Climate Cultures*, to which view culture is humancentric. This commitment lines up a bit too smoothly with the global discourse on climate change that puts humanity and its suffering as the sole motivation for reducing global warming and stabilizing carbon content in the atmosphere. It might be too soon to attempt to bring nonhuman futures and perspectives, such as those of species and ecosystems, into the conversation as well. Within the history of anthropology, however, the concept of culture has always incorporated more than the human through its attention to forms, shapes, modes of thinking, and structures, alongside its interest in human existence and experience. Consequently, a deeper engagement with the anthropological archives is necessary so that we do not end up making anthropology a little too readily available to the discursive powers that be in our efforts to make it useful.

References


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In 2008, the Icelandic Parliament created a Special Investigation Commission to look into the causes of the country’s financial meltdown—how could a small nation become so overleveraged? E. Paul Durrenberger and Gísli Palsson’s interdisciplinary collection, originating from a 2012 NSF-funded workshop at the University of Iowa, productively restages this critical introspection. The contributors are well-established scholars of Iceland coming from anthropology, sociology, history, philosophy, art, and business management. The 16-chapter volume is ethnographic and comparative in scope; as an ensemble, it gives an empirically and conceptually rich account of the crisis.

Gambling is a key metaphor for the book; a few gamblers (financiers) exempt themselves from the rules with the nation serving as collateral. Palsson and Durrenberger argue in their introduction that the devastation of neoliberal ideology (like genocidal war) is enacted through banal practices of everyday complicity. The fantasy of beating chance ends with the poorest members of society paying the debts. On trial here are uncritical belief in neoliberalism’s promises and yet refusal to take responsibility for its failures, the subject of Icelandic novelist Einar Már Guðmundsson’s satirical reckoning in the prologue.

The book is divided into four sections organized around the crash, each section cohering well thematically. Section 1 unravels the cultural narratives and discursive practices that underpinned neoliberal orientations. Kristín Loftsdóttir details how anxieties about Iceland’s marginality led many actors and institutions to translate complex histories of settler politics into empowering narratives of
national exception. The figure of the “business Viking” legitimized neoliberal subjectivities of flexibility and success that elided exclusionary othering practices. Next, Guðni Th. Jóhannesson (elected president of Iceland in June 2016!) shows how popular histories exploited a celebratory thread of Viking conquest, which academic historians criticized but left unchallenged by failing to offer accessible alternatives. Örn Jónsson and Rögvaldur Sæmundsson describe the transformations in the Icelandic economy through theories of entrepreneurship, emphasizing how privatization and expansion of the banking sector induced not innovation but “rent-seeking and asset-inflation” (26). The former banker Már Wolfgang Mixa offers an ethnographic account of banking culture before the meltdown; youth and inexperience formed an important part of the habitus of this new culture. Vilhjálmur Árnason, a philosopher who chaired an ethics working group, part of the Special Investigation Commission, completes this section by tracing through Foucault’s concept of horizontal power the interplay among politics, the media, academia, commerce, and the public sphere in mutually reinforcing neoliberal beliefs.

Section 2 spotlights the national soul-searching generated by the meltdown’s aftermath, in which critical reflection, direct democracy, and revolutionary potential led to political experiments. Jón Gunnar Bernburg’s sociological study of public demonstrations in Iceland after the crash illuminates how economic crises in advanced wealthy democracies have the potential to overturn the political order. Hulda Proppé extends this insight based on research within the new Best Party, comprised of comedians, artists, and musicians, to which she had inside access. Drawing on performance theory to interpret the party’s surrealist anarchist politics, she describes a new kind of political formation, calling for ethnographic work within political parties. Tinna Grétarsdóttir, Ásmundur Ásmundsson, and Hannes Lárusson outline how branding the nation depended upon artistic labors conscripted into the project of “corporate nationalism” (95) and neoliberal forms of labor. If art must demonstrate measurable results, can it still engender critical dissent?

The third section engages the core theme of fishing for the Icelandic economy and the national commons. Key to the political, legal, and economic reconfiguration of fisheries and rural communities are Individual Transferable Quotas, which Evelyn Pinkerton, a fisheries expert, argues created the need for more regulation, not less. The reliance on these quotas decreased the sustainability of fishing ecosystems. James Maguire follows with an insightful analysis of the different spatiotemporal and material scales at which “fleshy fish” and “virtual fish” materialized in Icelandic life through scientific, financial, and legal practices. Both forms of fish are material and paradoxical, with fish legally considered to be common and individual property simultaneously. This generative paradox is further underscored in Niels Einarsson’s chapter, where the right to fish from the national commons becomes the basis of a human rights case to the United Nations Human Rights Committee because the privatization of fishing rights and quotas dispossessed and excluded entire communities from the only livelihood they could depend on. The potential for rural resilience is therefore contingent upon how state-led legal and planning arrangements connect peripheral communities to the center, as Margaret Willson and Birna Gunnlaugsdóttir show.

The final section presents careful empirical accounts of the pre- and postcrisis shifts that have affected communities. Guðný Guðbjörnsdóttir and Sigurlina Davíðsdóttir compare the impact of the crash on schools in two communities, one dependent on farming and the other on services, fishing, and transport. While both made schools a priority and protected essential services through greater community involvement postcrisis, the timing and strategies available for cost cutting differed. Unnur Dis Skaptadóttir’s research with Polish and Filipino immigrants details how a strong currency positioned workers well in investing and supporting families back home, but after the crash they struggled with debt and unemployment as national perceptions of migrants grew more negative. Pamela Joan Innes picks up a related thread in her discussion of the curricular development and testing in language schools for immigrant workers. Postcrisis, greater emphasis on Icelandic language skills for job eligibility hit foreigners harder as language schools worked to maintain programs with fewer resources. Finally, James Rice examines donation solicitations of an Icelandic aid organization during and after the crisis, identifying enduring patterns in how aid is oriented and “worthy subjects” are created. Framing donations as emergency aid, charities stabilize rather than remedy poverty. For the poor, then, the meltdown was not a crisis but a continuation of the same, a reminder that notions of crisis are deeply classed, racialized, and gendered.

Dimitra Doukas’s epilogue brings the collection full circle, remembering the unraveling and reweaving work that led to this volume’s critical retelling of the meltdown and its global lessons. James Carrier’s retrospective calls for a renewed holistic focus on cultural systems and cause-effect questions in anthropology. While the volume generally presents an overly singular framing of neoliberalism as an externally imposed logic, the individual contributions show dissonances in how the neoliberal project played out across many domains of sociomaterial life in Iceland. Greater attention to youth experiences of the crisis would have enriched the otherwise far-reaching contributions of this volume in tracing the daily cultural assemblage work of making (and interrogating) neoliberal common sense.