



“Declare Independence:” Understanding Björk’s Fashion as the Construction of Iceland as a
Branded Nation-State

Witt Giannini

December 10, 2024

Music and History

Dr. Ruth Opara

Through her globalized success and influence in both the worlds of music and fashion, Björk has become an unofficial ambassador for Iceland and its cultural output. Understandings of her as the quintessential Icelandic creative have permeated receptions and reactions to her music and visual artistry throughout her career. Björk is a meticulous artist who carefully constructs auditory sounds and visual images as one intertwined and enmeshed narrative, with the complex dialogue between her sonic/fashion collaborations exemplifying what it means to be an audiovisual artist and storyteller. However, the fashion musical story told by Björk as an artist inevitably becomes a nationalist story of Iceland, too, because of this ambassadorial role assigned to her by both Iceland and the rest of the world. Through press coverage, critical reviews, and her own self-presentation at times, Björk's body and sound are understood (and/or purposefully constructed) as a stand-in for Iceland at large. Björk complicates essentialist readings of her Icelandicness, using her fashion and self-presentation as an artist to articulate three distinct conceptualizations — both overlapping and contradicting — of what it means to be Icelandic. Through her elaborate dress, makeup, and hair styling, she turns her body into a breathing synecdoche for Iceland as a national entity, representing an eccentric (and *distinguished*) Icelandic post-punk aesthetic, the seismic activity and natural beauty of Icelandic geographic landscape, and Iceland as a permanent “other” on the boundaries of civilizations.

Björk began her music career as a teenager performing in punk and alternative bands in Reykjavík. In their exploration of the punk politics of the Reykjavík music scene, Peter Webb and John Lynch emphasize an alternative Icelandic aesthetic of “nihilism, disruption, mistrust of authority, starkly juxtaposed collage art, and anarchist political and lifestyle elements, all tied into a ‘Do-It-Yourself’ philosophy.”¹ Though she would only go on to gain national - and later,

¹ Peter Webb and John Lynch, “‘Utopian Punk’: The Concept of Utopia in the Creative Practice of Björk,” *Utopian Studies* 21, no. 2 (2010): 313–30, 316.

global - success with her band the Sugarcubes, it is even in these earlier bands that we see her signature eccentric and against-the-grain style emerge. Her band *Tappi Tíkarrass* was featured in Icelandic filmmaker Friðrik Þór Friðriksson's documentary on the Reykjavík post-punk music scene, *Rokk í Reykjavík*, in 1982. A still image of Björk performing with her band (Figure 1) was even chosen for the film's promotional poster; however, her entire band and their instruments are obscured leaving a singular focus on Björk as she tilts her head away from the mic in a boldly saturated yellow dress with two red circles drawn on her cheek. Though she was only seventeen at the time of the film, Björk already demonstrated a careful attunement to self-differentiation through her stylistic — and notably, *cosmetic* — choices. While her yellow A-line dress and accompanying hair ribbon made of lace project an image of youthful innocence, Björk uses her accessories to complicate this reading and demonstrate her controlled presence and stylistic maturity. Her dark, bunched, and flat-soled boots juxtapose with rugged masculinity while the red circles painted on her cheek recall clown facepaint and almost a *mocking* of this projected naivety. Her innate skill at stylistic differentiation, evident from the early stages of her musical career, is exactly what propelled Björk to the status of national symbol and icon, perfectly aligning with the desired image of Iceland as a burgeoning nation-state and branded entity.

Iceland only gained sovereignty as a nation-state in 1944 after a decades-long peaceful independence movement succeeded in abolishing Danish rule over the island. However, Iceland would continue to be occupied by foreign militaries throughout World War II and the Cold War. It would not be until 2006 that Iceland would be entirely free of foreign military presence with the withdrawal of U.S. troops and the dissolution of their air base.² Because of this constant foreign presence, Iceland as a sovereign nation has maintained a sustained effort to define itself

² Dirk Gindt, "Performative Processes: Björk's Creative Collaborations with the World of Fashion," *Fashion Theory* 15, no. 4 (December 2011): 425–50, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174111x13115179149839>, 438.

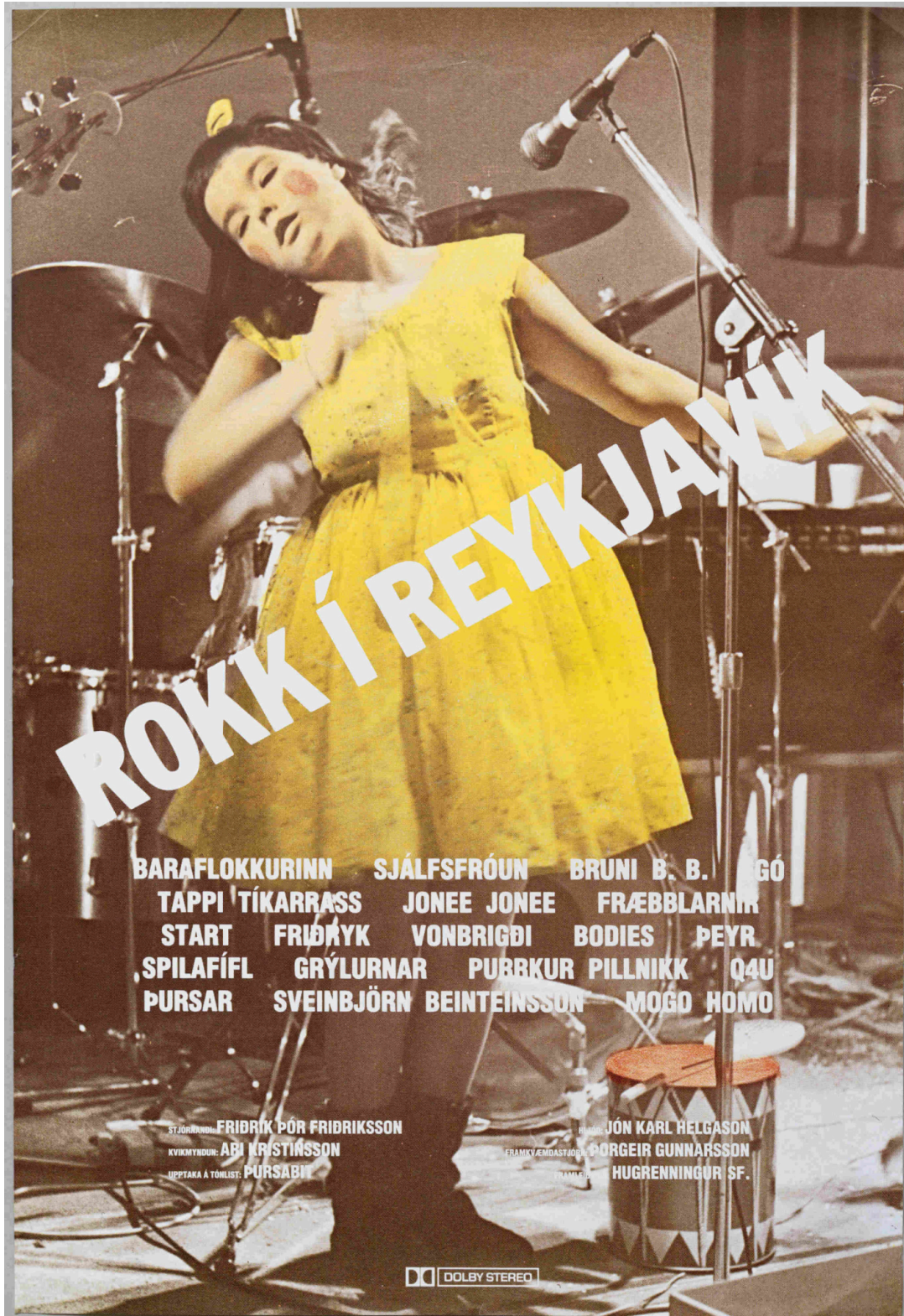


Figure 1. Poster for Friðrik Þór Friðriksson's *Rokk í Reykjavík* (1982) featuring a 17-year-old

Björk.

and its people as culturally distinct not only from Europe but from the rest of the entire world.

Æisa Sigurjónsdóttir examines how Iceland's particular brand of eccentric "weirdness," used to distinguish Iceland's cultural products in fashion, art, and music, has naturally lent itself to a symbiotic relationship with Björk as an audiovisual artist and fellow *brand*:

Björk's adaption of the weird or the eccentric in her self-fashioning was rapidly developed and integrated as a part of official branding of "Icelandicness," launched, around the turn of the century, when Reykjavík was selected as European Cultural Capital 2000. The idea of cultural and geographic difference, aided by cultural references inspired by Björk, have since been used in nation branding as has her accompanying emphasis on Iceland's unspoiled nature and her romantic belief in nature's creative force.³

This image of Björk as an up-and-coming eccentric creative who visually (as well as sonically) troubles traditional notions of gender expression and cultural belonging perfectly aligned with the image Iceland sought to forge for itself as an independent nation. It is exactly Björk's irregularity and whimsical self-presentation that positions her as the perfect ambassador for a country interested in promoting its creativity, "understood as a collective productive process... as a natural sustainable resource."⁴ Thus, Björk's fashioned body becomes a malleable representation of *all* Icelandic creative ability through her eccentricities and over-exaggerations in self-accessorization.

Björk's brand is further conflated and enmeshed with that of Iceland through her repeated audiovisual invocations of Iceland's unique topography and landscape. Shana Goldin-Perschbacher examines how Björk's aesthetic draws from the early ideology of Icelandic nationalism, noting how the Icelandic independence movement was

"inspired by Enlightenment philosopher and pastor Johann Gottfried Herder's... conception of nationality [that] centered on how a particular environment shapes a people... Icelanders were

³ Æisa Sigurjónsdóttir, "The New Nordic Cool: Bjork, Icelandic Fashion, and Art Today," *Fashion Theory* 15, no. 2 (2011): 239–58, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174111X12954359478807>, 247.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 252–253.

proud of their landscape, which they believed greatly impacted their way of life and character as people...”⁵

In the 1997 music video for her single “Jóga,” Björk subverts the expected music video form to emphasize her bodily connection to scenes of Icelandic landscapes in parallel with this early independent nationalist thought. Instead of offering the camera images of her body and face performing as her song plays, Björk only appears in the first fifteen seconds as the camera rapidly pans over the sea and focuses in on her in a starkly white, oversized puffer jacket as she lays against a contrasting black pebble beach (Figure 2). The camera then spends the next two and a half minutes flying over dramatic scenes of Icelandic geography and seismic activity before returning to the figure of Björk, now as a computer model, in the last thirty seconds. This digital animation, dressed in the same white puffer, opens up her chest to reveal a hole that leads to more scenes of rugged island landscapes. Dirk Gindt follows Björk’s performative collaborations and notes how this music video in particular advances a conflation of Björk’s human body and Iceland’s geographic (and thereby national) body. The sweeping camera motions and intercut images of body/geography recall the form of nature documentaries, visually forcing “Björk’s body and the Icelandic terrain [to] melt and become inseparable, a metaphor for the singer’s identification with and love for her home.”⁶ Geysers, mountains, seabed, human face, and rock are all given equal focus and visual treatment by the camera, naturalizing the terrain and body as equal extensions of the other. When the animated model opens herself up for the camera and reveals more images of rocks and moss, Björk exemplifies this Icelandic nationalist emphasis on the island’s terrain in shaping and *composing* who they are as people.

⁵ Shana Goldin-Perschbacher, “Icelandic Nationalism, Difference Feminism, and Björk’s Maternal Aesthetic,” *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 18, no. 1 (2014): 48–81, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wam.2014.0003>, 54.

⁶ Dirk Gindt, “Performative Processes: Björk’s Creative Collaborations with the World of Fashion,” *Fashion Theory* 15, no. 4 (December 2011): 425–50, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174111x13115179149839>, 430.



Figure 2. Collage of individual stills from the music video for “Jóga” (1997).

But Björk’s invocation of a nationalist championing of Icelandic geography does not stop with associating her body with land. Goldin-Perschbacher emphasizes how Iceland’s status as an island surrounded by open sea particularly shaped its self-conceptualizations as a nation: “the physical landscape of their island was ‘mother’ to its people and promoted ‘her’ independence from ‘King Denmark’... the image not only of the mountain but also of the sea was represented as motherly.”⁷ Björk, too, then assumes this feminized, maternal image of the sea in her performances representing Iceland on a global stage. At the 2004 Athens Olympics, Björk performed her song “Oceania” to a multi-national, global audience while dressed in a billowing blue gown designed by Sophia Kokosalaki (Figure 3). The dress is intricately constructed out of

⁷ Goldin-Perschbacher, “Icelandic Nationalism,” 54.



Figure 3. Björk performing “Oceania” at the 2004 Athens Olympics. Dress by Sophia Kokosalaki.

dense layers of blue fabric, ranging from a deep navy that fades into a misty pale blue as the fabric laps against Björk's upper torso and face, directly mirroring the coloration and form of the Icelandic sea from the opening of the "Jóga" video. It is notable that Björk chose to perform this particular song with its accompanying dress at a global event like the Olympics, where (athletic/musical) performers are understood as representative of their countries amongst a sea of other nations.

This particular globalized stage again parallels Icelandic nationalist thought in emphasizing the sea as a fluid of *connection* and motherly origin. Kokosalaki's dress does not end at Björk's feet and, instead, continues flowing down the stage where it then extends into vast swaths of blue fabric that fill the entire arena (Figure 4). Webb and Lynch emphasize how the Icelandic sea is understood as a "symbol of humankind understood as a single entity, and emphasizes commonalities between people from different cultures."⁸ Björk uses the textile excess of this dress's train to visually reconstruct an image of the sea filling the arena, submerging and *connecting* its audience of representatives from other countries around the world. In interviews, Björk herself has even emphasized this symbolic reading of the fashion and lyrical content of her performance:

The song is written from the point of view of the ocean that surrounds all the land and watches over the humans to see how they are doing after millions of years of evolution. It sees no borders, different races or religion which has always been at the core of these games... The Sea [says], 'Your sweat is salty / And I am why.'⁹

Björk understands the ocean as a communal force that transcends human-imposed borders and separations, ultimately underscoring the intimate bodily connection (*sweat*) she feels with the sea and the rest of humanity. The universal human phenomenon of sweat, producing water from your body, is charged with this connection to the sea as a uniting, and even *maternal* ("And I am

⁸ Webb and Lynch, "'Utopian Punk,'" 328.

⁹ Goldin-Perschbacher, "Icelandic Nationalism, 59.



Figure 4. Björk performing “Oceania” at the 2004 Athens Olympics. Dress by Sophia Kokosalaki.

why”), force. By transforming the traditionally feminine, and maturely conservative, ballgown into a cascading sea of fabric that floods the stadiums, Björk embodies the maternal force of the Icelandic sea as it links her island to every other country in the world.

This invocation of a globally connected culture then lends itself to understanding a third distinct strain in both Björk’s self-presentation and Iceland’s self-conceptualizations of itself as a national culture. Sigurjónsdóttir points to the concept of *cultural hybridity* as a defining characteristic of Icelandic consciousness, rooted “in its position on the border of Europe, a community in search for cultural singularity and difference, which is based on geographical and historical ideas of otherness.”¹⁰ Through this hybridization, this bricolage of disparate cultural elements from across the globe, Iceland further defined (and importantly distinguished) its cultural output to a global audience of consumers. Björk’s album cover for her 1997 album *Homogenic* (Figure 5), epitomizes this visual assemblage of garments and accessories from the distinct material cultures of vastly differing ethnic groups. The title of *Homogenic* proves ironic in Björk’s self-presentation on the album cover as a creature of *heterogeneous* identities as her visual heritage transcends continental divides, “refer[ing] to the mythic image of Iceland as a space on the border.”¹¹ Through cross-cultural citation, Björk amalgamates a hybrid cultural identity that presents an entirely new, almost *alien*, vision of human material culture and self-presentation.

The *Homogenic* album cover acts as a case study of the transnationality of Björk’s visual inspirations. She wears a Japanese kimono made by British designer Lee Alexander McQueen that maintains both its traditional form as well as distinct transformations. The neckline of the kimono is extended in the back to create a stiff and regal collar around her neck while the front is

¹⁰ Sigurjónsdóttir, “The New Nordic Cool,” 240-241.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 245.



Figure 5. *Homogenic* (1997) album cover. Photographed by Nick Knight with kimono by Lee Alexander McQueen.

lowered to (very *untraditionally*) reveal her cleavage and neck. The kimono is made out of a pale blue silk with floral embroidery that matches the backdrop; Gindt argues that this icy floral pattern “communicate[s] a cold Nordic atmosphere,”¹² maintaining a distinctly Icelandic identity in this combination while “display[ing] her willingness to incorporate international references

¹² Gindt, “Performative Processes,” 428.

into her art and music against the *background* of her Icelandic heritage.”¹³ Björk’s hair then immediately serves to contrast this distinguishable Icelandicness, pulling from a cultural heritage of an entirely different continent. Her hair recreates the squash blossom whorl hairstyle of the Hopi people (Figure 7) who inhabit the lands currently claimed by Mexico and Arizona. The altered neckline of the kimono then spotlights the neck rings which further accentuate a hybridity in their dual cultural heritage. The visual style of these neck rings mirror those of two distinct cultures in two distinct areas of the world (Figure 8): the *Dzila* of Ndebele people in the modern nation-states of South Africa and Zimbabwe, and the neck rings of the Kayan people in the modern nation-states of Vietnam, Thailand, and Myanmar. As Björk’s sea flows across the world and washes against the shores of all of these different cultures, it carries back with it these visual artifacts to bricolage together.

This blending of disparate cultural elements is another Icelandic affinity layered into Björk’s multifaceted brand, aided by her appropriative fashions and sonic blending of contrasting musical styles. As she visually collages culturally specific styles from Africa/Asia/the Americas, she simultaneously combines 20th-century French orchestra, Reggaeton, jazz, and experimental electronic music. She emphasizes the “utopia” of this musical melding: “To bring together roots, beats, strings, and words, to unite all these opposing systems, is to be a medium between disparate worlds trying to unite history, the present and the environment.”¹⁴ Her sonic practices (and commitment to an experimental, audiovisual harmony) further contextualize this fashioning of self-image from these disparate cultural sources. Webb and Lynch also note the influence of this notion of cultural hybridity throughout her brand as an artist, defining it as:

not of influence per se but collaboration and extension into new territories of musical [and visual] production... We can characterize Björk's projects as involving being "in the middle of" rather

¹³ Ibid., 430.

¹⁴ Webb and Lynch, “Utopian Punk,” 320.



Figure 7. C.C. Pierce, *Young Hopi Indian girl with hair worn up in large buns at the side of her head*, ca.1900. Squash blossom whorl hairstyle.



Figure 8. Left: A Kayan (from the modern nation-states of Myanmar/Thailand/Vietnam) woman wearing neck-rings. Right: A Ndebele (from the modern-nation states of South Africa/Zimbabwe) man wears *Dzilla*.

than at the beginning or end of something What is produced is not considered as somehow an average between the differing inputs but, rather, a place where there is acceleration away from any localizable starting points.¹⁵

For them, Björk is understood to advance a radically alternative vision of being through her cultural bricolage, transforming these citations into accessories of a *utopian* global culture. Gindt's reading of the *grotesque body*, "distinguished by exaggeration, hyperbole, and overflow... does not respect stable boundaries and therefore constantly threatens to spill over

¹⁵ Ibid., 325.

and swallow the social world,” in the extended nails, neck, collar, and hair of the *Homogenic* album cover further suggests this radical image of cultural connectivity across — or perhaps entirely without — or borders.¹⁶

Björk’s *Homogenic* then serves to offer a visually transcendent hybridity where the boundaries of the modern nation-state are entirely dissolved into a singular, global cultural *koine*. Though her body is often conflated (often by her audience and often through her self-fashioning) with the modern nation-state of Iceland and its cultural brand, Björk here articulates a vision of identity entirely emancipated from this singular, localized source. Her futuristic articulation draws from such disparate sources (across any binary of North/South, East/West, Global/Local, Colonizer/Indigenous, Visual/Sonic), to draw strength from each individual citation; Björk almost assumes the same confronting, piercing stare of the Hopi woman captured in C.C. Pierce’s photograph nearly a century before. Björk’s success as a global artist comes from her ability to naturalize this hybridity in her self-fashioning, furthering her conflation with Iceland as she borrows its inherent geo-political association with the other, the between, and the border.

Throughout her career, Björk has managed to create an experimental sound and visual presence that blurs the boundaries of geography and culture, in tandem with assuming a role as ambassador— and synecdoche — for the modern nation-state of Iceland. Yet as her sonic creations and fashion performances enmesh their two brands together and articulate three distinct conceptions of Icelandicness, Björk always manages to find differentiation and *distinguishment* as an artist outside of this limiting national affiliation. In her early career as a local post-punk artist, she exemplified the Icelandic branding of cultural “difference, even weirdness,” but even in the poster for *Rokk í Reykjavík* (1982), the visual focus is singularly on *her*, alone, as a

¹⁶ Gindt, “Performative Processes,” 429.

performer.¹⁷ While her body and Icelandic geography mix under her camera's focus in "Jóga," Björk's deliberate outfit choice of the oversized white parker acts as an armor that visibly contrasts (and separates her from) the black pebble beach. Even when she deliberately assumes the role of ambassador, utilizing nationalist associations of the Icelandic sea for a global audience, the lapping waves of the dress stop just before her spotlighted face. Her work continuously adopts and sheds essentialist associations with Icelandic heritage to promote an image (and perhaps a future projection of Iceland as a nation) of undefinable hybridity as a creative force. Björk's repertoire of assorted, contrasting, and seemingly incompatible references, as exemplified by the *Homogenic* album cover, are what allow her to additionally articulate a distinct brand that is rooted in, but ultimately declaring independence from, a monolithic idea of Icelandic identity.

¹⁷ Sigurjónsdóttir, "The New Nordic Cool," 241.

Bibliography

- Gindt, Dirk. "Performative Processes: Björk's Creative Collaborations with the World of Fashion." *Fashion Theory* 15, no. 4 (December 2011): 425–50.
<https://doi.org/10.2752/175174111x13115179149839>.
- Goldin-Perschbacher, Shana. "Icelandic Nationalism, Difference Feminism, and Björk's Maternal Aesthetic." *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 18, no. 1 (2014): 48–81. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wam.2014.0003>.
- Sigurjónsdóttir, Æisa. "The New Nordic Cool: Bjork, Icelandic Fashion, and Art Today." *Fashion Theory* 15, no. 2 (2011): 239–58. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174111XI2954359478807>.
- Webb, Peter, and John Lynch. "'Utopian Punk': The Concept of Utopia in the Creative Practice of Björk." *Utopian Studies* 21, no. 2 (2010): 313–30.

Images

@bjorkspears. “Joga (1997) The video shows different Icelandic terrains & landscapes with

Björk appearing only in the beginning & the end.” X, April 20, 2020, 5:09am.

Bjork, that dress and the extraordinary Athens 2004 Opening Ceremony. Olympics.com.

International Olympic Committee, June 4, 2018.

<https://olympics.com/en/news/bjork-that-dress-and-the-extraordinary-athens-2004-opening-ceremony>.

Evans, Steve. *Thailand Hill Tribe*. January 5, 2007. Photograph.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/babasteve/351227116/>.

Friðriksson, Friðrik Þór. *Rokk í Reykjavík*. 1982. Poster.

<https://www.forlagid.is/vara/rokk-i-reykjavik-plakat/>.

Knight, Nick. *Homogenic*. 1997. Photograph.

<https://medium.com/@bjorkaeiou/short-story-of-the-iconic-cover-shoot-for-homogenic-album-by-bj%C3%B6rk-862072692a25>.

Neck Ring (Dzilla or Idzila) - Ndebele People, South Africa. Africa and Beyond Art Gallery.

Africa and Beyond.

<https://www.africaandbeyond.com/african-currency-neck-rings-dzilla-brass-copper-ndebele-south-africa.html>.

Pierce, C.C. *Young Hopi Indian girl with hair worn up in large buns at the side of her head*.

ca.1900. Photograph. https://digitallibrary.usc.edu/asset-management/2A3BF15D8_1.