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## Útrásarvíkingar! The literature of the Icelandic financial crisis (2008-2014)

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Alaric Hall



**ÚTRÁSARVÍKINGAR!**

The Literature of the  
Icelandic Financial Crisis  
(2008–2014)

ÚTRÁSARVÍKINGAR!



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Fig. 1. Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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Alaric Hall



The Literature of the  
Icelandic Financial Crisis  
(2008–2014)





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*For my teachers*



*Why aren't there any elves in Hellisgerði any more?*





They've moved to Kópavogur to get some peace and quiet.



## Preface

Language-learning, my Glasgow colleague Alison Phipps once pointed out to me, is not so much epistemological as ontological: it is not a change so much in what you know as in how you are. In this respect, and in others, this book reflects a winding ontological journey. Correspondingly, my acknowledgements feel painfully incomplete, yet awkwardly capacious. Please bear with me.

Vaikka “valmistuin” Helsingin yliopiston tutkijakollegiumista yli kymmenen vuotta sitten, tämä on monessa suhteessa kollegiumin kirja ja monet siinä esiintyvistä ajatuksista liittyvät asioihin, jotka opin Helsingin yliopistossa ja ystäviltäni yliopistolla. Matkani ovat ikävä kyllä suuntautuneet viime aikoina usein luoteeseen koillisen sijaan, mutta minulla on ikävä teitä! (Trots att jag “utexaminerades” från Helsingfors universitets forskarkollegium för mer än tio år sedan så är den här i många avseenden en “Kollegiumbok.” Bland dessa sidor finns mycket som jag lärde vid universitetet och från mina vänner där. Tyvärr har jag rest på senare tid oftare till nordväst än nordost; jag saknar er!)

But this book is most of all a product of my time at the University of Leeds, in the School of English and the Institute for Medieval Studies. Wittingly or unwittingly, we all seek the approbation of our colleagues and students, and one way or another this shapes the research we do. My colleagues at Leeds

have been exceptionally supportive at every turn. I am grateful for the semesters of research leave granted by the School of English in 2014 and 2017 that enabled me to complete a good half of the work for this project. I am particularly indebted to David Higgins, Hamilton Carroll, Jeremy Davies, and Rory McTurk for their willingness to read draft material or discuss my ideas.

Much of the learning that underpins this book I gained alongside my students in Old Norse and modern Icelandic. They all have my thanks: it has been an enormous privilege to teach these subjects, and to work with such fun people. I suspect all my doctoral students would hear echoes of their research in this book, because they have all influenced it, but I must especially thank Catalin Taranu, Erika Sigurdson, Helen Price, Katherine Miller, Lynda Taylor, Sheryl McDonald Werronen, and Vicki Cooper for providing one crucial intellectual environment in which this book took shape, which I was very lucky to have. That intellectual environment was also defined by the Leeds University Old Norse Reading Group, to all of whose successive members I am indebted.

But, to me, this is also a Leeds book in other ways. I suppose you might say that it is, tacitly, a dialogue between two adoptive homes, Leeds and Reykjavík. It was written as I put down roots in the former, and it has drawn much sustenance from friendships and activism here. I am grateful to the Team with Many Names, my neighbours, and latterly my teachers and fellow students at Leeds Beckett University. Yvonne Murray and David Hoghton-Carter, in particular, have endured long conversations about this book and offered valuable comments on early versions. This book would have been finished much sooner were it not for Ed Carlisle and Leeds Green Party, but it would have felt less meaningful to write.

In important ways, this project grew out of the University of Victoria inviting me to deliver the autumn 2011 Beck Lectures, and I am correspondingly indebted to the Richard and Margaret Beck endowment, and to Trish Baer and John Tucker for their hospitality. It was also nurtured through meetings of the Viking Society for Northern Research, and I am hugely grateful for the

groovy vibe we enjoy in Old Norse studies in the UK. Among Viking Society members, however, Haki Antonsson deserves particular thanks for his pithy observations on my musings. The foundational period of research leave for this book was subsidised by an invaluable Leverhulme Trust International Academic Fellowship, which I also would not have received without the support of Matthew Driscoll, Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, and Terry Gunnell.

One perhaps never accrues debts of gratitude quicker than when living in a foreign country. Ég er þakklátur öllum þeim sem hafa tekið þátt í að bjóða mig velkominn á Ísland, íslendingum og útlendingum. Fræðimennskan og gestrisnin Árnastyfninganna eru með réttlæti víðfregnar, og oft hefur orðsporið Stofnunar orðið sannað í mínu reynslu. Ég hefði aldrei lært íslensku nógu vel til að skrifa þessa bók án þess að búa hjá Björgu Sigurðardóttur og fjölskyldu hennar; meira að segja var það hjá henni að ég varð vitni að pólitísku atburðunum í kjölfarið Búsáhaldaþytingarinnar. Heimilið hennar hefur verið skjól og skóli mér á margan hátt, eins og mörgum. En ég hefði líka lært of lítið íslensku til að skrifa þessa bók án þolinmæðis og örlætis Elínar Ingibjargar Eyjólfsdóttur. Samstarfsmenn og vinir sem, beint eða óbeint, hafa haft mestu áhrif á þessu verkefni, en eru ekki nefndir annarsstaðar í þessum formála, eru Alex Murphy, Arndís Þórarinsdóttir, Ármann Jakobsson, Bjarki Karlsson, Claire Musikas, Claudia Heynen, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, Kári Tulinius, Katelin Parsons, Kristín Loftsdóttir, Lenka Kovářová, Ludger Zeevaert, Luke Murphy, Merrill Kaplan, Reynhildur Karlsdóttir, Susanne Arthur, og Teresa Dröfn Njarðvík. En ég verð að geta sérstaklega Jóns Karls Helgasonar, sem las drög að bókinni og bauð mér dýrmætt ráð, og Hauks Þorgeirssonar, sem hefur verið ótrúlega duglegur leiðsögu- maður um alla atriða íslenskar menningar. Takk öllum saman!

The dedication of this book is meant inclusively, and both literally and figuratively. I hesitate to mention any names because so many others ought to follow. Yet, amidst manifold gratitudes, I have most often found myself offering up a prayer of thanks for the exertions of Messrs Collier and Ferris, of Aylesbury Gram-

mar School. At every turn — whether in language-learning, criticism, pedagogy, history, or philosophy — I find myself drawing on lessons I learned across six years studying Latin and Ancient History with those two very different and very dedicated scholars. And among the many kindnesses that have enabled this book to be written, the heavy lifting they did to help me from the bottom of my A-level Latin class to a level commensurate with my ambitions was life-changing.

It is perhaps in the nature of first books that they tend to be written as you are establishing your independence from your family — at any rate mine was. Conversely, this book came at a time when I was re-learning my interdependence with my family — not to mention learning to be a part of new ones besides. In some cases through their comments on draft material, and in all cases through conversations, my family have helped to shape this work, just as they are still helping to shape me.

Whatever he may make of its contents, this book is more the fault of Andrew Wawn than anyone else but me. He has implicitly been thanked above already as a teacher, a colleague, a denizen of the Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, and as a friend; to which I must perforce add that he is an invaluable fount of gnomic wisdom. But he has been exceptionally generous in each of these capacities, and deserves much of the credit for whatever this study has achieved. I am fortunate indeed to have worked alongside him. And whatever she may make of its contents, this book is more the fault of Shamira Meghani than anyone else but me and Andrew Wawn. It has been shaped by daily conversations through which I have benefited from Shamira's knowledge, critical acuity, and support; indeed, her encouragement to develop my thoughts across a broader canvas is one reason why I wrote this book at all. I hope more fervently in respect of these scholars than any others that they are not too horrified by its inevitable mistakes.

# Opening an Account

## 1.1 Icelandic culture goes boom

Here's a summary:<sup>1</sup> Iceland was first settled by humans in the ninth century. Their dispersed settlement patterns, pastoral farming, and the Norse language that they came to share shaped the island's society into the nineteenth century and still exert a powerful hold on the public imagination within Iceland, while also influencing the country's brand abroad. With a more or less wholesale conversion to Christianity in 1000, integration into the Kingdom of Norway in the 1260s, and the absorption of both Norway and Iceland into a Danish empire, effectively from 1415, fundamental institutional structures were established in Icelandic society that defined its political economy into the early twentieth century. Whether the net effect of Danish rule of Iceland was exploitation or subsidy is a matter of long-running

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1 Key accounts in English include Roger Boyes, *Meltdown Iceland: Lessons on the World Financial Crisis from a Small Bankrupt Island* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009); Eiríkur Bergmann, *Iceland and the International Financial Crisis: Boom, Bust and Recovery* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Már Wolfgang Mixa, "The Icelandic Bubble and Beyond: Investment Lessons from History and Cultural Effects" (Ph.D. diss., Reykjavík University, 2016). Vidar Thorsteinnsson, "Iceland's Revolution," *Jacobin*, March 14, 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/03/iceland-banking-finance-icesave-left-greens>, offers a helpful, pithy insight into an avowedly left-wing perspective on post-Crash politics.

debate, but either way, from around the 1830s, Icelandic intellectuals, often resident in the colonial metropole of Copenhagen and inspired by the German National-Romantic movement, began to lobby for independence from Denmark. Large-scale commercial fishing had been undertaken in Iceland since the fifteenth century, but liberalization of Icelandic trade and finance enabled the sector to industrialize around 1900, not least under the influence of the Danish-born entrepreneur Thor Jensen, whose name will recur in this study. From this time, industrial capitalism, urbanization, and devolution from Danish rule became key forces in Icelandic society. Iceland's population doubled from about 50,000 around 1820 to 100,000 around 1920, and hit 350,000 shortly before 2020. From 10% in 1900, the greater Reykjavík area is now home to more than two thirds of Iceland's population, and most of the rest too now live in nucleated settlements. For a long time the main export, fish have remained key to the economy — even “the foundation of Iceland's economic independence.”<sup>2</sup>

Strategically crucial to control of the Atlantic during the Second World War, Iceland was seized by the United Kingdom in 1940. Handed over to the USA in 1941, its strategic importance continued as a Cold War NATO outpost. While Iceland gained formal independence from Denmark in 1944, American occupation was normalized, continuing until 2006. The massive influx of wartime military infrastructure spending and associated opportunities for wage labor pushed the economy into a fully monetized, consumption-driven, urbanized capitalism. In the post-war period, employment was usually full, the economy generally growing quickly, inflation always high, and interest rates often negative: debt was therefore prudent, which swiftly eroded traditional aversions to indebtedness.

Post-War Iceland is often assumed by outsiders to be a Nordic social democracy, but its mid-Atlantic position in fact stands (not entirely coincidentally) as a good metaphor for its twentieth-century politics, with often rancorous public debate drawing

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2 Bergmann, *Iceland and the International Financial Crisis*, 37.



on both Nordic welfare models and American free-marketism. What might be called Iceland's "natural party of government" is the conservative *Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn* (Independence Party): it has been a member of most of Iceland's governments since 1944. The beginning of its embrace of neoliberalism is marked by the formation of a short-lived neoliberal journal *Eimreiðin* ("The Locomotive") in the 1970s by a group whose members would go on to prominent political, economic, academic, and media positions. The most famous of these young thinkers is Davíð Oddsson, a key player in the Independence Party's policies. In the 1980s, Iceland had to come to terms with its disastrous overfishing, and effectively privatized the previously common resources of the sea, distributing to vessel owners fishing quotas that were constituted as tradeable private property. This allowed a relatively small number of players to buy up others' quotas, rapidly consolidating the fishing industry and concentrating wealth. The move also allowed quotas — essentially, the promise of uncaught fish — to act as collateral for loans, which encouraged a growing culture of credit, debt, and speculation.

Iceland's access to markets and capital was opened up by accession to the European Economic Area in 1994, and over the ensuing decade the government also oversaw the deregulation and privatization of Iceland's banking sector. Since the Wall Street Crash, Iceland's banks had largely been state-owned and the country fairly closed to foreign investment, so the rapid liberalization of the financial system was a major shift. However, despite interest from foreign banks, the government ensured that as the Icelandic banks were privatized, they were bought by Icelanders. This policy was due to a mix of naive nationalist ideology and politicians' cynical (if only partly successful) desire to keep control of the banking system within established networks of patronage. By 2003, after a flurry of rebranding, the main players of the Icelandic banking sector emerged as Glitnir, Landsbanki, and Kaupping. (Tricky to translate, these might be rendered literally as "glitterer," drawn from a place-name in Old Norse mythology; "the country's bank"; and "marketplace.") The details of how these came to take on debts nearly ten times the

size of Iceland's GDP have been examined in a plethora of publications, with many more yet to come, and it is not necessary to plunge into this detail here. The story includes choices, by turns cynical and deluded, by an overwhelmingly male cast of politicians, financiers, and businessmen; risk-seeking machismo, cronyism and personal vendettas; exponential expansion of the financial sector; heedless exposure of the currency to international speculation; and a string of dubious and often unlawful practices including mis-selling, banks' owners becoming those same banks' biggest debtors, cross-financing between banks, and banks lending people money to enable them to buy those banks' own shares. These activities correlated with Iceland's participation in a wider, neoliberal financialization of Western societies, for which Iceland stands in some ways as a microcosm, and the newly liberalized Iceland was insufficiently shielded from global financial forces — but it seems beyond doubt that the fundamental causes of the Crash, and the reasons why it unfolded in the way that it did, were domestic.

When the international credit crunch came, Iceland was not, from the point of view of the global financial system, too big to fail. However, from the point of view of Iceland's central bank, Glitnir, Landsbanki and Kaupþing proved too big to save. Across three days in October 2008, the big three banks therefore collapsed, followed, in effect, by the central bank itself. The Icelandic currency, the króna, always a weak point in the Icelandic economy, plummeted with them, eventually losing more than half its value. The economic crisis this wrought is generally referred to in Icelandic as the *hrun*, literally “collapse” (also *kreppa* “difficulty, tight spot”) — hereafter rendered in this book as *the Crash*. The Icelandic government bailed out the central bank, nationalized the domestic operations of the big three, and put their international sections into administration, imposing capital controls to keep foreign capital in the country and so prevent the complete collapse of the króna.

Concerned to understand what people do in the face of crises as well as how to avert them, this book is at least as interested in the consequences of the Crash as the causes. The effects of

the Crash were of course numerous and diverse, but for most Icelanders they were felt first and foremost in terms of one of our most basic necessities, housing. Unwisely and often unlawfully encouraged to take out mortgages denominated in currencies other than the króna (on the assumption that these debts would depreciate as the króna grew irresistibly stronger), 40% of households soon found themselves significantly in arrears on mortgage payments.<sup>3</sup> Faced down by three months of popular protest, the Social Democratic Alliance resigned from its coalition with the Independence Party, leading to a parliamentary election in April 2009. The election returned Iceland's first ever entirely left-wing coalition — but also meant that it was this coalition that had to bear the brunt of the Crash, not least fraught negotiations with the UK and the Netherlands, whose citizens had collectively lost something like €4.5bn in investments in the Landsbanki “Icesave” scheme. (Despite high-profile politicking at all levels of Icelandic society, these problems were eventually resolved, in no small part because the banks' assets proved sufficient to repay most of their debts.) Still, prevented by circumstance from bailing out the banks, the public purse proved in good enough shape for the government to spend its way through the recession, with the help of a mixture of loans, cuts, and progressive tax increases, along with strong human capital and a real export economy that was not fundamentally affected by the Crash, but benefited from the plummeting value of the króna. The recession was over by 2011 and the budget more or less balanced by 2014.

Nevertheless, the post-Crash left-wing government managed to accrue most of the popular blame for the pain of the recession, and was replaced in 2013 by the familiar coalition of the Independence and Progressive Parties, who had succeeded at the last moment in fending off constitutional reform that might, amongst other things, have reduced the disproportionate representation of their rural supporters in the Icelandic parliament, the *Alþingi*. This government was able to remove the last of the

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3 Ibid., 129.

capital controls in 2017, in a significant way marking the end of Iceland's financial crisis. In the intervening period, however, those whose once-liquid wealth was trapped in Iceland by the capital controls tended to invest in property, snapping up foreclosed mortgages, achieving a major shift of land-ownership into the hands of wealthy rentiers and, within a short time, pushing up housing prices and rents dramatically.

Meanwhile, following its own exponential growth, tourism now accounts for about 40% of Iceland's foreign exchange earnings, twice as much as marine products. It may even have been boosted by the international media coverage that accompanied the Crash. It certainly helped drive both the economic recovery and the property boom. Thus, at the time of writing, Iceland is experiencing a new boom, which is happily based in the real economy, but worryingly in an industry where demand is infamously elastic. Although Iceland is objectively a unique country in various ways, and an attractive tourist destination for this reason, its success relies far less on objective attractions than on the careful cultivation of its national brand; with getting on for two million tourists passing through the country in 2016, sustaining this brand is putting strain on Icelanders' own sense of their national identity.

As widely in the West, Iceland experiences a sharp divide between generally elderly, rural voters who feel left behind by Iceland's development and are right-leaning, and generally young, urban voters who live in a Reykjavík that has in some ways become cosmopolitan, and are left-leaning.

## 1.2 Charting the Cultural Boom

“Can one base identity on irony?” asked Kristinn Schram as he “stood in the midst of the revelling Viking-helmeted bankers at the 2007 midwinter feast of Glitnir Bank,” and wondered “who was performing to whom? And why?”<sup>4</sup> Ironic, postmodern self-

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4 Kristinn Schram, “Banking on Borealism: Eating, Smelling, and Performing the North,” in *Iceland and Images of the North*, ed. Sumarliði

deprecation is a prominent characteristic of Icelandic culture, so the question is an important one and will resonate through this book. I am by profession a medievalist, and while this book is not primarily about medievalism, it is by the constellations of medieval Icelandic literature and later folklore that I have steered my analyses of post-Crash Icelandic fiction. Amidst all the postmodern irony in Iceland's recycling of its history, Crash-novels can be seen, at times, to compete earnestly over historical terrain and its meanings, accepting that history is capable of multiple different narrations and renarrations, but also that there are understandings of the past which are empirically grounded, or at least licensed by medieval primary texts, which conflict with the narratives which dominate Icelandic culture.

In economic research, Iceland has emerged as one popular case-study of the 2008 Western financial crisis: the collapse of Iceland's banks came early enough in the crisis for Iceland to be seen as the "canary in the mine"; was uniquely spectacular; and was relatively readily comprehended because of the country's small size and the swift, thorough, and public efforts of its government to investigate the causes of the collapse.<sup>5</sup> In the same way, Iceland also deserves close analysis as a case-study in how art has responded to the Crash. Characterized by one author as "litlu landi á hraðferð frá fornöld til framtíðar" ("a small country on an express journey from the ancient past to the future"), Iceland encapsulates the urgency in the early twenty-first century of both the pre-capitalist past and a globalizing future in ways that resonate far beyond its shores.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas lots has been written about the finance, economics, and politics of the Crash in Iceland, Anglophone scholarship has taken rather little note of the fact that there were two

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R. Ísleifsson (Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2011), 305.

- 5 The key study is Rannsóknarnefnd Alþingis, *Aðdragandi og orsakir falls íslensku bankanna 2008 og tengdir atburðir*, eds. Páll Hreinsson, Sigríður Benediktsdóttir, and Tryggvi Gunnarsson, 9 vols. (Reykjavík: Rannsóknarnefnd Alþingis, 2010).
- 6 Práinn Bertelsson, *Dauðans óvissi tími* [*Death's uncertain hour*] (Reykjavík: JPV, 2004), 138.

paths to the Crash: in a way two booms. Alongside the financial boom, there was also a cultural one.<sup>7</sup> With its roots running deeper than deregulation, to some extent this cultural boom took place independently of high finance; one early milestone in its development would be the sudden international success of The Sugarcubes' debut album *Life's Too Good* in 1988. But the two booms were nonetheless closely connected, as economic growth and rising cultural prestige fed off each other. Indeed, in many respects the two booms proceeded in lockstep: in early twenty-first century Iceland, the penetration of the cultural sector by the financial was deep. For example, Björgólfur Guðmundsson, chairman and part-owner of Landsbanki from 2003 to October 2008, who in 2009 experienced what appears to have been the world's biggest ever personal bankruptcy (but is perhaps best-known outside Iceland as the owner, from 2006–9, of West Ham football club), became the main owner of Iceland's biggest publisher, Edda, which was itself buying up smaller Icelandic publishers.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, some of the most interesting and prominent writers in this study, such as Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl, Óttar M. Norðfjörð, and Steinar Bragi, were linked to the experimental Nýhil art collective. I argue below that their left-field literary organizing during the boom years fostered a diversity and political acuity on the Icelandic literary scene that proved genuinely important when crisis came. Nevertheless, in 2006, Nýhil

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- 7 Cf. Magnús Þór Snæbjörnsson, "Björgólfskviða — eða listaverkið að lokinni fjöldaframleiðslu sinni: Smásaga með myndum og neðanmálgreinum," *Kistan*, October 18, 2008; Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl, "Literature in the Land of the Inherently Cute: The Search for Literary Crisis," in *Booby, Be Quiet!* (Helsinki: Poesia, 2011), 103–24; Einar Már Guðmundsson, *Bankastræti núll* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2011), 151–56; Alda Björk Valdimarsdóttir and Guðni Elísson, "Og eftir sitjum við með sektarkennd í brjósti": Hallgrímur Helgason og íslenska efnahagshrunið," *Ritið* 12, no. 2 (2012): 169–97; Tinna Grétarsdóttir, Ásmundur Ásmundsson, and Hannes Lárusson, "Creativity and Crisis," in *Gambling Debt: Iceland's Rise and Fall in the Global Economy*, eds. E. Paul Durrenberger and Gisli Pálsson (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015), 93–105.
- 8 Ingi Freyr Vilhjálmsson, *Hamskiptin: Þegar allt varð falt á Íslandi* (Reykjavík: Veröld, 2014), 6–82, 165–206.

struck an agreement with Landsbanki whereby Landsbanki paid for 1200 free copies of nine Nýhil publications to be distributed to Icelandic libraries.<sup>9</sup> In short, leading economic actors recognized that they benefited from patronizing the cultural sector, and the cultural sector accepted this patronage, with artists even becoming paragons of the flexible, post-industrial labor force championed by neoliberals. Moreover, in the wake of the Crash, Iceland's economic recovery has depended to an alarming extent on a new boom, this time in tourism. Many tourists are drawn directly by Iceland's literature, music, and film industries — but even when the main attraction is Iceland's landscape, what tourists encounter is still an assiduously cultivated national brand, as much the idea of Iceland as the land itself.<sup>10</sup> Understanding the literary side to Iceland's boom and bust, then, is important to understanding not only the relationship of art to neoliberalism, but also ongoing developments in Icelandic culture and economics.

And whatever else might be said of Icelandic literary responses to the Crash, they were swift and numerous. I am conscious that, intent on coming to grips with Icelandic financial-crisis literature, I have neglected the wider context of art relating to the Financial Crisis in other Western countries (let alone other work surrounding indirectly connected upheavals, like the Arab Spring) — though it is perhaps worth noting that many of the Icelandic writers I study here combine sometimes very local commitments within Iceland with much more international perspectives, writing from, for example, Spain (Óttar M. Norðfjörð), the UK (Sigrún Davíðsdóttir), Finland (Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl), Germany (Auður Jónsdóttir), the USA (Kári Tulinius), or even while travelling in Ethiopia, Pakistan, and

9 “Bókhneigður banki,” *Morgunblaðið*, March 3, 2006.

10 See for example Kristín Loftsdóttir, Katla Kjartansdóttir, and Katrín Anna Lund, “Trapped in Clichés: Masculinity, Films and Tourism in Iceland,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 24, no. 9 (2017): 1225–42 and the references given there.

Senegal (Bjarni Harðarson).<sup>11</sup> But the distinctiveness of Icelandic authors' post-Crash concern with the hegemony of its financiers can be indicated by comparison with the two pre-eminent British Crash-novels: John Lanchester's *Capital* and Sebastian Faulks's *A Week in December*. As I discuss in Chapter 2, both Icelandic and British literature struggle to write the Crash as a systemic, social phenomenon, and instead drift into conceptualizing it as a personal crisis for a banker, struggling to get beyond an individualistic account of the Crash.<sup>12</sup> But they struggle in different ways. Each with a dozen or so intertwining stories, both *Capital* and *A Week in December* are predicated on the sense that Londoners' experiences are so radically varied and their society so complex that they can only really be assayed through a loosely articulated network of narratives. It is the novelist's work to reveal each section of society to the others, and to map the invisible interdependencies which comprise London's social and economic fabric. London is in turn presented as a metonym for the fabulously complex globalized economy and society which any serious attempt to investigate neoliberalism and the financial crisis must attempt to map — hence the double

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- 11 Some key studies are: Suman Gupta, "Philology of the Contemporary World: On Storying the Financial Crisis," *Philology* 2 (2016): 275–96 and Nicky Marsh, Paul Crosthwaite, and Peter Knight, "Show Me The Money: The Culture Of Neoliberalism," *New Formations* 80–81 (2013): 209–17 on the UK; Leigh Claire La Berge, *Scandals and Abstraction: Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), Annie McClanahan, *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First-Century Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), and Judith Schulz, *From Wall Street to Main Street: Tracing the Shadows of the Financial Crisis from 2007 to 2009 in American Fiction* (Wiesbaden: Metzler, 2016), on the USA; Olga Bezhanova, *Literature of Crisis: Spain's Engagement with Liquid Capital* (London: Bucknell University Press, 2017), on Spain; Elenia Yannakakis and Natasha Lemos, "Introduction," in *Critical Times, Critical Thoughts: Contemporary Greek Writers Discuss Facts and Fiction*, eds. Natasha Lemos and Eleni Yannakakis (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 1–19, on Greece; and Michael K. Walonen, *Contemporary World Narrative Fiction and the Spaces of Neoliberalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), on a global selection of writers.
- 12 On the Anglophone material, see Marsh, Crosthwaite, and Knight, "Show Me The Money"; McClanahan, *Dead Pledges*, 21–95.



meaning of Lanchester's title *Capital*. (And even then, Lanchester's novel was both preceded and followed by non-fiction books about the Crash, as if he found that no single mode was suitable for tackling it.<sup>13</sup>)

By contrast, Iceland is a small and egalitarian enough country that, while recognizing its profound connections to the rest of the world, it feels possible to chart an integrated account of the crisis at a national level. Thus the tangibility of a small group of larger-than-life celebrity bankers in Iceland, ostensibly quite unlike the shadowy suits hidden behind serried walls of shell companies who are their counterparts elsewhere, has in a way been a blessing to writers, and one reason why Icelanders have been able to get some grip artistically on the Crash where Anglophone authors have at best struggled or, more usually, not tried. Yet these characteristics also mean that writers were more intimately bound to the boom than they might have been in other places. Whereas for British writers the challenge of 2008 has been to argue that Britain's disparate society needs to be understood as a whole, the most burning question for Icelandic writers following the Crash is how a flourishing diversity of critical voices can be fostered.<sup>14</sup> Sigrún Davíðsdóttir's *Samhengi hlutanna* also uses London as the scene for trying to map international finance (and Iceland's place in it) — but, characteristically, she does so through the eyes of a single, Icelandic protagonist, who acts as a node in a network of friendships and family ties. Through this one nexus point, Sigrún seeks to map out the society of the Icelandic boom. Indeed, in the present study a person cited in one paragraph as a scholar or journalist will appear in another as an author (among them Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl, Kári Tulinius and Sigrún Davíðsdóttir); people who appear below as authors and critics found themselves serving as MPs following the 2009 elections (Þráinn Bertelsson, Katrín Jakobsdóttir and

13 Gupta, "Philology of the Contemporary World," 286.

14 Cf. Bergljót Soffía Kristjánsdóttir's Crash-themed reading of Anton Helgi Jónsson's 2010 poetry collection *Ljóð af ættarmóti*: "'Ég get ekkert sagt.' Skáldskapur og hrun," *Ritið* 11, no. 2 (2011): 53–66, at 53.

Margrét Tryggvadóttir), or in one case eventually the president (Guðni Th. Jóhanesson), while others wrote as they adjusted to losing jobs as MPs (Bjarni Harðarson) or bankers (Guðmundur Óskarsson, Ármann Þorvaldsson, Már Wolfgang Mixa). Several, indeed, appear in my own acknowledgements. Thus Icelandic literature presents potentially powerful contributions to a wider international discussion, particularly with regard to the power of finance to shape public opinion, the problem of group-think, and the capacity of fiction to address high finance.

I am acutely conscious that the genesis of this book was my own endeavor to improve my Icelandic, and that my grasp of the language has grown with each novel I read. Reading relatively slowly in a foreign language is aesthetically quite a different experience from reading as a native-speaker — not least because, defamiliarized, the process of reading itself becomes an aesthetic experience. With unnerving consistency, Icelandic acquaintances' response to my sheepish admission that I am working on the(ir) Crash has been to say that, as a foreigner, I might see things in ways that Icelanders themselves can't. This response hints at the deep concern in Iceland that a small society needs outside points of view; but it is perhaps also a polite (and unwitting) manifestation of the idea that only Icelanders can really understand Iceland.<sup>15</sup> (This tension manifests in a large amount of the fiction studied here in the form of protagonists who are Icelanders, yet are returning to Iceland after a long period abroad.)<sup>16</sup> One's confidence is not bolstered by the separate fact that taking a pop at literary critics is a frequent passtime in Crash-novels. In Óttar M. Norðfjörð's *Lygarinn*, the writer Vera admonishes her students about the importance of Roland Barthes's seminal essay "The Death of the Author": "þessi áhrifamikla bókmenntafræðikenning virtist þó ekki hafa

15 Magnús Einarsson, "The Wandering Semioticians: Tourism and the Image of Modern Iceland," in *Images of Contemporary Iceland: Everyday Lives and Global Contexts*, eds. Gisli Palsson and E. Paul Durrenberger (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996), 228–29.

16 Cf. Jürg Glauser, *Inland: Eine Literaturgeschichte* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2011), 152.

borist meirihluta íslenskra gagnrýnenda, því þeir lásu ennþá skáldsögur út frá lífi höfundarins” (“this influential literary criticism seemed, however, not to have affected the majority of Icelandic critics, because they still interpreted novels on the basis of the author’s life”) — even as the book as a whole signals that Óttar is himself unconvinced by the grip Barthes’s polemic has had on literary criticism.<sup>17</sup> In Bjarni Bjarnason’s *Mannorð*, the author Almar Logi complains that “á Íslandi er ekki til andlegt líf. Það er að segja, þar er ekki til fólk sem getur lesið tilvistarlega merkingu bókmenntaverks og sett það í menningarlegt samhengi” (“in Iceland there is no intellectual life. That’s to say, there’s no-one there who can read the existential significance of a work of literature and situate it in its cultural context”). Here Almar denigrates the critics who failed to comprehend his allegorical warning of the impending Crash.<sup>18</sup> More luridly, Emil Þórsson’s efforts to write a dissertation on death in the novels of Halldór Laxness in Steinar Bragi’s novella *Rafflesíublómið* correlate with his descent into necrophilia. As a foreigner with quite limited exposure to Icelandic culture, I read these complaints nervously. Certainly Icelandic novels seldom suggest conclusions about Icelandic society so distinctive that they cannot be gleaned from other cultural commentary, not least the extensive anthropological work of Kristín Loftsdóttir<sup>19</sup> or the culturally and economically astute scholarship of Eiríkur Bergmann.<sup>20</sup>

This book is, therefore, aimed primarily at an Anglophone audience, offering a case study of how one literary culture has responded to the Crash. Anglophones have relatively little opportunity to sample contemporary Icelandic literature for themselves: Icelandic novels are widely translated into Scandinavian, French, and German, and often other European languages like Polish, Dutch, Finnish, or Spanish, but find their way slowly, if at all, into the brutally monolingual Anglophone book market.

17 Óttar M. Norðfjörð, *Lygarinn: Sönn saga* [*The liar: a true story*] (Reykjavík: Sögur, 2011), 294–95 (see also 71). See further below, §2.5.3.

18 Bjarni Bjarnason, *Mannorð* [*Reputation*] (Akranes: Uppheimar, 2011), 88.

19 Almost all of whose work on the Crash will be found in the bibliography.

20 Bergmann, *Iceland and the International Financial Crisis*.

The only novels which I discuss in detail in this book so far to have appeared in English are Bjarni Bjarnason's *Mannorð* and Steinar Bragi's *Hálendið* (both in 2017), and Andri Snær Magnason's *Tímakistan* (2018). To help readers without ready access to Icelandic texts, I have supported this study with a raft of Wikipedia entries on the texts, personalities, and key ideas covered. For a summary of any text discussed in this work, for example, just search Wikipedia.

Nevertheless, although *HRUNID, þið munið* ("the CRASH, you remember"), an encyclopaedia of Crash-related writing, has done a major service in surveying and memorializing Crash-literature for an Icelandic audience, there has not hitherto been a sustained analysis of Iceland's Crash-fiction in any language, and I hope the present study does provide a platform for further analysis within Iceland as well as beyond. Indeed, despite the prominence of Icelandic literature on the international scene, long-form academic studies of contemporary Icelandic writing are few.<sup>21</sup> The present study, then, aims not only to analyse how Icelandic writers responded to the Crash, and the forms and functions of medievalism in post-Crash society, but also to provide a cross-sectional view of the contemporary Icelandic fiction scene.

In the following chapters, I investigate how writers have tried to respond to the Crash through the medium of the novel before exploring the anxieties about Icelandic identity and Iceland's place in the world that suffuse Crash-writing. I take a close look at how representations of Iceland's foremost celebrity banker of the boom period, Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson, help us to understand the use and abuse of medievalism in Icelandic politics, before closing by analysing some key efforts at utopian thinking in the wake of the Crash.

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21 The main surveys are Ástráður Eysteinnsson and Úfhildur Dagsdóttir, "Icelandic Prose Literature, 1940–2000," in *A History of Icelandic Literature*, ed. Daisy Nejmánn (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 404–70; Glauser, *Island*, 133–81; Mitzi M. Brunsdale, *Encyclopedia of Nordic Crime Fiction: Works and Authors of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden since 1967* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2016), 183–242.

This book actually has relatively little to say about finance: this silence reflects my sources, and in Chapter 2 I explore the reasons for it. Tending to focus on the work of writers born in the 1970s and 1980s, this chapter invokes the concept of “capitalist realism” to discuss why early twenty-first-century Icelandic writing — and by implication writing more widely in the Global North — has proved so poorly adapted to exploring some of the most important realities of the world around it. Yet we can read economic commentary between the lines in ostensibly unlikely places, and explore utopian possibilities in the same way. The middle chapters of this book explore how Iceland’s financial crisis was as much a crisis of the *þjóðarsálin* (literally “nation’s soul”) as it was of the national balance sheet, with all the anxiety and contestation regarding national identity that that implies. The crisis of identity was partly a collision of nineteenth-century nationalist models of nationhood with a globalized modernity, demanding that Icelanders reaffirmed or renegotiated their identity in relation to other nations. Again drawing primarily on relatively young writers, Chapter 3 brings both novels and wider post-Crash cultural material together to examine Iceland’s acute anxieties of identity, as a near microstate which has historically been both poor and colonized, yet which in the boom surged to great riches; and as a country that gains important diplomatic leverage from its heritage and its whiteness, yet is increasingly finding itself made a spectacle for tourists and enmeshed in global movements of finance and people. The chapter focuses on a tension that these novels bring to the fore: between traditional, golden-ageist, National-Romantic medievalism and a dystopian, Orientalist medievalism that has come to prominence in Iceland in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center of September 11, 2001. Chapter 4 looks mostly to authors born in the 1960s and before — who tend to draw more determinedly on Iceland’s medieval literary heritage, and perhaps to have a different relationship with the neoliberal culture into which younger writers are inevitably more deeply immersed. It offers case-studies of two novels that have made particularly ostentatious use of medieval intertexts, both responding particu-

larly to the medievalism of Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson: Bjarni Harðarson's *Sigurðar saga fóts* and Bjarni Bjarnason's *Mannorð*. Both *Sigurðar saga fóts* and *Mannorð*, however, still make some headway in analysing the networks of patronage and clientage that facilitated the boom.

Keen to conclude an investigation of an often gloomy corpus on a positive note, I examine in Chapter 5 what kinds of utopian thinking are articulated in Crash-literature. Just as Crash-writing struggles to deal directly with finance, it reflects wider utopian thinking in Iceland after the Crash only partially, but nonetheless interestingly, pointing in particular to the importance of gender and architecture in rethinking Icelandic society. At the center of the chapter is perhaps the most lively literary response to the Crash, Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl's *Gæska*, which unusually combined formal experimentation, political vigor, satirical sharpness and utopian commitment: Eiríkur Örn not only charts but also challenges the anxieties I identify in many novels about the Crash.

### 1.3 Three Terms: *Hegemony, Utopianism, and Neoliberalism*

Most of the people who are actually likely to read this book will be conversant with these key terms of contemporary Western cultural criticism and can skip safely to the next section. But I have some hope that this book will also appeal to people who may not be familiar with how these terms are used in cultural theory, so it is worth explaining them.

“There, I’ve said it: the ‘C-word’. Just mentioning that term sounds almost subversive. Even talking about ‘capitalism’ makes it sound like you’re a dangerous radical of some kind,” writes Jim Stanford in his *Economics for Everyone*.<sup>22</sup> I was born in the same year Margaret Thatcher came to power, into a pro-Thatcher family in a safe Tory seat: my childhood was almost exactly coeval with eighteen years of Conservative governance. Until

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22 Jim Stanford, *Economics for Everyone: A Short Guide to the Economics of Capitalism*, 2nd edn. (London: Pluto Press, 2015), 31.

2010, notwithstanding influential years living in Scotland and Finland, I lived my whole adult life in an important sense under the Thatcherite Labour governance that followed from 1997. Although I feel things changing, gradually, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, I know what Stanford means about the C-word. Likewise, the term *neoliberalism* — which I necessarily use a lot below — still feels modish. And until a few years ago, the first thing I thought of when I heard the word *hegemony* was the political supremacy of one ancient Hellenic city-state over another; its meaning in Marxist cultural theory is a pretty recent arrival in my lexicon. (And there goes the “M-word.”) *Utopian* was an adjective evoking Thomas More’s 1516 *Utopia* and not a great deal more.

The most important technical term in this book is *hegemony*, in a sense crystallized from the varied usages of Antonio Gramsci. For our purposes, hegemony is the process by which elites convince the people they dominate that these power relations are normal, natural, common-sense, or inevitable, when in fact they are particular to a time and place. In this way, elites dissuade people, sometimes unconsciously, from questioning their dominance. Már Wolfgang Mixa’s interviews with Iceland’s boom-time bank employees give a straightforward example of hegemony at work: “many people [...] expressed bitterness at having fought to keep the banks afloat for what they then considered a just cause, only to find out that they were actually fighting for the interests of small groups.”<sup>23</sup> These employees were partly the victims of a straightforward deception. But if we are to explain why they did not question business practices which were, in hindsight, obviously hugely risky, or to explain why they blindly placed their trust in the small cabals that owned their banks, the hegemonic power of the banks’ owners and executives must play a part. And the experience of these

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23 Már Wolfgang Mixa, “A Day in the Life of an Icelandic Banker,” in *Gambling Debt: Iceland’s Rise and Fall in the Global Economy*, eds. E. Paul Durrenberger and Gisli Pálsson (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015), 42.

employees was, of course, repeated across the developed world not only among bankers but also citizens at large.

As a rule, hegemony works by being invisible, hence the awkwardness over the “C-word”: the people who benefit most from capitalism prefer to have it referred to it as “the market economy” or even just “the economy,” as if capitalism were the only possible game in town; to call a spade a spade feels subversive because it calls attention to the fact that there are other tools out there that might do the same job. Everyone is, like it or not, caught up in hegemonic systems. But, understandably, no-one likes being told this: we get irritated when people tell us that when we think we’re acting rationally in accordance with our free will we are really acting in the interest of people who are oppressing us. This irritation is sometimes, of course, well founded — but it is often hegemony’s immune system at work. The reason why hegemony is at the center of this book is that literature is one of the mechanisms for shaping what people see as normal, natural, common-sense, or inevitable in the world around them — and, conversely, for challenging those perceptions.

It is tempting to wonder whether, in the world of so-called “post-truth” politics which many seem to inhabit in the second decade of the twenty-first century, where elites seem to be less concerned with convincing people of a given “truth” than with destabilizing truth altogether, it is worth labouring to expose hegemonic structures. Yet at least in the context of the Icelandic boom that preceded the Crash, the power of hegemony is (in retrospect) so apparent that the continued critical power of exposing hegemony can scarcely be doubted. Icelanders are often adept in talking about the cultural constructs at the heart of Icelandic identity in sophisticated, post-modern, self-reflexive ways, such that one might imagine that these constructs exert no influence at all on actual decision-making. Yet the story of the boom shows that this would be a huge misunderstanding: beneath a self-knowing and self-critical veneer, cultural constructs like the Viking, the True Icelander, or the unique genius



of the Icelandic nation do exert an enormously powerful influence on Icelandic society and its politics.

Moments in literature which challenge hegemonic “common sense” may be called *utopian*. In everyday usage, a “utopia” is an impossibly nice place, and Iceland is for many people outside the country a utopia in this sort of sense: imaginary, off the map; a place of unearthly natural wonders; a land of inexplicably sexually available Nordic beauties; the most politically progressive country on Earth; a lost island of white supremacists’ contemporary ancestors; and more.<sup>24</sup> But in cultural theory, *utopian* tends to refer to art which contemplates desirable things that could come to pass, if we just opened our minds to the possibility. When, during their 2010 Reykjavík municipal election campaign, the insurgent Best Party said “we are going to attend all meetings and always be cheerful and fun, but also speculative, responsible, and diligent,” their promise to be “speculative” was a promise to be utopian.<sup>25</sup> The fact that the party, to everyone’s surprise, won a landslide victory and went on to do a good job of running the city — arguably a better one than professional politicians had tended to — emphasizes that utopian aspirations can lead to real-world achievements.

This book is particularly concerned to identify and analyse the utopian thinking of post-Crash Icelandic literature: there is, after all, no question that the world needs it. One consequence of continuing the economic and electoral realities of the boom period will be ecological collapse on a scale which will dramatically reduce Earth’s capacity to harbor our species, with unspeakable consequences for poorer people — not to mention for other species. As Benjamin Kunkel puts it in the title of his 2014 article collection, we are facing “utopia or bust.” So it is not a surprise to

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24 Cf. Dimitrios Kassis, *Icelandic Utopia in Victorian Travel Literature* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), on Victorian attitudes to Iceland.

25 Hulda Proppé, “‘Welcome to the Revolution!’ Voting in the Anarcho-Surrealists,” in *Gambling Debt: Iceland’s Rise and Fall in the Global Economy*, eds. E. Paul Durrenberger and Gisli Pálsson (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015), 83.

see people from diverse points on the political spectrum lapping up journalism suggesting that Icelanders have brought about a post-Crash revolution, imprisoned their banksters, weaned themselves off fossil fuels, moved on from patriarchy, decided to reform the money-supply, offered to take in thousands of Syrian refugees, or elected not to make the elves that are indigenous to the island homeless through industrial development.<sup>26</sup> These stories are usually only slightly true, and much of this book tries to articulate how post-Crash Icelandic literature responds to the anthropologizing gaze of foreign visitors and journalists, and so to communicate to an English-speaking audience something of what Icelandic novels make of this fetishization of the island and its culture. The “kitchenware revolution” forced elections which returned a fractious, factional government that was deftly outmanoeuvred and, in 2013, replaced by the parties that oversaw the banking boom (which are showing little sign of commitment to economic reform). While an unparalleled number of bankers were successfully prosecuted, justice has necessarily been a slow process, with court cases still ongoing a decade after the Crash—and much of the behavior that caused the Crash was in any case perfectly lawful. One of the main protagonists of the boom and bust, Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson, who became Iceland’s first dollar-billionaire in 2005 remained Iceland’s sole billionaire in 2017. Iceland’s per capita carbon-emissions are above the European and OECD averages. While women do well on many indicators, they nonetheless saw their economy brought to its knees by a testosterone-fuelled clique of male politicians and bankers. And as for elves, I discuss them in some detail below, but if I was one of them I would not bet on the Icelandic state driving around my house rather than through it. But however hyperbolic or ill-informed, stories about Iceland’s successes do afford their readers evidence, some of it meaningful, that the political and economic impasses they seem to face in their own societies are not immutable. I hope this book will

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26 G.S. Motola, *An Equal Difference* (London: Restless Machinery, 2016), while well informed, is a fulsome example of this eulogistic tendency.

give nuanced insights into how Icelandic writers have managed to conceive the world differently — and when, as they often do, they have hit the buffers of a narrow realism — they have nonetheless managed to provide well informed reference points for how Icelandic thought really might help us write ourselves a different world.

*Neoliberalism* is, for this book, a necessary shorthand for a complex and shifting set of political and economic policies and ideologies that have prevailed (more or less) in the UK since the election of Margaret Thatcher and in the USA since the election of Ronald Reagan, and which began to gain serious traction in Iceland with the election of Davíð Oddsson to the mayoralty of Reykjavík in 1982. Few Continental European countries have been as extreme as these three in their embrace of neoliberalism, but the trend in recent decades has been consistently in its favor. *Neoliberalism* can refer to the academic thought of people like Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, but also to the sometimes very different practices which their work inspired, or which became unintended consequences of implementing neoliberal policies. Key themes of neoliberal policy include privatization of public assets and services, and, at least in theory, the idea that societies will function optimally though the maximizing of positive freedoms (for example freedom for women to work, for people to have homosexual relationships, or for people to spend private income as they please) at the expense of negative freedoms (for example freedom from want, from exploitative employment practices, or ill health). However, as neoliberalism has sought to promote its chosen freedoms, it has often brought authoritarian practices, both in government and the workplace, such as curtailing rights to protest or strike, invading other countries, or introducing ever more intricate state intervention to create “markets” where there were none before. And, as the financial crisis emphasized, alongside the privatization of profits, neoliberalism has made integral the socialization of losses. Neoliberalism has at times posed as being outside politics, as if there really was a “free market” and as if the workings of this market were apolitical. This is, of course,

hegemony at work, and although *neoliberalism* is an awkward word, it is surely right that “the increased use of the term neoliberalism since 2000 is a symptom of the weakening power of neoliberalism. The more it is named, the less its doctrines can pose as post-political.”<sup>27</sup>

Neoliberalism is not, then, unitary: it is a shifting phenomenon characterized by trends rather than clear boundaries, and can manifest differently in different contexts. Using one label for these trends carries the risk of making them seem more coherent than they are, or conversely of stretching the term to the point where it is simply a catch-all for disfavoured policies. But, notwithstanding these caveats, the trends are clear and having a name for them has proved useful in writing the pages that follow.

Neoliberalism can be thought of as the successor to the Keynesian consensus that coincided with the dramatic period of growth in economies, equality, and productivity during the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in Europe, Japan, and America, but to some extent most of the rest of the world — the so-called “golden age of capitalism.” When people are critical of neoliberalism, it is often unclear whether they would prefer something more like Keynesian capitalism or something non-capitalist, something else again, or whether, like myself as I write this, they are agnostic on the point. Either way, since 2008, the critique of neoliberalism is something people of diverse political stripes have been able to get behind. I often write below, then, of authors resisting or responding to “neoliberalism” when it is not clear whether it is specifically neoliberalism or capitalism more generally that the authors would say they were engaging with — the attraction of the term *neoliberalism* in this respect is that whatever else they may be resisting, the novels are certainly resisting neoliberalism.

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27 Mark Fisher and Jeremy Gilbert, “Capitalist Realism and Neoliberal Hegemony: A Dialogue,” *New Formations* 80 (2013): 89–101, at 90. Cf. Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson, *Phallogical Museum* (Zürich: Lit, 2014).

In the arts, the handmaid to neoliberalism has, in some respects at least, been postmodernism. Modernism was an intellectual movement associated with the interwar period which was committed to the idea of social progress: that there were objectively valid goals for progress, that these could be achieved through scientific discovery, and that they could be achieved for the general benefit of society. Modernism was committed to the idea that there is such a thing as truth. Promising though this commitment sounds, it correlated with the rise of totalitarianism, both fascist and communist. Postmodernism, accordingly, doubted modernism's commitment to truth. From a postmodern viewpoint, the study of history, for example, does not reveal the truth about the past, but rather creates new stories from old material. This recognizes that many different sides to a story can, in a way, be true; "right" and "wrong" are not fixed moral co-ordinates, but vary from one context to another. This insight has been liberating and valuable, acknowledging that social or scientific elites may not hold all the answers to society's problems and that there are many different, yet valid, ways of seeing the world. But it is hard to be politically progressive if you no longer really believe that there is such a thing as progress — just a collection of equally valid subjective perspectives. Thus, as Fisher's summary of Deleuze and Guattari's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* puts it, capitalism

is a system which is no longer governed by any transcendent Law; on the contrary, it dismantles all such codes, only to re-install them on an *ad hoc* basis. The limits of capitalism are not fixed by fiat, but defined (and redefined) pragmatically and improvisationally. This makes capitalism very much like the Thing in John Carpenter's film of the same name: a monstrous, infinitely plastic entity, capable of metabolizing and absorbing anything with which it comes into contact.<sup>28</sup>

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28 Fisher and Gilbert, "Capitalist Realism and Neoliberal Hegemony," 5–6.

To put it another way, putting corporate robber-barons in the role of arch-villain never stopped Hollywood producers turning a profit.<sup>29</sup>

No longer feeling sure what is right or just, people in post-modernity struggle to throw their weight behind mass movements, while privileged individuals find it easier to imagine that in playing the system for their own gain they are being moral or just. But environmental change has brought objective, material realities only partly accessible through human experience hammering at the gates of politics, at the same time as the rise of “post-truth politics,” in which key Western politicians and their voters are increasingly willing and able to invent whatever account of history suits their immediate purposes, are gaining a new purchase. Postmodernism is, then, entering its own crisis, in parallel to neoliberalism.

#### 1.4 What Is Crash-Literature?

Already in 2010, Björn Þór Vilhjálmsson, reviewing Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl's *Gæska*, suggested that “er mögulegt að kalla sérstaka undirgrein íslenskra samtímabókmennta: hrunskáldverk” (“it is possible to identify a particular sub-genre of Icelandic contemporary literature: Crash-writing”).<sup>30</sup> But as Eiríkur Örn himself has said,

defining what literature counts as “crisis-literature” is not an easy task. To a certain extent (practically) all literature written during (or right after) the crisis is “crisis-literature” — and even a great deal of the literature written during the economic boom, before the crisis. Many books included the crisis, the

29 Cf. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 12–19.

30 Björn Þór Vilhjálmsson, “Þjóðarbrott. Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl: *Gæska*. Mál og menning, Reykjavík, 2009,” *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 71, no. 1 (Feb. 2010): 81–98, at 138; cf. Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson, “Lesið í skugga hrunsins: Um skáldsögur ársins 2009,” *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 71, no. 4 (Nov. 2010): 81–98.

collapse and/or the protests by simply adapting the storyline to the times. [...] The prose fiction that deals with the crisis does so, in a certain sense, peripherally. The novels are all essentially about something else — they stand right in front of the crisis and they turn their gaze away.<sup>31</sup>

I have simply sought omnivorously to read all the novels published in Icelandic which mention or clearly allude to the Crash — books written almost uniformly by Icelanders for Icelanders, allowing me to peek inside Iceland's internal discourses on the Crash. A key period for the writing of this book was a period of research leave in 2014, which enabled me to attempt to read all relevant fiction up to the end of 2012; thereafter I have sampled incompletely.<sup>32</sup> There is, as Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl put it, also “boatloads of poetry about the crisis,” not to mention film, music, drama, and other artistic responses.<sup>33</sup> I chose to focus on novels over verse on the supposition that for the most part they reach, and so perhaps reflect, a wider audience, while I began the research for this project too late to see most of the key theatrical responses close up.<sup>34</sup> But I have (unsystematically) sampled poetry, films, drama and short stories and included them in this study where I have found that they illuminate the themes exposed by prose fiction.

31 Norðdahl, “Literature in the Land of the Inherently Cute,” 111.

32 In assembling my corpus, I drew particularly on Árni Matthíasson, *Sunnudags Moggín*, November 15, 2009, 52; Norðdahl, “Literature in the Land of the Inherently Cute”; Margrét Tryggvadóttir, “Barnabækur eftir hrún,” *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 71, no. 2 (May 2010): 80–86; Helga Birgisdóttir and María Bjarkadóttir, “Kreppa í íslenskum barnabókum”; Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson, “Lesið í skugga hrunsins”; Glauser, *Island*, 158–72; Viðar Þorsteinsson, “Fjármálavæðing og mótun tímans í Konum eftir Steinar Braga,” *Ritið* 15, no. 3 (2015): 9–33; and the web encyclopedia of Crash literature, *Hrunið, þið munið*, <http://hrunid.hi.is/>.

33 Norðdahl, “Literature in the Land of the Inherently Cute,” 115.

34 For an early survey of post-Crash theatre, see Silja Aðalsteinsdóttir, “Dansinn í hrúni: Yfirlit yfir leikhúsin,” *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 71, no. 1 (May 2010): 104–14.

I am sure that many of the writers discussed here would not wish their work to be read primarily as Crash-fiction; they may justly feel that, in reading their work from this perspective, I am not judging their work on its merits. This is true. Nor were books that fit my remit necessarily straightforwardly composed in response to the Crash: Ævar Örn Jósepsson's *Land tækifæran-na* was altered to refer to the unfolding crisis while in press, and Hjálmar Einarsson's film *Bodðberi* similarly in late stages of production; Steinar Bragi's *Konur* and Anton Helgi Jónsson's *Ljóð eftir ættarmóti* were written before the Crash but published after it; and the writing of Eiríkur Örn's own *Gæska*, initially about a hypothetical economic crash, was actually punctuated by the Crash itself.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the nimblest commentators on the Crash use it as the starting point for critiques of other ongoing issues in Icelandic politics, such as the privatization of Iceland's natural resources (Óttar M. Norðfjörð's *Áttablaðarósinn*), the commodification of Icelanders' genes (*Lygarinn*, by the same author), the industrialization of the countryside (Steinar Bragi's *Hálendið*), the refugee crisis (Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl's *Gæska*) or the rise of right-wing populism (the same writer's *Illska*). Yet writers are sometimes most revealing about those subjects they address most obliquely. Analysing at least some of the novels that "turn their gaze away" was as important as probing the few that do not.

One might also object that novels about the Crash written within a few years of that event could hardly be expected to offer mature, or even lasting, reflections on it. But the capacity of a literary culture to respond swiftly to the unforeseen is

35 For *Land tækifæran-na*, see Jakob, "Hommahatari reyndi að drepa Hörð Torfason," *Fréttablaðið* 8, no. 287, October 20, 2008, 38; for *Bodðberi*, Anna Björg Auðunsdóttir, "Bodðberi," *Hrunið, þið munið: Gagnabanki um samtímasögu*, November 2014, <https://hrunid.hi.is/skaldskapur/bodberi/>; for *Konur*, Norðdahl, "Literature in the Land of the Inherently Cute," 114 and Viðar Þorsteinsson "Fjármálavæðing og móttun tímans í Konum eftir Steinar Braga," 9; for *Ljóð eftir ættarmóti*, Bergljót Soffía Kristjánsdóttir, "Ég get ekkert sagt," 66; for *Gæska* Norðdahl, "Literature in the Land of the Inherently Cute," 113 n. 31. Cf. Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson, "Lesið í skugga hrunsins."



as interesting a subject of study as the acuity of the responses themselves. The fact that Icelandic writers responded as directly and promptly to the Crash as they did is remarkable, certainly compared with literary output in the Anglophone world — and even without the “per capita” tag that is almost obligatory in measures of Icelandic achievement. How important these novels were to national discourse at the time of their publication is outside my present scope — not very, I suspect. But, as the web-encyclopedia of Crash-literature *Hrunið, þið munið* emphasizes, literary writing has a role in memorializing a key moment in an ongoing tale of crisis that may outlast most of the journalism or political speeches produced at the time. And at their best, Crash-novels provide some of the most striking commentary on the 2007–8 Western financial crisis generally.

For want of time, I have read little of the (sometimes well informed) English-language Crash-literature that has circulated in Iceland or been set there, important examples of which would include Sarah Prebble’s 2009 musical *Enron*, which was, in translation, a success in Iceland in 2010; the crime-writing of Quentin Bates; and a raft of (ghost-written) autobiographies by key players in the boom (only some of which are also available in Icelandic), the most important of which for this study is Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson’s *Billions to Bust — and Back*.<sup>36</sup> I have inevitably also failed to read lots of books with relevant but indirect commentary on the Crash. One example is Auður Ava Ólafsdóttir’s *Afleggjarinn*, published just before the Crash. Its date of publication and its focus on a young man who gives up his education to grow roses and attend to the beauty in the mundane puts it comfortably beyond my purview, yet the novel can be read as a self-conscious act of resistance to the hypermasculine swashbuckling of the banking boom. This perhaps helps explain why the present book is dominated by male writers. The preponderance of male authors unquestionably partly reflects the dominance of men in Icelandic novel-writing, and bringing in more poetry and theatre might have changed the dynamic

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36 On Bates see Bruntsdale, *Encyclopedia of Nordic Crime Fiction*, 239–40.

somewhat, opening up space for explicitly political work like Linda Vilhjálmsdóttir's 2015 poetry collection *Frelsi* or Ásdís Thoroddsen's 2009 one-woman show *Ódó á gjaldbuxum*. But it may also be a product of my own choice to focus on literature that articulates a direct link with the Crisis. For all the renowned victories of feminism in Iceland, political-economic discourse remains predominantly men's domain (and my decision to seek literature which comments on politics and economics is itself no doubt characteristic of my own masculinity). Whereas Steinar Bragi has said that "man kan inte skriva om moderna isländska människor utan att skriva om kraschen" ("you can't write about modern Icelandic people without writing about the crash"), for example, Yrsa Sigurðardóttir, Iceland's leading woman crime-writer, has said that

corruption in Iceland often takes the form of nepotism, although recent events have brought to light double-dealing regarding money and the clandestine trading in bank and government assets. However, all these things are done in such a clumsy, greedy way that it does not spark my imagination as a writer, and to date I have not been inclined to shift from crime committed for psychological reasons as the focus of my books.<sup>37</sup>

One suspects that these conflicting attitudes reflect gender norms. Nor do Yrsa's words mean that women writers are necessarily apolitical writers. Among writers of the world, Icelandic women would not be alone among relatively less powerful groups in choosing to draw attention to, say, structural social inequalities, in defiance of a focus in dominant media discourses on transient upheavals in parliamentary politics and high finance. Auður Jónsdóttir's 2008 novel *Vetrarsól* frames its off-beat version of a murder-mystery plot with the female

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37 Erik Helmerson, "Han sågar hemlandet Island," *Dagens nyheter*, March 21, 2014, 5; Barry Forshaw, *Death in a Cold Climate* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 137.

protagonist Sunna's attempts to juggle her work as an under-appreciated employee at a publishing house with looking after her stepson Helgi and her elderly mother. Sunna's husband Axel spends most of the novel mysteriously absent in Ísaförður: it transpires by the end that his business has failed (not for the first time); that he was unable to admit to its problems sooner; and that, alongside everything else that Sunna has to do, she is nevertheless going to patiently steer the family through this crisis. Needless to say, the work resonates with the national crisis that took place in the year that it was published, and foreshadows the widespread sense in Iceland following the Crash that women were stepping up, yet again, to clear up men's mess.<sup>38</sup> Yet it also chooses to direct readers' attention away from the history of events to the *longue durée* of patriarchal (and, as I discuss in §5.3.2, colonial) power structures. These observations do not invalidate my decision to study how Icelandic novelists have responded explicitly to the Crash; but we should not imagine through their limited representation here that women writers have not addressed the Crash at all. My study can only be one brick in a wall of a more holistic investigation, and had I the opportunity to begin it again, I might have started in a different place.

## 1.5 Themes

A surprisingly wide range of the themes of this book are conveyed by the joke which is its epigraph. I was told the joke while I was in Reykjavík in 2010 by someone who was almost certainly needling me about my dubious renown as one of the world's foremost experts on elves.<sup>39</sup> The research on medieval romance-

38 Cf. Glauser, *Island*, 157. See further §5.3.1 below.

39 Attributable largely to Alaric Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2007). The Icelandic terms which I generally render in English as "elves" or "hidden people" are, respectively, *álfar* (singular *álfur*) and *huldufólk*, which are for most Icelandic-speakers largely synonymous, cf. Unnur Jökulsdóttir, *Hefurðu séð huldufólk? Ferðasaga* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2007), 11;

sagas that had brought me to Iceland had nothing to do with elves or — at least as I thought at the time — the financial crisis, so I didn't give much thought to the joke, only remember it in English, and have not been able to rediscover who told it to me. Nor have I since found other attestations of it, so it is probably not especially representative. But it is a useful way into summarizing the themes of this book, and to sketch what kinds of insights a foreigner's reading of Iceland's Crash-literature might have to offer. The joke may not provoke many belly-laughs outside its immediate cultural context, but in fact it covers a lot of cultural ground: modernization, local identities, tourism, and the financial crisis. Its intertexts take us beyond, into nationalism, gender, and ethnicity.

"Anybody who writes about Iceland in English has to write about elves," Kári Tulinius has commented ruefully.<sup>40</sup> I assure the reader that when I was interviewed for a (rather thoughtful) piece on Icelandic elves in *The Atlantic*, I stated unambiguously that no Icelander I know believes in elves, but the piece still emerged under the title "Why So Many Icelanders Still Believe in Invisible Elves," situating it firmly in a tradition of borealizing journalism constructing the exotic, backward Icelander.<sup>41</sup> There is much to be lamented in this tradition, and it is understand-

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Erlendur Haraldsson, "Psychic Experiences a Third of a Century Apart: Two Representative Surveys in Iceland with an International Comparison," *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 75, no. 2 (2011): 76–90, at 88. *Álfur* is the older and, in modern usage, more literary term, with a wider semantic range, its usage extending, for example, into fantasy fiction and children's fairy tales. *Huldufólk* connotes a more specific local tradition, its generic element *fólk* emphasizing the humanness of the elves; as a euphemism, it also expresses greater respect than *álfar*.

40 Kári Tulinius, "So What're These Elves I Keep Hearing About?" *The Reykjavík Grapevine* 12, no. 1 (January–February 2014): 10, <https://grapevine.is/mag/column-opinion/2014/01/20/so-whatre-these-elves-i-keep-hearing-about>.

41 Ryan Jacobs, "Why So Many Icelanders Still Believe in Invisible Elves," *The Atlantic*, October 29, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/10/why-so-many-icelanders-still-believe-in-invisible-elves/280783>. I owe the term "borealism" to Kristinn Schram, "Borealism: Folkloristic Perspectives on Transnational Performances and

able that at about the same time, Egill Helgason, one of Iceland's foremost cultural commentators, complained that “ég hef aldrei hitt Íslending sem trúir á tilveru álfa eða huldufólks — eða hefur nokkurn áhuga á slíkum verum” (“I have never met an Icelander who believes in the existence of elves or hidden people — or has any interest in such beings”). Egill opined that elves are an example of how the tourist industry's commodification of Icelandic culture is starting to influence Icelanders' own self-image.<sup>42</sup> Actually, this is by no means an unusual or abnormal process, and elves can reveal more about Icelandic society than Egill or Kári perhaps realized. Egill overlooked the fact that elves turn up fairly frequently in literature and other cultural products produced by Icelanders for Icelanders, and have done so for a long time, sometimes in sophisticated discursive roles.<sup>43</sup> The question of whether Icelanders “believe” in elves, despite the interest shown in it by many journalists and some scholars, is for the most part a red herring: the key point is that, like early modern intellectuals contemplating demons, Icelanders find elves “good to think with.”<sup>44</sup>

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the Exoticism of the North” (Ph.D. diss., University of Edinburgh, 2011); Schramm, “Banking on Borealism,” 310.

42 Egill Helgason, “Huldufólkið, lundinn og þjóðarímyndin,” *Eyjan*, December 23, 2013, <http://eyjan.pressan.is/silfuregils/2013/12/23/huldufolkid-lundinn-og-thjodarimyndin>.

43 See below, especially §5.3.

44 Cf. Stuart Clark, *Thinking With Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). The question of belief is epitomized by a fierce debate sparked in Iceland by Árni Björnsson, “Hvað merkir þjóðtrú?” *Skírnrir* 170 (1996): 91–92. See Terry Gunnell, “Heima á milli: Þjóðtrú og þjóðsagnir á Íslandi við upphaf 21 aldar,” in *Rannsóknir í félagsvísindum: Félags og mannvísindadeild: Erindi flutt á ráðstefnu í október 2009*, eds. Gunnar Þór Jóhannesson and Helga Björnsdóttir (Reykjavík: Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2009), 899–907, esp. 899. Cf. Valdimar Tr. Hafstein, “The Elves' Point of View: Cultural Identity in Contemporary Icelandic Elf-Tradition,” *Fabula* 41, nos. 1–2 (2000): 87–104, at 87–88; Kirsten Hastrup, “Getting It Right: Knowledge and Evidence in Anthropology,” *Anthropological Theory* 4 (2004): 455–72, at 465–66; Unnur Jökulsdóttir, *Hefurðu séð huldufólk?*, esp. 10; Erlendur Haraldsson, “Psychic Experiences a Third of a Century Apart,” 87–88. The documentary *Draumalandið* by Þorfinnur Guðnason and Andri

The implied answer to the question “why aren’t there any elves in Helligerði any more?” is of course “because elves don’t exist (albeit that they may once have been believed to)”: the joke comments pointedly on what we might loosely call modernization (specifically the rise of rationalism), and is predicated on people’s belief in a temporal disjunction between a disenchanting modernity and a more credulous past, which we might think of as Iceland’s long Middle Ages. Foreign journalism about Icelanders’ elf-beliefs places Icelanders on the wrong side of this temporal boundary, and the joke resists this by being predicated on (and therefore ultimately reinforcing) the rationalist outlook of its audience. But the humor arises, of course, from this rationalist answer proving incorrect: thus the joke probes the possibilities of other attitudes, gently mocking reductive rationalist world-views at the same time as it reinscribes them.

Moreover, the joke addresses more aspects of modernization than rationalism alone. The specific reference to Helligerði implies a critique of Iceland’s changing settlement structures. Helligerði is a park in Hafnarfjörður, a town now part of the

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Snær Magnason, an environmentalist critique of developing massive hydroelectric powerplants for aluminium production that appeared just after the Crash and resonated strongly with the popular mood at that moment, provides a good example of how elves are a nebulous but powerful discursive strategy, rather as “heritage” is in Anglo-American public discourse. Jakob Björnsson, the former director general of the National Energy Authority, is shown explaining that traditional ideas about the inhabitation of the Icelandic highlands by supernatural beings, which protected them from human intrusion, is “allt saman fjarstæða” (“altogether nonsense”; 26’05”–27’11”). Trying to convince most of the audience that Iceland’s highlands are populated by elves, and that their valleys should not be flooded for this reason, would have been a hard job; the documentary for the most part takes a hard-headed (if at times alarmist) approach to making its case. But the task of disenchanting the landscape turns out to be little less challenging: giving Jakob the role of explicitly denying the existence of supernatural beings successfully makes him appear a cold-hearted opponent of Icelandic tradition and culture; he comes across as an opponent of the elves — and therefore the land and its people (cf. Andri Snær Magnason, *Dreamland: A Self-Help Manual for a Frightened Nation*, trans. Nicholas Jones [London: Citizen Press, 2008], 233–34).

Reykjavík conurbation which, however, works hard to sustain an identity distinct from the capital (while being the butt of quite a lot of Icelandic humor of the “how many Hafnarfirðingar does it take to change a light bulb?” variety). Helligserði is supposedly inhabited by elves, a fact which is prominent in the construction of Hafnarfjörður’s identity within Icelandic-language media. They are important, for example, in Kristín Marja Baldursdóttir’s 1996 novel *Mávahlátur*, set in Hafnarfjörður, while a systematic search for “álfar” and “huldufólk” in Iceland’s main national newspaper, *Morgunblaðið*, since 2002 indicates that it is primarily people from Hafnarfjörður who have expressed some degree of personal belief in *huldufólk* in this mainstream public forum.<sup>45</sup> This complicates Árni Björnsson’s claim that insofar as Icelanders today do believe in elves, we are dealing with the cultural category of mysticism rather than anything that can helpfully be called “popular belief.”<sup>46</sup> Rather, both the joke and *Morgunblaðið*’s interviews indicate that whether people actually “believe” in elves is not the point: rather, *discourses* of belief in elves are one way for Hafnarfirðingar to articulate a local identity distinct from that of the capital. Elves function in this respect partly as means to resist a centralizing state, urbanization, and the growing cultural dominance of Reykjavík.

Icelanders are not the only audience for Hafnarfjörður’s promotion of Helligserði as an elf-habitat, however: this is also prominent in Hafnarfjörður’s promotion of itself to foreign tourists. The road sign that marks the limits of the town to anyone who takes the main road to Reykjavík from Iceland’s international airport at Keflavík, illustrated with a tongue-in-cheek

45 Marta María Jónsdóttir, “Gatan mín Austurgata í Hafnarfirði: Undir hraunbrúninni í miðbænum,” *Morgunblaðið: Finnur.is*, April 19, 2012, 13; Marta María Jónsdóttir, “Hafnarfjörður er alltaf þorp,” *Morgunblaðið: Finnur.is*, July 19, 2012, 13.

46 Árni Björnsson, “Hvað merkir þjóðtrú?” 91–92; cf. Unnur Jökulsdóttir, *Hefurðu séð huldufólk?*, 273; a straightforward example of Icelandic-language mysticism in relation to Hafnarfjörður’s elves is Erla Stefánsdóttir, *Huliðsheimakort [Map of hidden worlds]* (Hafnarfjörður: Ferðamálanefnd Hafnarfjarðar, [1993]).

roadsign-silhouette of two dancing elves in the German-American tradition of Christmas elves, reads “TOWN OF ELVES | ÁLFA-BÆRINN.” The English text, placed first, suggests the primary audience for this announcement. Hellisgerði is also home to the company Álfagarðurinn, which sells elf-tours and elf-themed souvenirs to tourists. The joke is predicated on this information: the reason why the elves of Hellisgerði want peace and quiet is implicitly that they are fed up with tourists stamping around their neighbourhood. This constructs the elves less as rural recluses than as everyday people who do not of necessity live in mysterious volcanic rocks. While the punchline embraces the elves’ existence, then, the joke still succeeds in constructing the tourists who come to see the elves in Hellisgerði as credulous blunderers. The irritated elves of the joke, in this case, stand as a figure for Icelanders themselves: in seeking peace and quiet, the implication is that the elves are doing precisely what any good Icelander would want to do themselves; and as I discuss below, the use of the elf to represent the “true Icelander” is a well rooted and widespread tradition in Iceland.<sup>47</sup> The joke encodes Icelanders’ understandable irritation at being made a spectacle — whether by the world’s media via coverage of the Crash, by the continual enthusiasm for reporting Icelanders as freaks who believe in elves, or more specifically by tourists within Iceland, particularly in the wake of the Crash, when the falling króna encouraged a dramatic increase in tourism at a point when the Icelandic self-image and sense of independence was particularly bruised but when Iceland needed this foreign revenue most.<sup>48</sup> It is no accident that the tongue-in-cheek, Crash-themed detective novel *Sýslumaðurinn sem sá álfa* (“The Sheriff who Saw Elves”) opens with a pointed critique of some Swedish tourists mocking the outlandish attire of an Icelandic protagonist troubled (but

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47 §5.3.4.

48 On international coverage of the Crash see Daniel Chartier, *The End of Iceland’s Innocence: The Image of Iceland in the Foreign Media During the Financial Crisis*, trans. Daniel Chartier (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2010); cf. Nicola Dibben, *Björk* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2009), 31–32, 164–65, 179 n. 27, 185 n. 5 on coverage of Björk.



also, ultimately, assisted in his patriotic crime-fighting) by elf-induced insomnia. The message of the joke's punchline is that elves may be real, but that does not mean they are there to be a tourist attraction.

And what does it mean that Helligerði's elves move to the neighbouring suburb of Kópavogur? This could simply be because Kópavogur is, like Hafnarfjörður, prominently associated with elves. However, in the wake of the financial crisis, I understood the joke differently: parts of this district were especially associated during the boom with expensive building projects aimed at Iceland's *nouveau riche*, which were left unfinished or unsold during the property crash that accompanied the financial one. In this reading, then, the reason why the irritated elves of Hellisgerði move to Kópavogur for peace and quiet is that it offers a plentiful supply of plush, empty flats. The joke thus suggests discursive connections between elves, the financial crisis, and its associated building boom. Indeed, buildings of this kind turn up repeatedly in Crash-themed fiction as a figure for the misogynistic masculinity of the boom and its erosion of domesticity.<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile, the use of elves as a discursive strategy to critique new building projects is well embedded in modern Icelandic culture: as Valdimar Tr. Hafstein found in his analysis of 1990s memorates and urban legends about Icelandic elves, "narratives about the insurrections of elves demonstrate supernatural sanction against development and against urbanization; that is to say, the supernaturals protect and enforce pastoral values and traditional rural culture."<sup>50</sup> The fact that the Hellisgerði joke can be read as having elves moving into the sorts of buildings which writers repeatedly criticise, then, might even be taken to construct the otherness of these places, expressing their *unheimlich* character: these buildings are "unhomely" in the literal sense, and so a fitting home for supernatural beings whose otherworldliness makes them *unheimlich* in the Freudian sense of "uncanny." Moreover, in this reading, the joke takes a utopian

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49 See §5.3.

50 Hafstein, "The Elves' Point of View," 92–93.

step: unimpeded by an economic and legal framework which has ceased to serve society, elves are able to act with prudence to make the best use of the resources locked away from ordinary people by artificial structures of credit and debt. They are a means to imagine possible realities beyond capitalism. As Einar Már Guðmundsson comments in his *Íslenskir kóngar*,

fólk sem áður trúði á álfa og drauga trúir nú á væntingavísitölur og verðbólguþáp. Svo er hægt að veðsetja fiskana í sjónum og slá lán út á þá. Þannig er hagkerfið einsog dulspeki, miklir galdrar á sveimi, kannski töfraraunsæi.<sup>51</sup>

People who once believed in elves and ghosts now believe in consumer confidence and inflation forecasts. Thus you can mortgage the fish in the sea and take out a loan against them. So the economy is a kind of mysticism, enormous spells swirling, perhaps magical realism.

This returns us to the basic premise of the joke: moderns who construct themselves as rational and progressive by contrasting themselves with their backwards ancestors are deluding themselves. It is people who believed in elves but who understood the value — rather than the price — of fish who were the more clear-sighted, and both Einar Már and the joke hint that in a return to an earlier mode of being there lies the possibility of rectifying the madnesses of the present.

This book explores all these themes in post-Crash Icelandic literature. The only key theme that the joke does not cover — and it is a key theme — is that in the novels analysed for this study, an interest in Iceland's medieval literature and its folklore is almost always articulated alongside another kind of medievalism: an Orientalist, dystopian medievalism that has risen to prominence following the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, which labels much of the Islamic world “still medieval,” and

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51 Einar Már Guðmundsson, *Íslenskir kóngar [Icelandic kings]* (Reykjavik: Mál og menning, 2012), 12.

abjects it as unable to belong to modernity. The interactions of these two medievalisms are so widespread in the novels studied for this book that one can clearly not be understood without the other, and understanding the relationship between the two proves important for interpreting Icelandic culture in the wake of the Crash. Before grappling with Iceland's use and abuse of its medieval and traditional culture, however, I examine some key reasons why Crash literature has managed to say so little about the Crash itself.



## The Crisis of Realism

### 2.1 Form Crashes

ÁSTIN MÍN, á hverjum morgni vakna ég og ætla að yrkja til þín ljóð. Þau koma til mín í draumi, tær einsog fuglasöngur sumarsins, fögur sem tunglið á milli trjáanna. Ég sé glampandi sólsetur, himna og höf. Einhver hlær í myrkrinu, einhver grætur. Einhvern tíma kemur þetta allt til mín, einhvern tíma vaknar veruleikinn og þá erum við hætt að hugsa um fjármálamarkaðina, einkavæðinguna og allt þetta *helvítis fokking fokk*, óréttlætið, ástandið, af því að þá verðum við búin að koma böndum á fjármálamarkaðina, taka einkavæðinguna í bakaríið og græðgina úr sambandi. Þá yrkjum við um dýrð ástarinnar, fegurð himinsins og söng fuglanna; en hamarshögg veruleikans halda áfram að dynja. Þau dynja úti í þjóðfélaginu, inni í þér, inni í mér, alls staðar.

My beloved, each morning I wake and plan to compose you poems. They come to me as I dream, clear as the birdsong of summer, beautiful as the moon through the trees. I see the gleaming sunset, the heavens and the oceans. In the dark, someone laughs, someone cries. Sometimes all this comes to me, sometimes reality awakens and then we're done with thinking about the financial markets, the privatizations and this *helvítis fokking fokk*, the injustice, the situation, because

by then we'll be done putting constraints on the financial markets, telling privatization where to stick it, and taking the gadgets offline. Then we'll compose about the splendor of love, the beauty of the sky and the songs of the birds; but the hammer-blows of reality keep resounding. They resound out through society, within you, within me, everywhere.

So Einar Már Guðmundsson begins the second of his essay-collections on the Crash, *Bankastræti núll*.<sup>1</sup> This ostentatiously formal opening evokes the literary form of the *mansöngur* (literally, “maiden-song”): in the *rímur*, the long narrative poems that dominated Icelandic literary production from around the sixteenth century into nineteenth, each new section (*ríma*) of the poem conventionally opened with a *mansöngur*. The poet traditionally laments that his art is insufficient to please the maiden who is the object of his affections, but frequently also takes the opportunity to lament the state of the world, and particularly the vanity of worldly glories. Thus Einar Már's prose reinvention of the *mansöngur* situates his account of the greed and corruption exposed by the Crash in a deep and distinctively Icelandic literary history. Modesty topoi usually serve, disingenuously, as a platform for writers to display their virtuosity, and Einar Már's opening is no exception: it indicates that he could perfectly well be writing poetry, whether for his supposed beloved or about the Crash, but has chosen the medium of the essay instead.

Even so, Einar Már's *mansöngur* is still at one level an apology from a man who is perhaps Iceland's pre-eminent literary author for not writing a novel about the Crash.<sup>2</sup> His point that an economic crisis is not conducive to poetry is an interesting and a serious one, and is not unique to Iceland.<sup>3</sup> It reflects the widespread sense that art seems suddenly insufficient to the task in hand: what Mark Fisher has labelled as art's confinement within

1 Einar Már Guðmundsson, *Bankastræti núll* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2011), 7.

2 Though his 2012 *Íslenskir kóngar* was later to address it.

3 See for example Benjamin Kunkel, *Utopia or Bust: A Guide to the Present Crisis* (London: Verso, 2014), 1–21.

a “capitalist realism” and Amitav Ghosh has, in his discussion of novels’ failure to address climate change, called our “great derangement.”<sup>4</sup> Turning to the *Rannsóknarskýrsla Alþingis*, the at times strangely gripping 2010 government report on the financial crisis, Einar Már pointed out that “rithöfundur sem [...] hefði látið sér detta í hug allt sem stendur í *Rannsóknarskýrslu Alþingis* hefði verið talinn skýjaglópur” (“an author who [...] had allowed himself to dream up everything that is contained in the *Rannsóknarskýrslu Alþingis* would have been considered to have his head in the clouds”).

Á Íslandi er veruleikinn einsog nýtt bókmenntaform. Hann slær öllum skáldskap við. Öfgafullir súrrealistar hljóma einsog raunsæjar kerlingar, glæpasögur einsog vögguvísur og furðusögur hafa ekkert í ímyndunarafl útrásarvíkinganna að gera.

In Iceland, reality is like a new literary form. It beats all literature. Radical surrealists sound like pragmatic old women, crime novels like nursery rhymes, and fantasy stories have no imaginative power to compare with the *útrásarvíkingar*.<sup>5</sup>

As Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl put it, “perhaps this lack of ‘crisis’ in the ‘crisis-literature’ is mainly a symptom of another ‘crisis’, namely the lack of agency in contemporary literature which for too long may have been busy picking at its own bellybutton and now knows not what to do.”<sup>6</sup> The purpose of this chapter, then, is to add a case-study to the growing body of work documenting how, in the wake of the Crash, reality indeed generally outpaced Icelandic fiction’s imaginative capacity, to examine how and why

4 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009); Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (London: Penguin, 2016).

5 Einar Már Guðmundsson, *Bankastræti núll*, 177, 34, respectively.

6 Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl, “Literature in the Land of the Inherently Cute: The Search for Literary Crisis,” in *Booby, Be Quiet!* (Helsinki: Poesia, 2011), 114.

art has been struggling to keep pace with politics in recent decades in the West.

Fiction ought, after all, to be good at dealing with money, which as a social reality is itself a kind of fiction. Although different theories of money conceptualize the relationship between money and debt in different ways, money is usually thought inherently to imply debt, and therefore credit. Etymologically, credit links money intimately with belief — as implied by Marx’s infamous and provocative phrase *Kredit und fiktives Kapital* (“credit and fictitious capital”).<sup>7</sup> Money is real: it cannot be wished away, and has real effects in the world; it is not, in this respect, fiction. Nonetheless, its reality depends on a critical mass of individuals’ belief, and it is notionally within society’s power to reconceive it. A financial transaction is rather like a speech act, in which representation makes reality, never more so than in an age of purely digital transactions. The stock-market indices, business newspapers, annual reports, and even novels that La Berge groups together as “financial print culture” reveal “a logic of the sinews of finance itself, as it stakes out spaces of textual representation and then metabolizes them into sites of profit, loss, and value.”<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, a number of prominent left-leaning non-fiction works arising from the financial crisis attempt to explain or explore the crisis with reference to folklore, myths, or fiction. Marx talked about vampires, and zombies now lurch through the language of mainstream economics.<sup>9</sup> Super-abundance of credit is the Grimm Brothers’ *The Sweet Porridge* (about a magic porridge pot that produces too much porridge), America’s hunger for imports is the Cretan Minotaur (with its insatiable demand for human sacrifice), and the Euro-crisis is the paradoxical encounter between Laelaps (who never failed to catch her prey) and the Teumessian Fox (who could

7 Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Oekonomie*, 3 vols. (Hamburg: Meissner, 1867–94), 3:386.

8 Leigh Claire La Berge, *Scandals and Abstraction: Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 12.

9 David McNally, *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).



never be caught).<sup>10</sup> Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* famously orientates the reader (accurately or otherwise) by the landmarks of Jane Austen's novels, along with a supporting cast including César Balzac, Henry James, and Naguib Mahfouz.<sup>11</sup> Even aliens have started to put in appearances.<sup>12</sup> In Iceland, Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson, one of the key players in Landsbanki, infamously said that when stock crashes "a lot of money" simply "goes to money-heaven."<sup>13</sup> Hallgrímur Helgason recast Baugur Group ("ring group") as Draugur Group ("ghost group").<sup>14</sup> For Einar Már, the crisis was like "The Emperor's New Clothes" and Iceland's need to escape its Icesave debt was the folktale of Sæmundur fróði escaping his pact with the Devil.<sup>15</sup> But although folktales nourish non-fiction accounts of the Crash, the converse is not true: in post-Crash Icelandic fiction, there is little scrutiny of money or finance as such.

My starting point, therefore, is a glance at Halldór Laxness's *Atómstöðin*, published in 1948, showing how Laxness already articulated some of the economic and political themes that have come back to the fore since 2008 — and did so more successfully than recent fiction. I then read a range of post-Crash writing in relation to Mark Fisher's concept of "capitalist realism," illustrating the limits of current modes of realism with reference to Iceland's burgeoning output of murder-fiction, and illustrating

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- 10 Yanis Varoufakis, *The Global Minotaur: America, Europe and the Future of the Global Economy*, rev. edn. (London: Zed Books, 2013), 9, 24–25, 165, 201.
- 11 Cf. Gareth A. Jones, "Where's the Capital? A Geographical Essay," *The British Journal of Sociology* 65, no. 4 (2014): 721–35; Ronald Berman, "Complex Fortune: F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Piketty, and Capital in the Basil and Josephine Stories," *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review* 14 (2016): 60–78; Carlos Rodríguez Braun, "Piketty Misreads Austen," *The Independent Review* 21 (2017): 465–76.
- 12 Hamilton Carroll and Annie McClanahan, "Fictions of Speculation: Introduction," *Journal of American Studies* 49, no. 4 (2015): 655–61.
- 13 Gunnar Sigurðsson, dir., *Maybe I Should Have: Frásögn af efnahagsundrinu Íslandi* (Argout Film, 2010), 31'44"–48".
- 14 Hallgrímur Helgason, "Draugur Group — minningarorð frá Baugspenna," *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 71, no. 2 (2010): 4–15.
- 15 Einar Már Guðmundsson, *Bankastræti núll*, 19.

the failure of utopianism through how children's literature has imagined the end of the world. I focus finally on examples of adult literature that display an acute self-consciousness at writers' integration into neoliberal hegemonies but that address this primarily by commenting on their inability to escape them. Although the range of genres analysed here is quite eclectic, the authors were mostly born in the 1970s and early '80s, so in some way represent a generation that was reaching literary maturity at the time of the Crash. This is most obviously true of the writers who had been associated with the avante-garde organization Nýhil, which ran from around 2002–10, disappearing as its most prominent voices made the transition from being disruptive young men to taking a position at the center of the literary scene. In this way, this chapter tends to contrast with the older authors who are the focus of Chapter 4.

## 2.2 *Atómstöðin*

Iceland's pre-eminent writer in the twentieth century, and the country's sole Nobel prize winner, was Halldór Laxness. A useful reference point for understanding the strategies, weaknesses, and successes of post-Crash Icelandic literature is Laxness's 1948 *Atómstöðin*, which was written in the wake of Iceland's independence from Denmark in 1944 and the almost simultaneous legal normalization of American military occupation through Iceland's entry into NATO in 1946, an event of such magnitude in Icelandic politics that it provoked Iceland's last riots prior to those of 2008–9. *Atómstöðin* describes Reykjavík's economic and political elite from the clear-eyed perspective of Uglá, newly arrived from Iceland's rural north and steeped in medieval saga, folklore, and traditional Icelandic Christianity. *Atómstöðin* is often thought most important for being Iceland's first urban novel, and its politics rather limited by nostalgia for a simpler, pastoral past.<sup>16</sup> However, by writing from the perspective of a

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16 Cf. Ástráður Eysteinnsson and Úfhildur Dagsdóttir, "Icelandic Prose Literature, 1940–2000," in *A History of Icelandic Literature*, ed. Daisy

naive narrator with experience of a non-capitalist economy, Laxness gave his critical observations a suppleness not available to satires written from the perspective of caricatures of jaded bankers. Like most satire, *Atómstöðin* is in some ways ephemeral, the precise inspirations for most of Laxness's characters today being a topic for research itself. Yet the characters also stand on their own terms, while Uglá's trenchant observations as an outsider feel far from ephemeral, giving *Atómstöðin* a directness seldom seen in the wake of the Crash. As Giuliano D'Amico has recently pointed out, what is perhaps most striking about *Atómstöðin* from the point of view of the Crash is that the novel makes credit and money nearly as central themes as Iceland's entry into NATO or elites' manipulation of popular nationalist sentiment.<sup>17</sup> Already in 1948, then, *Atómstöðin* was exploring precisely the characteristics of Icelandic society that, sixty years later, the Crash would bring under the spotlight. And, as if in a proleptic response to Einar Már's point that reality has outpaced realism, *Atómstöðin* explores credit through surrealist modernism. As if to orientate the reader, the novel has Uglá and her mentor the Organist muse on realism in the visual arts, metatextually exploring how it is through the surreal that we can best represent the real.<sup>18</sup> Through surreal representations, Laxness both links and problematizes the concepts of money, credit, and crime.

In *Atómstöðin*, money and credit get their first mention in the same breath, on Uglá's arrival in her new workplace in Reykjavík: she explains that “koffortið mitt hafði verið flutt inn, sömuleiðis orgelið: ég hafði keypt hið síðarnefnda þennan sama dag fyrir alla þá peninga sem ég hafði eignast á ævinni og hrukku þó ekki til” (“my trunk had been moved in, and likewise the organ: I had

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Nejmann (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 411; Glauser, *Island*, 150.

- 17 Giuliano D'Amico, “The Whole World Is One Atom Station: Laxness, the Cold War, Postcolonialism, and the Economic Crisis in Iceland,” *Scandinavian Studies* 87, no. 4 (2015): 457–88, esp. 479–86.
- 18 Laxness, *Atómstöðin* [*The atom station*] (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1961), 49–50. I owe this observation to Sam Driver.

bought the latter that same day with all the money I had ever had in my life, though it still wasn't enough").<sup>19</sup> Insofar as Ugla's efforts to learn the organ lead to many of her key encounters and experiences, the organ is central to the story; where she got the rest of the money that she needed to buy it is never made clear, but her situation implies a role for credit already at this crucial juncture. The circulation of money paid to wage-labourers contracted by occupying forces during the Second World War had been key to effecting the long-awaited monetization of the Icelandic economy: entering into urban society is for Ugla to enter into a world of wage-labor, credit and debt.<sup>20</sup> Icelandic culture had traditionally promoted an aversion to debt, and tended to use the individual free from debt as a metaphor for an independent Iceland (though Laxness was well aware that the individual free of obligations to others was an awkward metaphor for a nationalist movement that insisted on Icelanders' social cohesion, satirizing this tension in his *Sjálfstætt fólk*, "Independent People," published in 1934–35). Although traditional sentiments like "það sé ekki gott að deyja í skuld" ("it's not good to die in debt") occasionally appear in post-Crash fiction, a long history of colonial use of debt-slavery followed by post-independence high inflation has encouraged debt as a central part of Icelandic life, a reality which *Atómstöðin* reflects.<sup>21</sup>

Crime appears in *Atómstöðin* soon after credit, again in connection with the organ, as Ugla muses that "ef til er synd þá er synd að kunna ekki á hljóðfæri [...] ef til er glæpur þá er glæpur að vera ómentaður" ("if there is such a thing as sin, then it is a sin not to know how to play a musical instrument [...] if there is such a thing as crime, then it is a crime to be uneducated").<sup>22</sup>

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19 Ibid., 9.

20 Örn D. Jónsson and Rögnvaldur J. Sæmundsson, "Free Market Ideology, Crony Capitalism, and Social Resilience," in *Gambling Debt: Iceland's Rise and Fall in the Global Economy*, eds. E. Paul Durrenberger and Gisli Pálsson (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015), 27.

21 Árni Þórarinnsson, *Morgunengill [Morning-angel]* (Reykjavík: JPV, 2011), 298.

22 Laxness, *Atómstöðin*, 15–16.

Money and crime are then brought into relation through a comment by the poet *briljantín*, who appears to be bankrolled by the entrepreneur *Tvö Hundruð Þúsund Naglbítar* (“two hundred thousand pliers”), whose own wealth seems to arise from fraudulently overvaluing his revenue in order to secure large loans.<sup>23</sup> One of the poets’ acquisitions from *Tvö Hundruð Þúsund Naglbítar* is a Cadillac. “Ef þú vilt skal ég berja benjamín og taka af honum kádiljákinn” (“if you want, I’ll beat benjamín up and take the Cadillac off him”), *briljantín* tells *Ugla*, explaining that “ég á alveg með að stela þessum kádilják einsog hann” (“I have just as much right to steal this Cadillac as he does”).<sup>24</sup> For this statement to make sense, we have to assume that property is theft. In this way, *Laxness* imbues his storytelling with a Marxist economic perspective, calling attention to the way in which everyday language is imbued with capitalist economic perspectives. Not long after, *Ugla* meets a “feimna lögreglan” (helpfully rendered by *Magnus Magnusson* as “selfconscious policeman”) — a man who has come to *Reykjavík* from the country and is getting by as a policeman while knowing that he is merely implementing a “smáborgaralega réttlætiskend” (“petit-bourgeois sense of justice”).<sup>25</sup> In ordinary discourse, we would say that this character is seeking his fortune in the city, but in *Atómstöðin*’s Marxist frame of reference, he is trying to fulfil his vocation of being a thief.<sup>26</sup> Towards the end of the novel, after the Self-Conscious Policeman has gone into business, been outmaneuvered by established interests, and imprisoned, the *Organist* explains the idea that the policeman’s calling was to be a thief in ways as resonant today as they were in 1948:

auðvitað skildi jafngreindur og tónhneigður maður fljótt að fjármunir eru ofvel geymdir til þess að sveitamenn nái þeim með því að klifra innum glugga á nóttunni. Ef maður vill

23 *Ibid.*, 30–31; cf. *D’Amico*, “The Whole World Is One Atom Station,” 483.

24 *Laxness*, *Atómstöðin*, 28.

25 *Ibid.*, 56.

26 *Ibid.*, 58–59.

stela í þjófafélagi, þá verður að stela samkvæmt lögum; og helst að hafa tekið þátt í því að setja lögin sjálfur. Þessvegna þreyttist ég aldrei á að brýna fyrir honum að komast á þing, eignast bakhjall í miljónúngi, stofna hlutafélag og fá sér nýan bíl, helst alt í senn. En hann var of mikill sveitamaður og skildi mig aldrei til fulls; og því fór sem fór [...] Hann flaskaði á öllum tæknilegum smáatriðum í köllun sinni. Árángurinn er auðvitað sá að hann sem átti að byrja á því að setjast við Austurvöll er sestur við Skólavörðustíg.<sup>27</sup>

Of course, such an intelligent and musically attuned person realized swiftly that assets are too well secured for rustics to get them just by climbing in through the window at night. If one wishes to steal in a thieves' society, one must steal in accordance with the law, preferably after taking part in making the laws oneself. This is why I never tired of urging him to get into Parliament, get the backing of a millionaire, float a company on the stockmarket, and get himself a new car, preferably all at once. But he was too much of a rustic, and never understood me properly, which is why it turned out the way it did [...] He floundered in all the technical details of his vocation. The result, of course, is that a man who should have begun by settling in at Austurvöllur is sitting at Skólavörðustígur.

Austurvöllur is home to Iceland's parliament, and Skólavörðustígur was the location of Reykjavík's jail. Again, Laxness insists on describing events from a Marxist point of view which at first sight seems surreal but can also be taken a clear-sighted description of the workings of capitalist Iceland. In fact, the Organist describes pretty well the reality of how Jón Ásgeir Jóhannesson rose (to the enormous consternation of the established elite) from a working-class background to being the effective owner of Glitnir, the first of Iceland's banks to collapse in 2008 (see further §4.2). While some Crash-fiction invokes

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27 Ibid., 216.

the truism that the best way to rob a bank is to buy one — indeed, this idea structures Práinn Bertelsson's 2004 *Dauðans óvissi tími*, whose main plot about a banker is contrasted with a sub-plot about two small-time bank robbers — Laxness goes far beyond this cliché: he defamiliarizes capitalism and conveys capitalism's own surreal character through his literary form, destabilizing the sense that capitalism is the natural or only way to organize society.

Moreover, *Atómstöðin* extends its critique of crony capitalism to a critique of money itself, which is exceptionally rare in Crash-fiction. Einar Már makes a start when he depicts the protagonist of *Íslenskir kóngar*, Arnfinnur, being rung up by a banker partway through a fabulously expensive, five-week, alcohol-fuelled bender to be told that he is overdrawn. Arnfinnur elicits the clerk's admission that Arnfinnur had until recently been in the black — “og var ég þá að hryngja í ykkur?” (“and was I phoning you then?”) demands Arnfinnur before hanging up.<sup>28</sup> This pithily, if implicitly, calls attention to the seldom remembered fact that anyone with a positive bank balance is in fact lending money to the bank, which is correspondingly in debt to its client. But Arnfinnur's question does not come close to the radicalism of Uglá's reminiscence that

þegar móðir mín varð sextug voru henni gefnar hundrað krónur. Þá kom það uppúr dúrnum að hún þekti ekki á penínga. Hún hafði aldrei séð penínga fyr. Afturámóti hafði sá dagur ekki komið fyrir síðan hún var tólf ára að hún ynni skemur en sextán tíma á sólarhring á veturna, átján á sumrin, nema hún væri veik.<sup>29</sup>

When my mother turned sixty, she was given a hundred *krónur*. It then emerged that she didn't recognize money. She had never seen money before. Nevertheless, the day had

28 Einar Már Guðmundsson, *Íslenskir kóngar* [*Icelandic kings*] (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2012), 43.

29 Laxness, *Atómstöðin*, 35.

never dawned since she was twelve years old that she hadn't worked less than sixteen hours a day in winter, and eighteen in summer, unless she was ill.

This exposes how uncommodified labor is still labor, and legitimates *Atómstöðin's* socialism by rooting it in the pre-capitalist peasant culture lionized by Iceland's Romantic nationalism: “þegar ég var heima dreingur, þá fann ég upp kommúnismann sjálfur, án þess að lesa bók. Kanski gera það allir fátækir dreingir” (“I discovered communism for myself as a boy back home, without reading any books. Maybe all poor boys do”), as the Self-Conscious Policeman puts it.<sup>30</sup> Ugla's mother stands as a living reference point for Ugla's assertion, almost incomprehensible in a monetized society, that “sá sem heldur peningar séu veruleiki er vitlaus” (“he who thinks that money is reality is mad”).<sup>31</sup> Though the portrayal of Ugla's mother is nostalgic, at its most vividly surreal, *Atómstöðin* probes the meaning and use of money more radically. At one point, the two *atómskáld* (literally “atom poets,” who were to give their name to Icelandic modernist poets generally) perform a song and tear up wads of “stolen” money at the Organist's house, shortly after which the Organist borrows a króna from Ugla to buy sweets.<sup>32</sup> Our inevitable horror at the scene affirms in us the reality of the power-relations money facilitates, while underscoring the fictive nature of monetary wealth itself, and reminding us that money is entirely a creation of society, dependent for its value on collective belief, yet whose supply and transmission is often controlled by elites.

Laxness's use of literary form to challenge normative attitudes to money foreshadows the growing post-Crash challenges to the privatization and financialization of the money supply, reflected both in increasingly innovative central bank policies in the wake of the Crash and the growing assertiveness of people who seek radically to reduce or extend the role of the state in supplying

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 29–31.



money. Thus central banks' "quantitative easing" represented an unprecedented admission of the state's ability to create and allocate electronic money. The lingering necessity of capital controls in post-Crash Iceland was challenged in 2014 when an unknown party under the mythologizing moniker Baldur Friggjar Óðinson attempted to establish a new crypto-currency for Iceland, the Auroracoin, distributing pre-mined coins automatically to all citizens (albeit not to great effect).<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, the pressing question of how electronic money is created and to what ends, and whether the state should once more determine its supply, has received unusually serious parliamentary consideration in Iceland.<sup>34</sup> Whether anything comes of these innovations, my key point is that their radical contemplation of money is shared more by *Atómstöðin* than any post-Crash novel, emphasizing both how stable Icelandic politics and power-structures have been since Iceland's independence, and how profoundly fiction-writers are struggling to represent financial culture.

Laxness was, undeniably, expressing his criticisms of Icelandic capitalism in what was in some ways a simpler time: the battle-lines between left and right were more clearly drawn; Western governments exercised more sovereign power over their economies; and non-capitalist life was within living memory — or occasionally still a reality — for many Icelandic people. I am reminded of Amitav Ghosh's comments on the shift from coal to oil as a source of energy, which accompanied the shift towards neoliberal finance. Coal is at the center of plenty of great literature from the decades around 1900, but

for the arts, oil is inscrutable in a way that coal never was: the energy that petrol generates is easy to aestheticize — as in images and narratives of roads and cars — but the substance

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33 Richard D. Porter and Wade Rouse, "Reinventing Money and Lending for the Digital Age," in *Banking Beyond Banks and Money: A Guide to Banking Services in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Paolo Tasca et al. (Cham: Springer, 2016), 65–67.

34 Frosti Sigurjónsson, *Monetary Reform: A Better Monetary System for Iceland* (Reykjavik: Forsætisráðuneyti, 2015).

itself is not. Its sources are mainly hidden from sight, veiled by technology, and its workers are hard to mythologize, being largely invisible.<sup>35</sup>

This helps us understand why it has been so hard for writers in the twenty-first century to write about a monetized, financialized culture from the outside: it is beyond the realms of most people's experience, and its control seen as being beyond the pale of political possibility. Thus it is tempting to conclude that high finance is simply too abstract for representation through fiction.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Srnicek and Williams identify a left-wing "folk politics" dating back to the counter-culture of the 1960s and dominating left-wing thinking today that cannot cope with the complexities of modern societies:

increasingly, multipolar global politics, economic instability, and anthropogenic climate change outpace the narratives we use to structure and make sense of our lives [...] In simple terms, the economy is not an object amenable to direct perception; it is distributed across time and space (you will never meet "the economy" in person); it incorporates a wide array of elements, from property laws to biological needs, natural resources to technological infrastructures, market stalls and supercomputers; and it involves an enormous and intricately interacting set of feedback loops, all of which produce emergent effects that are irreducible to its individual components.<sup>37</sup>

Whereas neoliberal actors have managed to develop a widespread "folk politics" which accommodates this situation by ac-

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35 Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 74–75.

36 Cf. Barbara Czarniawska, "New Plots Are Badly Needed in Finance: Accounting for the Financial Crisis of 2007–2010," *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal* 25, no. 5 (2012): 756–75; Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work* (London: Verso, 2015), 13.

37 *Ibid.*

cepting it as reality itself, and therefore immutable, mainstream left-wing “folk politics” has not established a counter-narrative, but rather a reactive politics of “resistance” that “is saturated with calls for a return to authenticity, to immediacy, to a world that is ‘transparent’, ‘human-scaled’, ‘tangible’, ‘slow’, ‘harmonious’, ‘simple’, and ‘everyday.’”<sup>38</sup> As will be clear below, these trends are readily apparent in Icelandic writing on the Crash. However, as La Berge has argued, financialization has not in fact proved altogether beyond the powers of representation of print culture, or novelists specifically.<sup>39</sup> A bigger impediment might rather be the ideological barrier that imagining the world through a lens other than a neoliberal one challenges post-war literary conventions of realism. I have sketched how *Atómstöðin* achieves its effects through its formal refusal of realism: this contextualizes the dominance in recent art of what has been called “capitalist realism.”

### 2.3 Capitalist Realism and Murder Fiction

Since the 2008 crisis, the concept of “capitalist realism” has risen to prominence in literary criticism. Originally coined jokingly in the 1960s to indicate the comparability of art under capitalism to the art of Socialist Realism, and later taken up by a few thinkers in the study of advertizing,<sup>40</sup> the term has gained a wider currency in commentary on culture under neoliberalism due to Mark Fisher’s 2009 *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Einar Már Guðmundsson commented that the Icelandic bubble was rooted “í sögulegum atburðum á borð við fall Berlínarmúrsins og þeim veruleika sem fylgdi og kenndur hefur verið við póstmódernisma” (“in historical events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the ensuing reality which has been asso-

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>39</sup> Leigh Clair La Berge, *Scandals and Abstraction*.

<sup>40</sup> Prominently, Michael Shudson, *Advertising: The Uneasy Persuasion. Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

ciated with postmodernism”).<sup>41</sup> But in preference to postmodernism, Fisher uses “capitalist realism” both to denote cultural production and, more broadly, lived experience in which “capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable.”<sup>42</sup> In Jeremy Gilbert’s summary, the term denotes,

at its simplest, both the conviction that there is no alternative to capitalism as a paradigm for social organization, and the mechanisms which are used to disseminate and reproduce that conviction amongst large populations. As such it would seem to be both a “structure of feeling” [...] and, in quite a classical sense, a hegemonic ideology, operating as all hegemonic ideologies do, to try to efface their own historicity and the contingency of the social arrangements which they legitimate.<sup>43</sup>

Or, to adduce one of the many of Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl’s poems in his Crash-themed collection *Hnefi eða vitstola orð* which express this concept,

*Við erum það sem við borðum  
Við étum það sem við verðum  
Við borðum það sem við étum  
Við erum það sem við verðum*<sup>44</sup>

*We are what we eat  
We gobble what we will be  
We eat what we gobble*

41 Einar Már Guðmundsson, *Hvíta bókin* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2009), 17; translation from Einar Már Guðmundsson, “A War Cry from the North,” *Counterpunch*, February 23, 2009, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2009/02/23/a-war-cry-from-the-north>.

42 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 8.

43 Mark Fisher and Jeremy Gilbert, “Capitalist Realism and Neoliberal Hegemony: A Dialogue,” *New Formations* 80–81 (2013): 89–101, at 89–90.

44 Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl, *Hnefi eða vitstola orð* [A fist or words bereft of sense] (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2013), no. 80.

*We are what we will be*

It is telling that *Atómstöðin* has suffered in the eyes of Icelandic critics precisely because they have looked at a surrealist novel from the aesthetic perspective of realism and found it wanting: from one perspective, *Atómstöðin*'s surrealism exposes economic realities; but from the dominant one, its economic vision obfuscates them, and the novel is therefore accorded lower prestige — which, regrettably, in turn diminishes its power to effect cultural change.<sup>45</sup>

As Einar Már has pointed out, the stylistic limitations of realism are made particularly apparent by the recent wave of Icelandic crime fiction, which might more precisely be labelled “murder-fiction,” a crime which, it seems, none of these novels can do without.<sup>46</sup> By calling attention to so-called crime novels’ obsession with murder, the term emphasizes how they have struggled to formulate narratives focusing on the actual crimes and misdemeanours of the financial crisis. The genre took off in Iceland in the early twenty-first century, and there has been no shortage of Crash-themed murder-fiction:<sup>47</sup> prominent examples include what promises to be a series of novels by Ævar Örn Jósepson; contributions by stalwarts such as Arnaldur Indriðason and Árni Þórarinsson; and work by newcomers such as Mikael Torfason, Óskar Hrafn Þorvaldsson, Sigrún Davíðsdóttir, and Þórunn Erlu-Valdimarsdóttir; not to mention TV series such as Baltasar Kormákur’s *Ófærð* (broadcast in English as *Trapped*). It is, moreover, worth noting that the majority of female novelists discussed in this book have made their voices heard through the crime-fiction genre, and there is surely something to be said,

45 Cf. Ármann Jakobsson, “Nietzsche í Grjótaþorpinu: Siðferði manns og heims í Atómstöðinni,” *Andvari* 127 (2002): 127–42.

46 Einar Már Guðmundsson, *Bankastræti núll*, 18–20.

47 Cf. Ástráður Eysteinnsson and Úfhildur Dagsdóttir, “Icelandic Prose Literature,” 458–59; Glauser, *Island*, 154–72; Mitzi M. Brunsdale, *Encyclopedia of Nordic Crime Fiction: Works and Authors of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden since 1967* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2016), 184–242.

then, for the way in which genre fiction has given them access to a generally male-dominated market. Indeed, one has at times a strong sense that a writer aiming at literary realism is taking shelter in the crime genre, perhaps in the hope of increasing the marketability of their work at home or, given the obsession with so-called “Nordic noir,” abroad: key examples are the numerous crime novels by Óttar M. Norðfjörð, the voluminous *Samhengi hlutanna* by Sigrún Davíðsdóttir, and the contemporary rewritings of medieval sagas by Þórunn Erlu-Valdimarsdóttir. This section proceeds by taking the latter two writers as case-studies of the possibilities and limitations of murder-fiction as a medium for discussing the Crash.

### 2.3.1 Þórunn Erlu-Valdimarsdóttir

Any genre predicated on a murder rate that is entirely at odds with reality is necessarily read from a partly ironic position, and is not in this sense realist. Accordingly, metatextual pointers along the lines of “hún [...] veit að önnur líðan og betri kemur þegar þessari hryllingsbók verður lokað” (“she [...] knows that another and better situation will come once this horror-story is finished”) are a stock feature of the genre, a characteristic taken to extremes by Óttar M. Norðfjörð’s ostentatiously metafictional *Lygarinn: Sönn saga* (“The Liar: A True Story”) and parodied by Auður Jónsdóttir’s *Vetrarsól*, in which the protagonist works for a publisher and is pushed into attending evening classes on crime-writing by their best-selling writer.<sup>48</sup> But overall, a realist

48 Þórunn Erlu-Valdimarsdóttir, *Mörg eru ljónsins eyru* [*Many are the lion’s ears*] (Reykjavík: JPV, 2010), 304, cf. 86, 245–86, and Katrín Jakobsdóttir, “Meaningless Icelanders: Icelandic Crime Fiction and Nationality,” in *Scandinavian Crime Fiction*, eds. Andrew Nestingen and Paula Arvas (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 46–61. *Lygarinn* contains numerous ostentatious metatextual devices, not least its paradoxical title. The main protagonist, Vera, is a writer of crime-thrillers suffering from writer’s block, which itself arises from her dissatisfaction with writing fiction rather than truth; she lectures on Roland Barthes’s seminal postmodernist essay “The Death of the Author”; the novel contains a story within a story whose own truth value is questioned in the novel and is never unambiguously resolved. The story within a story in turn calls

mode remains key to the genre. Icelandic crime fiction cloaks its unlikely plots in as many trappings of mundane realism as it can: date- and time-stamped chapter headings; ostentatious mentions of ephemeral consumer technologies; superficial references to recent real-world events; and, often, irretrievably prosaic direct speech masquerading as everyday language.

This realism has been seen as a positive characteristic. Thus Katrín Jakobsdóttir has argued that “Scandinavian crime fiction [...] can be considered one of the few literary genres which holds the sign of realism aloft and takes up community problems as a subject for debate and examination.”<sup>49</sup> Indeed, in a Greek context, social-realist crime writing has even been “considered the most ‘appropriate’ genre for the representation of the current crisis.”<sup>50</sup> Certainly Arnaldur Indriðason’s *Mýrin* (generally known in English as *Jar City*), both as a novel (2000) and in the film adaptation by Baltasar Kormákur (2006), has raised awareness of the ethical problems implicit in Iceland’s increasingly well integrated databases of its citizens’ medical, genealogical, and genetic information.<sup>51</sup> Katrín has emphasized that Ævar Örn Jóseppsson rewrote parts of his *Land tækifæranna* in response to the unfolding financial crisis just before going to press in order to integrate “skarpri samfélagsrýni” (“sharp social criticism”).<sup>52</sup> Katrín has shown how some crime fiction satiriz-

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into question Vera’s own identity, and even her name: instead of being called Vera (Latin for “true”), she may have been born Saga (Icelandic for “story”), making the novel’s subtitle a pun on her two names. The novel closes with an account of how the novel is itself Vera’s own account of true events in her life, with the names of the characters changed, and published under the name of an author friend (implicitly Óttar himself).

- 49 Katrín Jakobsdóttir, “Meaningless Icelanders,” 48.
- 50 Eleni Yannakakis and Natasha Lemos, “Introduction,” in *Critical Times, Critical Thoughts: Contemporary Greek Writers Discuss Facts and Fiction*, eds. Natasha Lemos and Eleni Yannakakis (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 8.
- 51 Lucy Burke, “Genetics and the Scene of the Crime: DeCODING *Tainted Blood*,” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 6, no. 2 (2012): 193–208.
- 52 “Engin glæpasagnakreppa: Íslenska glæpasagnaárið 2008,” *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 70, no. 1 (February 2009): 36–49, at 48.

## EXCERPT 1

Ævar Örn Jóseppson, *Land tækiferanna*, 68–70

“Hún var að baka spesíur, konan, trúirðu þessu?” spurði Katrín þegar þau Árni voru komin langleiðina aftur á stöðina. Hún hafði ákveðið að láta tæknideildarliðið um heimili Labudzki-fjölskyldunnar í bili, hún mundi skoða það betur þegar þau höfðu lokið sér af. Nú lá meira á að hafa uppá þeim Marek og Ewu. “Það er október og hún djöflast fram á nótt við að baka smákökur fyrir jólin?” Árni brosti þreytulega.

“Það er furðulegasta fólk að hamstra furðulegustu hluti núna,” sagði hann. “Ég fór í Bónus um daginn og hveitið var búið. Sykurinn líka. Mér skilst á pabba að þau mamma hafi farið og keypt sjö kíló af hvoru um helgina, bara til að vera viss. Kannski ekki skrítið að fólk láti svona einsog umræðan er búin að vera undanfarið.”

“Ég var í Bónus bara í gær og það var nóg til af hveiti,” sagði Katrín ergileg. “Og sykri líka. Ekkisens hystería.”

“Jújú, en þeir seldu helling af hveiti og sykri. Og núðlum og hrisgrjónum og niðursuðumat og hvað veit ég. Hysterían selur helvíti vel. Opnunartilboð og ótti, það er málið. Það er það sem selur.” Það hnussaði í Katrínu.

“Ótti. Veistu hvað þeir óttast núna, topparnir hjá okkur?”

“Hvað?”

“Byltingu. Eða allavega óeirðir og uppþot og læti. Í trylltum lýðnum.” Árni hló. “Alveg satt,” hélt Katrín áfram. “Þeir eru að setja saman viðbragðsáætlun útaf ástandinu þessir snillingar. Ætli þeir séu ekki að fylla á gasbrúsana núna.”

“Meiri dellan,” sagði Árni. “Hvað halda þeir að gerist? Það mættu tíusinum fleiri á opnunina á nýjasta mollinu til að kaupa eitthvað djönk heldur en á mótmælin á laugardaginn. Ef þeir eru hræddir við byltingu þurfa þeir bara að opna nýja búð einusinni í viku og málið er dautt.



es myths of Icelandic national identity, and, how at their best, crime novels can succeed in sketching the hidden connections, dependencies, and chains of causation between social spheres which dominant ideologies strive to keep separate.<sup>53</sup>

But Einar Már is surely right that crime fiction's mode of realism precludes radical or utopian thinking. The generic demand for crime fiction to focus on murders instantly poses a challenge to anyone who wishes to explore other kinds of social disorder through this literary mode, while casting an inherent doubt on the plausibility of any other aspect of the narrative. "Being a crime writer in the land of no murders can't be easy. It seems you need the creative powers of a genius just to be able to provide your murderer with a gun," as Hallgrímur Helgason has his protagonist comment in his satire of the genre, *The Hitman's Guide to Housecleaning*.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, any radical critique of society or attempt to imagine alternative societies would read as "unrealistic," so the demand for "realism" constrains the novels and in a sense their readers merely to world-weary observations of systemic social, political, and economic problems which brook no prospect that there might be any other way of organizing the world. Excerpt 1 provides one example of the justly critical, but jaded tone of these texts. Read in the light of the later Kitchenware Revolution, it is a little ironic; and perhaps, as the atmosphere in Iceland grew increasingly febrile, Árni's insistence that "Íslendingar eru hænsn" ("Icelanders are poultry") might have served more as a provocation than a discouragement. Moreover, Árni's comments in the passage on the power of consumerism to distract from and defuse any revolutionary trends stand as a convincing metatextual comment on how the crime fiction of Ævar Örn Jóseppson is itself a commodity, shaped by more than shaping market forces. But overall it is clear that murder-fiction itself follows the crowd rather than leading it: the prevailing sense is of a dour search for such anchor-points as might be

53 Katrín Jakobsdóttir, "Meaningless Icelanders."

54 Hallgrímur Helgason, *The Hitman's Guide to Housecleaning* (Las Vegas: AmazonCrossing, 2012), 50.

Við hættum við byltinguna, förum í búðina og græðum rosalega á öllum tilboðunum, rosa happí.”

“Ágætis plan,” samþykkti Katrín. “Bara einn galli á því.”  
“Nú?”

“Það er verið að loka búðum núna. Ekki opna þær.”

“Það er líka verið að opna þær,” mótmælti Árni. “Eins- og ég sagði, það voru öll stæði troðfull við Korputorgið daginn eftir að allt fór til fjandans. Og það má alltaf opna aðra búð. Loka einni, opna þá næstu.”

“Og selja hvað?”

“Skiptir ekki máli,” sagði Árni, “Skiptir nákvæmlega engu máli. Íslendingar eru hænsn.”

“Hænsn?”

“Já. Og hænur gera ekki byltingu. Hlaupa bara gaggandi í burtu þegar egginn er tínd undan þeim og hlaupa svo gaggandi til baka þegar eggjaþjófurinn hendir í þær nokkrum brauðmolum. Hænsn.” Katrín brosti.

“Og ég hélt að ég væri sú svartsýna.”

“Hey, þetta er engin svartsýni,” sagði Árni. “Þetta er bara staðreynd. Og hænur eru líka fólk, ekki gleyma því.”



“The woman — do you believe she was baking ginger snaps?” asked Katrín when she and Árni had finished the long trip back to the station. She had decided to leave off the technical department about the home of the Lubudzki family for the time being: she would look into it better when they were finished. For now Marek and Ewa were more important. “It’s October and she’s rushing about at night making biscuits for Christmas?” Árni gave a tired smile.

“The most unlikely people are squirreling away the weirdest things just now,” he said. “I went to Bónus the other day and the flour was all gone. The sugar too. I understand from my dad that he and mum went and bought seven kilos of both over the weekend, just to be sure. Per-

found in the shifting sands of capitalist realism, rather than an aspiration to change the environment itself.

The inertia of literary realism in the face of the Crash intersects with the challenge posed by a long-standing focus on subjectivity in the Western novel. It is a genre requirement of murder fiction to put individual psychology at the heart of explaining murderers' motivations, pathologizing and privatizing the causes of crime; although social and systemic factors in crime may be acknowledged, they are as a rule firmly in the background. This of course dovetails with the individualism promoted by neoliberal ideologies. This individualizing trend is perhaps most clearly illustrated by Þórunn Erlu-Valdimarsdóttir's *Mörg eru ljónsins eyru*. This is a self-consciously literary crime novel, to which the murders themselves are actually peripheral to a close study of personal relationships. It is the second of two novels based by Þórunn on medieval Icelandic sagas: her 2007 *Kalt er annars blóð* was based on the most vigorously canonized of the sagas, *Njáls saga*, while *Mörg eru ljónsins eyru* is a rewriting of the second most prominent, *Laxdæla saga*. One of the most striking characteristics of these sagas is their capacity to trace the complex chains of causation that lead to (and follow from) a moment of crisis, by developing narratives that run across several generations and that trace the participation of a large number of actors. It is not unknown for modern writers to try adopting the style of sagas to similar effect, one example being Tony Williams's 2017 rewriting of *Grettis saga*, *Nutcase*; and I discuss Bjarni Harðarson's use of saga-style in Chapter 4. Þórunn, however, works to adapt *Laxdæla saga* to the conventions of the literary novel: the plot is trimmed to focus on the love triangle at the center of the saga, and the cast is boiled down accordingly. This creates space for far more intimate examinations of the main characters, and a sympathetic, feminist exploration of the woman who becomes the clear protagonist of the story, Guðrún. Minor alterations to the plot create a telling commentary on how society has changed yet stayed the same. For example, in the saga, Kjartan sours his relationship with Guðrún by refusing to let her give up looking after her widowed

haps it's not so strange that people are acting like this the way things have been lately."

"I was in Bónus yesterday and there was plenty of flour," said Katrín angrily. "And sugar too. Pointless hysteria."

"Of couses, but they did sell a ton of flour and sugar. And noodles and rice and tinned food and I don't know what else. Hysteria sells bloody well. Special offers and fear, that's the thing. That's what sells." Katrín snorted.

"Fear. Do you know what they fear now, our bosses?"

"What?"

"Revolution. Or at least unrest and uprisings and uproar, from a frenzied people." Árni laughed. "Cross my heart," Katrín went on. "They're putting together a response plan because of the situation, the smart-arses. They're probably filling up the gas cannisters now."

"More rubbish," said Árni. "What do they think will happen? Ten times as many people went to the opening of the newest mall to buy some junk, rather than going to the protest on Saturday. If they're scared of revolution, they just need to open a new shop once a week and that's that. We'll stop the revolution, go to the shop, and pay handsomely for all the offers, totally happy."

"Nice plan," agreed Katrín. "Just one flaw in it."

"Really?"

"People are closing shops now, not opening them."

"People have been opening them too," protested Árni. "Like I said, it was packed at Korputorg the day after everything went to pieces. And you can always open another shop. Close one, open the next."

"And sell what?"

"Doesn't matter," said Árni, "doesn't make any difference. Icelanders are poultry."

"Poultry?"

"Yep. And hens don't do revolutions. They just run away clucking when their eggs are taken away from

father's household and travel abroad with him, whereas in the novel the same rupture comes because Kjartan expects his partner Guðrún to disrupt her career by moving with him to Sweden. In the novel, social structures and the way in which they shape the actions of characters who are, often reluctantly, caught up in forces beyond their control have a place, and Þórunn gives the Crash a prominent role in exacerbating personal tensions. But whereas *Laxdæla saga* focuses on these social forces, deftly sketching its characters' psychologies but keeping psychology on the periphery of its explanations of events, *Mörg eru ljónsins eyru* puts the psychologies of Guðrún and her lovers Kjartan and Bolli firmly at the center of attention. Characteristically, the saga leaves it uncertain — as it would have been to most people present had the events described transpired — who actually undertook a couple of key actions in the saga, whereas Þórunn takes it upon herself to explain and motivate these deeds, shifting the focus away from social questions of duties and reputations and onto individual actors and their personalities. What in the saga is Bolli's tragic killing of his foster-brother and rival Kjartan is rewritten by Þórunn as the suicide of a Kjartan driven mad by envy. *Mörg eru ljónsins eyru* has much to recommend it, but it emphasizes novels' current inability to capitalize on Iceland's literary heritage to chart the complex, abstract forces exposed by the Crash.

### 2.3.2 *Sigrún Davíðsdóttir*

If any of the murder novels written about the Crash do echo sagas' social scope, though, it is Sigrún Davíðsdóttir's *Samhengi hlutanna*, perhaps the most impressive effort in the whole Crash-corpus to use literary realism as a means to explore the Crash. Weighing in at a fulsome 469 pages, *Samhengi hlutanna* is a first-person crime thriller, written in the voice of Arnar Finnsson, an Icelander who has abandoned a career as a lawyer to move to London and become an artist and illustrator. Following the death of his partner, a London-based Icelandic journalist called Hulda, Arnar finds himself at the forefront of trying to finish her investigation of the Crash, in the course of

under them, and run clucking back when the egg-thief throws them some breadcrumbs. Poultry.” Katrín smiled.

“And I thought I was the pessimistic one.”

“Hey, this isn’t pessimism,” said Árni. “This is just how it is. And hens are people too, don’t forget.”

which he realizes that she was murdered. As in many murder-novels, a large proportion of the book is direct speech, uttered as the main characters work their way from one informant to another, and process the information they gather in conversations between themselves. More strikingly than in many crime novels, however, these interviews form a series of set-piece case studies of different sections of Iceland’s boom-time business community, with each character reflecting on the Crash from their own perspective. Amongst others, we meet a Latvia-based Icelandic entrepreneur; a business lawyer who worked for Óttar Hafsteinsson, the novel’s equivalent to the real-life Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson; Arnar’s ex-wife, a bank employee put out of work by the Crash; his brother, a lawyer and patriotic member of the Icelandic establishment; and even, fleetingly, a Chinese sweatshop-worker in London. All told, then, *Samhengi hlutanna* recalls the celebrated capacity of the realist novel for polyphony, representing a range of different voices to give a conspectus of Iceland’s financial society, and it makes an exceptionally comprehensive attempt to chart the international financial networks and social forces that formed during the Icelandic banking boom.

Although it manages to rack up two murders, one suicide, and a slaughtered pitbull terrier, *Samhengi hlutanna* nevertheless integrates its murders into this representation of reality with a certain deftness. Uniquely in the Crash-corpus, the novel focuses firmly on the painstaking process of investigating financial crime. Thus at its center is a valiant effort to adapt the crime genre to the exposition of financial reality, and particularly to the challenge of assembling a holistic picture of offshore finance from the fragments of data that are accessible in the public do-

main. Although the audience inevitably assumes from the beginning that the deceased Hulda has been murdered, and keep turning the pages of the novel in the expectation of seeing her killers identified, the protagonists do not even realise that that Hulda was murdered until page 373. In fact, the murder-narrative is cunningly used as a sort of *deus ex machina* whereby Sigrún brings a story about financial crime to an ostensibly satisfactory conclusion. She could have sustained her focus on financial crime all the way to the end, perhaps having the protagonists successfully prove some aspect of the money-laundering they believe they are uncovering. This is how Ernir Kristján Snorrason's burlesque detective novel *Sýslumaðurinn sem sá álfa* ends: it fantasizes that its protagonist locates the hoard of laundered Russian money which had, in this account, built up at the core of the Icelandic banking system. The hero delivers the stash secretly into the hands of the stricken Icelandic Central Bank, thus becoming a never-to-be-recognized savior of the Icelandic economy. Yet the commitment of *Samhengi hlutanna* to representing the fearsomely slow and difficult realities of investigating financial crime precludes this kind of ending: it insists on leaving its money-laundering plot unresolved. By shifting its focus onto the fast-paced identification and arrest of Hulda's murderers in order to conjure up a denouement, *Samhengi hlutanna* rather adeptly covers the nakedness of its form as a realist exploration of financial crime with the fig leaf of the murder-novel.

As these analyses suggest, Sigrún can be understood as working to make the financial complexities of the Icelandic Crash accessible to a wider audience unlikely to read the lengthy official report, but liable to be tempted by a crime thriller. Correspondingly, it is hard, as Jón Karl Helgason has pointed out, not to read *Samhengi hlutanna* as a *roman à clef* about the Crash. It charts the passing of narrative time with even more ostentatious particularity than most murder-fiction: rather than being divided into chapters as such, the narrative is simply punctuated by headings stating the date whenever a new day begins (in the clinical, abbreviated format "2.4. (fö.," i.e. "2 April (Friday)"). It features НК banki ("НК Bank"), Eyjabanki ("Bank of the Is-

lands”) and Sleipnir (the name of the mythological horse of Óðinn), and the investment funds Hringur (“Ring”) and Delilah, which seem straightforwardly to be ciphers for KB banki, Landsbanki, and Glitnir, alongside Baugur Group (where Baugur likewise means “ring”) and Samson Holdings. Indeed, as a female Icelandic journalist in London investigating the Crash, Hulda can be seen as a cipher for Sigrún herself: since 2000, Sigrún has been the London correspondent for RÚV, the Icelandic state broadcaster. Not only Sigrún’s published reporting but also her English-language blog Icelog has sustained an indefatigable and enormously valuable scrutiny of the labyrinthine financial affairs and legal cases arising from the Crash. Correspondingly, the novel wastes no time establishing a meta-commentary on the relationship between art and journalism. Already in the opening passage, Arnar recalls that “listamenn þyrftu tíma til að hlaða batteriin, sagði hún, en í blaðamennskunni þyrfti maður að juða jafnt og þétt” (“artists needed time to recharge their batteries, she said, but in journalism you had to hustle hard, all the time”).<sup>55</sup> This sends a fairly clear signal that *Samhengi hlutanna* will be a meditation on the relationship between journalism and literature, and will comment on the Crash in ways that journalism cannot. Naturally, the novel also contains obligatory metatextual markers like Raggi’s comment that the heroes’ findings are “bara eins og þvottekta þriller” (“just a dead ringer for a thriller”).<sup>56</sup> But given how closely it maps real-life institutions, it is quite natural that Jón Karl inferred that the novel’s exposition of Icelandic money-laundering reflects Sigrún’s opinions about history itself:

sem skáldsagnahöfundur getur Sigrún tekið sér margháttuð skáldaleyfi (kannski er viðeigandi að tala um skáldaskjól í þessu sambandi) án þess þurfa að standa skil á texta sínum frammi fyrir dómstólum.

<sup>55</sup> Sigrún Davíðsdóttir, *Samhengi hlutanna* [*The context of things*] (Akranes: Uppheimar, 2011), 10.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.



As a novelist, Sigrún can take a wide-ranging poetic licence (perhaps it is appropriate to talk about poetry as a shelter in this regard) without having to be held accountable for her texts before the courts.<sup>57</sup>

The novel gives us the sense, then, that realist writing can expose reality in ways that, say, journalistic writing cannot.

On the other hand, *Samhengi hlutanna* also prompts us to ask what it means when such a painstaking thought experiment in a possible reality turns out *not* to represent reality after all. In the wake of the Crash, there were plenty of good reasons to explore the hypothesis that banks had been laundering Russian gangster money, and Sigrún's journalism had a significant role in researching this. Yet by 2017 she had concluded that no evidence of money laundering in the Icelandic banks had come to light, and that the suspicious behavior that suggested laundering could instead be attributed to extraordinary incompetence. She noted that "the Russian rumours were persistent, some of them originating in the murky London underworld [...] Most of this coverage was however more fiction than facts (the echo of this is found in my financial thriller, *Samhengi hlutanna*, which takes place in London and Iceland after the collapse[...])." Here, then, *Samhengi hlutanna*, which works so hard to use genre fiction as a platform for exploring reality, is sidelined almost apologetically as a mere thriller. It is possible for the novel to become marginal in this way because it approaches the Crash as a conspiracy of wilful (if partially informed) agents. Although it does a fine job of sketching how peripheral actors (like Arnar's brother or ex-wife) find themselves complicit in conspiracies which they neither understand nor approve of, the novel has no scope for a critique of finance *per se*, enabling the assumption that the people at the center of Iceland's boom and crash were bad apples in a blameless system. Politics, either as a cause of the Crash or as a means of resolving it, are absent, in favor of crime and law.

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57 Jón Karl Helgason, "Samhengi hlutanna," *Hrunið, þið munið*, September 2014. <http://hrunid.hi.is/skaldskapur/glaepasogur/samhengi-hlutanna/>.

This is not to say that the approach of *Samhengi hlutanna* was a bad idea: the premise was an idea worth entertaining, and had the book successfully divined what later proved true, it would no doubt have been acclaimed for its acuity. Yet the novel can still be seen as paradigmatic of capitalist realism, because it does not establish any more profound critique of the system it portrays, and because its critiques are correspondingly constrained in scope.

But it is by no means only crime novels, or Icelandic ones, that exhibit this trend. Two of the main UK novels about the global financial crisis are Sebastian Faulks's *A Week in December* (2010) and John Lanchester's *Capital* (2012). Both also attempt to achieve some of the social scope of the great nineteenth-century realist novels, in each of these cases by presenting a dozen or so largely parallel narratives set in London, using this hub of the globalized economy as a case-study of the world economy, and trying to chart the hidden interdependencies of London's wildly diverse classes and communities.<sup>58</sup> Yet in both, "the crisis that engulfs" the banker character "is personal rather than political or economic. The 2008 financial crash is merely a backdrop for a reckoning that denies a systematic critique of the financial crisis whilst also resisting a purely individualized one."<sup>59</sup> The same approach characterizes Baldvin Zophoníasson's similarly structured 2014 crisis-inspired movie *Vonarstræti*, Guðmundur Óskarsson's *Bankster*, Bjarni Bjarnason's *Mannorð*, Bjarni Harðarson's *Sigurðar saga fóts*, Óttar M. Norðfjörð's *Áttablaðarósinn*, and Steinar Bragi's *Hálendið*.

58 Katy Shaw, "'Capital' City: London, Contemporary British Fiction and the Credit Crunch," *The Literary London Journal* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 44–53; Catherine Bernard, "Writing Capital; or, John Lanchester's Debt to Realism," *Études anglaises* 6, no. 2 (2015): 143–55.

59 Nicky Marsh, Paul Crosthwaite, and Peter Knight, "Show Me The Money: The Culture Of Neoliberalism," *New Formations* 80–81 (2013): 209–17, at 214; cf. Linda McDowell, "Making a Drama out of a Crisis: Representing Financial Failure, or a Tragedy in Five Acts," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 36, no. 2 (2011): 193–205.

One of the various irreverent declarations made by the comedian Jón Gnarr as he became, to his surprise and everyone else's, the mayor of Reykjavík in 2010, was that he wouldn't want to enter a coalition with anyone who hadn't seen the television drama *The Wire*.<sup>60</sup> Here, as often, Jón was speaking from the position of the wise fool: what Lanchester and Faulks merely hope to achieve in their respective novels, *The Wire* achieves triumphantly. Sustaining vivid characterization while focusing masterfully on social and institutional structures, *The Wire* explodes the popular crime genres which it at first sight resembles. It not only charts the economic forces shaping social interactions, but also succeeds in weaving in Utopian thinking that sketches the contours of new political possibilities and even goes on in its final series to chart the forces shaping realism itself — even if its account falters at America's borders, struggling to see events in Baltimore in a global context.<sup>61</sup> By contrast, the conception of agency and responsibility enabled by crime novels' plotting does little to help readers frame a response to their own bafflement at the financial crisis, as they wonder where to seek or direct restitution, how to deal with the blame directed at the Icelandic nation by others, and whether they are themselves to blame as individuals. In *Morgunengill*, Ásbjörn says,

Þegar upphæðir eru orðnar mörgum sinnum hærrí en nokkur venjulegur maður kemst yfir að eyða á heilli ævi í sjálfan sig og allan sinn ættboga frá landnámsöld, ja, þá hætti ég að skilja.

When the sums get many times higher than any normal person manages to spend in their whole life, themselves and all

60 Haukur S. Magnússon, "What Are You Voting For, Reykjavík? Grapevine Attempts to Find Out," *The Reykjavík Grapevine* 8, no. 6 (May–June 2010): 14–15.

61 Fredric Jameson, "Realism and Utopia in *The Wire*," *Criticism* 52 (2010): 359–72; Leigh Claire La Berge, "Capitalist Realism and Serial Form: The Fifth Season of *The Wire*," *Criticism* 52 (2010): 547–67.

their ancestors since the Settlement Period, yeah, then I stop understanding.<sup>62</sup>

And the novel does not take the reader any further.

These arguments correlate with the wider observation that in the wake of the Western financial crisis, corporate and political institutions have proved adept at deflecting blame onto “supposedly pathological individuals, those ‘abusing the system,’” while invoking institutional structures “precisely at the point when there is the possibility of individuals who belong to the corporate structure being punished. At this point, suddenly, the causes of abuse or atrocity are so systemic, so diffuse, that no individual can be held responsible.”<sup>63</sup> And whereas *The Wire* (and *Atómstöðin*) put politics nearer the center of their stories than commerce, working outwards from state institutions to exploring how politicians’ connections with commerce corrupt their philanthropic mandate, Iceland’s Crash-novels tend to focus on bankers. This diminishes the possibilities for exploring political accountability and possible responses. As with the focus on interiority, this too is consistent with neoliberal ideologies, in which politics and political institutions are conceptualized as marginal to the successful ordering of society, while the deeds of economic actors in commerce and finance are put at the center. A literature enabling people to chart these evasions, as, *mutatis mutandis*, *The Wire* does, would be valuable. Much of the rest of this book is directed at identifying and following those threads in Icelandic Crash-literature that do attempt to draw these kinds of networks.

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62 Árni Þórarinnsson, *Morgunengill*, 111–12. Cf. Annie McClanahan, *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First-Century Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 21–95.

63 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 69–70.

## 2.4 Children's Fiction and the End of Capitalism

"It is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism": so Fredric Jameson famously formulated an aphorism which puts the idea of capitalist realism in a nutshell. He went on to add that "we can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world."<sup>64</sup> Children's literature mentioning or alluding to the Crash provides a wealth of opportunities literally to test these propositions, moving our analysis of capitalist realism from form to content. Children's literature is particularly useful for studying responses to the Crash because it tends to stand outside the modes of realism dominant in adults' fiction, often drawing on fantasy/science-fiction and potentially enjoying more space for utopian thought. Moreover, postwar Western novels tend to be characterized by an insistence that "preaching" is beneath the art of the writer (and/or unmarketable).<sup>65</sup> However, it is still socially and economically acceptable to write stories for children which take a forthright stance on moral questions. Together, these factors make children's literature the site of some of the most direct yet also experimental responses to the Crash. However, for all the merits of Icelandic children's writing, imagining the end of the world really does seem easier than imagining the end of capitalism. Among the more pointed and in some ways successful Crash-novels are Þórarinn Leifsson's *Bókasafn Ömmu Huldar* and Andri Snær Magnason's *Tímakistan*, both of which make extensive use of fantastic elements, yet both illustrate Jameson's point. Arndís Þórarinsdóttir's *Játningar mjólkurfernuskálds*, in turn, shows a bold exploration of possibilities for resistance to

64 Fredric Jameson, "Future City," *New Left Review* 21 (May/June 2003): 65–79, at 76; on the aphorism's origins see Qlipoth, "Easier to Imagine the End of the World ... than the End of Capitalism," *Qlipoth* (blog), November 11, 2009, <http://qlipoth.blogspot.co.uk/2009/11/easier-to-imagine-end-of-world.html>.

65 See for example Jón Karl Helgason, "A Poet's Great Return: Jónas Hallgrímsson's *Reburial* and Milan Kundera's *Ignorance*," *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies/Études scandinaves au Canada* 20 (2011): 52–61.

neoliberalism which reaches far beyond what most adult writing attempts, but nevertheless remains more about resisting neoliberalism than imagining an alternative.

#### 2.4.1 *The End of the World Is Not the End of Capitalism*

The frame story of *Tímakistan* allegorizes a recessionary spiral driven by a lack of consumer confidence by presenting a world much like our own in which, faced with an economic crisis, ever more adults lock themselves and their families in boxes in which time stands still, to spare themselves the agonizing wait for the end of the recession, until everyone is in stasis, waiting for everyone else to jump-start the economy. Meanwhile, the novel's inner story, set in a pseudo-medieval fantasy world, explores the expansive character of capitalism and its links with colonialism and human reshaping of the environment, making the commodification of time a central theme. This is a very interesting angle: by portraying an economic collapse driven by the commodification of time itself, the novel hints at how capitalism's inherent drive for expansion means that once everything that can be commodified has been, capitalism must necessarily end. Yet the end of the novel embraces a pretty traditional narrative of the necessity of consumer confidence to economic growth, and of economic growth to human wellbeing. The novel portrays the beginning of the Reykjavík's reclamation by non-human species, but as the children who have escaped the time-boxes reawaken the human population and set about reviving economic life, a teenager comments determinedly that “það sem hefur verið byggt er hægt að byggja aftur” (“what was built once can be built again”).<sup>66</sup> Admittedly, one of the children, Pétur, suggests that “sumt átti kannski aldrei að vera til” (“perhaps some things shouldn't ever have existed”), pointing to a moss-covered bank.<sup>67</sup> But Pétur's aside does not really attempt to dissuade us

66 Andri Snær Magnason, *Tímakistan* [*The time-chest*] (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2013), 292.

67 *Ibid.*

that banks have a crucial role to play in rebuilding the economy and its infrastructure.

*Bókasafn Ömmu Huldar* presents a dystopian future in which the world is ruled by Gullbanki, a bank based in a space-station orbiting the Earth. Instrumental education has deprived everyone of any interest in literature and culture, and parents and their children are systematically drawn into a literal form of debt-slavery. One of the protagonists, Hávar M. Grímsson, mayor of Reykjavík and obsequious puppet of Gullbanki's director Böðvar, is a fairly direct parody of Davíð Oddsson, who during and after a stint as Reykjavík's mayor in 1982–91 took a central role in deregulating Iceland's banks, and was at the time of the financial crisis the governor of the central bank (before being offered the job of editor of Iceland's main newspaper, *Morgunblaðið*, a position he still holds at the time of writing). Having successfully commodified everything that can be commodified and achieved a total monopoly, melodramatically encoding capitalism's paradoxical demand for continual consolidation and its impossible insistence on endless growth, Böðvar plans nihilistically to destroy Earth by crashing Gullbanki into it, allegorizing the environmental catastrophe which the world's dominant models of capitalism are creating. The main protagonist, Albertína, averts disaster with the help of her friends. She succeeds partly through the assistance and self-sacrifice of her ostentatiously folkloric great-great-grandmother Huld, which suggests the importance of casting off nostalgia for a lost Romantic past as a step to an ecologically viable future. As a response to the financial crisis which shows the possibilities of imagination, this text is promising.

Yet *Bókasafn Ömmu Huldar* ends with an epilogue in which, several years after the main events of the novel, Albertína and her friend Valli Veira

sátu hvort með sinn kaffibollann og horfðu yfir götuna sem ekki var lengur umferðargata heldur göngugata með ferhyrn-dum, metersháum blómabeðum, hávaðasömum skyndibita-sölum og blaðasölum

sat, each with their cup of coffee, and looked across the street, which was no longer an arterial road but rather a pedestrianized street with rectangular, metre-high flower-beds, noisy fast-food sellers, and newspaper vendors.<sup>68</sup>

Pedestrianization has much to recommend it, as does 101 Reykjavík's cafe culture, and both are certainly preferable to debtenslavement in a deracinated future. But this is a timid vision of victory in a story featuring an attempted suicide-bombing by Valli, Albertína's acquisition of dragon-like incendiary powers, the magical appearance of a million-volume library, and the near-destruction of Earth by Gullbanki. And it does nothing to address how the fast-food and newspaper sellers, cafe staff, and coffee farmers feel about their role in this new world.

Moreover, the epilogue emphasizes that the post-Gullbanki present is effectively as amnesiac as its culturally benighted past: historians exist, but, faced with a dearth of written records and in spite of Valli and Albertína's own memories of events, they debate whether Gullbanki even existed. At one level, this is a playful bid to integrate the novel's unlikely future-history into mainstream understandings of reality and to advert to the allegorical character of the novel. But the absence of historical truth from the world after Gullbanki echoes more tellingly the postmodern condition in which the young, real-life audience of *Bókasafn Ömmu Huldar* find themselves, with historical narratives endlessly open to retelling and re-formation: in real-life Iceland, the process of renarrating the Crash as the "svokallað hrun" ("so-called Crash") was already beginning by the time *Bókasafn Ömmu Huldar* hit the shelves.<sup>69</sup> Likewise, in *Timakistan's* frame story, the past depicted by the inner narrative, set in the fantastical pseudo-medieval empire of Pangaea, is reduced to a jumble of archaeological relics. One character, Hrafninn, lives from the Pangaeian past into the novel's pres-

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68 Þórarinn Leifsson, *Bókasafn ömmu Huldar* [Granny Huld's library] (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2009), 215.

69 See §2.6.



ent time by being preserved in a time-chest. But at the end of the novel, Hrafninn vanishes and Pangaea with her, once more subsumed into a postmodern historiography of fragmentary and competing narratives.

Þórarinn and Andri Snær have, of course, every right to compose novels about the Crash that embrace capitalism, and to distinguish between more and less humane incarnations of capitalist life. They rightly wish their young readers to celebrate forms of capitalism which deliver them greater freedom than, say, the genocidal, pseudo-medieval violence portrayed in *Tímakistan*; and wish steer their readers from self-destructive resistance to capitalism of the kind represented by Valli Veira's attempt to become a suicide bomber in *Bókasafn Ömmu Huldar*.<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, in failing to imagine alternatives to the Icelandic culture that caused the crash, these novels inhabit rather than compete with its norms.

#### 2.4.2 *Confessions of a Milk-Carton Poet*

The social effects of the limitations which *Tímakistan* and *Bókasafn Ömmu Huldar* represent is suggested by a widespread anxiety in Crash-novels about the effects of capitalist realism on children: it is perhaps fair to say that Crash-novels exhibit a culturally specific set of anxieties about childhood that correlate with millennial Western culture. Thus post-Crash writers express in apparently equal measure concern and pity about young people's rising mental-health problems, along with a fear of youth delinquency. Both concerns are partly represented through the (Islamophobic) spectre of terrorist radicalism. Admittedly, in Þórður Helgason's *Vinur, sonur, bróðir* or Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir's *Hjartsláttur*, both books for teenagers, participating in the Kitchenware Revolution seems just to be part of the cheerful rough and tumble of teenagers finding their places in the world. But *Hrafnaspark* has the protagonist's horror at his history-teacher's right-wing views on the Vietman and

<sup>70</sup> Þórarinn Leifsson, *Bókasafn ömmu Huldar*, 97–113.

Iraq wars leading him into delinquency.<sup>71</sup> I have mentioned Valli Veira's suicidal depression in *Bókasafn Ömmu Huldar* above, and discuss related themes in Kristín Steinsdóttir's *Hetjur* below.<sup>72</sup> Echoes of the same anxieties continue beyond children's literature into how literature aimed at adults talks about children. Kári Tulinius's *Píslarvottar án hæfileika* interweaves its story of pretentious yet hapless twenty-something wannabe rebels at the peak of the banking boom with flashbacks to the early life of the main character, Sóli, who was imprisoned in his own home by his mother out of fear of the horrors of the world,<sup>73</sup> echoing concerns at young people's increasingly managed and circumscribed upbringing. Among crime novels, *Morgunengill*, by Árni Þórarinnsson, revolves around the misguided and ultimately fatal efforts of children to hold the daughter of a disgraced banker to ransom. The murder-victim in Ævar Örn Jósefsson's *Önnur líf* is a young woman, Erla Líf, psychologically scarred by (amongst other things) her inability to accept society's injustices, and drawn into danger by her association with the radical wing of the post-Crash protest movement. In terms of the novel's plot, the danger to Erla turns out to come less from other activists than from a conservative politician and his lackeys, in an indictment of political corruption that is not without force. But the novel still mourns Erla's inability simply to become part of the crowd: in part, the novel says "if only Erla hadn't resisted." These texts indicate that children are required by neoliberal culture to establish a positive self-image from believing themselves to be members of a just society, to whose norms they take pride in subscribing. Yet they are also expected to assimilate pervasive news of the horrifying violence and injustice of their world, which they know that they are at best lucky not to experience, and at worst complicit in perpetuating. Children learn that their consumer comforts come at the cost of the oppression of chil-

71 Eysteinn Björnsson, *Hrafnaspark [Scrawl]* (Reykjavík: Ormstunga, 2010).

72 §3.2.

73 Kári Tulinius, *Píslarvottar án hæfileika: Saga af hnattvæddri kynslóð [Martyrs without talent: a history of a globalized generation]* (Reykjavík: JPV, 2010).

dren elsewhere in the world — yet nevertheless are expected to become well behaved consumers. In earlier times, violence and injustice elsewhere could be rationalized or legitimated through explicit racism or nationalism. Yet millennials have grown up in societies that claim to subscribe to, fulfil, and promote universal human rights, while often failing to support these goals and, at worst, actively working against them. Crash-novels worry about how children are expected to compartmentalize these mutually incompatible discourses to avoid destructive cognitive dissonance, yet struggle to see a way out of this oppressive reality.

Anxieties about children's formation under capitalist realism are most directly addressed by Arndís Þórarinsdóttir's *Játningar mjólkurfernuskálds* ("confessions of a milk-carton poet," referring to the Icelandic custom of publishing childrens' poems on the side of milk-cartons). In this novel, the Crash itself is for the most part present only in the background: it helps motivate a dramatic change in circumstances for the novel's thirteen-year-old protagonist, Halla, whose parents (two gay men) are forced to give up their house in the posh Vesturbær district and move to the down-at-heel suburb of Breiðholt, bringing Halla into a new set of social circumstances. Nor does the novel attempt great social scope: it focuses firmly on its teenage protagonist's first-person account of her tribulations, revelling in the literary challenge of inhabiting Halla's often self-absorbed personality while providing the reader with enough perspective to read her narrative ironically — yet insisting that we take Halla's subjective experience seriously. In doing so, however, the novel succeeds in addressing some of the key anxieties about children's experience of neoliberalism. Facing bullying in her new school by the girl who fulfils the alpha-female role which Halla herself had inhabited in her previous school, Halla becomes aware of structures of class and privilege to which she had previously been comfortably blinkered. As her character develops, she reassesses and deepens her conceptions of the tensions between fulfilling social norms on the one hand and cultivating sincerity and authenticity on the other.

Halla's efforts to gain the acceptance of two of the people in her new school who are willing to show some hospitality to the new arrival—both of them goths, and therefore belonging to a sub-culture standing at a tangent to mainstream social norms—expose her to explicitly political thinking. The goth Anna Ninja implies that shoplifting from the shopping center Smáralind is ethical, but is clear that “maður *stelur ekkert úr Nexus*” (“you *don't steal* from *Nexus*”), Iceland's main stockist of science fiction and fantasy books and games.<sup>74</sup> Through Anna, the book sketches an ethical assessment of different varieties of capitalist enterprise:

Það kom í ljós að hún hafði þælt í rosa mörgu sem ég hafði aldrei hugsað út í, þótt ég lærði heima en ekki hún. Ólöglegri dreifingu höfundarréttarvarins efnis á netinu (hlynnt), banni við höfuðklútum í skólum (andvíg), kynja-kvótum (hlynnt) og stofnfrumurannsóknum (hlynnt), svo fátt eitt væri nefnt.<sup>75</sup>

It emerged that she'd thought about an awful lot that I'd never considered, even though I did homework and she didn't. Illegal distribution of copyrighted material on the Internet (in favor), the ban on head scarves in schools (opposed), gender quotas (in favor) and stem cell research (in favor), to name just a few.

Meanwhile, Anna Ninja's friend Alexander Filippus suffers from depression and self-harms, and *Játningar mjólkurfernuskálds* is fairly explicit that one factor in his condition is his inability to sustain the cognitive dissonance required to fulfil social norms in a society where the ideals of Western democracy are so clearly at odds with society's actual behavior. As Halla concludes,

74 Arndís Þórarinsdóttir, *Játningar mjólkurfernuskálds* [*Confessions of a milk-carton poet*] (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2011), 108.

75 *Ibid.*, 112.

Alexander hefur svo miklar áhyggjur af alvörvandamálum úti í heimi að enginn tekur eftir því að hann getur ekki hjálpað sér sjálfur. Og það er verið að drepa börn í Tsjad og dæma fólk til dauða í Ameríku og alls konar. Og það er miklu þægilegra að hugsa ekki um það — en ef maður gerir það, þá veit maður að það eina *rétta* er að segja eitthvað. Og gera eitthvað.<sup>76</sup>

Alexander is so worried about real problems elsewhere in the world that no-one notices that he can't look after himself. And children are being killed in Chad and people are being sentenced to death in America and all sorts. And it's much more comfortable to not think about it — but if you do that, you still know that the only *right* thing to do is to say something. And do something.

That is, rather than simply expressing anxiety and regret at the situation of people like Alexander Filippus, the book recognizes that the way to resolve cognitive dissonance is to force transparency, bringing the inconsistencies in the ideologies within which people are expected to function into open view.

The novel's climax comes when Halla realizes that Anna and Alexander are going to throw paint over some members of parliament in a generalized act of protest at the state of the world. Halla recognizes that, notwithstanding her conservative instincts as a person who has invested heavily in fitting social norms, civil disobedience can be ethically necessary, and selfless in a way that self-aggrandizing charity collections for poorly understood “good causes” are not. Halla's greater facility with mainstream social norms, however, enables her to see that a vague and violent demonstration will be ineffectual. She harnesses her experience of organizing conventional charity collections to steer her friends into painting a huge banner calling attention to specific issues, hanging it from the parliament building, and tipping off the press. An epilogue explains that

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76 Ibid., 208.

the banner enjoys international media coverage; provokes parliamentary debates on Chad and the situation of children in Iceland; and fetches up in the National Gallery of Iceland.

The direct action envisaged in *Játningar mjólkurfernuskálds* fits neatly into Williams and Srnicek's model of "left-wing folk politics." Each child chooses to represent the issue closest to their heart on the banner: their activism represents the politics of a culture better adapted to building support for specific issues rather than building generalized solidarities — and so better adapted to movements than parties. Accordingly, *Játningar mjólkurfernuskálds* does not find space for a grander utopian vision. One closes the novel wondering whether those parliamentary debates about Chad and the plight of Icelandic children had any meaningful outcome. Yet at the same time, Halla's civil disobedience is both more daring than any political action the vast majority of people ever contemplate, and conceivable in an Icelandic context. Although the so-called "kitchenware revolution" (*búsáhaldabylting*) is not mentioned in the book, the protest by Halla and her friends resonates with events in Iceland around 2009. But instead of portraying the 2009 protests rather two-dimensionally as a fun pastime or equivocating anxiously about whether the protests are too dangerous, or simply pointless, the dounouement of *Játningar mjólkurfernuskálds* rather studiously lays out a blueprint for civil disobedience: how to calibrate the pros and cons of unlawful action; how to target campaigns; and how to harness the power of media and other institutions to amplify the message. Perhaps most importantly, given the focus of most Crash-literature on bankers, it focuses on government as the most effective target for campaigning. For all the profound failings of democracy in countries hit by the 2008 financial crisis, focusing critiques of the Crash on bankers serves to detract from the pressing question of how to use democratic channels to convince or enable states more vigorously to promote the interests of their citizenry at large. Thus *Játningar mjólkurfernuskálds* both promotes utopian thought as a viable response to capitalist realism, and helps its young audiences as-

semble some of the tools to chart a path towards bringing about different futures.

Overall, one is left with the impression that Icelandic writers on the Crash think the stakes are high when it comes to challenging neoliberal capitalism, particularly in terms of children's psychological wellbeing. But they are unsure as to how to go about it. Perhaps more strikingly again, even when they are happy to imagine successful resistance to capitalism or to neoliberal politics, whether of the fantastic sort presented by Þórarinn Leifsson or the realist variety developed by Arndís Þórarinsdóttir, they flinch from presenting goals for a progressive society rather than a vision of resistance.

## 2.5 Hegemony and the Cultural Boom: Two Case Studies

Having explained the prominence of capitalist realism in Iceland through its crime novels, and tested its boundaries through children's writing, I conclude this chapter by focusing on two writers who mount particularly interesting challenges to Iceland's neoliberal hegemony — though who I also see as exemplifying the limitations of writers seeking to get beyond it — Steinar Bragi (born 1975) and Óttar M. Norðfjörð (born 1980). Both draw on genre-fiction, but are clearly distinguished from the adults' fiction examined above by their direct engagement with the constraints placed on writers by capitalist realism, and their anxiety at the role of art in the boom. Both are associated to some degree with the Nýhil literary collective, and my examination of their work here stands alongside my analysis of Crash-writing by the Nýhil writers Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl (born 1978) and, in less detail, Grímur Hákonarson (born 1977) in Chapter 5. Nýhil came into being around 2002–4 and wound up around 2009–11: its life thus tracks the height of the banking boom, and the subsequent bust.<sup>77</sup> The group ran a press and a series

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77 On the origins and significance of the group, see Hjalti Snær Ægisson, "Um ljóðabækur ungsálda frá árinu 2004. Nokkrar glæfralegar athugasemdir," *Són* (2005): 141–59; Viðar Þorsteinsson, "Nýhil, eða vandi

of international poetry festivals, promoting an outward-looking scene of socially critical, avante-garde writing, and particularly poetry (the publication of which underpinned several Nýhil writers' development of their later prose styles). Of the writers considered here, Steinar Bragi was peripheral to the group: his only Nýhil publication, the novel *Konur*, was published by Nýhil in 2008 shortly after Steinar Bragi ended a long relationship with the publisher Bjartur, and was soon republished by the mainstream Mál og menning, which has continued to put out most of Steinar Bragi's books. Óttar M. Norðfjörð, by contrast, was central, and his fabulous rewriting of Voltaire's *Candide*, *Örvitinn; eða hugsjónamaðurinn*, was one of Nýhil's last publications, in 2010. Whatever the precise applicability of the term "Nýhil writer" to these two quite different figures, however, a lot of common ground can be identified in their responses to the Crash.

Once again, we can turn to Laxness for a sketch of the relationship between money and art that is as applicable to the politics of artistic patronage in early twenty-first-century Iceland as of the period when it was composed. The passage is from Laxness's 1927 *Vefarinn mikla frá Kasmír*, and the speaker is Örnólfur Elliðason, one of the richest men in Iceland, who echoes the real-life fishing magnate Thor Jensen (1863–1947), the great-grandfather of Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson, one of the key figures in the twenty-first-century boom:

skáldin eru hættulegust [...] Það er tilgángslaust að ætla sér að mæta þeim á sama vettvángi og öðrum þjóðfélagsborgurum; þeir standa fyrir utan þjóðfélagi og hafa aldrei neitt að missa. Þá bíta eingin vopn. Þeir hafa ekki nema eitt markmið, og það er að sturla lýðinn, — ef ekki með þessu laginu, þá

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hins nýja," *Skírnir* (Spring 2006): 207–11; Hermann Stefánsson, "Eitthvað nýtt!" *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, June 9, 2007, 10; Benedikt Hjartarson, "Af þrálátum dauða og upprisum framúrstefnunnar: Ótímabærar hugleiðingar um hefðarvitund og nýsköpun," *Són: Tímarit um óðfræði* 8 (2010): 173–207; and Bjarni Bjarnason, *Boðskort í þjóðarveislu* (Akranes: Uppheimar, 2009), 172–95.



með hinu. Og þeir hafa þann merkilega hæfileik frammyfir aðra menn að láta sér aldrei segjast. Þessvegna hef ég aldrei þreyst á að brýna fyrir flokksbræðrum mínum hver nauðsyn okkur sé á að tapa ekki þessum loddurum yfri umturnunar-flokkinn. En Steinn á séreignir og getur farið sínu fram án þess að segja einsog hinir: Wessen brot ich ess, dessen lied ich sing.<sup>78</sup>

Poets are the most dangerous [...] It's hopeless to try to confront them in the same arena as other citizens: they stand outside national society and never have anything to lose. They're impregnable to weapons. They only have one goal, and that is to stir up the people — if not with this approach then with another. And they have the remarkable talent, beyond other people, of never letting themselves be gainsaid. So I have never tired of impressing on my brothers in the Party how crucial it is for us not to lose these clowns to the revolutionaries. But Steinn is independently wealthy and can go his own way without saying, like the others, *whose bread I eat, their song I sing*.

In a way Örnólfur's analysis of the importance of poets in *Vefarinn mikli* is heartening: it emphasizes that, if twenty-first-century financiers found artists a useful source of cultural capital, they must have thought that the arts sector has some power to influence people. Certainly artists of various stripes took a central role in the sustained protests that led to the eventual resignation of the Geir Haarde government. Jón Gnarr is the most striking example: his comedy both echoed and shaped the public mood and eventually led to him becoming the mayor of Reykjavík in 2010. Correspondingly, no-one, in the wake of the Crash, wanted to have been a *baugspenni*, or “Baugur pen,” as writers who supported the expansion of Jón Ásgeir Jóhannes-

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78 Halldór Kiljan Laxness, *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* [*The great weaver from Kashmir*], 3rd edn. (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1957), 152.

son's investment group Baugur have been called.<sup>79</sup> It is striking, however, that while Steinar and Óttar strive mightily to call attention to the capture of literature by capital, they struggle to move beyond merely expressing their anxiety about it.

### 2.5.1 Steinar Bragi

All Steinar Bragi's post-Crash novels are to a significant extent a meditation on how authors were compromised by the banking boom. The clearest example is his 2008 *Konur*, which can be pithily summarized by borrowing Einar Már Guðmundsson's statement that during the boom "urðu bankarnir listrænar stjórnendur og listamennirnir að eins konar innsetningu í hagkerfi þeirra" ("the banks turned into artistic directors and the artists into some kind of installation in their economic system").<sup>80</sup> To capture the essence of *Konur*, one need only add the gender component: these artistic directors are men, operating in a misogynistic system of hegemonic masculinity. In *Konur*, Eva, a fairly unsuccessful Icelandic artist (whose biblical name suggests her symbolic status), moves from New York to Reykjavík to take up the offer of an Icelandic banker, Emil Þórsson, to house-sit his flat. Finding herself locked in the flat, Eva begins to realize that she is actually part of a voyeuristic, misogynistic art installation (presumably bankrolled by Emil). The narrative focuses on the psychological torments inflicted on Eva by her imprisonment; the novel hints that she is sexually abused yet also paraded as a celebrity at parties for the elite of the banking and art worlds. A version of Eva alienated from the Eva presented to us by the central narrative eventually comes to be celebrated as a successful artist. This is an incisive, if not brutal, critique of patronage during the banking boom. As one might expect from an author who was writing a systematic critique of the boom before the bust, *Konur* is an impressively holistic ex-

79 Alda Björk Valdimarsdóttir and Guðni Elísson, "Og eftir sitjum við með sektarkennd í brjósti": Hallgrímur Helgason og íslenska efnahagshrunið," *Ritið* 12, no. 2 (2012): 169–97.

80 Einar Már Guðmundsson, *Bankastræti núll*, 154.

ploration of the nature of reality in a neoliberal debt-economy, as Viðar Þorsteinsson has demonstrated in detail.<sup>81</sup> Yet Steinar Bragi's subsequent novella *Rafflesíublómið*, which seems to portray Emil earlier in his life, suggests that he is pretty unhinged, pathologizing his behavior, and recalling the familiar immune response of hegemonic systems: to identify individuals whose behavior exposes the values and structures of the system they are within instead as deranged outliers.

Steinar Bragi's 2011 novel *Hálendið* uses the form of Gothic horror to reach outwards from *Konur* into a wider exploration of social relations, again portraying Iceland at the height of its boom-time hedonism, with a larger cast representing a wider cross-section of the elites of both the cultural and the banking booms. Presently available in French, Dutch, Hungarian, Finnish, Spanish, Scandinavian, and even English translations, it is perhaps the most internationally successful novel in this study. With multiple narrative viewpoints and, it emerges by the end, narrators so fundamentally unreliable that virtually nothing about the events told in the story is certain, the novel maps neoliberal modernity as a nightmarish collage of fragmented personalities, endemic substance abuse and strained mental health, financialization, childhood trauma, the industrialization of Iceland's wilderness, and the commodification of people's genes, where traditional gender systems no longer provide secure frameworks for identity and where economic activity is seldom harnessed to a sense of social progress. One of the achievements of the book is that its firmly non-realistic form allows it to explore the Crash from a wide range of perspectives. The story entails four young people, all in their way involved in the banking boom, going on holiday in the Icelandic highlands, driving in a jeep to the south of Askja. Losing the road in foggy darkness, the driver, Hrafn, accidentally drives the jeep into the wall of a house mysteriously located in the highland desert, making the jeep unusable and forcing the characters to demand the reluc-

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81 Viðar Þorsteinsson, "Fjármálavæðing og móttun tímans í Konum eftir Steinar Braga," *Ritið* 15, no. 3 (2015): 9–33.

## EXCERPT 2

Steinar Bragi, *Hálendið*, 198–200

Í sögunni sagði frá manni sem villtist í hríð uppi á Hofsjökli og varð viðskila við ferðafélaga sína, meðlimi gönguhóps úr bænum. Eftir að stytta upp gekk maðurinn niður af jöklinum og óttaðist ekkert þar sem hann var ágætlega búinn. Brátt kom hann að djúpum, grösugum dal í jaðri jökulsins, sem maðurinn mundi ekki eftir að hafa heyrt um áður. Dalurinn var gróðursæll og á rann eftir honum miðjum.

Maðurinn gekk niður í dalinn og fylgdi ánni þar til hann kom að bæ þar sem hann knúði dyra. Tvö horuð börn opnuðu fyrir honum og leiddu inn í stofu þar sem sátu enn horaðri hjón ásamt með litlu kvikindi sem var í óðaönn að éta sig ofan í mikla kjöthrúgu á disk. Hjónin buðu manninn velkominn, settu fyrir hann disk og skömmtuðu glærri súpu, eins og þeirri sem þau átu sjálf með börnum sínum en sem var mjög frábrugðin þeim gerningi sem kvikindið hafði.

Kvikindið var undarlegt bæði í útliti og háttum, hæð þess var litlu meiri en barnanna en bakið bogið og andlitið eins og á gamlingja. Það leit aldrei upp frá diskinum en þó var eins og það sæi allt í kringum sig þar sem augun tróndu óvenju hátt á enninu. Það klæddist litríkum fötum, rauðum, gulum og bláum, svo björtum að óþægilegt var að horfa á þau. Þegar grannt var skoðað sást að húðin hékk skökk utan á kvikindinu, næstum eins og henni hefði verið fleygt yfir það í skyndingu, og hér og þar glitti í rjött, gljáandi kjöt, sem rifnaði og lak út á húðina ef kvikindið hreyfði sig. Lyktin af því var römm, líktist blöndu af saur og úldnum fiski sem lagði um allt húsið.

Maðurinn tók til súpu sinnar og reyndi að komast að því hvar hann væri staddur, en augun drógust alltaf aftur að þessu litla, viðurstyggilega kvikindi við borðsendann, eins og reyndar augu allrar fjölskyldunnar sem horfði á það éta einsog dáleidd. Eftir að hafa hreinsað af diskinum

tant hospitality of the house's two inhabitants: an old woman, Ása; and an old man who in the characters' estimation is at an advanced stage of Alzheimer's disease. The novel is quick to imply that there is something strange and dangerous about the situation, which swiftly degenerates as the characters' efforts both to understand the mysterious house and to escape both it and each other unravel. The novel closes with a confused account of one of the four, Vigdís, being discovered wandering naked in the highlands, the police investigating events at the "house," and Vigdís's hospitalization. Yet it also appears at this stage that the house was in fact a large rock;

þá hlýtur lesandi að velta fyrir sér hvort allt það sem á milli fer hafi aðeins verið ofskynjanir, kallaðar fram af neyslu áfengis og eiturlýfja, en þó umfram allt hinni ríku sjálfseyðingarhvöt sem ungmennin fjögur búa yfir.

Thereupon the reader has to wonder whether everything that goes on in between [the car-crash and the ending] was only hallucinations, triggered by the consumption of alcohol and drugs, but above all by the powerful impulse to self-destruction which the four young people experience.<sup>82</sup>

Near the house is a mysterious dam, which evokes the much contested building of the dam at Kárahnjúkar, a project to generate hydroelectric power for aluminium smelting that was touted by its supporters as a way to bring work and industry to the countryside, but argued by its detractors — including protesters who came to Iceland from abroad — to be causing irreparable environmental damage, abusing migrant labor, and bringing limited benefits to Iceland itself.<sup>83</sup> Meanwhile, the monstrous

82 Úlfhildur Dagsdóttir, "Hryllilegar hremmingar á hálendinu," *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 73, no. 4 (November 2012): 112–17, at 115–16.

83 Cf. Andri Snær Magnason, *Dreamland: A Self-Help Manual for a Frightened Nation*, trans. Nicholas Jones (London: Citizen Press, 2008); Þorfinnur Guðnason and Andri Snær Magnason, dir., *Draumalandið [Dreamland]*, Ground Control Productions, 2009.

hvarf það út og maðurinn spurði hver þetta væri. Hjónin sögðu “litla manninn,” eins og þau kölluðu hann, hafa komið til þeirra nokkrum vikum áður, hann væri þeim mikill aufúsgestur og þau vildu allt fyrir hann gera. Manninum blöskraði þetta og þreif til sín annað af börnunum, kleip um handlegg þess sem var ekki nema bein og spurði hvort þau sæju ekki að börnin þeir[r]a syltu, rétt eins og þau sjálf, og hvers vegna þau létu kvikindið ganga fyrir. Þá svöruðu þau einum rómi: *Það hefur svo fögur klæði.*

Daginn eftir um kvöldverðartíma endurtók sami leikurinn sig; kvikindið birtist við bæinn, settist í stofuna og heimtaði sitt, án þess þó að nokkuð væri sagt. Kúffullur diskur af feitu kjöti var lagður fyrir það, meðan fjölskyldan og maðurinn átu súpu. Nú gat maðurinn ekki lengur orða bundist og skammaði kvikindið en það svaraði engu, og eftir að það kláraði af diskinum hvarf það á brott.

Manninn tók að gruna ýmislegt um ástand mála og hét því að fara hvergi fyrr en fjölskyldan væri leyst úr vanda sínum. Nokkrum dögum síðar gerðist það svo að kjötið í dalnum var uppuríð, enda hafði það allt verið étið af kvikindinu. Um kvöldið þegar ekkert kjöt kom á disk þess — við mikla örvæntingu fjölskyldunnar — byrjaði kvikindið að baula hátt þannig að lömun sló á viðstadda. Fyrr en varði hafði það þrifið til sín börnin tvö, fyrst drenginn, svo stúlkuna, og étið sig inn í kvið þeirra, upp í gegnum lungun og hjartað og smurði blóðinu yfir föt sín svo að þau virtust skína sem aldrei fyrr. Að þessu loknu hvarf það út um dyrnar.

Þegar maðurinn fékk aftur mátt til að tala krafðist hann þess að húsbóndinn vopnaðist og þeir færu saman og eltu uppi kvikindið, en húsbóndinn og húsfreyjan sögðu: *Það hefur svo fögur klæði*, og neitðu að aðhafast nokkuð fleira.

Kvöldið eftir birtist kvikindið á ný, settist við borðið og enn heimtaði það sitt. Þegar ekkert kjöt kom á diskinn byrjaði það aftur að baula, klifraði svo upp á borðið og gekk rակleitt að húsfreyjunni, lagði munninn þétt að augum hennar og saug þar til heyrðist smellur þegar au-

human experiments of which Anna uncovers evidence in the house evoke the prominence in Iceland of the real-life genetics firm DeCODE, with its project to chart and monetize the genes of the whole Icelandic population.<sup>84</sup> Little Crash-writing has attempted to draw the subtle connections between these disparate economic developments, and its effort to do so is an achievement of *Hálendið*.

Into this, Steinar Bragi weaves a chapter on the career of one character, Anna, a journalist, bluntly entitled “Íslensk blaðamennska” (“Icelandic journalism”). This comprises one of the novel’s main meditations on the relationship between writing and the Crash. Hitting a mid-life crisis, Anna finds that

í hátt í tíu ár hafði hún ekki skrifað eina einustu línu fyrir sjálfa sig, engan skáldskap, ekki smásögu eða ljóðlínu, var hætt að skrásetja líf sitt í dagbækur nema stopular athugasemdir um veður og líðan, og hætti því svo líka með öllu. — Í hátt í tíu ár hafði engin sköpun farið fram í lífi hennar nema sú sem rúmaðist innan söluviðmiða tímarita og meðal pistla eða viðtalslengdar.<sup>85</sup>

for almost ten years she hadn’t written a single line for herself: no literature, not a short story or a line of verse; she had stopped setting her life down in diaries except for occasional comments on the weather or wellbeing, and so stopped doing it altogether. For almost ten years no creativity had taken place in her life except what met the marketing criteria of journals and fitted within the length of an opinion piece or interview.

Rather, her writing has been “spenntar fyrir vagn einhverra peninga-apa til að lyfta orðspori Sjálfstæðisflokksins gagnvart

84 On which see Michael Fortun, *Promising Genomics: Iceland and deCODE Genetics in a World of Speculation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

85 Steinar Bragi, *Hálendið [The highlands]* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2011), 105.

gun hlupu úr tóttunum, fyrst öðrum megin og svo hinum megin. Því næst fletti það frá brjóstum húsfreyju og át þar til ekkert var eftir af þeim, og smurði blóðinu yfir klæði sín þar til þau ljómuðu skært. Að þessu loknu hvarf það á brott. Þegar maðurinn spratt á fætur og heimtaði að þeir fyndu kvikindið og dræpu sagði húsbóndinn sem fyrr: *Það hefur svo fögur klæði.*

Maðurinn sá að við þetta mætti ekki una. Fyrir kvöldverð daginn eftir dreypti hann vaxi í eyru sér og lét storkna, svo töfrarnir verkuðu ekki lengur á hann. Þegar kvikindið settist og upphóf baul sitt spratt maðurinn á fætur og lagði til þess með hníf, en þá bar svo við að kvikindið hvarf. Við nánari aðgæslu sá hann að það hafði breytt sér í litla svarta flugu sem maðurinn elti marga hringi í kringum húsið og aftur inn, þar sem hann datt örmagna í gólfið. Þá hnitaði flugan hringi yfir borðinu, þar sem húsbóndinn sat og át nær gagnsæja súpuna, lenti á súpuskeiðinni og hvarf með henni upp í munn hans, þar sem kvikindið tók aftur á sig sína fyrri stærð. Við þetta sprakk höfuð bóndans og kvikindið birtist aftur, sat klofvega yfir herðum hans og laugaðist heitu blóði, klæði þess svo skínandi björt að maðurinn var nauðbeygður til að líta undan.

Eftir þetta fór maðurinn burt, enda var nú enginn eftir á lífi í dalnum. Hann fylgdi ánni og gekk lengi niður í móti þar til hann kom til byggða, þar sem hann sagði söguna af púkanum sem kastaði yfir sig mannshúð og sveipaðist litum sem voru bjartari en nokkuð af þessum heimi.



The story was about a man who got lost in a snowstorm up on Hofsjökull and became separated from his companions, who were members of a hiking group from town. After the weather cleared the man walked down off the glacier and, being well equipped, had nothing to worry about. Soon he came to a deep, grassy valley at the edge of the glacier, which he didn't remember ever hearing



miðaldra kellingum” (“harnessed to the wagon of some money-apes, to raise the reputation of the Independence Party among middle-aged women”) or otherwise to burnish the public image of politicians. Steinar Bragi’s analysis of Anna’s writing is in its way a version of Örnólfur Elliðason’s view of artists in *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, updated for the media-go-round of the twenty-first century, and stands figuratively for the power of established political and economic elites to harness and contain the creative powers of literary writers. As in *Konur*, it is the women of the story who bear the brunt of its voyeuristically hideous violence, and it is perhaps symbolic that the mutilations visited upon Anna deprive her of sight, hearing and speech, along with her capacity to write.<sup>86</sup>

Anxiety over the power of the person who pays the piper implies wider concerns about hegemony and about what prospects writers have of competing with dominant hegemonic discourses. *Hálendið* expresses these concerns most clearly through a parable that takes its form (albeit not its exact content) from folktale. Steinar Bragi has another of the characters, Vigdís, pick up a collection of folktales which she has never heard of before, in which she finds a grotesque pastiche of a traditional folk-tale, presented in Excerpt 2.<sup>87</sup> The traveller who, lost in the highlands, accidentally wanders into a hidden valley of unnatural pleasantness and fertility is a familiar trope in Icelandic folktale; but Steinar Bragi subverts our hopes for a pastoral utopia with a story of utter corruption. Tellingly, we never get to hear Vigdís’s reflections on the story, as she is distracted by other events: thus the story effectively stands outside the main text, implicitly as a commentary on it. Hans Christian Andersen’s “Kejserens nye klæder” (“the emperor’s new clothes”) has been a common reference point in non-fiction commentary about the Crash, albeit more as a proverb than through harnessing the rather rich po-

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86 Bragi, *Hálendið*, 216–19.

87 *Ibid.*, 198.

about before. The valley was verdant, with a river running down the middle.

The man walked down into the valley and followed the river until he came to a farm, where he knocked at the door. Two thin children opened it and led him into the main room, where an even thinner couple were seated, along with a little creature which was intent on eating through a huge plateful of meat. The couple welcomed the man and put a dish before him, and then served him some thin soup like they and their children were eating, and which was far short of the deal the creature had got.

The creature looked strange and behaved as strangely: it was hardly taller than the children, its back bent, and its face like an old person's. It never looked up from the plate, and yet it was as though it could see all around it because its eyes were perched so high up in its forehead. It was dressed in colorful clothes — red, yellow, and blue, so bright that it was hard to look at them. If you looked closely, you could see that the creature's skin hung loosely on it, almost as if it had been thrown on in a hurry, and here and there glimmered red, shining flesh, which burst and slid through the skin if the creature moved. It had a pungent smell, like a mix of excrement and rotten fish, which hung over the whole house.

The man got on with his soup and tried to work out whereabouts he was, but his eyes kept being drawn back to this small, vile creature at the end of the table, as in fact were the eyes of the whole family, which watched it eat as though they were hypnotized. After clearing its plate, it disappeared, and the man asked who it was. The couple said that the "little man," as they called him, had come to them a few weeks before and that he was a very welcome guest, and that they wanted to do everything they could for him. The man was horrified and pulled over one of the children, pinched at its arm, which was just skin and bone, and asked if they couldn't see that their children were starving, as indeed there were themselves, and

tential of the story itself.<sup>88</sup> Steinar Bragi reimagines Andersen's story horrifically to portray Icelandic elites as winning, through their beautiful clothes, people's assent to their own consumption. The demon's metamorphic powers evoke the capacity of elites to perpetuate and utilize the contingency of history and meaning in postmodernity: the rare outsider who is able first to perceive the demon's deception and second, by forcibly refusing to listen to it, to overcome its capacity to induce paralysing terror, is still unable to pin it down or hold it to account.

Vigdís is probably the least unbalanced character in *Hálendið* and the one whose professional work as a psychiatrist entwines her least closely with the cultural and financial booms; it is perhaps significant that, as apparently the only main character to survive, she is found wandering in the highlands naked, having suffered an attack like the demon's assault on the farmer's wife in the story: "í stað brjóstanna voru rauðir, lófastórir hringir sem gljáðu eins og jarðarber og þar undir glitti í rifbeinn" ("instead of her breasts were red, palm-sized circles which glistened like strawberries, from under which you could glimpse the rib-bones").<sup>89</sup> As an interruption and metacommentary on the nightmarish reality which the story's characters inhabit, this pseudo-folktale affords one of the novel's more memorable defamiliarizations and explorations of capitalist realism. Still, neither the tale nor the novel as a whole is optimistic: the best that the visitor to the hidden valley can do in the end is walk away.

### 2.5.2 Óttar M. Norðfjörð

The extensive, unusually variegated, and ostentatiously political oeuvre of Óttar M. Norðfjörð, which features often throughout this book, makes him one of the pre-eminent figures in the literature of the Crash. Moreover, Óttar's scurrilous political satires prior to the Crash (pre-eminently *Jón Ásgeir & afmælisveislan*,

88 E.g., Einar Már Guðmundsson, *Hvíta bókin*, 17; Guðni Thorlaicus Jóhannesson, *The History of Iceland* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2013), 147. For Marxist readings of the text, see Hollis Robbins, "Emperor's New Critique," *New Literary History* 34, no. 4 (2003): 659–75.

89 Bragi, *Hálendið*, 253.

why they let the creature take priority. Then they both answered together: *it has such beautiful clothes*.

At dinnertime the next day the same performance played out: the creature appeared at the farm, sat down in the main room, and demanded dinner, without anyone speaking up. A plate heaped with fatty meat was put before it, while the family and the man ate soup. Now the man couldn't restrain himself any longer and scolded the creature, but it didn't reply, and after it had emptied the plate it went away.

The man had begun to get a bit suspicious about this situation and vowed that he wouldn't leave until the family had been freed from this misery. A few days later, it happened that all the meat in the valley was gone — it had all been eaten by the creature. That evening, when, to the utter despair of the family, no meat appeared on its plate, the creature began to roar so loudly so that everyone who heard it was paralyzed. Before they knew it, it had grabbed the two children, first the boy and then the girl, and eaten its way into their bellies and up through the lungs and heart, and smeared the blood over its clothes so that they seemed to shine like never before. And after that it disappeared out through the doors.

When the man regained his power of speech, he told the husband to arm himself so that they could go together and hunt the creature down. But the husband and the wife both said *it has such beautiful clothes*, and refused to do anything more.

The next evening, the creature appeared again, sat down at the table and once more demanded dinner. When no meat appeared on the plate, it began to roar once more, climbed up on the table, and went straight for the woman, set its mouth tightly over her eyes and sucked until there was a pop, and the eyes came out of their sockets, first on one side and then on the other. Next it stripped the woman's breasts bare and ate them up leaving nothing, and smeared the blood over its clothes until they shone

“Jón Ásgeir and the Birthday Party,” 2007) have given him an unusually firm platform from which to say “I told you so.” In the years following the Crash, Óttar wrote prolifically, across a startling range of genres, from experimental art and poetry, to cartoons, to both literary novels and crime thrillers, providing a unique opportunity to compare and contrast how one author has handled the Crash through different genres. Óttar’s post-Crash novels focus in detail on the challenges of perceiving the violence of capitalist society, failing to influence it, yet, unlike Steinar Bragi’s lost hiker, being unable simply to walk away.

Óttar’s first thriller, *Hnífur Abrahams* (“Abraham’s Knife”) 2007), was surely self-consciously modelled on Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), but it puts the Orwellian “War on Terror” at the center of its story; it was followed by the sequel *Sólkross* (2008). Immediately after the crash, Óttar published two ostentatiously literary novels: *Paradísarborgin* (“The Paradise City,” 2009), which allegorizes Iceland’s banking boom, and *Örvitinn eða; Hugsjónarmaðurinn* (“The Idiot, or, the Visionary,” 2010), the latter modelled primarily on Voltaire’s *Candide, ou l’Optimisme* (1759) and again centrally concerned with the War on Terror. But at the same time, Óttar continued to develop crime writing, palpably striving to bring the generic demands of crime fiction together with his literary commitments. The novels of most interest here are *Áttablaðarósín* (“The Eight-Petaled Rose,” 2010) and *Lygarinn: Sönn saga* (“The Liar: A True Story,” 2011).

Like Steinar Bragi, Óttar devotes a lot of energy to wringing his hands about the relationship between finance and art in Iceland. His baldest comment on the influence of money in Icelandic literature comes in *Áttablaðarósín*. In a melodramatic re-writing of how Björgólfur Guðmundsson used his ownership of the publisher Edda to censor a biography of his wife which Edda published, the fictitious Egill Brandt (modelled on Björgólfur Guðmundsson’s son Björgólfur Thor) has his father prevent the biographer of their ancestor Henrik Brandt from revealing that Henrik Brandt had framed an innocent man for murder. Egill Brandt ultimately has the biographer murdered, before attempt-

brightly. And after that it went away. When the man jumped up and demanded that they find the creature and kill it, the husband said, as he had before: *it has such beautiful clothes.*

The man could see that this wouldn't do. Before dinner the next day he dripped wax into his ears and let it solidify, so that the magic wouldn't work on him any more. When the creature sat down and began roaring, the man jumped to his feet and attacked it with a knife, but at that moment the creature disappeared. On closer inspection, he saw that it had turned itself into a little black fly, which he chased out and around the house, over and over, and back in again, whereupon he fell down exhausted on the floor. Then the fly circled the table where the husband was sitting, still eating the almost transparent soup, landed on his soup spoon, and disappeared with it into his mouth, whereupon the creature resumed its previous size. The husband's head burst apart and the creature appeared again, sat on the husband's shoulders, and bathed itself in his hot blood, its clothing so glaringly bright that the man was forced to look away.

After this, the man went away, leaving no-one behind him alive in the valley. He followed the river and walked down a long way until he came to a settlement, where he told the story of the demon that put on human skin and covered itself in colors brighter than anything in this world.

ing to murder the novel's main protagonist Áróra, who has also discovered this skeleton in the Brandt family's closet. Áróra then finds herself unable to break her unfolding story in the press because Egill part-owns all of Iceland's newspapers. More subtly, though, Óttar's post-crash output consistently includes metatextual musings on the nature of writing, insistently complicating the postmodern orthodoxy of the death of the author. *Áttablaðarósín* is not only the name of a book which appears

in the real-life novel of the same name, but the description of *Áttablaðarósín's* dust jacket in the novel matches the real-life dustjacket of Óttar's book.<sup>90</sup> *Paradísarborgin* eschews proper nouns: by refusing its characters names, it highlights that they are characters rather than people, while making it easier to read the text as a *roman à clef* about real people (with Óttar, in this reading, figured as the protagonist). Likewise, *Örvitinn* (whose protagonist is never named by his parents and finds a variety of monikers imposed upon him) picks up on *Candide's* extensive allusions to writers and thinkers who had caught Voltaire's eye, but takes this intertextuality further, setting the protagonist on a mission to become an author whose writing brings about world peace, and drawing many of the characters from literary fiction. This makes the journeys undertaken in the novel not only a satire on politics, philosophy, and human behavior, like *Candide*, but also at one level an allegory of the exploration of the world through reading. And although the protagonist of *Lygarinn* is called Vera (Latin for "true"), it emerges that she might have been born Saga (Icelandic for "story"). *Örvitinn* (unlike *Candide*) and *Lygarinn* both end with their protagonists sitting down to write the third-person narrative that the reader has just read, blurring fiction and autobiography. *Lygarinn* has its protagonist complaining to her undergraduate students that they need to eschew readings of texts driven by their authors' biographies,<sup>91</sup> yet the endnotes to *Örvitinn* (which meticulously catalogue its many intertextual references) state baldly (and at some level clearly falsely) that "'höfundurinn er dauður' er bókmenntakenning Rolands Barthes sem ég skil ekki" ("the author is dead' is a critical metaphor by Roland Barthes that I do not understand").<sup>92</sup> In *Örvitinn*, invoking Barthes is one of the Panglossian Alfróði's many strategies to distract the nameless protagonist from his

90 Óttar M. Norðfjörð, *Áttablaðarósín* [*The eight-petaled rose*] (Reykjavík: Sögur, 2010), 177.

91 Óttar M. Norðfjörð, *Lygarinn: Sönn saga* [*The liar: a true story*] (Reykjavík: Sögur, 2011), 71, 294–95.

92 Óttar M. Norðfjörð, *Örvitinn eða; Hugsjónarmaðurinn* [*The idiot, or, the visionary*] (Reykjavík: Nýhil, 2010), 138, n. to p. 22.

innate, good-hearted humanism,<sup>93</sup> and, accordingly, in *Lygarinn* Vera realizes that fictionalized autobiography is the solution to a period of writer's block caused by dissatisfaction with writing insincerely. Óttar is clearly demanding, then, that we note the parallels between these works and his own life: the protagonists of both *Paradísarborgin* and *Lygarinn* are dealing, through art, with the loss of their fathers (in the first through death, in the second through Alzheimer's disease), which recalls how, during the same period, Óttar wrote two books memorializing his late father: *Arkitektinn með alpahúfunu: Ævisaga Sverris Norðfjörð* and *Teflt fyrir augað: 12 bestu skákir Sverris Norðfjörð* (both 2010). Óttar's post-Crash novels, then, show him exasperatedly rattling the cage of postmodernity, yet suggesting (with a suitably postmodern sense of irony) that he cannot get outside the closed loops of textual reference that it can imply.

Although *Hnífur Abrahams* predates the Crash and visibly shows Óttar finding his feet with genre fiction, it is worth exploring here as a useful counterpoint to his post-Crash literary work. The novel tackles populist Islamophobia, partly by including positive Muslim characters. It emphasizes the USA's violence and hypocrisy, particularly in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, while leaving the reader in no doubt that it is a literary artefact. *Hnífur Abrahams* does have a measure of radical political potential: the cryptic clues which articulate the plot demand the reader's investment in reading about and appreciating the scriptural commonalities of the Abrahamic religions, cultivating a familiarity with key features of Islam in an audience that will mostly be unfamiliar with these. But for all its realist accoutrements, the novel's denouement, which reveals that the September 11 attacks were actually a false-flag operation masterminded by the (real) neoconservative think tank Project for the New American Century, winds up situating its counter-narrative to the War on Terror firmly on the lunatic fringe. As Srnicek and Williams point out, "conspiracy theories act by narrowing the agency behind our world to a single figure or power

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93 Ibid., 22–23.



[...] Despite the extraordinary complexity of some of these theories, they nevertheless provide a reassuringly simple answer to ‘who is behind it all, and what our own role is in the situation.’ Thus *Hnífur Abrahams* reflects the indubitable challenges of representing highly complex and dispersed causations, becoming a good example of how conspiracy theories act as “a (faulty) cognitive map.”<sup>94</sup> In a similar way, Óttar’s *Áttablaðarósín* (whose eponymous eight-leaved rose is the real-life logo of Arion Banki, the rebranded successor to the failed Kaupþing) emphasizes how the antagonist Egill Brandt has preserved his wealth and influence beyond the Crash — as his model Björgólfur Thor indeed has — providing a potentially interesting platform for exploring and criticizing the staying power of pre-Crash hegemonies. But by having the Björgólfur-figure attempt to sustain his hegemony by commissioning three successful murders, attempting three further ones, and engineering one fake attempted murder all in the space of a couple of weeks, the novel becomes almost completely unable to represent the inordinately more subtle but far more effective methods whereby Icelandic elites actually win consent to their domination. If any Icelandic writer in the early twenty-first century could have made the thriller politically radical, it was Óttar, but *Hnífur Abrahams* and *Áttablaðarósín* show how little room the genre leaves for manoeuvre.

It is *Paradísarborgin* that deals most directly, thoroughly, and poignantly with the Crash, through the allegory of a fungus that appears in (implicitly) Reykjavík and soon takes over the city. The novel focuses not on a financier or politician at the center of the banking boom, but a doubting bystander — who, as an artist, is clearly to some extent a cipher for the novel’s author. The inability of the protagonist, known only as the *einhenti maðurinn* (“the one-handed person”), to convince the people around him of the threat they face, and the emotional difficulties his efforts entail, is one of the central themes of the novel. People are slow to respond to the appearance of the fungus; when they do, their panic is readily stilled by the platitudes of the city’s mayor (per-

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94 Srnicek and Williams, *Inventing the Future*, 14–15.

haps most reminiscent of Davíð Oddsson) and his right-handman (a biochemist who figures the self-consciously neoliberal economist Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarson, also the subject of satires by Óttar in 2009 and 2011). Moreover, it emerges that eating the fungus makes people feel better, is addictive, and slowly lethal. State institutions, including the healthcare system, start promoting the fungus's consumption, most people in the city eat it, and the city authorities start to plan to export it. As allegory should be, this narrative is polyvalent, adverting directly to the Icelandic bubble, but also to the power of capitalism to render human environments inhospitable to humans themselves (the pervasive fungus makes the town increasingly unhealthy to live in), the American sub-prime mortgage crisis (people finally start to recognize the danger posed by the fungus when it causes buildings to start collapsing), the illegal drug industry as a metaphor for (and an integral part of) neoliberal capitalism, and so forth. The mysterious fungus is also a powerful metaphor for the difficulty of either representing or comprehending the abstract character of globalized economies (albeit not a very revealing representation of the economies themselves). Reading the novel specifically as an exploration of hegemony, its key point is that the protagonist, a diffident character prone to worry, is one of the few people who recognize the dangers of the fungus — yet that this does not enable him successfully to convince the people around him of their peril until buildings are collapsing and the fungus's first victim (a cat) is dissected before their eyes to reveal the horrors hidden within (evoking the sudden insight into the desperate situation inside the ostensibly healthy banks afforded by the collapse of Glitnir). The one-handed person's main ally is a biologist (who presumably figures the economist Þorvaldur Gylfason) who is, however, shunned by the rest of the academy.<sup>95</sup> Thus the novel explores vividly the experience

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95 On the compromising of critical academic voices during the boom (including Þorvaldur's), see Gisli Pálsson and E. Paul Durrenberger, "Banality of Financial Evil," xxi–xxiii; Guðni Th. Jóhannesson, "Exploiting Icelandic History 2000–2008," in *Gambling Debt: Iceland's Rise and Fall in the Global Economy*, eds. E. Paul Durrenberger and Gisli Pálsson (Boulder:

and the isolation of being a person who — like Óttar — could see what was happening in Iceland long before the crisis broke, but was not able to penetrate the intoxicated group-think of the society around them.

A little like Steinar Bragi's lost traveller, the one-handed man is alien to his society: recently returned from living abroad, shy, in mourning, and disbarred from fulfilling traditional ideals of masculinity because he has lost a hand in an accident. Being an outsider helps the one-handed man see the fungus for what it is, and equips him to go against the flow. But his critical attitude to the fungus in turn reinforces his isolation. Sitting in the hot-pot at the swimming pool alongside other, older regulars, he admits that he has moved to the tent-city that has sprung up on the tree-covered hill of Öskjuhlíð to the south of central Reykjavík, populated by the small number of naysayers fleeing the fungus in the town. "Tjaldbúðunum? Ertu einn af þeim?" ("the tents? Are you one of those people?") asks the woman with the pink swimming hat, accusingly. The man with the scar holds forth about how the fungus is promoting commerce, factories, exports, and tourism. "En þetta er *myglusveppur*" ("but it's a fungus"), says the one handed man; "en þetta er *myglusveppurinn okkar*" ("but it's our fungus"), his interlocutor retorts, neatly expressing the way in which a nationalistic narrative of common gain obscured a situation where a tiny elite was reaping huge private profits while preparing to socialize huge losses. Even the resident grumbler, who refuses to eat the fungus, suggests the one-handed man should let people do what they want rather than pushing them to move to the tent-city, encoding the power of neoliberal discourses of individual freedom to enable elites to flourish at the expense of others. Confiding in the one-handed man later, the foreigner who doesn't look foreign confesses that he also considers the fungus dangerous, but daren't say so be-

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University Press of Colorado, 2015), 15–22; and Vilhjálmur Árnason, "Something Rotten in the State of Iceland: 'The Production of Truth' about the Icelandic Banks," in *Gambling Debt: Iceland's Rise and Fall in the Global Economy*, eds. E. Paul Durrenberger and Gisli Pálsson (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015), 53–57.

cause he'll be pushed out of the swimming-pool group. Pathetically, he has turned to yoga and orientalist spiritualism in a bid to stay healthy despite the fungus around him, evoking sticking-plasters like “mindfulness training” which neoliberal economies impose on people facing increasingly ill-paid, insecure, and alienating employment.<sup>96</sup> As his mother lies dangerously ill in her mouldering house, the one-handed man argues with his elder brother about what to do with her. The one-handed man wants to take her to the tent-city on Öskjuhlíð, away from the fungus, despite the evident discomforts of life in a tent for an old woman. The elder brother wants her to eat the fungus, and to take her to the hospital where more will be administered; he accuses his younger brother of selfishness in demanding that their mother come and live with him instead of receiving treatment. All she can manage in response to the one-handed man's plea is “leyfðu mér að sofa á því. Ég er orðin afskaplega þreytt” (“let me sleep on it. I'm just so tired”).<sup>97</sup> The conversation evokes the confusion of elderly people during the boom as their savings were deliberately and disastrously preyed on as sources of capital by young financiers.

Whereas Steinar Bragi, and Óttar's *Áttablaðarósin*, show how neoliberal hegemony operates through news media and cultural institutions, then, *Paradísarborgin* offers an incisive and affecting investigation of how that hegemony is then transmitted into and effected through everyday social relations. Yet the novel emphatically stops short of attempting to present ways to revolutionize this situation. *Paradísarborgin* explicitly explores utopianism in its portrayal of the tent city on Öskjuhlíð: the tent city represents people's attempts to step outside the capitalism allegorized by the fungus, and evokes hippy communes. The novel portrays the tent city as a place where people can find genuine refuge, suggesting the importance of a critical intellectual life alongside capitalism. When the protagonist finally convinc-

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96 Óttar M. Norðfjörð, *Paradísarborgin* [*The paradise city*] (Reykjavík: Sögur, 2009), 144.

97 *Ibid.*, 151.

es his mother to stay there, she finds it like the old farm in her childhood, recalling the importance in Laxness's *Atómstöðin* of nostalgic recollections of the past. But *Paradisarborgin* is clear that none of the one-handed man's actions can ultimately keep the fungus at bay. In the end, the one-handed man comes to terms with his father's death by recognizing that all life, including human life, is cyclical and follows natural courses. Concurrently, he realizes that his efforts to resist the fungal infestation are simply exacerbating the problem, and that the best option is to pay as little attention to it as possible, in the knowledge that its cycle of growth too will come to an end. As a philosophy to get one through life under capitalism, this at least bears the imprimature of popularity. Moreover, Óttar's stoicism has a certain flair: in the febrile atmosphere of 2009–10, presenting a patient optimism was perhaps a more striking position to take than it might now seem, in the wake of the failures of the post-revolution government and the renewal of avowed neoliberal governance. But one might hope for more from radical literature than a template for personal stoicism.

Similar conclusions arise from *Örvitinn*. I feel lucky to have read this before reading *Candide* itself, and venture to suggest from this innocent encounter that it is as pungent and insightful a commentary on our times as *Candide* was on Voltaire's. But neither novel, of course, is beyond criticism. In its interest in the War on Terror, *Örvitinn* overlaps in theme with *Hnífur Abrahams*. By contrast with *Hnífur Abrahams*, however, *Örvitinn* abandons the realist mode in favor of a surreal and darkly comical tour of Icelandic Islamophobia, American military action in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Guantanamo Bay (echoing *Candide*'s own international scope and interest in European colonialism). As in *Candide*, the situations *Örvitinn* reports emerge straight from well documented journalism, but by dispensing with the form and context which customarily frame journalism, the novel defamiliarizes and so exposes the brutality and hypocrisy of America and its allies. Its representations of injustice are the sharper for their wry concision, and the perennially innocent protagonist's bafflement at his circumstances is a powerful tool

for exposing the cognitive dissonance with which we customarily live. This text, then, does an impressive job of portraying rather than inhabiting capitalist realism. One of the most striking political successes in the wake of the Crash was the rise of the Best Party, headed by the comedian Jón Gnarr. The reasons for its success (both at the ballot box and then in government) are complex, but a key feature of the Best Party campaign was to wrong-foot the practitioners of postmodern political discourse by parodying their rhetoric so thoroughly that it swiftly became hard to tell which party was the biggest joker.<sup>98</sup> *Örvitinn* applies much the same technique, becoming in terms of form one of the most successful experiments in the Icelandic Crash-fiction corpus.

*Örvitinn* is also the most literally utopian novel in the Crash-literature corpus: its protagonist comes from and eventually returns to the hamlet of Engisstaður í Fögrusveit. This name ostensibly means “meadow-place in prettyshire.” But *Engisstaður* can also be understood as “no-place,” a literal translation of *utopia* (as Óttar rather painstakingly explains in the notes to the novel): its location amidst glaciers and mountains in the Icelandic highlands evokes the same mythical hidden valleys of plenty in Icelandic folklore that Steinar Bragi recalls in his dystopian folktale.<sup>99</sup> Yet Engisstaður is not, ultimately, a place for promoting utopian political thought: rather, after the long sequence of brutalities faced by the novel’s protagonist, it is a place where he, at last reunited with his Arabian princess and child Astrólabe, can retreat from society and arrive at the philosophy that “það eina sem þau gátu gert var að halda í gleðina, jafnvel þótt hún yrði aðeins tímabundin og allir vissu það” (“the only thing they could do was to continue in happiness, even though it would just be ephemeral and everyone knew it”).<sup>100</sup> It is rather as if

98 Hulda Proppé, “‘Welcome to the Revolution!’ Voting in the Anarcho-Surrealists,” in *Gambling Debt: Iceland’s Rise and Fall in the Global Economy*, eds. E. Paul Durrenberger and Gisli Pálsson (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015), 79–91.

99 Norðfjörð, *Örvitinn*, 137.

100 *Ibid.*, 136.

*Candide* began and ended in El Dorado. *Candide* does finish with a rural idyllicism, when it finally dawns on the novel's cast that they can join in the happiness of the simple Turkish farmer by turning away from high politics and focusing on avoiding "trois grand maux, l'ennui, le vice, & le besoin" ("three great evils: boredom, vice, and necessity").<sup>101</sup> But in taking *Candide* (however indirectly) from Westphalia to Constantinople, *Candide* insists on linearity over circularity, and in having *Candide* settle down with the motley crew of companions he has accrued on his travels, including his now fabulously ugly sweetheart Cunégonde, it closes with a vision of a very different community from the nuclear family of the protagonist, his beautiful "arabíska prinsessa" ("Arabian princess") Scheherazade, and their child Astrolabe with which *Örvitinn* ends.

Thus Óttar's work illustrates more forcefully than most the unsatisfactoriness of waiting patiently for vaguely conceived better times ahead when the violence inherent in current incarnations of capitalism is laid bare. His fine job in *Paradísarborgin* of expressing the emotional challenges of resisting capitalist realism remains as relevant as ever. Óttar gets further than almost any other Icelandic post-Crash writers in trying to view capitalism from outside, and he is most successful when, like Laxness in *Atómstöðin*, he abandons realism. Yet ultimately Óttar turns away from political action to promote stoicism, or even escapism.

## 2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has hopefully given a rounded sense of the way Iceland's Crash-novels have faced the financial crisis. The novels

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<sup>101</sup> Voltaire, *Candide, ou l'Optimisme, Traduit de l'Allemand de M. le Docteur Ralph, avec les Additions Qu'on Trouvées dans la Poche du Docteur, Lorsqu'il Mourut à Minden, l'An de Grâce 1759* [*Candide, or optimism, translated from the German of M. Doctor Ralph, with the additions found in the Doctor's pocket when he died at Minden, in the year of grace 1759*], in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. Louis Moland (Paris: Garnier, 1877–85), 21:217.

addressed in this chapter include some sparky and challenging pieces, which whatever their limitations deserve to be better known in Anglophonia — whether Þórarinn Leifsson and Óttar M. Norðfjörð's spirited use of science fiction to allegorize finance capitalism, Arndís Þórarinsdóttir's mapping of young people's possibilities for civil disobedience, or Steinar Bragi's grotesque representations of postmodernity. These works bespeak the liveliness of the Icelandic literary scene and the relative openness of its market to experimental writing. That some of the most interesting work has emerged from writers who developed their talents during the boom by participating in the Nýhil collective indicates the importance of such internationalist, avante-garde literary organizing for providing a kind of standing reserve of capacity for innovation that might in good times seem ornamental but in times of crisis comes into its own. Conversely, the fact that many of these works have been translated into large numbers of European languages while, at the time of writing, only *Hálendið* is available in English reminds us of the narrowness of Anglophone literary markets.

Even so, the constraints of so-called “capitalist realism,” whereby a neoliberal view of the world is confused with the natural and inevitable order of things, are widely apparent in the Crash-corpus, manifesting variously in world-weary cops encouraging equally jaded responses in their audiences, fantasy literature whose fantasies ultimately look remarkably like business as usual, and political critique which tends to encourage stoicism, or even despair, over action. I have argued that there is a good case that whereas Halldór Laxness's 1948 *Atómstöðin* was successful at observing rather than merely inhabiting capitalism, Crash-novels struggle to achieve this perspective. In Iceland in the years immediately following the Crash, the abstract character of financialized capital has proved largely beyond the grasp of dominant literary forms. Because capitalist realism forbids writing which transgresses neoliberal economic paradigms, it inhibits observation and testing of those paradigms themselves. Form is important as well as content: I have joined other voices in arguing that even where the content of novels moves into fan-



tasy or science fiction, a narrow conception of literary realism prevails that makes individual psychologies, rather than social structures and power relations, the primary mechanism for explaining the world. This limits the understandings of the world presented by novels to perspectives that fit within the individualism promoted by neoliberalism.

This conclusion is consistent with the fact that while veering away from exploring possibilities for political change, a lot of Crash-novels put angst at the co-option of art during the boom center stage: the novels themselves seem to be making the argument for their own limitations. The novels suggest that Icelandic elites under neoliberalism have increasingly perfected the art of winning the consent of their audiences to having their perceptions of reality shaped by those elites, in ways traditionally associated with art itself. Writers' concern at their failure to warn of the Crash before it happened, or their inability to make their message heard, along with their inability to see a clear way forward after the Crash, is central to a great deal of post-Crash fiction.

These patterns in fiction seem broadly consistent with electoral politics in the decade following the Crash. Although the shape of Iceland's left-wing parties has shifted quite rapidly since 2008, and although the Independence Party has not altogether recovered from its central role in causing the Crash, Iceland has not, in a way that has had a definitive impact on electoral politics, succeeded in imagining a different form of reality than a neoliberal, nationalist "business as usual" in the wake of the Crash. "Eru ekki meira eða minna allir Íslendingar að bíða eftir nýju partíi?" ("aren't more or less all Icelanders waiting for the party to start again?"), asks Einar, the protagonist of Árni Þórarinnsson's *Morgunengill*. After the Crash, Stefán Jón Hafstein wrote that "sjálfsmynd þjóðarinnar hrynur" ("the national self-image is crashing"), but even as he did so powerful forces were hard at work promoting an altogether more comforting narrative that there was nothing really wrong with the national

self-image after all.<sup>102</sup> Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson has argued that after the crisis, “Icelandic media continued to successfully scapegoat a few business leaders and politicians, while the neo-liberal political structure remained unscathed and intact” and Magnús Halldórsson and Þórður Snær Júlíusson have charted how patterns of power and ownership in post-Crash Iceland have not changed significantly since the boom.<sup>103</sup> Already by 2010, the phrase “svokallað ‘hrun”” (“so-called ‘crash””) had entered Icelandic discourse, apparently at first as an expression of distaste at a colloquial term by the authors of formal documents, but soon as a disavowal of the Crash itself.<sup>104</sup> Again, whatever one thinks of the policies of people touting this phrase, calling one of the world’s biggest bank collapses a “so-called ‘crash”” is virtuosically mendacious. Part of the rhetoric that allowed the parties associated with the banking boom to reclaim power was blaming the Crash on developments abroad;<sup>105</sup> that this rhetoric has some success in the face of superabundant evidence that the most fundamental failings lay in the structuring and regulation of Iceland’s domestic financial system emphasizes its seductiveness. Iceland’s 2014 municipal elections, in particular, saw the rise of populist xenophobia in political discourse, foreseen with unnerving clarity by Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl’s 2012 novel *Illska*. The survival of many of the principles and structures which

102 Stefán Jón Hafsteinn, “Rányrkjubú,” *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 72, no. 3 (September 2011): 6–23, at 14.

103 Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson, *Phallogological Museum* (Zürich: Lit, 2014), 18; Magnús Halldórsson and Þórður Snær Júlíusson, *Ísland ehf. Auðmenn og áhrif eftir hrun* (Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 2013).

104 The earliest attestation I have found at timarit.is is Hjördís Ýr Ólafsdóttir et al., “Viðhorf yngri félagsmanna,” *FLE blaðið* 32, no. 2 (July 2010): 38–39, at 39. *Svokallað bankahrun* (“so-called bank-crash”) is attested already in June 2009: Lárentsínus Kristjánsson, “Ályktun stjórnar Lögmannafélags Íslands,” *Lögmannablaðið* 15, no. 2 (June 2009): 7

105 Gisli Pálsson and E. Paul Durrenberger, “Banality of Financial Evil,” in *Gambling Debt: Iceland’s Rise and Fall in the Global Economy*, eds. E. Paul Durrenberger and Gisli Pálsson (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015), xxvii.

produced the Crash lends a continuing and obvious political urgency to understanding Icelandic responses to it.

Yet the commitment of Icelandic elites to ensuring their hegemonic dominance in Icelandic society emphasizes the importance to these elites of manufacturing consent, suggesting that art ought yet to have a place in challenging their dominance. As this chapter has found, one strategy that has emerged for writers to historicize their own time, and so to examine it from outside, is to develop intertextual dialogues with earlier literature. For Óttar M. Norðfjörð, a key intertext is Voltaire's *Candide*, but a more common strategy is to look to Icelandic folklore, mostly collected in the nineteenth century, and to medieval Icelandic literature. This enables writers to satirize or renarrate Icelandic bankers' own (very successful) co-options of nationalist medievalism, and perhaps to envisage other kinds of economy than our own. The next chapter explores wider cultural dimensions of the Crash which these novels hint at, and without which post-Crash Iceland does not really seem to me to make sense: Iceland's post-colonial anxieties.



## Neomedievalism and a Microstate

### 3.1 Welcome to the Postcolonial Turn

In the discussion following a paper at the University of Leeds's Institute for Medieval Studies I heard the historian Pauline Stafford breezily mention, as an aside to something else, that we historians were in the midst of "the Postcolonial Turn." That is to say: a paradigm shift is afoot which, at its most basic, recognizes how profoundly not only the societies we study or live in but even the ways in which we think have been shaped by European imperialism. Recognizing this is crucial, as the first step to responding critically to our imperial legacies. The term *Postcolonial Turn* is not yet widely used, and perhaps we will eventually describe the present moment with other labels: "globalization" or "worlding," for example. But as soon as Stafford made her comment, I saw that it made sense of a raft of developments across my scholarly activities, and beyond into popular culture and politics. In the context of the present book: as I started reading Crash-literature in 2011, I was surprised and at first puzzled to find that, aside from murder-novels (which are more interested in eastern European immigrants), almost everything I read at some point orientated its explorations of Icelandic culture to the Islamic world. Nor was this generally in any obvious reference to the "Al-Thani case," in which Kaupþing, desperate to bolster its credibility, illegally lent Sheikh Mohammed bin Khalifa Al-

Thani of Qatar money to buy a 5% stake in Kaupþing itself.<sup>1</sup> But when Iceland's 2014 municipal elections saw an unprecedented outburst of racist and Islamophobic politicking, which was in many ways of a piece with similar spasms widely in the Western world in the present decade, it became clear that Crash-literature was reflecting powerful anxieties in Icelandic culture. It was immediately obvious that postcolonial perspectives were necessary to understanding both the literature and the politics — and the fact that this seems increasingly obvious to a wide range of critical commentators emphasizes that the Postcolonial Turn reaches far beyond university history departments.

If we look back at key works of the earlier “Linguistic Turn” (during which historians grasped that language and writing are not transparent conveyors of meaning, but necessary objects of historical study in their own right), we see that they rather seldom show the direct imprint of, say, Jacques Derrida's post-structuralist philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, little of the research that belongs to the Postcolonial Turn may seem to bear much resemblance to the seminal work of Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, or Homi Bhabha, or to be very concerned with some of the debates that animate self-professed postcolonialists, like the sometimes fiercely contested distinctions between *post-colonial* (merely a chronological label) and *postcolonial* (describing a particular mode of political and critical thought). This diffuseness is probably the necessary corollary of an idea going mainstream.<sup>3</sup> But although it may not be explicit, there is no doubt in my mind that Icelandic public discourse, at least, is experiencing the Postcolonial Turn. That this has been going on in the wake of the Crash is partly a coincidence — postcolonial ideas have simply been getting increasingly embedded in Western cultures. But

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1 Eiríkur Bergmann, *Iceland and the International Financial Crisis: Boom, Bust and Recovery* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 100–101.

2 I am thinking of works like Rosamond McKitterick's *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

3 For a very brief but cogent sketch of the scene, see David Armitage, “From Colonial History to Postcolonial History: A Turn Too Far?” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (2007): 251–54.

it is also partly because Icelanders have realized that to understand the mentalities behind the Crash itself, it is necessary to understand the relationship between Icelandic identities and the far-flung Danish empire to which Iceland once belonged, as well as the neo-imperialism of the USA and other European countries — that is, the mutated forms that nineteenth-century colonial imperialism has taken as countries seek to achieve the extractive economic dominance once associated with empire without actually using direct rule, or indeed admitting (even to themselves) to having a colonial agenda. Postcolonial thought is necessary to understand how Iceland has both been a victim of imperialisms old and new, but also a participant in them, and indeed a beneficiary.

It should come as no surprise, then, that one of the foremost commentators on the Crash from a cultural point of view has been Kristín Loftsdóttir, an anthropologist whose postgraduate research, based at the University of Arizona and completed in 2000, led her to develop a deep understanding of life in Niger.<sup>4</sup> Kristín then returned to the University of Iceland and launched into a project, running from 2002 to 2005, on “Images of Africa in Iceland,” and has traced the ideological deployments of images of black people in Iceland from the Middle Ages onwards in a series of overlapping studies.<sup>5</sup> Correspondingly, as the boom reached its height, Kristín became a key observer of the ways in which Iceland’s nationalism, post-colonial identity, and cultural investment in whiteness were shaping its economic life.<sup>6</sup> The case that Iceland’s post-colonial anxieties are an important explanation for how Icelandic culture accommodated the banking boom has also been developed by Eiríkur Bergmann, whose 2014 book *Iceland and the International Financial Crisis* posi-

4 Kristín Loftsdóttir, *The Bush Is Sweet: Identity, Power and Development among WoDaaBe Fulani in Niger* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2008).

5 See the bibliography.

6 Esp. Kristín Loftsdóttir, “Útrás Íslendinga og hnattvæðing þess þjóðlega: Horft til Silvíu Nóttar og Magna,” *Ritið* 1 (2007): 149–76; cf. Kristín Loftsdóttir, *Crisis and Coloniality at Europe’s Margins: Exotic Iceland* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

tions its use of postcolonial thinking as its “principal novelty.”<sup>7</sup> The work of these scholars, and others working in a similar vein such as Ann-Sofie Nielsen Gremaud, clearly both reflects and is helping to shape mainstream discourses Iceland. What is less clear is what the Postcolonial Turn looks like more widely in Icelandic writing, and this chapter sets out to explore this question, while providing one important context for understanding other aspects of Crash-writing. Examining literature closely allows us to develop a richer sense of the cultural tensions and artistic potential of Iceland’s post-colonial anxieties.

Iceland does not situate its belonging in Europe and in modernity only through positive image-building, but also establishes this identity through the abjection of others—that is, like everybody, Icelanders imagine what makes them Icelandic partly by disowning characteristics which they do not wish to recognize as their own. Meanwhile, post-colonial identities necessarily imply temporality: that is, they relate to the ways in which, regardless of the dispassionate passage of real time, we pigeon-hole different cultures as belonging to different eras. As a medievalist, I have been particularly sensitive to the uses and abuses of the idea of the “medieval” in Crash-literature: how a medieval past, or even a “still medieval” present, sometimes forms part of Icelandic culture’s positive self-image, yet at other times is rejected as a method for Icelandic society to define itself as modern and/or Western. Thus this chapter explores in particular how Iceland, as a microstate, can both find itself caught unwillingly in the medievalist discourses of more powerful actors in the world order, but also use medievalist discourses to lever its position in relation to those actors. Like most of this book, this chapter in many ways follows my source material in examining the cultural rather than the economic. Yet the chapter also expounds one important reason why neoliberal economic policies enjoy the support they do: mainstream Icelandic culture cultivates an anxiety as to whether Icelanders really belong to the First World, and situates neoliberalism as

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7 Bergmann, *Iceland and the International Financial Crisis*, 12.



a marker of belonging to this club. Of course, by lots of measures — among them standards of living, access to low-carbon energy, gender equality, and sexual freedom — Iceland is close to the cutting edge of what dominant Western discourses label “modern”: Icelandic culture may fall short of progressives’ aspirations for modernity on all these parameters, but less so than most of its competitors (even since the Crash). To the outside reader, then, it may seem bizarre that Icelanders worry about whether their country is really “developed”; but they do, with significant consequences.

Rather than combining to form a single argumentative arc, the sections of this chapter stand more as a series of essays on the ways in which Icelandic anxieties of identity are manifesting in the context of the Postcolonial Turn. I investigate examples of Icelandic attitudes to Muslims (§3.2), and specifically the dissonances that arise when the idea that Islam is stuck in a backward Middle Ages collides with the Icelandic nationalist view of the Middle Ages as Iceland’s golden age (§3.3). I look at how the importance of tourism in the Icelandic economy makes Icelanders feel uncomfortably like the inhabitants of island tourist resorts in the developing world (§3.4), and at the racist abjection of the developing world implied by Icelanders’ enthusiasm for characterising their country as a “banana republic” (§3.5). Finally, I examine how Kári Tulinius, in particular, has sought to make productive, critical use of the tensions in Icelandic attitudes to the Middle Ages (§3.6). This series of case-studies establishes the central place of post-colonial anxiety in Icelandic identity, which is fundamental to explaining the explorations of the Crash in the fiction examined in the following chapters.

### 3.2 The “Clash of Civilizations”

As I have said, characters from the Islamic world pop up curiously often in Crash-writing. As so often, it is Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl who best expresses this trend, through a characteristically trenchant satire of the post-Crash literary scene: his 2015 novel *Heimska* is about two Icelandic writers who each, simultane-

ously and independently, write a novel in which a man called Akmeð migrates from a majority-Muslim country to Iceland as a youth. He becomes an Islamic-fundamentalist terrorist, joins ISIS, and fights in the Syrian Civil War, before being found dead in a house on Laugavegur. (Chapter XLVI, apparently a review of the books, partly reproduced on the cover of the novel, provides explicit commentary on the pomposity of two white authors largely ignorant of Islam writing this story.) While each author accuses the other of plagiarism, it is clear that both are in fact reflecting the *Zeitgeist*: stories like Akmeð's are just in the air.

Sure enough, the Icelandic literary scene around the time of the Crash was evidently pervaded by a widespread need to write Iceland in relation to the Islamic and/or developing world. The identical choice of names by the authors in *Heimska* has a real-world correlate: almost every female Muslim character in my corpus is named after the Prophet's most revered daughter, Fatima. In Óttar M. Norðfjörð's *Hnífur Abrahams* she is Egyptian-American; in Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl's *Gæska* and Auður Jónsdóttir's *Vetrarsól* she is Moroccan; in Böðvar Guðmundsson's *Töfrahöllin* she is Turkish. Both *Hnífur Abrahams* and *Töfrahöllin* deliver their submissive, Orientalized beauties conveniently into the arms of their white, male protagonists, which is also true of Fatíma's counterpart in Óttar's *Örvitinn*, who, while not called Fatíma, is named (admittedly self-consciously) after the other medieval Muslim woman famous in the West, Scheherazade, the narrator of *One Thousand and One Nights*. Individually, these authors are well informed and thoughtful: indeed, Auður and Óttar co-edited an article collection working to improve Icelandic understanding of Islam in the wake of the controversy over the Danish *Jyllands posten* cartoons of the Prophet in 2006, *Íslam með afslætti* (2008), and I discuss (and largely praise) Eiríkur Örn's exploration of feminism within the Islamic world below (Chapter 5). *Fatima* is undeniably an enormously popular name in the Muslim world — but there are others. Taken together, the homogeneity of these novels' naming of

Muslim women suggests an ongoing reliance on stereotypes in Icelandic discourses of the Islamic world.

At times the eruption of the East into Crash-writing is merely fleeting and implicit, primarily indicating how the Middle East hovers, peripherally but perpetually, in Icelanders' consciousnesses. When one of the debt-wracked characters in Ævar Örn Jósepson's *Önnur líf* complains about having to move out of central Reykjavík, his colleague comments that "þú hljómar einsog hún hafi verið að biðja þig að flytja til Afganistan [...] Ekkert að Rimahverfinu" ("you sound like she's asked you to move to Afghanistan [...] not to the Rima-district").<sup>8</sup> In *Bankster*, Markús listens to the New Year's fireworks exploding in 2009 and imagines himself as "ísraelskur 'major' eftir velheppnaða hernaðaraðgerð" ("an Israeli major after a successful military operation"), momentarily asking the audience to compare the Icelandic crisis, and Markús's involvement in it, with the Israeli siege of Gaza.<sup>9</sup> But at times the comparisons are more pointed, as I discuss variously in this chapter and the next.

I am reminded of Antia Loomba's statement that "early modern English plays about the East [...] obsessively stage cross-cultural contact, conversion, and exchange, while articulating a parochial fantasy of global relations": Loomba's words fit my interpretation of Icelandic Crash-writing well. Moreover, Loomba has suggested that scholarship on the early modern period "often tends to read Muslim elites as emblematic of all non-Europeans."<sup>10</sup> In a similar way, post-Crash Icelandic novels, even though they are usually sympathetic to the difficult position Muslims find themselves in Iceland, often seem not only to draw rather heavily on stereotypes of Muslims, but also to be deploying Muslims as emblematic of the developing-world Other.

8 Ævar Örn Jósepson, *Önnur líf* [*Other lives*] (Reykjavík: Uppheimar, 2010), 112–13.

9 Guðmundur Óskarsson, *Bankster: Skáldsaga* [*Bankster: a novel*] (Reykjavík: Ormstunga, 2009), 86.

10 Ania Loomba, "Periodization, Race, and Global Contact," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37, no. 3 (2007): 595–620, at 595–96, 603.

## EXCERPT 3

Óttar M. Norðfjörð, *Örvitinn eða;  
hugsjónamaðurinn*, 27

Eldhúsið var í sama stíl og stofan, 19. öldin sveif þar yfir vötnum. Alfróði ákvað að steikja hamborgara. Hann sótti kokteilsósu og hamborgarabrauð en baðst afsökunar á því að eiga einungis svínakjöt. Afsakanir voru óþarfi að mati Kristínar; ekki voru þau svínahatandi múslimar. Í kjölfarið lét hún nokkur misvitur orð falla um “múhamedstrúaða.”

Innsæi stráksins sagði honum aftur á móti að tal hennar væri særandi. Hann spurði þess vegna hvort múslimar væri ekki bara eins og venjulegt fólk. Ekki stóð á svari frá Alfróða. Múslimar voru *ekki* eins og venjulegt fólk, heldur mörgum öldum eftir á, svipað og Pólverjar í fatatísku. Þau þrjú máttu ekki haga sér eins og kommarnir eða menningarlegu afstæðissinnarnir sem sögðu ekki múkk við illskunni. Fjölmening átti sín mörk. Ekki var nasistum sýnt umburðarlyndi. Nei. Hvers vegna þá múslimum? Þetta öfgafólk hafði nú haldið Evrópu í gíslingu nógu lengi og það var kominn tími á aðgerðir. Múslimar vildu augljóslega ekki aðlagast Vesturheimi og því var best fyrir þá að hypja sig.

Strákurinn stóð agndofa; hann hafði ekki vitað að múslimar væru svona vondir. Það bjó nefnilega enginn múslimi í Fögrusveit. Kristín viðurkenndi að hún hefði heldur aldrei hitt múslima, en það var nóg að sjá myndir af þeim í sjónvarpinu; þeir voru alltaf í grautfúlu skapi. Strákurinn vildi gjarnan vita hvers vegna múslimar væru svona vondir og Kristín svaraði að bragði að það væri út af því að þeir væru fastir á miðöldum — þegar fólk var vont.



The kitchen was in the same style as the living room: the nineteenth century was hanging in the air. Alfróði decid-

Excerpt 3 presents Óttar M. Norðfjörð's condensing of Islamophobic attitudes, as familiar in Iceland as in the wider Western media discourses from which they arise, into the dinner-time conversation of the Panglossian figure Alfróði and his guests in *Örvitinn*.<sup>11</sup> The diatribe concludes with the firm, familiar assertion that Muslims “væru fastir á miðöldum — þegar fólk var vont” (“were stuck in the Middle Ages — when people were evil”). This discursive construction of the Islamic world as “still medieval” is a characterization which has achieved geopolitical importance in the wake of the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers, with a key public example being the rhetoric of George Bush Jr and Paul Wolfowitz.<sup>12</sup> As Holsinger has argued, one of the most important functions of the post-9/11 American medievalization of Islam has been to justify America itself dispensing with the legal and diplomatic conventions through which it has traditionally construed itself as “modern”:

post-9/11 medievalism functions [...] as a means of reducing a host of very complex geopolitical forces to a simple historical equation, freeing its users from the demands of subtlety, nuance, and a rigorous historical understanding of the nature of inter- and supra-national conflict in an era of globalization. In this temporal bisecting of the world, America's enemies inhabit an unchanging medieval space equivalent in many ways to the monolithic East imagined in Orientalist discourses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One of the more obvious effects of 9/11, in fact, has been to reenergize the enduring interplay of medievalism and Orientalism.<sup>13</sup>

Decrying the medieval as barbaric is presumably a relatively straightforward rhetorical manoeuvre in the New World, where

11 Cf. the comparable passage in Norðdahl, *Illska [Evil]* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2012), 54.

12 Bruce Holsinger, *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2007).

13 Holsinger, *Neomedievalism*, 9–10.

ed to grills some hamburgers. He fetched the cocktail sauce and burger-buns but apologised for only having pork. As far as Kristín was concerned, the apologies were unnecessary: they weren't pig-hating Muslims. She continued by dropping into conversation some loopy words about "Mohametans."

The boy's intuition told him, however, that her speech was insensitive. So he asked whether Muslims might not just be like normal people. He didn't have long to wait for an answer from Alfróði: Muslims were *not* like normal people—rather many centuries out of date, rather like Poles in relation to fashion. The three of them couldn't behave like commies or cultural relativists who wouldn't utter a peep at evil. Multiculturalism had its limitations. No tolerance was shown to Nazis. No. So why to Muslims? These extremists had held Europe hostage long enough, and now it was time to do something. Muslims obviously didn't want to adapt to the Western world, and so it was best for them to sling their hooks.

The boy stood perplexed; he hadn't known that Muslims were so bad. In fact, there weren't any Muslims living in Fögrusveit. Kristín confessed that she had also never met any Muslims, but it was enough to see pictures of them on the tv; they were always in a terrible mood. The boy was keen to know why Muslims were so bad, and Kristín replied that it was because were stuck in the Middle Ages—when people were bad.

medievalism, while important, is less central to mainstream nationalist narratives than in the Old World. It is also relatively easy in European countries, like Britain or Sweden, whose national identities center more on post-medieval industrialism and imperialism. For a country like Iceland, however, whose independence movement and national narrative has been squarely predicated on medieval glory-days, it potentially poses a serious ideological problem, exacerbating a existing cognitive

dissonance regarding the place of the medieval in Icelandic constructions of itself as modern.

The tension between nationalist and Orientalist medievalisms is, as Bergljót Soffía Kristjánsdóttir has argued, neatly represented by one of the poems from Anton Helgi Jónsson's *Ljóð af ættarmóti*.<sup>14</sup> It is worth mentioning, for the uninitiated, that Icelandic phonebooks list people's professions as well as their names:

Nafn mitt á eftir að lifa.  
Símaskráin frá 1994 þykir nú þegar safngripur.  
Í henni stendur nafn mitt.

Ég finn fyrir stolti  
þótt konan hafi neitað að skrá titilinn hryðjuverkamaður.

Það skiptir ekki alltaf máli hvað maður gerir  
eða hvort maður gerir yfirleitt eitthvað.

Nafnið lifir.<sup>15</sup>

My name must live on.  
Today, the phonebook from 1994 already seems a museum-piece.  
It contains my name.

It gives me a sense of pride,  
even though the woman refused to list my profession as terrorist.

it doesn't always matter what you do,  
or whether you do anything in particular.

14 Bergljót Soffía Kristjánsdóttir, "'Ég get ekkert sagt.' Skáldskapur og hrun." *Ritið* 11, no. 2 (2011): 53–66, at 61–63.

15 Anton Helgi Jónsson, *Ljóð af ættarmóti* [*Poems from a family reunion*] (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2010), 60.

The name lives.

Here terrorism — which Bergljót argues to connote Islamist terrorism — is brought into a wry allusion to the most famous stanzas (76–77) of the famous medieval poem *Hávamál*, a key text of the medieval Icelandic canon and prominently cited by, among many others, the financier Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson.<sup>16</sup> The former of the two runs:

Deyr fé,  
deyja frændr,  
deyr sjalfr it sama;  
en orðstírr  
deyr aldregi,  
hveim er sér góðan getr.<sup>17</sup>

Cattle die,  
kinsmen die,  
you yourself will die;  
but reputation  
never dies  
for him who gets a good one.

As with many poems written shortly before the Crash, Anton Helgi's could retrospectively be interpreted as a comment on the Crash itself: Björgólfur Thor's overweening desire to promote his good name has led to him wreak the kind of destruction which might be associated with terrorism, pressing us to rethink the categorical othering of the terrorist. But either way, it asks us awkwardly to read traditional, nationalist medievalism and the new, orientalist medievalism in the same breath, disturbing the chronologies into which Iceland is normally fitted.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Chapter 4.

<sup>17</sup> David A.H. Evans, ed., *Hávamál [The speech of the High One]* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1986), 54.



Another neat illustration of the tensions that arise at the intersections of nationalist and Orientalist medievalism is the children's book *Hetjur*, by Kristín Steinsdóttir. Here the protagonist, a sensitive Icelandic boy of about 13 called Þórhallur, moves with his family to Norway. The Crash makes no appearance: the family moves because Þórhallur's father Þórður has a year-long university position in Trondheim. But, coincidentally or otherwise, the novel resonates with the experience of extensive Icelandic emigration to Norway (in particular) in the wake of the crisis, and the disruption of family lives it caused. Unlike his outgoing younger sister Katla, Þórhallur struggles to settle in, feeling alienated in the new society. At first, he draws solace from the respect which Norwegians have for Snorri Sturluson (d. 1241), to the point of taking *Snorre* as his Norwegian name: this is a straightforward recapitulation of Iceland's nationalist medievalism and the ways in which Iceland has tended to rely, continuously since Snorri's own time, on its heritage of saga-production for cultural status. Eventually, Þórhallur makes friends with another lonely child, Erlend, a half-Greek orphan, who is even keener on King Ólafur Tryggvason of Norway (d. 1000) than Þórhallur is on Snorri. Meanwhile, Katla's first friends in Trondheim are two Iraqi refugees, Shirouk and Shamshad. By hearing about their experiences of war-torn Iraq (along with watching TV coverage of Palestine), Þórhallur comes to recognize the horrific nature of the violence which characterized the careers of both Snorri and Ólafur, and both Þórhallur and Erlend reject their societies' veneration of these figures.<sup>18</sup>

Þórhallur's insight, then, is in some ways a critique of Iceland and Norway's nationalist medievalism. But *Hetjur* figures the temporality of the present-day Middle East as overlapping with that of medieval Scandinavia, implying that, unlike the West, the Middle East is "still medieval." Norway's acceptance of refugees is portrayed in terms of Norwegians' hospitality rather than refugees' rights: "ég er bara glöð að mega vera hérna í Nóregi"

18 Kristín Steinsdóttir, *Hetjur* [*Heroes*] (Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 2009), esp. 80–82, 121–24.

(“I’m just glad to be able to be here in Norway”), says Shirouk dutifully.<sup>19</sup> The book does hint at the quasi-colonial relationships whereby the promotion of nationalist medievalism within the Nordic countries compromises the region’s commitment to the wellbeing of people beyond it: “Þið takið þátt í öllum friðarhreyfingum en samt flytur þú með þér bækur um morðingja og glæpamenn” (“you both take part in all the peace-movements but you still bring books here about murderers and criminals”), Þórhallur tells his father, referring to Snorri’s history of the king of Norway, *Heimskringla*.<sup>20</sup> Þórhallur’s critical stance at least sketches how Nordic culture can be hypocritical, and less supportive of human rights than it likes to imagine. Meanwhile, while recognizing the privileged status Icelandic immigrants have in Norway over people from further south or east,<sup>21</sup> *Hetjur* indicates how it is hard for ethnic outsiders — whether Icelanders, Iraqis, or half-Greeks — to become included in Norwegian society, showing that it is easier for outsiders instead to develop solidarity with one another. And, through Þórhallur’s reflections on how foreigners in Iceland might have as hard a time as he is having in Norway, the book implies that Iceland’s society is also rather closed. Thus *Hetjur* indicates the main lines of both positive, nationalist medievalism and abjected, Orientalist medievalism, in Icelandic culture, and the tension between the two.

What is perhaps most striking about the number of references to the Islamic world in Crash-fiction is that the explosion of highly public Islamophobia, racism and xenophobia that has convulsed Western politics in the last few years had not yet occurred when most of it was written. The racism that came to the fore in the Reykjavík municipal elections of 2014, the UK’s referendum on membership of the European Union and the US presidential election of 2016, and so forth caught political commentators by surprise: Icelandic fiction, then, provides in-

19 Ibid., 43.

20 Ibid., 121.

21 Cf. Guðbjört Guðjónsdóttir, “We Blend in with the Crowd but They Don’t: (In)visibility and Icelandic Migrants in Norway,” *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 4 (2014): 176–83.

teresting evidence for how these forces were already stirring and manifesting themselves in fiction around 2008. Thus an examination of how Crash-writing navigates temporality to negotiate Iceland's situation in a globalizing world is worthwhile, and provides useful possibilities for understanding post-Crash politics not just in Iceland, but more widely in the West.

### 3.3 We Are Not Terrorists

There is no neater example of the popular power and the high stakes of colliding discourses of nationalist and Orientalist medievalism in the post-Crash micro-state of Iceland than the events that unfolded as Landbanki's savings scheme Icesave collapsed. On October 8th 2008, the UK government invoked the 2001 Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act to freeze Icelandic assets in Britain. This decision and the Icelandic response to it brings both varieties of medievalism sharply into view. I begin, however, by illustrating these themes in current Icelandic discourse through the debate over Iceland's first purpose-built mosque.

The tensions between Orientalizing medievalism and nationalist medievalism — and the forces released when these two tectonic plates of Icelandic culture collide — is well illustrated in the post-Crash period by the racism and Islamophobia exposed by the decision on 6th July 2013 of Reykjavík City Council, under Jón Gnarr, to allot land for the building of Iceland's first purpose-built mosque. The application for land had been made by the Muslim Association of Iceland in 1999 and the City Council's delay had been lengthy enough to provoke the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance to suggest that the delay was “a possible sign of prejudice against Muslims.”<sup>22</sup> With municipal elections in Reykjavík due in 2014, the mosque became a political flashpoint. On 10th July 2013, *Morgunblaðið*

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22 Kristín Loftsdóttir, “Whiteness Is from Another World: Gender, Icelandic International Development and Multiculturalism,” *European Journal of Women's Studies* 19, no. 1 (2012): 41–54, at 47.

published a letter by Ólafur Friðrik Magnússon, who had been Mayor of Reykjavík for much of 2008. Ólafur Friðrik proposed that it would be more suitable to build a neo-pagan temple on the proposed mosque site— notwithstanding that this temple already had a planned site near the center of Reykjavík at Öskjuhlíð— on the grounds that “Ásatrúin nýtur velvildar þorra landsmanna. Hún er hluti af þjóðmenningu okkar og flest höfum við mætur á meðlimum Ásatrúarsafnaðarins” (“Ásatrú enjoys the goodwill of the majority of the population. It is part of our culture and most people have a positive view of members of the Ásatrú collective”).<sup>23</sup> Ólafur Friðrik’s objections, then, integrated the Icelandic nationalist medievalism manifested in the Ásatrú movement, which partly seeks to reconstitute pre-Christian Icelandic religion, firmly with Islamophobia. Ólafur Friðrik went on on 21st August to argue in the same paper that it would be “móðgun við Íslandssöguna og alveg sérstaklega við Vestmannaeyinga, sem minnst hryllingsins frá 16.–18. júlí 1627, þegar allt líf á staðnum var lagt í rúst, hátt í 250 teknir fastir og tugir drepnir” (“an insult to Iceland’s history and most especially to the people of the Vestmannaeyjar, who remember the horror of the 16th–18th July 1627, when all life in those places was left devastated, nearly two hundred and fifty seized and dozens killed”) by “múslímar” (“muslims”) sailing from Ottoman Algiers.<sup>24</sup> Ólafur Friðrik’s characterization of Islam in this letter cites the views of the one-time US president John Quincy Adams (1767–1848) and focuses on presenting Islam as a seventh-century fraud. In these respects, then, the letter falls into the pattern whereby the Islam of the present is read as an unchanging, monolithic phenomenon, stuck in the medieval period, and reckoned as barbaric on that account. Ólafur Friðrik’s views were representative of a significant body of people: around the same time,

23 Ólafur F. Magnússon, “Samfylkingarflokkarnir og moska í Reykjavík,” *Morgunblaðið* 101, no. 159, July 10, 2013, 21. A more central site, at Öskjuhlíð, had in fact already been allotted to the Ásatrú organization, work on which eventually began in 2015.

24 Ólafur F. Magnússon, “Orð Adams Bandaríkjaforseta um íslam,” *Morgunblaðið* 101, no. 194, August 21, 2013, 20.

the Facebook group *Mótmælum mosku á Íslandi* (“we protest against a mosque in Iceland”) attracted the membership of more than 1% of Icelanders (as, it should be said, did *Mótmælum ekki mosku á Íslandi*, “we don’t protest against a mosque in Iceland”). The Facebook group’s header image for most of 2014 was of the church at Þingvellir, alluding to Iceland’s Lutheran heritage but also its pre-Christian medieval past, of which Þingvellir is a key national symbol. During this time, the group posted images of sword-wielding medieval crusaders, along with a picture conflating imagery of Muslims with early modern pirates. Although this group was extreme, it represented the extreme end of a large body of opinion. An independent opinion poll of adults run between 26th September and 1st October 2013 asked “hversu fylgjandi eða andvíg(ur) ertu því að eftirfarandi trúfélög fái að byggja trúarbyggingar á Íslandi?” (“how supportive or opposed are you to the following religious groups being allowed to build faith-buildings in Iceland?”).<sup>25</sup> It found fairly consistent and positive attitudes to building by the National Church and the *Ásatrúarfélag* alike (8.5% and 9.1% opposed, 67.2% and 54.7% in favor, respectively), but quite strong opposition to building by the *Félag múslima á Íslandi* (43.4% opposed, 31.5% in favour). (Among the demographic sub-sets recorded by the survey, it is most noteworthy that younger people differentiate less in their attitudes to different religious groups, with more extreme attitudes among older respondents.)

Given the self-evident absurdity of holding any (let alone all) current practitioners of a world religion responsible for the actions of two shiploads of pirates four hundred years ago, it is worth explaining that as one of very few attacks on Iceland in its history, and as a relatively rare direct Icelandic encounter with early modern globalization, the so-called *Tyrkjurán* (“Turkish raid”) on the *Vestmannaeyjar* (an archipelago off the southern Icelandic coast) is prominent in modern Icelandic primary edu-

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25 “Ólík afstaða til trúfélaga,” *Market and Media Research*, 2013, <http://mmr.is/frettir/birtar-nieurstoeur/348-olik-afstatha-til-trufelaga>.

cation and so the national self-image.<sup>26</sup> Although contemporary accounts of the *Tyrkjuránið* actually varied widely in their interpretations of the raid, it also has a long history as a site for the promotion of Islamophobia in Icelandic historiography.<sup>27</sup> Thus when *Töfrahöllin*'s young protagonist Jósep, inspired by a photograph in an ethnographic book, asks “eru Tyrkir ekki mjög fríðir?” (“Turkish people are very beautiful, aren’t they?”), his host Símon’s first response is “alveg áreiðanlega [...] En líklega hefur Vestmannaeyingunum ekki þótt þeir sérlega fríðir þarna um árið” (“I’m sure they are [...] But they probably didn’t seem especially beautiful to the people of the Vestmannaeyjar back when”).<sup>28</sup>

Not that this excuses Ólafur Friðrik for wilfully neglecting to situate the *Tyrkjuránið* in its context of endemic early modern piracy, or for ignoring the fact that the majority of the ships’ crews were probably originally from northern Europe — as certainly was their Dutch-born captain Murat Reis the Younger, a. k. a. Jan Janszoon.<sup>29</sup> Rather, the disproportionate importance Ólafur Friðrik attached to the *Tyrkjuránið* reflects a wider consequence of Iceland’s anxiety about its nationhood: a desire to write itself into the dominant discourses of the West, whether or not Iceland’s history makes a good fit for the dominant narrative. As Steinn Elliði put it nearly a century ago in Laxness’s *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, “ég vil komast úti heiminn [...] þángað sem styrjöldin stóð, í löndin þar sem skotið var á dómkirkjurnar uppá grín og hlóðir ekkjunnar jafnaðar við jörðu í samviskulausum misgripum” (“I want to get out into the world [...] to where the World War happened, to the lands where people shot

26 Þorsteinn Helgason, “Tyrkjaránið sem minning,” *Ritið* 13, no. 3 (2013): 119–48.

27 Þorsteinn Helgason, “Historical Narrative as Collective Therapy: The Case of the Turkish Raid in Iceland,” *Scandinavian Journal of History* 22, no. 4 (1997): 275–89.

28 Böðvar Guðmundsson, *Töfrahöllin [The hall of enchantment]* (Akranes: Úppheimar, 2012), 54.

29 Þorsteinn Helgason, “Hverjir voru Tyrkjarásmenn?” *Saga: Tímarit Sögufelags* 33 (1995): 110–34; Þorsteinn Helgason, “Historical Narrative as Collective Therapy,” 276.

at cathedrals just for fun, and widows' hearths were razed to the ground through pitiless errors").<sup>30</sup> There is a sense that to be a first-world country, you need to have first-world problems; thus, notwithstanding the ironic stance of Icelandic murder-fiction, the high murder-rates implicit in Icelandic crime fiction are presented with the air of something integral to a generally desirable modernity. First-world status is defined, *inter alia*, by enduring the envy of the third, expressed through terrorism. This habit of mind is satirized in *Píslarvottar án hæfileika* when the would-be left-wing activist Sóli turns his hand to writing fiction in the form of "Reykjavík hundrað og ein nótt" (which might be translated "Reykjavík 101 Nights");<sup>31</sup> a selection of the stories from *One Thousand and One Nights* adapted to an Icelandic setting, and specifically to the trendy "101 Reykjavík" brand associated with the cultural boom and spearheaded by Hallgrímur Helgason's novel of the same name.<sup>32</sup> Sóli includes a story about an "Íslendingur að berjast með Fídel og Che í frumskóginum [...] bjargandi þeim úr fangelsi og frá hermönnum Batista" ("an Icelander fighting alongside Fidel and Che in the jungle [...] rescuing them from prison and Batista soldiers").<sup>33</sup> The text exemplifies his desperation to write Iceland into both world literature and world history at the levels of both form and content, but also exemplifies his failure to do so in a way that is sensitive to and so supportive of the struggles into which he tries to write himself.

Accordingly, Icelandic commentary has been prone to comparing the shock of the Crash to that felt in the USA when the

30 Halldór Kiljan Laxness, *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* [*The great weaver from Kashmir*], 3rd. edn. (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1957), 22.

31 Kári Tulinius, *Píslarvottar án hæfileika: Saga af hnattvæddri kynslóð* [*Martyrs without talent: a history of a globalized generation*] (Reykjavík: JPV, 2010), 67–68.

32 Cf. Alda Björk Valdimarsdóttir and Guðni Elísson, "Og eftir sitjum við með sektarkennd í brjósti": Hallgrímur Helgason og íslenska efnahagshrunið," *Ritið* 12, no. 2 (2012): 169–97, at 173–74.

33 Tulinius, *Píslarvottar án hæfileika*, 68.

Twin Towers were destroyed.<sup>34</sup> Seeing the murder of nearly 3,000 people as being comparable to an economic crisis which caused hardship but (notwithstanding the murder-fiction) few deaths might be seen as crass, if not solipsistic; but it does indicate a need to frame Icelandic experience, even within Iceland, in terms familiar in international media discourse. *Töfrahöll-in* opens with Jósep fretting that his new girlfriend's delayed flight might have been struck by terrorists. In *Bókasafn ömmu Huldar*, an Icelandic child, feeling powerless to resist the injustices around him, has to be dissuaded from becoming a suicide bomber. *Gæska* offers a trenchant satire of Bush-era American rhetoric about September 11th, and its own tendency to solipsism or exceptionalism;<sup>35</sup> but its surrealist epidemic of women jumping from tall buildings (on which see Chapter 5) also arguably echoes the mediatized images of people jumping from the Twin Towers, weaving them into the Icelandic setting. Ólafur Friðrik, then, provides a clearer, public, and in his case especially racist example of the wider desire in Iceland to inhabit narratives of Islamist terrorism.

This is not to say, however, that Iceland has not experienced real-world effects of the so-called “War on Terror”: far from it. This in turn emphasizes that some of Iceland's cultural anxieties have quite profound real-world correlatives and consequences — albeit not (hitherto and hopefully henceforth) in the form of Islamist terror attacks. These range from the deadly serious — like Iceland's participation in the American-led invasion of Iraq — to the bizarre — as when the so-called Islamic State started using a .is web address in 2014. Most strikingly, however,

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34 E.g., Alda Sigmundsdóttir, *Living inside the Meltdown* (Reykjavík: Enska Textasmiðjan, 2010), 84; cf. 95; and implicitly, as one of relatively few international events mentioned, in Sindri Freysson, *Ljóðveldið Ísland: 65 ár í 66 erindum við þig* [*The poetic republic of Iceland: 65 years in 66 essays to you*] (Reykjavík: Svarta Forlag, 2009), 144–45 and Alda Sigmundsdóttir, *Unraveled: A Novel about a Meltdown* (Reykjavík: Enska Textasmiðjan, 2013), 76–77.

35 Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl, *Gæska: Skáldsaga* [*Kindness: A novel*] (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2009), 68–69.



on October 8th 2008, the UK government used the 2001 Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act to freeze Icelandic assets in Britain. This, then, opens up a good example of how the tension between golden-ageist, nationalist medievalism, and dystopian, Orientalist medievalism is also apparent in responses to the Crash.

The Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act covers a range of activities besides terrorism, but it has seldom been perceived this way in public discourse either in the UK or in Iceland. While it seems likely that all of Iceland's major banks would have collapsed without the UK government's intervention, there seems to be no doubt that the UK government invoking the act was one trigger-cause of the collapse of Iceland's largest bank, Kaupþing. The decision sparked understandable outrage in Iceland; as one character puts it in *Unravelled*, "we're on a blacklist now, with a bunch of other terrorists. Like Al-Qaeda." "What was happening?" wonders the protagonist: "Iceland and Britain were NATO allies; they were friendly nations."<sup>36</sup> After sitting through a moralizing conspectus of problems facing their society from their head teacher a few months before the crisis breaks, Beggi, one of the protagonists of *Vinur, sonur, bróðir*, observes that his cohort were lucky not to have been accused of the September 11th attacks too — which the post-Crash reader is presumably expected to read ironically, given that the British government used post-September-11th legislation in its efforts precisely to burden Beggi's generation with private Icelandic banks' debts.<sup>37</sup> A wittier summary of the situation is stanza 11 of Bjarki Karlsson's burlesque lament for the fallen state of the modern world, "Þúsaldarháttur":

Svo bilaði spottinn og botninn var dottinn úr ballinu hressa,  
píslar — með — vottinn við peningaþvottinn menn  
pukruðust hlessa,

<sup>36</sup> Alda Sigmundsdóttir, *Unraveled*, 137.

<sup>37</sup> Þórður Helgason, *Vinur, sonur, bróðir* [*Friend, son, brother*] (Reykjavík: Salka, 2010), 18.

breskur dró hrottinn upp hryðjuverksploTTin er heift sauð í  
vessa  
og ei vildi Drottinn (sem er víst svo gott skinn) Ísaland  
blessa.<sup>38</sup>

Then it went to pieces and the ground disappeared from  
under the lively dance;  
people began whispering about the money-laundering  
martyr;  
the British ruffian, in whose blood boiled spite, cooked up  
the terrorism accusations;  
and the Lord (who's apparently such a good bloke) didn't  
want to bless the land of Ice.

One response to the British action was the “we are not terrorists” social-media campaign, co-ordinated by a rapidly formed group called InDefence, whereby Icelanders circulated pictures of themselves holding signs bearing this slogan.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, according to Sóley Björk Stefánsdóttir, the biggest Facebook group relating to the Crash was called “Icelanders are NOT terrorists” (at 17,188 members).<sup>40</sup> Kristín Loftsdóttir has discussed how this campaign was not a declaration of solidarity with the many people around the world oppressed by the “War on Terror,” but implicitly rather a bid to situate Icelanders and Britons as people who ought to be standing in solidarity against the spectre of the Islamist terrorist. As Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl puts it in *Illska*,

um allt land, uppi á jöklum og úti á sjó, stillti fólk sér upp  
með letuð spjöld og lét taka myndir: “Mr. Brown, We Are

38 Bjarki Karlsson, *Árleysi alda* [*The timelessness of ages*] (Akranes: Uppheimar, 2013), 9.

39 Kristín Loftsdóttir, “Colonialism at the Margins: Politics of Difference in Europe as Seen Through Two Icelandic Crises,” *Identities* 19, no. 5 (2012): 597–615.

40 Sóley Björk Stefánsdóttir, “Er Facebook hið nýja almannarými? Greining á upplýsingamiðlun og samskiptum á Facebook” (BA diss., Háskólinn á Akureyri, 2009), 17.

Not Terrorists.” Því einsog allir vita eru terroristar brúnir karlar með sítt skegg og vefjarhatta og því auðséð á ljósmynd hver er hryðjuverkamaður og hver ekki.<sup>41</sup>

Throughout the whole land, up on the glaciers and out on the sea, people arrayed themselves with slogans on placards and had pictures taken: “Mr. Brown, We Are Not Terrorists.” Because as everyone knows, terrorists are brown men with long beards and turbans, and so it is obvious in a picture who is a terrorist and who isn’t.

And as both Kristín and Eiríkur Örn, in their different ways, have explored, this discourse is deeply rooted in Icelandic culture going back to the days of Danish colonialism: Iceland has long gained cultural capital by situating its people as the guardians of Scandinavian or Germanic heritage, at the expense of other groups within the Danish Empire or America’s neo-imperial dominion. An example of this that has become the key reference point in Icelandic discourses is the occasion in 1905 when Denmark presented a “colonial exhibition” in Copenhagen’s main pleasure garden, Tivoli, which was to include Iceland (and indeed Icelanders, in national dress). Rather than protest against the concept of presenting colonized peoples as exhibits for the amusement of metropolitan Danes, Icelanders protested only against their own inclusion in the exhibit, working to advance their status in Denmark’s colonial politics by aligning themselves with the colonisers.<sup>42</sup> The similarity of this to the “we are not terrorists campaign” has been widely noted, not least by Kristín Svava Tómasdóttir, who in 2011 published the poetry collection *Skrælingjasýningin* (“the Eskimo exhibition”), which includes a “letter to Mister Brown”:

stundum eru augun í mér svo blá  
að þau skelfa mig í speglinum

<sup>41</sup> Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl, *Illska*, 111.

<sup>42</sup> Kristín Loftsdóttir, “Colonialism at the Margins.”

lít ég út fyrir að vera hryðjuverkamaður?<sup>43</sup>

sometimes my eyes are so blue  
that they startle me in the mirror  
do I look like I'm a terrorist?

Medievalism also had its place in the campaign: working in a similar vein to the “we are not terrorists” social media campaign, the photographer Þorkell Þorkelsson shot a collection of photographs at the Smáralind shopping center on 22nd October 2008 “of alleged Icelandic ‘terrorists’ and their ‘weapons’ of choice.”<sup>44</sup> The 79 images exhibited on his website include four men equipped with Viking-Age re-enactment weaponry. While hardly representative of most of the subjects, their presence adverts to the shared enthusiasm in English and Icelandic nationalism for a common viking heritage. In *Bankastræti núll*, Einar Már Guðmundsson makes much of the Icelandic-British love-hate relationship, exploring it not least through *Laxdæla* saga and its story of Melkorka, an enslaved Irish princess who becomes the mother of the celebrated saga-hero Ólafur pái, expressing nicely Icelanders’ enthusiasm for a narrative in which Icelandic vikings first raided Britain, and then made its people their own.<sup>45</sup> From the English side, although the possibility of conflating the heathen viking with the heathen Saracen is readily apparent already in Middle English romance, by the late fourteenth century, at least, English writers were already showing a discomfort with othering the ancestors of their Scandinavian neighbours in this way.<sup>46</sup> In the present, roguish “viking

43 Kristín Svava Tómasdóttir, *Skrælingjasýningin [The Eskimo exhibition]* (Reykjavík: Bjartur, 2011), 27.

44 Þorkell Þorkelsson, “Icelandic Terrorists,” *Thorkell Þorkelsson: Photographer*, October 22, 2008. <https://www.thorkell.com/gallery8.htm>.

45 Einar Már Guðmundsson, *Bankastræti núll* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2011), 42–44; cf. 106–7, 149–50.

46 Kathy Cawsey, “Disorienting Orientalism: Finding Saracens in Strange Places in Late Medieval English Manuscripts,” *Exemplaria* 21, no. 4 (2009): 380–98.

ancestors” have become a well loved feature of English identity-building.<sup>47</sup>

This suggests that when post-September-11th Orientalist medievalism encounters the nationalist medievalisms of the Islamic world, it readily incorporates these into its Orientalizing process, seeing them as confirming its premise that the Islamic world is stuck in the Middle Ages. However, when it encounters the nationalist medievalisms of the Global North, cognitive dissonance arises. Chartier’s account of UK reporting on the early stages of the Icesave dispute suggests that the UK media took a generally negative tone towards Iceland.<sup>48</sup> However, a survey of British newspaper coverage of the “we are not terrorists” campaign itself suggests that it was almost uniformly well received. This is not, of course, by any means only or even primarily because of Iceland’s medievalism: for example, the Icelandic campaign did well in the UK partly because it appeared against the backdrop of a rancorous series of UK parliamentary debates concerning the Counter-Terrorism Act 2008 and the fear that its sweeping powers might be abused. Yet it remains apparent how important cultural capital is for Iceland as a microstate trying to avoid being consumed by the omnivorous discourse of the War on Terror, and it is apparent that appealing to a common stock of nationalist medievalism was diplomatically helpful to Iceland as it faced off against the UK.

This section has shown, then, how lively both Orientalist and Nationalist medievalisms can be in Iceland’s post-Crash public discourse, the cultural tensions that these mutually inconsistent medievalisms expose, and the importance of temporalities (medieval/modern, developing/developed, colonized/independent) in how current Icelandic discourses construct Iceland’s place in the world. The section has emphasized that these discourses do

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47 The seminal study is Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000).

48 Daniel Chartier, *The End of Iceland’s Innocence: The Image of Iceland in the Foreign Media During the Financial Crisis*, trans. Daniel Chartier (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2010), 152–60.

not merely reflect culture, but themselves have real effects on politics both within Iceland and on an international stage. This provides a useful context, in turn, for delving into how these temporalities are probed in Crash-literature.

### 3.4 *Bankster* and the Touristic Gaze

It is possible to investigate Iceland's identity as a microstate, and the role of temporality in that, by considering tourism. A key aspect of Icelandic society both in the boom and, to a markedly greater extent, following the Crash, is the explosion in tourism. Studying the portrayal of tourism in post-Crash literature brings an important additional perspective on Icelandic culture, and helps to contextualize the insistence of post-Crash writers on reading Iceland in relation to the Global South. These portrayals start to suggest the importance of medievalism to Icelanders' situation of themselves, and marketing of their country, in a wider world; but as we explore the complex interplays between Icelandic identities and foreign Others exposed by tourism discourses, we will also encounter a wider, post-colonial context for understanding Icelandic culture, and specifically its medievalism.

For all the anxiety on parade about writers' complicity in the Crash, discussed in the previous chapter, it has in no way ended the arts' relationship with capital: writers have to eat. Indeed, if Iceland can still be said to have a national left-wing press, a key representative of it would, bizarrely, be the free, English-language *Reykjavík Grapevine*, funded entirely by advertizing revenue and ostensibly aimed at tourists. Most of the more literary authors studied in this book have at one time or another funded their artistic activities partly through their contributions to its pages. In the wake of the Crash, developing Iceland's fetishized status as a land of hip nightlife, alternative music, and literary dynamism, along with fire, ice, and auroras — all of which are as much constructs of art and advertizing as physical phenomena — became the central plank in the Icelandic economy. In a sense, when the banking bubble burst, the cultural boom was

required to go into overdrive. The marketing of all these attractions of Iceland is bound up with Iceland's ancient tradition of representing itself as a repository of Germanic cultural heritage. This is obvious in the way that Iceland is marketed as the setting of viking sagas, but its reputation as a land of pristine wilderness too is, somewhat paradoxically, bound up with perceptions of the island as economically developed and culturally white.<sup>49</sup> These themes came to the fore at the 2010 Frankfurt Book Fair, at which post-Crash Iceland was coincidentally the guest of honor, under the banner "Sagenhaftes Island" ("fabulous Iceland," but also, more literally, "legendary Iceland" — and, in Jürg Glauser's playful rendering, "fictitious Iceland").<sup>50</sup> To take just one quotation from Jón Örn Loðmfjörð's 2010 "A Poem for Frankfurt" (lines 22–26):

"Icelandic is the nation that guards your heritage"  
Is transformed, with the aid of a translation machine, into  
"Island ist eine Nation, die Ihr Geschäft braucht."  
Which translates back into Icelandic as  
"Iceland is a nation well suited to the demands of your  
company."<sup>51</sup>

The German line means "Iceland is a nation which needs your business." The quotation encapsulates Iceland's heritage and cultural industries, their complicity in efforts to attract commerce to Iceland, and a fear that the economically broken Iceland is not in a position to bargain for a good deal from foreign investors, instead being at risk of the kind of exploitation familiar in

49 Cf. Ann-Sofie Nielsen Gremaud, "Ísland sem rými annarleikans: Myndir frá bókasýningunni í Frankfurt árið 2011 í ljósi kenninga um dulendur og heterótópíur," *Ritið* 12, no. 1 (2012): 7–29; Ann-Sofie Nielsen Gremaud, "Power and Purity: Nature as Resource in a Troubled Society," *Environmental Humanities* 5, no. 1 (2014): 77–100.

50 Jürg Glauser, *Island: Eine Literaturgeschichte* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2011), 173.

51 Jón Örn Loðmfjörð, "Five Poems," *3:AM Magazine*, December 19, 2010, <https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/five-poems-jon-orn-lo%C3%Bomfor%C3%Bo/>.

the post-colonial world. *Draumalandið* expounds on this theme through the comments of John Perkins, author of *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*:

what goes around comes around. We in the developed world have been willing to accept — in fact, we’ve embraced — low costs, low prices, for our oil, for our aluminum, for our computers: we’ve been willing to take these goods at very low prices, and turn a blind eye on what that’s done to the environment and the people of the countries where these things have come from. And now that’s coming back around to reach all of us, and I think Iceland is an amazingly important example of how this is happening.<sup>52</sup>

Although less dramatic than flooding valleys to power aluminium smelters, the global tourism industry has no less potent connections with colonial power-structures,<sup>53</sup> and anxieties at Iceland’s commodification of its culture are on a continuum with the concerns Perkins expresses.

Icelandic elites have been making cultural capital of their claim to be the repository for the pre-Christian heritage of the Germanic-speaking world since at least the early thirteenth century, when Icelanders were singled out as important sources by Danish and Norwegian historiographers.<sup>54</sup> While the Icelandic experience of Danish rule, and Danish views of Iceland, have been far from uniformly positive, being identified as “living ancestors” of the Danes and playing to this identity has certainly given Icelanders useful opportunities in relation to the Danish

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52 Þorfinnur Guðnason and Andri Snær Magnason, dir., *Draumalandið* [*Dreamland*] (Ground Control Productions, 2009), 37’46”–38’42”.

53 Cf. Anthony Carrigan, *Postcolonial Tourism: Literature, Culture, and Environment* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

54 Bjarni Guðnason, “The Icelandic Sources of Saxo Grammaticus,” in *Saxo Grammaticus: A Medieval Author between Norse and Latin Culture*, ed. Karsten Friis-Jensen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 1981), esp. 81.



metropole unavailable to, say, Greenlanders or Faroe Islanders.<sup>55</sup> Likewise, in the wake of the Crash, the numerous Icelandic migrants to Norway have benefited there from a mutual perception of ethnic and racial sameness not afforded to immigrants from many other parts of the world.<sup>56</sup> This has also been true of Iceland's relations with other hegemonies, prominently Britain and the USA, both of whose elites have, to various degrees across the last few hundred years, invested heavily in a white Anglo-Saxon and, to some extent, viking identity which draws heavily on Old Icelandic sources.<sup>57</sup>

The discourse of the Icelander as “contemporary ancestor” remains alive and well, and is well represented in *American Gods*, a novel by the British writer Neil Gaiman, writing primarily for an American market:<sup>58</sup>

the big tourist had walked most of Reykjavik that morning, listening to people talk in a language that had changed little in a thousand years. The natives here could read the ancient sagas as easily as they could read a newspaper. There was a

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55 Cf. Kristín Loftsdóttir, “Belonging and the Icelandic Others: Situating Icelandic Identity in a Postcolonial Context,” in *Whiteness and Postcolonialism in the Nordic Region: Exceptionalism, Migrant Others and National Identities*, eds. Kristín Loftsdóttir and Lars Jensen (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 60; Mitchinson, “The Saming of the Few: Post-Colonialism without the ‘Other’ in the Faroe Islands,” *Scandinavica* 49, no. 2 (2010): 6–26.

56 Guðbjört Guðjónsdóttir, “We Blend in with the Crowd but They Don’t”

57 Allen J. Frantzen, *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Wawn, *Vikings and the Victorians*.

58 Kristinn Schram, “Banking on Borealism: Eating, Smelling, and Performing the North,” in *Iceland and Images of the North*, ed. Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (Québec: Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2011), 305–27; Katla Kjartansdóttir, “The New Viking Wave: Cultural Heritage and Capitalism,” in *Iceland and Images of the North*, ed. Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (Québec: Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2011), 461–80.

## EXCERPT 4

Guðmundur Óskarsson, *Bankster*, 64–65

16.12. – Þriðjudagur

Ég togast viljalaus eftir götunum. Enn og aftur fór ég niður eftir og rétt náði að beygja áður en ég kom að bankanum, fór Pósthússtræti og þvert yfir Austurvöll, undir og framhjá ljósskreyttum trjám, og eftir Kirkjustræti. Ég hægði á mér meðfram rammgerðu girðingunni utan um fornleifauppgróftinn. Innan hennar er síðasta partitjald Íslands varðveitt, hvítt og ílangt og hefur örugglega einhvern tímann skýlt öðru en snyrtilegum moldargryfjum. Skilaboð til áhorfenda höfðu verið fest á girðingarteinana, svartur olíútússpenni á nakið A4-blað: Do not feed the archaeologists. / Gefið ekki fornleifafræðingunum. Nokkrir þeirra stóðu í kofadyrum innan vinnusvæðisins og reyktu, allir í drullugum hlífðargöllum og öllum kalt. Ætli það heiti ekki “að norpa,” það sem þau voru að gera, “norpa reykjandi” kannski, eða “reykja norpandi.” Allavega – ein af þeim var fingerð stelpa sem reykti krumpaða, handvafna sígarettu undir alltof stórri, grófprjónaðri ullarhúfu. Hvorki sígarettan né húfan passaði við andlitið sem hélt mér kyrrum við ósveigjanlega girðinguna.

Ég hélt áfram og settist inn á hótellkaffihúsið sem ég kom á um daginn, að morgni 8. desember nákvæmlega. Áður en ég gekk hingað inn sá ég auglýsingarnar fyrir utan, um sýninguna í kjallaranum, Reykjavík 871 +/- 2. Nú sit ég beint fyrir ofan þar sem áður var skáli landnámsmanns. Fólk bjó hérna, horfði héðan á heiminn, bara ekki núna heldur á öðrum tíma – fyrir skömmu, jarðfræðlega séð, fjallahringurinn er nákvæmlega eins.

Það eru töluvert fleiri hérna en síðast [...] Þetta eru allt ferðamenn sýnist mér. Kaupsýslufólki hefur örugglega fækkað mikið. Kannski að stöku fulltrúi erlendra lánardrottna snæði hérna síðbúinn kvöldverð áður en hann fer upp á herbergi, flakkar á milli sjónvarpsstöðva, fróar sér á

sense of continuity on this island that scared him, and that he found desperately reassuring.<sup>59</sup>

The incarnation of the pagan god Óðinn that the protagonist meets in Iceland is, unlike his suave American counterpart Mr Wednesday, bluntly boreal.<sup>60</sup> Meanwhile, the term “natives” casts Icelanders in an anthropologizing mode deriving directly from nineteenth-century colonialism. As Gisli Pálsson and Paul E. Durrenberger have pointed out,

the discipline of anthropology developed in the metropolises of the world as a means to understand various “others” in Western colonial empires. In Iceland and many other peripheral societies of the colonial order, the primary scholarly task was not so much to understand others but to be understood by them.<sup>61</sup>

Texts like Gaiman’s indicate how Icelanders’ anxieties about how they are seen by the rest of the world are not unfounded. Böðvar Guðmundsson’s representation of these anxieties in his *Töfrhöllin* is characteristic. The protagonist Jósep and his grandfather rescue the British foreign minister and a prominent British industrialist, who have got lost on Vörðufell during a fishing holiday sometime in the 1970s; such recognition as the two Icelanders get in the British press comes under the headline “saved by noble savages.”<sup>62</sup> Later, in the 1980s, some Japanese exchange students in France earnestly identify Iceland as the

59 Neil Gaiman, *American Gods: The Author’s Preferred Text* (London: Headline, 2004), 631.

60 Ibid., 631–35. For some other foreign representations of Iceland leading to a similar conclusion see Daisy Nejmman, “Foreign Fictions of Iceland,” in *Iceland and Images of the North*, ed. Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (Québec: Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2011), 481–511.

61 Gisli Pálsson and E. Paul Durrenberger, “Introduction: Toward an Anthropology of Iceland,” in *The Anthropology of Iceland*, eds. E. Paul Durrenberger and Gisli Pálsson (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), xvii.

62 Böðvar Guðmundsson, *Töfrhöllin*, 85.

meðan hann klæmist við makann í síma, ræsir vekjarann og sofnar með herkjum.

En ég kemst ekki yfir þessa einkennilegu tilfinningu, að sitja og drekka bjór í loftrýminu sem landnámsmaður horfði í gegnum þegar hann leit beint upp af hlaði sínu, kannski nýbúinn að blóta Þór eða Frey og skýjaður desemberhiminn yfir honum eins og núna, nákvæmlega eins himinn og núna — himinninn er alltaf eins, í vissum skilningi, og Hallgerður var víst alltaf lesbía.



16.12. – Tuesday

I trawl aimlessly along the streets. Yet again, I went down and managed to turn before I came to the bank, walked Pósthússtræti and straight across Austurvöllur, under and past the light-decorated trees, and along Kirkjustræti. I slowed down along the robust fence around the archaeological excavation. Inside, Iceland's last party-tent is preserved, white and oblong, and it has certainly at some point covered something other than neat excavations. Messages to onlookers had been attached to the fence rails, black marker-pen on the naked A4-sheet: Do not feed the archaeologists. / Gefið ekki fornleifafræðingunum. Some of them stood in the door of the hut inside the working area and smoked, all in muddy protective overalls and all cold. I guess what they were doing isn't called "to *norpa*" [loiter outside in the cold] exactly: "to *norpa* smoking" perhaps, or "to smoke *norping*." Anyway — one of them was a delicate girl who smoked a crumpled, hand-rolled cigarette under an altogether too large, coarsely knitted wool hat. Neither the cigarette nor the hat suited the face that kept me still at the rigid fence.

I went on and settled into the hotel café that I visited the other day, on the morning of December 8 to be precise. Before I came in here I saw an advert outside for the

home of polar bears and reindeer, while around 2000 — ironically a page after Jósep’s own racist musings on black people — a Liverpool tax official jokes “Aha, the Cod’s own Country! Hvað gerið þið við bíl á Íslandi? Eru þar vegir?” (“Aha, the cod’s own country! What do you do with cars in Iceland? Are there roads there?”).<sup>63</sup> These representations, of course, in turn caricature non-Icelanders, but they are not entirely baseless: one of the more widely read accounts of the Crash outside Iceland, for example, was Michael Lewis’s “Wall Street on the Tundra,” originally published in *Vanity Fair* in April 2009, which declared, less wittily than its author presumably intended, that “Icelanders are among the most inbred human beings on earth — geneticists often use them for research.”<sup>64</sup> Two years later, Lewis reprinted the essay as part of a book whose first, American edition was entitled *Boomerang: Travels in the New Third World*.

Yet the exoticization of Icelandic culture enables Iceland to be, as *Gæska*’s protagonist Halldór Garðar has it, “samfélaginu sem seldi skyr til New York og reyfara til Berlínar, popplíst til Parísar og álfa um alla veröld” (“the society that sold *skyr* [a yoghurt-like cheese] to New York and thrillers to Berlin, pop-art to Paris, and elves all over the world”).<sup>65</sup> Making money out of such unlikely products as invisible people that no-one believes in can be understood as a mark of entrepreneurial ingenuity worthy of the cunning god Óðinn himself, and is certainly consistent with the neoliberal vision for post-industrial “knowledge” or “creative” economies.<sup>66</sup> In Grímur Hákonarson’s 2010 film *Sumarlandið*, the protagonist Óskar’s comic role as a fundamentally upstanding family man trying awkwardly to play the rogueish entrepreneur as he runs his unlikely “Ghost House” tourist business is ultimately more endearing than off-putting: while we are not supposed to applaud Óskar’s attraction, we are

63 Ibid., 137, 286.

64 Michael Lewis, *Boomerang: Travels in the New Third World* (New York: Norton, 2011), 14.

65 Norðdahl, *Gæska*, 162.

66 Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson, *Phallogical Museum* (Zürich: Lit, 2014), 156–57.

museum in the basement, “Reykjavík 871 +/- 2.” Now I’m sitting right over where the house of a settler used to be. People lived here, looked out on the world from here, just not now, just in another time — pretty recently, geologically speaking. The mountains on the horizon are just the same.

There are a lot more people here than last time [...] Looks like they’re all travellers. There are certainly a lot less businessmen: perhaps the occasional representative of foreign creditors might eat a late dinner here before he goes up to his room, does some channel-surfing, masturbates while he talks dirty with his other half on the phone, sets the alarm clock and barely sleeps.

But I can’t get over this strange feeling of sitting and drinking beer in the air which a settler looked through when he looked straight up from his farmyard, maybe just after sacrificing to Þór or Frey with a cloudy December sky above him just like now, exactly the same sky as now: the sky is always the same, in a way, and Hallgerður was certainly always a lesbian.

supposed to indulge it. Icelandic heritage, then, is a key commodity in the twenty-first-century Icelandic economy, and writers have an important part in constructing it.

A passage in Guðmundur Óskarsson’s 2009 novel *Bankster* analyses these themes, and tests the dichotomy between the native and the tourist implied by some of these texts. The novel is written in the form of the diary of its protagonist, a newly unemployed, depressed, and at times misanthropic ex-banker called Markús; accordingly, Excerpt 4 presents a complete diary entry.

This is a densely layered passage. Both the dig and the sign existed in real life, the joke no doubt being told by the archaeologists at their own expense (moreover, the archaeologist Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir informs me that Guðmundur himself worked on the dig). But the passage can also be read as a

rewriting of Jónas Hallgrímsson's famous 1835 "Ísland," a nationalist elegy lamenting Iceland's decline from its medieval golden age. Markús's diary takes Jónas's lament for the (then) present state of the country to sordid extremes, but more strikingly is also unable to embrace Jónas's praise for the heroes of old. The tourists and occasional creditors, for example, stand for Jónas's observation that "þá riðu hetjur um héröð, og skrautbúin skip fyrir landi | flutu með fríðasta lið, færandi varninginn heim" ("then, heroes rode through the districts, and ships, decked out, | floated to the land with the most beautiful company, bringing home their goods").<sup>67</sup> The image of the native *útrásarvíkingur* bringing home the prizes of commerce has been replaced by the curious visitor and the incurious bailiff.

The detached tone of Markús's contemplation of the medieval, given the centrality of medievalism (and indeed the poem "Ísland") to Icelandic national identity, functions within the novel partly to express the alienation of this depressed and unemployed man from his society. The way he stares through the fence at the female archaeologist emphasizes how his diary presents the world unabashedly through his male gaze, while his homophobic dismissal of the vividly drawn but dangerous wife of Gunnar Hámundarson in *Njáls saga* expresses his own emasculation and inability to adapt to changing gender norms. But his alienation also emphasizes the disjunction between the Icelandic past and present: like the Hellisgerði joke which stands as the epigraph of this book, Excerpt 4 is musing on modernity. Markús's wonder at the incongruity of modern business, telecommunications, secularity and sexuality with the life of the late ninth century both depends on and problematizes the culturally dominant expectation of continuity with the early medieval period.

The anxieties about modernity which Guðmundur expresses in *Bankster* are construed not simply as a matter internal to Iceland, but with reference to the foreigner's gaze: Markús's mus-

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67 Jónas Hallgrímsson, "Ísland," *Fjölnir: Árs-rit handa Íslendingum* 1 (1835): 21–22, at 21.

ings imply the precarity of Iceland's existence by comparison with a wider world, and recall the argument of Magnús Einarsson that

Icelanders are ambivalent toward the presence of tourists and at the same time are ambivalent about their own identities [...] Tourists' reputation is low because they are believed to be too "vulgar" to understand the essence of being Icelandic, the purity of culture, language, and landscape so dear to the image [...] But at the same time Icelanders enjoy the role of the host. They need to show the guests who they really are. They need witnesses to confirm their identity.<sup>68</sup>

Part of the complexity in Markús's ruminations, therefore, is that being a spectacle for tourists is not straightforwardly bad news. The archaeologists' sign puts English before Icelandic: tourists' gaze makes a spectacle of the archaeologist at work. But, nevertheless, Markús's gaze does too: Icelanders are constructed not only by foreigners, but also by one another, and the gaze of the foreigner and the local may not be that different. This implication impels us to consider how the archaeologists are in turn making a spectacle of the past on behalf not only of tourists but also of Icelanders: the Icelander of postmodernity, in a sense, becomes a tourist in their own past—as the urbanite protagonists of Steinar Bragi's *Hálendið* discover to their cost when they venture into the wilderness and encounter its folklore-inspired threats.<sup>69</sup> It is, after all, in no small part because elves became prominent in nationalist discourses which then became the basis for Iceland's tourism-marketing that elves have become

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68 Magnús Einarsson, "The Wandering Semioticians: Tourism and the Image of Modern Iceland," in *Images of Contemporary Iceland: Everyday Lives and Global Contexts*, eds. Gisli Pálsson and E. Paul Durrenberger (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996), 228–29.

69 Cf. Arnar Árnason et al., "Speeding towards the Future through the Past: Landscape, Movement and National Identity," *Landscape Research* 40, no. 1 (2015): 23–28 on how Icelanders now construct their sense of nationhood by gazing at the land from their speeding cars.



the commodified monstrosity that they have in international discourses about Iceland.<sup>70</sup> The archaeologists' sign, then, does prime the reader to consider how the gaze of jaded foreign bailiffs and wide-eyed tourists makes a spectacle of Icelanders, but it also encourages an Icelandic audience to criticize traditional, nationalist constructions of the past.

Gender norms are integral to Iceland's nationalist self-image, with the archetypal Icelander being male, and moreover a particular kind of male. As Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson memorably puts it, "Icelanders are not 'Icelandic' but rather 'Icelandic(k).'"<sup>71</sup> By drawing Hallgerður Höskuldsdóttir, the vengeful beauty at the center of *Njáls saga*, irreverently from a medieval past "before the closet" into present-day discourses of homosexuality,<sup>72</sup> Guðmundur highlights the easy familiarity of his audience with key aspects of *Njáls saga*. But, as with his musings on the archaeological dig, he does so to alienate his readership from the conventional patriarchal, nationalist understanding of the saga. Hallgerður's sudden appearance in Markús's musings highlights his anxiety as a man confronted with a modernity which countenances women's sexual self-sufficiency — an anxiety explored in excruciating detail a dozen years previously in Hallgrímur Helgason's *101 Reykjavík* (which addresses most of the themes tackled by *Bankster*, but more incisively, albeit at greater length,

70 Gísli Sigurðsson, "Icelandic National Identity: From Romanticism to Tourism," in *Making Europe in Nordic Contexts*, ed. Pertti J. Anttonen (Turku: Nordic Institute of Folklore, University of Turku, 1996), 41–76; Marion Lerner, "Images of the North, Icelandic Nature, and a Pioneering Icelandic Nation," in *Iceland and Images of the North*, ed. Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2011), 229–53.

71 Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson, *Phallogological Museum*, 10; cf. Guðbjört Guðjónsdóttir and Júlíana Magnúsdóttir, "Ingólfur Arnarson, Björgólfur Thor og Ólafur bóndi á Þorvaldseyri: Karlmennska, kynjakerfi og þjóðernissjálfsmynd eftir efnahagshrun," *Rannsóknir í félagsvindum: Stjórnmaláfræðideild* 12 (2011): 45–53; Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, "The Gender-Equal North: Icelandic Images of Femininity and Masculinity," in *Iceland and Images of the North*, ed. Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2011), 405–34.

72 Allen J. Frantzen, *Before the Closet: Same-Sex Love from Beowulf to Angels in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

and with its own very astute interest in time and temporality).<sup>73</sup> A good example comes when the protagonist Hlynur Björn ponders his mother's entry into a lesbian relationship:

Það er eitthvað við svona kjaftforuga kvenmenn, svona konur sem eru jafn klárar og kallar, svona tussur með tunguna á réttum stað. Ég meika þær ekki. Maður á engin svör. Maður lamast. Sérstaklega ef þær eru með brjóst líka. Þá er einsog það sé bara eitthvað svindl í gangi. Ég meina. Konur hafa stellið fram yfir okkur, það er þeirra það. Við áttum að fá heilann í staðinn. En nú eru þær búnar að húsa hann líka. Hvað er þá eftir? Þær komnar með allt. Gáfur og útlit. Og við liggjum bara eftir orðlausir með þann heilalausa í höndunum að gubba útúr sér síðustu sellunum.<sup>74</sup>

There is something about these filthy-mouthed womenfolk, these women who are as clever as men, these cunts with their tongues in the right place. I can't be doing with them. A guy doesn't have an answer. You're paralysed. Especially if they've got breasts too. Then it's basically just a rip-off. I mean. Women have got one over on us, you have to give them that. We were supposed to get the brains instead. But now they've got those too. What's left? They've got everything. Talent and looks. And we just lie around dumb, with Mr Brainless in our hands puking out our last cells.

Perhaps a similar nervousness underlay the ill-judged insult thrown by Davíð Oddsson — at that time the disgraced ex-Prime Minister and central bank chair — at Iceland's new, left-wing and lesbian prime minister Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir during the March 2009 national meeting of Davíð's Independence Party: that Jóhanna was (in the summary of the newspaper *DV*)

73 Cf. Lisa Hopkins, "Hamlet Smokes Prince: 101 Reykjavík on Page and Screen," *Adaptation* 1, no. 2 (2008): 140–50.

74 Hallgrímur Helgason, 101 Reykjavík (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1996), 17–18.

“eins og álfur út úr hól enda litin hún út eins og álfur” (“like an elf out of a hill [= like a deer in the headlights] — and actually looking like an elf”).<sup>75</sup> These gender crises are of course far from unique to Iceland, and La Berge has shown specifically the prominence of an anxious “financial masculinity” in the literature of neoliberalism, as men who sit at desks fiddling with computers try to imagine their livelihood as manly.<sup>76</sup> But just as women have long had to endure being the objects of the male gaze, the prototypical “Icelandick” person now has to endure being the object of the increasingly pervasive, disempowering gaze of the foreign tourist. Iceland isn’t alone, then, in its anxieties, but they are perhaps more pronounced than elsewhere.

One response to these anxieties is to seek succor in nationalist medievalism, and the supposition that Iceland somehow has a monopoly both on images and descendants of manly vikings. But Markús’s diary entry undermines the sense of rootedness normally afforded by the medieval golden age by incongruously emphasizing Iceland’s newness — and so implicitly its impermanence. In this way, the author presents the tension within Icelandic discourses between Icelanders’ own temporalizations of their culture as modern and the temporalization of it as medieval by foreign onlookers like Neil Gaiman. Implicitly, the foreigners observe Iceland from a standpoint whose geological and cultural rootedness, and therefore modernity, is more assured. Moreover, Markús’s musings also emphasize the awkwardness of Iceland’s fit with mainstream European temporalizations of the past generally. The concept of the Middle Ages is enormously problematic in any context, but as the term comes to be used in historiography looking beyond Europe to Africa and Asia, and even the Americas, historians are increasingly debating whether the term is appropriate or whether its use serves to integrate extra-European historiographies into Euro-

75 “Jóhanna litur út eins og álfur,” *DV*, March 28, 2009. <https://web.archive.org/web/20090329121811/http://www.dv.is:80/frettir/2009/3/28/johanna-litur-ut-eins-og-alfur/>

76 Leigh Claire La Berge, *Scandals and Abstraction: Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

centric, colonial systems of knowledge.<sup>77</sup> So it is worth noting how poorly Iceland fits a periodization based on the history of Continental, and particularly Mediterranean Europe. Not only was it outside the Roman Empire (whose supposed fall traditionally defines the beginning of the Middle Ages), but in terms of human history, the island missed the first few centuries of the Middle Ages entirely, as it only received (traceable) human settlement around the 870s. Even then, one reason why much early Icelandic literature has been valued by historians is that it echoes a culture which had in many ways not yet “medievalized,” but was still part of a long iron age (a categorization with some popularity among archaeologists).<sup>78</sup> Later, Iceland experienced Reformation and humanism, but little by way of a Classical (re)naissance. Rather, in significant respects — particularly manuscript and literary culture — medieval Icelandic culture continued with little change into the nineteenth century.<sup>79</sup> Yet despite Iceland’s awkward fit with mainstream European temporalities, it has enthusiastically been slotted, by scholars both in Iceland and abroad, into the mainstream historiography of the European Middle Ages. The weirdness of this is emphasized by the fact that other parts of the Roman Empire, like North Africa, which much more clearly fit the post-Roman narrative that defines the Middle Ages but which did not come to be part of Christendom, have not been. Markús’s musings in *Bankster* help to expose how tenuous Iceland’s belonging to the European club of countries that can root their identity in the ancient-medieval-modern progression really is.

77 Daud Ali, “The Idea of the Medieval in the Writing of South Asian History: Contexts, Methods and Politics,” *Social History* 39, no. 3 (2014): 382–407.

78 I owe the term “medievalize” to Carol J. Clover, “Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe,” *Speculum* 68, no. 2 (1993): 363–87.

79 Matthew James Driscoll, *The Unwashed Children of Eve: The Production, Dissemination and Reception of Popular Literature in Post-Reformation Iceland* (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1997).

Markús likewise hints at how Icelandic culture is in one straightforward sense indigenous: more demonstrably than almost any other culture on Earth, Iceland's language, a key facet of Icelandic ethnicity, remains mutually comprehensible with that of many of the primary human settlers of the island. Icelanders have no claim to descent from a later wave of conquerors, but at the same time their indigeneity arises from a settlement too recent and (notwithstanding the interval between settlement and saga-writing) too well recorded readily to be mythicized. Icelanders are thus in a way construed as immigrants in their own land, which is itself a new arrival on the geological scene. As the Organist puts it in *Atómstöðin*, "Ísland skiftir ekki miklu máli þegar litið er á heildarmyndina [...] Það hafa ekki verið til íslendingar nema í hæsta lagi þúsund ár" ("Iceland isn't very important if you look at it from a global perspective [...] Icelanders didn't even exist until the last thousand years at most").<sup>80</sup> These considerations provide a useful context for understanding the cultural power of the statement in the post-Crash film *Sumarlandið* that elves "byggðu þetta land á undan okkur og við eigum að sýna þeim virðingu" ("settled this land before us and we have to show them respect"): by making elves an indigenous ethnic Other, this speech enables Icelanders to inhabit the identity not of the indigene but rather the more prestigious identity of the colonist.<sup>81</sup> As *Bankster* indicates and explores, the precarity of Iceland's fit with key categories of European identity emphasizes the importance in Icelandic discourses of maintaining Iceland's prestigious medievalism.

### 3.5 Iceland Is Not a Banana Republic

Just as the "we are not terrorists" campaign emphasizes that narratives of Icelandic identity both in relation to the Middle Ages

80 Halldór Kiljan Laxness, *Atómstöðin [The atom station]* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1961), 212.

81 Grímur Hákonarson, dir., *Sumarlandið [Summerland]* (Blueeyes Productions/Sögn ehf., 2010), 1.05'15–17"; cf. Lára's similar statement at 24'34–39".

and to an Oriental Other is important in the real world, so it is clear that Icelandic anxiety about whether it is “developed” had real effects during the banking boom too. Gunnar Sigurðsson’s 2010 documentary *Maybe I Should Have* presents the economist Richard Wade discussing his efforts to warn Icelanders before the Crash that they were experiencing a bubble like the early twenty-first-century south-east Asian bubble. The response, he says, was “in Iceland we’re not like the people in Asia. We have our young Vikings; they are very clever businesspeople; they know what they’re doing; they are very sophisticated at managing risk; and so there’s really nothing to worry about.” The implication is that an insistence on understanding Iceland as a developed, Western country trumped economically useful comparisons with other parts of the world.<sup>82</sup> Danske Bank’s warning about the Icelandic economy in 2006 was successfully narrated by Icelandic bankers as Danish jealousy at the success of Denmark’s one-time colonial subjects.<sup>83</sup>

This section develops these observations from another angle: the pervasive discourse of Iceland as a “banana republic.” As Kristín Loftsdóttir has argued at length, a prominent, anxious response to anthropologization in Iceland is to emphasize Iceland’s first-worldness through the abjection of third-world Others.<sup>84</sup> *Atómstöðin* provides a convenient example of the deep

82 Ibid., 9’41”–10’03”; cf. 11’41”–54”.

83 Kristín Loftsdóttir, “Colonialism at the Margins,” 606–7; Kristín Loftsdóttir, “Going to Eden: Nordic Exceptionalism and the Image of Blackness in Iceland,” *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 7 (2014): 27–41, at 11–12; Kristín Loftsdóttir, “‘The Danes Don’t Get This’: The Economic Crash and Icelandic Postcolonial Engagements,” *National Identities* 18, no. 1 (2016): 35–51; cf. Þróstur Olaf Sigurjónsson, David Schwartzkopf, and Auður Arna Arnadóttir, “Viðbrögð tengslanets við gagnrýni á fjármálastöðuleika Íslands,” *Stjórnmal og stjórnsýsla* 7 (2011): 163–86. For literary commentary see Bjarni Harðarson, *Sigurðar saga fóts: Íslensk riddarasaga* [*The saga of Sigurður Foot: An Icelandic romance*] (Selfoss: Sæmundur, 2010), 235–36; Alda Sigmundsdóttir, *Unraveled*, 63–64; Bjarki Karlsson, *Árleysi alda*, 9; Eiríkur Bergmann, *Hryðjuverkamaður snýr heim* [*A terrorist turns for home*] (Reykjavík: Sögur, 2015), 133–40.

84 See Kristín Loftsdóttir, “Whiteness Is from Another World” esp. 243–47 and publications cited there.

roots of these discourses. The novel wastes no time establishing most of its political parameters. The first chapter presents us with religion, contrasting the Lutheranism of the National Church with both alternative varieties of Christianity and a “hundheið-na alþingi” (“dog-heathen parliament”) which alludes both to Iceland’s pagan past and to its secular modernity.<sup>85</sup> The chapter contrasts Iceland’s rural North with the urbane Reykjavík of the South; it offers us our first introduction to the Alþingi’s boon-doggles, and, as I have discussed above, to the paradoxes of a credit economy (§2.1). It introduces education and class struggle.<sup>86</sup> But it also situates Iceland in relation to the USA, Western Europe — and Africa. Búi Árland deprecatingly characterizes the newly fashionable reduplicated nicknames of his children, from which the chapter takes its name “Budúbódi,” as the names of “villimenn” (“savages”).<sup>87</sup> The name of Búi’s son Bubu (a.k.a. Arngrímur) “virðist vera frá Tanganjiku, eða Kenja; eða þessu landi þar sem þeir prýða á sér hárið með rottuhöllum” (“seems to come from Tanganyika or Kenya, or the country where they decorate their hair with rats’ tails”).<sup>88</sup> Kendra Willson points out that Laxness here draws an equivalence “between the real and urban jungle,” plausibly inferring that Laxness was participating in the racist discourse that characterizes all of Africa as jungle.<sup>89</sup> But of course Laxness does so firmly to emphasize that redu-

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85 Laxness, *Atómstöðin*, 8.

86 *Ibid.*, 9.

87 *Ibid.*, 8.

88 *Ibid.*, 10.

89 Willson, “Icelandic Nicknames” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2007), 145. Cf. Kristín Loftsdóttir, “‘Pure Manliness’: The Colonial Project and Africa’s Image in Nineteenth Century Iceland,” *Identities* 16, no. 3 (2009): 271–93; Kristín Loftsdóttir, “Encountering Others in Icelandic Textbooks: Imperialism and Racial Diversity in the Era of Nationalism,” in *Opening the Mind or Drawing Boundaries? History Texts in Nordic Schools*, eds. Þorsteinn Helgason and Simone Lässig (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht UniPress, 2010), 81–95; Kristín Loftsdóttir, “Becoming Civilized: Iceland and the Colonial Project during the 19th Century,” *Kult* 7 (2010): 1–6.

plicated nicknames belie Iceland's fundamental difference from Africa.

We can conveniently explore Iceland's positioning of itself in relation to the wider world through the widespread discourse of Iceland as a *bananalýðveldi* ("banana republic"), usually not in the relatively technical sense of an emerging economy which is too reliant on one product, but in the pejorative sense of a corrupt ex-colony. The term is probably most closely associated with South America, but seems readily to evoke tropical developing countries more generally. "Something like this wouldn't even happen in the worst banana republic. This country is filled with criminals who would have been assassinated if they'd lived in an African country. It's that simple. This would never have been tolerated," opines one of the interviewees in Alda Sigmundsdóttir's *Living Inside the Meltdown*, plunging into an age-old discourse of using (somewhat) noble savages as a stick with which to beat civilized people.<sup>90</sup> The image of the "banana republic" is so embedded in Icelandic political discourse that people need only allude to it: protesters, for example, can simply wave bananas to make their point.

Interestingly, the discourse of the banana republic is prominent among the young, left-leaning authors studied here as well as in more conservative media, emphasizing a stratum of embedded racism in Icelandic society. Thus in the riotous sequence which depicts Iceland's national day in the second chapter of Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl's *Gæska*, we are told that the members of parliament "skakklöppuðust einhvern veginn áfram yfir að Alþingishúsinu, pípanði, æmtandi og skræmtandi, andsetnir á heljarþróm vanhelgra daga einsog smákrakkar í spreng eða apakettir að bitast um síðasta banana lýðveldisins" ("careered somehow or other across to the Parliament, howling, shouting, and squawking, perched on the precipice of desecrated days like little kids bursting to piss or monkeys scrapping over the last banana in the republic").<sup>91</sup> This is a vivid series of images, and

<sup>90</sup> Alda Sigmundsdóttir, *Living Inside the Meltdown*, 78.

<sup>91</sup> Norðdahl, *Gæska*, 14.



in its way a powerful, if unsubtle, critique of Iceland's parliamentary culture. However, it is also uncomfortably close to well established and well known racist images of black people as apes or monkeys. Characteristically, the character in Ævar Örn Jóseppsson's crisis-novels who calls members of parliament *apakettir* ("monkeys") refers jovially on the same page to his colleague Árni's black family as "svarta genginu" ("the black gang").<sup>92</sup> Later in *Gæska*, Freyleif goes clubbing to music likened to "villimanna trumbur" ("the drums of savages"), which casually invokes the racist colonial association of drumming with "savages" — implicitly Africans.<sup>93</sup> The similarity of this metaphor to the lyrics of Emiliana Torrini's hit "Jungle Drum," also from 2009, underscores the familiarity of the association in Icelandic culture. Emiliana's song belies its mentions of "Ebony and Ivory" (alluding to the anti-racism song first recorded by Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder) and "Dancing in the Street" (an iconic work of black American motown) as unreflective appropriation of black culture through an official video featuring a khakhi-clad band evoking the colonial conquest of Africa, and the image of the jungle as a place of danger and ecstatic wildness for the singer, evoking an othered and sexualized black culture. In turn, the song was used as the soundtrack for the 2010 "Inspired by Iceland" tourism marketing campaign. As Eiríkur Örn's next book, *Illska*, in which he comes much more profoundly to grips with racism, puts it, "ríkisstjórnin eyddi hundruðum milljóna í *Inspired by Iceland* átak til að tjá útlendingum að á Íslandi ríkti ekki óöld vegna eldgosa (eða efnahags), en undirtextinn — sjálf merkingin — var öllum ljós: *Við erum ekki hottintottar*" ("the government spent hundreds of millions in the *Inspired by Iceland* campaign to tell foreigners that Iceland wasn't in the grip of turmoil from eruptions (or the economy), but the subtext — the real meaning — was clear to all: *we aren't hottentots*").<sup>94</sup> And the fact that this video, devised by a UK company, was generally seen

92 Ævar Örn Jóseppsson, *Önnur líf*, 354; cf. 157, 229.

93 Norðdahl, *Gæska*, 103.

94 Norðdahl, *Illska*, 111.

as a great success, emphasizes that Iceland is not alone in its embedded racism.<sup>95</sup>

The racist understanding of black people as simians is explicit in *Töfrahöllin*, when Jósep passes by the Liverpool docks:

nokkrar svartar spikhlussur reyndu að selja mér á sér naflann og rasskinnarnar, mig langaði mest til að hýða þær og skipa þeim að snauta heim til Afríku. En það þorði ég auðvitað ekki því áreiðanlega voru margar góririllur til taks ef viðskip-tavinur var með derring.<sup>96</sup>

Some black roly-polies tried to sell me their navels and arse-cheeks; what I really wanted was to flog them and pack them off home to Africa. But obviously I didn't actually dare, because there were no doubt plenty of gorillas on hand if a customer got arrogant.

Such racist images are also implicit, for example, in the vivid caricatures which illustrate the 1922 childrens' book *Tíu litlir negrastrákar* ("Ten Little Negro Boys"), republished to both criticism and acclaim, in 2007.<sup>97</sup> In 2008 Óttar M. Norðfjörð reworked the text as *Tíu litlir bankastrákar*, a powerful critique of Iceland's boom and bust. On the cover, Lárus Welding, CEO of Glitnir when it collapsed, appears holding a banana. Meanwhile, the epigraph to the book is a quotation from stanza 75 of the medieval poem *Hávamál*: "margur verður af aurum api" ("many are made apes by money").<sup>98</sup> The quotation cements the identification of Iceland as a banana republic ruled by simians, and is certainly witty. But if the idea of the banana republic were not racist already — one might suggest that it is merely chauvinistic — then ostentatiously deploying it in a rewriting of *Tíu*

95 Cf. Björn Þór Sigbjörnsson et al., *Ísland í aldanna rás*, 393.

96 Böðvar Guðmundsson, *Töfrahöllin*, 285.

97 Kristín Loftsdóttir, "Racist Caricatures in Iceland in the 19th and the 20th Century," in *Iceland and Images of the North*, ed. Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2011), 196.

98 Cf. Evans, *Hávamál*, 54.

*litlir negrastrákar*, which caricatures black people in ways evoking their racist association with simians, would be a good way to make it so.

In an interview about *Hálendið*, Steinar Bragi characterized Iceland as “en nordlig bananrepublik med en liten skræpvaluta som snarast borde kastas i havet och ersättas med euron” (“a northern banana republic with a minor and useless currency which ought to be chucked into the sea and replaced with the Euro”).<sup>99</sup> The image of the banana republic does not appear in his crisis-novels, but is reflected in one of the criticisms of Iceland uttered in *Hálendið* by Vigdís, that it has the world’s third greatest rate of unprovoked urban violence “á eftir tveimur hafnarborgum í þriðja heiminum” (“after two port-towns in the third world”).<sup>100</sup> Indeed, although the setting of *Hálendið* itself is firmly Icelandic, one reviewer still found herself looking to Joseph Conrad’s colonial Africa as she sought a reference point for the horror which Steinar Bragi situates in Iceland’s dark heart.<sup>101</sup> Similar concepts appear in Icelandic political discourse in the widely used term “fjölskyldurnar fjórtán” (“the fourteen families”) to denote a political-economic clique of powerful families, a term appropriated from political discourse in El Salvador;<sup>102</sup> and, closer to home, the subversion of the language of tourism marketing to present Iceland as the “Sikiley norðursins” (“Sicily of the North”) in the sense of a small, volcanic island run by a mafia, again popular among authors.<sup>103</sup> These observations all

99 Erik Helmersen, “Han sågar hemlandet Island,” *Dagens nyheter*, March 21, 2014, 5.

100 Steinar Bragi, *Hálendið [The highlands]* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2011), 127.

101 Úlfhildur Dagsdóttir, “Hryllilegar hremmingar á hálendinu,” *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 73, no. 4 (November 2012): 112–17.

102 For a survey of the half-dozen or so families actually comprising this group, see Guðmundur Magnússon, *Íslensku Ættarveldin: Frá Oddaverjum til Engeyinga* (Reykjavík: Veröld, 2012), 231–83.

103 Cf. Einar Már Guðmundsson, *Bankastræti núll*, 125–33; Ævar Örn Jósepsson, *Önnur líf*, 355; Halldór Lárusson, “A Lesson from Auden: What Can Iceland Learn from the Late English Poet W.H. Auden about the Icelandic Króna?” *Icelandic Review/Atlantica* 50, no. 1 (2014): 40–42.

emphasize the ongoing importance to the Icelandic self-image of abjecting foreign Others, and particularly Others from the post-colonial world. Yet it is abundantly clear that, as Stefán Jón Hafstein puts it in his more thoughtful comparison of Iceland with African countries, “það eru ekki margir 300 þúsund manna hópar í heiminum sem búa við jafn mikinn auð og Íslendingar” (“there are in the world few groups of three hundred thousand people who dwell amidst as much wealth as Icelanders”).<sup>104</sup> For all its faults, Iceland is so clearly not actually a kleptocracy founded on cash-crops, or actually run by a homicidal mafia, that the underlying discursive function of the criticism, even when uttered by serious critics of Icelandic society, is surely actually to shore up Iceland’s positive self-image at the expense of less fortunate post-colonial countries.

Children’s books in particular bring abjection of developing-world Others explicitly into contact with medievalism, and help to demonstrate its importance in constructing Icelandic modernity in relation to the developing world. The plot of Kristín Helga Gunnarsdóttir’s *Ríólítreglan* arises from the destruction of an *álfasteinn* (“elves’ stone”) to build a housing estate in a Reykjavík suburb, leading indirectly to an encounter between the protagonists and a community of elves. The novel draws on nineteenth-century folklore to show that despite their glamorous attraction, the elves actually represent a hierarchical and selfish society, posing a capricious threat to everyday people. The novel juxtaposes the folkloric material which drives its plot with a social-realist account of its protagonists’ lives to promote a disenchanting, stoical and fairly individualistic personal independence. *Ríólítreglan* celebrates the ability of the orphan Steinn to live alone; of Móna to look after her alcoholic mother where her father proves emotionally unable to cope; and of the siblings Glória and Diggi to endure, along with their mother María, flight as refugees from Colombia. The book promotes Iceland’s countryside as a site of beauty and adventure, and medieval Ice-

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<sup>104</sup> Stefán Jón Hafsteinn, “Rányrkjubú,” *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 72, no. 3 (September 2011): 6–23, at 6.

landic history as a resource lending it cultural meaning. However, the medieval past which the book invokes is not the golden age of the settlement period, but the late fifteenth century, a time characterized by plague and hardship. Kristín Helga does not make the traditional nationalist move of blaming this situation on Danish oppression: rather, Iceland's problems are implicitly portrayed as reflecting a lack of technological means to deal with a harsh environment. The hero of Kristín's account of the fifteenth century, the Icelander Torfi Jónsson í Klaufa (c. 1460–1504), is portrayed as a tough man for tough times: a man to be admired, but not emulated. While *Ríólítreglan*, then, moves firmly away from golden-ageism, it still positions medieval history and folklore as fundamental to understanding Icelandicness. We are encouraged to be grateful to inhabit a (neoliberal) modernity unlike the harsh medieval past, but also to embrace understanding that past as a means to achieving this identity.

However, in *Ríólítreglan*, Iceland's modernity is implicitly also defined and celebrated through the portrayal of María and her children. *Ríólítreglan* contrasts Colombia as a place of danger and poverty with Iceland as a place of “áhyggjulaus börn, kappklædd að leik úti á götum, snjóskafla, falleg hús, glæsilega bíla, skólabörn að sveifla sér í leiktækjum, bækur og girnileg matarborð” (“carefree children, wearing hats and playing in the street, snowdrifts, pretty houses, flashy cars, schoolchildren swinging themselves around on playground equipment, books, and tables laden with appealing food”).<sup>105</sup> *Ríólítreglan's* social-realist portrayal of the difficulties in the children's families, which imply social breakdowns within Iceland and beyond it the exploitation of the developing world by the developed, does not extend to analysing the social causes of these problems: they are simply facts of life. By normalizing the Colombian children as ordinary and upstanding members of Icelandic society and by othering the elves, Kristín Helga emphasizes that Iceland has more to gain from globalization than from clinging to insular tradi-

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105 Kristín Helga Gunnarsdóttir, *Ríólítreglan [The order of the rhyolite]* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2011), 113.

tions (at least where the new arrivals emerge as hard-working Icelandic-learners); but this is a globalization in which Iceland's role in the exploitation of poorer countries is not interrogated.

Andri Snær Magnason's *Timakistan* shows some similar trends. It makes a brave attempt to grapple with the massive extension of the timescales in which, over the last few decades, people have had to understand human politics, recognizing that humans have become a defining geological force.<sup>106</sup> In this it faces up, proleptically, to the challenge recently posed by Amitav Ghosh for novelists to tackle the way that realism limits the timescales of novels' storytelling.<sup>107</sup> But it does so by rather unsatisfactorily jumbling the beginnings of agriculture, urbanization, and the break-up of Pangaea into a pseudo-mythical past. It makes an impressive and still rare effort to express the colonialist violence implicit in much fantasy heroism, making no bones about the genocidal character of King Dímon's war on the dwarves. In the frame-story which comprises the present time of the novel, the overlap between colonial archaeology and mere tomb-raiding is likewise made clear. But when Andri projects the Snow White story into a tropical space in this mythic but clearly geologically early time, he emphatically writes white western ideals of beauty into times and places where dark pigmentation was and/or is the norm rather than seizing the opportunity to renarrate *Snow White* with a black protagonist. Meanwhile, the most successful resistance to the tyranny of Dímon in the novel comes, predictably, from plucky Arctic barbarians. And when the time-chest arrives from the pseudo-medieval past into the novel's present, it fulfils a familiar trope whereby modern brutalities are understood as medieval methods of social control, that have to be overcome by the heroine.<sup>108</sup> By falling into a modernist narrative of the evil Middle

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106 See for example Jeremy Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

107 Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (London: Penguin, 2016), 58–63.

108 Cf. Amy S. Kaufman, "Our Future Is Our Past: Corporate Medievalism in Dystopian Fiction," in *Corporate Medievalism II*, ed. Karl Fugelso

Ages, Andri Snær perhaps limits his prospects for a more radical critique of modernity.

Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir's *Hjartsláttur* (2009) and Þórður Helgason's *Vinur, sonur, bróðir* (2010) discuss race more explicitly, suggesting a sense that race and racism need directly to be addressed among young audiences. By rewriting the story of Tristan and Isolde with a black teenager in the Tristan role, Ragnheiður works rather effectively to normalize a black character within a European-Icelandic canon. That said, she does write the beauty of the Isolde character, Íris Sól, in terms which reinforce white norms of beauty, which corresponds to the fact that norms of female beauty are in western culture far more vigorously policed than mens'. Ragnheiður acknowledges the unusualness of her black Tristan in predominantly white Iceland: his impending arrival at his new school is much discussed; he is stared at on his first day; he is aware, when he runs away from home, that he is easily identified. These developments are consistent with recent research into black people's experience of Iceland.<sup>109</sup> For Tristan these experiences seem to be like water off a duck's back. Hopefully this is generally true for racial-minority Icelanders; there is certainly some evidence that racism is not as stark in Iceland as in many other places, though it intersects with powerful xenophobia, and social-science research still has quite a long way to go to assess the situation.<sup>110</sup> But other evidence suggests that racism can have a defining power for many

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(Cambridge: Brewer, 2013), 11–19, on English-language dystopian medievalism with similar characteristics.

109 Kristín Loftsdóttir, "Still a Lot of Staring and Curiosity': Racism and the Racialization of African Immigrants in Iceland," in *New Dimensions of Diversity in Nordic Culture and Society*, eds. Jenny Björklund and Ursula Lindqvist (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 263–78.

110 Rannveig Thorisdottir, "Armed with a Pen," in *Black Light, White Shadows: Young People in the Nordic Countries Write about Racism*, ed. Leena Suurpää (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 1998), 85–97; Kristín Loftsdóttir, "Being 'the Damned Foreigner': Affective National Sentiments and Racialization of Lithuanians in Iceland," *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 7, no. 2 (2017): 70–77.

## EXCERPT 5

Kári Tulinius, *Píslarvottar án hæfileika*, 75–77

“Ókei, sko,” segir Markús, “bara ótrúlegar staðreyndir, ef fólk vissi af þeim myndi það vera brjáláð. Og ríkisstjórnir halda þeim frá fólki. Eins og, til dæmis, eftir næn eleven, þá fór faðir Bush yngri að hitta konung Sádi-Arabíu, sem þá var orðinn mjög gamall og máttfarinn. George eldri hafði ekki hitt kónginn í mörg ár þar sem veikindi hans voru svo mikil að krónprinsinn var sá sem í raun fór með völdin, en eftir að flugvélnar klesstu á Tvíburaturnana var kóngurinn gamli ólmur í að hitta forsetann fyrrverandi. Þannig að Bush fyrsti var leiddur inn í svefnherbergi Fahds, þar sem konungurinn lá innan um samansafn af dýrustu lækningatækjum í heimi. George gekk upp að fótagaflinum og sagði hæ. Fahd svaraði lágri röddu, en rúmið var svo stórt að forsetinn gamli greindi ekki orðaskil svo að hann gekk að hlið rúmsins og sagði aftur hæ. Kóngurinn svaraði lágri röddu en rúmið var svo stórt að Bush fyrsti heyrði ekki hvað gamli maðurinn sagði svo að hann greip í rúmgaflinn og hallaði sér eins langt og hann gat yfir rúmið og sagði aftur hæ. Konungurinn svaraði lágri röddu, en rúmið var svo stórt að George greindi ekki orðaskil svo að hann lagðist upp í rúmið við hlið Fahds og sagði aftur hæ. Kóngurinn svaraði, ég ætlaði að biðja yður um að rétta oss hljóðnemann sem liggur á náttborðinu en þetta er svo sem alveg jafn gott. Um hvað viltu tala við mig, spurði Bush eldri. Árásina á turna yðar. Hryllilegt, hryllilegt. Þér og sonur yðar eigið samúð vora óskipta. Þakka þér fyrir, sagði forsetinn fyrrverandi, þú veist að ég met þig og vináttu okkar mikils, orð þín veita mér og syni mínum meiri þægð en milljón tunnur af olíu. Vissulega, sagði konungur Sádi-Arabíu, en orðin ein mega sín lítils, og olía rann ekki í æðum þeirra sem brunnu inni í turnunum. Nei, blóð þarf að koma í staðinn fyrir blóð. Báðir gömlu mennirnir þögðu, hugsu. Fahd hélt áfram. Það hefur ekki farið fram hjá oss að fimmtán af þeim níttján sem brenndu



young racial-minority people in Iceland, and certainly that there are inequalities — for example, Iceland has a higher drop-out rate from upper secondary school among young immigrants than the EEA average.<sup>111</sup> As Eiríkur Örn expresses these profound identity conflicts in *Illska*,<sup>112</sup>

Við viljum að þetta sé ljóst:  
 Þú tilheyrir ekki okkur.  
 Þú tilheyrir okkur.  
 Þú tilheyrir ekki okkur.  
 Þú tilheyrir ekki okkur.  
 Þú tilheyrir okkur.  
 Þú tilheyrir ekki okkur.  
 Þú tilheyrir okkur.  
 Þú tilheyrir okkur.  
 Og maður veit aldrei hvort er verra.

We want this to be clear:  
 You don't belong to us.  
 You belong to us.  
 You don't belong to us.  
 You don't belong to us.  
 You belong to us.  
 You don't belong to us.

111 Hanna Ragnarsdóttir, “Competences for Active Communication and Participation in Diverse Societies: Views of Young People in Iceland,” in *Intercultural Competence in Education: Alternative Approaches for Different Times*, eds. Fred Dervin and Zehavit Gross (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 75; cf. Hanna Ragnarsdóttir, *Collisions and Continuities: Ten Immigrant Families and Their Children in Icelandic Society and Schools* (Saarbrücken: vdm Verlag Dr. Müller, 2008); Gunnar J. Gunnarsson et al., “Friendship, Diversity and Fear: Young People’s Life Views and Life Values in a Multicultural Society,” *Nordidactica: Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education* (2015:2): 94–113. A helpful and rounded anecdotal account is provided by Viðar Þorsteinsson and Yousef Ingi Tamimi, “Maður verður að hafa húmor fyrir sjálfum sér: Viðar Þorsteinsson og Yousef Ingi Tamimi ræða saman,” in *Íslam með afslætti*, eds. Auður Jónsdóttir and Óttar Martin Norðfjörð (Reykjavík: Nýhil, 2008), 142–51.

112 Norðdalhl, *Illska*, 62.

turna sonar yðar til grunna og drápu þusundir þegna ríkis hans voru þegnar vorir, því býð ég yður þetta, vér munum velja jafn marga af vorum þegnum til að deyja og dóu af þegnum sonar yðar. Þetta yrðu allt frjálsir þegnar, enginn glæpalýður, af báðum kynjum og öllum þjóðfélagsstigum, jafnt pöpull sem aðalbornir. Vér myndum brenna þá inni í vöruskemmu eða fjósi. Fyrrum leiðtogi hins frjálsa heims starði í gaupnir sér þögull. Nei, sagði hinn aldni pólitikus, það mun aldrei ganga, kjósendur munu aldrei samþykkja að hægt verði að gjalda fyrir líf þeirra sem dóu í New York með lífi þinna þegna, jafnvel þótt fjórir væru drepnir fyrir hvern þann sem hryðjuverkamennirnir drápu. Líf er ómetanlegt. Þá hvesstist Sádinn. Ertu að segja oss, sagði hann skrækri röddu, ertu að segja oss að líf eins af vorum þegnum, eitt lækningatækið pípti, sé ekki jafn, annað tæki fór að skríkja, mikils virði, bjalla glumdi fyrir utan dyr herbergisins, ekki jafn verðmætt lífi landa yðar? Konungurinn var orðinn náfölnur, það skein af svitaslikju á andliti hans. Kæri Fahd, elsku besti gamli vinur, hvíslaði George, tveir lækningar þustu inn, Bush rúllaði sér út úr rúminu og lækarnir klofuðu yfir hann með öll þau tól sem þeir gátu borið og, já.”

“Og hvað?” spyr Geiri.

“Og já,” segir Markús, “hann lifði.”



“OK, right,” says Markús, “like, unbelievable situations, if people knew about them they’d go mental. And the state keeps them from people. Like, for example, after Nine Eleven, Bush Junior’s dad went to meet the king of Saudi Arabia, who back then was really old and weak. George Senior hadn’t met the king for years, and he was so ill that it was actually the crown prince who really had the power, but after the planes crashed into the Twin Towers, the old king was really keen on seeing the ex-president. So Bush the First was led into Fahd’s bedroom, where the king was

*You belong to us.  
 You belong to us.  
 And you can't tell which is worse.*

Asked if Tristan is bullied, Íris Sól replies “út af því að hann er svartur, meinarðu? Það eru kannski sumir krakkarnir í bekknum fífl, en ekki þannig fífl. Þau eru ekki rasistar” (“do you mean because he’s black? Perhaps there are some idiots in the class, but not that kind of idiot. They aren’t racists”). Íris Sól’s failure to recognize the exoticization and staring at her boyfriend as racism reflects the novel’s limitations in addressing subtle but still influential forces of normative whiteness.<sup>113</sup>

Key events of *Vinur, sonur, bróðir* include not only the protests on Austurvöllur of 2008–9 but also the protagonists’ endeavours to establish the source of racist hate-mail being sent to their half-Thai schoolmate Súsanna. The novel positions the problem as resolved when the culprits turn out to belong to a family that has fallen from grace on account of the Crash (and are themselves presented as deserving of some pity). Having apologized for their actions, they are suitably wowed by Súsanna’s mother’s Thai food and participate in a traditional dance. Again, the book constructs the effects of racism on children as easily resolvable: once explicit racist abuse has ceased, Súsanna is expected to put her experiences behind her and feel as much a part of Icelandic society as the other characters. Characteristically, however, Súsanna herself is marginal to the efforts of the protagonists to help her, making it clear that the expected subject-position of the reader is that of the ethnic Icelander; Súsanna has little agency. Thus to some extent, all these works show writers responding directly to the great migrations which globalization (and, concomitantly, climate change) are bringing about, and working diligently (if not always successfully) to develop an image of Iceland as a multi-ethnic country. But much about these works also shows the shallow roots of this

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113 Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir, *Hjartsláttur* [Heartbeat] (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2009), 110.

lying surrounded by this collection of the most expensive medical equipment in the world. George went up to the end of the bed and said 'hi'. Fahd replied in this low voice, but the bed was so big that the old president couldn't understand a word, so he went to the side of the bed and said 'hi' again. The king replied in this low voice but the bed was so big that Bush the First couldn't hear what the old man said, so he hung onto the headboard and leant over as far he could, over the bed, and said 'hi' again. The king replied in this low voice, but the bed was so big that George couldn't understand a word, so he got into bed next to Fahd and said 'hi' again. The king replied 'we were trying to ask you to pass us the microphone on the bedside table, but this will do just as well'. 'What do you want to talk to me about?' asked Bush Senior. 'The attack on your towers. Dreadful, dreadful. You and your son have our unalloyed condolences.' 'Thank you', said the former president. You know that I greatly respect you and your friendship. Your words bring me and my son more comfort than a million barrels of oil.' 'Indeed', said the king of Saudi Arabia, 'but words alone have little power, and it was not oil that ran in the veins of the people who burned alive in the towers. No, blood must be given in return for blood.' The two old men fell silent, in thought. Fahd continued, 'It has not escaped us that fifteen of the nineteen who burned the towers of your son to the ground and killed thousands of his country's subjects were subjects of ours; so I offer you this: we will select just as many of our subjects to be killed as there were subjects of your son. They will all be free citizens, not criminals, of both sexes and all classes, both the masses and the nobility. We will burn them alive in a warehouse or barn.' The former leader of the free world stared down silent. 'No', said the aged politician, 'that would never do. The voters will never agree that it is possible to pay for the lives of those who died in New York with the lives of your subjects, even if four were killed for every one that the terrorists killed. Life is priceless.'

image: these children's books suggest a discourse in which the basics of racism are being thought through, but in failing to address racism's subtler dimensions unwittingly reinscribe racist discourses.

### 3.6 Martyrs without Talent: Navigating Orientalist and Nationalist Medievalisms

I have now shown how Crash-novels represent the dependence of Icelandic culture on, on the one hand, a Romantic, nationalist medievalism, and, on the other, the abjection of medievalized non-Western others — which is symptomatic of wider, unquestioned racisms — to sustain mainstream national identity. I have also indicated the awkwardness that arises when these two conflicting discourses of the Middle Ages come into contact. One of the challenges for literary writers engaging with Icelandic nationalist medievalism, then, is to expose and explore its relationship with Orientalist medievalism. Strikingly, as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 4, few post-Crash medievalist texts fail to make some attempt at this, emphasizing how important it is in current Icelandic discourses to navigate these choppy waters of cultural identity. The way that the gears crunch as Icelandic discourses shift between these medievalisms is knowingly exposed in Kári Tulinius's *Píslarvottar án hæfileika: Saga af hnattvæddri kynslóð*.

The collision of traditional Icelandic medievalism with a globalized postmodernity is encapsulated by the novel's subtitle: by calling itself a *saga* ("history") rather than a *skáldsaga* ("novel") the book nods, amongst other things, to its medieval literary forebears; it abets this sense with descriptive chapter-titles that evoke eighteenth-century novels, like "frásögn Geira af ferð sinni til Palestínu" ("Geiri's account of his journey to Palestine"). But the novel is also explicitly about a globalized generation. A group of Reykjavík's well-educated and fashion-conscious twenty-something would-be radicals form a "terroristaklúbb," whose name points firmly to their integration into US-driven discourses of the "war on terror" and their naive lack of reflection

Then the Saudi got agitated. ‘Are you telling us’, he said in this screechy voice, ‘are you telling us that the lives of our subjects’—one medical gadget started beeping—‘is not of equally’—another gadget started wailing—‘great value’—a bell started dinging outside the door of the bedroom—‘not of equal value to the life of your compatriots?’ The king was pale as death, a film of sweat was shining on his face. ‘Dear Fahd, beloved, best, old friend’, whispered George; two doctors burst in, Bush rolled out of the bed and the doctors clambered over him with all the equipment they could carry and, yeah.”

“And what?” asks Geiri.

“And yeah,” says Markús, “he survived.”

on what living up to their name might really entail. Palestine is not only much talked about but also the scene of a key plot development, reflecting widespread sympathy for Palestine in Iceland, and emphasizing how the identity of the protagonists at times depends on a partly fantastical understanding of Middle Eastern politics.<sup>114</sup> Apart from a lot of chatting, mostly in bars, their main achievement is that two of their number gain funding to travel to Palestine as aid workers, only for one of them, Dóra, to be run over by a tank; the incident evokes the death in 2003 of Rachel Corrie, an American killed by an armoured bulldozer. Dóra’s death comes just as the “kitchenware revolution” is gathering pace in Iceland, so that what should be the *terroristaklúbb*’s moment to shine is cast into shadow, putting the characters’ inability to act meaningfully within their own society—let alone elsewhere—in a particularly stark light. Traditional medievalism puts in cameo appearances: a fashionably neo-pagan replica of the Eyrarland Statue of Þór appears as a windowsill ornament; an appropriately dreadful poem by one of the characters portentously invokes “postular og víkingar” (“apostles and

<sup>114</sup> Cf. Kári Tulinius’s subsequent involvement in translating the poetry of Mazen Maarouf: *Ekkert nema Strokleður* [Nothing but an eraser], trans. Aðalsteinn Ásberg, Kári Tulinius, and Sjón (Reykjavík: Dimmur, 2013).

vikings”).<sup>115</sup> But for the most part the medievalism on show in the book works to detach its characters from traditional Icelandic nationalist medievalism, demonstrating that their frame of reference is indeed the popular culture of a globalized, educated elite: J.R.R. Tolkien; *One Thousand and One Nights*; the European Black Death; debates over the proper Icelandic words for zombies and vampires; and a story supposedly from *The Three Princes of Serendip* which a character finds on the Internet and which, rather like Steinar Bragi’s pseudo-folktale in Excerpt 2, serves to provide a pithy moral commentary on the text.<sup>116</sup>

It is against this backdrop that Markús, one of the *terrorista-klúbb*, embarks on a story ostensibly intended to illustrate how terrorist attacks on small nations are harder to cover up and so more effective (see Excerpt 5). The story is a deftly handled narrative cul-de-sac: it has the structure of an extended joke, but collapses without a punchline. Thus the audience is pressed to ask what, apart from an elaborate show of conversational verisimilitude and a display of Markús’s own cluelessness, the digression is for. King Fahd’s language, unlike Bush’s, is archaic, characterized by the now virtually lost honorific plural and by feudalistic vocabulary. Fahd assumes an equally hierarchical responsibility for the attack on the World Trade Center and proposes a diplomatic solution based on revenge. By contrast, Bush, as the leader of the free world, emphasizes his democratic commitment to following the will of his people, implying that the West’s post-Enlightenment individualism is morally superior to Fahd’s feudalism. Markús’s story is, then, ostensibly about the barbarity of King Fahd.

But the unflattering portrayal of Bush — Bush’s choice of metaphor in comparing Fahd’s condolences with a million barrels of oil is at best patronizing to Fahd and at worst lays bare

115 Tulinius, *Píslarvottar án hæfileika*, 54, 100. Kári points out to me that Lilja’s poems are based on the work of the seventeenth-century ranter Abiezer Coppe. I leave it to others to determine how far Lilja and how far Coppe is to blame for their quality.

116 *Ibid.*, 54, 67 119, 126; 128–29, 206–8. I thank Kári for confirming that he did compose this story.

Bush's own venality, making Fahd himself look almost honourable — serves to remind the reader that the barbarities of Saudi Arabia belie the claims to civilization of the countries that provide it with diplomatic and military support. Moreover, it is hard not to read Markús's story in relation to medieval sagas about Icelanders: across the *Íslendingasaga* corpus, there are no fewer than fifteen accounts of people burning their enemies alive by torching the building they are in and preventing their escape. The connection between Markús's story and medieval texts is encouraged by the phrasal verb *brenna inni* ("burn indoors"), rather loosely translated as "burn alive" above, but which specifically denotes this practice, and which surely owes its currency in modern Icelandic to the sagas, pre-eminently *Njáls saga*, where the burning-in is the central event. Moreover, within the medieval saga-corpus, mostly composed by thirteenth-century Christians, accounts of burning-in are presented as characteristic of Iceland's pagan past.<sup>117</sup> In Markús's story, then, Fahd does not straightforwardly represent an Orientalized feudal mentality, but also recalls the carefully calibrated meting out of revenge in the *Íslendingasögur*. If Fahd's vengeful mentality is being condemned here, so too is the culture presented with a complex mixture of admiration and regret by *Njáls saga* itself.<sup>118</sup> Markús's narrative thus gives rise to the question of whether Fahd's solution to the attack on the Twin Towers might not, had it worked, have been less destructive of life, peace, and liberty than the post-9/11 military actions of America and its allies in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan.

Like most post-Crash writing, Kári's work emphasizes the bewilderment of radical young people in an early twenty-first century Iceland which is much too deeply embedded in a wider western popular culture, increasingly far-flung and abstract structures of power, and implicitly an increasingly globalized

117 Lisa Bennett, "The Most Important of Events: The 'Burning-in' Motif as a Site of Cultural Memory in Icelandic Sagas," *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association* 3 (2007): 69–86.

118 I owe my phrasing to F.C. Robinson, *Beowulf and the Appositive Style* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 11.



economy, to find traditional nationalisms and their conceptions of sovereign states useful as a guide to political action — yet altogether unsure of what other maps might be available. Excerpt 5, recognizing both the dystopian neo-feudalism of Saudi Arabia and the injustice of Western Orientalist medievalism, winds up presenting the West, including Iceland, as also partly integrated into a dystopian new Middle Ages. Resisting the hubris of the boom, the book is less focused on trying to see ways to nudge Iceland forward than on critiquing Iceland for thinking it is so far forward when in fact it has so far to go.

This is not to say that putting Icelandic politics into a dialectic with the politics of the Global South cannot be fruitful. When, in autumn 2008, the Icelandic government had to accept a \$2bn loan from the International Monetary Fund, Icelanders were appalled. This was partly because of a sense of national shame that Iceland was (in the words of Gisli Palsson and E. Paul Durrenberger) “in the same situation as Third World countries and Greece.” But their fear also arose from their familiarity “with the negative impact of the IMF on other countries.”<sup>119</sup> “Þeir segja að við verðum Kúba norðursins ef við samþykkjum þetta ekki” (“they say that we will become the Cuba of the North if we don’t agree to this”), Einar Már observed when the Icelandic state agreed to insure foreign deposits in Landsbanki’s Icesave scheme, before going on to say that “við verðum Haítí norðursins ef við samþykkjum þetta” (“we will be the Haiti of the North if we do agree”).<sup>120</sup> The comparison belittles the plight of Haiti, but Einar Már’s warning about the dangers of disaster capitalism in Iceland shows an informed sensitivity to the destruction wreaked on Haiti through ostensibly well-meaning foreign aid.<sup>121</sup>

Musically the most impressive work directly connected with the Crash is probably the concept album *Helvítis fokking funk*

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119 Gisli Palsson and E. Paul Durrenberger, “Introduction: The Banality of Financial Evil,” in *Gambling Debt: Iceland’s Rise and Fall in the Global Economy*, eds. E. Paul Durrenberger and Gisli Palsson (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015), xix.

120 Einar Már Guðmundsson, *Bankastræti núll*, 125.

121 *Ibid.*, 125–33.

by the Samúel Jón Samúelsson Big Band. *Helvítis fokking funk* alludes with its cover images to the protests on Austurvöllur (though it actually depicts UK riot police) and draws its name from a protest placard made by the artist Gunnar Már Pétursson which read “helvítis fokking fokk” (“bloody fucking fuck”), reflecting his speechlessness at the magnitude of the corruption unveiled. Aided by a comedy sketch by Jón Gnarr depicting the creation of the sign, the phrase swiftly became proverbial in Iceland — it is a favourite, for example, of Guðni’s in *Önnur líf*.<sup>122</sup> Particularly on the opening track, “Chicken Street,” the album uses the genre of Afrobeat, alluding to and so conveying to an Icelandic context the blistering critiques of successive Nigerian governments by the Nigerian musician Fela Kuti. Meanwhile, the track takes its name from the street in Kabul where three Icelandic peacekeepers were attacked by a suicide bomber in 2004 while accompanying their superior on an ill-advised souvenir-shopping trip, eliciting the equally ill-advised comment from this superior that “shit happens.”<sup>123</sup> What Samúel Jón’s composition achieves, however, is the respectful adoption of a mode of resistance from Nigeria, and the implicit expression of solidarity with it, rather the abjection of the developing world. A similar strategy is the use in *Draumalandið* of clips from Samarendra Das’s 2005 documentary *Wira Pdika*, on the destruction wrought by bauxite mining among Khond people in Odisha.<sup>124</sup> It is telling, however, that the global perspective of *Draumalandið* is more apparent in the 2009 documentary than the 2006 book on which it is based. This hints that the realization that Iceland’s recent wealth is dependent on earlier colonial and then post-

122 Ævar Örn Jóseppson, *Önnur líf*, 51, 91, cf. 193.

123 “Ordnung im Chaos: Die Samúel Jón Samúelsson Big Band,” *Inreykjavík.is*, April 15, 2014, <http://www.inreykjavik.is/ordnung-im-chaos-die-samuel-jon-samuelsson-big-band>; cf. Björn Þór Sigbjörnsson and Bergsteinn Sigurðsson, *Ísland í aldanna rás, 2001–2010: Saga lands og þjóðar ár frá ári* (Reykjavík: JPV, 2012), 156.

124 Þorfinnur Guðnason and Andri Snær Magnason, dir., *Draumalandið*, 32°54”–32°59”; 38°08”–38°55”, 49°43”–50°13” (cf. 33°24”–34°30” on bauxite production in Jamaica).

colonial structures of power in the global economy, of which Iceland is a beneficiary and increasingly a promoter, is only just beginning to sink in.<sup>125</sup>

### 3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has drawn on post-Crash literature but also a range of other telling cultural developments to sketch a broad context for understanding the Icelandic culture of the boom and bust, abetting existing work in other disciplines that has shown how it is essential to understand Iceland's nationalist story and post-colonial anxieties in order to understand the Crash. This nationalist and post-colonial context is, of course, far from sufficient for a full explanation of how the Icelandic boom was allowed to unfold the way it did, but it is a dimension which literary writers have evidenced extensively, both knowingly and unwittingly.

By an odd coincidence, the term "neomedievalism" not only denotes the use and abuse of texts and tropes from the Middle Ages under neoliberalism, but also a theory of statecraft, first articulated in 1977 in Hedley Bull's *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*.<sup>126</sup> The coincidence is helpful for interpreting the place of medievalism in relation to Icelandic politics. Bull's neomedievalism sees a globalized world as post-national, and sees its political order as analogous to high-medieval Europe, where neither states nor the Church, nor other territorial powers, exercised full sovereignty, but instead participated in complex, overlapping and incomplete sovereignties. The figure of the terrorist epitomized by the attack on the World Trade Center in 2011 has been seen by American administrations as belonging to a neomedieval world; and America has responded by treating itself as, for example, exempt from the Geneva Con-

125 Andri Snær Magnason, *Dreamland: A Self-Help Manual for a Frightened Nation*, trans. Nicholas Jones (London: Citizen Press, 2008).

126 Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 3rd edn. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 245–46; cf. Holsinger, *Neomedievalism* and Victoria Elizabeth Cooper, "Fantasies of the North: Medievalism and Identity in *Skyrim*" (Ph.D. diss., University of Leeds, 2016), 52–87.

ventions on prisoners of war when dealing with them, as Óttar M. Norðfjörð's *Örvitinn* explores with particular force.

But Iceland too, as a microstate which despite the aspirations of its independence movement has never fitted neatly into the post-Treaty of Westphalia model of sovereignty, finds its place in the world uncomfortably familiar from Bull's "neomedieval" world order. Even before independence from Denmark, its future sovereignty was already compromised by an American military occupation which the country formally endorsed but in fact had little choice in, and then by Britain's response to the banking crisis, situating Iceland uncomfortably closely to the medievalized antagonists of the Western "war on terror." Yet its position as a post-colonial micro-state with unusually high cultural capital, attributable to its perceived racial and cultural purity among Germanic-speaking nations, helped it to win international acceptance of a unilateral extension of its territorial waters, eventually to 200 nautical miles, between 1958 and 1976, facing down British diplomatic and military opposition to this, and, following the Crash, to win international sympathy on the question of the Icesave debt.

This chapter began by exploring a key case-study of the collisions of different medievalist discourses, which I have labelled "nationalist medievalism" and "Orientalist medievalism." By looking at the discourses of terrorism in the Icesave dispute, showing how traditional, nationalist medievalism in Iceland has an important and ongoing role in Iceland's negotiation of its place in an increasingly "neomedieval"-looking world order. I used literary evidence to outline Iceland's medievalist cultural capital and its National-Romantic roots, and then showed how the medievalist discourse of Iceland's fitness to belong among the world's "developed" countries nonetheless depends on the abjection of "third-world" Others. Finally, I pointed to the emergence of a critical discourse on these problems in literature and other art forms arising from the Crash, while also indicating that the predominantly relatively young artists discussed are for the most part in the midst of (re-)orientating their world-views

to accommodate an understanding of Iceland's integration into colonial and neo-colonial structures of power and exploitation.

The next chapter turns to writers a generation or two older than the children of the 1970s and 1980s who have dominated the last two, to investigate in more depth the ways in which older writers have, with varying degrees of success, attempted to use medievalism, drawn both from nationalist and Orientalist reservoirs, as a critical discourse in relation to the present.



## Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson, Knight of Industry

### 4.1 Remaking the Medieval

Perhaps one of the key differences between Icelandic Crash-writing and its Anglophone equivalents is that Icelandic writers have been able to latch on to real figures from the banking boom, centering their characters and stories firmly on real-life biography. This is an evident strength of how Icelandic writers have been able to respond to the Crash. It is striking, however, that the real-life figures treated in this way are few: primarily Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson (born 1967, the co-owner of a controlling share in Landsbanki from 2002, named the richest Icelander by *Forbes* not only for 2005 but still in 2017), his father Björgólfur Guðmundsson (born 1941, chairman of Landsbanki 2003–8, and the person who has experienced the world’s biggest personal bankruptcy), and to a lesser extent their competitor Jón Ásgeir Jóhannesson (born 1968, one of the key owners of Glitnir, and a major owner of numerous Icelandic and UK high street brands). As the prosecutions following the Crash have emphasized, writers have had a true rogues’ gallery from which to choose as they criticize the banking boom. Thus the focus on Björgólfur Thor (who has not been prosecuted) reflects the tangibility to writers of the public image which Björgólfur in particular cultivated. Examining this interaction between

Björgólfur's own self-mythologization and writers' renarrations of it provides particularly interesting insights, then, into how finance can be made accessible to fiction, and what the limitations of this biographical approach to narrating finance are. Several crime novels model major characters clearly on Björgólfur Thor: the main examples are Óttar M. Norðfjörð's thriller *Át-tablaðarósinn* (where he is the basis for Egill Brandt, discussed in §2.5.2 above) and Sigrún Davíðsdóttir's *Samhengi hlutanna* (discussed in §2.3.2, where he manifests as Óttar Hafsteins-son). But Björgólfur is most prominent in more determinedly literary material, which ostentatiously rewrites his biography through the prism of medieval Icelandic sagas. Bjarni Bjarnason's *Mannorð* rewrites Björgólfur as Starkaður-Leví, drawing on the character Starkaður Stórvirksson in the legendary saga *Gautreks saga*.<sup>1</sup> Bjarni Harðarson's *Sigurðar saga fóts* uses the medieval romance-saga of the same name to rewrite a blend of Björgólfur Thor and Jón Ásgeir as Sigurður fótur. *Töfrahöllin*, by Böðvar Guðmundsson, draws on both families in shaping its sinister investor Kormákur Cooltran. Prior to these, Þráinn Bertelsson, one of the few writers to highlight the problems of the banking boom long before the Crash, wrote crime novels that were impressively well researched *romans à clef* focusing on the escapades of the Björgólfar (figured as Haraldur Rúriksson in *Dauðans óvissi tími*, 2004) and Jón Ásgeir (figured as Magnús Mínus in *Valkyrjur*, 2005). The former novel makes extensive use of *Fóstbræðra saga* and the latter *Völsunga saga*. This chapter focuses on two of these novels as particularly interesting explorations of the mythmaking by Icelandic financiers and novelists: *Sigurðar saga fóts* and *Mannorð*. Happily, *Mannorð* has also appeared in English translation, as *The Reputation*.

1 Cf. "Rithöfundur og talsmaður deila um skáldsögu: 'Mannorðskaup eru á hans áhugasviði,'" *Eyjan*, December 12, 2011, <http://eyjan.pressan.is/frettir/2011/12/12/talsmadur-og-rithofundur-deila-um-skaldsogu-a-upplestri-mannordskaup-eru-a-hans-ahugasvidi>; Luisa Kroll, "Thor's Saga," *Forbes*, March 28, 2005, <https://www.forbes.com/global/2005/0328/078.html>.



Thus Björgólfur Thor himself is only in a limited sense the subject of this chapter: rather, the subject is the myth of Björgólfur Thor, because it is emphatically this to which novelists have responded. (It is partly for this reason that this chapter refers to him following Icelandic convention, rather than by his preferred international moniker of Thor Bjorgolfsson.) Analysing the representation of Björgólfur Thor does afford a case-study of the representation of financiers after the Crash, but much more importantly plunges us into examining the role of medievalism in Icelandic discourse, both during the banking boom and in its wake. More than most of the protagonists of Iceland's boom, Björgólfur Thor developed a prominent public persona. He made much of both the ancestral and the mythic resonances of his second name, calling himself Thor in English; calling his investment firm *Novator*, understood as a Latinizing (albeit coincidentally feminizing) pun meaning “new Thor”;<sup>2</sup> and calling his plan to build a luxury yacht *Project Mars*, an *interpretatio romana* of Þór.<sup>3</sup> A conveniently Anglophone example of Björgólfur Thor's public image as the boom reached fever pitch is the 2005 *Forbes* interview tellingly (if tackily) entitled “Thor's Saga,” whose header runs “after his father was felled by a business scandal, Thor Bjorgolfsson went to find his fortune and redeem the family name. He's now Iceland's first billionaire”:<sup>4</sup>

Bjorgolfsson has been on a quest to redeem his family's reputation. “Respect is the number one thing that occupies my mind,” says Thor (pronounced “tore”), as he is universally known. “Power, money, that's just the road to respect,” he explains, before paraphrasing a well-known Icelandic verse: “After all, money disappears, friends die, and you die your-

2 Alda Björk Valdimarsdóttir and Guðni Elísson, “Og eftir sitjum við með sektarkennd í brjósti”: Hallgrímur Helgason og íslenska efnahagshrunið,” *Ritið* 12, no. 2 (2012): 169–97, at 188.

3 Simon Bowers and Sigrún Davíðsdóttir, “Icelandic Tycoon Still Living the High Life in London After the Collapse of Icesave,” *The Observer*, August 28, 2011, 35.

4 Kroll, “Thor's Saga.”

self, but your reputation remains.” That pursuit has led him to the U.S., Russia, Bulgaria and eventually back to Iceland for a triumphant homecoming, when he seized control of the nation’s oldest bank and installed his father as its chairman.

Like his Viking ancestors, Thor got mad, got even — and got very rich.

The “well-known Icelandic verse” comes from the Old Norse mythological poem *Hávamál* (see §3.2 above).<sup>5</sup> Icelandic novelists’ usual response to Björgólfur’s medievalist myth-making is correspondingly epitomized by the epigraph to Óttar M. Norðfjörð’s satirical *Tíu litlir bankastrákar*, where Óttar uses the simple expedient of selecting an adjacent maxim from the same poem: “margur verður af aurum api” (“money makes an ape of many”) — that is, the response of novellists after the Crash is to say, “if you can do medievalism, we can do it better.”<sup>6</sup> How far Björgólfur Thor himself is to be credited with the cultivation of his medievalist image and how far he simply reflected the expectations of his Icelandic audience back at them is unclear — certainly his autobiography vacillates between an insistence, on the one hand, on how as an investor he likes to keep a low profile, and on how throughout his adult life he has sought to distance himself from Iceland, and, on the other, a patent obsession with cultivating a public persona (of which the autobiography is itself evidence).<sup>7</sup> Unsurprisingly, then, both *Mannorð* and *Sigurðar saga fóts* present a character at times bewildered by the persona which he finds himself inhabiting.

5 Cf. David A.H. Evans, ed., *Hávamál* [*The speech of the High One*] (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1986), 54 [st. 76].

6 Óttar M. Norðfjörð, *Tíu litlir bankastrákar* [*Ten little banker-boys*] (Reykjavík: Sögur, 2008); cf. Evans, ed., *Hávamál*, 54 (st. 75). See also Sigfús Bjartmarsson’s earlier poetry collection *Andræði* [*Antonymic*] (Reykjavík: Bjartur, 2004), which makes extensive use of this strategy.

7 Thor Björgólfsson and Andrew Cave, *Billions to Bust — and Back: How I Made, Lost, and Rebuilt a Fortune, and What I Learned on the Way* (London: Profile, 2014).

The recent surge of academic work on medievalism has tended to focus on Anglophone, Anglo-American literature, and the present book is intended as one step towards rectifying this.<sup>8</sup> Focusing on Anglophone writing, John M. Ganim has suggested that despite

its continuing power as a source of imagery for popular culture, from films to computer games, the Medieval has lost its status as a critical discourse in relation to the present. It is no longer an Utopian ideal to be recovered, while its negative rhetorical implications, from “medieval justice” to the “medieval” social conditions and practices in, most typically and revealingly, Islamic states, remain almost unquestioned.<sup>9</sup>

How accurate Ganim’s statement is depends partly on what one accepts as “critical discourse” or a “Utopian ideal”: even when he wrote, medieval imagery was being touted by white-supremacists, and white-supremacist medievalism has become increasingly prominent in Anglophonia in recent years. Ganim was also writing before the rise of the self-professed Islamic State and its own mobilization of selected medievalisms. Still, as a generalization about mainstream popular culture, Ganim’s statement is plausible, and is also resonant in an Icelandic context. Still, his claims less obviously hold true for mainstream Icelandic culture than many places in the West. Although medieval texts have enjoyed diminishing cultural salience in Iceland over the last century and a half, the Romantic Nationalism developed in the nineteenth century remains central enough to current Icelandic culture, and medieval Icelandic literature central enough to nationalism, for medievalism to continue as a potent

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8 Cf. Vincent Ferré and Alicia C. Montoya, “Speaking of the Middle Ages Today: European and Transatlantic Perspectives,” in *Medievalism on the Margins*, eds. Karl Fugelso, Vincent Ferré, and Alicia C. Montoya (Cambridge: Brewer, 2015), 89–91, at 89.

9 John M. Ganim, *Medievalism and Orientalism: Three Essays on Literature, Architecture and Cultural Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 4.

resource in Icelandic politics.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Guðni Th. Jóhannesson has ventured that the “use of Iceland’s past [...] was probably never as pronounced as during the economic boom in the first decade of the twenty-first century.”<sup>11</sup> This chapter traces how the medieval has been used in political criticism, and is also able to chart patchy but not uninteresting invocations of medievalist utopias. Meanwhile, as I discussed in the previous chapter, the importance of nationalist medievalism gives rise to a particular anxiety about the “negative rhetorical implications” of the medieval. Icelandic political discourses are well integrated into wider western Islamophobic medievalisms, and the facile equation *medieval* = *muslim* = *malignant* has gained popularity there as elsewhere. In Iceland, however, this equation of the medieval with the barbaric is more discomfiting than in places which set less store by their own medieval past, setting up interesting tensions in Icelandic identity.

In turn, medievalism, and particularly the idea of the feudal, is used by Icelandic writers to bring into focus the importance of social class in Icelandic society, and to challenge a dominant discourse which presents that society as egalitarian and indeed classless. Interestingly, the medievalizing handlings of Björgólfur Thor examined here are mostly by authors older than those on whom I focused in Chapters 2–3. Bjarni Harðarson and Bjarni Bjarnason were born in the 1960s, Einar Már Guðmundsson and Þórunn Erlu-Valdimarsdóttir in 1954, Þráinn Bertelsson in 1944, and Böðvar Guðmundsson in 1939. The fact that their work shows a deeper engagement with Iceland’s medieval literary heritage than that of the mostly younger writers examined in Chapter 2 surely reflects the greater prominence that *Íslendingasögur* once had in Icelandic culture, combined with the perspective of writers whose formative years came before neoliberalization. These older writers, writing from a perspec-

10 Jón Karl Helgason, “Continuity? The Icelandic Sagas in Post-Medieval Times,” in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 64–81.

11 Guðni Thorlaicus Jóhannesson, *The History of Iceland* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2013), 141.

tive less determined by capitalist-realist norms, tend to see the Crash not as the most momentous political event in their adult lives, but rather as a logical consequence of more deeply rooted social forces.

This chapter focuses its case study on Bjarni Harðarson's *Sigurðar saga fóts*, and so begins by both summarizing the novel and providing a short biography of Björgólfur Thor to contextualize the analyses that follow.

#### 4.2 A Biography and a Satire

*Sigurðar saga fóts* is a fictionalized, satirical account of the developments which led to the 2008 financial crisis. Although it changes names and blends or invents characters and events, it is in many ways a faithful account of the privatization, boom, and, to a lesser extent, bust of the Icelandic banking sector. As my discussion of capitalist realism in Chapter 2 implies, the nature of the Crash makes the novel's satirical form awkward: often, in seeking to satirize the culture of the boom, *Sigurðar saga fóts* finds itself a somewhat pale reflection of a reality whose outlandishness outpaces satire. But at times the novel rises insightfully to the challenge. It is worth outlining its relationship to real life: doing so provides an exposition of the allusions of the novel, a convenient summary of key aspects of the Icelandic financial boom for readers who may not be familiar with them, and a demonstration of how the structure of *Sigurðar saga fóts* is reminiscent of the great intergenerational histories of the *Íslendingasögur*. The main character, Sigurður fótur Bjarnhéðinsson (1966–), is most closely modelled on Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson (1967–), who became the effective owner of the newly privatized Landsbanki late in 2002, blended with Jón Ásgeir Jóhannesson (1968–), a retail magnate who in 1999 gained extensive control of the bank soon to be known as Glitnir. As *Sigurðar saga fóts* itself implies, fact regarding the larger-than-life cast and murky dealings of the Icelandic financial crisis is itself sometimes hard to distinguish from fiction, and rather than burdening the account below with a plenitude of references to

often disparate sources, I have instead provided or improved English-language Wikipedia entries for key figures.<sup>12</sup>

*Sigurðar saga fóts* focuses on the relationship between the children of Langa-Fritz, a French consul, known as the Fiddarnir, and Oddur Jónsson, a *hreppstjóri* (which might best be rendered “chairman of the parish council”) living at Höfði on the river Skrauta, the finest salmon-river in Iceland. The comment that “Fiddarnir voru [...] næstum eins finir og Thorsararnir” (“the Fiddarnir were [...] almost as elevated as the Thorsararnir”) superficially denies the identity of the fictitious Fiddar and the real-life Thorsarar, but in practice indicates it.<sup>13</sup> The Thorsarar were the children of Thor Jensen (1863–1947), a Dane who moved to Iceland in 1878 and became not only a businessman but also one of the wealthiest people in the country, being credited with a major role in introducing capitalism to Iceland. The Thorsarar were enormously influential in Icelandic politics and business around the middle of the twentieth century: most obviously, Thor’s third son Ólafur Thors led the Independence Party during 1934–61 and was prime minister of Iceland six times. Thor bought up and to some extent rented out large tracts of land, including, over a gradual period, much of the land and all of the fishing rights along the famous salmon-river Haffjarðará, where he took family holidays.<sup>14</sup> In *Sigurðar saga fóts*, the name of Oddur Jónsson alludes to the real-life Oddastaðavatn, the lake where the Haffjarðará rises; Oddur lives at Höfði, recalling the Höfði near Oddastaðavatn; the Skrauta

12 However, the single handiest secondary source for the below is Roger Boyes, *Meltdown Iceland: Lessons on the World Financial Crisis from a Small Bankrupt Island* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009). For Björgólfur Thor’s own, autobiographical account of events, see Björgólfsson and Cave, *Billions to Bust*, and for the account of his activities in Russia from the perspective of one of his erstwhile business partners see Þorfinnur Ómarsson, *Ingimar H. Ingimarsson: Sagan sem varð að segja* (Reykjavík: Bjartur, 2011).

13 Bjarni Harðarson, *Sigurðar saga fóts: Íslensk riddarasaga* [*The saga of Sigurður Foot: An Icelandic romance*] (Selfoss: Sæmundur, 2010), 11.

14 Guðmundur Magnússon, *Thorsararnir: auður — völd — örlög* (Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 2005), 146.

represents the Haffjarðará; and accordingly, in the novel, it is the Fiddar rather than the Thorsarar who gradually destroy the rural community along it through their aggressive acquisitiveness.

The main model for Sigurður fótur is Björgólfur Thor, one of Thor Jensen's many great-grandchildren. The main difference between Bjarni Harðarson's Sigurður fótur and Björgólfur Thor is that Sigurður is written (even) larger than life. In 1928, Thor Jensen's eighth child, Margrét Þorbjörg Thors, married Hallgrímur Fr. Hallgrímsson, best known as the chairman of Shell Oil in Iceland; their first child was Margrét Þóra Hallgrímsson, who, after a fleeting first marriage to Haukur Clausen and a longer second one to the American Nazi George Lincoln Rockwell, was in 1966 brought home from America on her parents' instructions, along with her children (one by Clausen and three by Rockwell). Björgólfur Guðmundsson married her in 1963, adopting her children, and in 1967 the couple had Björgólfur Thor. Both Björgólfur Thor and Sigurður fótur spend time studying at undergraduate level in the USA (but Sigurður only gets a diploma, not a bachelor's degree). Both have a period as self-employed music promoters in Iceland before going into business with their fathers (but Sigurður's self-employment extends to drug-smuggling). Both owe their success to business in the ex-USSR (but Sigurður's is not in metropolitan St Petersburg, like Björgólfur Thor's, but in the peripheral, predominantly Muslim Turkmenistan). And, crucially, both are offered effective ownership of a newly privatized state bank by Freedmanite politicians who nonetheless want to keep these assets in Icelandic hands in order to ensure they remain within established networks of patronage and clientage.

Significantly, despite his elevated maternal pedigree, Björgólfur Thor has had an awkward relationship with certain sections of the Icelandic elite: Björgólfur Guðmundsson became the managing director of the upstart Icelandic shipping company Hafskip in 1977, but, according to a widely accepted version of events, in 1985 (when Björgólfur Thor was about 18) key investors in Iceland's dominant shipping company Eimskip used their banking and political connections to bring about the bank-

ruptcy of Hafskip and the prosecution of Björgólfur for fraud, embezzlement, and other misdemeanours. Although some of the prosecutions stuck and Björgólfur received a twelve-month suspended jail sentence, the affair was widely seen (and certainly by the father and son) as persecution for challenging the incumbent business elite, and the two Björgólfar have presented their subsequent business activities as an effort to regain their reputations and pay their opponents back. Björgólfur Thor's enthusiasm for asserting his membership of the Thorsarar led him to purchase the townhouse Thor built in 1908, Fríkirkjuvegur 11, from the City of Reykjavík.

Björgólfur Thor's genealogy is fundamentally repeated in *Sigurðar saga fóts*, with exaggeration in order to channel more of Iceland's class tensions into Sigurður's character. Oddur's first daughter Hulda (born c. 1899) has Down's syndrome; as in the novella *Skugga-Baldur* (2003) by Sjón, the sexual abuse faced by a woman with Down's functions as a marker of premodernity. Hulda is made pregnant by one of the visiting Fiddar, Fritz L. Fritz, but the Fiddar refuse to accept paternity which, coupled with their destruction of Skrautadalur's community through their aggressive purchases of land and fishing rights, leads to an irreparable rift between them and Oddur's family. Hulda's daughter by Fritz is christened Hulda Skrauta Oddsdóttir, and on the death of her mother she is fostered in Reykjavík by her maternal aunt Guðríður (c. 1909–79). Hulda Skrauta's wayward youth sees her getting pregnant, apparently — in an echo of Þóra Hallgrímsson's marriage to Rockwell — by an American serviceman; but one Bjarnhéðinn kaupahéðinn Jónsson accepts the paternity (after which, like her model, Hulda settles down to being a prudent housewife and mother, becoming a touchstone for sensible, traditional values in the novel). Bjarnhéðinn, of course, parallels the real-life Björgólfur Guðmundsson (though he dies in 2004 whereas the real-life Björgólfur Guðmundsson is, at the time of writing, living, and, unlike Björgólfur, Bjarnhéðinn is an alcoholic to the end, whereas Björgólfur has apparently been dry, and a major supporter of Iceland's Alcoholics Anonymous, since 1978). Defying her own rejection by the Fiddar, Hulda



Skrauta names her child Sigurður Frits — the ancestral name-element, of course, paralleling that of Björgólfur Thor — but Sigurður becomes generally known as Sigurður fótur instead (for reasons discussed below). Björgólfur Thor's purchase of Fríkirkjuvegur 11 is recast as Sigurður fótur's futile attempt to avenge himself on the Fiddar by buying parts of Skrautudalur.

*Sigurðar saga fóts* further develops the precarious nature of Sigurður's connection with the Fiddar through an admixture into his character of the biography of Jón Ásgeir Jóhannesson, who with his father Jóhannes Jónsson rose from a lower middle-class background to found, in 1989, the supermarket chain Bónus, from which grew Baugur Group, a business empire including, at its peak, many UK high street brands. Through Baugur's holdings in Glitnir, Jón Ásgeir became one of the most powerful figures in the Icelandic banking sector. His disruption of Icelandic hierarchies was a major source of friction with incumbent elites, and especially with Davíð Oddsson, the right-wing politician whose Friedmanite economic reforms were a direct cause of the Icelandic boom and bust. Thus in *Sigurðar saga fóts*, Sigurður's father Bjarnhéðinn is from a poor fishing family, while the partner of Sigurður's adoptive maternal grandmother, after whom Sigurður fótur is named, is a blacksmith called Sigurður stál í Beggjakoti. Summers in the countryside at Beggjakot during Sigurður fótur's youth become a touchstone in the novel for a sane and meaningful existence; Sigurður stál is not only from the rural working class but also a staunch socialist, providing the novel with an anchor point in the socialism that flourished in the earlier twentieth century.

Jón Ásgeir's success began with the Bónus supermarket chain, but the beginning of Baugur Group and their investment career was a highly leveraged takeover of their main supermarket competitor Hagkaup, then owned by the four children of its founder Pálmi Jónsson, facilitated by the bank Kaupþing under the leadership of Sigurður Einarsson. A lack of confidence among Icelandic investors almost led to the deal crippling Kaupþing, until a friend of Jóhannes Jónsson's, Odd Reitan, who owned Norway's largest retailer Reitangruppen, took a 20% stake in Baugur,

boosting its perceived credibility. Despite fractious relationships with Pálmi Jónsson's sons, Jón Ásgeir subsequently married Pálmi Jónsson's eldest daughter Ingibjörg, who also became his business partner. This story is carried across into *Sigurðar saga fóts*, with the sinister Hugi Sandal of the investment bank Blöndal & Sandal suggesting that the baffled Sigurður rescue his father's debt-crushed business Bjarnhéðins og Co. by floating it on the Icelandic stockmarket and taking over its more successful competitor Nord-bræður; Icelandic investors are again sceptical, putting Blöndal & Sandal at risk; but the deal is rescued when a Norwegian steps in to buy "bréf fyrir fáeinar milljónir" ("shares for a few million") — a mark of foreign approval which sends Icelandic investors, whose lack of self-assuredness implicitly leaves them craving the wisdom of their Nordic cousins, into a panic of enthusiasm for the company's shares.<sup>15</sup> Sigurður goes on to enter a marriage of convenience with Ella, a sister of the Nord brothers, though his real affections are for his de facto wife, the ostentatiously working-class Vala Maríudóttir.

The story of Sigurður fótur and Bjarnhéðinn's purchase of Nord-bræður differs from Bónus's real-life Hagkaup purchase in that it is part of an elaborate money-laundering deal, which picks up instead on suspicions about the Björgólfar's business dealings in St Petersburg and about putative roles for the Icelandic banking system in enabling tax evasion and the laundering (in particular) of Russian gangster money (though these suspicions have not subsequently been supported by convincing evidence):<sup>16</sup> Hugi Sandal sends Sigurður fótur to Turkmenistan to meet the German-Russian gangster Kex Wragadjip, where Sigurður negotiates for Blöndal & Sandal to borrow \$400m to buy an old Soviet building materials factory on Kex's behalf, which Kex will then repay with interest via Norway in the form of share purchases in Bjarnhéðins og Co.<sup>17</sup> With not only the

15 Bjarni Harðarson, *Sigurðar saga fóts*, 125.

16 Sigrún Davíðsdóttir, "Iceland, Russia and Bayrock: Some Facts, Less Fiction," *Icelog*, May 30, 2017, <http://uti.is/2017/05/iceland-russia-and-bayrock-some-facts-less-fiction>.

17 Bjarni Harðarson, *Sigurðar saga fóts*, 121.

threat of bankruptcy hard on his heels, but now the added risk that bankruptcy would entail losing Kex's money and incurring his lethal wrath (emphasized when Kex sends Hugi's stooge Ásgrímur back to Iceland as a consignment of dogfood), Sigurður fótur and his associates have no choice but to hurtle onwards in ever more over-leveraged excess until the crisis breaks. In reality, Björgólfur Thor avoided Iceland by living and working in London, from where, at the time of writing, he continues his business activities. But in *Sigurðar saga fóts*, Sigurður is sent to safety in the tribal areas of Pakistan near the Afghan border, giving the novel a dramatically non-realist denouement.

### 4.3 *Útrásarvíkingar*

*Út* means “out”; *rás*, in this context, means “a rush, race, sprint, expansion”; and *víkingur* (pl. *víkingar*), in Old Icelandic meaning any kind of pirate, today generally denotes a construct of nineteenth-century National Romanticism, firmly embedded in the popular imagination as ethnically Scandinavian (and therefore prototypically white), manly, nobly savage, and inclined — to cite a collocate which is currently used with startling nonchalance in the Anglophone world — to rape and pillage.<sup>18</sup> Thus the term *útrásarvíkingar* came to denote the Icelandic financiers who made a string of high-profile, credit-fuelled purchases of European businesses during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Björgólfur Thor swiftly became the prototypical *útrásarvíkingur*, situating his persona firmly within a medievalizing discourse. The arrival of the word *útrásarvíkingur* was, in fact, a late development in the Icelandic banking boom: the earliest attestation in the online corpus of Icelandic news-

18 The key work on the construction of the Viking is Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000). On “rape and pillage” see Erika Ruth Sigurdson, “Violence and Historical Authenticity: Rape (and Pillage) in Popular Viking Fiction,” *Scandinavian Studies* 86, no. 3 (2014): 249–67.

papers and periodicals Tímarit.is comes from June 1, 2005.<sup>19</sup> Although deeply indebted to Continental National Romanticism, twentieth-century Icelandic nationalist medievalism had previously been too steeped in real medieval sagas to latch on to the “viking” label. In the *Íslendingasögur*, the thirteenth- to fourteenth-century Icelandic histories which narrate the period from around the Scandinavian settlement of Iceland in the 870s to the establishment of Christianity in the eleventh century, young aristocratic farmers and their clients would *fara í víking* (“go raiding”) merely as a sideline to their main business of agriculture: being a viking was a short-term activity, not an identity, and still less an ethnicity. Accordingly, later nationalists generally preferred to locate Icelandic identities in the figure of the *landnámsmaður* or “settler.” But as Icelandic financiers started to make inroads into the UK high street, Anglophone media began speaking of them in terms epitomized by the *Sunday*

- 19 “Peningaskápurinn,” *Fréttablaðið* 5, no. 146, June 1, 2005, 22:  
 “Útrásarvikingarnir í íslensku viðskiptalífi hafa oft talið það hafa gagnast Íslendingum að hér sé návígi mikið” (“the *útrásarvikingar* in Icelandic business life have often considered it useful to Icelanders that they are at very close quarters here”). The seminal works on the *útrásarvikingur* concept were (prophetically) Kristín Loftsdóttir, “Útrás Íslendinga og hnattvæðing þess þjóðlega: Horft til Silvíu Nóttar og Magna,” *Ritið* 1 (2007): 149–76, and (retrospectively) Kristín Loftsdóttir, “Kjarnmesta fólkið í heimi: Prásteif íslenskrar þjóðernishyggi í gegnum lýðveldisbaráttu, útrás og kreppu,” *Ritið* 9, nos. 2–3 (2009): 113–39. Cf. Kristín Loftsdóttir, “Vikings Invade Present-Day Iceland,” in *Gambling Debt: Iceland’s Rise and Fall in the Global Economy*, eds. E. Paul Durrenberger and Gisli Pálsson (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015), 3–14. Other key contributions are Ann-Sofie Nielsen Gremaud, “The Vikings Are Coming! A Modern Icelandic Self-Image in the Light of the Economic Crisis,” *NORDEUROPAforum* 20 (2010): 87–106; Guðbjört Guðjónsdóttir and Júlíana Magnúsdóttir, “Ingólfur Arnarson, Björgólfur Thor og Ólafur bóndi á Þorvaldseyri: Karlmennska, kynjakerfi og þjóðernissjálfsmynd eftir efnahagshrun,” *Rannsóknir í félagsvindum: Stjórn málafræðideild* 12 (2011): 45–53; Katla Kjartansdóttir, “The New Viking Wave: Cultural Heritage and Capitalism,” in *Iceland and Images of the North*, ed. Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (Québec: Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2011), 461–80; Daniel Chartier, *The End of Iceland’s Innocence: The Image of Iceland in the Foreign Media During the Financial Crisis*, trans. Daniel Chartier (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2010), 118–28.

*Times* headline “Iceland Vikings Storm Britain.” This discourse extended a habit dating to the 1980s of describing the financial sector with a jargon of macho violence.<sup>20</sup> So Icelanders used the viking brand to market themselves outside Iceland, and increasingly the term *útrásarvíkingur* gained purchase in Iceland itself. Yet although the term *útrásarvíkingur* was new, it was an extension of a long-standing nationalist medievalism, and this nationalism helped to insulate the banking boom from critical voices. As disquiet about the viability of the Icelandic economy grew and people started to wonder where all the money was really coming from, the idea that Icelanders were, on account of their Viking heritage, simply naturally good at aggressive, high-risk finance became increasingly widely articulated. Everyone but the truly mad understood at some level that these utterances were postmodern playfulness; yet they dovetailed so well with deeply embedded ideas of national and racial supremacy that they nonetheless served as a powerful placebo.

Icelandic novelists reflecting on the Crash have often nodded to, and sometimes drawn heavily on, Iceland’s medieval literary heritage. One might have expected their main reference point to have been the *Íslendingasögur* canonized by nineteenth-century National Romantics in Iceland and beyond, which enjoy a considerable, if diminishing, prominence in Icelandic culture. Sure enough, many writers do mention these for one reason and another. Most importantly for this chapter, Einar Már Guðmundsson’s *Íslenskir kóngar* makes pointed reference to the Viking Age via the *Íslendingasögur*. Meanwhile, *Dauðans óvissi tími* uses *Fóstbræðra saga*, and I have discussed Þórunn Erlu-Valdimarsdóttir’s rewritings of *Njáls saga* and *Laxdæla saga* above (§2.3). *Njáls saga* is also an important intertext for *Sigurðar saga fóts*, as one might expect given that Bjarni’s later novella *Mörður* rewrites *Njáls saga* from the point of view of its

20 Dominic O’Connell, “Special Report: Iceland Vikings Storm Britain,” *Sunday Times*, November 28, 2004, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/special-report-icelands-vikings-storm-britain-nlx7fl9gjt>; Leigh Claire La Berge, *Scandals and Abstraction: Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

main antagonist in ways that suggest parallels between medieval Christianization and twenty-first-century Europeanization and globalization. Yet for the most part, this prestigious genre is little emulated in post-Crash writing. Instead, in the medievalism of novels responding directly to the Crash, pride of place has been given to genres marginalized in the National-Romantic canon. Bjarni Harðarson took the name and some of the inspirations for *Sigurðar saga fóts* from the medieval romance-saga of the same name. *Töfrahöllin* draws ostentatiously on the medieval ballad known in Icelandic as *Kvæði af Ólafi liljurós*, and characterizes its *útrásarvíkingur* figure through references to the twelfth-century Valþjófsstaður Door, which depicts a knight thought to represent the French romance hero Yvain.<sup>21</sup> *Mannorð* and *Valkyrjur* take their cues from *fornaldarsögur*, sagas set in the pre-Settlement, pre-Christian legendary past. Among books for children and young adults, Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir's *Hjartsláttur* draws on the romance of Tristan and Isolde, specifically in its Icelandic form *Tristrams saga og Ísöndar*, while Andri Snær Magnason's *Tímakistan* echoes medieval Icelandic romance as it rewrites the story of Snow White.<sup>22</sup> As I have discussed in Chapter 2, Einar Már Guðmundsson's second collection of essays on the Crash begins with a prose updating of a *mansöngur*, the lament with which traditional Icelandic *rímur* normally begin, while Bjarki Karlsson's "Þúsaldarháttur" invokes the early modern Hallgrímur Pétursson's generically similar, golden-ageist lament for the fallen state of Iceland, "Aldarháttur."<sup>23</sup> Together,

21 For the ballad see Vésteinn Ólason, *The Traditional Ballads of Iceland: Historical Studies* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1982), 112; cf. Bengt R. Jonsson, Svale Solheim, and Eva Danielson, eds., *The Types of the Scandinavian Medieval Ballad: A Descriptive Catalogue* (Stockholm: Svenskt Visarkiv, 1978), 42 [A63].

22 Andri Snær Magnason, *Tímakistan [The time-chest]* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2013).

23 Einar Már Guðmundsson, *Bankastræti núll* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2011), 7; Bjarki Karlsson, *Árleysi alda [The timelessness of ages]* (Akranes: Uppheimar, 2013), 7–11; Hallgrímur Pétursson, *Hallgrímsljóð: Sálmar og kvæði [The poems of Hallgrímur: Psalms and verses]*, ed. Freysteinn Gunnarsson (Reykjavík: Leiftur, 1944), 263–72.

these texts show the awakening of a new interest in medieval genres marginalized by traditional nationalist medievalism.

The invocation of medieval romance and its fellow travelers reflects a long-term revisionism in medieval studies: in the post-nationalist, Europeanist phase of the discipline following the Second World War, Iceland's more cosmopolitan literature has received progressively more attention from scholars as well as writers.<sup>24</sup> But it also reflects a direct critique of the nationalist medievalism of the *útrásarvíkingar*. Before analysing this point in detail, it is worth sketching how, in drawing on romance and related genres, and using this form to relate Iceland to a wider world, post-Crash novels are part of a longer, if patchy, literary tradition.

The ideological center of gravity of Iceland's medieval romance-literature was firmly in French- and German-speaking Continental Europe: these were the regions from which the main literary models for Icelandic romances came and, indeed, it is a genre-feature of medieval Icelandic romance that Iceland itself is almost never mentioned (if ever). This is of course profoundly unlike Crash-writing, where Iceland is usually center-stage. But there can be no doubt that medieval Icelanders were exploring their own identity through romances set overseas: implicitly, in mapping the encounters between heroes from France or Germany and their antagonists from the known world's southern and eastern peripheries, Icelanders were exploring both their own sense of peripherality, and their own aspirations for integration into the narratives of the

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24 For recent work on romance-sagas, which for the present study are the key examples of this trend, see Geraldine Barnes, *The Bookish Riddarasögur: Writing Romance in Late Mediaeval Iceland* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2014); Alaric Hall, "Translating the Medieval Icelandic Romance-Sagas," *The Retrospective Methods Network Newsletter* 8 (May 2014): 65–67; Marianne E. Kalinke, *Stories Set Forth with Fair Words: The Evolution of Medieval Romance in Iceland* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017); Sheryl McDonald Werronen, *Popular Romance in Iceland: The Women, Worldviews, and Manuscript Witnesses of Nítíða saga* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

center.<sup>25</sup> Although the business of Icelanders constructing their identity as Western with reference to an imagined eastern Other could perhaps be traced right through the history of Icelandic literature from early medieval Germanic writers' fascination variously with Goths, Huns, and Trojans,<sup>26</sup> medieval European romance shows a particular interest in the Orient, and Icelandic romance is no exception. Nor, contrary to expectations that Islamophobic discourses of the twenty-first century might lead us to, is the Orient that Icelandic literature constructs necessarily dystopian. The long echoes of historical Viking-Age encounters with Byzantium promoted an admiration for Constantinople rare in medieval western Europe.<sup>27</sup> By engaging with the Continental genre of romance, Icelandic saga-authors imagined spectacular encounters between heroes from western Europe and villains from Africa and Asia (alongside other, more complex combinations). By exploring the East as a heathen dystopia, they abjected their own pagan heritage; they probed and problematized the centrality of France and Germany to European images of the world; and they revelled in the idea of eastern wonderlands of learning and magic echoing their own distinctive commitment to scholarship.<sup>28</sup> A glimpse of Icelanders' potentially wry attitude to this process is afforded by a knowing comment on the wedding scene which closes the probably fourteenth-century romance *Nítíða saga*: “er [...] ei auðsagt með ófróðri tungu í útleigðum veraldarinnar [...] hver fögnuður vera mundi

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25 Alaric Hall, Steven D.P. Richardson, and Haukur Þorgeirsson, “*Sigrgrarðs saga frækna*: A Normalised Text, Translation, and Introduction,” *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies/Études Scandinaves au Canada* 21 (2013): 80–155, at 92–94; Barnes, *The Bookish Riddarasögur*; McDonald Werronen, *Popular Romance in Iceland*.

26 Shami Ghosh, *Writing the Barbarian Past: Studies in Early Medieval Historical Narrative* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Catalin Taranu, “The Making of Poetic History in Anglo-Saxon England and Carolingian Francia” (Ph.D. diss., University of Leeds, 2016).

27 E.g., Barnes, *The Bookish Riddarasögur*, 147–81.

28 Margaret Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1934); Barnes, *The Bookish Riddarasögur*; McDonald Werronen, *Popular Romance in Iceland*.



í miðjum heiminum af slíku hoffólki samankomnu” (“it is not easily said in an uncivilized language on the peripheries of the world [...] how blissful it might be in the middle of the world when such courtly people congregate”).<sup>29</sup> The “courtly people” alluded to in the saga include people from France, but also their spouses from Constantinople and India; the comment ostensibly situates Iceland and Icelandic as inferior to a distant Continental Europe, but the fact that the text goes on to describe the wedding anyway, and engages in sophisticated ways with the Continental romance-genre, shows that it is at least partly an ironic comment on Iceland’s supposed marginality. These anxieties about Icelandic peripherality, and complex responses to them, remain startlingly familiar today. While in the fourteenth century Icelandic anxieties of identity were driven by the land’s relatively recent entry into the Roman Church and even more recent absorption into the kingdom of Norway, today they are made piquant by fierce debates over Icelandic sovereignty and whether Iceland should join the the medieval Roman Church’s current closest equivalent, the European Union.

Medieval Icelandic romances and their successors were staples of Iceland’s popular reading culture down through the nineteenth century,<sup>30</sup> so we should perhaps expect more Orientalism in Icelandic medievalism than previous work has identified, and, sure enough, hints of Orientalist medievalism are there when looked for. Halldór Laxness’s breakthrough modernist novel *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (1927), for example, makes characteristically scathing allusions to medieval Icelandic romance-writing: they include Diljá’s story of a “stóreflis kóngur í Suðurlöndum sem hét Hexametur” (“mighty king in the southern lands who was called Hexameter”) and a comically butchered account of Roman history presented by an Italian tourist guide but recalling medieval romance-sagas.<sup>31</sup>

29 McDonald Werronen, *Popular Romance in Iceland*, 233; cf. 206–10.

30 Driscoll, *Unwashed Children of Eve*; McDonald Werronen, *Popular Romance in Iceland*, 25–59.

31 Halldór Kiljan Laxness, *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* [*The great weaver from Kashmir*], 3rd edn. (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1957), 61, 317.

Critical though they may be, these allusions still indicate Laxness's familiarity with medieval Icelandic romance, and his participation in its tradition; and Laxness builds on this through frequent allusion to Romantic Orientalism. Partly modelled on Dante's *Commedia*, and largely set on the Continent, *Vefarinn mikli* explores Christianity through the experiences of a young, aristocratic Icelander, Steinn Elliði Grímúlfsson. Steinn Elliði begins the novel imagining himself as the eponymous Great Weaver, "fæddur í Kasmír, dal rósanna, með hörpu í höndum einsog goðin" ("born in Kashmir, the valley of the roses, with a harp in his hands like the gods").<sup>32</sup> Steinn wishes to see his life as an *æfintýri* ("adventure," but also "romance, exemplum"), and his teenage spirituality as expressed towards the beginning of the novel is replete with allusions to Alexander the Great, along with Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic literature.<sup>33</sup> Laxness satirizes Steinn's reception of this material with little less vigor than he satirizes his medieval forebears. In a particularly wry collision of perspectives between Steinn's free indirect discourse and Laxness's narratorial voice, Laxness depicts Steinn sitting in Italy: "hversu snauð og einskisverð er öll dýrð tilverunnar frammi fyrir hinu annarlega sigurbrosi á andliti dauðs manns! Jafnvel kvæði drottins vors, Ómars Kajams, blikna hjá því! Hann situr í hægindastólnum á svölunum illur einsog dólgur í haugi, hugur hans sýldur" ("how impoverished and worthless is all the wealth of existence compared with the unsettling smirk on the face of a dead man! Even the poems of our lord, Omar Khayyam, pale beside it. He sits in the armchair on the balcony, evil as a thug in a burial mound, his thoughts frozen solid").<sup>34</sup> Laxness implicitly contrasts the eleventh-century Persian world of poetry with the fascination that Icelandic sagas have with ill-tempered, eleventh-century men experiencing a malevolent living death in their burial mounds: he indicates that while you can take the

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, quoting 22, cf. 29. For examples of allusions to Oriental literature, see 39–41, 188.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 183–84.

Icelander out of the “hundrað ára gamalt hindurvítni” (“hundred-year-old superstition”) that is his country, you can’t take the superstition out of the Icelander.<sup>35</sup> But Laxness equally leaves us in no doubt that eleventh-century Persia fostered a civilization to which Icelanders should bow in admiration.

This complex mix of attitudes to and uses of the East pervades post-Crash writing as it, like medieval romance, seeks to interpret Iceland’s place in an increasingly cosmopolitan world. The revisionist take of Crash-literature on Iceland’s medieval past is helpfully expounded in a tellingly clunky digression in *Samhengi hlutanna* about the *goðaveldi*, the system of governance in Iceland from around 930–1262.<sup>36</sup> Here one Steinn explicates the financial crisis to the novel’s protagonist Arnar:

“Í mínum huga er ekki hægt að skilja íslenskt þjóðfélag öðruvísi en út frá goðaveldinu.”

“Náði Noregskonungur ekki Ísland undir sig 1262? Ég hélt að goðaveldið hefði liðið undir lok þá!”

“Formlega séð,” sagði Steinn. “En strúktúr goðaveldisins leið ekki undir lok. Goðaveldið byggðist á að ráðamenn hafa í kringum sig handgegna menn sem hafa svo aðra í kringum sig. Þannig greinast völdin um allt þjóðfélagið. Eftir stríð stýrðu stjórn málaflokkarnir úthlutun gæðanna svo að völdin lágu þar.”

“To my mind, it’s impossible to understand Icelandic society without tracing it from the *goðaveldi*.”

“Didn’t the King of Norway take power in Iceland in 1262? I’d thought the *goðaveldi* had come to an end then!”

“On the surface, yes,” said Steinn, “but the underlying structure of the *goðaveldi* didn’t. The *goðaveldi* was based on rulers surrounding themselves with hand-picked men, who in turn surrounded themselves with others. And so their

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>36</sup> Sigrún Davíðsdóttir, *Samhengi hlutanna* [*The context of things*] (Akranes: Uppheimar, 2011), 272.

power spread through the whole society. After the war, it was the political parties which handed out the favours, so power was centred there.”

Arnar’s confusion at Steinn’s account here is because he accepts the traditional, nationalist narrative of a democratic golden age of Icelandic independence foreclosed by Norwegian take-over (this golden age usually being known as the *þjóðveldi* or “reign of the people,” traditionally rendered in English as the “Icelandic commonwealth”). The nationalist narrative is deeply embedded in Icelandic culture: business magnates are denoted by compounds in *-kóngur* (“king”), *-jöfur* or *-furstur* (“prince”), or *-drottinn* (“lord”), implying (like *magnate*) that their dominance is quasi-feudal.<sup>37</sup> As with the word *rex* in the Roman Republic or *tyrannos* in ancient Athens, *kóngur* and other feudal-sounding vocabulary like *drottinn* (“lord”) have deep resonances for a culture whose traditional golden age was a time without kings, foreclosed by submission to the King of Norway in 1262–64. Thus whereas English has tended to use the Greek loan *oligarch*, Icelandic has invoked *fjáraflakóngar*, *kvótakóngar*, *auðjöfrar* and *lánardrottnar* (“finance kings,” “quota kings,” referring to the tradeable quotas of fish determined by the state, “wealth-princes” and “loan lords”). The image of the petty king provides one of the controlling metaphors for the pretensions of the big men of twentieth-century Icelandic fishing villages in Einar Már Guðmundsson’s *Íslenskir kóngar*, and the novel discusses in some detail the medieval roots of this love-hate relationship with kingship (along with Iceland’s converse pride in a

37 The validity of the term “feudal” in medieval studies has been the subject of vigorous debate, the most prominent trigger to which was Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). Cf. Charles West, *Reframing the Feudal Revolution: Political and Social Transformation Between Marne and Moselle, c. 800–c. 1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), for a recent reassessment. For present purposes, however, the term is relevant for its continued prominence in popular discourse, and to be understood in these terms.

largely fantastical claim to hosting Europe's oldest parliament).<sup>38</sup> Indeed, *Íslenskir kóngar* even uses the negative connotations that the term *útrásarvíkingur* has acquired since the Crash as a convenient means to criticize the medieval past itself, mentioning the “útrásarvíkingum fornaldar [...] Þórólf úr Egilssögu og Hrút úr Njálssögu” (“útrásarvíkingar of ancient times [...] Þórólfur from *Egils saga* and Hrútur from *Njáls saga*”): rather than providing the metaphor through which investment bankers are understood, vikings are, in Einar Már's sardonic phrasing, retrospectively reconstructed as the investment bankers of their day.<sup>39</sup> However, returning to *Samhengi hlutanna*, Steinn prefers the unusual term *goðaveldi* (“reign of the *goðar*,” which might be rendered for present purposes as “reign of the aristocrats”) for Iceland's supposed golden age, and posits its continuity throughout Icelandic history since. This kind of revisionism is not new: sagas' portrayal of a heroic period of Icelandic independence has been open to subversive readings and outright criticisms since, probably, the Middle Ages themselves.<sup>40</sup> But it has seldom been very prominent.

By narrating its protagonist as a medieval knight, and therefore feudal overlord, then, *Sigurðar saga fóts* critically renarrates Icelandic nationalist medievalism as a hegemonic discourse that serves to disguise a quasi-feudal reality. Accordingly, *Sigurðar saga fóts* almost entirely dispenses with the noun (*útrásarvíkingur* in favor of *riddari* “knight” (or *riddari viðskiptalífsins*, “knight of the business world”). The crucial contest in *Sigurðar saga fóts* over what medievalist terminology should be applied to the emergent financial elite arises at the society event that is the wedding of Sigurður fótur to Ella Nord. While engaged to Ella, Sigurður has recently started sleeping with an overweight and heavy-drinking cleaner from his workplace, Vala Maríudót-

38 Einar Már Guðmundsson, *Íslenskir kóngar* [Icelandic kings] (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2012), esp. 11–12, 30–31, 47, 54, 71, 144.

39 *Ibid.*, 31.

40 Jón Karl Helgason, “Continuity?”

tir. Not wanting to miss the marriage of the century, Vala has Sigurður get her onto the roster of waiting staff.

Utánríkisráðherra hafði flutt hjartnæma ræðu þar sem hann líkti Sigurði fót við víkinga fornaldar, kallaði hann útrásarvíking hins nýja tíma. Næst á eftir ætlaði veislustjóri að gefa forstjóra eins olíufélaganna orðið en þá heyrðist slegið fruntalega í glas og við borðsenda brúðhjónanna stóð Vala Mariudóttir með svarta svuntu.

— Kæru þið, kæri Sigurður og þið öll. Fyrir hönd, — segir maður ekki þannig? — jú, fyrir hönd eða önd okkar starfsfólksins, okkar hinna óbreyttu á gólfinu hjá köllunum okkar, Sigurði fót og Bjarnhéðni kaupahéðni, já okkur finnst þetta gegt og okkur stelpunum finnst hann Sigurður eiginlega miklu flottari en víkingur, okkur finnst hann vera riddari, hann er í raun og veru riddarinn okkar á hvíta hestinum og nú þegar hann er að gifta sig þá finnst okkur eins og við séum allar að giftast honum og kannski erum við það bara, svo þú skalt passa þig, Ella mín, því við erum allar skotnar í honum og hann veit það. Hann Sigurður minn.<sup>41</sup>

The foreign minister had delivered a moving speech in which he likened Sigurður fótur to the ancient Vikings, calling him a modern-day Viking raider. Next, the master of ceremonies had planned to give the word to the CEO of one of the oil companies but then an impertinent tapping on a glass was heard, and at the end of the bridal couple's table stood Vala Mariudóttir in her black apron.

“Ladies and gentlemen — Sigurður, and everyone. On behalf of [lit. for the hand of] — doesn't one say it that way? Yes, for the hand, or the spirit [*fyrir hönd eða önd*], of us employees, us other, simple folk on the floor fulfilling our vocations, Sigurður fótur and Bjarnhéðinn kaupahéðinn, yes, we think this is cute, and actually Sigurður seems to us girls much cooler than a Viking: for us he is a knight, he is well and truly

41 Bjarni Harðarson, *Sigurðar saga fóts*, 132.

our knight on a white horse, and now, when he is getting married, it feels for us like we are all marrying him, and actually maybe we are — so you should watch out, Ella dear, because we've all fallen for him and he knows it. My Sigurður.”

After a silence in which the master of ceremonies wishes the floor would open and swallow him, rapturous applause breaks out. For Vala, of course, part of the point of this speech is to express her claim to Sigurður (which in practice she fulfils until, after the Crash, Sigurður has to flee to Pakistan). But this is also the key moment in Bjarni's renarration of Sigurður as a *riddari viðskiptalífsins* instead of the *útrásarvíkingur* which the real-life Björgólfur Thor was seen as. Bjarni's point is that the *útrásarvíkingar* were not in fact like medieval vikings — adventurers whose gains, in the popular imagination, corresponded to the high risks they took, and who disrupted Continental hierarchies from their relatively flat peripheral societies. Rather the so-called *útrásarvíkingar* were feudal lords, consolidating their existing privilege. As Kristín Loftsdóttir has said,

as economic inequality grew [...], so too did the Icelandic tabloid media, which to some extent emerged during these years. Tabloids reported glowingly on the conspicuous lifestyles of the Business Vikings [...] and gave regular updates on the intermingling of prominent Icelanders with international superstars. Such idolization of the rich and famous was unknown prior to the economic boom and ran contrary to the common belief that equality was a basic characteristic of Icelanders.<sup>42</sup>

Through Vala, Bjarni expresses the fairy-tale-like wish-fulfilment which the *útrásarvíkingar* were supposed to represent,

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42 Kristín Loftsdóttir, “Vikings Invade Present-Day Iceland,” in *Gambling Debt: Iceland's Rise and Fall in the Global Economy*, eds. E. Paul Durrenberger and Gisli Pálsson (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015), 3–14, at 10.

and satirizes how Icelandic society as a whole bought into the dream — like the nineteenth-century peasants who consumed medieval romances originally composed to promote aristocratic hegemony, enjoying them as tales of wish-fulfilment without thinking through the violent oppression which is their real stock in trade. Vala's words bring class-conflict in the novel firmly into the twenty-first century, but also foreground the hegemonic power of Jón Ásgeir's story of upward mobility — a story which is, Bjarni implies, really the exception that proves the rule that the class-hierarchy is seldom disrupted.

Bjarni's preference for talking about *riddarar* over *víkingar* corresponds with how the tone of medieval Icelandic romances differs from the *Íslendingasögur*. Selected *Íslendingasögur*, which have been given pride of place in the nationalist canon and provide the classical Scandinavian portrayals of *víkingar*, are characterized by a restrained style and, at least relatively speaking, gritty realism. Medieval Icelandic romance, on the other hand, revels in cartoonishly unlikely feats of violence; and the genre requires every story to have a happy ending, ensuring that however bloody the path to the protagonists' weddings, it is only ever the lives of others that are in serious danger. Thus romance-sagas suit Bjarni's satirical portrayal of the excess of the banking boom. Likewise, whereas *Íslendingasögur* tend to examine breakdowns in social order, and probe gender relations obsessively but also subtly, most medieval Icelandic romances are cheerfully heteronormative, and ostentatiously promote homosocial male bonds, again making the genre particularly suitable for satirizing the testosterone-driven culture of the *útrás*.<sup>43</sup> An example of all these factors comes in the medieval *Sigurðar saga fóts* where Sigurður's foster-brother Ásmundur has travelled to Ireland to seek the hand of the daughter of King Hrólfr

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43 Henric Bagerius, *Mandom och mödom: Sexualitet, homosocialitet och aristokratisk identitet på det senmedeltida Island* (Göteborg: Bagerius, 2009); Alaric Hall et al., "Sigurðar saga fóts (The Saga of Sigurðr Foot): A Translation," *Mirator* 11 (2010): 56–91, at 59–60; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).



of Ireland, but been imprisoned for his troubles by her father. Sigurður has come to Ireland to save Ásmundur, defeating Hrólfur and chaining him up:

“En þess vil eg spyrja Hrólfr konung,” segir Ásmundur, “hvort hann vill nú gifta mér Elínu dóttur sína.”

Hrólfrur konungur svarar þá: “Það vil eg að vísu og vinna það til lífs mér.”

Þarf eigi hér langt um að hafa, að það verður ráðum ráðið, að Ásmundur fær Elínu, og er þegar að brullaupi snúíð [...] Leysti Hrólfrur konungur út mund dóttur sinnar sæmilega í gulli og dýrgripum. Skildu þeir nú með vináttu.<sup>44</sup>

“I want to ask King Hrólfr this,” says Ásmundur: “whether he wishes to marry his daughter Elína to me now.”

Then King Hrólfr replies: “I most certainly want that and will do so in order to win my life.”

It’s not necessary to make a long tale of this: it was decided that Ásmundur would marry Elína, and the wedding was immediately prepared [...] King Hrólfr paid his own daughter’s bride-price in a noble fashion, with gold and precious things. They parted now with friendship.

Reading the saga from the critical standpoint of Bjarni’s novel, we must read the “noble fashion” of Hrólfr’s payment of the dowry and the “friendship” with which the families part ironically, viewing Sigurður and Ásmundur as a pair of gangsters feigning politeness as they shake down a rival. This reading is consonant with the proverbial post-Crash criticism of Iceland that notwithstanding its pretensions to being a Nordic welfare state cleaving firmly to the rule of law, it is actually the “Sikiley norðursins” (“Sicily of the North”)—an island known for two things: volcanoes and organized crime (see §3.6 above). The meta-textual framing of Bjarni’s novel in relation to romance-sagas puts a stamp of authorial approval on Jamil’s observation that

44 Hall et al., “*Sigurðar saga fóts*,” 90.

the tight integration of business and political interests in twentieth-century Iceland constitutes a *lénskerfi* (“feudal system”).<sup>45</sup>

Bjarni’s insistence on identifying Sigurður as a “knight of the business world” echoes the image of the “Ritter von der Industrie” (“knight of industry”) probably best known from the work of Karl Marx. Marx took what he understood as “feudal” relationships between lords and serfs as a paradigm for understanding the relationship between nineteenth-century capitalists and wage-labourers. A serf, tied to land, was transparently unfree, whereas a wage-labourer was ostensibly free to travel and to choose work as he pleased, this freedom being a key tenet of liberal capitalism. But, particularly in the absence of an effective welfare state and in conditions where there was a large supply of labor, Marx noted that the wage-labourer was no less compelled to work for others’ profit than the serf, and might in practice have no freedom to withdraw his labor or change employer. While recognizing that the increased productivity of agriculture following the Enclosures made for tangible gains in meeting human needs, then, Marx argued that “wage-slavery” was more a continuation of serfdom than a state of freedom: that from the point of view of the proletariat, “die Ritter vom Degen” (“the knights of the sword”) had simply been replaced by “die Ritter von der Industrie” (“the knights of industry”).<sup>46</sup> Whereas the time a serf spent working his lord’s land was transparently for the benefit of the lord, the surplus value created by a wage-labourer and appropriated by his employer is less tangible. By presenting the economic position of the wage-labourer as a continuation of that of the serf, then, Marx sought to expose how “liberal” capitalism too was exploitative and authoritarian.

In the wake of the financial crisis, there is a widespread concern that the social-democratic societies of the second half of the twentieth century are giving way to something resembling medieval feudalism. Ideas of “refeudalization” and “neo-me-

45 Bjarni Harðarson, *Sigurðar saga fóts*, 112.

46 Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Oekonomie* (Hamburg: Meissner, 1867–94), 1:743.

dievalism” are in the air, whether simply as bywords for staggering inequality — the simple caricature of “bad old days” medievalism — or a more subtle comment on the dominance of crony capitalism, the replacement of a true public sphere with the spectacle of personality politics (Jürgen Habermas’s *Refeudalisierung*) or the collapse of the post-Westphalian order of sovereign states (Hedley Bull’s “new mediaevalism”).<sup>47</sup> Marx’s analogy, therefore, is widespread in post-Crash Icelandic writing. As Einar Már Guðmundsson pithily put it, “fjármálafurstar hafa riðið um héruð og skilið eftir sig sviðna jörð” (“the finance-princes have ridden through the provinces and left scorched earth behind them”), and the title of his *Íslenskir kóngar* points in a similar direction.<sup>48</sup> Katrín in *Ævar Örn Jósepsson’s Önnur líf* describes the small-time businessman Brynjólfur’s dependence on the conservative politician Ingólfur Halldórsson as “skólabókardæmi um samband drottunarans og hins undirgefna” (“a textbook example of the relationship between the lord and the vassal”).<sup>49</sup> The same kinds of relationship also drive the plot of the same author’s 2008 *Land tækifæranna*. Steinar Bragi’s *Hálendið* puts a more sophisticated version of the same idea at its center, by examining the tense relationship between the petty-aristocratic Hrafn and his old school-friend, the upwardly mobile Egill. Even Björgólfur Thor himself quotes at length in his autobiography from a blogpost on America’s rising inequality by the venture capitalist Nick Hanauer, including the claim that “our country is rapidly becoming less a capitalist society

47 On which see respectively Sighard Neckel, “Refeudalisierung der Ökonomie: Zum Strukturwandel kapitalistischer Wirtschaft,” *MPiFG Working Paper 10/6*. Cologne: Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, July 2010, <http://www.mpifg.de/pu/workpap/wp10-6.pdf>. §3.8; Bruce Holsinger, *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2007). Cf. Michael K. Walonen, *Contemporary World Narrative Fiction and the Spaces of Neoliberalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 78.

48 Einar Már Guðmundsson, *Íslenskir kóngar*, 111.

49 *Ævar Örn Jósepsson, Önnur líf [Other lives]* (Reykjavík: Uppheimar, 2010), 350.

and more a feudal society.”<sup>50</sup> I doubt that many of the Icelandic authors who have used the idea of a feudal Iceland have done so in self-conscious emulation of Marx himself. Nevertheless, the idea that, with rapidly growing inequality and increasingly entrenched commitments to rent-seeking, along with diminishing opportunities for social mobility, developed countries are returning to a feudal state is widespread.<sup>51</sup>

Portraying Iceland today as a neo-feudal society does not, however, necessarily challenge golden-ageist Icelandic medievalism, because the particular medieval past traditionally lionized by Icelandic nationalism predates the emergence of the kind of relatively hierarchical and formalized power-relations for which the term *feudal* has traditionally been used. Indeed, in many ways the medieval past depicted by the *Íslendingasögur* is the archetype for Romantic visions of the “free Germanic peasant.”<sup>52</sup> Whereas the quotation from *Samhengi hlutanna* above does question the reality of the so-called *þjóðveldi*, the valence of reading Iceland as “feudal” is often not the familiar abjection of the medieval (“Oh no! We are returning to the Middle Ages!”). Rather the valence is “the Middle Ages we are returning to aren’t the ones we were promised.” Thus Alda Sigmundsdóttir’s *Unravelled*, commenting on what became the Kitchenware Revolution, claims that “Icelanders had a habit of reacting fiercely to injustice but soon sinking back into the lethargic serfdom that had been conditioned into the nation’s soul during centuries of colonial rule and oppression,” which figures the essential Icelander as a paragon of egalitarianism predating

50 Thor Björgolfsson and Andrew Cave, *Billions to Bust — and Back: How I Made, Lost, and Rebuilt a Fortune, and What I Learned on the Way* (London: Profile, 2014), 194.

51 Cf. Boyes, *Meltdown Iceland*, 61; Amy S. Kaufman, “Our Future Is Our Past: Corporate Medievalism in Dystopian Fiction,” in *Corporate Medievalism II*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: Brewer, 2013), 11–19.

52 Santiago Barreiro, “La Lógica y el Vocabulario de la Circulación y la Acumulación de Bienes en la Saga de Egill” (Ph.D. diss., University of Buenos Aires, 2014), 76–86. See also Barreiro, *Independent Farmers, Greedy Kings: The Representation of Economic Life in Egils Saga* (Leeds: Kismet, forthcoming).

Norwegian (and later Danish) rule.<sup>53</sup> Kári Tulinius's *Píslarvottar án hæfileika* is altogether more knowing, but makes a point of introducing Geiri's complaint that "íslensk stjórnvöld og íslenskir auðmenn hafa alltaf fengið að valta yfir þjóðina" ("the Icelandic government and Icelandic oligarchs have always got to lord it over the people") and Sóli's rejoinder "alveg síðan Ísland var nýlenda og Danir réðu öllu" ("ever since Iceland was a colony and the Danes controlled everything").<sup>54</sup> These comments replicate the nationalist narrative of a medieval golden age of true Icelandicness which reveals an innate, egalitarian Icelandic fighting spirit and enthusiasm for justice, overlain with the cultural baggage of later Danish imperial rule.

The golden-ageist pattern is particularly clear in *Töfrahöllin*. In *Töfrahöllin*, much of the action is explicitly set in the same areas of Iceland as *Njáls saga*, and this detail is often mentioned, implicitly as a reference point for proper Icelandic values in contrast to the corrupt culture of shady business deals, drug-taking, and prostitution which the protagonists Kormákur and Jósep are establishing in the same place. These portrayals, then, do not show Icelanders dispensing with golden-ageist thinking. Rather they use golden-ageism as a baseline for critiquing the present, characterizing Iceland today as reinstating the wrong kind of medievalism — the kind associated with Norwegian and later Danish rule rather than the golden age of the settlement period.

But in *Sigurðar saga fóts*, Bjarni Harðarson does put up some significant resistance to golden ageism. Whereas in content, *Sigurðar saga fóts* draws on a medieval Icelandic romance, its style owes much more to the classical *Íslendingasögur* and *könungasögur* — which comes as no surprise, given the author's subsequent novelistic rewriting of *Njáls saga*, *Mörður*. *Sigurðar saga fóts* closes off sections with classical-sounding phrases

53 Alda Sigmundsdóttir, *Unraveled: A Novel about a Meltdown* (Reykjavík: Enska Textasmiðjan, 2013), 167.

54 Kári Tulinius, *Píslarvottar án hæfileika: Saga af hnattvæddri kynslóð* [*Martyrs without talent: a history of a globalized generation*] (Reykjavík: JPV, 2010), 148.

like “þaðan eru engar sögur,”<sup>55</sup> and indeed mentions *Njáls saga* three times.<sup>56</sup> In keeping both with the deep historical roots of the Crash and with the literary form of classical *Íslendingasögur* such as *Egils saga* or *Laxdæla saga*, the novel begins several generations before the birth of the main character, in the interwar years. Like these, Bjarni’s *Sigurðar saga fóts* insists on trying to expose intergenerational cascades of cause and effect and complex webs of circumstances beyond the protagonists’ control.

The novel challenges the idea that Iceland’s settlement period was a golden age most memorably at the moment in the story — which the reader has awaited with curiosity for fifty pages — when the origin of Sigurður fótur’s epithet is revealed. The saga that gives the novel its title is itself intriguingly unsatisfying on this point, breezily offering the somewhat baffling observation that Sigurður “var svo snar og fóthvatur, að hann hljóp eigi seinna né lægra í loft upp og á bak aftur á öðrum fæti en hinir fræknustu menn á báðum fótum framlangt. Af því var hann Sigurður fótur kallaður” (probably meaning “was so quick and nimble-footed that he neither leapt up more slowly nor lower into the air, landing backwards on only one foot, than the most valiant people on both feet forwards. Because of this he was called Sigurður Foot”).<sup>57</sup> The description echoes, or even parodies, *Njáls saga*’s initial description of Gunnar Hámundarson á Hlíðarenda, but these remarkable skills of Sigurður’s never resurface in the saga, making the epithet a curious diversion.<sup>58</sup> The eight-year-old Sigurður Frits finds himself as confused about his own second name as the reader of the medieval *Sigurðar saga fóts* is about its hero’s. Having begun to get an inkling of his complex ancestry, Sigurður Frits asks his eponymous grandfather Sigurður stál (a.k.a. Siggí) why Siggí does not also have the name *Frits*. Siggí replies

55 Ibid., 70, cf. 80.

56 Ibid., 51, 66, 226.

57 Hall et al., “*Sigurðar saga fóts*,” 78.

58 Ibid., 78.

hvaða vitleysa. Hvaða vitleysa, þú hefur aldrei heitið Frits. Ekki hér í þessari smiðju. Þú heitir bara Sigurður F., já eff eins og í ... í fótur. Þú ert líka svo fótstór og varst strax fótstór. [...] Já og veistu hverjir voru þeir fótstóru í þessu landi til forna? [...] Það voru þrælarnir sem voru fótstórir af öllu mýralabbinu og þeir voru líka einu heiðarlegu mennirnir sem hingað komu. Hitt voru bara þrjótar og illmenni, bölvaðir fantar upp til hópa sem stálu öllu frá heiðarlegu fólki og eru enn að stela, já enn að stela. Stela laxveiðiám og eru í hermanginu.<sup>59</sup>

What rubbish! What rubbish—you've never been called Frits. Not here in this smithy. You're just called Sigurður F., yes, F like in ... in foot. You have such big feet, and always have [...] Yeah, and you know who the people with big feet in this country were in the olden days? [...] It was the slaves who had big feet, from all the yomping about in the marshes, and they were also the only upstanding people who came here. The rest were just rogues and knaves, bloody bullies wandering about stealing everything from upstanding people, and they're still stealing, yep, still stealing. Stealing salmon-rivers and profiteering.

Siggi stál is one of the touchstones of solid reasoning in the novel, and this passage is also one of the novel's key expressions of egalitarian values, contrasting with the neoliberalism in which Sigurður fótur becomes embroiled. Siggi stál's exposure of continuity between medieval and modern oppressions comes at a key moment in Sigurður fótur's character development, and emphatically reaches beyond the infamously troubled *Sturlungaöld*—the period of aristocratic conflict which ran from about 1220 to 1264 and led to the annexation of Iceland by Norway—to be equally damning about the island's first settlers. *Íslenskir kóngar* figures the settlement of Iceland in the same way: not as the flight of freedom-loving farmers from royal tyranny, but as the establishment of a tax-haven for greedy vikings:

59 Bjarni Harðarson, *Sigurðar saga fóts*, 56–57.

Ekki þurftu gömlu víkingarnir að gefa allt upp til skatts, enda nenntu þeir ekki að búa í Noregi þar sem skattayfirvöld genu hart fram gegn höfðingjum og smákóngum. Þess vegna flúðu þeir hingað, í þá skattaparadís sem hér var.<sup>60</sup>

The old vikings didn't need to give everything up as tax, and certainly didn't fancy living in Norway when the taxman went hard at chieftains and petty kings. It was for this reason that they fled to Iceland, to the tax-haven that was here.

Thus, whereas Böðvar Guðmundsson's references to *Njáls saga* in *Töfrahöllin* seem simply to be contrasting the golden age depicted in the saga with the novel's present, Bjarni gives the same idea a more critical edge: the ill-starred encounter of the young Sigurður fótur and Ásmundur Jamil with the drug-lord Addi feiti, characterized as a “nú tíma þjóðsagnapersóna” (“modern-day folktale-character”), is not only set in the cellar of the youth center and concert venue Njálsbúð, but explicitly (in the words of Sigurður fótur) in “einhverjum Njáluslóðum” (“some kind of *Njáls saga* country”), hinting that Addi is not so different from the region's venerated tenth-century strongmen.<sup>61</sup> Meanwhile, Iceland's relationship with Denmark before independence, a traditional scapegoat in Icelandic nationalist discourses, is portrayed with wry humor in *Íslenskir kóngar*, and kept out of view in *Sigurðar saga fóts*. Instead, as I discuss below, *Sigurðar saga* gives Iceland's post-colonial anxiety about its status some prominence, and despite characters' occasional trips abroad and the novel's emphasis on international money-laundering, its focus on Iceland positions the Crash first and foremost as the product of domestic culture. There are no major women characters, but the novel fairly firmly positions masculinity as a key theme in the culture of the boom — and where women are given a voice, it is often the voice of reason. *Sigurðar saga fóts* thus stands as a pre-eminent example of a widespread post-Crash discourse,

60 Einar Már Guðmundsson, *Íslenskir kóngar*, 206.

61 Bjarni Harðarson, *Sigurðar saga fóts*, 65, 66.



in which Björgólfur Thor's *útrásarvíkingur* identity is recast to expose Icelandic capitalism as quasi-feudal, with bankers as its knightly aristocrats.

#### 4.4 Orientalist Medievalism

Like many post-Crash commentators, Bjarni Harðarson points to Iceland's post-colonial inferiority complex as a key reason for its over-expansion in the banking boom. In a scene which is part of an allusion to the rapturous national welcome given to the silver-medallist Olympic handball team on 27th August 2008 — 40,000 people gathered in the center of Reykjavík to celebrate this rare Olympic achievement — Iceland's state master of public ceremonies greets returning Icelandic businessmen at the airport with the following speech:

Ég var nýlega á fundi með forseta Indlands [...] Í hans landi búa margir og þeir þar hafa lyft grettistaki í baráttu við hin gömlu heimsveldi. En á fundi okkar undraðist forseti þessi og dáðist raunar að því að við svo fáir gætum unnið slík her- virki, jafnvel slegið eign á gamla gimsteina heimsveldanna. En ég svaraði forsetanum með setningu sem kona mín skaut að mér fyrir fundinn og er svona:

— You ain't seen nothing yet. He, he.<sup>62</sup>

I was recently at a meeting with the President of India [...] In his country there are many people, and there they have lifted a *grettistak* [a large glacial erratic, proverbially understood to be liftable only by the fabulously strong hero of *Grettis saga*] in their struggle with the old Empire. But at our meeting, the President was amazed and actually full of admiration that

62 Ibid., 205; cf. Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, "The Gender-Equal North: Icelandic Images of Femininity and Masculinity," in *Iceland and Images of the North*, ed. Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2011), 422; Kristín Loftsdóttir, "Whiteness Is from Another World: Gender, Icelandic International Development and Multiculturalism," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 19, no. 1 (2012): 41–54, at 46.

## EXCERPT 6

Bjarni Harðarson, *Sigurðar saga fóts*, 51–52

Breiðholtsvillingar voru þeir vinirnir Sigurður F. og Ásmundur Jamil Neró. Jamil var ekki bara besti vinur Sigurðar heldur allt í senn, frá þeirra fyrstu fundum, aðstoðarmaður, hugmyndafræðingur og ráðgjafi. Hann var hálfur Palestínumaður og hálfur Dalamaður og samt ekki hálfur maður í neinu, þjóðlegastur allra Breiðhyltinga og las Njálu fyrir fermingu en um leið ákafur Palestínumaður, PLO-maður og löngu seinna, og án þess að nokkurn grunaði, Hamas-liði. Á vöxt var Jamil snemma ófríður, feitlaginn og þrúttinn í andliti þannig að allt ákaflyndi og óþreyja mannsins speglaðist þar og kallaði á varnarviðbrögð þeirra sem því mættu. Hann var ofvirkur millibilskrakki þess tíma að fara á mis við bæði barnaþrælkun og rítalín. Börn af þeirri kynslóð reyndu mest á uppeldis-hæfileika íslenskra foreldra sem voru litlir.

Þeir voru ellefu, alveg að verða tólf, þegar leiðir þeirra lágu saman og eftir það lengi óaðskiljanlegir þó að ólíkari menn fyrirfyndust ekki á þessari íslensku Gólanhæð. Sigurður var fríður drengur og hægur, íhugull og með það pókerfés að enginn vissi hug hans. Þó hann væri seinþreyttur til vandræða var hann í hverju máli seiglan og einurðin. Jamil aftur á móti var maður ekki einhamur, skapbráður og jafn fljótur að snúa af hverju máli eins og að. Hann var allra manna greindastur á bókina en þolinmæði hans við bóknám voru þó mjög takmörk sett og í öllu námi treysti Jamil frekar á náttúrugreind en lærdóm og lauk hverju prófi með góðri einkunn. Það var meir undir hælinn lagt hjá Sigurði fót hvernig prófum lyktaði. Þeir félagar voru mjög samstiga í að stunda bóklestur hóflega og leggja því ákafari stund á það líf sem hvergi er á bók fest.



we — so few — could have achieved such a conquest, indeed gain ownership of the family jewels of the empires. But I replied to the President with a sentence which my wife suggested to me before the meeting, which goes something like this: “You ain’t seen nothing yet. Hahaha.”

The final words appeared in President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson’s infamous Walbrook Club speech of 3 May 2005, in which Ólafur Ragnar attributed Iceland’s success in business to an innate entrepreneurial spirit deriving directly from Icelanders’ viking ancestors.<sup>63</sup> The speech in *Sigurðar saga fóts* implicitly recognizes that Iceland’s challenges and achievements since 1944 have in fact been of an entirely different order from India’s since 1948 — amongst many other and profound reasons because of Iceland’s cultural status as a white, Western country discussed in the previous chapter. Adapting the real-life Björgólfur Guðmundsson’s attempt to purchase the newspaper *DV* in response to it reporting his editorial interventions into Edda, Iceland’s then largest publisher, which Björgólfur largely owned, along with Kaupþing’s purchase of the Danish *FIH* bank, Bjarni has Sigurður’s father Bjarnhéðinn make an over-leveraged purchase of a Danish newspaper because of his desire to get one over on the Danes.<sup>64</sup> And, trying to convince Sigurður fótur of the merits of borrowing his way out of bankruptcy, one of Blöndal & Sandal’s employees suggests that

Íslenskt kapítal var dautt. Það lá ósnertanlegt inni hjá pabadrengjum gamla auðvaldsins og í dag væri enda leiðin til ávöxtunar í gegnum okurlánastarfsemi ríkisbanka. Sam-

63 Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, “How to Succeed in Modern Business: Lessons from the Icelandic Voyage,” *The Reykjavík Grapevine* 6, no. 16 (October–November 2008): 11. The speech is also parodied in Böðvar Guðmundsson, *Töfrahöllin [The hall of enchantment]* (Akranes: Uppheimar, 2012), 392. Cf. Guðni Th. Jóhannesson, “Útrásarforsetinn,” in *Ísland í aldanna rás 2001–2010*, eds. Björn Þór Sigbjörnsson and Bergsteinn Sigurðsson (Reykjavík: JPV, 2012), 410–13.

64 Bjarni Harðarson, *Sigurðar saga fóts*, 175–87.

The friends Sigurður F. and Ásmundur Jamil Neró were Breiðholt boys. Jamil was not only Sigurður's best friend but at the same time, from their first meeting, his assistant, ideas specialist and adviser. He was half Palestinian and half Dalesman, but at the same time half neither, the most nationalistic of everyone in Breiðholt, and read Njáls saga before his confirmation; but meanwhile was an enthusiastic Palestinian, a PLO-supporter and much later—and without anyone suspecting—a Hamas-member. As he grew up, Jamil was soon a bit ugly, podgy and chubby-faced, so that all of his enthusiasm and impatience were reflected there and elicited defensive reactions from those who encountered them. He was a hyperactive in-betweenener, feeling the lack of both child labour and ritalin. Children of that generation pushed the parenting skills of Icelandic mothers and fathers—which were limited—to the limit.

They were eleven going on twelve when their paths first crossed, and for a long time after they were inseparable, even though no-one more different could be found in these Icelandic Golan Heights. Sigurður was a good-looking, calm lad, thoughtful, and with the sort of poker face that meant that no-one could guess his mind. Though he was patient, he was persistence and determination personified in any matter. Jamil, by contrast, was not a resolute person: hot-tempered and just as quick to turn his attention from something as to turn his attention to it. He was the best-read of anyone but his patience with book-learning was very limited and in all his studies Jamil relied on his inborn wit rather than learning—and finished all his exams with a good grade. Sigurður was less sure-footed when it came to exams. The friends were very much in agreement in studying in moderation and more eagerly pursuing that life which is nowhere set down in books.

bærilegt afturhald væri vandfundið nema á Arabíuskaganum enda margt líkt með sjeikunum þar og Viðeyjarættunum hér heima.<sup>65</sup>

Icelandic capital was dead. It lay, unreachable, with the daddy's boys of the old capitalism and today, moreover, the route to growth was through the usury of the state banks. A comparable conservatism would be hard to find outside the Arabian Peninsula — and actually, there was a lot in common between the sheikhs there and the Viðey dynasties here at home.

The “Viðey dynasties,” though also evoking the real-life “Engey dynasty” (to which many, mostly Independence Party, politicians belong), implicitly include the Thorsarar, named here for the fact that Thor Jensen's iconic fishing company Milljónarfélagið was based on the island of Viðey. Their quasi-feudal domination is expressed through comparison to the repressive monarchies of the Arabian peninsula: this comparison of Iceland to the post-colonial Arab world is unfavourable, and implicitly intended to incite Sigurður to taking part in bringing Iceland into a neoliberal modernity better befitting a developed, Western country. (The irony, of course, is that Iceland was implicitly better off under the nepotistic but stable old capitalism than under neoliberalism; meanwhile, in 2010, states like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were, notwithstanding their monarchies, repressiveness, and exploitation of resident aliens, economically thriving: “hina íslensku ríkiskapitalista virtist á slíkum dögum ekki skorta fé frekar en arabíska soldána og af-ríska ráðherrasyni,” “the other Icelandic state-capitalists seemed no more to lack money in those days than Arab sultans and the sons of African government ministers”).<sup>66</sup>

As well as criticizing Iceland's nationalist medievalism, then, Bjarni also situates Icelandic medievalism in relation to medi-

65 Bjarni Harðarson, *Sigurðar saga fóts*, 88–89.

66 *Ibid.*, 177.

evalist constructions of the developing world. A key moment for the book's development of both its medievalism and its Orientalism comes at the opening of the second section, when the eponymous protagonist Sigurður fótur is first described in detail (Excerpt 6).

There is plenty of traditional Icelandic medievalism here. The passage mentions *Njáls saga*, and a deeper connection again with the classical *Íslendingasögur* is indicated by style and allusion. Its thumbnail sketches of the characters' attributes recall sagas, as do the archaic turns of phrase "á vöxt var" and "hann var allra manna greindastur." In Sigurður fótur's case, the characteristics are certainly the attributes of a promising *Íslendinga saga*-hero — physical beauty, mental fortitude, and a disinclination to waste words — while also echoing the reputation of Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson for these characteristics.<sup>67</sup> Incorporating the time-honoured expression *seinþreyttur til vandræða*, Sigurður's portrait neatly echoes both Hildigunnur's celebrated characterization of Gunnar Hámundarson in *Njáls saga* and a self-characterization of Björgólfur Thor: "ég hef alltaf sagt að ég sé seinþreyttur til vandræða, en harður í horn að taka ef svo ber undir" ("I have always said that I am patient, but I fight my corner hard when it's called for").<sup>68</sup>

But Bjarni's medieval Icelandic literary allusions, resonant with an essentially white Icelandic nationalism, are juxtaposed with his description of a half-Palestinian Icelander — who is made to chime with a glib nickname for the downtrodden Reykjavík suburb of Breiðholt that was popular in the 1970s and '80s, "the Icelandic Golan Heights." Jamil has no neat real-world correlate — his clearest inspiration is Einar Páll Tamimi (1969–), a

67 E.g., Armann Thorvaldsson, *Frozen Assets: How I Lived Iceland's Boom and Bust* (Chichester: Wiley, 2009), 64–65.

68 Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga* [*The saga of Burnt Njáll*] (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornrítafélag, 1954), 149; cf. Peter Lee, "Landsbanki's New Masters Take Control," *Euromoney* 33, no. 403 (November 2002): 34–47 ("we're hard-pressed to get into a conflict but pretty feisty once we're dragged into one"); Blöndal, "Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson," *Morgunblaðið* 94, no. 231, August 27, 2006, B 1–8, at 8.

member of one of Iceland's best known immigrant families, noted for its participation in both Palestinian and Icelandic politics, who was a lawyer for Glitnir and in 2008 its best paid employee; but the comparisons with Ásmundur Jamil are, however, not otherwise close.<sup>69</sup> Jamil's inclusion partly reflects Bjarni's medieval model: in romance sagas, every hero must have a foster-brother, and it is not uncommon for the fosterbrother to arrive from a positively portrayed but fantastic Orient. Equally, as a number of writers have noted, Björgólfur Thor's image-crafting was not without Middle Eastern resonances: his holding company in the boom years was Samson ehf., alluding to the Israelite Samson's vengeance on the Philistines, echoed in *Sigurðar saga fóts* in a fleeting portrayal of Bjarnhéðinn og Co.'s attempt to disrupt Iceland's aristocracy as David facing Goliath.<sup>70</sup> But Jamil is clearly doing much more besides mirroring a medieval saga character or echoing the Samson brand: instead he provides a way into interrogating insular Icelandic identities.

Jamil's enthusiasm for *Njáls saga* at one level simply indicates his nerdiness. But at another level it indicates his need to be more Icelandic than the Icelanders, in the same way that the half-Greek Erlend's enthusiasm for Ólafur Tryggvason does in *Hetjur*, discussed in Chapter 3. *Sigurðar saga* can be read to suggest that this inequality takes its toll, portraying a hierarchical relationship between Sigurður and Jamil. While Sigurður has wonderful summer holidays with his grandfather in Beggjakot, Jamil has miserable ones with his harsh grandfather in Palestine. Like their saga-namesakes, Sigurður fótur and Ásmundur Jamil get into a fight over a girl, whom Jamil gives up to Sigurður in a way that hints at his beta-male status to Sigurður's alpha. When Sigurður and Jamil are arrested for drug-smuggling, Jamil elects to confess to the whole crime and to take the prison sentence

69 Cf. Kristjana Guðbrandsdóttir, *Von: Saga Amal Tamimi* (Reykjavík: Bókautgáfan Hólar, 2013).

70 Bjarni Harðarson, *Sigurðar saga fóts*, 89. Cf. Magnús Þór Snæbjörnsson, "Björgólfskviða — eða listaverkið að lokinni fjöldaframleiðslu sinni: Smásaga með myndum og neðanmálsgreinum," *Kistan*, October 18, 2008; Einar Már Guðmundsson, *Bankastræti núll*, 167.

for the two of them. Jamil does not emerge unscathed from the experience: his increasingly nihilistic attitude is hinted at as the novel goes on, such that at the moment when the financial bubble bursts, he chides Sigurður for wanting to switch off the news: “djöfullinn að hann pabbi þinn skuli missa af þessu. Sá hefði skemmt sér” (“it’s crap that your dad should have to miss out on this: he’d have enjoyed it”).<sup>71</sup> *Sigurðar saga fóts* does explore how Sigurður’s identity is complicated by class tensions, but although Sigurður is upwardly mobile and uneasy at his new status, and so has his crosses to bear, he is implicitly secure enough in his identity to exert a hegemonic masculinity. Jamil does not enjoy this possibility. By the end of *Sigurðar saga fóts*, it is clear that Jamil, alienated from his society as well as from his labor (and conceivably having never forgotten his teenage Marxism), has implicitly embraced the discourse that high finance is a game to be played — and that it would be unwise to care too much about whether the game is lost or won.

This makes Jamil a particularly ambivalent, troubling character. The novel seldom gives us access to his thoughts, and when it does it is usually through his laconic comments to Sigurður fótur, leaving Jamil a rather shadowy figure. The novel is fairly clear that if Jamil feels alienated from Icelandic society, it is to a significant extent society — and to some extent specifically Sigurður — that is to blame. Yet the emotional detachment with which Jamil seems to embrace the culture of the bubble — quite unlike the bewildered angst of Sigurður, which the novel portrays in detail — is unnerving. The last company Jamil gets Sigurður to create in order to unlock new credit before the bubble bursts is called Sam Foxtrott, named for the faithful manservant of Basil fursti, secret agent and hero of a series of interwar-era pulp fiction stories by the Danish writer Niels Meyn which were translated into Icelandic in the 1930s and ’40s. Accordingly, when Jamil engineers Sigurður’s escape to Pakistan, Sigurður is given the false identity of “Basil, lífsleiður þýskur fursti” (“Basil,

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71 Bjarni Harðarson, *Sigurðar saga fóts*, 238.



a world-weary German duke”).<sup>72</sup> These names, then, stand as Jamil’s ironic commentary on his relationship with Sigurður, affording him some agency. This agency comes to the fore in the story when the Crash breaks, and Sigurður places himself in the hands of Jamil. As the crisis unfolds, Sigurður and Jamil face a double peril: the wrath of the Icelandic people and, much more scarily, the wrath of the gangster Kex Wragadjip, whose laundered money has evaporated. As usual, it is Jamil who comes to the rescue, engineering his and Sigurður’s escape from Iceland: when the crisis breaks, Jamil uses his Middle Eastern contacts to escape to Palestine, where he is protected from a vengeful Kex by a “tvöföld öryggisgæsla, að útan sú ísraelska, að innan frá Hamas” (“double security service, the Israeli one from the outside and Hamas’s from the inside”).<sup>73</sup> Meanwhile, Jamil arranges Sigurður’s escape to “hinn öruggi staðurinn [...] í fríríki herskárra Hasara uppi í Khyber-skarði nærri landamerkjum Afgana og Pakistana” (“the other safe place [...] in the militant free state of Hazara, up in the Khyber Pass, near the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan”).<sup>74</sup> Here, Bjarni manages to fit in a side-swipe at the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip following 2008’s Operation Cast Lead, implying sympathy for the Palestinian predicament, while also deepening the shadows with which Jamil is surrounded.

Through Jamil, a marginal and troubling character, Bjarni begins to express not only how Iceland’s nationalist medievalism was a hegemonic discourse that helped the financial elite exert their influence over society, but also how it formulates an image of Icelandic society that struggles to accommodate incomers. At the same time, however, *Sigurðar saga fóts* encodes disquiet about how Iceland’s marginalized immigrants might respond to their ambivalent status: with little to lose, Jamil proves too willing to risk everything. The novel is unclear about whether Icelandic society would be best off making more space

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72 Ibid., 241.

73 Ibid., 240.

74 Ibid., 241.

for people of a complex ethnicity like Jamil to belong and flourish, or whether it would be better off without them altogether.

#### 4.5 Nostalgia

Jamil is also the mechanism whereby *Sigurðar saga fóts* shifts into its curious epilogue. This too owes something to inter-texts. Bjarni's stated inspiration for the novel besides its medieval namesake is the song *Furstinn* by Iceland's most renowned singer-songwriter, Megas, which recounts the life of a retired drug baron. The song opens with the lines "það veit enginn hvar í veröldinni hann býr | en vinir hans giska á píramída eða klaustur" ("no-one knows where in the world he lives, | but his friends guess either the Pyramids or a monastery"), an oriental image which clearly meshes with Sigurður fótur's final escape to Hazara.<sup>75</sup> But the end of the saga also recalls the end of the medieval *Grettis saga*, another bleak account of a promising young Icelander who, caught up in cultural changes which he cannot control, winds up becoming more of a menace to his society than a help. Grettir grows up in a land newly converted to Christianity where monsters of various kinds are a threat, and his skills as a monster-fighter compensate well for his lack of social graces. But as Christianity gets established in Iceland, implicitly chasing away demonic forces of its own accord, Grettir's skills are progressively less called for. He increasingly becomes a social problem and eventually, as a preternaturally strong outlaw himself, almost as much of a bane as the monsters he once faced. In both tales, a key message is that the best the protagonist can hope for is to look fate in the eye and take what is coming to him. However, whereas Grettir's problem is that he is fated not to move with the times, Sigurður fótur's problem is that he is fated to be at the forefront of change. Both texts, in their ways, mourn the passing of older ways of doing things. *Grettis saga*, however, ends firmly on a message of hope, encoded by a dra-

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75 Megas, *Hættuleg hljómsveit & glæpakvendið Stella* [A dangerous orchestra and Stella the criminal], Íslenskir Tónar IT237, 1990.

matic shift of mode to Continental-style romance in an epilogue fittingly entitled *Spesar þáttur* (“the story of Spes,” a woman whose name is Latin for “hope”). *Spesar þáttur* follows the journey to Constantinople of Grettir’s brother Þorsteinn Drómundur and recounts how Grettir became the Icелander whose death was avenged farthest from home. It is inspired by *Tristrams saga og Ísöndar*, itself translated from French, and balances the story of Christianization in Iceland, and the mourning for the loss of heroic, pre-Christian Icelandic culture, with the prospect of Iceland’s inclusion in a bright, new, cosmopolitan, Christian future. *Sigurðar saga fóts* likewise ends with a startling shift of mode, also to an Orientalist setting, having Sigurður flee Iceland in a wholly unrealistic escape to the north-west borders of Pakistan. The resonances between the two denouements are increased by the fact that Sigurður fótur is initially sheltered in an old monastery, while *Spesar þáttur* concludes with Þorsteinn Drómundur and his Byzantine wife Spes becoming religious recluses in Rome. *Sigurðar saga* demands to be read no less symbolically.

The novel’s presentation of Jamil is reflected in its ambivalent representation of Hazara, which is, however, far from simply negative. *Sigurðar saga fóts* likens the Middle East to Iceland in an earlier time: “Sigurður fótur var óafvitandi kominn í Áradal þann sem leitað hafði að Jón forfaðir hans í Höfða” (“unwittingly, Sigurður fótur had arrived in the very Áradalur which his forefather Jón í Höfða had looked upon”).<sup>76</sup> For all its criticism of nationalist medievalism and its challenging of medievalist golden ageism, *Sigurðar saga fóts* is an enthusiastically nostalgic novel, locating happiness in the rural lives and pastoral economies, manual labor, and autodidactic working class cultures two generations above the *útrásarvíkingar*. Nostalgia was, of course, widespread following the Crash, in Iceland and abroad.<sup>77</sup> In Iceland it was perhaps most obvious in the sudden fashion for *lopapeysur*, the jumpers hand-knitted from the un-

76 Bjarni Harðarson, *Sigurðar saga fóts*, 243.

77 Cf. Christian Klöckner, “Risk and Nostalgia: Fictions of the Financial Crisis,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 60, no. 4 (2015): 463–78.

spun and untreated wool called *lopi* which seem to have taken their present form around the 1930s but are now seen as icons of traditional Icelandic handicrafts.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, Þórarinn Eldjárn even published a short story, “Flökkusaga,” in which an out-of-work financier takes on an acting job playing a nineteenth-century vagabond, wandering from one settlement to another and taking payment for his storytelling. Identifying with the role altogether too much, the character is eventually found dead in the countryside: the story invites interpretation as an allegory for post-Crash nostalgia.<sup>79</sup>

But *Sigurðar saga fóts* does offer a fairly radical nostalgia, challenging the time- and date-stamped financialized temporalities of many Crash-novels. Its account of early twentieth-century rural Iceland and its petty elites takes a satirical tone, but the satire is gentle, and, in a description more idyllic than parodic, we are told how “ofan til rann áin beina leið en þegar kom niður á mýrarnar hlykkjaðist hún eins og óþekk og fjörug stelpa, tók beygjur út í bláinn og horfði eins og fullþroskuð kona til tunglsins” (“the river ran down on its straight course, and when it came down to the marshes it [lit. “she”] curved like a disobedient and lively girl, took a bend out into the blue, and gazed like a full-grown woman towards the moon”). In a circular process of naming which presents a charmingly naive parochial pomp, the river Skrauta í Dölum is properly known as Skrautudalsá (“Skrautadale River”), “og dalur hennar þar eftir Skrautudalsárdalur” (“and its valley Skrautadale River Dale after it”).<sup>80</sup> Beside it lies the farm named Höfði (literally “chief”)

78 Guðrún Helgadóttir, “Nation in a Sheep’s Coat: The Icelandic Sweater,” *FORMakademisk* 4, no. 2 (2011): 59–68; Sarah Moss, *Names for the Sea: Strangers in Iceland* (London: Granta, 2012), 280–309; Kathleen Donlan, “The *Lopapeysa*: A Vehicle to Explore the Performance of Icelandic National Identity” (Honors diss., Wellesley College, 2016), esp. 24–25, 48–49.

79 Þórarinn Eldjárn, *Alltaf sama sagan* [*Always the same story*] (Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 2009), 133–59.

80 This is presumably inspired by the infamous real-life place-name Staðarstaður (which might, using the corresponding English place-name

“eftir höfðanum” (“after the chief”).<sup>81</sup> We are at this point in the genteel world of the down-to-earth squire Jón in Halldór Laxness’s *Sjálfstætt fólk* rather than his pushy, would-be cosmopolitan wife or his philandering, metropolitan son. By insisting on giving his account of the Crash class tensions and a rural dimension, Bjarni encodes a widespread concern at land-purchases by wealthy individuals; at the power of the wealthy to destabilize rural communities; and the risk to urbanites of being cut off, perhaps irrevocably, from their rural heritage.<sup>82</sup> This roots the Crash in the initial development of Icelandic popular capitalism around the beginning of the twentieth century, and demands that it be read in terms of the class conflicts that came to prominence at that time.

Focusing on the grandparents of the *útrásarvíkingar*’s generation helps Bjarni to situate the Crash in a discourse of class struggle and to suggest a critique of neoliberalism which has otherwise been difficult to sustain since the fall of the Soviet Union. But it also implicitly locates Icelandic values in the generation or so before Iceland’s independence. Jón Karl Helgason, discussing the Icelandic independence struggle, has asked

what is the goal of a nation that has already experienced the realization of its greatest dream, reached its final destination? [...] It is [...] tempting to compare such a nation to an ageing hero who is preoccupied with the memories of his past achievements, his most thrilling adventures. The greatest dream of such a nation is to experience again its glorious moment of triumph.<sup>83</sup>

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elements, be Anglicized as Steadstead) some kilometres west of the mouth of the Hafnará.

81 Bjarni Harðarson, *Sigurðar saga fóts*, 7.

82 Cf. Alda Sigmundsdóttir, *Unraveled*, 13, 17; Árni Þórarinnsson, *Morgunengill* [*Morning-angel*] (Reykjavík: JPV, 2011), 42, 52, 214.

83 Jón Karl Helgason, “A Poet’s Great Return: Jónas Hallgrímsson’s Reburial and Milan Kundera’s Ignorance,” *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies/Études scandinaves au Canada* 20 (2011): 52–61, at 55.

Although independence is scarcely mentioned in the novel, the impression one gets from *Sigurðar saga fóts* is indeed of a need to reach back to the time of the independence struggle to locate and attempt to revive true Icelandic values. In Bjarni's Skrautdalur, the politics of the valley are those of the *hreppur*, an ancient administrative unit:

Rigurinn milli bakka er íþrótt sem á góðum degi gerir hvern mann að sagnameistara og skáldi.

Og nú þegar siðmenningin hafði loksins skotið rótum á millistríðsárunum með útvarpsviðtækjum og línulömpum þá urðu til nýjar tegundir fylkinga.<sup>84</sup>

The quarrelling between the two sides of the river is an art which on a good day makes everyone into a master of story and poetry.

And now, when civilization had finally put down down roots during the inter-war years, with radio sets and oil lamps, new kinds of factions came into being.

Here, then, “siðmenningin” (“civilisation”) is introduced with a somewhat critical tone; the older politics encourage *sagnameistarar* — people who can tell stories and sustain history — whereas the new party politics and modern media, with their endlessly mutable manipulations of reality, are both to be the subject of sustained critique throughout the novel. Hulda's baby-boomer acquaintance Ágústa gains no credit by taking on a forty-year mortgage simply for the amusement of fitting out a new house, nor for taking it as an opportunity to throw out her husband's grandfather's Danish encyclopedia along with all the *Íslendingasögur*.<sup>85</sup> Thus *Sigurðar saga* promotes knowledge of the past, and implies that for all its petty tensions and inequalities, the rural society of interwar Iceland was, until it was interrupted by the predations of a capitalist metropolitan elite, a better place

84 Bjarni Harðarson, *Sigurðar saga fóts*, 7.

85 *Ibid.*, 214.

than the society that produced the banking crisis. It also hints, in its talk of *sagnameistarar*, that we can read this past as part of Iceland's long literary Middle Ages.

While clearly enjoying this nostalgia, then, Bjarni complicates it by extending it beyond Iceland itself to Hazara, where, in exile, Sigurður employs the skills taught him by his grandfather Siggí stál to become a gunsmith. When, in 2047, Vala Maríudóttir's sons come to bring the elderly Sigurður back to Iceland, he explains that

Næst á eftir henni mömmu ykkar er þessi byssusmiði það besta sem fyrir mig hefur borið. Þegar ég byrjaði hér að smíða, plóga fyrst og svo byssur, fann ég loks það frelsi sem ég átti í smíðjunni hjá afa mínum. Hitt allt var martröð þar sem ég gerði aldrei neitt, nema skemmta skrattanum. Hér er ég þó að smíða áþreifanleg verðmæti, guðsgjafir.

— Til þess að drepa fólk, sagði sá yngri og fýldari. Það er nú varla gaman að vera skotinn með svona verkfæri?

— Hmmm. Það deyr enginn nema einu sinni og þegar að því kemur eru byssurnar mínar ekki það versta. Það eina sem skiptir er að gera vel það sem manni er falið að gera. Við ráðum svo engu um það hvað um þau verk verður og hvert þau leiða veröldina. Sjálfum finnst mér jafnan eins og að það sem ég vildi að yrði best og til mestra heilla hafi orðið mér öllum til mestrar bölvunar. Eins og þegar ég reyndi að ala ykkur upp, það er skelfing að sjá ykkur í dag, he, he.<sup>86</sup>

After your mum, this gun-smithing is the best thing that ever happened to me. When I began smithing here, first ploughs and then guns, I finally found the freedom which I had in the smithy with my granddad. Everything else was a nightmare where I didn't do anything except amuse the Devil. But here I get to make something of real value, God's gift.

86 Ibid., 251–52.

“In order to kill people,” said the younger and more peevish one. “It’s hardly fun to be shot with that kind of tool, right?”

“Hmm. You only ever die once, and when it comes to it, my guns aren’t the worst way to go. The only thing that matters is to do well what you’re hired to do. We don’t have any control over what becomes of what we make and where that takes the world. In fact, it’s actually as if all the things I wanted to turn out best and the most perfectly have been my greatest misfortunes. Like when I tried to bring you two up — it’s a fright to see you today, hahaha.”

The novel ends with the observation that “til Völustrákanna spurðist aldrei meir” (“of the Vala-boys, nothing was ever heard again”).<sup>87</sup> Sigurður obviously comes across as a dark figure here. At the end of *Grettis saga*, Þorsteinn drómundur proceeds from the darkness of Iceland’s pagan heritage into the light of religious devotion, and, barring a brief final chapter recording Sturla Þórðarson’s assessment of Grettir, the saga ends with a characteristically matter-of-fact statement about Þorsteinn’s descendants: “en ekki hafa börn hans né afkvæmi til Íslands komið svo að saga sé frá ger” (“but neither his children nor descendants have come to Iceland, so far as history records”).<sup>88</sup> By contrast, Sigurður fótur steps back into an ancient and decidedly uncanny temporality: swords in this world are not beaten into ploughshares; quite the reverse. The last line of the novel echoes the end of *Grettis saga*, but strikes an altogether more sinister tone. It recalls how Signý has those of her sons who do not live up to her expectations for her kin killed in the spectacularly gory *Völsunga saga*, or how, in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, Bárður kills his only son, Gestur, for converting to Christianity, thereby ending his own trollish dynasty, as well perhaps as Völundur, a smith, murdering the sons of his enemy and hiding their bodies

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87 Ibid., 252.

88 Örnólfur Thorsson and Mörður Árnason, eds., *Grettis saga* [*The saga of Grettir*] (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1996), 222.



in his forge in *Völundarkviða*.<sup>89</sup> But it is far from clear that we should read Sigurður fótur simply as having reached the nadir of a decline from childhood promise to violent depravity, having gone to seed in a violent and backward Orient. The narratorial voice flatly portrays Sigurður's sons as "miðaldra kramarmenn" ("middle-aged consumptives") who "höfðu aldrei náð sér til fulls eftir að hafa rekið nefið í lúxus á barnsaldri" ("had never fully recovered from getting their noses in the trough of luxury as children").<sup>90</sup> We get the impression that Sigurður's career in banking has given him a bleak world view, but also a certain moral clarity.

The particular moral clarity Sigurður gains is once more consonant with Marx's thought, and given that this section of the novel is in a symbolic mode, we are invited to read it in philosophical terms. Working in a Hegelian tradition, Marx built on Feuerbach's idea that God was a human creation, and that in attributing their own achievements and merits to God, humans alienated themselves from their own natures. Marx took the further step of arguing that economic systems were also (and were more fundamental) mechanisms of alienation. Labor, and its products, are essential to being human; to produce something, undertaking every stage of its production and disposal, is to undertake a meaningful and fulfilling activity. But the more "abstracted" labor becomes, as the worker enjoys progressively less control over the means of production, undertakes a progressively thinner slice of divided labor, and has less benefit from the value they have generated, the more alienated the worker becomes from themselves. *Sigurðar saga fóts* echoes Marx's use of metaphors and ideas about religion by repeatedly likening the

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89 R.G. Finch, ed. and trans., *The Saga of the Volsungs* (London: Nelson, 1965), 8–9 [ch. 6]; Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds., *Harðar saga; Bárðar saga; Þorskfirðinga saga; Flóamanna saga* [*The saga of Hörður; the saga of Bárður; the saga of the people of Þorskfjörður; the saga of the people of Flói*] (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritfélag, 1991) [ch. 21]; Guðni Jónsson, *Eddukvæði (Sæmundar-Edda)* [*The Poetic Edda (Sæmundur's Edda)*] (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1949), 1:185–98.

90 Bjarni Harðarson, *Sigurðar saga fóts*, 251.

blind faith demanded by high finance to the faith demanded by Christianity.<sup>91</sup> Relatively early in this trajectory, Sigurður is depicted as going to work the forklift-truck on the warehouse floor of his and his father's company, and the relative solace even this highly abstracted enterprise brings him is pathetic; later, the relief with which he undertakes to launder Kex Wragadjip's drug-money implicitly arises from his recognition that he is at last participating in a real economy of concrete supply and demand. Entering what is effectively figured as a pre-capitalist economy where handicrafts are still valued and necessary, then, is portrayed as Sigurður's emancipation from alienation and a long-awaited opportunity to fulfil himself.

Bjarni's account of Hazara is not uncomplex, nor merely an empty caricature. Rural Iceland really can look like northern Pakistan. Moreover, *Sigurðar saga fóts* doughtily resists discourses which posit Afghanistan as a proverbially awful place to live, exhibiting a knowing awareness of Iceland's post-colonial anxieties. It is possible, then, to take Bjarni's account of Sigurður's escape as a partly serious, if symbolic, endorsement of life in Hazara as a living example of how Iceland has been and should be: a serious attempt at utopianism.

Yet *Sigurðar saga fóts*'s utopia is still more an Orientalist fantasy than a call to action. The idea that someone who learned a bit of blacksmithing as a child can turn up in his forties in a completely unfamiliar environment and make himself a successful gunsmith fulfils a fantasy of Western superiority and civilization. Bjarni's text is explicit that in 2047, "það var að vísu allt annað ár í Mehet-dal eða jafnvel ekkert ár því þar liðu árin lengstum án talningar" ("it was of course an entirely different year in the Mehet-valley, or indeed no year at all, because the years passed mostly without being counted").<sup>92</sup> This proceeds from alluding to the Islamic calendar to becoming a classic depiction of the Orient as belonging to its own temporality, outside the Western progression to modernity. This section of the book

91 E.g., *ibid.*, 79, 149.

92 *Ibid.*, 251.

suggests that Bjarni's critique of Icelandic masculinity is not so much that masculinity needs to be revolutionized (in line, say, with Auður Ava Ólafsdóttir's 2007 *Afleggjarinn*, the diffident protagonist of Óttar M. Norðfjörð's 2009 *Paradísarborgin*, or indeed Þorsteinn drómundur's reliance on both the wiles and the spiritual guidance of Spes), but that, by traditional standards, Icelandic bankers were not truly masculine. Bjarni tends, conversely, to associate traditional gender norms with a condition of non-alienation. And whereas *Spesar þáttur* presents a positive view of Constantinople and has its protagonists end their lives in Rome, *Sigurðar saga fóts* seeks its utopia in a sparsely populated rurality — one which seems more nostalgic than a model for political change in the present. In this, it is rather similar to Óttar's *Örvitinn*, discussed in §2.5.3.

So despite its critique of a neo-feudal medievalism, *Sigurðar saga fóts* also attempts a medievalist utopianism, seeking a return to a pastoral past which is not idyllic, but which draws on medieval Icelandic literature to situate pre-modern modes of production as more conducive to human wellbeing than post-modern ones. This utopianism has an internationalist character, insofar as it sees in the present of Hazara the possibility of a return to the Icelandic past of a century or so ago. But to make this move, the novel lapses into Orientalist fantasy, while failing really to make a case for this shift in temporality in Iceland.

*Sigurðar saga fóts* is a playful, prickly novel, engaging vigorously with the medievalism of the *Útrásarvíkingar* and making good use of satire of Björgólfur Thor, in particular, as a way into a nuanced and historically sensitive exploration of the Crash. At times it struggles to keep up with the outlandishness of its own subject matter, but its engagement with medieval form — both the intergenerational explorations of cause and effect of the classical *Íslendingasögur* and the enthusiastically cartoonish and *riddarasögur* — helps it to chart some of the deep complexity of the Crash, to challenge the nationalist medievalism of the boom, to articulate an account of Iceland's deeply entrenched but little discussed class hierarchies, and to formulate an account of Iceland's medieval past that conveys its critique of the present. By

dispensing with golden-ageist medievalism and developing the case that Iceland is really experiencing feudal, dystopian medievalism, the novel seeks to expose the hegemonic power of the *útrásarvíkingar*. All the same, despite its awareness of Iceland's post-colonial anxieties, it struggles to do justice to its readings of Iceland in relation to Hazara. In these ways, *Sigurðar saga fóts* is quite representative of the post-Crash medievalism of the baby-boomers and their elders. Thus *Sigurðar saga fóts* and *Íslenskir kóngar* both take a satirical stance on the Crash. While the former concentrates on the generation that provided the key personnel of the banking boom and the latter on their parents' generation, both go to some lengths to situate the origins of banking boom with the nepotistic, often criminal, right-wing elites that took the tiller of Icelandic society as it adopted capitalism and moved towards independence in the first half of the twentieth century. Both novels put allusions to a feudal model of aristocracy at the center of their satires, reading the Crash partly as the outcome of intergenerational class-dominance. That said, barring a passing mention of Viking trade in the East, *Íslenskir kóngar* avoids framing its account of Icelandic society with references to the world beyond Europe, but it does pointedly emphasize the degree of sympathy for the Nazi regime in Germany during the 1930s and '40s, adverting to the lasting importance of white supremacism to how Iceland constructs its identity in relation to the wider world.<sup>93</sup>

*Sigurðar saga fóts* is even more similar in many of its plot decisions to *Töfrahöllin*, emphasizing the degree to which these stylistically very different novels nonetheless represent the post-Crash Iceland *Zeitgeist*. Whereas *Sigurðar saga fóts* is cheerfully burlesque, *Töfrahöllin* is a ploddingly realist, psychologically driven character study of a troubled man who can readily be read as an allegory of the Icelandic public. But despite their contrasting style, the books' underlying themes are very similar. Both develop their *útrásarvíkingur* figure through medieval and folkloric intertexts: *Sigurðar saga fóts* draws on the medi-

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93 Einar Már Guðmundsson, *Íslenskir kóngar*, 175–76, 105–13.

eval romance-saga of the same name, while *Töfrahöllin* uses the twelfth-century carving of a knight on the Valþjófstaður Door, the ballad *Kvæði af Ólafi liljurós*, and the Goethe poem inspired by a Danish variant of the same ballad, *Der Erklönig*. Both novels are deeply concerned with class, presenting main characters whose ancestry manifests a collision of elite and working class identities: in Bjarni's novel, this is Sigurður; in *Töfrahöllin* it is Jósep, whose devotion to the *útrásarvíkingur* Kormákur parallels Jamil's devotion to Sigurður fóttur, and likewise arises partly because Jósep is uncertain of his identity, tugged in three different directions by the communism of his grandfather, the aristocracy of his father, and the frustrated ambition of his mother; Jósep is further undermined when his father, who is gay, abandons the family. Both show how the masculinity of the *útrásarvíkingur* figure exerts a hegemonic control over his doting right-hand man, who in both cases gets involved in his friend's drug-smuggling and chooses to do time in jail rather than betray the *útrásarvíkingur*. Both weave a deep alarm about elites' purchases of land and fishing-rights in the countryside into their stories. Finally, both intersect their medievalist accounts of Icelandic boom-time culture with characters from the Islamic world, both ending with an unlikely Orientalist denouement. In *Töfrahöllin*, the counterpart to the fourth elf-maiden encountered in the ballad *Kvæði af Ólafi liljurós* turns out to be a Turkish sex-worker whom the protagonist rescues from violent oppression so that the two of them can settle down in unexpected petit-bourgeois comfort. This emphasizes how Bjarni Harðarson's Orientalism in *Sigurðar saga fóts* is, relatively speaking, quite productive and interesting — but also how it is not only Bjarni who has struggled to write Iceland convincingly in relation to the Global South.

The similarities between *Sigurðar saga fóts*, *Íslenskir kóngar*, and *Töfrahöllin* point clearly to the tightly integrated discursive structures of post-Crash Icelandic culture, perhaps specifically in this case among the baby-boomers and their elders. The tension between “nationalist” and “Orientalist” medievalism which I described in Chapter 3 is very visible here, and one which writ-

ers are clearly struggling to resolve. The possibilities for a more revealing and challenging engagement with medievalism and the Orient are, however, shown by Bjarni Bjarnason in his own satire of Björgólfur Thor, *Mannorð*.

#### 4.6 Bjarni Bjarnason's *Mannorð*: Writers and Reputations

Bjarni Bjarnason's *Mannorð* ("reputation") presents a revisionist approach to Iceland's nationalist medievalism using rather different strategies from *Sigurðar saga fóts* and attempting a rather grander scope. It shifts our attention away from Iceland's struggles to integrate ethnic Others, on which *Sigurðar saga fóts* focuses, and onto the international nature of Icelandic finance and Iceland's participation in the West's asymmetric, neo-colonial economic relationships with the developing world, this time choosing India as its point of reference. As well as helping us examine the use and abuse of the mythic figure of Björgólfur Thor, and Iceland's medievalism and Orientalism, *Mannorð* further provides a case study of the anxiety discussed in Chapter 2 about the co-option of Icelandic art to the banking boom (and to neoliberal capitalism more generally). *Mannorð* engages vigorously with Iceland's medieval literary heritage to imagine how, after the Crash, a despised Icelandic banker, Starkaður Leví, attempts to recover a good name (but not, as it turns out, *his* good name) by paying an agency to help him take on the identity of a world-weary but well-loved Icelandic author, Almar Logi. *Mannorð* is ultimately, probably, more cynical than *Sigurðar saga fóts*; but it also succeeds in engaging with international finance in ways that *Sigurðar saga fóts* does not.

Much about *Mannorð*'s style will be familiar from the survey in Chapter 2: it is at one level an extended meditation on the angst of an author who feels that reality has overtaken fiction. Accordingly, large sections of the novel are ostensibly drawn from the diary of one of its protagonists, the author Almar Logi, putting anxiety about authorship, the relationship between the author's life and his writing, and the position of the author in society at the forefront of the tale. The same device is used in Guð-

mundur Óskarsson's *Bankster* (2009) and Óttar M. Norðfjörð's *Lygarinn* (2011), emphasizing the appeal of diaristic form to post-Crash Icelandic writers keen to muse on the nature of writing. Describing his most recent work, *Demón Café*,

Almar sagði að saga af djöflinum sem kemur til Íslands og auðgast á því að fórna sál gamals manns og ætlar síðan að vinna ást guðs með því að fórna barninu sínu, hafi verið lýsing á Íslandi 2007 eins og hann skynjaði það. Þetta hefði ekki verið fantasía, heldur raunsæi, eins og síðar kom í ljós.<sup>94</sup>

Almar said that the story of the Devil who comes to Iceland and gets rich by sacrificing the soul of an old man, and intends thereafter to win God's affection by sacrificing his own child, had been a description of Iceland in 2007, as he perceived it. This had not turned out to be a fantasy, but reality, as later became clear.

Local audiences had not, however, apprehended the significance of the novel, helping to precipitate Almar Logi's existential crisis. As well as its Judaeo-Christian resonances, ranging from Abraham to Faust, in the context of *Mannorð* this story recalls Snorri Sturluson's account of Aun inn gamli, the Swedish king who sacrificed all but one of his sons to Óðinn in return for a grotesquely extended life:<sup>95</sup> the use of medieval intertexts is a key means for *Mannorð* to gain some purchase on the problems of writing within capitalist realism.

The multiple resonances of the book's title are emphasized by the forty-fifth of the collection of poems on the Crash by Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl, *Hnefi eða vitstola orð*:<sup>96</sup>

94 Bjarni Bjarnason, *Mannorð* [*Reputation*] (Akranes: Uppheimar, 2011), 88.

95 Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla* [*The orb of the world*], ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1941–51), 1:47–50.

96 Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl, *Hnefi eða vitstola orð* [*A fist or words bereft of sense*] (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2013), unnumbered pages.

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*Orðlof* is an archaic word, literally meaning “word-praise”; *mannorð* is its modern counterpart. *Orðlof* evokes the stock-in-trade of medieval Icelandic court poets, and thus the power of writers to praise or criticize their rulers. Its insistent repetition in Eiríkur Örn’s poem evokes the almost proverbial centrality of personal honor in canonical Old Icelandic literature, and it sets this golden age in contrast to the corruption of the present. But it can also be read ironically as a comment on current Icelandic golden-ageism and obsession with keeping up appearances at the expense of deeper reform. It comments not only on the personal reputations of bankers, but Iceland’s national anxiety about foreign views of the country — a point underscored by the fact that every page of the collection *Hnefi eða vitstola orð* charts the changing (mostly falling) value of the króna relative to the Euro from about 24 July 2008 to 15 May 2009. *Mannorð*, despite focusing on the personal reputation of one banker, evokes similar issues.

Bjarni takes the self-medievalizing Björgólfur Thor and re-narrates him through the saga-character Starkaður Stórvirksson from *Gautreks saga*. Starkaður Leví’s first attempt to regain his reputation is to publish an open letter of apology “eins og [...] hann væri á pari við þjóðina sem hann talaði til líkt og fyrrverandi eiginkonu í biturri ástarsorg” (“as if [...] he was in a relationship with the nation, which he talked to like it was his ex-wife in a bitter break-up”).<sup>97</sup> This is a method which several real Icelandic financiers attempted, not least Björgólfur Thor. These epistles appeared both to widespread incredulity and

<sup>97</sup> Bjarni Bjarnason, *Mannorð*, 7.



literary parody, and Starkaður Levi's fares no better.<sup>98</sup> In *Gautreks saga*, Starkaður Stórvirksson's life is shaped by a series of blessings and curses he receives respectively from the gods Óðinn and Þór (which in turn resonate with the second part of Starkaður Levi's name: the biblical patriarch Levi is characterized by the curse he receives from his father Jacob in Genesis 49). Þór begins by cursing Starkaður to have no descendants; Óðinn counters by according Starkaður a life three life-spans long; Þór curses him with a *níðingsverk* ("atrocities") in each; and a long series of further blessings and curses follows. Óðinn and Þór's exchange closes thus:

Óðinn mælti: "Ek gef honum skáldskap, svá at hann skal eigi seinna yrkja en mæla." Þórr mælti: "Hann skal ekki muna eptir, þat er hann yrkir." Óðinn mælti: "Þat skapa ek honum, at hann skal þykkja hæstr inum göfgustum mönnum ok inum beztum." Þórr mælti: "Leiðr skal hann alþýðu allri."<sup>99</sup>

Óðinn said: "I give him the art of poetry, such that he will compose poetry no slower than speaking." Þór said: "he will not remember anything he composes." Óðinn said: "I decree it for him, that he will be considered the highest by the noblest and best people." Þór said: "he will be despised by all the common people."

The exchange is conventionally understood to reflect an antagonism between Óðinn (associated with aristocrats, court poetry, and provoking war), and Þór (thought to have been more popular further down the social ladder, and associated

98 See, in addition to the previous note, Ævar Örn Jósepsson, *Land tækifæranna* [*Land of opportunities*] (Akranes: Uppheimar, 2008), 96–97; Árni Þórarinnsson, *Morgunengill*, 236; Guðbjörg Hildur Kolbeins, "...svo sem vér og fyrirgefum... Fyrirgefningin og hrúnið," *Rannsóknir í félagsvindum: Viðskiptafræðideild* 12 (2011): 45–53.

99 Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds., *Fornaldarsögur norðurlanda* [*Ancient sagas of northern lands*] (Reykjavík: Bókautgáfan Forni, 1943–44), 3:25–26.

## EXCERPT 7

Bjarni Bjarnason, *Mannorð*, 154–55

En hvers vegna sá ég þá hvergi vannært fólk? Ég velti því mikið fyrir mér. Einu sinni sem oftar þegar billinn strandaði í umferðarmartröðinni fékk ég svar við spurningunni. Ég sá bláfátækan mann sem reyndi að framfleyta sér á að selja te í plastmálum. Búðin hans var valtur timburkassi sem hann hafði lappað uppá með afgangstimbri. Hann breytti um svip þegar hann stóð fyrir aftan kassann, varð mjög ábúðarfullur. Þegar enn fátækari vegfarandi átti leið hjá með staf sinn þá steig hann í veg fyrir hann og rétti honum tebollla og þurra hveitiköku orðalaust. Sá fátækari tók við máltíðinni tignarlega hljóður, settist á hækjur sér og snæddi með stafinn liggjandi milli fótanna. Augun, blóðhlaupin og stjörf, höfðu allt séð. Búðareigandinn horfði á hann stoltur. Eins og hann væri ríkasti maður heims úr því hann gat boðið honum fría máltíð.

Atvikið sýndi mér mestu hámenningu jarðarinnar, og hún byrjar í sárustu fátæktinni. Allar tilraunir til að taka fátæktina af mannkyninu enda í hörmulegri afskræmingu náttúrunnar. Sálin sprettur heil og fögur upp úr fátæktinni en afskræmist í ríkidæminu. Fátæktarsálin er hin sýnilega mynd heilagleikans í veröldinni. Heyrirðu það, amma! Indverjar vita þetta manna best enda þykir þeim ekkert eðlilegra en að örfáir eðalbornir eigi allt fínerisgóssið og hinir snúist í kringum þá eins og guði og nuddi þá með heitum ilmólum frá morgni til kvölds. Fátækir á Indlandi eru átta hundruð milljónir. Heyrirðu það, amma? Átta hundruð milljónir! Það er tvöfalt meira en allur íbúafjöldi Evrópu. Á maður að velta fyrir sér hver á hve margar krónur þegar svona er ástatt í veröldinni? Gæti maður ekki rétt eins velt fyrir sér eignaskiptingu meðan maður horfir á stjórnurnar? Ef einhver ætlar að breyta þessu getur viðkomandi tekið náttúrulögmálin til endurskoðunar og endurskipulagt sporbauga himintunglanna í leiðinni.

with maintaining social order by patrolling the borders of the worlds of gods and men against giants).<sup>100</sup> As I described in §4.1, Björgólfur Thor has made much of associating himself with his popular namesake. By renarrating Björgólfur Thor instead as an Óðinn-hero in the mould of Starkaður Stórvirksson, then, *Mannorð* figures Björgólfur Thor's self-presentation as a hegemonic discourse disguising his true resemblance to the wily, selfish, and destructive Óðinn. *Mannorð* then goes on to have Starkaður Leví fulfil Óðinn's blessings — but unlike his namesake, ultimately also to avoid Þórr's curses.

Starkaður Stórvirksson's first step in fulfilling Óðinn's blessings is his first *níðingsverk*: sacrificing his foster-brother Víkar to Óðinn. Accordingly, *Mannorð* has Starkaður Leví regaining his reputation, and gaining for the first time an *innihaldsrikt líf* ("content-rich life, meaningful life"), through the sacrifice of the depressed, jaded, but well loved author Almar Logi. Spurred partly by the mockery of a detractor wearing a Thor's hammer pendant, Starkaður Leví pays a company which specializes in arranging new identities for the hyper-rich to take on Almar Logi's identity and life. Starkaður Leví takes on Almar's form through plastic surgery, and Almar himself accepts a lethal injection by a *sprauta* ("syringe"), echoing the way Víkar agrees to be the victim of a mock-sacrifice in which Starkaður thrusts a *sprotta* ("twig") at him which, however, magically becomes a lethal spear.<sup>101</sup> Yet rather than delivering the infamy accorded to Starkaður Stórvirksson, Starkaður Leví's secret sacrifice of Almar Logi is unknown to the rest of society, allowing Starkaður Leví in many respects to gain the best of both worlds. Likewise, whereas Starkaður is cursed with sustaining horrific injuries, Bjarni has Starkaður Leví lightly injured by a startling but not life-threatening knife attack. In his life as a banker, Starkaður Leví had been dumped by his long-term partner and left child-

100 E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (London: Weidefeld and Nicolson, 1964), 211. Cf. Declan Taggart, "Understanding Diversity in Old Norse Religion Taking Þórr as a Case Study" (Ph.D. diss., University of Aberdeen, 2015), esp. 59–69.

101 Bjarni Bjarnason, *Mannorð*, 222.

Ég gerði hagfræðilega tilraun í Jaipurferðinni. Hún fólst í því að ég skipti tíu þúsund rúpíum í þúsund tíu rúpíu seðla í bankanum og fór niður í miðbæ Jaipur, fyrir utan gömlu konungshöllina og hóf að deila þeim út, einum í senn. Ég get sagt þér það, að allt fór á annan endann. Ég ætlaði að drepast úr hlátri þegar ég var að troðast undir æstum betlaralyðnum. Það er skömm að segja frá því, amma, af því að ég gerði þetta í vísindaskyni, að ég man ekki meira frá þessu. Nema hvað ég rankaði við mér undir ávaxtaborði á markaðstorginu með lögreglumenn vopnaða bareflum yfir mér. Tilraunin mistókst kannski fyrst ég rankaði við mér og mér tókst ekki að sanna kenninguna. Eðlilegast hefði verið að ég hefði kramist undir æstustu gyðju heimsins, fátæktinni. Það hefði sannað tilgátuna um að ríkir eiga ekki að reyna að þóknast fátækum. Ef til vill var það bílstjórinn sem þarna spornaði við framþróun vísindanna. Fyrsta sem ég sá var hann að tala við lögreglumennina, hafði sigað þeim með kylfurnar á börnin og gamalmennin.

Ég staulaðist á fætur, lét hann keyra mig út á flugvöll og gat ekki gert að því að ég hló allan túrinn. Sársaukafullum hlátri því líkaminn var allur lemstraður eftir hvíluþrögðin með fátæktargyðjunni.



But why didn't I see any undernourished people anywhere? I thought about that a lot. One time, when the car was stuck yet again in the nightmare traffic, I got the answer to my question. I saw a totally destitute man who was trying to support himself by selling tea in these plastic cups. His shop was this upturned wooden box that he'd patched together from leftover bits of wood. His demeanour changed when he stood behind the box, became really proprietorial. When an even poorer passer-by was passing with his stick, he stepped out into the road in front of him and silently handed him a cup of tea and a dry

less (matching Þór's curse that Starkaður Stórvirksson should have no descendants), but in becoming Almar Logi he both metaphorically gains another lifespan, echoing the longevity granted by Óðinn to Starkaður Stórvirksson, and a fulfilling family life. (Ironically, moreover, Almar Logi's wife is a key witness in the prosecution of Starkaður Leví.) In death, Almar Logi may forget everything he has ever written, but, inheriting Almar's diaries, Starkaður Leví not only gets to remember it, but to use it as the basis for his next novel, circumventing Almar's writer's block. Thus Starkaður Stórvirksson's gift of *skáldskap* is a key motif for *Mannorð*. As well as writing the Crash as a personal crisis for a banker, *Mannorð* also writes it as a personal crisis for an author who, worn down by life as a critical voice on the margins of capitalist society, can be bought too readily.

By rewriting *Gautreks saga*, then, Bjarni challenges the *útrásarvíkingur* narrative by renarrating one of its leading figures as a destructive, Odinic character; but he also concludes — with justifiable cynicism — that such characters generally get to have their cake and eat it. *Mannorð* mounts a pointed critique of the medievalism of the *útrásarvíkingar*, while also exposing their continued capacity to continue to reap the profits of their finance activities.

#### 4.7 International finance

*Mannorð* is also particularly interesting, however, for the way it uses medieval intertexts to situate Iceland in relation to the developing world. While *Mannorð* shows the same desire as *Sigurðar saga fóts* and *Töfrahöllin* to write Icelandic medievalism in relation to the Orient, it makes a concerted attempt to think about the meaning of Iceland's banking boom in relation to global economic and political forces, and to recognize that the boom also had consequences for the developing world. The novel opens with Starkaður Leví in self-imposed exile in Kochi in south-west India. Later in the novel, as he reaches the point of no return in abandoning his identity, Starkaður pays a final visit to his grandmother and finds himself unexpectedly mus-

wheat-cake. The poorer one received the meal in dignified silence, crouched down on his heels and ate with the stick lying between his feet. His eyes, bloodshot and gazing, had seen it all. The stall owner looked at him proudly, as if he was the richest man in the world, because he'd been able to offer him a free meal.

The incident showed me the most civilised culture on earth, and it begins in the most extreme poverty. Every attempt to take poverty away from mankind ends in this horrible distortion of nature. The spirit grows up healthy and beautiful from poverty, but is corrupted by wealth. The soul of the poor is the clearest image of holiness in the world. You see what I mean, Gran? Indians know this better than anyone, and nothing seems more natural to them than that a tiny number of the high-born own all the flash possessions and the others revolve around them as if they're a god, and massage them with hot, aromatic oils from morning to night. There are eight-hundred million in poverty in India. You see what I mean, Gran? Eight-hundred million! That's twice as many people as the whole population of Europe. Do you have to think about who owns how many krónur when this is the state of the world? Couldn't you just as well be thinking about asset allocation when you're looking at the stars? If anyone wants to change this they have to take into account the laws of nature and the ordained orbits of the heavenly bodies.

On the Jaipur trip, I did an economic experiment. It consisted of me changing ten thousand rupees into a thousand ten-rupee notes at the bank and going down into the middle of Jaipur, outside the old royal palace and court, to hand them out, one by one. It all went differently than I expected, I can tell you. I intended to die of laughter as I was squashed by a demented crowd of beggars. It's a disgrace to admit this, Gran, given that I did it in a scientific spirit, but I don't remember any more about it. Just that I came to my senses under a vegetable stall

ing at length on his time in India. As far as I am aware, there is no historical basis for situating the self-imposed exile of a disgraced Icelandic banker in India or elsewhere in the Global South. For Starkaður, however, his reminiscences about India become an opportunity for a meditation on the privilege of the super-rich in a global context. Starkaður finds himself spending two months not leaving his air-conditioned five-star New Delhi hotel and availing himself of the oblivion afforded by hours of massages. Starkaður is eventually spurred into flight by an unexpected invitation from the Icelandic ambassador in India to attend a garden party for a visit by the Icelandic president: one of the “kokteilboðin sem stjórna heiminum” (“cocktail parties that rule the world”), and the sort of event at which

tilfinningin þar var sú að við værum úrval tilverunnar og stjórnunum framtíðinni út frá gamansögum hver annars, framtíðin kom til almúgans í gegnum hlátur okkar sem klingdi eins og gullpeningar sem falla ofan í fjársjóðskistu. Já, þetta var hinn gyllti úrvalshláturkór heimsins sem kokteilsglösin léku undir þegar brosfólkið skálaði í nutímatónlistarlegum takti.<sup>102</sup>

It felt like we were a segment of reality and we controlled the future through one another’s anecdotes: the future came to ordinary people through our laughter, which jingled like gold coins dropping into a treasure chest. Yep, this was the gilded-elite-laughter-choir of the world, which the cocktail glasses accompanied with the rhythms of avante-garde music when the smiling people said “cheers!”

This nods to the existence of a global elite of the super-rich and national leaders whose class solidarity transcends national borders at the expense of the sovereignty of national governments, and contradicts the interests of lower social orders across the globe. “En ég var viss um að gamansögurnar yrðu á minn kost-

102 Bjarni Bjarnason, *Mannorð*, 153.

in the market place, with policemen armed with clubs over me. Perhaps the experiment went wrong because I came to my senses before I could prove the hypothesis. The most natural thing would have been that I would have been crushed under the most furious goddess in the world, poverty. That would have proved the theory that the rich don't have to try and please the poor. Perhaps it was the driver who impeded the advancement of science that day. The first thing I saw was him talking to the policemen — he'd set them on the children and old folk with their truncheons.

I got myself to my feet and had him drive me out to the airport, and couldn't do anything because I was laughing the whole way. With painful laughter, because my body was totally beaten up after getting into bed with the goddess of poverty.

nað að þessu sinni og framtíðin kæmi til heimsins í gegnum hlátur einhvers annars en mín” (“but I was sure that this time the anecdotes would be at my expense, and the future would come about through the laughter of someone other than me”), Starkaður goes on, reflecting a loss of agency that pervades the novel. Instead of attending the party, he heads to Jaipur.

Starkaður recounts to his grandmother how, as he travelled, he reflected on the charity he witnessed around him between people who to his eyes were uniformly impoverished, and the enormous inequality that characterizes Indian society. Excerpt 7 presents the key account. Starkaður's story is ambiguous: his vision of the solidarity of the poor is romantic, and does not address the brutality of the caste system. This is a confusing narrative, and if it is hard to imagine just what Starkaður Levi thinks he is doing here, that is surely partly because his sense of normality has become so detached from the reader's. But there is no doubt that Bjarni here is developing the portrayal of Starkaður Stórvirksson as an Óðinn-hero by alluding to the ac-



count of how Óðinn gained the mead of poetry in *Skáldskaparmál*, which begins thus:

Óðinn fór heiman ok kom þar, er þrælar níu slógu hey. Hann spyrr ef þeir vili at hann brýni ljá þeira. Þeir játa því. Þá tekr hann hein af belti sér ok brýndi, en þeim þótti bíta ljárnir miklu betr ok fqluðu heinina. En hann mat svá at sá er kaupa vildi skyldi gefa við hóf, en allir kváðusk vilja ok báðu hann sér selja, en hann kastaði heininni í loft upp. En er allir vildu henda þá skiptusk þeir svá við at hverr brá ljánum á háls öðrum.<sup>103</sup>

Óðinn travelled from his home and arrived at a place where nine slaves were mowing hay. He asks if they would like him to sharpen their scythes. They agree to that. He then takes a whetstone from his belt and sharpened the scythes, and the slaves found that they cut much better, and asked to buy the whetstone. And he priced it such that whoever wanted to buy it should give accordingly in return, and everyone said they did want to and asked him to sell it them. But he threw the whetstone up into the air. And when everyone tried to catch it, they crossed each other's paths such that each one drew his scythe across the throat of the others.

Óðinn here shows a callous indifference to the unfree poor: his motivation for engineering the slaves' demise is to take their jobs as a first step to stealing a drink of the Mead of Poetry. In *Gautreks saga*, Starkaður Stórvirksson undertakes no such activity, but *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* suggests that Óðinn's trick here is the sort of thing we should expect his followers to get up to. In his old age, *Egils saga*'s eponymous protagonist, an old devotee of Óðinn, plots to take two chests of silver onto the *lögberg* at the Alþingi and cast the silver amongst the crowd, "ok þiki mér undarligt, ef allir skipta vel sín í milli. Ætla ek at þar myndi vera

103 Anthony Faulkes, ed., *Edda: Skáldskaparmál* [*Edda: discourse on poetics*] (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), 1:4.

þá hrundningar eða pústrar, eða bærisk at um síðir, at allr þingheimrinn berðisk” (“and I will be surprised if everyone shares it out nicely. I want there to be pushing and punching, or it ending up with everyone at the *þing* getting into a fight”).<sup>104</sup> Both Egill and Starkaður Leví seem to want to expose people’s inner barbarity, but to do so in ways which serve equally to expose their own psychopathy.

Recognizing that *Mannorð* is mining a mythic seam here, we are surely expected to read Starkaður Leví’s distribution of ten-rupee notes allegorically: he represents the power of Western finance to win the coercive support of the post-colonial state, working systematically to maximize profits without regard to the wellbeing of the slave-like poor, while claiming to bring wealth by redistributing a fraction of the wealth that the poor have themselves produced. Bjarni’s critical deployment of *Snorra Edda*, which stands close to the heart of the nationalist medievalist Icelandic canon, brings home how, once Iceland joined the global financial machine, and contrary to its habitual self-image as a newly independent, plucky post-colonial underdog, it took on a significant new role in a neo-colonial financial system.

Iceland initiated an official overseas development policy in 1971; it created a peacekeeping force, the Icelandic Crisis Response Unit, in 2001; it supported the US-led invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003); and all of these activities were partly intended to support the ill-timed (and unsuccessful) attempt to join the UN Security Council in 2008, one of Iceland’s self-professed qualifications for which was an impressively hollow sounding sympathy with post-colonial countries, supposedly born of a shared experience of colonial oppression.<sup>105</sup>

104 Bjarni Einarsson, ed., *Egils saga [The saga of Egill]* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2003), 180.

105 Silja Bára Ómarsdóttir, “Framboð Íslands til öryggisráðs Sameinuðu þjóðanna: Orðræða utanríkisráðherra 2003–2008,” *Rannsóknir í félagsvindum: Stjórn málafræðideild* 12 (2011): 127–35; Kristín Loftsdóttir and Helga Björnsdóttir, “The ‘Jeep-Gangsters’ from Iceland: Local Development Assistance in a Global Perspective,” *Critique of Anthropology*

These manoeuvres reflect the wider trend for the militarization of “development” through the discourses of “peacekeeping” and “security,” and have been widely criticized in Iceland as militarization through the back door — not least in Þráinn Bertelsson’s novel *Valkyrjur*, where the government’s efforts to create a secret service without proper public oversight are roundly criticized. Likewise, Óttar M. Norðfjörð’s *Örvitinn; eða hugsjónamaðurinn*, following in the footsteps of *Candide*’s portrayal of European colonialism, tumbles brilliantly from Iceland’s participation in the Iraq war and its discourses of “the war on terror” to the Crash, hinting through juxtaposition at how participation in war chimed with the macho, chauvinistic hubris which gained such prominence during Iceland’s boom. But Óttar never really brings war and Crash into dialogue; the economic drivers for Western war in Iraq are not explored in *Örvitinn*. *Sigurðar saga fóts*, Sigrún Davíðsdóttir’s *Samhengi hlutanna*, and Ernir K. Snorrason’s burlesque crime-novel *Sýslumaðurinn sem sá álfa* work on the assumption that Icelandic banks were laundering Russian mafia money, thus implicating Iceland in corruption overseas, but none attempts to depict the consequences of these activities for foreign societies. By contrast, Bjarni Bjarnason’s account of Starkaður Levi’s “economic experiment” implicitly recognizes the shared history of Iceland and India as recently poverty-stricken colonies, the complicity of Icelandic finance in the perpetuation of colonial-era systems of political economy, and the moral imperative for Iceland to make common cause with the poor of India. The invocation of medieval Icelandic texts in this argument helps to bring the critique close to home: whereas the use of *fornaldarsögur* and romances enables writers to articulate different medievalisms from the nationalist medievalism at the heart of the *útrásarvíkingur* myth, the critical use of texts at the heart of the nationalist canon — *Snorra Edda* and *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* — enables Bjarni to suggest that the psychopathy and corruption he identifies in these canonical

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30, no. 1 (2010): 23–39; Kristín Loftsdóttir, “Whiteness Is from Another World.”

texts is as integral to the elite culture of the banking boom as it is to the medieval texts that the *útrásarvíkingar* have appropriated.

#### 4.8 Conclusion

As satirical biographies of Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson, *Sigurðar saga fóts* and *Mannorð* do not strike me as particularly powerful politically: for all their dark humor, it is hard for the reader not to come to sympathize with the protagonist, who in both novels finds himself increasingly (even tragically) alienated from himself. This is not to say that the financiers at the heart of the financial crisis do not deserve some personal sympathy, but rather that biographies of bankers struggle to harness affect to a critique of financial systems; a similar criticism can be levelled, for example, at the portrayal of Eric Packer, the financier at the center of Don DeLillo's 2003 *Cosmopolis*.<sup>106</sup> It is, moreover, instructive that the range and ingenuity of Icelandic novels inspired by Björgólfur Thor for the most part seem unlikely to reflect a specific Icelandic capacity to use biographical forms to write about the Crash: rather the novels reflect the high public profile and personal myth-making that made the more colourful protagonists of the banking boom digestible to writers. The contrast between Björgólfur Thor and another key pair of Icelandic financiers, Ágúst and Lýður Guðmundsson, who beginning with share purchases in 2002 became the single biggest owners of Kaupþing, is instructive: Ágúst and Lýður gave their companies bland names and kept a low profile before and after the Crash, and correspondingly have stayed firmly beyond the criticism of Icelandic novelists. Much the same might be said for their British counterparts. In John Lanchester's *Capital*, the banker Roger Yount is a bumbling caricature of Britain's privately educated and overprivileged elite, while in Sebastian Faulks's *A Week in December*, the financier John Veals is a James Bond-villain without the intrepid antagonist: it is as if both authors, in

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106 Michael K. Walonen, *Contemporary World Narrative Fiction and the Spaces of Neoliberalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 49–50.

their different ways, are trying to condense their villains from the ether. The main British exceptions to this unwritable anonymity are perhaps Fred Goodwin, erstwhile CEO of the Royal Bank of Scotland Group, and Philip Green, one-time owner of British Home Stores and much else besides: both had the misfortune to receive knighthoods of which they could be stripped. (Curiously, then, they too have been given their cultural meaning through anachronistically medieval sign systems.) That said, while not necessarily more realistic than Yount and Veals, Starkaður Leví and Sigurður fótur are at least more tangible, given form by the literary strata that underlie them.

These limitations notwithstanding, though, it is also clear that, by taking bankers' eminently postmodern remixing of medieval signs (as mediated through National Romanticism) and not only renarrating them but bringing them forcibly back into intertextual contact with medieval sources, Iceland's baby-boomers have been able to chip away at the medievalist-nationalist narratives which economic and political elites used to justify their boom-time activities. We might go so far as to suggest that a key way for many Icelandic literary writers to gain some purchase on the capitalist realism discussed in Chapter 2 has been to work with medieval texts: texts from pre-capitalist societies. In terms of Fredric Jameson's famed injunction to "always historicize,"<sup>107</sup> they could perhaps be said to historicize the medievalism of the *Útrásarvíkingar*, helping to reveal how it is the product of nationalist, patriarchal historiography rooted in nineteenth-century Romanticism and colonialism. By drawing on neglected medieval genres, associated in Icelandic nationalism with Norwegian oppression and so-called feudal social structures, Icelandic novellists have been able to present rather forcefully an image of Iceland entering a neo-feudal epoch, and in doing so challenge nationalist neoliberal hegemonies.

In Chapter 2, I argued that a great deal of post-Crash fiction fairly neatly inhabits capitalist realism, seeking to resist neo-

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107 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Social Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), 9.

liberalism, but struggling to examine neoliberal culture from outside its own frame of reference. I found these limitations manifesting themselves at the levels of style (the ostensible realism of crime novels, for example, actually promotes a very particular understanding of the politically “realistic”) and content (the fantastical character of children’s fiction often seemingly unable to imagine the end of capitalism, or to assert a progressive agenda beyond resistance). I emphasized that novels tend to be constrained by the post-war Western commitment to the novel as an exploration of individual psychologies, and that this contrasts with the classical *Íslendingasögur*, pre-eminently *Njáls saga*. While acknowledging individual psychology, the classical *Íslendingasögur* focus firmly on the long-term, social, and systemic causes of violence, presented in a vividly portrayed, non-capitalist society. *Njáls saga* is a literary work precisely concerned with the relationship between individual responsibilities, social structures, and the institutions that are supposed to mediate them, and deftly explores the ethical dilemmas and individual tragedies these relationships entail without taking its eye off the social.

It will be clear that in some ways the same critique holds for the literature examined in this chapter too: both *Mannorð* and *Sigurðar saga fóts* are committed to the exploration of the inner thoughts of a main protagonist in a way that even sagas focusing on a single character seldom concern themselves with. Yet both texts do, in different ways, echo the achievements of classical sagas. When Steinar Bragi bodily included a quasi-folktale in *Hálendið*, he succeeded brilliantly in allegorizing neoliberal hegemony, but did not get much further than this. *Sigurðar saga fóts*, however, firmly situates the boom in a multi-generational frame going back to the first decades of Icelandic industrial capitalism. Both this novel and *Mannorð*, in their different ways, make some progress in explicating the global character of Icelandic finance, and even, in the case of the former, to contemplate other forms of reality — albeit with an Orientalizing nostalgia which Steinar Bragi would contemplate with deserved scepticism. *Mannorð* manages to complicate nationalist and Oriental-

ist medievalism alike by using canonical texts to indicate how the troubles of the Global South are both a consequence and an integral part of the nationalist-medievalist project. Albeit tentatively, *Mannorð* helps to indicate that the medieval does at least suggest productive challenges to dominant discourses.

Nevertheless, *Mannorð*'s message is (justifiably) cynical. In one sense, it is the financier in *Mannorð* who is metabolized by literary sign-systems rather than the writer: as perceived by the rest of the world, it is Almar Logi who lives and thrives, and Starkaður Leví who vanishes. But in a practical sense, it is clearly the financier who gets the last laugh: the novel exposes hegemonic discourses but struggles to envisage their successful subversion. To borrow another rephrasing of the same passage of *Hávamál* once invoked by Björgólfur Thor, this time from Bjarni Harðarson's 2011 rewriting of *Njáls saga*, "orðstír deyr aldrei þeim sem sér góðan kaupir" ("good word-glory never dies, for those who buy it for themselves").<sup>108</sup> But, though nostalgic and Orientalist, Bjarni Harðarson's insistence on a utopian, *Spe-sar þátttr*-style denouement to *Sigurðar saga fóts* does point the way to a key aspect of post-Crash writing, on which the next chapter focuses.

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108 Bjarni Harðarson, *Mörður* [*Mörður*] (Selfoss: Sæmundur, 2014), 87.





## Utopianism

### 5.1 Creative Destructions

The second chapter of this book explored how post-Crash Icelandic writing is shaped by the hegemonic structures that can be called “capitalist realism.” The key force of this ideology is to make alternatives to a neoliberal cultural and economic regime seem “unrealistic” and so to constrain utopian thought. With this fundamental consideration of form in place, Chapter 3 focused on anxieties about Icelandic identity in a post-colonial and globalizing world, and Chapter 4 showed how post-Crash writing has deployed medieval intertexts to interrogate the hegemonic power of nationalist medievalism, and shown how, amidst much pessimism, some writing nods towards a nostalgic kind of utopianism. Still, the overwhelming sense from Crash fiction is of a literary community struggling to articulate criticisms of the banking boom, while being busy digesting its own complicity in it. However, there is one strikingly and strongly utopian Icelandic literary response to the Crash, Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl’s *Gæska*. In this chapter, I take it as a vantage point from which to examine utopian thought in Crash-writing more generally. Utopian ideas are, in their way, quite widespread in Crash-novels, and show interesting differences of emphasis from the lively but more explicitly political discussions that ran through Icelandic society in the years immediately follow-

ing the Crash. The novels tend to focus their critiques of society and therefore also their implied possible futures on gender and on settlement-structure and architecture. They are often rather constrained in this by poorly interrogated patriarchal assumptions. But at their best, they offer some promising lines of thought in response to the Crash.

## 5.2 Surreal Times

*Gæska* is a richly satirical novel, but its knowing humor does not prevent it from committing itself to a utopian vision. The novel is divided into two halves, one set before and one after a revolution, caused by an economic meltdown, which brings an all-woman, left-wing government to power. Eiríkur Örn was presumably assisted in thinking originally about the Crash by the fact that he began *Gæska* before the crash actually happened: he had had time to think through the formal challenge of writing about a bust that Icelandic society was insisting could not happen. In this, he showed a prophetic tendency that is also evident in the unexpected overnight arrival at the end of *Gæska* of ninety-three million refugees on Iceland's shores, which prophetically tackles the European refugee crisis that began in 2014. Likewise, his next novel, *Illska*, scrutinizes racism, right-wing populism, and the banality of evil, engaging early with the rise of right-wing populism during the second decade of the twenty-first century. Reviewing *Gæska*, Björn Þór Vilhjálmsson concluded, not without justification, that “það er líkt og verkið sé í beinu símasambandi við undirvitund íslensks samtíma” (“it’s as though the work is on a direct phone line to the subconscious of contemporary Iceland”).<sup>1</sup>

Given Halldór Laxness's success in engaging with the nature of money and credit through surrealist form in *Atómstöðin*, it is perhaps unsurprising that *Gæska* builds on Eiríkur Örn's ex-

1 Björn Þór Vilhjálmsson, “Þjóðarbrot. Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl: *Gæska*. Mál og menning, Reykjavík, 2009,” *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 71, no. 1 (February 2010): 136–43, at 139.

tensive work as an avant-garde poet: like *Atómstöðin* but in a far more bombastic mode, *Gæska* is committed to challenging both literary and linguistic norms in order to defamiliarize social formations and to promote realisms beyond capitalism: the novel is characterized by its “surrealískar myndir, ‘fáránlegar’ fléttur, öfgakenndar líkingar, orðabombur og sprengjukast, framandi taktur: allt þetta gefur í skyn þrot ‘beinnar’ skírskotunar tungumálsins, að eitthvað sé ósegjanlegt með hefðbundnum hætti” (“surreal images, absurdist plotting, extreme analogies, word-explosions and bomb-drops, exotic rhythm: all this suggests the exhaustion of the ‘direct’ reference of the language, that something is unsayable through traditional forms”).<sup>2</sup> Many impossible events take place, often without explicit comment on their oddness. Thus, along with the very fact that it dares to foresee an economic crash, the novel features a spate of women jumping from tall buildings without the fatal consequences of these leaps ever seeming to eventuate. As its post-revolution second half builds towards a climax, it posits the inexplicable arrival of ninety-three million refugees. Mount Esja (the mountain nearest to Reykjavík, ever-present in northward vistas of the city) spends most of the novel undergoing a volcanic eruption (despite not actually being volcanically active), ceasing at the end in a moment of ostentatious pathetic fallacy.

The novel’s experimental character is readily illustrated through its unusual use of person. Particularly in the first half, material is narrated in all three persons, each person being associated with a different character’s point of view. The first person is associated with Halldór Garðar, a right-wing, neoliberal MP, married to Millý, a left-wing, social-democratic MP. The story-arc of the novel is defined by Halldór’s realization, at the beginning, that his life and work are essentially meaningless; and his discovery, by the end, of an existential purpose, fundamentally through recognizing the central importance of kindness as a source for life’s meaning. The second person is associated with Freyleif, personal assistant to Millý. The use of the second per-

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2 Ibid., 137.

son to narrate Freyleif's experience is particularly interesting: Freyleif, like Halldór, is afflicted by a profound sense of purposelessness, arising in her case from living as the female half of the prototypical Icelandic "kjarnafjölskyldu í úthverfisturni" ("nuclear family in a suburban block of flats"), fulfilling the "ákveðið 'norm' góðærisins" ("the decided norm of the boom years").<sup>3</sup> "Þvert á það sem þú helst hefðir kosið, vaknarðu" ("contrary to what you would most rather have chosen, you wake up"), reads the opening sentence of chapter 2.<sup>4</sup> The sense that Freyleif's life is dictated to her by the novel reflects rather viscerally the sense of alienation from her own life with which she begins the story. Meanwhile, the second-person narration compels readers to put themselves in Freyleif's shoes, in a way that they need not when they read Halldór's first-person account. Finally, third-person narration is used for a wider range of purposes, but in the first half particularly for the perspective of Óli Dóri, Freyleif's husband; and in the second for narrating the experiences of Millý, Freyleif, and a Moroccan refugee, Fatíma. In Björn Þór's assessment, "jafnvel kemur fyrir að hinn almáttugi þriðju persónu sögumaður yrðir á lesanda" ("it even emerges that the omnipotent third-person narrator turns into a reader"), the shifts of person "til þess fallið að raska samsömum lesanda með textanum" ("with the effect of distorting the relationship of the reader with the text").<sup>5</sup> The multiple perspectives help the novel to achieve something of the effect sought in the British novels *Capital* and *A Week in December* by presenting numerous, only partially overlapping narratives, yet without the same sense of atomization.

Unlike *Atómstöðin*, *Gæska* does not use its surrealism to explore the nature of money and credit, and in this respect *Gæska*, like most other novels studied in this book, avoids a key issue in the culture surrounding the Crash. That there is a purpose

3 Ibid., 140.

4 Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl, *Gæska: Skáldsaga [Kindness: a novel]* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2009), 19.

5 Björn Þór Vilhjálmsson, "Þjóðarbrót," 141.

to this silence, however, is suggested by the fact that the novel disregards discussion of the financial sector altogether. Instead, almost uniquely in my corpus but again like *Atómstöðin*, *Gæska* focuses firmly on government: the three most prominent protagonists are the politicians Halldór Garðar and Millý, and a civil servant, Freyleif. Thus the book, implicitly but unwaveringly, situates the responsibility for remedying the Crash with government and civil society. Thus it avoids allowing individual bankers—however personally immoral they may have been—to become scapegoats for doing what the legal, regulatory, and social environment they were working in encouraged them to do, and focuses attention on revitalizing democratic governance. The novel engages rather little with the international financial context for this, perhaps lapsing into a reliance on the idea of national sovereignty long since outdated even for large countries, let alone for Iceland, where it was always largely illusory. But, then, the real-world experience of Iceland after the Crash suggests that the power of even a tiny state should not be underrated: albeit more by luck than judgement, having let its banks collapse and prevented foreign creditors from nationalizing their losses, Iceland did experience a good recovery, and stands in a telling contrast to Greece, forced into ruinous austerity by more powerful EU states seeking to recoup the losses they incurred bailing out their own banks. Either way, *Gæska* certainly opens up a fictive space for meditating on the crucial responsibility of government to shape markets, and for refusing to allow globalization to offer an excuse for governments' failure to assert or exercise what sovereignty they have.

In other ways, though, *Gæska* engages rather deeply with the culture of the banking crisis, in ways that ultimately help it to challenge Icelandic nationalism, and explore other possibilities for ordering society. A good example of how the novel uses literary form to conceptual ends is its handling of temporality. A range of Crash-novels have recognized that financialization, with its loans and debts, has a major effect on the cultural construction of time, among them Andri Snær Magnason's *Tí-*

*makistan* and Steinar Bragi's *Konur*;<sup>6</sup> work on wider literatures has shown the same thing.<sup>7</sup> Eiríkur Örn's 2013 collection of Crash-themed poetry, *Hnefi eða vitstola orð*, expresses the financialization of time starkly: in place of page numbers, the top right-hand corner of each page in the collection instead states the exchange value of krónur relative to the Euro, falling from 81.98 on the first page to 172.76 on the last. The fact that the sequence of exchange rates provides useful measure of time (running from about 24 July 2008 to 15 May 2009) suggests both the commodification of poetry and of time. Accordingly, although like many of the novels studied in this book *Gæska* time-stamps chapters to help readers navigate its interwoven narratives, it problematizes — and sometimes mocks — the way our obsessive calibration of time's passage infiltrates story-telling. For example, the book is divided into two sections, enigmatically entitled “Fyrsti þáttur (sumar eitt fyrir nokkru síðan, áður en gerð var bylting á Íslandi)” (“episode one (one summer a little while ago, before a revolution happened in Iceland)”) and “Annar þáttur (ekki svo löngu síðar hið eilífa sumar, skömmu eftir byltingu)” (“episode two (not so long later in the eternal summer, shortly after a revolution”).<sup>8</sup> These detailed yet altogether imprecise statements parody the hyper-realistic temporal markers beloved of contemporary fiction. The women who jump from tall buildings, but rather than dying simply find their narratives picking up somewhere else, reflect both the static character of life constrained by economic and patriarchal forces, and a refusal of familiar patterns of cause and effect. In turn, Freyleif's biography is sketched through a long sequence of disordered flashbacks passing, between blinks, before her eyes.<sup>9</sup>

6 Viðar Þorsteinsson, “Fjármálavæðing og mótun tímans í Konum eftir Steinar Braga,” *Ritið* 15, no. 3 (2015): 9–33.

7 E.g., Leigh Claire La Berge, *Scandals and Abstraction: Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Annie McClanahan, *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First-Century Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

8 Norðdahl, *Gæska*, 5, 149.

9 *Ibid.*, 30–33.

Eiríkur Örn counterposes his interest in our frenetic post-modernity with reference to longer-breathed temporalities — and counterposes his interest in utopianism with an examination of golden-ageism. *Hnefi eða vitstola orð* alludes on a few occasions to one particular episode of Snorri Sturluson's thirteenth-century *Gylfaginning*, which depicts the early, all-male society of the Æsir and how they gained technologies enabling them to create a gilded age:<sup>10</sup>

Þar næst gerðu þeir þat at þeir lögðu afla ok þar til gerðu þeir hamar ok tǫng ok steðja ok þaðan af ǫll tól ǫnnur. Ok því næst smíðuðu þeir málm ok stein ok tré, ok svá gnógliga þann málm er gull heitir at ǫll búsgǫgn ok ǫll reiðigǫgn hǫfðu þeir af gulli, ok er sú ǫld kǫlluð gullaldr, áðr en spiltisk af tilkvámu kvennanna. Þær kómu ór Jǫtunheimum. Þar næst settusk guðin upp í sæti sín ok réttu dóma sína ok mintusk hvaðan dvergar hǫfðu kviknat í moldunni ok niðri í jǫrðunni svá sem maðkar í holdi. Dvergarnir hǫfðu skipazk fyrst ok tekit kviknun í holdi Ymis ok váru þá maðkar, en af atkvæði guðanna urðu þeir vitandi mannvits ok hǫfðu manns líki ok búa þó í jǫrðu ok í steinum.<sup>11</sup>

The next thing they did was to set up forges, and so they made hammers and tongs and anvils and thereafter all other tools, and then they worked metal and stone and wood, working that metal which is called *gold* so much that all their household equipment and their utensils were made of gold — and that epoch is called the golden age, before it was destroyed by the arrival of the women. They came from the worlds of the giants. Next, the gods took up their seats and laid down their judgements and recalled how dwarves had come to life in the soil and down in the earth, like maggots in flesh. The

10 Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl, *Hnefi eða vitstola orð* [A fist or words bereft of sense] (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2013), nos. 12, 41, 71.

11 Anthony Faulkes, ed., *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning* [Edda: prologue and the deception of Gylfi] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 15.

dwarves had been shaped first and come to life in the flesh of Ymir (when they were maggots), but through the decree of the gods, they gained human intelligence and human appearance, but they still live in the earth and in rocks.

This passage had clearly lodged itself in Eiríkur Örn's imagination, and his allusions to it work hard, perhaps even still echoing in the passing statement in *Illska* that “Íslendingar voru dvergþjóð í sjálfstæðisbaráttu” (“the Icelanders were a dwarf-nation in an independence struggle”).<sup>12</sup> *Gylfaginning*, literally “the deception of Gylfi,” is itself a very complex text, of several nested layers of stories: in it the Swedish king Gylfi travels under the pseudonym of Gangleri (“vagabond”)<sup>13</sup> to the land of the pagan gods, the Æsir, who display their fabulous wealth and, within the frame of a philosophical dialogue with Gylfi, tell him mythological stories. However, all this is itself framed by Snorri's explicitly Christian perspective, which makes it clear that the Æsir are not true gods, and that Gylfi's experiences are in some ill-defined way illusory. Yet Snorri clearly put so much effort into producing this material that he must have had a much deeper cultural investment in it than his rather dismissive title implies. In the particular passage to which Eiríkur alludes, Snorri evokes a specifically patriarchal golden age, underscored by a firm class hierarchy and by racial prejudice, and by alluding to *Gylfaginning*, Eiríkur Örn of course imputes these characteristics to the Icelandic boom. As with the medievalist texts discussed in the previous chapters, this reads the culture of the boom not as an aberration in Icelandic culture, but as a fulfilment of deeply embedded structures, therefore standing as quite a radical critique of Icelandic identities.

Poem 12 of *Hnefi eða vitstola orð* runs:

12 Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl, *Illska [Evil]* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2012), 29.

13 Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd edn. by William A. Craigie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), s.v. “gangleri.”



*Gangtegund til að ganga í*  
*Gangstígur til að ganga á*  
*Gangráður til að ganga með*  
*Gangleri til að ganga frá*

*A gait to walk with*  
*A path to walk on*  
*A governor to walk beside*  
*Gangleri/a vagabond to walk from*

Whether Poem 12 envisages elites strutting away from Snorri's legendary poser of hard questions about the order of things or from poor vagrants (or both), it brings into question the structures of Snorri's golden age, positioning elites as ignoring hard questions and/or the poor, being pompous, and capturing government. In another poem alluding to the passage of *Gylfaginning* mentioned above, Eiríkur sketches "nálægir dvergar með litla raunbirtu | eða fjarlægir reginrisar með mikla raunbirtu" ("nearby dwarfs with a low absolute magnitude | or distant god-giants with high absolute magnitude"), evoking astrophysics, but pointing also to the possibility of appearances to deceive: Icelanders too readily mistake nearby dwarfs for distant giants.<sup>14</sup>

Returning to *Gæska*, then, whereas *Hnefi eða vitstola orð* is for the most part a biting mapping of the corruption exposed by the Crash, *Gæska* shows an interest in golden ages extending beyond criticizing them to imagining them. Amitav Ghosh has emphasized the political limitations of novels that "conjure up worlds that become real precisely through their finitude and distinctiveness," contrasting these with the "universes of boundless time and space that are conjured up" by, for example, mythic narratives.<sup>15</sup> By engaging with mythic pasts and refusing the trappings of realist time, *Gæska* helps itself to imagine different futures. *Gæska* is at pains to work with the medieval

<sup>14</sup> Norðdahl, *Hnefi eða vitstola orð*, no. 41.

<sup>15</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (London: Penguin, 2016), 61.

Icelandic literary heritage without nostalgia: as I show below, its irreverence towards the trappings of Icelandic nationalism is continual. *Gæska's* engagements with time, then, underpin its utopian strategies. In a straightforward way, its manipulations of time situate the action of the novel outside our normal realities, emphasizing that the setting is literally a no-place. But they impel the novel to look not to ways of ordering the world that have been lost, but ways that have never been.

However, before reading *Gæska's* utopianism more closely, I contextualize it by sketching two axes of utopian thought which have been prominent more widely in Icelandic literature in the wake of the Crash: gender, and architecture. Neither may at first sight seem particularly important to understanding finance (nor might either seem particularly relevant to the other), but both emerge as powerful, interconnected avenues for theorizing the Crash and conceptualizing future possibilities. These analyses help us to understand mainstream utopian Icelandic responses to the Crash, and to see what *Gæska* adds to them.

### 5.3 Gender and Architecture

Sarah Moss's Iceland travelogue, based on a year teaching at the University of Iceland in the wake of the Crash in 2009–10, keeps returning to the block of flats which she finds herself inhabiting.

The other apartments in our block are shells. The building is on the corner of a development that was half-built when the banks collapsed and the money ran out, and it's still half-built, as if the builders had downed tools and walked away one day in the winter of 2008. Our northward sea view will be blocked if the luxury flats across the road are ever finished. For now, we see the waves between the bars of metal rods that grow out of concrete foundations.<sup>16</sup>

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16 Sarah Moss, *Names for the Sea: Strangers in Iceland* (London: Granta, 2012), 16.

The would-be opulence of Moss's flat, rendered absurd by the building site around it and by the way it is inhabited by a cash-strapped itinerant lecturer with scarcely any furniture, serves as a continual commentary on the incongruities both of Moss's life and of Icelandic culture generally. Towards the end of the year, however, Moss's explorations of post-Crash culture take her to the home of a (Canadian) student and his Icelandic wife:

it's all wood inside, warm and comforting as an old sweater. People, I realise, aren't meant to live in concrete, they're meant to live like this. There are plaited rag-rugs on the floors [...] and books, books in Icelandic and English and Danish, jostling each other off floor-to-ceiling shelves. Steely light floods through the windows, which face over the lake. There's a kitchen area, with wooden shelves and counters, and arm-chairs gathered around a wood-burning stove.

Sigrún María comes through one of the doors leading off to the bedroom. She has short honey hair, blue eyes, high cheekbones, carries herself like someone riding the waves and watching the horizon. I thank her for letting me visit, tell her I won't mind at all if she wants to go rest while the baby sleeps [...] Mark makes tea, and we all sit down by the fire and talk about knitting, while outside the spruce branches sway and the wind moves across the lake like a magnet over iron filings. I curl up in my chair, which is covered by a blanket, and warm my hands on my mug.<sup>17</sup>

This material points neatly to two key, interconnected, and evidently deep-rooted streams of utopian thought in post-Crash Iceland (as well as indicating their international appeal): feminism and pastoral idyllicism. The path from the self-destructive materialism of the Crash is found by pursuing traditional feminine domestic space, shaped not by "builders," but by a goddess-like woman's traditional work of textile production and

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17 Ibid., 291.

childbearing, abetted by a domesticated, twenty-first century husband.

To put this another way, mainstream Icelandic utopianism following the Crash ranged along two key axes: gender politics and the politics surrounding technology. Both are more fraught than Moss's portrayal of Sigrún María's home at first suggests. For example, both gender and technology are readily commodified, and have had significant roles in the brand that has underpinned the post-Crash tourism boom.<sup>18</sup> Nicola Dibben has shown, for example, how the work of the musician Björk has been deeply concerned to reconcile traditional modes of music-making with high-tech ones, while challenging the traditional association of technology with masculinity, exposing a much more complex interaction between gender and technology than Moss's idyll acknowledges.<sup>19</sup> Both gender and technology find physical manifestation in the house — which was also, for many people, the physical manifestation both of the boom (which they experienced most tangibly through credit-fuelled building and house-buying) and the Crash (which they experienced most tangibly through half-finished building sites and soaring mortgages). This section, then, explores how the axes of gender and technology manifest themselves, partly through architecture, in Crash-literature, before analysing Eiríkur Örn's distinctive handling of these.

### 5.3.1 *Will Women Save Us?*

One of the paradoxes of Iceland is that it is ostensibly at the forefront of achieving gender equality, and many key tenets of feminist thought have achieved an everyday standing in Icelandic culture. Yet in day-to-day life Icelandic society is rather starkly gendered, in ways mapped with great care in Þráinn Bertelsson's 2005 *Valkyrjur*, which depicts a patriarchal society

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18 Ann-Sofie Nielsen Gremaud, "Power and Purity: Nature as Resource in a Troubled Society," *Environmental Humanities* 5, no. 1 (2014): 77–100; Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson, *Phallogical Museum* (Zürich: Lit, 2014).

19 Nicola Dibben, *Björk* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2009), 96–98.

in transition to a state yet to be realized. *Valkyrjur* scrutinizes often tense or miscomprehending encounters between the genders, explores how the pros and cons of feminism are part of the weft of everyday conversation, examines the bafflement of men whose traditional gender roles are being dismantled by rising gender-equality, and runs the gamut of patriarchal aggression from raving misogyny and lethal domestic violence down to a steady background noise of micro-aggressions. The simmering tensions over gender in Icelandic society were brought dramatically into focus by the Crash: even as the crisis unfolded and the ranks of the culpable grew, they remained almost uniformly male. Conversely, there was a strong sense that it was women who were taking the lead in cleaning up men's mess.

As it first describes Iceland after the revolution, *Gæska* alludes to the famous 1983 poem “Kona” (“woman”) by Ingibjörg Haraldsdóttir, which was widely cited in blogs and other everyday discourse in post-Crash Iceland:<sup>20</sup>

Þegar allt hefur verið sagt  
þegar vandamál heimsins eru  
vegin metin og útkljáð  
þegar augu hafa mæst  
og hendur verið þrýstar  
í alvöru augnabliksins  
— kemur alltaf einhver kona  
að taka af borðinu  
sópa gólfíð og opna gluggana  
til að hleypa vindlareyknum út.

Það bregst ekki.<sup>21</sup>

When everything has been said  
when the problems of the world are

<sup>20</sup> Norðdahl, *Gæska*, 153.

<sup>21</sup> Ingibjörg Haraldsdóttir, *Orðspor daganna [Reputation of the days]* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1983), 38.

weighed measured and settled  
 when eyes have met  
 and hands have been shaken  
 with the gravity of the moment  
 — there always comes some woman  
 to clear the table  
 sweep the floor and open the windows  
 to let the cigar-smoke out.

It never fails.

The implication of the people circulating “Kona” was that had Iceland been run by women, the Crash would never have happened — and certainly that women were bearing the brunt of fixing the mess in its wake. After all, one of the few banks to survive the Crash more or less unscathed was Auður Capital, founded in 2007 by women; *auður* means “wealth” but is also a woman’s name, borne most famously by Auður hin djúpauðga (Auður the deep-minded), one of Iceland’s most famed settlers. The head of the post-Kitchenware Revolution government was Iceland’s first female prime minister, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir; the fact that she was also a lesbian seemed to underscore her womanhood. Jóhanna’s government prominently appointed the anti-corruption activist Eva Joly as a special advisor. And women writers’ criticism of the swashbuckling masculinity of the *útrásarvíkingar* had already been mounting when the Crash hit.<sup>22</sup>

Correspondingly, the so-called “Kitchenware Revolution” drew its symbols from the traditionally female domestic sphere. As Moss’s description of Mark and Sigrún María’s house implies, knitting became a form of utopian resistance, as a rash of knitting groups formed (or, where they already existed, reformed) to embody ideals of thrift, feminism, environmentalism, solidarity-building, nostalgia, family values, and even national-

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<sup>22</sup> See §1.4 above.

ism.<sup>23</sup> Understanding gender relations is therefore clearly key to understanding the Crash, while vernacular feminist politics in Iceland have served as an impressive standing reserve of utopian political thought, which could be swiftly and effectively mobilized when crisis hit. Perhaps the low profile of such politics in the UK in the early years of the twenty-first century helps explain the wan responses to the Crash there.

Yet as the resigned tone of Ingibjörg's poem implies, there is something quite dull about this feminism. While it clearly has a great deal to recommend it, it is equally clearly limited as a framework for developing a holistic response to the Crash. Crash-writing often tends towards gender-essentialism — suggesting that there is something inherent in women, rather than in the way that culture shapes their behavior, that makes them better governors than men — suggesting a degree of inevitability in men's behavior. Correspondingly, post-Crash writing often sees Icelandic masculinity as being in crisis — usually with the implication that men need to accept and adjust to new forms of masculinity — while struggling to imagine what more viable gender norms might look like. (*Bankster*, as I discussed in chapter 3, is one example of this trend.) Crash-writing also frequently integrates its feminism too tightly into the nationalism and racism that I discussed in Chapter 3 to develop a sufficiently rounded analysis of the problems underlying the Crash, or a truly emancipatory vision of the future.

Grímur Hákonarson's 2010 film *Sumarlandið* is a good example of well-meant but misfiring Icelandic post-Crash feminism (from a writer closely associated, like Eiríkur Örn, with the

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23 On knitting, see Kathleen Donlan, "The *Lopapeysa*: A Vehicle to Explore the Performance of Icelandic National Identity" (Honors diss., Wellesley College, 2016), 48–49; cf. generally Guðbjört Guðjónsdóttir and Júlíana Magnúsdóttir, "Ingólfur Arnarson, Björgólfur Thor og Ólafur bóndi á Þorvaldseyri: Karlmennska, kynjakerfi og þjóðernissjálfsmynd eftir efnahagshrun," *Rannsóknir í félagsvindum: Stjórn málafræðideild* 12 (2011): 45–53; Gyða Margrét Pétursdóttir, "Sköpun alþjóðlegrar viðskiptakarlmennsku: Íslenskt tilvik," *Rannsóknir í félagsvindum: Stjórn málafræðideild* 12 (2011): 62–68.

Nýhil collective). The film responds to, and arguably allegorizes, the Crash by portraying the husband and wife couple Óskar and Lára. Lára is a medium who can see ghosts and talk to the dead, and runs an apparently successful business in this role. Óskar, meanwhile, has set up a tawdry tourist trap called “Ghost-house” in the basement, financed with loans; but the business is going badly. To remedy the family finances, Óskar sells an elf-stone in the garden to a passing German tourist, Wolfgang, but this leads to the elves taking revenge, sending Lára into a coma. Óskar eventually expiates his misdeed by throwing himself in front of a bulldozer to save another elf-stone (identified in the film as the real stone Grásteinn) due to be destroyed as part of a road-widening project, and dying. The film achieves a light-hearted ending by having Lára awaken from the elves’ curse while Óskar returns to family life as a ghost.

In some ways, the film is scrupulously gender-balanced: while Óskar is sceptical and Lára believing, this is reversed in their children, with their young son Flóki able to see ghosts and becoming best friends with an elf, but their teenage daughter Ásdís unable to see ghosts and sharing her father’s pragmatic tendencies, and going out with Sverrir, the chair of an extremist atheist organization. Sverrir, a disbelieving man, is in turn balanced by the male leader of the protest against the destruction of Grásteinn. Of the two ghosts who appear in the film, one is female and one (the late Óskar) is male. There is an implicit generational divide here: the parents fit the traditional model of the rational man and the spiritual woman, and it is Óskar who (however ineffectually) deals with the family finances, while Lára focuses instead on nurturing the family spiritually. The film points to new possibilities opening up for the couple’s children. Likewise, the limitations of Óskar’s traditional masculinity are brought into relief through contrast with the extravagantly camp Wolfgang: Óskar looks bewildered as Wolfgang and his male partner kiss in their joy at obtaining the elf-stone, and later



refers to them unabashedly as “hommarnir” (“the gays”).<sup>24</sup> In a familiar capitulation of the crisis in Icelandic masculinity, Óskar also struggles to cope with female economic self-sufficiency: the film implies that Lára’s income as a medium has been sufficient for the family, and that their financial difficulties arise from the debt accrued by Óskar’s entrepreneurialism; he unwisely spends money on an expensive new TV. The film suggests that Óskar’s desire to take unnecessary risks to fulfil the role of the family’s main breadwinner, and to acquire glitzy consumer technology, is the underlying cause of the family’s destabilization. Part of the message of the film is that Óskar needs to get in touch not only with his spiritual, but also his feminine side, for the wellbeing of the family as a whole.

But the film doesn’t give the viewer much by way of pointers to how Óskar’s children might do better than their father: it takes a crisis caused by a man, and then makes the story all about the man. In reality, of course, masculinity is always in crisis: this is how its norms are sustained. In *Atómstöðin*, Uglá pointedly praises Iceland’s pre-eminent Romantic poet Jónas Hallgrímsson as the man who “gaf okkur það sem við höfðum aldrei séð, fegurð landsins, íslenska náttúru, og sáði í bjróst eftirtímans dulri viðkvæmni álfins í stað hetjuskapar og forn-sögu” (“gave us that which we had never seen — the beauty of the land, Iceland’s natural beauty — and sowed in the breast of a later time the shy sensitivity of the elf in place of heroism and ancient saga”).<sup>25</sup> Of the two men to whom Uglá is attracted, the Self-conscious Policeman is diffident, while Búi Árland, while imposing, is not overbearing; meanwhile the Organist, who is in many ways the most subversive and positive character in the story, quietly but firmly eschews traditional masculinity. But in *Sumarlandið* Óskar’s self-sacrifice to save Grásteinn and his wife hardly exhibits Laxness’s “shy sensitivity of the elf in place of

24 Grímur Hákonarson, dir., *Sumarlandið* [*Summerland*] (Blueeyes Productions/Sögn ehf., 2010), 27’29”, 53’44”–45”.

25 Halldór Kiljan Laxness, *Atómstöðin* [*The atom station*] (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1961), 74.

heroism and ancient saga”: on the contrary, *Sumarlandið* ultimately promotes a very traditional, nationalist view of masculinity. Its vision of masculinity is adapted, in the recent tradition of “the ‘decent’ Nordic man,” to accommodate being good with the kids, but not adapted very much further.<sup>26</sup> While *Sumarlandið*, then, suggests that venture-vikings was a dangerously and unnecessarily masculinist phenomenon and that society should shape itself more on the model of its nurturing, spiritual, yet pragmatic women, this film struggles to move beyond this gender dichotomy and reimagine twenty-first century Icelandic masculinity.

Much the same points stand for *Töfrhöllin*, which takes its inspiration from the early modern Icelandic ballad of Ólafur liljurós, in which Ólafur meets four elf-maidens and is killed by one of them for refusing to marry her. Böðvar Guðmundsson makes his protagonist Jósep equally hapless and equally central to his story, and makes the elves the daughters of the sinister *útrásarvíkingur* Kormákur Cooltran — who is himself modelled on Goethe’s seductive Erlikönig, an elf-king inspired by a Continental Scandinavian analogue to Ólafur liljurós. Thus the key women of *Töfrhöllin* are positioned firmly as the Other to a male norm. The sense that these women are a force of nature, inscrutable to Jósep, gives them greater agency than Jósep enjoys — and perhaps by making its women inscrutable in this way, *Töfrhöllin* is criticizing men’s failure to understand women. But these women do not generally come across well in the novel: they tend to be overprivileged, flighty, and controlling (if also oppressed by their father). So *Töfrhöllin* does not do much to disabuse us of the implication that women are indeed a mysterious elvish Other. This is a far cry from Kristín Marja Baldursdóttir’s adaptation of the same ballad-tradition in her 1996 novel *Mávahlátur*: *Mávahlátur* reads against the grain of Óla-

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26 Cf. Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, “The Gender-Equal North: Icelandic Images of Femininity and Masculinity,” in *Iceland and Images of the North*, ed. Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (Québec: Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2011), 414–17.

*fur liljurós*, using the elf-maidens as a starting point for imagining working class women's resistance to the patriarchal and hierarchical society of mid-twentieth-century Iceland. Here, the elf-queen of the ballad is the upwardly mobile woman Freyja. Rather than learning from Freyja how not to behave — which was presumably what early modern women were expected to take away from *Ólafur liljurós* — Agga, the girl from whose perspective *Mávahlátur* is narrated, ends the novel simultaneously learning to enter into solidarity with Freyja and making the transition from girlhood to womanhood. *Töfrahöllin* is able to portray Jósep's struggles with masculinity, but not to move beyond them. Likewise, Ernir K. Snorrason's 2012 *Sýslumaðurinn sem sá álfa* in some ways touchingly explores the vulnerability of a man late in middle age who has lost his wife, suffered an almost fatal illness followed by depression, and sees elves — but goes on to have this character win a beautiful and markedly younger girlfriend who, notwithstanding her lively character, is for the most part a mere foil for her man's penetrating intellect and steely nerve, joyfully seizing the opportunity to become a baby-factory.

The conservatism of *Sumarlandið* and *Töfrahöllin* and their handling of gender is consistent with some prominent post-Crash images of the *fiallkona* (“lady of the mountain”), an originally eighteenth-century nationalist personification of Iceland as a motherland. This personification is widespread in Icelandic national culture, and no doubt echoed in the widespread (if jocular) sentiment in Iceland that the havoc wreaked on European air-travel by the eruption at Eyjafjallajökull in 2010 represented the land's revenge on Britain and the Netherlands for their aggressive pursuit of the Icesave dispute.<sup>27</sup>

Gunnar Sigurðsson's 2010 documentary on the Crash, *Maybe I Should Have*, closes with a sentimental song, *Freyja*, by Magnús Þór Sigmundsson, for which, according to one review, “the

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27 E.g., Einar Már Guðmundsson, *Bankastræti núll* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2011), 35–36.

crowd went wild” at an early screening.<sup>28</sup> The video features an all-male band and choir at Þingvellir, “a place where culture and landscape seem almost identical to Icelanders,” asking for forgiveness from the pagan goddess Freyja, who is implicitly conflated with the *fjallkona*, herself figured as an isolated violin-playing woman in national dress.<sup>29</sup> The concluding scenes of the video feature this woman laying her violin on the grave of Jónas Hallgrímsson, Iceland’s national poet, with a reverence which suggests no recognition of how the “repatriation” of Jónas’s bones from Denmark (itself satirized in *Atómstöðin*), was in fact enormously problematic.<sup>30</sup> The last shot shows the *fjallkona* walking away from both the memorial and the camera in what could perhaps be read as a gesture of contempt towards the viewer, perhaps particularly towards the men who have dominated the video, and so to suggest some agency on her part. It is not inevitable that the *fjallkona* should be a patriarchal figure: she has at times been deployed to legitimate feminism both in Iceland and Canada.<sup>31</sup> Björk’s memorable blurring of her own body with the Icelandic landscape in the video to her 1999 song “Jóga” harnesses traditional nationalist resources to a renewed sense of the nation which, while still consistent with the patri-

28 Nanna Árnadóttir, “Maybe I Should Have Spoken Up?” *Iceland Review*, January 25, 2010, <http://icelandreview.com/stuff/reviews/2010/01/25/maybe-i-should-have-spoken>.

29 Magnús Einarsson, “The Wandering Semioticians: Tourism and the Image of Modern Iceland,” in *Images of Contemporary Iceland: Everyday Lives and Global Contexts*, eds. Gisli Pálsson and E. Paul Durrenberger (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996), 224; cf. Birgir Hermannsson, “Hjartastaðurinn: Þingvellir og íslensk þjóðernishyggja,” *Bifröst Journal of Social Science/Tímarit um félagsvísindi* 5 (2011): 21–45.

30 Jón Karl Helgason, *Ferðalok: Skýrsla handa akademíu* (Reykjavík: Bjartur, 2003).

31 Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir, “The Mountain Woman and the Presidency,” in *Images of Contemporary Iceland: Everyday Lives and Global Contexts*, eds. Gisli Pálsson and E. Paul Durrenberger (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996), 106–25; Anne Brydon, “Mother to Her Distant Children: The Icelandic Fjallkona in Canada,” in *Undisciplined Women: Tradition and Culture in Canada*, eds. Pauline Greenhill and Diane Tye (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997), 87–100.

archal system in which the land is personified as female while the citizen is personified as male, gives female agency a defining prominence.<sup>32</sup> But in *Freyja*, the goddess and the *fjallkona* are firmly subjugated to a thoroughly traditional, patriarchal nationalism.

The cover of the 2010 concept album about the crash by Bjartmar og bergrisarnir, *Skrýtin veröld*, parodies the Icelandic coat of arms, draping a nubile blonde *fjallkona* across the front of it, associating the arms with sexist advertising tropes to express the state's callous commodification of the nation, and recalling Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir's argument that the late twentieth century saw Icelandic beauty queens taking over "the symbolic space previously occupied by the 19th-century Mountain Woman as a central nationalistic trope."<sup>33</sup> But while knowing, and altogether more sophisticated textually than *Freyja*, the album uses the sole female figure on the cover more to celebrate than to criticize the irreverent rock and roll masculinity of the aged male band members she shares it with. The pessimistic ending of Óttar M. Norðfjörð's *Tíu litlir bankaþrákar* makes its last surviving "banker-boy" Davíð Oddsson. It goes on to describe how

Einn lítill bankaþrákur hafði enn ekki fengið nóg.  
Hann fann sér fjallkonu sem var örmagna og mjó.

Hann sótti handjárnin og hjakkaðist á píu,  
og fyrr en varði urðu bankaþrákar aftur tíu.

One little banker-boy still hadn't had enough.  
He got himself a *fjallkona* who was exhausted and skinny.

He went to get the handcuffs and clapped the girl in irons  
and before you knew it, there were ten banker boys again.

32 Dikken, *Björk*, 41–49. Cf. Shana Goldin-Perschbacher, "Icelandic Nationalism, Difference Feminism, and Björk's Maternal Aesthetic," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 18 (2014): 48–81, at 54–61.

33 Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, "The Gender-Equal North," 421.

This neatly, if grotesquely, expresses the capacity of Icelandic elites to perpetuate themselves whatever misfortunes might befall their individual members, at the expense of a passively accepting Icelandic people as a whole. But while a trenchant critique of the hegemonic power of financial masculinity, it leaves little scope for a resisting feminism. Individually these works all use the image of the *fjallkona* effectively to make their point; but collectively they tend to reinscribe rather than rethink patriarchal norms. And I have discussed above how Óttar M. Norðfjörð manages to end *Örvitinn; eða hugsjónamaðurinn* and Böðvar Guðmundsson ends *Töfrahöllin* in ways that are not only patriarchal but also Orientalist. Despite its promise, then, Icelandic feminism has struggled to make real inroads into the patriarchal nationalism that was such an important factor among the causes of the Crash.

### 5.3.2 *Gender in Gæska*

One of the core tests of the utopianism of *Gæska*, then, is its capacity to capitalize on mainstream feminist responses to the Crash while moving beyond their limitations. *Gæska* certainly includes key elements of mainstream feminist critiques of the Crash. It opens with the arresting statement “konur deyja. Þær hrapa ofan af byggingum og skella á gangvegum og strætum” (“women die. They plunge from buildings and crash into pavements and streets”).<sup>34</sup> Freyleif is one of the women who jump from tall buildings, fed up with with life in the fancy but soulless new flat her family inhabits; her husband, meanwhile, is himself in the building trade, whose boom has helped make the purchase of the flat possible. In this, *Gæska* replicates the widespread gendering of the causes of the Crash, whereby women with an eye for domestic comfort are constrained by men and by men’s enthusiasm for displays of phallic architectural pomp. Echoing the opening, the first chapter of *Gæska* ends by emphasizing the persistence of traditional gender divisions:<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Norðdahl, *Gæska*, 7.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

konur deyja. Það er hin óumflýjanlega staðreynd. Þær hrapa fram af byggingum, illa til hafðar og örvæntingarfullar.

Og karlmenn, þeir fara á þing.

Women die. That is the other unavoidable fact. They plunge from buildings, badly dressed and desperate.

And men, they go to meetings.

Here Eiríkur Örn echoes a prominent gender divide in medieval Eddaic poetry, well represented by *Brymskviða* stanza 14:

senn váru æsir  
allir á þingi  
ok ásynjur  
allar á máli<sup>36</sup>

later the Æsir [the male gods] were  
all at a meeting  
and the Ásynjur [the goddesses]  
all in conversation.

By alluding to this formula, Eiríkur Örn emphasizes how deep-rooted the gender division is in Icelandic culture, and by replacing women's conversation with their suicide he exposes how destructive this disempowerment is. Thus *Gæska* is forthright about recognizing the existence of gendered behavior, and the patriarchal structure of Iceland's boom and bust. Moreover, *Gæska* also looks Icelandic nationalism for the most part straight in the eye, and in doing so positions itself better to critique the gender norms with which nationalism has a symbiotic relationship. The enthusiasm for elves and the associated image of the Fjallkona discussed above provides as good an avenue as any into examining *Gæska*'s irreverent rethinking of Crash-culture.

36 Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Eddukvæði (Sæmundar-Edda)* [*The Poetic Edda (Sæmundur's Edda)*] (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1949), 1:167. Cf. *Baldurs draumar* stanza 1: 2:465.

Eiríkur Örn's cheerfully unrealistic portrayal of the all-women post-revolution government takes the bull of gender essentialism by the horns: what if Iceland really *did* put women in charge? The resulting picture is positive but not simple. After the revolution, Millý, as Iceland's new prime minister, is called upon to negotiate with the head of the International Monetary Fund, Aimé De Mesmaeker, a suave Frenchman whose name is presumably to be understood as "loverboy the mess-maker," a thinly disguised version of Dominique Strauss-Kahn, IMF director general from 2007 to 2011. The arrival of the IMF is, in the novel as in reality, viewed with a sense of doom, with Iceland fearing that the IMF's disaster-capitalist policies in the developing world might be visited upon Iceland itself. Indeed, *Hnefi eða vitastola orð* opens with "Kreppusonnettan" ("the crisis sonnet"), whose first eight lines, in an explosion of iambic pentameter, comprise only the syllables "IMF!" and "OMG!" At one level, of course, these mean "International Monetary Fund! Oh my God!" They evoke the horror but also the chatroom hysteria at IMF intervention in Iceland. In performance, however, Eiríkur rattles through the alternating syllables at a pace evoking the strong alternation of on- and off-beats in hardcore techno music, in turn evoking the frenetic pace of electronic financial transactions and the economic realities they cause. Against this backdrop, Aimé arrives in Reyjavík, subtly demanding that Millý have sex with him in return for the IMF's assistance — both a comment on the personal morality of the world's elite men and a metaphor for the prostitution of Iceland, with Millý, like the Fjallkona, personifying the country. As Aimé seduces Millý — or, we might equally say, outlines to her the terms of IMF assistance — he asks

hví að eyðileggja jafn fagurt kvöld með prósentureikningi?  
Ég hef aldrei komið til Reykjavíkur áður og himinninn yfir  
borg yðar er svo fagur, Millý. Ég vil sjá þennan heim — sýnið



mér álfa og ég skal færa yður allt sem þér óskið. Hvar eru norðurljósín og hvar er Björk?<sup>37</sup>

Why waste such a beautiful evening calculating percentages? I have never been to Reykjavík before and the sky above your city is so beautiful, Millý. I want to see this world — show me elves and I will bring you everything you wish for. Where are the northern lights, and where is Björk?

The fact that Aimé is speaking in French here, and therefore his foreignness, is emphasized by his use of the defunct honorific second-person plural, used to recall the French *votre*. Aimé emerges as the borealizing outsider willing to pay handsomely to see Iceland and Icelanders perform the identity constructed by their tourist brochures and international media profile. Indeed, Björk, herself frequently portrayed as elf-like in international media, has commented that “a friend of mine says that when record-company executives come to Iceland they ask the bands if they believe in elves, and whoever says yes gets signed up.”<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, when, absorbed by the throes of adulterous sexual passion that follow, Millý is described fleetingly to escape a long list of things which normally demand her attention, the list is crowned, with glorious implausibility, with “álfabyggðir” (“elf-communities”).<sup>39</sup> This portrayal, then, echoes images of the rape of the Fjallkona, but gives it not only levity, but also complexity, satirizing the role of supernatural beings in the construction of national identity. Significantly, Aimé’s approach does not work: upon discovering him having sex with a secretary the next morning, Millý exhibits all the rage of the proverbial woman scorned and concludes — to the implicit relief of the audience and to the exasperation of Freyleif — that Iceland is better off without the IMF. Eiríkur Örn’s rewriting of the rape

37 Norðdahl, *Gæska*, 194.

38 Alex Ross, “Björk’s Saga,” *The New Yorker* 80, no. 23, August 23, 2004, 48–59. Cf. Dibben, *Björk*, 31–32.

39 Norðdahl, *Gæska*, 198.

of the Fjallkona, then, irreverently invokes gender stereotypes, yet develops Millý's agency and presents the utopian prospect of refusing the IMF's interventions.

As this account suggests, *Gæska* is not averse to invoking a range of traditional gender stereotypes, partly for comic effect. The novel boldly follows the poem "Kona" to its logical conclusion by presenting an all-woman post-revolution government. Yet it satirizes the hope that this revolution is a panacea: thus the new government, sporting pearls and short skirts, spends quite a lot of time sitting on the grass of Austurvöllur, picking flowers and having tea parties. Meanwhile, Millý's husband Halldór Garðar, still in the midst of his pre-Crash identity-crisis, locks himself in his bedroom with his new-found friend Kadír and the two spend their time masturbating in a blunt metaphor for men's mutually reinforcing self-absorption. While *Gæska* is knowing, then, its humor visibly rests upon a sense that women are profoundly different from men. This distinguishes *Gæska* from the altogether subtler probing of gender and other identities in Eiríkur Örn's later *Illska*, which is characterized by musings like

karlar kjósa nasista. Þetta er bara staðreynd, ég er ekki að reyna að móðga neinn. Allar rannsóknir sýna fram á að það eru fyrst og fremst karlar sem kjósa nasista. Það þýðir ekki að allir karlar kjósi nasista eða að engar konur kjósi nasista. Þetta er meira svona almenn tilhneiging en undantekningarlaus regla.

En til að bæta gráu ofan á svart (og rugla alla endanlega í ríminu) eru konur (samkvæmt rannsóknum) *ekki* minni rasistar en karlar. Ef konur og karlar eru spurð: Vilt þú búa við hliðina á útlendingi? svara jafn margir karlar og konur neitandi. Ef þau eru spurð: Myndir þú geta hugsað þér að giftast útlendingi? svara jafnmargir karlar og konur neitandi. Konur stíga síður út fyrir ramma hins félagslega ásættanlega og kjósa síður stjórnámálmenn sem ögra, einsog Le Pen — og frekar hina sem ögra ekki en breyta kannski í flestum meginatriðum einsog þeir væru Le Pen — til dæmis Sarkozy sem

bannar búrkur og rekur sígauna úr landi (til þess að fólk þurfi ekki að kjósa Le Pen). Konur eru síður tilbúnar til þess að svara spurningunni *er ég rasisti* játandi, en það þýðir ekki að þær séu síður rasistar.<sup>40</sup>

Men vote for Nazis. This is just how it is: I'm not trying to offend anyone. All the research shows that it is, first and foremost, men who vote for Nazis. This doesn't mean that all men vote for Nazis or that no women vote for Nazis. It's more of a general trend than an immutable rule.

But to make things worse (and ultimately to confuse the whole business), women are (according to the research) *not* less racist than men. If women and men are asked "would you wish to live next door to a foreigner?" just as many women say "no" as men. If they are asked "could you imagine yourself marrying a foreigner?" just as many women as men say "no." Women are less inclined to push the boundaries of social acceptability and avoid voting for politicians who are provocative, like Le Pen — and instead the ones who aren't provocative but nonetheless behave in all important respects as if they were Le Pen — like Sarkozy, who bans burqas and drives gypsies from the country (so that people don't have to vote for Le Pen). Women are less willing to agree with the statement "I am a racist," but that doesn't make them less racist.

Yet *Gæska's* imagined matriarchy still leaves space for some subtle probing of Icelandic gender. Freyleif's frustration with Millý indicates that a matriarchal world is not necessarily a harmonious one. In the face of a 93,000,000-strong refugee crisis, Millý's innate optimism is represented as fantastically powerful, but when Halldór is finally reunited with her at the end of the novel, his more pessimistic assessment of their achievements in their political career to that point, which finds that most are insignificant and all are ethically ambiguous, suggests that in less

<sup>40</sup> Norðdahl, *Illska*, 168–69.

dramatic circumstances, Milly's optimism blurs into self-delusion. Freyleif's husband Óli Dóri, perhaps the closest character to an Icelandic everyman in the novel, is an affable figure who struggles to empathize with the women around him or to understand the subtle workings of patriarchy, yet when put to it is perfectly happy to put his shoulder to the wheel to fulfil their plans for a better world.

Meanwhile, *Gæska* pointedly presents a reasonably well developed female, Muslim, immigrant character. *Gæska* both complicates and adds force to its analysis of Icelandic society by threading through the book the narrative of the Moroccan refugees Fatíma and Kadír, who have fled persecution for labor organizing during the so-called "years of lead" under King Hassan II, and their Iceland-born daughter Amelía. While Kadír and Halldór lock themselves away to masturbate, Fatíma gets on with post-revolutionary work as a feminist activist in the local Muslim Association. I have discussed above how almost every Icelandic writer who presents a female Muslim character calls her Fatíma, and obviously Eiríkur Örn is no exception.<sup>41</sup> One wonders if there is some confusion about what a burqa is too (or whether the Icelandic *búrka* might simply have a wider meaning than the narrow technical sense of *burqa*, a whole-body covering): in Morocco the niqab (face-veil) is uncommon and the burqa all the more so — and Fatíma seems to be able to smoke while wearing one, which seems odd. Nevertheless, Fatíma enjoys some complexity as a character: without remarking on it, *Gæska* presents a woman who wears traditional dress yet smokes, reflecting some of the complexity of real-life adherence to religious ideals; who takes her daughter out for ice-cream and teaches her how best to communicate about Islamic culture with Western left-wingers; whose first encounter with Óli Dóri involves mutual shy embarrassment at a cross-cultural clash of gender norms; and whose political activism leads her to take charge of creating Reykjavík's first mosque (with minarets, a bone of contention regarding the real mosque to be built

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41 See §3.2.

at Sogamýri). Perhaps most importantly, the novel counters the narrative long deployed in racist Western discourses which claims that Islam is inherently misogynistic (thus constructing Western societies as progressive), and that non-Muslim people should therefore oppose Islam or forcibly intervene in Muslim cultures to “modernise” them.<sup>42</sup> This discourse features prominently in Auður Jónsdóttir’s *Vetrarsól*. While at one level, this novel is a satirical romp through the conventions of chick-lit and crime fiction, it has a sinister heart. Its antagonist, Arndís, proves to have few compunctions about “rescuing” a baby from a future living in an Islamic culture, allowing its Moroccan mother Fatíma to die and attempting to shift the blame for Fatíma’s death onto Fatíma’s brothers. Thus *Vetrarsól* puts incisive coverage of Western feminist justifications for Islamophobia and violence in the Global South center-stage, but the focus remains firmly on the Icelandic characters. By contrast, through its own Fatíma, *Gæska* encodes the fact that the Muslim world has its own feminists and activists, whose priorities and goals may not look the same as those of mainstream Western feminism but are ethically no less justifiable.

*Gæska*, then, is unusual in that it not only identifies masculinity as a key problem in Iceland’s Crash-culture, but proceeds to think through some of what it might mean to do anything about this. It explores how the kindness traditionally encoded as a feminine quality is key to a social and political renewal in Iceland: whereas Millý is a politician out of passion and finds the job fulfilling, Halldór has allowed himself to drift into it under the pressure of social expectations, and his existential crisis arises from not understanding the eponymous *gæska* (“kindness”) that needs to be at the center of the job. However, by presenting several quite different major female characters, the novel avoids platitudinous essentialisms, implying that Iceland does not need women in government so much as feminists. The novel

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42 Kristín Loftsdóttir, “Shades of Otherness: Representations of Africa in 19th-Century Iceland,” *Social Anthropology* 16 (2008): 172–86. See also Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, “The Gender-Equal North,” 410–11.

also hints at how Icelandic masculinity is probably inextricable from nationalism, and how, to rethink one, we must reshape the other. In particular, the novel recognizes that the feminism needed by an increasingly cosmopolitan Icelandic society itself needs to be cosmopolitan, and to nurture feminisms linked to cultures other than Iceland's mid-Atlantic, Lutheran tradition.

### 5.3.3 *Understanding the Urban*

Feminist Icelandic thinking about the Crash sits alongside, and interconnects with, architecture as a way of theorizing the Crash. Like their American counterparts, Icelandic Crash-novels most frequently and consistently express anxiety about social and economic formations through the architecture of domesticity.<sup>43</sup> This fact stands alongside the fact that the history of the post-war Icelandic novel is in a way the history of writers coming to terms with Iceland's urbanization, with the recent rise of crime-novels, mostly centred on Reykjavík as a site of social disorder, in some ways representing the extreme point of this development.<sup>44</sup> The connections between the boom, building, and the liveability of urban space are the theme of a text by Þórarinn Eldjárn entitled "Draugaborg" ("ghost-town"):

Andstætt því sem flestir hefðu haldið líkar draugum betur að búa í nýjum borgum og borgarhlutum en gömlum. Ástæðan er sú að gamlar borgir og gömul hverfi spruttu af lífi. Á seinni árum hefur það hinsvegar orðið æ algengara að nýjar borgir og ný hverfi fæðist til dauða. Það er byrjað á röngum enda. Í öndverðu var gangurinn sá að fyrst kom fólk og síðan hús [...] Nú kom fólkið síðast, og svo fór að bera á einu: Það var ekkert fólk til að flytja inn í húsinn.<sup>45</sup>

43 Cf. Michael K. Walonen, *Contemporary World Narrative Fiction and the Spaces of Neoliberalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 78.

44 Cf. Jürg Glauser, *Island: Eine Literaturgeschichte* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2011), 141–58.

45 Þórarinn Eldjárn, *Alltaf sama sagan [Always the same story]* (Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 2009), 111, 115.

Contrary to what most people have assumed, ghosts prefer to live in new towns and districts rather than old ones. The reason is that old towns and old neighbourhoods were full of life. In recent years, however, it has become ever more common that new towns and new neighbourhoods are stillborn. They're done the wrong way round. Earlier, the process was that people came first, and then the houses [...] now the people came last, and so things proceeded to their logical conclusion: there were no people to move into the houses.

The archetypal ghost-town, then, is the speculative, finance-driven building of the twenty-first century.<sup>46</sup> As in “Draugaborg,” portrayals of architecture in Crash-fiction frequently advert to the merits of older modes of dwelling. The question is whether this promotes a meaningfully utopian vision, with an implied theory of change, or merely nostalgia suggesting the lack of a progressive ideology with which writers can respond to their sense of belonging to a dystopia. Another example of the ideas expressed in “Draugaborg” is, of course, the elf-joke with which this book opened: it evokes the empty new flats associated with the boom and crash, and uses the figure of the elf to express their uncanny character — but the joke also deploys the elf subversively to ask what happens if beings simply appropriate these assets for practical use. Elves' revenge at road- and house-building is a widespread trope in Icelandic popular discourses, and such stories provide a mode of discursive resistance to destructive forms of economic development.<sup>47</sup> These ideas drive the plot not only of *Sumarlandið* but also Kristín Helga Gunnarsdóttir's 2011 children's novel *Ríólítreglan*, and also put in an appearance in Helga Sigurðardóttir's *Stúfur tröllastrákur*, from 2010. “Við blöstu mýmörg ný hverfi, hvert á sínum álfahöli” (“a swarm of new districts sprang up, each on its own elf-hill”), as Eiríkur Bergmann puts it, wryly indicating the ubiquity of the

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46 Ibid., 115.

47 Cf. Valdimar Tr. Hafstein, “The Elves' Point of View: Cultural Identity in Contemporary Icelandic Elf-Tradition,” *Fabula* 41, nos. 1–2 (2000): 87–104.

trope.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps the most effective use of these ideas in Icelandic children's literature is Þórarinn Leifsson's *Bókasafn ömmu Huldar* (discussed in Chapter 2), set in a dystopian future in which one bank, Gullbanki, owns almost everything and has reduced all culture to economic exploitation; Gullbanki forces the eleven-year-old protagonist Albertína to work as a living advertisement in Gullbanki's new block of flats, Gullbúrið ("gilded cage"), which has been rendered unsaleable because everything in society that can be commodified finally has been. The book lingers on describing the soulless, hotel-like character of the block, concisely evoking how global finance is increasingly hollowing out housing markets, turning homes into mere sites of speculation, and increasingly pricing citizens out of one of the most basic necessities for survival. Albertína's struggle is accordingly characterized by a desire to return to the old, homely house and garden which her indebted parents have been forced to give up, while the beginning of the end for Gullbanki's regime is the moment where Albertína's long-forgotten 158-year-old cigar-smoking great-great-grandmother Arnheiður Huld takes over Albertína's anodyne flat with her rambling library. Huld has a wide variety of subversive traits, but crucially is drawn from Icelandic vernacular tradition: the sinister Christmas-witch Grýla. Thus Þórarinn uses supernatural figures distinctive to Icelandic tradition to criticize the incongruity of the building boom with traditional Icelandic values, and as a fulcrum from which to exert some leverage against the hegemony of the banking sector.

Crime novels tend to complain less explicitly about the style of new architecture; as usual, the exception is Óttar M. Norðfjörð, who integrates a quick tirade into the closing chapter of *Áttablaðarósinn* that recalls "Draugaborg":

Reykjavík [...] var sögulaus borg. [...] Þau fáu gömlu hús sem Reykjavík hafði upp á að bjóða áttu raunar í vök að verjast fyrir fólki sem vildi ryðja burt gömlu fyrir nýtt. Þetta

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48 Eiríkur Bergmann, *Hryðjuverkamaður snýr heim* [A terrorist turns for home] (Reykjavík: Sögur, 2015), 13.



kristallaði lífsspeki Íslendinga. Íslensk menning var að eyða menningu sinni. Áður fyrr rifu Íslendingar skinnhandritin sín í sundur og notuðu sem skó. Í dag rifu þeir niður gömlu húsin sín til að reisa nýttiskuleg glerhýsi.<sup>49</sup>

Reykjavík [...] was a city without history. [...] The few old houses which Reykjavík had to offer were actually under threat from people who wanted to clear away the old for the new. This was Icelanders' view of the world in a nutshell. Icelandic culture was to destroy its culture. Once Icelanders tore up their parchment manuscripts and used them as shoes. Now they tore down their old houses in favor of trendy plate-glass buildings.

However, the worry of characters facing crippling mortgage debt is pervasive, and these novels express anxiety about financialization through a geography of shiny new corporate palaces on the one hand, and on the other through crimes conducted or hidden in abandoned, half-finished homes, or old buildings abandoned to dereliction because of people's enthusiasm for novelty. A junkie hangs himself in a squat in central Reykjavík while a murderous financier imprisons the people who have uncovered his bloody trail in an unfinished housing estate; a banker is tortured to death in his unfinished mansion; a kidnapped banker's daughter dies trying to escape the derelict house in which she has been imprisoned.<sup>50</sup> More unusually, in Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir's children's book *Hjartsláttur*, an unfinished building and the migrant labourers who are inhabiting it becomes an unexpected place of refuge in Tristan's self-imposed exile — but as he proceeds further into the Reykjanes peninsula, he discovers that his ancestral farm, now his grandparents' summerhouse, has been made into a hub of organized drug-crime. Anxieties about

49 Óttar M. Norðfjörð, *Áttablaðarósin* [*The eight-petaled rose*] (Reykjavík: Sögur, 2010), 448.

50 *Ibid.*; Ævar Örn Jóseppson, *Önnur líf* [*Other lives*] (Reykjavík: Uppheimar, 2010); Árni Þórarinnsson, *Morgunengill* [*Morning-angel*] (Reykjavík: JPV, 2011).

architecture abound in literary adult fiction too. The fungus that infects the city in Óttar M. Norðfjörð's *Paradísarborgin*, making its buildings unhealthy to live in and eventually structurally unsound, evokes the power of the commodification of property to corrupt a society. Baldvin Zophoníasson's 2014 film *Vonarstræti* encodes capital buying the acquiescence of the cultural sector by having the banker eventually succeed in buying the writer Móri's old wooden house for redevelopment, while *Konur* develops Steinar Bragi's long-standing interest in domestic spaces (which continues through his subsequent Crash-fiction) by imprisoning its protagonist Eva in one of Reykjavík's new seafront apartment blocks in a grotesque art installation.<sup>51</sup> In Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl's summary,

the apartment — showy, expensive and in bad nouveau riche taste — turns out to be (almost) alive, an entity of its own, and it starts sadistically manipulating Eva's life, pushing further and further until the end, when she literally gets sucked into the walls.<sup>52</sup>

Glauser went so far as to say that *Konur* “nimmt eine noch stärkere Engführung zwischen moderner Stadtarchitektur und dem Zerfall der ethischen Grundlagen der Gesellschaft vor. In diesem Text hat die zeitgenössische Architektur eine geradezu apokalyptische Dimension erreicht und repräsentiert das Böse an sich” (“draws an even deeper link between modern urban architecture and the decay of the ethical foundations of society. In this text, contemporary architecture has reached an almost apocalyptic dimension and represents evil in itself”).<sup>53</sup> Standing as a metaphor for the caging and consuming power of finance in Reykjavík's art scene, and so across Icelandic society more generally, Steinar Bragi's apartment block recalls the critique

51 Cf. Dagný Kristjánsdóttir, “Listin að pína konur,” *Timarit máls og menningar* 70, no. 4 (2009): 109–13, at 109.

52 Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl, “Literature in the Land of the Inherently Cute: The Search for Literary Crisis,” in *Booby, Be Quiet!* (Helsinki: Poesia, 2011), 114.

53 Glauser, *Island*, 153.

that its real-life counterparts are phallic constructions, over-compensating for Iceland's lack of the trappings of big capital cities.<sup>54</sup> It also, however, explores the constraining of women both to their traditional domestic sphere, and to an architectural manifestation of the domestic sphere that is brutally inconducive to domesticity. Thus, albeit in very different ways, *Konur* and *Bókasafn Ömmu Huldar* both allegorize men's capture and destruction of the Icelandic economy by narrating the imprisonment of women in buildings designed by men for economic gain, rather than designed by women to be homes, emphasizing the centrality of discourses of gender to discourses of architecture in Crash-fiction.

Although Crash-novels are generally focused on Reykjavík, their portrayals of finance reach beyond it too. This is very significant, as Iceland stands in this as in many matters as a stark case-study for globally widespread trends. The industrialization of the countryside, which began in Iceland with the industrialization of fishing, is proceeding apace, whether through the construction of power-plants like the Kárahnjúkar dam or, elsewhere, through the robotization of agriculture. This is coupled with demographic flight to the city, and a corresponding shift of rural life to servicing the leisure of visiting urbanites, whether from Iceland or from abroad. Rural property is, therefore, increasingly controlled from the city, increasingly a setting for urbanites' architectural fantasies, and increasingly open to global financial speculation.

These forces are most diligently mapped by Steinar Bragi's *Hálendið*, which moves from *Konur*'s focus on a city tower-block to a nightmarish house in the wilderness, in order brutally to subvert the nationalist image of a rural utopia. Genetic experimentation and a mysterious unfinished dam haunt the landscape, while the novel makes it clear that the misogynistic hell the characters blunder into in the highlands is ultimately one which they have brought with them from the city. *Hálendið* resonates with Árni Þórarinsson's crime novel *Morgunengill*,

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54 Cf. Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson, *Phallogical Museum*, 105.

whose *útrásarvíkingur* obsessively seeks to win over his disapproving parents by buying their ancestral farm for them:<sup>55</sup> the novel ends with the protagonist's increasingly senile father reciting the classic Icelandic folk legend *Trunt, trunt og tröllin í fjöllum*, a troubling story about a man who, spending overlong in the wilderness, loses his Christianity and becomes a troll.<sup>56</sup> In this novel, the folktale serves primarily to allegorize the progress of Alzheimer's disease, but it also strikes a suitably disquieting tone at the end of a novel about a society which, like the character in the folktale, is undergoing disturbing transformations — and those transformations are not, this time, happening in the wilderness, but in the heart of the city.

Other Crash-novels also depict urbanites buying rural property, again, usually in a futile bid to reconnect with the family's ancestral rural patrimony. *Sigurðar saga fóts*, discussed in Chapter 4, and *Töfrahöllin* both encode a deep anxiety about financiers buying up rural land, disrupting traditional rural economies and values alike. Likewise, a vengeful Kjartan ensures his financial ruin with an over-leveraged land-purchase intended to deprive his one-time friend Bolli of access to some ancestral land in *Mörg eru ljónsins eyru*. Whereas popular tales about vengeful elves tend to comment on suburbs encroaching on the surrounding hinterland, in these novels, the corrupting power of financiers' money reaches out from the city in long filaments of property ownership, deep into the countryside. Not infrequently, those filaments are charted as views of rural properties seen from car windows, evoking how Icelanders increasingly experience and construct their county precisely by driving cars from the Reykjavík area on high-grade roads, witnessing the land from these private and sheltered spaces.<sup>57</sup>

55 Árni Þórarinnsson, *Morgunengill*, 42, 52, 214.

56 *Ibid.*, 297–98; cf. Jón Árnason, ed., *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* [*Icelandic folktales and fairy tales*] (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1862–64), 1:193.

57 Cf. Arnar Árnason et al., “Speeding towards the Future through the Past: Landscape, Movement and National Identity,” *Landscape Research* 40, no. 1 (2015): 23–28.

Notwithstanding *Hálendið*'s pessimism, several of these novels sketch rural utopias. *Sigurðar saga fóts* concludes by giving its protagonist a kind of peace in the mountains of Hazara, which recall the rural forge of his grandfather Siggi stál, and replicate the Iceland of his great-grandfather's day. Alda Sigmundsdóttir's *Unravelled* has the main character rescued from personal crisis by the mythologically named Baldur, who is linked with the rural home of her grandparents, which her cousin Egill has succeeded in repurchasing. The nostalgic tone of her account is unalloyed:

There was a house. On the West Fjords, harboring many of her best childhood memories. Closing her eyes she could hear the whisper of happy voices on the breeze — now, calling. It was a house that her grandparents had owned, that held a part of her within its walls, a place of refuge. It had been there since she was small, not always visible, but permanent nonetheless.<sup>58</sup>

In *Hrafnaspark*, by Eysteinn Björnsson, the impending delinquency of the teenage protagonist is averted by his stoic grandfather and a bracing encounter with the simple, life-or-death realities of the Icelandic countryside. While Óttar M. Norðfjörð's *Örvitinn eða; hugsjónamaðurinn* knowingly situates its utopia in a rural idyll, and self-consciously locates the beginning of its protagonist's real problems in Reykjavík, the same author's *Paradísarborgin* strikes a more sincere tone when the One-Handed Man's mother finds that the low-tech encampment on Öskjuhlíð of people fleeing the fungus that is spreading through Reykjavík reminds her comfortingly of her childhood home.

These novels imply a similar utopian/dystopian framework to that made more or less explicit by *Sigurðar saga fóts* and discussed in the previous chapter: that the culture of the banking boom can be rectified by revizing the financial structures that

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<sup>58</sup> Alda Sigmundsdóttir, *Unravelled: A Novel about a Meltdown* (Reykjavík: Enska Textasmiðjan, 2013), 13.

## EXCERPT 8

Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl, *Gæska*, 99–100

“Kæri herra!” hrópaði hún og fleygði sér um furðu lostna fætur mína. “Hjálp! Þú ert yfirgefnur í öllum bænum Múhameðs.”

Ég starði vantrúa á þetta barn, þennan hörundsökka betlara, sem ég átti bágð með að trúna að væri á Íslandi en ekki í sjónvarpinu eða í öðrum löndum. Suður í Evrópu. Í Norður-Afríku. Á Arabísuskaganum. Í skandínávískri heimildamynd. Ég hváði. Hikaði. “Hver ertu?” ætlaði ég að spyrja en gerði ekki. “Hvað ertu að gera — hvað í fjáranum viltu mér? Ég þekki þig ekki, hana, burt með þig!” hugðist ég enn fremur segja en komst ekki að því án nokkurs fyrirvara stóð upp úr henni orðaflaumurinn.

Ríkisstjórnin hefur rænt mig foreldrum mínum svo nú má ég lifa á götunni líkt og hver annar rakki og það eina sem verður mér til lífs eru matarleifarnar sem hrynja af borðum yðar umburðarlyndustu samborgara og stöku miskunnsamur samverji sem náðarsamlegast hefur leyft mér að sleikja næringuna af risnu holdi sér.”

Ég vissi ekki hvað ég ætti að gera. Hvað ég ætti að segja. Trúði ekki þessu frekar en öðru. Var mig enn að dreyma? Deleríum tremens? Ég fann kraftmikið kvíðakast læsast um líkama minn þegar stúlkan greip örvæntingarfull þéttingsfast um sköflunginn á mér, einsog til að koma í veg fyrir að ég tæki á rás og hlypi í burtu (sem var mér ekki fjarri). Hún gróf neglurnar í aftanverðan kálfann á mér og gnísti síðan tönnum af slíku afli að ískrandi marrið bergmálaði í húsunum í kring. “Hjálp!” öskraði hún svo hátt að hún virtist við það að missa meðvitund. “Ég hef neyðst til að lifa með úlfum allt frá því fátækir foreldrar mínir voru frá mér teknir og líf mitt allt er síðan markað skepnuskap. Kæri herra! Ég hef gengið berfætt þvert yfir hálendið um byljandi vetur með þá von eina í brjósti mér að mín biði björg hér í höfuðborginni þar sem óskólagenginn hjólhýsaskríll landsbyggðarinnar nær ekki taki á mér — að hér

provide people with homes; by attending to the habitability of those homes and their associated communities; and by enabling rural economies to stand on their own feet. Most texts add to this the ideal of facilitating more domestic (implicitly feminine) modes of living. Thus, just as many of the Icelandic handlings of feminist critiques of the Crash have struggled to move beyond quite traditional gender structures, utopian thinking on the techno-political axis finds itself firmly at the low-tech end of the scale.

The nostalgic tone of the post-Crash view of the countryside is particularly striking given the degree to which real-world Icelandic responses to the Crash involved prominent rethinkings of social and technological structures, many of which were articulated in mainstream politics by, for example, the Best Party and the Pirate Party. Examples include the Icelandic Modern Media Initiative, a citizen-led grassroots rethinking of the Icelandic constitution, and new thinking about money creation. The protagonist of Óttar M. Nordfjörð's *Lygarinn* is a member of a team of activists loosely associated with WikiLeaks, but otherwise it seems that writers — unlike Björk in the 1990s — have struggled to develop utopian thought that harnesses rather than rejects technology. The books struggle to imagine different architectures beyond those of either a cosier past or a commodified present, at a moment when factors ecological, social, and financial are all demanding a radical rethink of humans' environments.

From (urban) domestic architecture, to rural property, Crash-novels often extend these geographies beyond Iceland — albeit usually fleetingly. Examples include Sigurður fótur laundering money from Turkmenistan and fleeing to Hazara; Örvitinn's triangulation of its rural-urban Icelandic axis with the wider world of the "War on Terror" (Iraq, Guantanamo Bay, and London); Arnar's explorations in *Samhengi hlutanna* of a London that is, in the structure of the narrative, nevertheless a planet to Iceland's star; or the geography of Starkaður Leif's violent journey beyond the oasis of his five-star hotel into the realities of Indian life in *Mannorð* (discussed in §4.7). At these

geti ég verið frjálst til að lifa lífi mínu og geti jafnvel, ef æðri máttarvöld eru því ekki of mótfallin, gengið í skóla og hlotið menntun sem æterni mínu væri til sóma, en ég er, einsog þér kannski sjáið, komin af stærðfræðingum.”

Fyrsta viðbragð mitt var að taka til fótanna. Sparka stúlkunni lausri og hlaupa burt einsog fætur toguðu áður en nokkur yrði var við níðingsskapinn. Næstu viðbrögð á eftir voru öll keimlík þessu fyrsta, en lamaður af undrum og barinn í duftið af eigin sálarkrísnum aðhafðist ég ekkert heldur starði bara í augu barnsins. Þau voru brún og svo stór að mér fannst ég enn einu sinni missa vitið þegar þau boruðu sér blóðuga leið innum sjáöldur mín.

En á þessum fagra degi var svo mikill kærleikur í loftinu að jafnvel mestu gungum gat ekki verið um megn að draga andann djúpt og fylla líkama sinn andlegri móðurelsku í garð heimsins barna. Ég tók stúlkuna í faðm mér og þrýsti henni að mér.

“Hvað heitir þú?” spurði ég eins vinalega og ég gat.

“Ég heiti Amelía, frá Karlsstöðum í Vöðlavík, undir Svartafjalli, þar sem nykrar ganga lausir og draga með sér vitgranna og ógætna í Grænavatn, einkadóttir Fatímu og Kadírs frá Augnaborg í Tangers-Tetúan héraði Marrokkó — foreldra minna sem nú hafa verið frá mér teknir.”



“Dear Sir!” she cried, and flung herself about my weirdly astonished legs. “Help us, the forsaken, by all the prayers of Mohammad.”

I stared in disbelief at this child, this dark-skinned beggar, who I struggled to believe was actually in Iceland and not on the tv or in other countries. Southern Europe. North Africa. The Arabian Peninsula. A Scandinavian documentary. I ummed. Hesitated. “Who are you?” I meant to ask, but didn’t. “What are you doing? What the hell do you want with me? I don’t know you — her — go away!” was even nearer the top of my mind, but, lacking



points, then, Crash-novels are not concerned only with domestic architecture, but also to address profound anxieties about the meaning of a nationalism founded on an insular, rural economy in an economically globalized, urban present. But these explorations, though important, tend to be peripheral and tentative.

It will be clear that architecture and the ways in which rural settlements have fallen into the orbit of Reykjavík are bearers of huge amounts of meaning in Crash-writing, used with varying degrees of self-awareness to explore gendering, financialization, nationalism, tradition, and (albeit usually very implicitly) globalization. It will also be clear that Crash-writing struggles to navigate a course between the Scylla of pessimism (epitomized by *Hálendið*) and the Charybdis of nostalgia (epitomized by *Sigurðar saga fóts*). *Gæska* again offers a refreshing exploration of these straits.

#### 5.3.4 *Gæska: Renewing the City*

*Gæska* offers its own take on rethinking the city, but puts the challenging of Icelandic nationalism firmly at the center of this process, helping it both to map the ideologies underpinning the Crash and to reconceptualize Icelandic space in a globalizing context. Following Halldór's breakdown towards the beginning of *Gæska*, he emerges bewildered from Hótel Borg, a large hotel on Austurvöllur into which he has retreated, to encounter his society in the wake of the Crash. Halldór finds, gathered in bafflement on Austurvöllur, a conspectus of society reminiscent of the "fair field full of folk" that frames the prologue to the fourteenth-century dream-vision *Piers Plowman*.<sup>59</sup> Far from seeking a return to rural tranquility, then, *Gæska* embraces the bustle of the city, but insists, through its imagined crisis, on ploughing the sections of an atomized society together, with the public architecture of the city as their forum. Wandering through this gathering, Halldór is accosted by Amelía (Excerpt 8). In a corpus

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59 William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17*, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt, 2nd edn. (London: Everyman, 1995), 1–13.

any prior notice, didn't manage to reach the surface of her flood of words.

"The state has robbed me of my parents, such that now may I exist only on the street, like any other mongrel, and all that sustains me are the left-overs that tumble from the tables of thy most tolerant fellow citizens, and the occasional good Samaritan who graciously allows me to lick some sustenance from his erect flesh."

I had no idea what I ought to do. What I ought to say. Didn't believe this any more than the rest. Was I still dreaming? *Delerium tremens*? I felt a powerful nausea seize my body when the girl exerted a desperate, vice-like grip on my tibia, as if to prevent me making a break and running away (which wasn't far off happening). She dug her nails into the backs of my calves and then ground her teeth with such force that the chilling creaking echoed around the buildings. "Help!" she screamed, so loudly that she seemed to be losing consciousness. "I have been forced to live among wolves solely because my impoverished parents were taken from me, and my whole life has since been scarred by horror. Dear Sir! I have walked barefoot across the wastes in the raging winter with the one hope in my breast that shelter might await me here in the capital, where the unschooled trailer-trash of the countryside cannot reach me—that here I could be free to live my life and even—if the higher powers be not too opposed—attend school and receive education, which would be an honour to my dynasty, since I am, as you can perhaps see, descended from mathematicians."

My first response was to take to my heels. To kick the girl loose and run away as fast as my legs would carry me before someone noticed the indecency. My next responses were all much the same as the first, but, crippled by amazement and beaten to dust by my own inner crisis, I didn't manage anything but to stare into the eyes of the child. They were brown, and so big that I thought I would

where it is fashionable to emphasize the non-native language of Iceland's immigrants — a strategy which is realistic yet also tends to make immigrant characters' utterances more about their immigrant identity than about the content of their speech — it is refreshing to see Eiríkur Örn giving Amelía the scope instead to speak in an elevated, literary prose quite at odds with Halldór's fumbling interjections, and gloriously incongruous with her described demeanor. Like the novels which trace filaments of influence running from Reykjavík to Iceland's countryside, *Gæska* here maps a path between Karlsstaðir, on the opposite side of Iceland from Reykjavík, and the capital. But rather than simply watching finance flow from the city to the countryside, the novel instead adverts to the fact that Iceland's rural settlements have been partly sustained by immigrants willing to take on jobs in fishing and related industries. Rather than presenting the countryside as the true home of Icelandicness, *Gæska* presents it as a complex, multi-ethnic environment — and if *Gæska* neglects rural Iceland, it at least avoids fetishizing it. Hereafter, however, the focus of the novel is firmly on the city.

It emerges that Fatíma and Kadír have been seized by the state for enforced acculturation and are being forced to recite the Eddaic poem *Hávamál* and perform folk-dances in traditional dress before the government at a state dinner, in an allegory for cultural assimilatory policies predicated on a cynically manipulated and essentially fictitious nationalist image of Icelandic identity. Amelía innocently punctures the pomp of Icelandic nationalism by describing how her parents have been forced to wear clown-costumes, with her mother's hair uncovered in a room full of fat men smoking cigars.<sup>60</sup> Halldór realizes, with shame, that he was one of the parliamentarians who supported the assimilation policy. With negligible help from Halldór but significant assistance from Freyleif, Amelía rescues her family.

The unfolding stories of Fatíma and Kadír give specificity and depth to the real crisis in the novel, the mysterious arrival

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60 Norðdahl, *Gæska*, 111.

once more lose my mind as they bored their bloody way through my pupils.

But on this beautiful day, there was so much love in the air that even the worst coward could not have withstood drawing a deep breath and filling his body with spiritual maternal affection towards the children of the world. I took the girl into my arms and held her close.

“What are you called?” I asked, as companionably as I could.

“I am called Amelía, of Karlsstaðir í Vöðlavík, which lies beneath Svartafjall, where kelpies wander at large and drag the foolish and the unwary with them down into Grænavatn, the only daughter of Fatíma and Kadír of the City of Eyes, in the region of Tangier-Tetouan in Morocco — those very parents who have now been taken from me.”

of ninety-three million refugees, making Iceland suddenly Europe’s most populous country — with 900 inhabitants per square kilometre (up from 3.2, but still, as Millý points out, markedly lower than Singapore’s 7,000).<sup>61</sup> Their arrival in Iceland partly serves to remind the reader that however sorry Icelanders may have felt for themselves in the wake of the Crash, most people are markedly worse off elsewhere in the world. But it is more interesting to consider the meaning of the refugees in relation to the geographies of the Crash considered above. It is easy to read the silent, undifferentiated mass of refugees, who fill Reykjavík and whose arrival is as startling to Kadír and Fatíma as to everyone else, as simply inscrutable. But they perhaps make sense as an extension of the anxious but tentative probing of geographies beyond Iceland that appears widely in the Crash-fiction corpus. They remind us that the disorientatingly rapid urbanization of Icelandic life during the last century has in fact been experienced globally, with

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 268.

the explosion of the shantytown, born of the continual impoverishment of the developing world by multinational corporations and financial organizations, the erosion of traditional rural ways of life, and the focalization of the cheap consumer good production so central to contemporary capitalism in the urban areas of poor nations.<sup>62</sup>

“Í okkar samfélagi er ekki til nema einn glæpur verulega hættulegur [...] og það er að vera ofanúr sveit. Þessvegna munu allar borgir heimsins hrynja” (“in our society, there is no really dangerous crime — except one [...] and that is to be from the countryside. For this reason, all the world’s cities will crumble”), comments the Organist wryly in *Atómstöðin*.<sup>63</sup> Widening its scope to take in the horror of the civilized at the uncivilized on a global scale, *Gæska* puts the Organist’s words to the test. It seizes on iconic, mediatized images of the overpopulated *favelas* and slums of developing world, and projects them onto Reykjavík in ways which seem on the one hand entirely incongruous with reality, yet on the other the natural extension of an internal process of urbanization which has by itself generated enormous strains on Iceland’s national self-image, gleefully challenging the anxious and the paranoid to envisage worse.

*Gæska*’s refugees constitute a thought-experiment in which some of the most pressing consequences of neoliberalism, and the developed world’s power to assist with them, are given the urgency they deserve by being brought not merely to the developed world’s door, but unstoppably into that world. The surreal figure of ninety-three million is important insofar as, despite the misgivings and protestations of several of the characters, it is self-evidently physically impossible for a population of 330,000 to try to close the door on the problem by deporting the arrivals: as Millý recognizes, the only viable response is also the most humane one, which is to welcome them. “Þetta er sjálfsmorð” (“this is suicide”), protests Halldór; “kannski,” replies Millý, “en

62 Walonen, *Contemporary World Narrative Fiction*, 16.

63 Laxness, *Atómstöðin*, 215.

það er þá óhjákvæmilegt. Hinn valkosturinn er margfalt þjóðarmorð” (“perhaps,” “but it’s also inevitable. The alternative is multiple genocide”).<sup>64</sup> Musing that some of the new arrivals will probably starve, Halldór ponders how this “gæti farið í taugar-nar á Íslendingunum. Ef þeir dræpust ekki líka. Það var allt eins líklegt. Allt eins réttlátt” (“might get on the nerves of Icelanders. If they didn’t die too. That was equally likely. Equally just”).<sup>65</sup> Whereas the arrival of a small number of immigrants or the growth of an unfamiliar religion is central to Icelandic anxieties of identity, *Gæska* explodes these anxieties by exploring how the problem of overwhelming numbers of refugees contains its own solution — the novel’s eponymous kindness, put at the center of a new sense of political purpose.

Moreover, it is Fatíma who delivers the hopeful denouement of the novel, through an intervention in Reykjavík’s architecture. Commandeering the assistance of Óli Dóri, who experiences unease at having a mosque in Reykjavík but finds that helping his neighbours is more fun than worrying about this, Fatíma oversees the raising of minarets on the unfinished Tónlistarhús, the huge, basaltic, glass and steel concert hall conceived by Björgólfur Guðmundsson as a spectacle of yuppie achievement, left half-finished by the Crash. The moment when Fatíma’s Arabic call to prayer rings across Reykjavík encodes a pluralist (and feminist) dawning of hope for the beleaguered island: “röddin sem söng var bæði sorgmædd og glöð, grátklökk og stolt, hokin af þjónustu við Drottin og full vonar fyrir hans sakir” (“the voice that sang was both sorrowful and glad, misty-eyed and proud, bent in service to the Lord and full of hope for his sake”).<sup>66</sup>

In locating true spirituality in Islam, *Gæska* participates in a well-worn Orientalist trope (and by locating this spirituality in a women, *Gæska* is also consonant with traditional gender norms). But the novel does not shy from bringing into relief the hollowness of the hegemonic deployment of both traditional

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64 Norðdahl, *Gæska*, 269.

65 *Ibid.*, 267.

66 *Ibid.*, 264.

and Christian beliefs in Icelandic political discourse. The state Lutheranism to which the novel alludes extensively is portrayed as shackled to neoliberal and neocolonial ideologies.<sup>67</sup> The novel's depiction of a fictitious Reykjavík NATO conference attended by George W. Bush, for example, rewrites Ephesians 6:10–20 in a bitter critique of the Bush regime's invocations of Christianity, and of Iceland's complicity in America's expeditionism in the Middle East during this period:

Næst dyrunum stóðu friðargæsluliðar með alvæpni og stóðust vélabrögð andskotans, gyrtir sannleika um lendar sínar, klæddir brynju réttlætisins og skóaðir með fúsleik til að flytja fagnaðarerindi friðarins. Á höfðum sér báru þeir hjálma hjálpræðis, og þrýstu að brjósti sér hálfsjálfvirkum hriðskotarífflum hreinlætisins, sem gátu slökkt öll hin eldlegu skeyti þess vonða.<sup>68</sup>

At the doors stood fully armed peacekeepers withstanding the wiles of the Devil, the belts of truth buckled around their waists, wearing the breastplates of righteousness, and shod with readiness to preach the gospel of peace. On their heads they wore helmets of salvation, and clutched to their breasts semi-automatic assault rifles of purity, which could extinguish all the fiery arrows of the evil one.

Meanwhile, post-Crash Icelandic nationalism has quite frequently adverted to traditional beliefs, not least in elves. I have discussed some of these above regarding gender in Crash-writing. The deployment here can be understood through a pregnant observation in *Atómstöðin*, when Uglá refers to “huldumanninn

67 Cf. *ibid.*, 272.

68 *Ibid.*, 64; cf. Kristín Loftsdóttir, “The Loss of Innocence: The Icelandic Financial Crisis and Colonial Past,” *Anthropology Today* 26, no. 6 (December 2010): 9–13 at 12; Kristín Loftsdóttir and Helga Björnsdóttir, “The ‘Jeep-Gangsters’ from Iceland: Local Development Assistance in a Global Perspective,” *Critique of Anthropology* 30, no. 1 (2010): 23–39, esp. 31–32.

dýpst í brjóstum okkar sjálfum” (“the hidden person deepest in our own breasts”), where *huldumaður* is a respectful euphemism for an elf.<sup>69</sup> Uglá positions the elf as the true Icelandic, embedded (however deeply) somewhere in every true Icelandic citizen. This discourse about elves, arising from nineteenth-century National Romanticism, then serves in *Atómstöðin* as a mode of resistance to another set of new ideas and external pressures, the modernity of the *atómskáld* (“free-verse poet”) and the “sölu landsins” (“sale of the country”) to NATO.<sup>70</sup> This idea of the “elf within” as the prototypical Icelandic within each citizen had put down deep roots in Icelandic culture, sufficiently to be implicit in modern Icelandic folklore.<sup>71</sup> Accordingly, Guðmundur Böðvarsson’s celebrated environmentalist poem *Völuvísa*, with which he closed his 1963 collection *Landsvísur: Ljóð*, positions elves (and dwarves) as forces policing the boundaries of specifically Icelandic behaviour:

Eitt verð ég að segja þér áður en ég dey,  
 enda skalt þú börnum þínum kenna fræði mín,  
 sögðu mér það álfarnir í Suðurey,  
 sögðu mér það dvergarnir í Norðurey,  
 sögðu mér það gullinmura og gleymérei  
 og gleymdu því ei:  
 að hefnist þeim er svíkur sína huldumey,  
 honum verður erfiður dauðinn.<sup>72</sup>

One thing I must say to you before I die —  
 and you must teach your children what I know;  
 the elves in Suðurey said it to me,  
 the dwarves in Norðurey said it to me,  
 the buttercup and forget-me-not said it to me  
 and forget it not:

69 Laxness, *Atómstöðin*, 75.

70 *Ibid.*, 74.

71 Hafstein, “The Elves’ Point of View,” 92–93.

72 Guðmundur Böðvarsson, *Landsvísur: Ljóð* [*Verses of the land: poems*] (Reykjavík: Bókauktgáfa Menningarsjóðs, 1963), 57.



that he who betrays his hidden maiden faces revenge;  
an ill death will befall him.

This poem has been quite prominent in the wake of the Crash: for example, Brynja Björg Halldórsdóttir quoted the last lines when resigning from the Left-Green Party in 2011; it is the epigraph to Kristín Helga Gunnarsdóttir's 2011 novel *Ríólítreglan*; and it was quoted on at least one placard in the 2016 protests in the wake of the Panama Papers scandal.<sup>73</sup> Writing a racist letter against the building of a purpose-built mosque in Reykjavík, and against Islam generally, one Stefánía Jónasdóttir invoked similar ideas, signing off with “megi landvættir mínir varðveita land mitt og þjóð” (“may my land-spirits protect my land and people”).<sup>74</sup> Thus people like Stefánía appropriate traditional beliefs in elves in order to naturalize nationalist ideologies: they claim that ideologies such as Islamophobia are rooted in traditional discourse (while in practice adapting traditional discourses to novel ideologies). But *Gæska* vigorously satirizes the idea of the elf as the Icelander within. Thus Halldór Garðar's drunken musings on the Icelandic people run:

Heimski lýður.

Nema þetta væri bara brennivínið að tala.

Sjálfsagt var þetta besta fólk. Gott við börnin sín. Barnabörnin sín. Barnabarnabörnin sín. Frænkur og frændur. Ör-látt á jólnunum og ósérhlífíð við vinnu. *Þjarkar*. Einstakt fólk. Engu líkt. Mótað af náttúrunni í þúsund ár. Heimsmeistarar í lýðræði, velsæld og stjórnsýslu. Lengi lifi úfið hafið og þeir sem það sóttu. Lengi lifi fjörugrjótið og huldufólkið. Lengi lifi fiskurinn á gjaldmiðlinum og fávitarnir sem dá hann.<sup>75</sup>

Stupid people.

73 “Forystukona ungra VG,” *Evrópuvaktin*, December 4, 2011, <http://www.evropuvaktin.is/frettir/21326>.

74 Stefánía Jónasdóttir, “Þjóð í vanda,” *Morgunblaðið* 102, no. 141, June 18, 2014, 18, <http://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/1513349>.

75 Norðdahl, *Gæska*, 77.

Unless this was just the booze talking.

Of course these were the best people. Good to their children. Their grandchildren. Their great-grandchildren. Their relatives. Generous at Christmas and unhesitating in work. *Hard workers*. Unique people. Second to none. Shaped by nature for a thousand years. Champions of democracy, prosperity and governance. Long live the ruffled sea and those who brave it. Long live the pebble beaches and the hidden people. Long live the fish on the coins and the idiots who revere it.

On the surface here, Halldór conflates elves (*huldufólk*, “hidden people”), Icelanders, and Iceland, as the nationalist sources discussed above lead us to expect. But of course in its satirical context the quotation really calls ideals of Icelandicness themselves into question, dispensing unabashedly with the idea that Halldór Garðar is at this moment finding his inner elf, or indeed that there is any inner elf to be found. No less than in Aimé de Mesmaeker’s seduction speech, considered in §5.3.2, Halldór Garðar’s elves are hollowed-out commodities in an economy of cultural and political capital.

Thus Eiríkur Örn’s contrast of commodified elves, compromised Christianity, and a committed Islam exposes the spiritual bankruptcy of Stefánía’s invocation of *landvættir* against the imagined Muslim peril and establishes a humanism in which there is space for a positive reimagining of Icelandic identities in a globalizing world. The novel does use Islam as a cipher for some kind of universal spirituality, but in choosing Islam rather than any other religion for this purpose, it opts for a religion whose adherents are disproportionately representative of the world’s poor. And by giving its primary Muslim character some complexity and agency, and implicitly recognizing the heterogeneity of Islamic theology and its scope for politically progressive thought, *Gæska* avoids presenting a mere caricature of Islam.

It is not coincidental that the site of *Gæska*’s new mosque is the enormous concert hall Tónlistarhús (“house of music”), in 2009 only part finished, now called Harpa (“harp”). The har-

bor redevelopment of which it was intended to be a part was financed by Björgólfur Guðmundsson, branded “World Trade Center Reykjavík” in Icelandic as in English, and intended *inter alia* to include a new headquarters for Landsbanki. When the Crash hit and Björgólfur plunged into bankruptcy, work halted on the Tónlistarhús until the government concluded that it was both fiscally and psychologically prudent to finance its completion; whether the rest of the proposed development ever takes place remains, at the time of writing, to be seen. During the depths of the crisis, then, the unfinished Tónlistarhús stood as a towering monument to boom-time hubris and the parlous state of the economy. Though now a popular building, Harpa’s scale, glitzy mirrored interior, and predilection for English signage over Icelandic continue to memorialize the culture of the Icelandic boom. Meanwhile, the site was exceptionally suitable for Eiríkur Örn to envisage a mosque that would exasperate the people complaining about the supposedly undue prominence of the real-life new mosque in the suburb of Sogamýri.<sup>76</sup> These points all make the Tónlistarhús a potent setting for the denouement of *Gæska*.

But the Tónlistarhús also symbolizes the convergence of finance, government, and patronage of the arts. *Gæska* is refreshingly light on hand-wringing about what it is to be an author under neoliberalism, instead getting on with challenging neoliberalism directly. Insofar as the novel frets about artists’ complicity in the boom, it does so brusquely and incisively: among the gathered estates around Austurvöllur after the Crash,

undir styttnni af Skúla fógeta stóð handfylli af ósofnum listamönnum, hálfdrukknum, sem allir höfðu fengið höfnun á debetkortin sín þegar spurðist út að Björgólfur væri einkaþotinn úr landi með styrktarpeningana sína. Þeir klóruðu sér í hausnum og veltu fyrir sér næstu skrefum.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>76</sup> See §3.3.

<sup>77</sup> Norðdahl, *Gæska*, 130.

Under the statue of Sheriff Skúli stood an underslept handful of artists, half-drunk, who had all had their debit cards rejected when it was heard that Björgólfur was be private-jetted out of the country with his grant money. They scratched their heads and considered their next steps.

Fatíma's call to prayer from the repurposed Tónlistarhús, then, does not simply represent the awakening of a spirituality in a land in thrall to mammon. It also represents the discovery of a new identity for the arts in Iceland, repurposing the white elephants of the boom years, perhaps to express some of the characteristics of Fatíma's call to prayer: sorrow and joy, yearning and pride, service and hope, enabling people at large, like Fatíma's small congregation, "að draga andann eftir langvarandi kokþrengsli og köfnunartilfinningu" ("to draw breath after choking for a long time, and a feeling of suffocation").<sup>78</sup> If this is an Orientalist moment, then, it is at least one that can contemplate the artistic heritage of the Islamic world, recognize that the Islamic world has its own histories of feminism, and see there the possibility for the arts in Iceland to help Icelandic society to shift into a new and kinder mode. The moment presents a view of boom-time architecture which recognizes its unhomey, alienating character, but does not advocate flight from the ghost-towns of the boom to the countryside of nationalist nostalgia. Rather *Gæska* embraces the idea that Icelandic society, like most human societies, is now predominantly urban; contemplates the possibilities for reclaiming private space for public use; and imagines repopulating the ghost towns in a newly cosmopolitan mode.

#### 5.4 Conclusion

When the Crash hit, people in Iceland had one framework for critiquing the boom particularly close to hand: a popular feminism that has been diligently nurtured in Iceland for decades.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 265.

Yet much of the literary commentary on the Crash that has attempted feminist perspectives (which is, I should reiterate, usually by men) has tended to focus on crises of masculinity and has often done little seriously to rethink how Icelandic gender might work — rather it tends to remind us how little some key feminist ideas have actually penetrated much of Icelandic society. Commentary has also often drifted into essentialist ideas that posit that women are inherently better able to run finance and governance than men. These perspectives seem unlikely either to be correct or to help achieve a restructuring of the dominant ideologies in Icelandic culture. At the same time, much commentary on the Crash has considered the home, urban space, and speculative building, linking its analysis of these topics with gender by positing the feminine domestic space as a useful antidote to macho building projects unsuitable for homely life. However, such commentary has tended towards a nostalgic reversion to a pastoral existence fetishized by Icelandic nationalism but at odds with the urban realities of Icelandic society (and, correspondingly, with little power usefully to imagine alternative futures for rural Iceland).

*Gæska* reflects but also challenges these utopian impulses. It is awkwardly structured, idiosyncratic, and not immune to essentialist attitudes to gender, to deeply embedded racisms, or to stereotypes of the Islamic world. Its humanism leaves little room for contemplating the destruction capitalism had wreaked and continues to wreak on other species. But it is also vivacious, characterful, and willing to present bold thought-experiments that reveal the pettiness or constriction of many responses to the Crash. *Gæska* not only contemplates gender and space, but tackles nationalism head-on. It shows a continual awareness of canonical medieval and folkloric themes in Icelandic discourses of identity, satirizing the ways they are used in nationalist discourses, and does not hesitate either to laugh at these or to repurpose them to a global context and a progressive outlook. Thus *Gæska* succeeds in satirizing mainstream feminist responses to the Crash while nonetheless addressing the role of masculinity in causing it, and complicates the tendency of Icelandic femi-

nism to abject the Islamic world by giving Islamicate feminism a significant role and dramatic position in the story. While the text can at one level be read to remind its Icelandic audience in the context of the Crash of how lucky they are, it goes far beyond this to promote a utopian internationalism.

*Gæska* also implies something like a theory of change. First and foremost, *Gæska* dispenses wholesale with technocratic, neoliberal governance, seeing the repoliticization of politics as a key response to the Crash. It does this by exploring, primarily through Halldór Garðar's personal crisis, the corrosive sense under globalized neoliberalism that the only scope (or even purpose) for politics is to tinker with a system largely beyond politicians' control. *Gæska* promotes instead a recognition that "free-market" neoliberal finance only exists because states create and maintain the conditions for its existence. Indeed, the novel inverts the neoliberal assumption that it is governments' job to facilitate the free movement of capital while tightly regulating the movement of labor, helping to expose the artificiality of the constraints within which, neoliberal governments protest, they must act. Unlike novels that lament the emergence of a neo-feudal elite, then, *Gæska* expresses a basic democratic theory of change, encouraging people to reclaim political and physical space for the public. And while installing a government of women would, it implies, be a good start, *Gæska* presses for government orientated to a higher purpose than being a kind of middle-manager between global corporations and the proletariat which must, irritatingly, win occasional re-election. Near the end of the novel, a still bewildered Halldór Garðar asks Millý to reflect on the last year of government and says "nefndu mér eitthvað sem allir geta verið sammála um að hafi verið gott. Eitthvað sannanlega gott — einsog það er sannanlega gott að gefa svöngum manni að borða" ("tell me something that everyone can agree has been good. Something truly good — the way that it's truly good to feed a hungry person").<sup>79</sup> Accommodating the 93,000,000 refugees fits the bill. This utopianism is in

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79 Norðdahl, *Gæska*, 263.

many ways simplistic: it is ably summarized in the book's blurb (which, if not by Eiríkur Örn himself, at least sounds like it is): "*Gæska* er ótrúlega hugmyndarík og fyndin skáldsaga um allt sem skorti á Íslandi síðustu ár: Jafnrétti, bræðralag og meðalhóf — og allt hitt sem nóg var af: Græðgi, heimsku og fordóma" ("*Gæska* is an incredibly imaginative and funny novel about everything that has been lacking in Iceland in recent years: equality, fraternity, and moderation — and everything of which there has been plenty: greed, stupidity, and prejudice"). But, if simplistic, the novel is no less a reminder of common sense in a literary corpus dominated by the jaded resignation engendered by capitalist realism. Coming back to theories of change, *Gæska* is also unusual in putting Iceland's post-colonial anxiety, expressed in so many novels through marginal characters or encounters representing the Islamic world, at the center of its story, and recognizing firmly that Icelandic culture needs to square up to this to have a chance of developing a more effective politics.

The philosophy of *Gæska* is naive. But this cheerful naivety is one part of its resistance to the mode of capitalist realism, whereby only a circumscribed and ultimately brutal *Realpolitik* is considered suitable subject matter for writing. In asserting its internationalist humanism, *Gæska* does good work to expose the poverty of neoliberal discourses when it comes to political possibility.





## Interest Payments

Whereas the world continues to experience a (welcome) deluge of monographs on medieval Icelandic literature, and occasionally studies of individual contemporary Icelandic writers, this book is one of only a handful of monograph-length studies of contemporary Icelandic literature.<sup>1</sup> Even within Iceland, while the country's numerous periodicals sustain a lively commentary on the literary scene, monograph-length analyses are rare. Through its thematically driven sample, then, this book has provided the first wide-ranging account of the Icelandic novel in the twenty-first century. Meanwhile, critics are still at a fairly early stage of putting together the story of how art has responded to the Western financial crisis of 2007–8 and the world's biggest recession since the 1920s, making this book one significant case study in an emergent history of our turbulent times.

As I have said above, for a book about the financial crisis, there is surprisingly little in here about finance—a dearth

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1 Its main precursor is the substantial survey by Ástráður Eysteinnsson and Úfhildur Dagsdóttir, "Icelandic Prose Literature, 1940–2000," in *A History of Icelandic Literature*, ed. Daisy Nejmman (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 404–70. See also Jürg Glauser, *Island: Eine Literaturgeschichte* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2011). For one major recent author study, see Birna Bjarnadóttir, *Recesses of the Mind: Aesthetics in the Work of Guðbergur Bergsson* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012).

which, as I recapitulate below, provides telling insights into how fiction has become integrated into the worldviews of finance-capitalism. On the other hand, this study — particularly Chapter 3 — reveals pervasive concerns about Iceland's relationship with the developing world, and provides insights into how the Islamophobia and racism that became prominent in Icelandic politics in around 2014, and more widely in Western politics around the same time, were evident in literary writing already shortly after the Crash. This observation emphasizes how Iceland can provide important perspectives on wider cultural questions. Icelanders experienced considerable economic hardship in the wake of the Crash, but there was no serious doubt that the Crash was caused first and foremost by Icelanders — many of whom had, moreover, been lionized in national discourse as icons of Icelandicness. Insofar as blame could be directed elsewhere, it was at financial and political elites in majority-white, rich countries, like Lehman Brothers or Gordon Brown's Labour government. And while the Crash caused considerable economic distress in Iceland, the economy bounced back more vigorously than in most of Europe. Although Iceland has in the last few decades become a destination for immigration in ways never hitherto experienced, the country has faced no plausible risk of Islamist terrorism and was geographically and politically well insulated from the 2014 refugee crisis. The country is, however, intimately familiar with both Anglophone and Scandinavian media discourses. An insistence in Icelandic writing, then, on weaving characters from the Islamic world into Crash-fiction, or otherwise working in encounters between Icelanders and ethnic others from the developing world, emphasizes that the anxieties of identity sweeping Western politics at the moment can reflect discourse as much as material reality.

Just as the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the later financial crisis have proven inseparable in American fiction, Iceland's Crash-novels argue that the story of the Crash is just one crisis point in an international scramble to cope with the cultural pressures exerted by economic and demographic globaliza-

tion.<sup>2</sup> The crime novels of my Crash-corpus tend to contemplate them through the presence of Eastern European migrants, who in this writing usually bring criminals in their midst. The rest of the Crash-novel corpus contemplates them through characters associated with the developing world, most often the Islamic world. At times these fictional encounters between the Icelander and the Other are clearly part of a self-consciously progressive political response to cultural anxieties that authors must have been perceiving around them — as for example in Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl's *Gæska* or Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir's *Hjartsláttur*. At other times, the portrayals are more ambivalent, as in Bjarni Harðarson's *Sigurðar saga fóts* or Böðvar Guðmundsson's *Töfrhöllin*. Either way, these novels often wind up replicating well embedded xenophobia and racism. But often too, they develop interesting and challenging efforts to find new understandings of Icelandic culture in a globalizing context, recognizing the historical roots but also the irrationality of some of its cultural anxieties and exploring the ways in which the country has not only been a victim of colonialism, but also a protagonist in and beneficiary of the neo-colonialism of the neoliberal era. We are left in no doubt that Iceland, a near-microstate frequently navigating the world order from the interstices between larger political and economic blocs and structures, finds itself exceptionally reliant on cultural capital, and that its cultural investment in whiteness is both deep in domestic culture, and powerful on the international stage. As the power of national sovereignty continues to diminish in the coming decades, larger countries may find their existing reliance on cultural capital growing in ways that echo the Icelandic experience.

As I have explored how the Crash, and Crash-writing, can only be understood with reference to Iceland's nationalism and post-colonial anxieties, I have investigated how Icelandic discourses narrate the nation with reference to medievalist images.

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2 Judith Schulz, *From Wall Street to Main Street: Tracing the Shadows of the Financial Crisis from 2007 to 2009 in American Fiction* (Wiesbaden: Metzler, 2016), 1.

Specifically, Icelandic writing flits between what I have called “nationalist medievalism” (which figures Iceland’s medieval past as a golden age that legitimates its independence and international prestige in the present) and “Orientalist medievalism” (which figures “medieval” traits imagined to linger among backward cultures as barbarisms, the rejection of which in Iceland legitimates its claim to modernity). Though often mutually incompatible, both these discourses are prominent in Iceland, producing a fascinating tension in Icelandic identity as it claims, rejects, and abjects the medieval. Indeed, past research has overlooked what a historiographical feat it has been that an Atlantic island so far from the Roman world, where humans seem not to have set foot before the ninth century, has become so central to Western medieval studies, while the southern and eastern littorals of the Mediterranean basin have been so comprehensively excluded.

Looking back on the relationship between history-writing and the boom, Guðni Th. Jóhannesson wrote that “by 2008 it seemed clear that historians had lost the history wars.” He went on:

it would be easy to blame the Venture Vikings, statespersons, and the gullible public. Even so, historians should take a critical look at their own approach. It simply was not enough to find fault time and again with an outdated, glorified, nationalistic version of the past. Historians should have provided an enticing, readable, and entertaining alternative. In this they failed. They did not produce popular works on the Vikings, the settlement, or even the sagas, and when they did, they were not sufficiently promoted.<sup>3</sup>

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3 Guðni Th. Jóhannesson, “Exploiting Icelandic History 2000–2008,” in *Gambling Debt: Iceland’s Rise and Fall in the Global Economy*, eds. E. Paul Durrenberger and Gisli Pálsson (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015), 21, 22.

This gloomy assessment is important, and is relevant to understanding the work of novelists as well as historians. Novelists struggled to provide alternative visions of Icelandic culture during the boom, and either to map what had gone wrong or to explore what might happen next after the Crash. That said, the work of post-Crash novelists *does* seem to show the influence of recent history-writing. This shows that history-writing has managed to exert influence beyond historians themselves, albeit more slowly than Guðni would have wished. Indeed, I have been impressed at how often one bumps into Icelandic writers at academic seminars and conferences at the University of Iceland: the capacity for historians in Iceland to get their messages out at least as far as novelists seems to me quite striking. Thus although I have shown at various points in this study how Crash-novels recapitulate conservative nationalist-medievalist narratives, I have also shown how plenty of them present a much more critical and incisive engagement with the past. Crash-novels tend to reflect the post-nationalist wave of academic research that (at different speeds in different regions) followed the Second World War. Recent decades have seen a lot of academic work calling attention to medieval Icelandic genres that were marginalized by the National-Romantic movement, and Crash-novels have turned to this material quite enthusiastically as a way to criticize the nationalist ideologies emphasized in the boom period. Of course, to conclude that historians have been influencing novelists is not to say that those novelists have themselves been very influential on the general public. But the novelists are at least unlikely to have developed the medievalist responses to the Crash that they did with such alacrity had revisionist histories not been reaching beyond narrow circles of professional historians. Accordingly, it is worth noting that during the 2016 presidential election, Guðni was criticized for his insufficiently nationalist approach to Icelandic history by his competitor (and chief proponent of the deregulation of Iceland's banks) Davíð Oddsson; but Guðni won with 39% of the votes to Davíð's 14%. And the possibility remains that it is the more substantial artworks that emerged in the wake of the Crash that will come

most to shape its memorialization and so Iceland's longer-term responses to it.

More interestingly again, from the point of view of Guðni's critique of historians, the medievalism of Icelandic novels, as revealed by Chapters 3–4, seems to me actually to have been some way ahead of mainstream academic medieval studies. The novels' engagement not only with the European Middle Ages but with the relationship between the European Middle Ages and Orientalism parallels scholars' nascent rethinking of the Eurocentrism of post-war medieval studies. Whether the novels do this well or badly, they show that medieval historians, often still busy Europeanizing a field criss-crossed by the anachronistic borders of nineteenth-century nationalism, need to pick up their pace: other intellectuals are already reworlding the Middle Ages from outside the profession, and it would be helpful if they had more research to draw on as they do so.

But the richness of the explorations of identity in Crash novels brings into relief the thinness of their explorations of finance, perhaps echoing the way in which identity politics has shifted from being a critical, left-wing project to being the basis for contestation across the political spectrum, while simultaneously overshadowing critiques of capitalism. Here at the conclusion of this study, it is possible to look across the Crash-corpus that I have surveyed above and identify an inchoate writing of finance capital through the illegal drug trade—a method of charting capitalism which has served writers well, from India to America.<sup>4</sup> The idea that credit during the boom was an addiction pervades Icelandic Crash-writing, within the literary corpus and far beyond. Einar Már Guðmundsson's essay collection *Bankastræti núll* (“zero Bank Street”) takes its name from the colloquial sobriquet of the public toilets at the top of Bankastræti, once noted as a haunt of junkies.<sup>5</sup> Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson's autobiog-

4 E.g., Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy, the first novel of which is *Sea of Poppies* (London: Murray, 2008), and Simon et al., dir., *The Wire: The Complete Series*, Warner, 2009.

5 Cf. Einar Már Guðmundsson, *Bankastræti núll* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2011), 36–37.

raphy opens with the words “My name is Bjorgolfur Thor Bjorgolfsson and I’m a deal junkie.” In its 2010 election campaign, the Best Party “promised to break all of its promises, make corruption more visible, and advocate for ‘sustainable transparency’ in addition to calling for a drug-free Parliament by 2020.”<sup>6</sup> Thus it is clearly possible that Icelandic writing could have developed this reference point to explore the nuances of finance.

Often Icelandic writing simply uses the passing association between financiers and hard drugs to wag the finger, co-opting the conservative attitude that taking drugs is immoral, and writing financiers as drug-takers as a convenient mode of defamation. Thus the bombastic opening poem of Bjarni Karlsson’s 2013 poetry collection *Árleysi alda* wryly integrates drug abuse into its representation of the *útrásarvíkingar*’s hyperbolic, nationalistic medievalism and post-colonial hubris as it describes the peak of Iceland’s banking boom in stanza 10:

Íslandi gagnar þá auðsælir bragnar til útlanda spana,  
 ákefð þeim magnar arfur fornsagnar og efni í rana.  
 Baunverjinn þagnar er bruna fram vagnar um borgarhlið  
 Dana.  
 Ákaft því fagnar Ólafur Ragnar með orðum úr krana.<sup>7</sup>

It serves Iceland when wealth-blessed heroes rush to foreign  
 lands;  
 the heritage of ancient tales increases their eagerness (as  
 does the powder in their snouts).  
 The Dane falls silent when chariots charge at his city gate.  
 Ólafur Ragnar eagerly welcomes it with words from the tap.

6 Hulda Proppé, “‘Welcome to the Revolution!’ Voting in the Anarcho-Surrealists,” in *Gambling Debt: Iceland’s Rise and Fall in the Global Economy*, eds. E. Paul Durrenberger and Gisli Palsson (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015), 83.

7 Bjarki Karlsson, *Árleysi alda* [*The timelessness of ages*] (Akranes: Uppheimar, 2013), 9. Cf. Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl, *Hnefi eða vitstola orð* [*A fist or words bereft of sense*] (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2013), nos. 28 and 74.

But the powerful potential for drugs as a vehicle for writing neo-liberalism is hinted at in Steinar Bragi's *Hálendið*, where the entrepreneur Hrafn "með bakgrunn sinn í kókinu skildi [...] betur en flestir grunnþætti hinnar nýju markaðshugsunar" ("with his background in coke understood [...] the essentials of the new market-ideology better than most").<sup>8</sup> The comment builds on previous examples of Hrafn's questionable self-control; indeed, in revealing at the end that most of the events of the novel cannot actually have taken place, the novel raises the possibility that most of its content is the product of the drug-addled brains of its protagonists. But the quotation also indicates how organized crime, and pre-eminently the international drugs trade, has a central place in deregulated, neo-liberal economies: prohibition has effectively put drugs entirely outside state regulation, and the trade has thrived on globalization, with deregulated finance making it easy to launder and move illegal funds. It is therefore in some ways the global industry that is least affected by government regulation, standing as a metaphor for the extremes of neoliberal ideology; yet in other ways, it is the industry which, through state repression, is the most constrained by state intervention, paradoxically standing at the same time as a metaphor for how many of the "free markets" beloved of neoliberalism only exist because they are constituted by states. The refusal of socially conservative yet economically neoliberal political elites to legalize the drugs trade thus stands as a marker of their hypocrisy; and the suspicion persists that this refusal arises because, directly or indirectly, they benefit from it, which in turn stands and as a marker of their corruption.

Correspondingly, the addictive yet lethal fungus that allegorizes capital in Óttar M. Norðfjörð's *Paradísarborgin* builds firmly on discourses about illegal drugs. Böðvar Guðmundsson's *Töfrahöllin* attempts to concretize and defame finance capital by narrating it through parallel stories of drug trafficking. The murdered banker Daníel Marteinnsson at the center of *Ævar Örn*

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8 Steinar Bragi, *Hálendið [The highlands]* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2011), 119.



Jósefsson's *Land tækifæranna* is noted for his alcoholic excesses. Meanwhile, the sequel *Önnur líf* sketches the possibility — implicitly to be explored in a further sequel — that the murderer, rapist, and conservative politician Ingólfur Halldórsson is also implicated in the drugs trade, and has used his influence to corrupt the police and to shield Iceland's pre-eminent drug-baron Lalli feiti from investigation. As I have explored in Chapter 4, the drugs trade provides particularly important opportunities to write Iceland's participation in international finance to Bjarni Harðarson's *Sigurðar saga fóts*. Through it, Bjarni explores the gang-like, masculine hierarchies at the heart of the boom-time finance sector, and puts the illicit (and therefore invisible) cash-flows of the drugs trade into counterpoint with the financialized (and therefore invisible) credit-flows of finance. He even manages to use Sigurður's involvement in the drugs trade implicitly to contemplate the neoliberal "shock therapy" that was visited on post-Communist states in the early 1990s (a process in which Björgólfur Thor was a protagonist), its association with neo-colonialism and the "war on terror," and its unnerving resonances with Iceland's own post-Crash experiences.

And yet, despite these promising feints, little Crash-writing gets beyond hinting at the lurking sense that the drugs industry is somehow an analogue to or metaphor for high finance. By shying away from investigating the moral complexities and economic realities of the drugs industry, and therefore the complexities and hypocrisies of politicians' stances on it, the Crash-corpus veers characteristically away from mapping finance.

Rather, novels written in the years following the Crash are dominated not by investigation of neoliberal economies, but by a sense of confusion, as writers try to get a grip on the abstractions of finance capital but find themselves confined by genres and modes of writing which are attuned to writing individualism rather than to charting the systemic social forces which produced the Crash. In Chapter 2, I discussed at length how post-Crash writers across the genres of murder fiction, children's novels, and literary fiction struggle to stand outside capitalist realism sufficiently to describe rather than inhabit it.

Like other commentators examining both the Crash and the planet's unfolding environmental catastrophe, I find currently popular modes of literary realism one of the key limiting factors here. Even *Bókasafn Ömmu Huldar* by Þórarinn Leifsson, which deploys science fiction heroically to literalize the abstractions of finance capital for a child audience, and is literally able to contemplate the end of the world, nonetheless struggles to sketch anything resembling the end of capitalism. Concerned to represent the world as it is rather than as it might be, novelists tend to find themselves able to represent the world only as neoliberalism would like us to believe it is. No novel in my corpus deals with finance with the acuity of Halldór Laxness's short, surrealist *Atómstöðin* of 1948 — and few deal as incisively with the complex structures of power that underpin Icelandic politics either.

As so-called “post-truth politics” has come to prominence in the West, it is increasingly tempting to imagine that hegemony is no longer important as a tool of elite dominance: exposing the truth can feel irrelevant in a world where political elites can so openly show disdain for facts. But this study has shown how, in post-Crash Iceland at least, novelists were acutely aware of their failures to expose hegemony during the boom, and were rapidly coming to terms with the fact that hegemony was alive and kicking in Icelandic political life. Many of these novelists — particularly people who came of age during the neoliberal ascendancy of the 1980s and 1990s — focus on their powerlessness in the face of capitalist realism, Steinar Bragi and Óttar M. Norðfjörð being among the most eloquent of these voices. In §2.3.1 I viewed with scepticism the claim that crime fiction might be the most appropriate genre to writing the financial crisis. One might rather wonder whether satire might be emerging as the pre-eminent critical medium for the post-Crash period: although at times reality palpably outpaces satire, as with Bjarni Harðarson's *Sigurðar saga fóts*, satire has notched up some considerable achievements in post-Crash Iceland. Óttar M. Norðfjörð's rewriting of Voltaire's *Candide*, *Örvitinn*, is magnificent; Auður Jónsdóttir's *Vetrarsól* is a gentle but insistent take-down of murder-fiction,

patriarchy, and the racism of much Icelandic feminism; and of course the would-be comic mayoral campaign of Jón Gnarr led to electoral triumph in 2010. But this is not to say that realism is in itself the biggest problem with Crash-fiction's struggles to tackle finance (as Jón Gnarr's enthusiasm for the realist TV drama *The Wire* emphasizes). Rather, my reading of the Crash-novel corpus has exposed how one key way in which Icelandic elites have managed to avoid incisive scrutiny in post-Crash writing has been novelists' fairly consistent choice to focus their psychologically driven, individualistic tales on financiers rather than on government. The main exceptions to this are Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl's surreal *Gæska* and Arndís Þórarinsdóttir's realist *Játningar mjólkurfernuskálds*, both of which succeed in showing how writing about political possibilities might indeed help to map paths out of what feels like a political impasse.

A different limitation in Crash-writing that has haunted this book, and may also have implications for the capacity of Crash-fiction to critique the ideologies of the banking boom, is the dearth of female voices in the corpus. As I discussed in the introduction, the lack of women writers in this study is probably partly because I chose to analyse texts that explicitly discussed the Crash; this was no doubt (unwittingly) a gendered choice on my part, and women writers may justifiably have felt that they had more pressing issues to write about than explicitly addressing a masculinist blip in Iceland's *histoire événementielle*, its short-term "history of events." A useful future study might explore what women writers *were* writing about in the wake of the Crash, and what their implicit politics were. That said, I have found that some important women writers on the Crash, such as Sigrún Davíðsdóttir and Þórunn Erlu-Valdimarsdóttir, write as firmly from within capitalist realism as their male counterparts. Meanwhile, the men who dominate the Icelandic publishing scene often give feminist thought a central place in their fiction. Although the existence of a well established and indeed mainstream feminist discourse in Iceland did not serve to prevent a crash brought about by male, and ostentatiously masculine, politicians and financiers, this discourse did pro-

vide a ready resource for people of any gender to start dissecting Iceland's boom culture when the Crash came. Yet Icelandic feminism as expressed in Crash-novels tends to lapse into essentialism, whereby people assume that prudence and virtue are inherent in women rather than culturally inculcated in them. Mainstream Icelandic feminism is also liable to participate in, and certainly to be co-opted by, xenophobic and racist discourses that oppress both men and women from the Global South by demonizing them for their supposedly patriarchal ways. For all these reasons, the ways in which Crash-literature handles gender is often profoundly constrained as a tool for imagining better futures, hinting at how the patriarchal structures in Icelandic society that were crucial to the Crash are powerful far beyond high finance. Even so, one can reasonably doubt whether, faced in 2008 with a crisis of the same magnitude, popular discourse in the UK or the USA would have articulated feminist responses with such alacrity. And, more encouragingly, at its best, feminist thinking in Iceland's Crash-literature does suggest that if society can cultivate financial prudence and moral kindness in women, it can cultivate these qualities in men too.

Within these ideological limitations on Icelandic Crash-writing, though, there are some trenchant critiques of the boom and bust. It is abundantly clear which of the many major players in Iceland's financial expansion have won writers' attention: Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson, followed by Jón Ásgeir Jóhannesson and Björgólfur Guðmundsson. These so-called *útrásarvíkingar* ("raiding vikings") not only cultivated celebrity, putting themselves firmly in the public eye (whatever their protestations to the contrary), but also integrated themselves into cultural sign-systems which were easily recognisable to the public, and readily manipulated by literary writers. Through their postmodern remixing of medieval signs (as mediated through National Romanticism), the *útrásarvíkingar* made it possible for writers to apprehend and renarrate their public personae, bringing these personae forcibly back into contact with medieval sources and chipping away at the medievalist-nationalist narratives which legitimated those *útrásarvíkingar's* activities.

Writing inspired by the *útrásarvíkingar* has been particularly prominent among their contemporaries, the children born in the decades from the 1930s to 1960s. Returning to hegemony, this is again surely telling. Writers who had come of age before the rise of neoliberalism seem to have found more capacity for optimism in critiquing the protagonists of the banking boom, and their feel for saga-like intergenerational histories and their forthright but critical engagement with the same nationalist medievalism as the *útrásarvíkingar* drew on seems to have given them purchase.

Moving outwards from this observation, one might go so far as to say that one means for Icelandic novellists to address the abstract character of financial crisis has been to engage — admittedly with varying degrees of subtlety and conviction — with temporality. I have read the obsession of crime-writing with times and dates as echoing the financialized time of capitalist realism. Historicizing the boom and the Crash by testing the dominant narratives of Iceland's modernity against other possible periodizations has been one technique. Providing a sort of multi-temporal polyphony, Crash-writing shows how medieval and folkloric literature have the potential to stand in contrast with accounts of the postmodern condition and to challenge its presuppositions: the use of folkloric or medieval forms and references can bring epistemology to the fore, pushing readers accustomed to today's structures of thought to question where our knowledge comes from, and how it is constituted. Admittedly, the medievalist utopianism in the ending of Bjarni Harðarson's *Sigurðar saga fóts* lapses into nostalgia: tampering with temporalities does not necessarily produce a path to future action. But some writers challenge the financialization of time more dramatically, with surreal rethinking of temporality, cause and effect, notably Steinar Bragi and Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl. Óttar M. Norðfjörð's brilliant *Örvitinn eða; hugsjónamaðurinn* takes both approaches, by rewriting the eighteenth-century *Candide* for the early twenty-first century. Admittedly, the escapism at the end of *Örvitinn* ultimately promotes stoic unconcern at the horrors of the world. But pondering on the past, and the degree to

which Icelandic society is, despite its professions of modernity, stuck in or returning to a dystopian Middle Ages; or examining how Icelandic society seeks to define itself as both modern and Western through the abjection of an Orientalized Middle Ages; or even exploring the utopian possibilities indicated by pre-industrial life have all proven to be ways in which writers can challenge the assumptions imposed on them by capitalist realism.

Reimaginings of time in the Crash-corpus intersect with critiques of architecture, urbanism, and the construction of space more generally. Critiques of architecture tacitly intersect with and deepen urgent critiques of Iceland's house-price boom and a dramatic shift of post-Crash housing tenancy from owner-occupation to renting. But they also recognize that the way a society shelters its inhabitants defines a large proportion of their social and aesthetic existence too. These critiques are often patriarchal, and can be merely nostalgic, casting about (albeit somewhat in vain) for pastoral idylls whose path to a happier future, if they offer one, seems also to suggest the re-domestication of women and a parochial turning inwards. For a barren volcanic island which is probably unavoidably dependent on international trade to sustain its current population, this would of course be contrary even to a narrow self-interest, while for Iceland to close its eyes to the violence in which it is complicit abroad would represent a lamentable aversion to fulfilling its potential to advance the global public good. Yet there is also a real power to much post-Crash criticism of how Icelandic society has urbanized, and particularly criticism of boom-time Icelandic architecture. Accounts of how finance penetrates a countryside that is supposed, in the national imaginary, to be the repository of Icelandic values reflect widespread anxiety at how Iceland has essentially become a city-state whose very large hinterland is mostly productive only through its commodification as a tourist destination and as an industrialized source of energy. And the most committedly utopian novel of the Crash, *Gæska*, the idiosyncratic masterpiece on which I focused in Chapter 5, capitalizes on its surreal form to seize these ideas and gallop ahead with them to create a vision of a feminist, cosmo-

politan Icelandic future which puts a human politics of kindness at its center.

In reality, utopian thought and action in Iceland immediately after the Crash was buoyant, involved some extreme experiments in participatory democracy, and floated innovative ideas about harnessing technology to improve governance and the media. Indeed, even the entirely accidental collapse of Iceland's banks in a way represented the allowing of the unthinkable, as everyone else in Europe rushed, following the fall of Lehman Brothers, to prop up the financial system with public money. Moreover, this uninvited experiment in letting failed banks fail seems to have served Iceland well. Although it is easy to be disheartened by the limited change that innovative thinking after the Crash has so far achieved, then, that thinking may yet bear fruit, in Iceland and elsewhere. Crash-fiction has touched little on some important threads in Iceland's utopian politics: press freedom, civic and political life, and environmentalism have often been sidelined—just as has innovative thinking about finance itself. But Crash-fiction has nonetheless helpfully emphasized other ideas that enjoyed less explicit scrutiny in public political debate, suggesting a future that benefits from combining a number of ingredients. The novels recognize the degree to which the national imaginary has, despite Icelanders' talent for claiming an ironic distance from nationalist narratives, been in thrall to versions of history that do not represent the whole of the country's past—and which sometimes have been altogether bogus. Nor, the novels recognise, do these nationalist narratives provide a satisfactory template for Iceland's future: novellists have drawn on recent academic work to rehistoricize Iceland's current status as a neoliberal country, recognizing that this is not an inevitable situation, and its obsession with its own "independence," recognizing that this is often merely a hegemonic discourse—and that, conversely, where Iceland's sovereignty is not illusory, it is not always exercised. Novellists have sought to reshape the frenetic, financialized time to which we are increasingly habituated, epitomized by automated, superhumanly swift trading that creates no real value, in favor of long-term and well

informed investment. They seek to recognize the tangible successes of Icelandic society in cultivating humane and prudent behavior in one half of the population, and suggest that these practices could be extended to the other half, with compound benefits for both women and men. These recalibrations of national identity, time, and gender norms can be imagined, and to some extent actually realised, through long-term rethinking of human habitation and use of space. Although they offer little by way of templates for how they would look, Crash-novels at their best reject firmly the idea of housing as a commodity and push us instead, without reimposing patriarchy, to create habitations that are tailored firmly to domesticity and the real economy.

One has to be impressed by the sheer amount of Icelandic literature explicitly addressing the Crash, and although novels often shy from exploring possible alternatives to twenty-first century financialization, they comprise a large body of inventive, challenging writing. Naturally this reflects the enormous prominence of the Crash in Icelandic life. But despite writers' own complaints about the state of the Icelandic literary scene and the worrying ability of Icelandic elites to control it, the scene's ability to respond to political circumstances has been noteworthy. And although the way these novels turn their faces away from finance and direct political engagement is a limitation, in one sense it also represents an achievement: rather than thinking about the crisis narrowly in terms of the financial system itself, the novels studied here generally look at deeper or broader cultural forces which promoted Iceland's (selective) embracing of neoliberal policy and insulated an improbable banking boom from criticism. Echoing holistic grassroots responses to the crisis like the so-called "ant-hill" that organized the 2009 National Assembly, and recalling the way in which both Sebastian Faulks and John Lanchester felt the need to write state-of-the-nation novels far wider in scope than simply an account of the financial crisis itself, Iceland's Crash-novels collectively represent a rather fulsome exploration of key problems in Icelandic society. Moreover, while Icelandic novellists were late to grasp the perilousness of Iceland's economic situation, the anxiety at the



globalization, migrations, and cultural changes that has exploded into the forefront of Western politics in the last few years is already apparent everywhere in their post-Crash writing. In this sense, then, these texts were a step ahead of electoral politics, and provide valuable insights into the emergence of right-wing populism in Europe — both in showing the pervasiveness of the cultural anxieties which this populism has harnessed, and at times in attempting productively to address them.

These successes of Icelandic writing in the wake of the Crash surely partly reflect Iceland's unusually small market, in which the difficulty for any novel to achieve commercial viability perhaps makes publishers more agreeable (or resigned) to publishing novels that are awkward fits for the expectations of the marketplace. In turn, the fact that novels are viable at all is partly due to Icelanders' exceptionally large (if declining) per capita appetite for reading, which might be taken as another social good that has helped the country respond to the Crash. Correspondingly, the existence of state stipends, which provide a living for well established writers, and reduces their dependence on sales income, must also be significant. The charting of the value of the króna to the Euro on each page of *Hnefi eða vitsola orð* sends various messages, but partly reflects Eiríkur Örn's own dependence at the time on an income denominated in krónur while living in the Eurozone, and to this extent acknowledges the importance of state funding for writers. It is telling that *Gæska* has not yet been translated, unlike Eiríkur Örn's next and more conventional novel *Illska*, which has at the time of writing been translated into French, German, Swedish, Danish, Croatian, Spanish, and Greek — yet *Gæska* still made it onto the Icelandic market.

That said, the writers whose work I have found most challenging and interesting were nurtured outside Iceland's main publishing venues — and some significant contributions are by people who are not professional novellists, or even writers. Sigrún Davíðsdóttir's *Samhengi hlutanna* was an interesting experiment in expanding beyond her main professional writing as a journalist and translator, while Bjarni Harðarson's *Sigurðar*

*saga fóts* was published by a press which is tiny even by Icelandic standards, by a man whose main recent careers have been politician and bookseller, and it is again a telling sign that the novel still commanded quite extensive media coverage. But the most prominent minor press has proved to be the short-lived avant-garde collective Nýhil. Icelandic commentators have not always been altogether impressed with the avant-garde poetry that was the backbone of the group's publications, or convinced that the poetry really was as innovative as it sought to be; and the post-Crash novels of Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl and Óttar M. Norðfjörð have mostly been published by Iceland's mainstream commercial presses. Nevertheless, one gets the impression that without Nýhil's nurturing of a prickly, politicized, experimental, and internationalist corner of the Icelandic literary scene, the scene's capacity to respond to the Crash when it came would have been much shallower. Thus we owe a lot of the most interesting literary responses to the Crash to writers associated with Nýhil, and the sacrifices they made for their writing during the boom years. Patronage (and once or twice censorship) by financiers had an important role during the boom in shaping Icelandic literature and ensuring financiers' hegemonic dominance in Icelandic society. But civil society and the Icelandic state did, between them, enable a kind of standing reserve of forms and styles which came into their own after the Crash and produced some of the most idiosyncratic and inspired literary responses to the Crash anywhere in the world.

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