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.¹ 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 poststructuralist philosophy.² 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.³ 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

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 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. 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. 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.

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* pos-

5 See the bibliography.
tions its use of postcolonial thinking as its “principal novelty.” 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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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 Órn 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. Nordfjörð’s Hnífur Abrahams she is Egyptian-American; in Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl’s Gæska and Auður Jónsdóttir’s Vetrasól 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 Jósepsson’s Önnur lif 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”). 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. 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.” 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.

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Strákurinn stóð agndofa; hann hafði ekki vitað að múslimar væru svona vondir. Það bjó nefnilega enginn múslimi í Fögrusveit. Kristín viðurkenndi að hún hafði heldur aldrei hitt múslima, en það var nóg að sjá myndir af þeim í sjónvarpinu; þeir voru alltaf í grautfúlu skapi. Strákurinn vildi gjaran 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 dinnertime conversation of the Panglossian figure Alfróði and his guests in Örvitinn.11 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.12 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.13

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

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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*.\(^{14}\) 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 allt afr máli hvað maður gerir
eða hvort maður gerir yfirleitt eitthvað.

Nafnið lifir.\(^{15}\)

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.

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\(^{15}\) 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.16 The former of the two runs:

Deyr fé,
deyja frændr,
deyr sjalfr it sama;
en orðstírr
deyr aldregí,
hveim er sér góðan getr.17

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.

16 Cf. Chapter 4.
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.

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”

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("I’m just glad to be able to be here in Norway"), says Shirouk dutifully.\textsuperscript{19} 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, \textit{Heimskringla}.\textsuperscript{20} 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,\textsuperscript{21} \textit{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 \textit{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-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 43.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 121.
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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.”

With municipal elections in Reykjavík due in 2014, the mosque became a political flashpoint. On 10th July 2013, Morgunblaðið

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 Óskjuhlíð—on the grounds that “Ásatrúin nýtur velvildar þorra landsmanna. Hún er hlutu af þjóðmenningu okkar og flest höfuðum 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”). 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 Islandssöguna og alveg sérstaklega við Vestmannnaeyinga, sem minnast 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 Vestmannnaeyjar, 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. 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,


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?”).²⁵ 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-

cation and so the national self-image. 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. Thus when Töfrahöllin’s young protagonist Jósep, inspired by a photograph in an ethnographic book, asks “eru Tyrkir ekki mjög friðir?” (“Turkish people are very beautiful, aren’t they?”), his host Símon’s first response is “alveg áreiðanlega […] En líklega hefur Vestmannaeingunum ekki þótt þeir sérlega friðir þarna um árið” (“I’m sure they are […] But they probably didn’t seem especially beautiful to the people of the Vestmannaeyjar back when”).

Not that this excuses Ólafur Friðrik for wilfully neglecting to situate the Tyrjuránið 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. Rather, the disproportionate importance Ólafur Friðrik attached to the Tyrkjúránið 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 útí 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

at cathedrals just for fun, and widows’ hearths were razed to the ground through pitiless errors”).

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 nöt” (which might be translated “Reykjavík 101 Nights”): 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. Sóli includes a story about an “Íslendingur að berjast með Fídel og Che í frumskóginum […] bjargandi þeim úr fangelsi og frá ðermónnum Batista” (“an Icelander fighting alongside Fidel and Che in the jungle […] rescuing them from prison and Batista soldiers”). 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

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33 Tulinus, *Píslarvottar án hæfileika*, 68.
Twin Towers were destroyed. 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; 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 corollaries 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,

34 E.g., Alda Sigmundsdóttir, Living inside the Meltdown (Reykjavík: Ensk 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: Ensk Textasmiðjan, 2013), 76–77.

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 Unraveled, “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.”36 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.37

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, 
þíslar — með — vottinn við peningaþvottinn menn 
pukruðust hlessa,

36 Alda Sigmundsdóttir, Unraveled, 137.
37 Þórður Helgason, Vinur, sonur, bróðir [Friend, son, brother] (Reykjavík: Salka, 2010), 18.
breskur dró hrottinn upp hryðjuverksplottin er heif í vessa
og ei vildi Drottinn (sem er víst svo gott skinn) Ísaland blessa.³⁸

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.³⁹ Indeed, according to Sóley Björk Stefánsdóttir, the biggest Facebook group relating to the Crash was called “Icelanders are not terrorists” (at 17,188 members).⁴⁰ 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 jökulum og úti á sjó, stillti fólk sér upp með letruð spjöld og lét taka myndir: “Mr. Brown, We Are

Not Terrorists.” Því einsog allir vita eru terroristar brúnir karlar með sitt skegg og veðjarhatta og því auðséð á ljósmynd hver er hryðjuverkamaður og hver ekki.41

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.42 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

41 Eirikur Örn Norddahl, Íllska, 111.
42 Kristín Loftsdóttir, “Colonialism at the Margins.”
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.” 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. 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.

ancestors” have become a well loved feature of English identity-building.47

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.48 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

47 The seminal study is Andrew Wawn, The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-Century Britain (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000).
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.49 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”).50 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
“Iceland is a nation well suited to the demands of your company.”51

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

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.52

Although less dramatic than flooding valleys to power aluminium smelters, the global tourism industry has no less potent connections with colonial power-structures,53 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.54 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

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


metropole unavailable to, say, Greenlanders or Faroe Islanders. 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. This has also been true of Iceland’s relations with other hegemons, 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.

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:

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

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

Ég hélt áfram og settist inn á hótelkaffihúsið 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 vor skáli landnámshmans. Fólk bjó héra, horfði héðan á heiminn, bara ekki núna heldur á öðrum tíma — fyrir skömmu, jarðfræðlega séð, fjallahringurinn er nákvæmlega eins.

Það eru töluvert fleiri héra en síðast [...] Þetta eru allt ferðamenn sýnist mér. Kaupsýslufólkhefur örruggle fækkað mikítö. Kannski að stóku fulltrúi erlendrar lánar- drottna snæði héra síðbúinn kvöldverð áður en hann fer upp á herbergi, flakkar á milli sjónvarpsstóðva, fróar sér á
sense of continuity on this island that scared him, and that he found desperately reassuring.\textsuperscript{59}

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

the discipline of anthropology developed in the metropoles 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.\textsuperscript{61}

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 \textit{Töfrahöllin} 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.”\textsuperscript{62} Later, in the 1980s, some Japanese exchange students in France earnestly identify Iceland as the


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


\textsuperscript{62} Böðvar Guðmundsson, \textit{Töfrahöllin}, 85.
útrásarvíkingar!

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 loftþýminu sem landnámsmaður horfði í gegnum þegar hann leit beint upp af hlaði sínu, kannski nýbúinn að blóta Þór eða Frey og skýjaður decemberhiminn yfir honum eins og núna, nákvæmlega eins himinn og núna — himinninn er alltaf eins, í vissum skilningi, og Hallgerður var vist 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 fornleifarfæðingunum. 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?”).63 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.”64 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 Berlinar, popplist 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”).65 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.66 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.
65 Norðdahl, Gæska, 162.
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”). 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-
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.\(^{68}\)

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.\(^{69}\) 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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the commodified monstrosity that they have in international discourses about Iceland.70 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)’.”71 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,72 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,


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


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)

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“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”). 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. 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-

centric, colonial systems of knowledge. 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). 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. 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.

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”).80 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.81 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

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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.82 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.83

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.84 *Atómstöðin* provides a convenient example of the deep

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


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. 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. 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 “Budúbóðí,” as the names of “villimenn” (“savages”). The name of Búi’s son Bubu (a.k.a. Arngrímur) “virðist vera frá Tanganjiku, eða Kenja; eða þessu landi þar sem þeir prýda á sér hárið með rottuhólum” (“seems to come from Tanganyika or Kenya, or the country where they decorate their hair with rats’ tails”). 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. But of course Laxness does so firmly to emphasize that redu-

85 Laxness, Atómstöðin, 8.
86 Ibid., 9.
87 Ibid., 8.
88 Ibid., 10.
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.90 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, pípandi, æmtandi og skræmtandi, andsetnir á heljarþröm vanhelgra daga eins og 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”).91 This is a vivid series of images, and

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90 Alda Sigmundsdóttir, *Living Inside the Meltdown*, 78.
in its way a powerful, if unsubtle, critique of Iceland’s parliamen-
tary 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 Jó-
sepsson’s crisis-novels who calls members of parliament apaket-
tir ("monkeys") refers jovially on the same page to his colleague
Árni’s black family as “svarta genginu” (“the black gang”). Later
in Gæska, Freyleif goes clubbing to music likened to “villimanna
tumbrur” (“the drums of savages”), which casually invokes the
racist colonial association of drumming with “savages”—im-
plicitly Africans. The similarity of this metaphor to the lyrics of Emíliana Torrini’s hit “Jungle Drum,” also from 2009, un-
derscores the familiarity of the association in Icelandic culture.
Emíliana’s song belies its mentions of “Ebony and Ivory” (al-
luding to the anti-racism song first recorded by Paul McCart-
ney 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 im-
age 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 ljóss: Við erum ekki hottintottar” (“the
government spent hundreds of millions in the Inspired by Ice-
land 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”). And the
fact that this video, devised by a UK company, was generally seen

92 Ævar Örn Jósepsson, Önnur lif, 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.95

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 rasikinnarnar, mig langaði mest til að hýda þær og ski-
pa þeim að snauta heim til Afrikú. En það þorði ég auðvitað ekki því áreiðanlega voru margar gótrillur til taks ef viðskip-
tavinur var með derring.96

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 negrástrákar (“Ten Little Negro Boys”), republished to both criticism and acclaim, in 2007.97 In 2008 Óttar M. Norðfjörð re-
worked the text as Tíu litlir bankastrákar, a powerful critique of Iceland’s boom and bust. On the cover, Lárus Welding, CEO of Gltinír when it collapsed, appears holding a banana. Mean-
while, 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”).98 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 chau-

95 Cf. Björn Þór Sigbjörnsson et al., Island í aldanna rás, 393.
96 Böðvar Guðmundsson, Töfrahöllin, 285.
98 Cf. Evans, Hávamál, 54.
litlir negrastrákur, 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 skräpvaluta 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”).99 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”).100 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.101 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;102 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.103 These observations all

100 Steinar Bragi, Hálendið [The highlands] (Reykjavik: Mál og menning, 2011), 127.
102 For a survey of the half-dozen or so families actually comprising this group, see Guðmundur Magnússon, Íslensku Ættarveldin: Frá Oddaverjum til Engeyinga (Reykjavik: Veröld, 2012), 231–83.
 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 búið 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”).

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 Ríólitreglan arises from the destruction of an álfaisteinn (“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 disenchanted, stoical and fairly individualistic personal independence. Ríólitreglan 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-

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 Riólitéreglan, then, moves firmly away from golden-ageism, it still positions medieval history and folklore as fundamental to understanding Icelandic-ness. 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 Riólitéreglan, Iceland’s modernity is implicitly also defined and celebrated through the portrayal of María and her children. Riólitéreglan 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 sé í leiktækjum, bækur og gírnileg mataborð” (“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”). Riólitéreglan’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-

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 Tímakistan 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 understand human politics, recognizing that humans have become a defining geological force. In this it faces up, proleptically, to the challenge recently posed by Amitav Ghosh for novellists to tackle the way that realism limits the timescales of novels’ storytelling. 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 colonialis 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. By falling into a modernist narrative of the evil Middle

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. 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. 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.


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. As Eiríkur Örn expresses these profound identity conflicts in Illska,

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.
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.


112 Norðdalhl, Illska, 62.
útrásarvíkingar!

turna sonar yðar til grunna og drápú 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
glæpalyður, af báðum kynjum og öllum þjóðfélagsstigum,
jaðt pópull sem aðalbornir. Vér myndum brennu þá inni í
vöruskemmu eða fjósi. Fyrrum leiðtogi hins frjálsa heims
starði í gaurnir sér þögull. Nei, sagði hinn aldni pólitíkus,
það mun aldrei ganga, kjósendur munu aldrei samþykkt-
ja að hægt verði að gjalda fyrir lífi þeirra sem dóu í New
York með lífi þinna þegna, jafnvel þótt fjórir væru dreppir
fyrir hvern þann sem hryðjuverkamennirnar drápú. Líf er
ómétanlegt. Þá hvesstist Sáðinn. Ertu að segja oss, sagði
hann skrákri röddu, ertu að segja oss að lífi eins af vorum
þegnum, eitt lækningataækið pipti, sé ekki jafn, annað tæki
fór að skríkja, mikils vulði, bjalla glumdi fyrir utan dyr
herbergisins, ekki jafn verðmætt lífi þann annað tæki
þótt fjórir væru drepnir fyrir hvern þann sem hryðjuverkamennirnar drápú. Líf er
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fór að skríkja, mikils vulði, bjalla glumdi fyrir utan dyr
herbergisins, ekki jafn verðmætt lífi þann annað tæki
þótt fjórir væru drepnir fyrir hvern þann sem hryðjuverkamennirnar drápú. Líf er
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þegnum, eitt lækningataækið pipti, sé ekki jafn, annað tæki
fór að skríkja, mikils vulði, bjalla glumdi fyrir utan dyr
herbergisins, ekki jafn verðmætt lífi þann annað tæki
þótt fjórir væru drepnir fyrir hvern þann sem hryðjuverkamennirnar drápú. Líf er
ómétanlegt. Þá hvesstist Sáðinn. Ertu að segja oss, sagði

“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 bek-knum 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.113

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

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 hnattvædðri 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.”

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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. 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 terrorista-klúbb’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

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.

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 a 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. 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. 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

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Neomedievalism and a Microstate 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.”

“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 “we will be the Haiti of the North if we do agree.” 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.

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

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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.122 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.”123 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.124 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-


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.\textsuperscript{125}

### 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 \textit{The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics}.\textsuperscript{126} 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-


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.