

“The First White Mother in America” Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir, Popular History, Firsting, and White Feminism¹

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ABSTRACT: This article takes Ásmundur Sveinsson’s statue “The First White Mother in America” as a starting point. With reference to this work, its several later casts, and three illustrative examples from recent popular history writing, the article demonstrates how popular representations of the statue’s subject, Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir, frequently reinforce traditions rooted in racially exclusive historical standards and Indigenous erasure. While Guðríður’s story offers a valuable counterpoint to male-dominated and often hyper-violent images of “Viking” history, writers and other popular history purveyors depicting her story also run the risk of simultaneously reinforcing settler-colonial and white supremacist ideals regardless of their individual motives.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article prend comme point de départ la statue d’Ásmundur Sveinsson intitulée “La première mère blanche d’Amérique”. En se référant à cette statue, à ses différents moulages subséquents et à trois exemples illustratifs tirés de récents ouvrages d’histoire populaire, l’article démontre comment les représentations populaires du sujet de la statue, Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir, renforcent fréquemment les traditions enracinées dans des normes historiques racialement exclusives et dans l’effacement des Autochtones. Si l’histoire de Guðríður offre un contrepoint précieux aux images dominées par les hommes et souvent hyperviolentes de l’histoire des “Vikings”, les écrivains et autres diffuseurs d’histoire populaire qui décrivent son histoire courent également le risque de renforcer simultanément les idéaux coloniaux et suprémacistes blancs, quelles que soient leurs motivations individuelles.

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Introduction

Iceland was the smallest nation, at least in terms of human population, to participate in the 1939–1940 New York World’s Fair Hall of Nations. Given the fair’s location, the Icelandic pavilion rather predictably placed great emphasis on the Icelander Leifr Eiríksson’s so-called “discovery of North America.” Positioned beside the pavilion’s main entrance, for example, was a striking bronze statue of Leifr created by American sculptor Alexander Stirling Calder (1870–1945). The government of the United States of America had, in fact, already commissioned and gifted a cast of the same statue to Iceland in the early 1930s to commemorate the establishment of Iceland’s Althing 1000 years prior (Acker 300). That same cast occupies a prominent place in front of Hallgrímskirkja in downtown Reykjavík today. The statue from the New York World’s Fair, which was funded by the community of Icelandic immigrants and their descendants living in North America (“Heimssýningin í New York” 127), now stands at the entrance to the Mariners’ Museum and Park in Newport News, Virginia.¹

Visitors exiting the Icelandic pavilion encountered a similarly impressive bronze statue of Þorfinnr Karlsefni who, according to the medieval Icelandic sagas, followed in Leifr’s footsteps to travel to what is presently North America. This statue, created by Icelandic sculptor Einar Jónsson (1874–1954), was likewise a cast of a previously commissioned work. In this case, the original was commissioned by Joseph Bunford Samuel (1853–1929), through a bequest left by his wife Ellen Phillips Samuel (1849–1913) and placed in Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park in 1920 as a part of a series of sculptures “emblematic of the history of America from the time of the earliest settlers to the present” (“A Record”). The cast from the World’s Fair was later sent to Reykjavík (“Heimssýningin í New York” 127), where it was first placed in the middle of a small pond in a centrally located park, *Hljómskálagarðurinn*. Some years later, it was moved to a less visible setting beside the cinema *Laugarásbío*.² The interior of the Icelandic pavilion contained other artworks and all manner of information and images about life, culture, nature, and industry in modern Iceland. However, the country’s medieval heritage and its specific medieval connection to the North America continent was evidently the dominant theme from entry to exit.³

Iceland’s pavilion was, interestingly, not the only place on the fairgrounds where the country’s medieval heritage was on display. Opposite the fair’s Temple of Religion, visitors encountered a large concrete statue of a woman named Guðríðr Þorbjarnardóttir and her son Snorri. A placard next to the statue, which was created by Icelandic sculptor Ásmundur Sveinsson (1893–1982), identified Guðríðr as the “wife of the Icelander Thorfinnur Karlsefni”

and, more prominently, as “The First White Mother in America.” The text of the placard went on to explain: “She accompanied [Thorfinnr] on his voyage to Vinland (America) and in his attempted colonization 1004 [...] A.D. In 1005 through the birth of her son Snorri Gudrid became the mother of the first white child born on the American mainland” (“V-3528, 1939 New York World’s Fair”).⁴

Despite the placement of the statue beside the Temple of Religion, there is no explicit reference to religion on the placard, whereas its text rather emphasizes Guðríðr’s role as a mother along with her ascribed racial identity. Of course, many of those who encountered Guðríðr and her son Snorri in New York would have perhaps viewed mother and child’s ascribed racial identity and unstated religious identity as utterly inseparable whether the latter was viewed in terms of actual religious faith and practice or as a more nominal cultural or even hereditary signifier. Like the statues of Leifr and Þorfinnr, occupying prominent positions at the Icelandic pavilion, Ásmundur Sveinsson’s “The First White Mother in America” effectively underscored the significance and contemporary relevance of Iceland’s medieval heritage and of “Viking” history more broadly.



Figure 1: An image of Ásmundur Sveinsson’s *Fyrsta hvíta móðirin í Ameríku* from the December 1, 1938 issue of the Icelandic newspaper *Alþýðublaðið* (timarit.is)

There is, of course, a longstanding tradition of employing "Vikings" as symbols of Scandinavian or Nordic identity in North America. Many of these efforts stem from the desire to preserve a sense of shared cultural identity while also asserting the important role of one's ancestors in world history. Several decades prior to the New York World's fair, at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, for example, the voyage and installation of the replica ship "Viking" profoundly affected Americans' views of the significance of the medieval Norse voyages to Vinland particularly in the context of an event intended to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Columbus' "discovery of America" (Mulligan; see also DuBois). By this time, Leifr Eiríksson had already also arisen as an emblem of Norwegian-American identity through the work of writers such as Rasmus B. Anderson, a child of Norwegian immigrants (Bergur Þorgeirsson). Scholars have shown, however, that the persistent interest in North America's purported "Viking" history simultaneously stems from white supremacist ideologies and a sense of anxiety over national origins, and how the sagas have been adapted and appropriated for various political and religious purposes (see, e.g., Barnes; Kolodny). In my own previous research, with a focus on Newfoundland in particular, I have demonstrated how contemporary popular traditions relating to North America's "Viking" history have privileged the ephemeral Norse presence in the area while simultaneously marginalizing or obscuring Newfoundland's pre-colonial Indigenous histories (Crocker).

This article takes Ásmundur Sveinsson's statue of Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir and her son Snorri, which was recast several times and reappeared in several different contexts since its first appearance at the New York World's Fair, as a starting point. With reference to the original work, its several later casts, and three illustrative examples from recent popular history writing, I demonstrate how popular representations of Guðríður frequently reinforce traditions rooted in racially exclusive historical standards and Indigenous erasure. While Guðríður's story offers a valuable counterpoint to male-dominated and often hyper-violent images of "Viking" history, writers and other popular history purveyors depicting her story also run the risk of simultaneously reinforcing settler-colonial and white supremacist ideals regardless of their individual motives. In this respect, the conventional treatment of Guðríður and her story provides an illustrative example of "white feminism" at play in popular history.

Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir

Before discussing the different versions of Ásmundur Sveinsson's depiction of Guðríður and her son Snorri in more detail, it may help to provide a brief introduction to Guðríður and an overview of her story. The two medieval Icelandic sagas known as *Eiríks saga rauða* [The Saga of Eirik the Red] and

Grænlendinga saga [The Saga of the Greenlanders] are the only surviving medieval sources providing specific details of Guðríðr's life. The two sagas were no doubt inspired by oral traditions and, scholars believe, originally set down in writing in Iceland during the early 13th century. Their earliest surviving manuscript attestations, however, date to the 14th and 15th centuries.⁵ While the two sagas may not correspond on every detail, they generally agree on many of the major events of Guðríðr's life. According to the sagas, she was born in Laugarbrekka on the Snæfellsness peninsula on the west coast of Iceland in the late 10th century, perhaps around the year 980. She became a Christian at a young age before migrating to Greenland with her father Þorbjörn to join the newly established Norse settlement there. One of the earliest major events of Guðríðr's life in Greenland, according to a remarkably detailed passage found in *Eiríks saga*, is her reluctant participation in a pagan ritual aimed at relieving suffering among the local community.

Guðríðr marries and becomes widowed once or twice, depending on the saga, before marrying the aforementioned Þorfinnr Karlsefni. Sometime later, having heard of previous journeys to the south, she and Þorfinnr launch their own journey to Vínland, the Old Norse name for some nebulous area of present-day Northeast North America, with a group of others from the Norse Greenland settlement. Guðríðr gives birth to a son there named Snorri, the same child depicted in Ásmundur Sveinsson's statue. After a few years in Vinland, despite the welcome climate and bountiful resources the Norse settlers find there, including timber, grapes, and fish, they return to Greenland due to conflicts with Vínland's Indigenous inhabitants. Guðríðr, her husband Þorfinnr, and their son Snorri eventually relocate to Iceland. Some years later, following her husband's death, Guðríðr goes on a pilgrimage to Rome. On her return to Iceland, she becomes an anchoress at the church her son Snorri allegedly built at his farm Glaumbær in the North of Iceland. Both sagas conclude by mentioning several Icelandic bishops that can trace their lineage back to Guðríðr, namely Þorlákr Rúnólfsson (1086–1133), the third bishop of Skálholt, and Björn Gilsson (1100–1162) and Brandr Sæmundarson (1120–1201), the third and fourth bishops of Hólar.

Archeological work conducted at the L'Anse aux Meadows site on Newfoundland's Northern peninsula, beginning in the 1960s and continuing still today, confirms the presence of Norse settlers in what is presently North America roughly 1000 years ago (Wallace; Kuitmas et al.). Moreover, recovered artifacts related to weaving practices suggest the presence of women at the site (Wallace 20, 24). There is, however, no physical evidence to specifically connect Guðríðr to the L'Anse aux Meadows site, to any other location in what is presently North America, or even to attest to her real-life existence outside of the medieval saga narratives in which she appears. In fact, as mentioned previously, the sagas relating the events of Guðríðr's life are not contemporary

documentary sources but rather reflect oral traditions evidently first written down two to three hundred years after her purported death. This is, of course, also the case for men like Þorfinnr and Leifr who, alongside Guðríðr, continue to occupy a prominent place in the popular reception of the medieval Norse or “Viking” presence in North America.

The First White (or European) Mother in America

Ásmundur Sveinsson’s statue, *Fyrsta hvíta móðirin í Ameríku* [The First White Mother in America], created for the 1939–1940 New York World’s Fair, was described at the time as roughly three metres high (“Glæsilegt nýtt listaverk”). The concrete work features a woman standing in an impractically small ship with her left hand resting on a dragon figurehead on the forward keel and a naked child standing on her left shoulder. The woman appears to steady the precariously positioned child by holding his right hand above her head with her own right hand. The accompanying placard, as mentioned previously, identifies the pair as Guðríðr Þorbjarnardóttir and her son Snorri. The statue’s current location or whether it even still exists is presently unknown. However, the smaller original sculpture of which the World’s Fair statue was a significant enlargement survives in Iceland. The 92 cm high original has, as alluded to previously, been recast several times and displayed in remarkably different settings over the last few decades.

On July 9, 1994, a bronze cast of Ásmundur Sveinsson’s original sculpture sitting atop on stone base was unveiled by Iceland’s then-president Vigdís Finnbogadóttir in the churchyard at Glaumbær near the town of Skagafjörður in the North of Iceland. According to the sagas, and mentioned previously, Guðríðr supposedly lived as an anchoress at the church built at Glaumbær by her son Snorri following his father Þorfinnr’s death and his mother’s pilgrimage to Rome. Financial support for creating and installing the cast came both from within Iceland and from those of Icelandic descent living in North America, some of whom travelled to Iceland to attend the unveiling (Vigfús Vigfússon; Gíslason). The timing of the project intentionally coincided with the fifty-year anniversary of Iceland gaining its full political independence from Denmark in 1944. The original Icelandic-language title of Ásmundur Sveinsson’s sculpture, “Fyrsta hvíta móðirin í Ameríku,” exactly parallels the English title displayed at the New York World’s Fair. However, a small plate attached to stone base of the cast at Glaumbaer refers to Guðríðr as the mother of “fyrsta Evrópumanninn fæddan í Ameríku” [the first European person born in America] (Örn Þórarinnsson).



Figure 2: The cast of Ásmundur Sveinsson's *Fyrsta hvíta móðirin í Ameríku* installed in the churchyard of Glaumbær (Wikimedia Commons)

Just a few years later, in June 2000, another bronze cast of Ásmundur's sculpture was unveiled by Iceland's then-president Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson at Laugarbrekka on Snæfellsnes in the west of Iceland. According to the sagas, Laugarbrekka was Guðríðr's father Þorbjörn's farm and her birthplace. Like the cast installed at Glaumbær, the Laugarbrekka cast was also affixed to a stone base and an interpretive sign was posted nearby with an illustrated map and a short text containing information about Guðríðr's life, with a focus on her extensive travels. A committee comprised of a group of Snæfellsnes residents oversaw and secured funding for the project to produce and install the cast and the interpretive sign and to prepare a parking area and a footpath to access the site ("Minnisvarði afhjúpadur"). Unlike the plate attached to the stone base at Glaumbær, the heading of the interpretive sign here replicates the original title of Ásmundur's sculpture by referring to Guðríðr as "Fyrsta hvíta móðurin í Ameríku" [The First White Mother in America]. A trilingual Icelandic-English-German road sign placed at the turnoff to the site also reproduces the original

Icelandic-language title of the sculpture. The English-language text, however, refers to Guðríðr as "the first European woman to give birth on North American soil," and the German-language text reads "die erste europäische Frau, die in Amerika ein Kind zur Welt brachte" [the first European woman to give birth to a child in America].

A few months prior to the unveiling of the cast at Laugarbrekka, a gift from the Icelandic government to the Canadian people arrived in Gatineau, Quebec in the form of still another bronze cast of Ásmundur's sculpture of Guðríðr and Snorri. This cast was unveiled on April 6, 2000, at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, later renamed the Canadian Museum of History, in a ceremony involving both Canada's and Iceland's then-prime ministers, Jean Chrétien and Davið Oddsson (Isfeld and Einars). The gift, the arrangement of which was spearheaded by a group of descendants of Icelandic immigrants who came to North America in the late 19th and early 20th century, coincided with nationwide Millennium celebrations and also with a public announcement that Iceland would open an embassy in Ottawa the following year, which it did in May 2001. Following a short stay at the museum, on May 22, 2002, the statue was installed at the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa, Ontario, where it still resides in a glass case. Resembling the text of the plate affixed to the stone base of the statue at Glaumbaer and the English-language text on the road sign at Laugarbrekka, a nearby information card refers to the statue in Ottawa as a depiction of "The First European Woman to Give Birth on North American Soil, Gudridur Thorbjarnardottir and her son Snorri."⁶

Eleven years later, in 2011, a group consisting of some of the same residents of Snæfellsnes who organized the installation of the Glaumbær statue, arranged for another bronze cast of Ásmundur Sveinsson's sculpture to be sent to Vatican City. On March 4, 2011, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, still Iceland's president, presented the cast to Pope Benedict XVI along with a copy of an Icelandic-language bible and a facsimile edition of the 13th-century Codex Regius, the primary manuscript for many of the poems of the so-called *Poetic Edda*. A symposium on the history of the church in early Iceland followed, and the president continued his trip by visiting the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations to discuss sustainable fishing and the use of geothermal energy in food production (Einar Örn Gíslason; "Stytta afhent"). Icelandic media reported on the event using the work's original Icelandic-language title, "Fyrsta hvíta móðurin í Ameríku," while a Vatican press release referred to Guðríðr as "a pioneer of the Christian faith on the Island" and, alluding to her supposed pilgrimage to Rome, as a symbol of "the good relations between Iceland and the Apostolic See that have been in force for a millennium" (Holy See).

Ásmundur Sveinsson's sculpture and its original title communicate its subject as an Icelander, as an intrepid explorer or traveler, as a mother, and as a white woman. The enlarged statue's location at New York World's Fair, as

mentioned previously, also alluded to the important religious elements of her story along with the perhaps tacit assumption placed on the audience to confirm that traditional conflation of whiteness and Christianity in a North American context. Moreover, the sculptor had arguably already implied these religious elements through the sculpture's intentional assemblage of mother and son, which appears to owe some debt to Madonna-and-child iconography. The four bronze casts installed in Iceland, Ottawa, and Vatican City all convey these same meanings, though each cast also maintains its own unique point of emphasis. The locations of the casts in Glaumbær and Laugarbrekka, for example, stress Guðríðr's connections to Iceland, with Laugarbrekka being her supposed place of birth and Glaumbær being where she allegedly spent her final years as an anchoress. The churchyard setting of the Glaumbær cast also, naturally, accentuates the religious elements of her story. The supplementary texts found, respectively, on the bronze plaque and interpretive sign at the two sites also both highlight Guðríðr's role as a mother and her reputation as an explorer or traveler. Yet, while the interpretive sign at Laugarbrekka replicates the explicitly racialized context embedded in the original title of Ásmundur Sveinsson's work and the context provided for it at the World's Fair, the plaque at Glaumbær identifies Guðríðr and her son as "European" rather than "white," which is also the case for the English- and German-language texts on the road sign at Laugarbrekka.

The information card beside the cast in Ottawa similarly replaces Ásmundur Sveinsson's overt racialization of Guðríðr by referring to both her and her son as European. The text on the card also stresses Guðríðr's perceived role in the prevailing narrative of Canadian and North American history noting that she "played a major role in mapping a sea route to North America – some 500 years before Christopher Columbus." The circumstances behind the production of the Canadian cast and the ceremony around its unveiling further underscored Guðríðr's story as particularly meaningful to the living descendants of the wave of Icelandic immigrants who followed a similar path across the Atlantic some 900 years after Guðríðr's purported travels to some nebulous part of the North American continent.⁷ Finally, the cast that travelled from Iceland to Vatican City and was gifted to Pope Benedict XVI is similarly symbolic with much focus predictably falling on the religious elements of Guðríðr's story. In this context, the cast serves not only as a memorial of Guðríðr's own alleged journey from Iceland to Rome roughly 1000 years prior but also as a powerful token of the diffusion of the Catholic faith in the North Atlantic during the Middle Ages. In some respects, the cast presented to Pope Benedict as well as the cast installed in the churchyard at Glaumbær seem to signal concerted efforts to recover the Christian elements of Guðríðr's story. If so, they perhaps offer an indication that the conflation between her ascribed

racial and religious identities are perhaps not as widely legible or immediately apparent as it was, for example, during the 1939–1940 New York World’s Fair.

Guðríður in Popular History

Ásmundur Sveinsson’s work, as first presented at the 1939–1940 New York World’s Fair, and in the four castings of the original sculpture discussed previously together provide an illustrative example of what Lisa Blee and Jean M. O’Brien refer to as the “memory work” of monuments, which always begin with the paired processes of inclusion and exclusion. They describe this memory work as “the myriad ways in which monuments imbedded in a social fabric play a role in how individuals and collectivities make meaning of the past as distinct from the concrete matter of what actually happened” (7). In this respect, public statues or monuments “represent memory rather than history and are therefore open to reassessment” (15). This is evident in the different though not entirely distinct contexts surrounding the different versions of Ásmundur Sveinsson’s work, as discussed previously. The different manifestations of Ásmundur Sveinsson’s work are, however, only a small reflection of the broader popular interest in Guðríður and her story that has occupied the public for decades and continues to flourish. Guðríður has, for example, long been and continues to be a regular subject of popular history writing, much of which frequently aims to counter male-dominated and often hyper-violent perceptions of “Viking” history. The three following examples recently published in three different high-profile venues illustrate many elements common to the contemporary feminist framing of Guðríður and her story in popular history today. Several of these elements predictably coincide with some of the same elements emphasized in Ásmundur Sveinsson’s work and its casts and, not least among them, is a persistent emphasis on Guðríður’s perceived association with historical firsts.

The August/September 2018 issue of BBC’s *World Histories* magazine includes a short article by Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough profiling Guðríður and describing her story as a part of the Nordic world’s “long history of extraordinary women” (2018, 52).⁸ The article consists of a summary of Guðríður’s biography as detailed in the medieval sagas, as outlined previously, with a focus on Guðríður’s numerous acts of agency and a few added bits of historical context. This includes, of course, the familiar detail that Guðríður’s son Snorri was “the first baby born to a European on the North American continent, if the account is true” (Barraclough 2018, 52). Near the end of the article, Barraclough also mentions Ásmundur Sveinsson’s sculpture of Guðríður, specifically the cast at Laugarbrekka, which clearly served as inspiration for Lynn Hatzius’ accompanying full-page illustration for the article. Barraclough

concludes with a claim that, of all those people described in the sagas “who undertook long and dangerous sea voyages, building new lives far from home and discovering new lands,” Gudrid “was perhaps the most extraordinary of all” (2018, 52). Notably, the article’s subheading, which was likely, as is often the case, not written by the author herself, takes a slightly more sensational approach. This short text, which establishes an overarching framework for the readers, refers to Guðríðr as “the first lady of Viking Vinland” and claims that, while the medieval Icelandic sagas typically laud the exploits of certain men, “their real hero is female” (Barraclough 2018, 52).

In 2020, *The Guardian* published a similar profile of Guðríðr written by Marcel Theroux and published in the paper’s travel section as a part of its “Great explorers you’ve probably never heard of” series. The article’s attention-grabbing headline, again perhaps not attributable to the author himself, identifies Guðríðr as “the woman who found the New World 500 years before Columbus.” Beneath a photo of the cast of Ásmundur Sveinsson’s statue at Laugarbrekka, in the article’s subheading, she is further described as “the Icelandic explorer who reached America long before big Chris,” i.e., Christopher Columbus. In the article itself, like Barraclough, Theroux draws on the information provided by the sagas to trace the broad outlines of Guðríðr’s story, including her travels to Greenland, Vinland, and Rome. He also includes the customary mention of her son Snorri being “the first European born [in America].” While overall adopting a more irreverent tone, Theroux likewise places a great deal of focus on Guðríðr’s agency and her gender giving her a 10 out of 10 “Intrepidity rating” in light of “the era, the challenges, the risks, her gender and the cultural norms of the time.” Unlike Barraclough, who made no mention of Columbus in her article, Theroux reiterates the primary historical reference point suggested in his article’s headline and subheading by first referring to Guðríðr as a “New World explorer” and later declaring that “What makes her truly exceptional ... is that she sailed to North America in a longship, beating Christopher Columbus to the New World by almost 500 years.”

An article by Sarah Durn published online for the *Smithsonian Magazine* on March 3, 2021, also aimed at raising awareness of Guðríðr’s remarkable story by responding to its title question “Did a Viking Woman Named Gudrid Really Travel to North America in 1000 A.D.?” The article predictably overlaps in many ways with both Barraclough’s and Theroux’s articles in drawing from the saga narratives to relate the important events of Guðríðr’s life. Like both articles, Durn’s article also features an image of Ásmundur Sveinsson’s sculpture in a composite accompanying illustration. Durn also includes, of course, the familiar mention of Guðríðr’s son Snorri but only as a matter-of-fact personal detail rather than a historical first of any kind. The author preserves that sort of detail for Guðríðr’s brother Leif whom she refers to as “the first European to set foot in North America” (Durn). Like Theroux, however, Durn uses the term the “New

World” several times without any critical reflection and also explicitly mentions Columbus when posing the question whether Guðríðr “really set foot in the Americas 500 years before Christopher Columbus?” However, unlike both Theroux and Barraclough, who each mention the historic site at L’Anse aux Meadows only very briefly, nearly half of Durn’s article outlines the archaeological evidence from present-day Newfoundland and in Iceland that supports not the fact but at least the plausibility of the story of Guðríðr’s time in Vínland. Durn concludes her article by emphasizing that Guðríðr was far from a passive participant on her journey to Vínland, writing that “[s]he wanted the adventure – to be among the first group of Europeans to sail to this New World. And so, around the year 1000, she sailed off the edge of the map.”

The three articles examined here are, of course, the result of my own conscious selection process intended to highlight some of the conventional features found in contemporary English-language popular history writing about Guðríðr and the story of her time in Vínland. Rather than providing an exhaustive survey, which this space could not allow, these representative examples from particularly high-profile venues indicate how popular history writing generally relates Guðríðr’s story. In addition to simply being a compelling in its own right, Guðríðr’s story often serves as a counterpoint to male-dominated and hyper-violent perceptions of “Viking” history. Using her story, writers of popular history urge their readers to regard women’s lives and their material and social contributions as vital to our understanding of the “Viking” world. Of course, popular writing about “Viking Warrior Women” over the past few years, much stemming from the reevaluation of the so-called Bj 581 grave in Birka, Sweden in 2017, also strives to upset traditional understandings of both prescribed gender boundaries and roles in Viking Age societies (see, e.g., Greshko; Norton). Although never depicted as a warrior herself, Guðríðr and her story likewise offer popular history writers an opportunity to illustrate to their readers that women in the past were not passive participants in the events of their own lives, as patriarchal culture would have it, but should be regarded as active agents of history in their own right.

Historical “firsting” and Indigenous erasure

A noteworthy albeit small detail mentioned in Durn’s article is her passing reference to Guðríðr’s purported interaction with “an Indigenous North American woman.” This purported interaction, which specifically refers to a scene depicted in *Grænlandinga saga*, is only one example of many encounters between the Norse Greenlanders and the Indigenous inhabitants of Vínland described in the sagas. Such encounters only warrant mention in Durn’s article in this single instance and go entirely unmentioned in both Barraclough’s and

Theroux's articles. As in these three examples, rather than making any substantial effort to place Guðríðr's purported time in Vínland in the context of North America's pre-colonial Indigenous history, popular history writing overwhelmingly situates her story strictly in the relation to either Viking Age and medieval European history, as in Barraclough's article, or in relation to 15th- and 16th-century European colonial expansion, as exemplified by references to Columbus and the many uses of the term "The New World" found in both Theroux's and Durn's articles.

This same historical framing, as shown previously, appears in the context provided for both the original and later castings of Ásmundur Sveinsson's sculpture of Guðríðr and her son. Arguably also symptomatic of this mentality is the frequent appearance, across all media, of the word "first" in relation to elements of Guðríðr's story. In her study of non-Indigenous local history writing in 19th-century New England, Jean O'Brien uses the term "firsting" to describe the persistent emphasis on "historical firsts" in traditional North American settler-colonial historical narratives. She documents how writers, deploying such a narrative strategy, asserted "what counts as legitimate history, and who counts as legitimate peoples" (xviii). More specifically, the widespread emphasis on "firsting" in 19th-century New England history writing, O'Brien writes, "implicitly argues that Indian peoples never participated in social, cultural, or political practices worthy of note" (6). Writing two-and-a-half decades prior, in her investigation of 19th-century archival material in India, Gayatri Spivak similarly explained that historical narratives built around "the sudden appearance of an alien agent of 'true' history in native space" (267) are crucial to the colonial mission. Another two decades earlier, writing about French colonization in Africa, Frantz Fanon describes how "the settler makes history" and consciously advances the notion, that absent a settler presence, a given colonized society "would at once fall back into barbarism, degradation, and bestiality" (51, 211). O'Brien, Spivak, and Fanon each recognized the key role that historical narratives and the invocation of historical "firsts" serve in colonized space.

The persistent sorting of different kinds of settler activity as historical "firsts" in a given colonized space is vital to both the conception and preservation of the colonial project. It installs and doggedly reinforces an arrangement of time that separates "real" history, regarded as accurate, comprehensive, and modern, from a prehistory predating the establishment of a colonial order, which is seen as fabled, incomplete, primitive, and not worthy of preservation. In the context of traditional historical narratives about North America, the former is invariably conflated with whiteness and serves as a symbol of civilization, progress, and racial superiority. In turn, North American Indigenous cultures and Indigenous peoples are seen as inherently inferior, utterly resistant to change, and "unprepared for, or even fundamentally

unsuited to, ‘civilized’ life” (Buchholtz 673). To maintain this conception of Indigenous cultures and Indigenous peoples, the very notion of Indigenous histories must be diminished if not erased altogether. Indigenous scholar Vine Deloria Jr. captured the consequences of such views when he explained that,

unless and until [Indigenous people] are in some way connected to world history as early people [...] we will never be accorded full humanity. We cannot be primitive peoples who were suddenly discovered half a millennium ago. The image and interpretation are all wrong, and we are regarded as freaks outside historical time. (597)

The enduring legacy of this traditional form of North America history renders Indigenous cultures and Indigenous peoples as inseparable from a timeless and irretrievable past antithetical to a present and future purportedly heralded by the arrival of white European settlers.

Adding the Norse Greenlanders’ time in Vínland to this narrative, of course, disrupts the traditional Columbus-centred history of North American “discovery” to which Deloria Jr. refers. Yet, regardless of this added element, as I have previously explored specifically with respect to popular history in Newfoundland (Crocker), the same kind of division between “real” history and prehistory often remains. Rather than initiating a total overhaul and reevaluation of the traditional narrative, Norse Greenlanders often simply displace Columbus and other later European settlers as the performers of different historical “firsts.” Even when the Norse Greenlanders purported encounters with Vínland’s Indigenous people permit mention, whichever of North America’s Indigenous cultures and peoples the Norse Greenlanders may have interacted with are once again, in the words of Torres Strait Islander scholar Martin Nakata, “co-opted into another history, another narrative that is not really about them but about their relation to it” (202). Rather than exploring the Norse Greenlander’s time in Vínland in the context of precolonial North America’s long human history, popular history today still overwhelmingly maintains the traditional narrative structure whereby the continent evidently becomes a site of “real” world history only with the arrival and presence of European settlers, whether in the 15th century or half a millennium earlier.

Guðríður and white feminism

Turning back to Guðríður, the presentation of Ásmundur Sveinsson’s sculpture at the 1939–40 New York World’s Fair, as described previously,

exhibits a clear investment in the racially exclusive historical standards that simultaneously conflate whiteness with “real” North American history and render Indigenous histories significantly less important if not altogether unworthy of recognition. Several of the later casts of Ásmundur’s sculpture notably replace the term “white” in both the sculpture’s title and its accompanying material with the term “European.” This is also the label now typically applied in popular history writing to Guðríðr, her son Snorri, and the alleged historical “firsts” in which they took part, including in the three examples of popular history writing discussed previously. Yet, despite the absence of the sort of overt racialization applied to Guðríðr’s story in the past, popular history today still frequently exhibits an investment, which is likely often an unwitting investment, in the same structures of traditional narratives of North American history rooted in racially exclusive historical standards and Indigenous erasure. Understanding this sort of investment with respect to Guðríðr is all the more critical because of the evident popularity of her story as well as its capacity to offer a feminist counterpoint to the ever-popular male-dominated images of “Viking” history.

The phrase “The New World,” which appears several times in both Theroux’s and Durn’s articles, as discussed previously, is perhaps the most immediately recognizable signal of an investment in narratives of North American history rooted in colonial traditions. However, neither the medieval saga writers from whose narratives all modern retellings of Guðríðr’s story ultimately originate nor presumably the oral storytellers from whom the saga writers’ works derive adopt a view Vínland as a part of a “New World” in need of discovery and civilizing at the hands of European settlers. The nature of the medieval sagas’ depictions of the Indigenous peoples of Vínland is a topic beyond the scope of this article, but in *Eiríks saga rauða*, for example, as Sverrir Jakobsson explains, the inhabitants of Vínland “are evidently not savages but are rather depicted as living in an ordered society with their own kings,” and the saga also indicates that they even “possess some technology that placed them on a more superior footing to the Norsemen in warfare” (511). Whatever the legitimacy of these depictions might be, the emphasis in popular history today still often placed on the concept of the “New World” waiting to be discovered and civilized has little foundation in medieval Icelandic culture. Instead, the familiar concept and the layers of meaning it conveys reflect a retroactive application of colonial practices and traditions formed during and flourishing ever since the 15th and 16th centuries. Not least among these is the Doctrine of Discovery, which formalized the ideologies of white supremacy and Christian domination, both culturally and materially, over Indigenous peoples.

The same, of course, holds true for the primary reference point often used to indicate the broader historical significance of the Guðríðr’s story, which is the arrival of Columbus in the Americas roughly 500 years later. By offering and

privileging this historical reference point, as in Theroux’s and Durn’s articles and in relation to some of the recent casts of Ásmundur Sveinsson’s sculpture, as discussed previously, popular history seems to indicate that Guðríðr’s time in Vínland should primarily be seen as a precursor to the largescale European colonization of the Americas beginning in the late 15th century. Such framing underscores the ongoing primacy of historical events as subsequently arranged by European settlers during the early modern period as well as their knowledge systems (Sverrir Jakobsson 512). For example, in the final line of her article, Sarah Durn remarks that, “around the year 1000, [Guðríðr] sailed of the edge of the map” (2021). Disregarding for the moment the fact that the Norse Greenlanders navigated without using pictorial maps, the author’s use of the phrase “*the* map” rather than “*their* map” seems to impart the idea that medieval European geographical knowledge should be viewed as the primary and perhaps only legitimate way to organize and understand the world properly at the time.

Placing such a small detail under the microscope may seem excessive when considered in isolation. When viewed as a part of a larger pattern, however, this small detail, i.e., the difference between the definite article “the” and the possessive determiner “their,” becomes another piece of evidence indicating popular history writing’s frequent and continuing investment in narratives of North American history rooted in racially exclusive historical standards and Indigenous erasure. By highlighting this detail and others like it, my intention is not to disparage any individual piece of popular history writing about Guðríðr and her time in Vínland, including the three examples discussed previously, but rather to illustrate the broader continuing investment, which is likely very often an unwitting investment, in narrative structures informed by lasting and still highly influential colonial traditions. Within the broader popular interest in the Norse Greenlander’s time in Vínland, unique to Guðríðr’s story in this respect is the universal focus on the purported birth of Snorri in Vínland and on Guðríðr’s role not simply as Snorri’s mother but as the “first” white or, now more commonly, European mother in North America.

Notably, as related in the medieval sagas, Snorri’s birth in Vínland is never identified as any sort of historical “first” but rather as a matter-of-fact detail. His most noteworthy accomplishment in both narratives is instead being the ancestor of several early Icelandic bishops whose own descendants formed some of the most powerful families with respect to both the church and the broader society of Iceland during the time the sagas were first written down (Anderson 31). However, as in the three examples of popular history writing discussed previously and in relation to both the original version of Ásmundur Sveinsson’s work, “The First White Mother in America,” and its four smaller casts, popular history persistently depicts Snorri’s birth to be a significant historical “first.” Regardless of the now-typical replacement of the term

“white” with the term “European,” the continuing emphasis on Snorri being the “first European” child and Guðríðr the “first” European” mother in the Americas corresponds with a popular colonial trope that bears all the hallmarks of historical “firsting,” which as discussed previously is used to accentuate “what counts as legitimate history” (O’Brien xviii). The trope of the first “white,” “European,” or often “English” child, indeed, appears throughout local histories in North America and marks the intrenchment of a given colonial settlement as confirmed by the reproduction of whiteness, and hence also “civilization,” in Indigenous space. Settler communities employ this trope not only to imply their domination over the land and their supremacy over any pre-existing local populations but also to symbolize a naturalized controlling birthright for future generations.

Virginia Dare, the supposed “first English” or sometimes “first white” child born in what today is the United States of America, specifically in the Roanoke colony in present-day North Carolina in 1587, is one of the more prominent examples of this trope. The young girl, who disappeared without explanation along with the other settlers in the colony, became and continues to be a powerful symbol. She has served as the subject of numerous racialized myths and legends, stories and plays, and public artworks in which she typically symbolizes adventurousness, innocence, and feminine purity (Moore 86–87; Lawler 275–98). Her name and story also inspired the naming of the VDARE Foundation, which the Southern Poverty Law Center has designated as a White Nationalist Hate Group and the media branch of which has been identified as “one of the most prolific anti-immigration media outlets in the United States” (Jacobs). Through no fault of their own, of course, the historical and mythical legacies ascribed to Virginia and other children identified, like her, as the first “white,” “European,” or often “English” child born into particular settler communities are especially effective and sanitizing forms of settler-colonial history- and myth-making.

As Tricia E. Logan explains, “there is nothing more comforting in a colonial history of nation building than an erasure or denial of the true costs of colonial gains” (149). Lisa Blee and Jean M. O’Brien similarly observe that the discomfort often attending confrontations with histories of settler colonialism “stands in counterposition to mythic national origin stories of innocence and purity” (210). The elevation of historical narratives centred around children as well as motherhood and other aspects of women’s history is, of course, a vital part of countering often strictly patriarchal narratives about the past. However, settler communities and their ancestors have also used and sometimes continue to use racialized historical narratives about the first “white,” “European,” or often “English” children and mothers both to reiterate the conflation of “whiteness” with “real” North American history, as discussed previously, and to obscure or distract from the violent atrocities committed, most typically by men, to

establish the colonial order. Obscuring these violent acts also serves to sooth discomfort and to alleviate settler guilt by framing the suffering of Indigenous people and the decline of Indigenous cultures as primarily caused by inhuman forces like civilization, progress, and even history or time itself rather than deliberate and continuing settler violence.

Racialized narratives about historical “firsts” like those associated with Virginia Dare and other children share conspicuous similarities with popular history’s focus on Snorri and on Guðríðr’s purported role as the “first white” or, now more commonly, “first European mother in North America.” Of course, the outcome of the Norse Greenlanders’ attempts to settle in what is now North America around the turn of the first millennium differs greatly from that of the largescale European colonization of the Americas beginning in the late 15th century. The Norse Greenlanders’s evidently left little to no discernable cultural or social impact having maintained settlements in what is now North America for perhaps only a decade or two.⁹ Furthermore, the current preference to refer to Guðríðr and Snorri as “European” rather than “white” seems to be a conscious effort to counter the past uncritical application of modern racial classifications. However, even with the overt racialized veneer removed, popular history’s treatment of Guðríðr’s time in Vínland and its typical emphasis on her role as the “first” European mother corresponds with the familiar colonial trope and, thus, perhaps also reinforces its inference as to what counts as legitimate history and, by implication, what does not.

Indeed, as demonstrated with respect to the three examples of popular history writing discussed previously, the general lack of effort to situate Guðríðr’s time in Vínland in the context of North America’s precolonial Indigenous history while simultaneously echoing colonial tropes like the “first white child,” the concept of the “New World,” and offering Columbus as the primary historical reference point seems to guide readers to view Guðríðr and the other Norse Greenlanders as the first agents of “real” history in North American Indigenous space. Any Indigenous people they may have encountered, which number many according to the same sagas from which all other elements of the story derive, are either not worth mentioning at all and are perhaps, by implication, best viewed as “freaks outside historical time,” to borrow Vine Deloria Jr.’s phrase. Thus, while often being informed by a feminist desire to counterbalance male-dominated narratives of the past, popular history’s efforts to use Guðríðr’s story to promote the recognition of women’s lives and their material and social contributions as vital to our understanding of the “Viking” world maintain, wittingly or unwittingly, an investment in traditional narratives of North American history rooted in racially exclusive historical principles and Indigenous erasure.

Activists and scholars have long recognized and sought to remedy the modern feminist movements’ failure to fully distance itself from settler-

colonial, and white supremacist ideals. In a now famous essay written in the 1970s, Audre Lorde, for example, questioned the capacity of the feminist movement to affect real social change, positing that only very narrow changes are possible and permissible “when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy?” (25). In the 1980s, bell hooks similarly lamented what she recognized as the “feminist refusal to draw attention to and attack racial hierarchies” and explained that as long as any group “defines liberation as gaining social equality with ruling-class white men, they have a vested interest in the continued exploitation and oppression of others” (3, 16). A decade later, writing about Indigenous woman in Canada, Lee Maracle explained that “the dictates of patriarchy demand that beneath the Native male comes the Native female. The dictates of racism are that Native men are beneath white women and Native females are not fit to be referred to as women” (17–18). In the ensuing two decades, intersectional perspectives analyzing systems of oppression through the interconnected nature of social categories such as gender, race, and class have become increasingly common. Such perspectives seek to highlight and address the prevalence across the feminist movement of “white feminism,” which refers to expressions of feminism that continue to reinforce the principles outlined by Lorde, hooks, Maracle, and others.

Through no responsibility of her own, of course, nor of the medieval Icelanders who first wrote about her time in Vínland, the conventional treatment of Guðríðr’s story provides an illustrative example of the operationalization of “white feminism” in popular history. The typical emphasis placed on Guðríðr’s role as the purported “first white” or, more recently, “first European mother in North America,” bears specific parallels with certain traditions of North American history rooted in racially exclusive historical standards and Indigenous erasure. In fact, exchanging the word “white” for the word “European,” the latter of which may not contain explicit racial connotations on its own terms, is hardly sufficient to divest the narrative centred around Guðríðr’s alleged “historical first(s)” of its ties to these traditions if popular history writers fail to offer an explicit challenge to or at least signal an intentional departure from them. As an illustrative example, *Parks Canada*, the agency managing the L’Anse aux Meadows National Historic Site, has taken just such a departure in recent years by making increasing efforts to situate the site in the context of North America’s precolonial Indigenous history. This is evident in a recent episode in the agency’s *ReCollections* podcast series, which features a discussion of the site’s connections with Indigenous cultures and histories including those of the Groswater, Dorset, Innu, Inuit, and Beothuk peoples (Parks Canada).¹⁰ Without taking similar measures, irrespective of their motives, popular history writers continue to risk reinforcing the same racially exclusive historical principles characteristic of the

original presentation of Ásmundur Sveinsson’s statue of Guðríður and her son at the 1939–1940 New York World’s Fair conflating “real” North American history with whiteness and implying that precolonial Indigenous histories are irrelevant to the present and hardly worth mentioning at all.

Coda, or The First White Mother in Outer Space

In April of 2022, a few months after I had begun to undertake the research presented in this article, the cast of Ásmundur Sveinsson’s sculpture displayed at Laugarbrekka went missing. Just a few days later, the missing cast reappeared in Reykjavík in the parking lot of the Marshall House, the premises of the city’s Living Art Museum or *Nýlo*. The cast of Guðríður and her son was found encased inside a small rocket ship placed on a raised launch pad both fabricated from scrap metal with a small plaque bearing the words, in Icelandic, “Farangursheimild, Fyrsta hvíta móðirin í geimnum,” and, in English, “Carry-On, The First White Mother in Outer Space.”¹¹ Shortly afterwards, following its removal by the police, artists Bryndís Björnsdóttir and Steinunn Gunnlaugsdóttir released a statement confirming their authorship of the work. In their statement, the two artists begin by maintaining that their work was not an attack on Ásmundur Sveinsson, Guðríður, or her son Snorri while also denying any admission to an act of theft and, finally, calling on the police to return the work intact to its place in front of the Marshall House.

Elaborating on the motivation behind their work, the two artists asserted that Ásmundur Sveinsson’s sculpture does not necessarily represent a conscious racist intention but rather the deep systemic roots of racism present in Iceland at the time when it was made, and which still prevail today. The original work and the context typically provided for it, they write, simplifies Guðríður’s eventful life to that of “hvítan kvenlíkama sem fæðir hvítt barn á landsvæði þar sem heiðið fólk með lit í húð bjó fyrir – fólk sem síðar var myrt í miljónatali af annarri bylgju landtökumanna” [a white woman’s body that gave birth to a white baby in a territory where Indigenous people of colour lived – people who were later murdered in the millions by another wave of landgrabbers] (Bryndís Björnsdóttir and Steinunn Gunnlaugsdóttir). They go on to explain how the casts brought as gifts to foreign governments, seemingly alluding to the casts brought to Canada and Vatican City, as discussed previously, represent a desire to raise Iceland’s reputation “með því að tengja það með einfeldningslegum hætti hinni flóknu og sáru sögu blóðugrar tilurðar þeirrar ‘Ameríku’ sem titill verksins vísar til” [by simplistically connecting it to the complicated and painful history of the bloody birth of the ‘America’ to which the title of the work refers] (Bryndís Björnsdóttir and Steinunn Gunnlaugsdóttir). In a separate television interview, the artists suggested that

the spaceship and launchpad, which were not functioning of course, symbolized their contention that the original work should be “skotið upp og vonandi breytist hún þar í geimrusl sem flýgur í kringum jörðina” [launched and hopefully turned into space junk that orbits around the earth] (Berghildur Erla Bernhardsdóttir and Eiður Þór Árnason). “Farangursheimild” or “Carry-On” generated significant news coverage and public debate in Iceland but was never restored as the artists had requested. Police instead returned the cast of Ásmundur Sveinsson’s sculpture to officials of the Snæfellsbær municipality, and it was reinstalled at Laugarbrekka.

Bryndís Björnsdóttir and Steinunn Gunnlaugsdóttir’s “Farangursheimild” or “Carry-On” stirred significant controversy, not least on account of the circumstances of its creation.¹² The artists challenged the Icelandic public by presenting a well-known work and a well-known historical figure in a new and provocative way. At the same time, their primary intent was to bring forth a layer of meaning they identified as already present in Ásmundur Sveinsson’s work and in the context typically provided for it. This layer of meaning stems from a broad cultural investment in a traditional narrative rooted in racially exclusive historical standards, which, to borrow Blee and O’Brien’s words, the artists viewed as necessarily “open to reassessment.” As the two artists themselves recognized, this sort of investment is not simply a reflection of individual intent but rather of a larger ideology. This is also the case for popular history’s treatment of Guðríður time in Vínland, as exemplified in the three examples discussed previously. Guðríður’s story, including her purported time in Vínland, remains a valuable counterpoint to male-dominated and often hyper-violent images of “Viking” history as well as a highly compelling chapter of women’s history more broadly. Yet, when retelling Guðríður’s story, writers and other purveyors of popular history should be aware of the risk involved in reinforcing the kind of historical narrative that imposes a conflation, either explicitly or implicitly, of “whiteness” with “real” North American history and simultaneously diminishes if not totally obscures precolonial Indigenous histories. Mitigating this risk is not only a matter of moving away from a view of the past distorted by settler-colonial ideals but also a way to take on an active role in opposing the ongoing diminishing of Indigenous cultures and dehumanization of Indigenous peoples.

NOTES

1. For their helpful feedback, I wish to thank the organizers, Euan McCartney Robson and Simon John, and other participants of the Monumental Medievalism conference (October 5–6, 2022) at which I presented some of the preliminary findings of my research, more fully expressed here. I also wish to

thank the two anonymous peer reviewers for their constructive and insightful comments.

2. The first of many public monuments erected in North America depicting Leifr was actually created by a woman, namely by American sculptor Anne Whitney (1821–1915). Her bronze statue of a beardless and “delicate young” Leifr was installed along Boston’s Commonwealth Avenue in 1887, another cast of the same work was placed in Milwaukee’s Juneau Park the same year, and a third slightly modified cast was displayed as a part of the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. According to Janet A. Headley, Whitney’s highly original vision of Leifr “was characteristically inventive and may even have been a subversive private joke. Instead of the “strong-limbed” and “powerful” explorer envisioned by a number of her patrons or the rugged barbarian popularized in literature and art, Whitney created an alternative pilgrim that some called a “Norse Apollo” and others thought effeminate” (42).
3. On the Philadelphia and Reykjavik casts of the statue, including the former’s association with local white supremacist groups and its toppling in 2018, see Emma Theodórsdóttir.
4. For a detailed rundown of the pavilion, see HerraVintage.
5. Part of the placard sits outside the frame in the video, so I have replaced the indecipherable part of the text with an ellipsis in square brackets.
6. On the dating, manuscript attestations, and relationship between the two sagas, see Matthías Þórðarson, lxvii–xci; Gísli Sigurðsson, 266–68, 292–95.
7. The corresponding French title card refers to the statue as “La première Européenne à donner naissance à un enfant en sol nord-américain, Gudridur Thorbjarnadóttir et son fils Snorri.”
8. For more details on the collaboration between the descendants of Icelandic immigrants in Canada and the Icelandic government to arrange this “gift,” its transnational economic and political elements, and its role in relation to Icelandic-Canadian identity, see Tinna Grétarsdóttir.
9. BBC’s History Extra website later published the same article under a slightly different title; see Barraclough 2020.
10. Recent research suggests, however, that the Norse Greenlanders may have continued to harvest timber resources from North America long after abandoning their efforts to settle there (Lísabet Guðmundsdóttir).

11. Annette Kolodny also provides an excellent example of how to read Indigenous oral traditions of “first contact” alongside the saga narratives relating the Norse Greenlanders’ time in Vínland (280–326).
12. The installation of “Farangursheimild” or “Carry-On” coincided with an exhibition at Nýló titled “Ónæm” or “Immue” among the themes of which included the colonial history of the North and manifestations of whiteness (“Opening”). The artists were clear, however, that neither the board of Nýló nor the exhibition curators were informed of their work ahead of time (Bryndís Björnsdóttir and Steinunn Gunnlaugsdóttir).

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