Utopianism

5.1 Creative Destructions

The second chapter of this book explored how post-Crash Icelandic writing is shaped by the hegemonic structures that can be called “capitalist realism.” The key force of this ideology is to make alternatives to a neoliberal cultural and economic regime seem “unrealistic” and so to constrain utopian thought. With this fundamental consideration of form in place, Chapter 3 focused on anxieties about Icelandic identity in a post-colonial and globalizing world, and Chapter 4 showed how post-Crash writing has deployed medieval intertexts to interrogate the hegemonic power of nationalist medievalism, and shown how, amidst much pessimism, some writing nods towards a nostalgic kind of utopianism. Still, the overwhelming sense from Crash fiction is of a literary community struggling to articulate criticisms of the banking boom, while being busy digesting its own complicity in it. However, there is one strikingly and strongly utopian Icelandic literary response to the Crash, Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl’s Gæska. In this chapter, I take it as a vantage point from which to examine utopian thought in Crash-writing more generally. Utopian ideas are, in their way, quite widespread in Crash-novels, and show interesting differences of emphasis from the lively but more explicitly political discussions that ran through Icelandic society in the years immediately follow-
5.2 Surreal Times

Gæska is a richly satirical novel, but its knowing humor does not prevent it from committing itself to a utopian vision. The novel is divided into two halves, one set before and one after a revolution, caused by an economic meltdown, which brings an all-woman, left-wing government to power. Eiríkur Örn was presumably assisted in thinking originally about the Crash by the fact that he began Gæska before the crash actually happened: he had had time to think through the formal challenge of writing about a bust that Icelandic society was insisting could not happen. In this, he showed a prophetic tendency that is also evident in the unexpected overnight arrival at the end of Gæska of ninety-three million refugees on Iceland’s shores, which proleptically tackles the European refugee crisis that began in 2014. Likewise, his next novel, Illska, scrutinizes racism, right-wing populism, and the banality of evil, engaging early with the rise of right-wing populism during the second decade of the twenty-first century. Reviewing Gæska, Björn Þór Vilhjálmsson concluded, not without justification, that “það er líkt og verkið sé í beinu símasambandi við undirvitund íslensks samtíma” (“it’s as though the work is on a direct phone line to the subconscious of contemporary Iceland”).¹

Given Halldór Laxness’s success in engaging with the nature of money and credit through surrealist form in Atómstöðin, it is perhaps unsurprising that Gæska builds on Eiríkur Örn’s ex-

tensive work as an avant-garde poet: like Atómstöðin but in a far more bombastic mode, Gæska is committed to challenging both literary and linguistic norms in order to defamiliarize social formations and to promote realisms beyond capitalism: the novel is characterized by its “súrealískar myndir, ‘fáránlegar’ fléttur, öfgakenndar líkingar, orðabombur og sprengjukast, framandi taktur: allt þetta gefur í skyn þrot ‘beinnar’ skírskotunar tum-gumálsins, að eitthvað sé ósegjanlegt með hefðbundnum hætti” (“surreal images, absurdist plotting, extreme analogies, word-explosions and bomb-drops, exotic rhythm: all this suggests the exhaustion of the ‘direct’ reference of the language, that something is unsayable through traditional forms”).

Many impossible events take place, often without explicit comment on their oddness. Thus, along with the very fact that it dares to foresee an economic crash, the novel features a spate of women jumping from tall buildings without the fatal consequences of these leaps ever seeming to eventuate. As its post-revolution second half builds towards a climax, it posits the inexplicable arrival of ninety-three million refugees. Mount Esja (the mountain nearest to Reykjavík, ever-present in northward vistas of the city) spends most of the novel undergoing a volcanic eruption (despite not actually being volcanically active), ceasing at the end in a moment of ostentatious pathetic fallacy.

The novel’s experimental character is readily illustrated through its unusual use of person. Particularly in the first half, material is narrated in all three persons, each person being associated with a different character’s point of view. The first person is associated with Halldór Garðar, a right-wing, neoliberal MP, married to Millý, a left-wing, social-democratic MP. The story-arc of the novel is defined by Halldór’s realization, at the beginning, that his life and work are essentially meaningless; and his discovery, by the end, of an existential purpose, fundamentally through recognizing the central importance of kindness as a source for life’s meaning. The second person is associated with Freyleif, personal assistant to Millý. The use of the second per-

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2 Ibid., 137.
son to narrate Freyleif’s experience is particularly interesting: Freyleif, like Halldór, is afflicted by a profound sense of purposelessness, arising in her case from living as the female half of the prototypical Icelandic “kjarnafjölskyldu í úthverfisturni” (“nuclear family in a suburban block of flats”), fulfilling the “ákveðið ‘norm’ góðærisins” (“the decided norm of the boom years”).

“Þvert á það sem þú helst hefðir kosið, vaknarðu” (“contrary to what you would most rather have chosen, you wake up”), reads the opening sentence of chapter 2. The sense that Freyleif’s life is dictated to her by the novel reflects rather viscerally the sense of alienation from her own life with which she begins the story. Meanwhile, the second-person narration compels readers to put themselves in Freyleif’s shoes, in a way that they need not when they read Halldór’s first-person account. Finally, third-person narration is used for a wider range of purposes, but in the first half particularly for the perspective of Óli Dóri, Freyleif’s husband; and in the second for narrating the experiences of Millý, Freyleif, and a Moroccan refugee, Fatíma. In Björn Þór’s assessment, “jafnvel kemur fyrir að hinn almáttugi þriðju persónu sögumaður yrðir á lesanda” (“it even emerges that the omnipotent third-person narrator turns into a reader”), the shifts of person “til þess fallið að raska samsömum lesanda með textanum” (“with the effect of distorting the relationship of the reader with the text”). The multiple perspectives help the novel to achieve something of the effect sought in the British novels *Capital* and *A Week in December* by presenting numerous, only partially overlapping narratives, yet without the same sense of atomization.

Unlike *Atómstöðin*, *Gæska* does not use its surrealism to explore the nature of money and credit, and in this respect *Gæska*, like most other novels studied in this book, avoids a key issue in the culture surrounding the Crash. That there is a purpose

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3 Ibid., 140.
5 Björn Þór Vilhjálmsson, “Þjóðarbrot,” 141.
to this silence, however, is suggested by the fact that the novel disregards discussion of the financial sector altogether. Instead, almost uniquely in my corpus but again like Atómstöðin, Gæska focuses firmly on government: the three most prominent protagonists are the politicians Halldór Garðar and Millý, and a civil servant, Freyleif. Thus the book, implicitly but unwaveringly, situates the responsibility for remedying the Crash with government and civil society. Thus it avoids allowing individual bankers — however personally immoral they may have been — to become scapegoats for doing what the legal, regulatory, and social environment they were working in encouraged them to do, and focuses attention on revitalizing democratic governance. The novel engages rather little with the international financial context for this, perhaps lapsing into a reliance on the idea of national sovereignty long since outdated even for large countries, let alone for Iceland, where it was always largely illusory. But, then, the real-world experience of Iceland after the Crash suggests that the power of even a tiny state should not be underrated: albeit more by luck than judgement, having let its banks collapse and prevented foreign creditors from nationalizing their losses, Iceland did experience a good recovery, and stands in a telling contrast to Greece, forced into ruinous austerity by more powerful EU states seeking to recoup the losses they incurred bailing out their own banks. Either way, Gæska certainly opens up a fictive space for meditating on the crucial responsibility of government to shape markets, and for refusing to allow globalization to offer an excuse for governments’ failure to assert or exercize what sovereignty they have.

In other ways, though, Gæska engages rather deeply with the culture of the banking crisis, in ways that ultimately help it to challenge Icelandic nationalism, and explore other possibilities for ordering society. A good example of how the novel uses literary form to conceptual ends is its handling of temporal-

ity. A range of Crash-novels have recognized that financializa-

tion, with its loans and debts, has a major effect on the cultural construction of time, among them Andri Snær Magnason’s Tí-
makistan and Steinar Bragi’s Konur; work on wider literatures has shown the same thing. Eiríkur Órn’s 2013 collection of Crash-themed poetry, Hnefi eða vitstola orð, expresses the financialization of time starkly: in place of page numbers, the top right-hand corner of each page in the collection instead states the exchange value of krónur relative to the Euro, falling from 81.98 on the first page to 172.76 on the last. The fact that the sequence of exchange rates provides useful measure of time (running from about 24 July 2008 to 15 May 2009) suggests both the commodification of poetry and of time. Accordingly, although like many of the novels studied in this book Gæska time-stamps chapters to help readers navigate its interwoven narratives, it problematizes — and sometimes mocks — the way our obsessive calibration of time’s passage infiltrates story-telling. For example, the book is divided into two sections, enigmatically entitled “Fyrsti þáttur (sumar eitt fyrir nokkru síðan, áður en gerð var bylting á Íslandi)” (“episode one (one summar a little while ago, before a revolution happened in Iceland)”) and “Annar þáttur (ekki svo löngu síðar hið eilífa sumar, skömmu eftir byltingu)” (“episode two (not so long later in the eternal summer, shortly after a revolution”). These detailed yet altogether imprecise statements parody the hyper-realistic temporal markers beloved of contemporary fiction. The women who jump from tall buildings, but rather than dying simply find their narratives picking up somewhere else, reflect both the static character of life constrained by economic and patriarchal forces, and a refusal of familiar patterns of cause and effect. In turn, Freyleif’s biography is sketched through a long sequence of disordered flashbacks passing, between blinks, before her eyes.

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8 Nordahl, Gæska, 5, 149.
9 Ibid., 30–33.
Eiríkur Örn counterposes his interest in our frenetic post-modernity with reference to longer-breathed temporalities—and counterposes his interest in utopianism with an examination of golden-ageism. *Hnefi eða vitstola orð* alludes on a few occasions to one particular episode of Snorri Sturluson’s thirteenth-century *Gylfaginning*, which depicts the early, all-male society of the Æsir and how they gained technologies enabling them to create a gilded age:\(^{10}\)

\[\text{Þar næst gerðu þeir þat at þeir lögðu afla ok þar til gerðu þeir hamar ok töng ok steðja ok þaðan af ǫll töl ǫnnur. Ók því næst smiðuðu þeir málm ok stein ok trú, ok svá gnógliga þann málm er gull heitir at ǫll búsgogn ok ǫll reiðigogn hoððu þeir af gulli, ok er sú ǫld kölluð gullaldr, áðr en spiltisk af tilkvámu kvennanna. Þar kómu ór Jōtunheimum. Þar næst settusk guðin upp í sæti sín ok réttu dóma sín ok mintusk hvaðan dvergar hoððu kviknat í moldunni ok niðri í jǫrðunni svá sem maðkar í holdi. Dvergarnir hoððu skipazk fyrst ok tekít kviknun í holdi Ymis ok váru þá maðkar, en af atkvæði guðanna urðu þeir vitandi mannvits ok hoððu manns líki ok búa þó í jörðu ok í steinum.}\(^{11}\)

The next thing they did was to set up forges, and so they made hammers and tongs and anvils and thereafter all other tools, and then they worked metal and stone and wood, working that metal which is called gold so much that all their household equipment and their utensils were made of gold—and that epoch is called the golden age, before it was destroyed by the arrival of the women. They came from the worlds of the giants. Next, the gods took up their seats and laid down their judgements and recalled how dwarves had come to life in the soil and down in the earth, like maggots in flesh. The

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dwarves had been shaped first and come to life in the flesh of Ymir (when they were maggots), but through the decree of the gods, they gained human intelligence and human appearance, but they still live in the earth and in rocks.

This passage had clearly lodged itself in Eríkur Örn’s imagination, and his allusions to it work hard, perhaps even still echoing in the passing statement in Illska that “Íslendingar voru dvergþjóð í sjálfstæðisbaráttu” (“the Icelanders were a dwarf-nation in an independence struggle”).

Gylfaginning, literally “the deception of Gylfi,” is itself a very complex text, of several nested layers of stories: in it the Swedish king Gylfi travels under the pseudonym of Gangleri (“vagabond”) to the land of the pagan gods, the Æsir, who display their fabulous wealth and, within the frame of a philosophical dialogue with Gylfi, tell him mythological stories. However, all this is itself framed by Snorri’s explicitly Christian perspective, which makes it clear that the Æsir are not true gods, and that Gylfi’s experiences are in some ill-defined way illusory. Yet Snorri clearly put so much effort into producing this material that he must have had a much deeper cultural investment in it than his rather dismissive title implies. In the particular passage to which Eiríkur alludes, Snorri evokes a specifically patriarchal golden age, underscored by a firm class hierarchy and by racial prejudice, and by alluding to Gylfaginning, Eiríkur Örn of course imputes these characteristics to the Icelandic boom. As with the medievalist texts discussed in the previous chapters, this reads the culture of the boom not as an aberration in Icelandic culture, but as a fulfilment of deeply embedded structures, therefore standing as quite a radical critique of Icelandic identities.

Poem 12 of Hnefi eða vitstola orð runs:

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Whether Poem 12 envisages elites strutting away from Snorri’s legendary poser of hard questions about the order of things or from poor vagrants (or both), it brings into question the structures of Snorri’s golden age, positioning elites as ignoring hard questions and/or the poor, being pompous, and capturing government. In another poem alluding to the passage of Gylfaginning mentioned above, Eiríkur sketches “nálægir dvergar með litla raunbirtu | eða fjarlægir reginrisar með mikla raunbirtu” (“nearby dwarfs with a low absolute magnitude | or distant godgiants with high absolute magnitude”), evoking astrophysics, but pointing also to the possibility of appearances to deceive: Icelanders too readily mistake nearby dwarfs for distant giants.14

Returning to Gæska, then, whereas Hnefi eða vitstola orð is for the most part a biting mapping of the corruption exposed by the Crash, Gæska shows an interest in golden ages extending beyond criticizing them to imagining them. Amitav Ghosh has emphasized the political limitations of novels that “conjure up worlds that become real precisely through their finitude and distinctiveness,” contrasting these with the “universes of boundless time and space that are conjured up” by, for example, mythic narratives.15 By engaging with mythic pasts and refusing the trappings of realist time, Gæska helps itself to imagine different futures. Gæska is at pains to work with the medieval

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14 Norðdahl, Hnefi eða vitstola orð, no. 41.
Icelandic literary heritage without nostalgia: as I show below, its irreverence towards the trappings of Icelandic nationalism is continual. Gæska’s engagements with time, then, underpin its utopian strategies. In a straightforward way, its manipulations of time situate the action of the novel outside our normal realities, emphasizing that the setting is literally a no-place. But they impel the novel to look not to ways of ordering the world that have been lost, but ways that have never been.

However, before reading Gæska’s utopianism more closely, I contextualize it by sketching two axes of utopian thought which have been prominent more widely in Icelandic literature in the wake of the Crash: gender, and architecture. Neither may at first sight seem particularly important to understanding finance (nor might either seem particularly relevant to the other), but both emerge as powerful, interconnected avenues for theorizing the Crash and conceptualizing future possibilities. These analyses help us to understand mainstream utopian Icelandic responses to the Crash, and to see what Gæska adds to them.

5.3 Gender and Architecture

Sarah Moss’s Iceland travelogue, based on a year teaching at the University of Iceland in the wake of the Crash in 2009–10, keeps returning to the block of flats which she finds herself inhabiting.

The other apartments in our block are shells. The building is on the corner of a development that was half-built when the banks collapsed and the money ran out, and it’s still half-built, as if the builders had downed tools and walked away one day in the winter of 2008. Our northward sea view will be blocked if the luxury flats across the road are ever finished. For now, we see the waves between the bars of metal rods that grow out of concrete foundations.¹⁶

The would-be opulence of Moss’s flat, rendered absurd by the building site around it and by the way it is inhabited by a cash-strapped itinerant lecturer with scarcely any furniture, serves as a continual commentary on the incongruities both of Moss’s life and of Icelandic culture generally. Towards the end of the year, however, Moss’s explorations of post-Crash culture take her to the home of a (Canadian) student and his Icelandic wife:

it’s all wood inside, warm and comforting as an old sweater. People, I realise, aren’t meant to live in concrete, they’re meant to live like this. There are plaited rag-rugs on the floors […] and books, books in Icelandic and English and Danish, jostling each other off floor-to-ceiling shelves. Steely light floods through the windows, which face over the lake. There’s a kitchen area, with wooden shelves and counters, and armchairs gathered around a wood-burning stove.

Sigrún María comes through one of the doors leading off to the bedroom. She has short honey hair, blue eyes, high cheekbones, carries herself like someone riding the waves and watching the horizon. I thank her for letting me visit, tell her I won’t mind at all if she wants to go rest while the baby sleeps […] Mark makes tea, and we all sit down by the fire and talk about knitting, while outside the spruce branches sway and the wind moves across the lake like a magnet over iron filings. I curl up in my chair, which is covered by a blanket, and warm my hands on my mug.17

This material points neatly to two key, interconnected, and evidently deep-rooted streams of utopian thought in post-Crash Iceland (as well as indicating their international appeal): feminism and pastoral idyllicism. The path from the self-destructive materialism of the Crash is found by pursuing traditional feminine domestic space, shaped not by “builders,” but by a goddess-like woman’s traditional work of textile production and

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17 Ibid., 291.
childbearing, abetted by a domesticated, twenty-first century husband.

To put this another way, mainstream Icelandic utopianism following the Crash ranged along two key axes: gender politics and the politics surrounding technology. Both are more fraught than Moss’s portrayal of Sigrún María’s home at first suggests. For example, both gender and technology are readily commodified, and have had significant roles in the brand that has underpinned the post-Crash tourism boom. Nicola Dibben has shown, for example, how the work of the musician Björk has been deeply concerned to reconcile traditional modes of music-making with high-tech ones, while challenging the traditional association of technology with masculinity, exposing a much more complex interaction between gender and technology than Moss’s idyll acknowledges. Both gender and technology find physical manifestation in the house — which was also, for many people, the physical manifestation both of the boom (which they experienced most tangibly through credit-fuelled building and house-buying) and the Crash (which they experienced most tangibly through half-finished building sites and soaring mortgages). This section, then, explores how the axes of gender and technology manifest themselves, partly through architecture, in Crash-literature, before analysing Eiríkur Órn’s distinctive handling of these.

5.3.1 Will Women Save Us?

One of the paradoxes of Iceland is that it is ostensibly at the forefront of achieving gender equality, and many key tenets of feminist thought have achieved an everyday standing in Icelandic culture. Yet in day-to-day life Icelandic society is rather starkly gendered, in ways mapped with great care in Práinn Bertelsson’s 2005 Valkyrjur, which depicts a patriarchal society

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19 Nicola Dibben, Björk (Sheffield: Equinox, 2009), 96–98.
in transition to a state yet to be realized. Valkyrjur scrutinizes often tense or miscomprehending encounters between the genders, explores how the pros and cons of feminism are part of the weft of everyday conversation, examines the bafflement of men whose traditional gender roles are being dismantled by rising gender-equality, and runs the gamut of patriarchal aggression from raving misogyny and lethal domestic violence down to a steady background noise of micro-aggressions. The simmering tensions over gender in Icelandic society were brought dramatically into focus by the Crash: even as the crisis unfolded and the ranks of the culpable grew, they remained almost uniformly male. Conversely, there was a strong sense that it was women who were taking the lead in cleaning up men’s mess.

As it first describes Iceland after the revolution, Gæska alludes to the famous 1983 poem “Kona” (“woman”) by Ingibjörg Haraldsdóttir, which was widely cited in blogs and other everyday discourse in post-Crash Iceland:20

Þegar allt hefur verið sagt
þegar vandamál heimsins eru
vegin metin og útkljað
þegar augu hafa máest
og hendur verið þrýstar
í alvöru augnablikssins
— kemur alltaf einhver kona
að taka af bordinu
sópa gólfð og opna gluggana
til að hleypa vindlareyknum út.

Það bregst ekki.21

When everything has been said
when the problems of the world are

20 Norðdahl, Gæska, 153.
21 Ingibjörg Haraldsdóttir, Orðspor daganna [Reputation of the days] (Reykjavik: Mál og menning, 1983), 38.
weighed measured and settled
when eyes have met
and hands have been shaken
with the gravity of the moment
— there always comes some woman
to clear the table
sweep the floor and open the windows
to let the cigar-smoke out.

It never fails.

The implication of the people circulating “Kona” was that had Iceland been run by women, the Crash would never have happened—and certainly that women were bearing the brunt of fixing the mess in its wake. After all, one of the few banks to survive the Crash more or less unscathed was Auður Capital, founded in 2007 by women; auður means “wealth” but is also a woman’s name, borne most famously by Auður hin djúpauðga (Auður the deep-minded), one of Iceland’s most famed settlers. The head of the post-Kitchenware Revolution government was Iceland’s first female prime minister, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir; the fact that she was also a lesbian seemed to underscore her womanhood. Jóhanna’s government prominently appointed the anti-corruption activist Eva Joly as a special advisor. And women writers’ criticism of the swashbuckling masculinity of the útrásarvíkingar had already been mounting when the Crash hit.22

Correspondingly, the so-called “Kitchenware Revolution” drew its symbols from the traditionally female domestic sphere. As Moss’s description of Mark and Sigrún María’s house implies, knitting became a form of utopian resistance, as a rash of knitting groups formed (or, where they already existed, reformed) to embody ideals of thrift, feminism, environmentalism, solidarity-building, nostalgia, family values, and even national-

22 See §1.4 above.
Utopianism. Understanding gender relations is therefore clearly key to understanding the Crash, while vernacular feminist politics in Iceland have served as an impressive standing reserve of utopian political thought, which could be swiftly and effectively mobilized when crisis hit. Perhaps the low profile of such politics in the UK in the early years of the twenty-first century helps explain the wan responses to the Crash there.

Yet as the resigned tone of Ingibjörg’s poem implies, there is something quite dull about this feminism. While it clearly has a great deal to recommend it, it is equally clearly limited as a framework for developing a holistic response to the Crash. Crash-writing often tends towards gender-essentialism — suggesting that there is something inherent in women, rather than in the way that culture shapes their behavior, that makes them better governors than men — suggesting a degree of inevitability in men’s behavior. Correspondingly, post-Crash writing often sees Icelandic masculinity as being in crisis — usually with the implication that men need to accept and adjust to new forms of masculinity — while struggling to imagine what more viable gender norms might look like. (*Bankster*, as I discussed in chapter 3, is one example of this trend.) Crash-writing also frequently integrates its feminism too tightly into the nationalism and racism that I discussed in Chapter 3 to develop a sufficiently rounded analysis of the problems underlying the Crash, or a truly emancipatory vision of the future.

Grímur Hákonarson’s 2010 film *Sumarlandið* is a good example of well-meant but misfiring Icelandic post-Crash feminism (from a writer closely associated, like Eiríkur Òrn, with the

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NÝHIL collective). The film responds to, and arguably allegorizes, the Crash by portraying the husband and wife couple Óskar and Lára. Lára is a medium who can see ghosts and talk to the dead, and runs an apparently successful business in this role. Óskar, meanwhile, has set up a tawdry tourist trap called “Ghost-house” in the basement, financed with loans; but the business is going badly. To remedy the family finances, Óskar sells an elf-stone in the garden to a passing German tourist, Wolfgang, but this leads to the elves taking revenge, sending Lára into a coma. Óskar eventually expiates his misdeed by throwing himself in front of a bulldozer to save another elf-stone (identified in the film as the real stone Grásteinn) due to be destroyed as part of a road-widening project, and dying. The film achieves a light-hearted ending by having Lára awaken from the elves’ curse while Óskar returns to family life as a ghost.

In some ways, the film is scrupulously gender-balanced: while Óskar is sceptical and Lára believing, this is reversed in their children, with their young son Flóki able to see ghosts and becoming best friends with an elf, but their teenage daughter Ásdís unable to see ghosts and sharing her father’s pragmatic tendencies, and going out with Sverrir, the chair of an extremist atheist organization. Sverrir, a disbelieving man, is in turn balanced by the male leader of the protest against the destruction of Grásteinn. Of the two ghosts who appear in the film, one is female and one (the late Óskar) is male. There is an implicit generational divide here: the parents fit the traditional model of the rational man and the spiritual woman, and it is Óskar who (however ineffectually) deals with the family finances, while Lára focuses instead on nurturing the family spiritually. The film points to new possibilities opening up for the couple’s children. Likewise, the limitations of Óskar’s traditional masculinity are brought into relief through contrast with the extravagantly camp Wolfgang: Óskar looks bewildered as Wolfgang and his male partner kiss in their joy at obtaining the elf-stone, and later
Utopianism refers to them unabashedly as “hommarnir” (“the gays”). In a familiar capitulation of the crisis in Icelandic masculinity, Öskar also struggles to cope with female economic self-sufficiency: the film implies that Lára’s income as a medium has been sufficient for the family, and that their financial difficulties arise from the debt accrued by Öskar’s entrepreneurialism; he unwisely spends money on an expensive new TV. The film suggests that Öskar’s desire to take unnecessary risks to fulfill the role of the family’s main breadwinner, and to acquire glitzy consumer technology, is the underlying cause of the family’s destabilization. Part of the message of the film is that Öskar needs to get in touch not only with his spiritual, but also his feminine side, for the wellbeing of the family as a whole.

But the film doesn’t give the viewer much by way of pointers to how Öskar’s children might do better than their father: it takes a crisis caused by a man, and then makes the story all about the man. In reality, of course, masculinity is always in crisis: this is how its norms are sustained. In Atómstöðin, Ugla pointedly praises Iceland’s pre-eminent Romantic poet Jónas Hallgrímsson as the man who “gaf okkur það sem við höfðum aldrei séð, fegurð landsins, íslenska náttúru, og sáði í bjróst eftirtimans dulri viðkvæmi álfsins í stað hetjuskapar og fornsögu” (“gave us that which we had never seen — the beauty of the land, Iceland’s natural beauty — and sowed in the breast of a later time the shy sensitivity of the elf in place of heroism and ancient saga”). Of the two men to whom Ugla is attracted, the Self-conscious Policeman is diffident, while Búi Árland, while imposing, is not overbearing; meanwhile the Organist, who is in many ways the most subversive and positive character in the story, quietly but firmly eschews traditional masculinity. But in Sumarlandið Öskar’s self-sacrifice to save Grásteinn and his wife hardly exhibits Laxness’s “shy sensitivity of the elf in place of

24 Grímur Hákonarson, dir., Sumarlandið [Summerland] (Blueeyes Productions/Sögn ehf., 2010), 27’29”, 53’44”–45’.

heroism and ancient saga”: on the contrary, Sumarlandið ultimately promotes a very traditional, nationalist view of masculinity. Its vision of masculinity is adapted, in the recent tradition of “the ‘decent’ Nordic man,” to accommodate being good with the kids, but not adapted very much further. While Sumarlandið, then, suggests that venture-vikingdom was a dangerously and unnecessarily masculinist phenomenon and that society should shape itself more on the model of its nurturing, spiritual, yet pragmatic women, this film struggles to move beyond this gender dichotomy and reimagine twenty-first century Icelandic masculinity.

Much the same points stand for Töfrahöllin, which takes its inspiration from the early modern Icelandic ballad of Ólafur liljurós, in which Ólafur meets four elf-maidens and is killed by one of them for refusing to marry her. Böðvar Guðmundsson makes his protagonist Jósep equally hapless and equally central to his story, and makes the elves the daughters of the sinister útrásarvíkingur Kormákur Cooltran—who is himself modelled on Goethe’s seductive Erlkönig, an elf-king inspired by a Continental Scandinavian analogue to Ólafur liljurós. Thus the key women of Töfrahöllin are positioned firmly as the Other to a male norm. The sense that these women are a force of nature, inscrutable to Jósep, gives them greater agency than Jósep enjoys—and perhaps by making its women inscrutable in this way, Töfrahöllin is criticizing men’s failure to understand women. But these women do not generally come across well in the novel: they tend to be overprivileged, flighty, and controlling (if also oppressed by their father). So Töfrahöllin does not do much to disabuse us of the implication that women are indeed a mysterious elvish Other. This is a far cry from Kristín Marja Baldursdóttir’s adaptation of the same ballad-tradition in her 1996 novel Mávahlátur: Mávahlátur reads against the grain of Óla-

fur liljurós, using the elf-maidens as a starting point for imagining working class women’s resistance to the patriarchal and hierarchical society of mid-twentieth-century Iceland. Here, the elf-queen of the ballad is the upwardly mobile woman Freyja. Rather than learning from Freyja how not to behave — which was presumably what early modern women were expected to take away from Ólafur liljurós — Agga, the girl from whose perspective Mávahlátur is narrated, ends the novel simultaneously learning to enter into solidarity with Freyja and making the transition from girlhood to womanhood. Töfrahöllin is able to portray Jósep’s struggles with masculinity, but not to move beyond them. Likewise, Ernir K. Snorrason’s 2012 Sýslumaðurinn sem sá álfa in some ways touchingly explores the vulnerability of a man late in middle age who has lost his wife, suffered an almost fatal illness followed by depression, and sees elves — but goes on to have this character win a beautiful and markedly younger girlfriend who, notwithstanding her lively character, is for the most part a mere foil for her man’s penetrating intellect and steely nerve, joyfully seizing the opportunity to become a baby-factory.

The conservatism of Sumarlandið and Töfrahöllin and their handling of gender is consistent with some prominent post-Crash images of the fjallkona (“lady of the mountain”), an originally eighteenth-century nationalist personification of Iceland as a motherland. This personification is widespread in Icelandic national culture, and no doubt echoed in the widespread (if jocular) sentiment in Iceland that the havoc wreaked on European air-travel by the eruption at Eyjafjallajökull in 2010 represented the land’s revenge on Britain and the Netherlands for their aggressive pursuit of the Icesave dispute.27

Gunnar Sigurðsson’s 2010 documentary on the Crash, Maybe I Should Have, closes with a sentimental song, Freyja, by Magnús Þór Sigmundsson, for which, according to one review, “the

27 E.g., Einar Már Guðmundsson, Bankastræti núll (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2011), 35–36.
crowd went wild” at an early screening. The video features an all-male band and choir at Þingvellir, “a place where culture and landscape seem almost identical to Icelanders,” asking for forgiveness from the pagan goddess Freyja, who is implicitly conflated with the fjallkona, herself figured as an isolated violin-playing woman in national dress. The concluding scenes of the video feature this woman laying her violin on the grave of Jónas Hallgrímsson, Iceland’s national poet, with a reverence which suggests no recognition of how the “repatriation” of Jónas’s bones from Denmark (itself satirized in Atómstöðin), was in fact enormously problematic. The last shot shows the fjallkona walking away from both the memorial and the camera in what could perhaps be read as a gesture of contempt towards the viewer, perhaps particularly towards the men who have dominated the video, and so to suggest some agency on her part. It is not inevitable that the fjallkona should be a patriarchal figure: she has at times been deployed to legitimate feminism both in Iceland and Canada. Björk’s memorable blurring of her own body with the Icelandic landscape in the video to her 1999 song “Jóga” harnesses traditional nationalist resources to a renewed sense of the nation which, while still consistent with the patri-

archal system in which the land is personified as female while the citizen is personified as male, gives female agency a defining prominence. But in Freyja, the goddess and the fjállkona are firmly subjugated to a thoroughly traditional, patriarchal nationalism.

The cover of the 2010 concept album about the crash by Bjartmar og bergrisarnir, Skýtin veröld, parodies the Icelandic coat of arms, draping a nubile blonde fjállkona across the front of it, associating the arms with sexist advertizing tropes to express the state’s callous commodification of the nation, and recalling Þórarinna H. Þórdóttir’s argument that the late twentieth century saw Icelandic beauty queens taking over “the symbolic space previously occupied by the 19th-century Mountain Woman as a central nationalistic trope.” But while knowing, and altogether more sophisticated textually than Freyja, the album uses the sole female figure on the cover more to celebrate than to criticize the irreverent rock and roll masculinity of the aged male band members she shares it with. The pessimistic ending of Ótta M. Norðfjörð’s Tíu litlir bankastrákar makes its last surviving “banker-boy” Davíð Oddsson. It goes on to describe how

Einn litill bankastrákur hafði enn ekki fengið nóg.  
Hann fann sér fjaldkonu sem var örmagna og mjó.

Hann sótti handjárnin og hjakkaðist á píu,  
og fyrr en varði urðu bankastrákar aftur tíu.

One little banker-boy still hadn’t had enough.  
He got himself a fjállkona who was exhausted and skinny.

He went to get the handcuffs and clapped the girl in irons and before you knew it, there were ten banker boys again.


This neatly, if grotesquely, expresses the capacity of Icelandic elites to perpetuate themselves whatever misfortunes might befall their individual members, at the expense of a passively accepting Icelandic people as a whole. But while a trenchant critique of the hegemonic power of financial masculinity, it leaves little scope for a resisting feminism. Individually these works all use the image of the fjallkona effectively to make their point; but collectively they tend to reinscribe rather than rethink patriarchal norms. And I have discussed above how Óttar M. Norðfjörð manages to end Örvitinn; eða hugsjónamaðurinn and Böðvar Guðmundsson ends Töfrahöllin in ways that are not only patriarchal but also Orientalist. Despite its promise, then, Icelandic feminism has struggled to make real inroads into the patriarchal nationalism that was such an important factor among the causes of the Crash.

5.3.2 Gender in Gæska

One of the core tests of the utopianism of Gæska, then, is its capacity to capitalize on mainstream feminist responses to the Crash while moving beyond their limitations. Gæska certainly includes key elements of mainstream feminist critiques of the Crash. It opens with the arresting statement “konur deyja. Þær hrapa ofan af byggingum og skella á gangvegum og strætum” (“women die. They plunge from buildings and crash into pavements and streets”). Freyleif is one of the women who jump from tall buildings, fed up with with life in the fancy but soulless new flat her family inhabits; her husband, meanwhile, is himself in the building trade, whose boom has helped make the purchase of the flat possible. In this, Gæska replicates the widespread gendering of the causes of the Crash, whereby women with an eye for domestic comfort are constrained by men and by men’s enthusiasm for displays of phallic architectural pomp. Echoing the opening, the first chapter of Gæska ends by emphasizing the persistence of traditional gender divisions:

34 Norðdahl, Gæska, 7.
konur deyja. Það er hin óumflýjanlega staðreynd. Þær hrapa fram af byggingum, illa til haðar og örvæntingarfullar.
Og karlmenn, þeir fara á þing.

Women die. That is the other unavoidable fact. They plunge from buildings, badly dressed and desperate.
And men, they go to meetings.

Here Eiríkur Örn echoes a prominent gender divide in medieval Eddaic poetry, well represented by *Brymskviða* stanza 14:

senn váru Æsir
allir á þungi
ok Ásynjur
allar á máli.

later the Æsir [the male gods] were
all at a meeting
and the Ásynjur [the goddesses]
all in conversation.

By alluding to this formula, Eiríkur Örn emphasizes how deep-rooted the gender division is in Icelandic culture, and by replacing women's conversation with their suicide he exposes how destructive this disempowerment is. Thus *Gæska* is forthright about recognizing the existence of gendered behavior, and the patriarchal structure of Iceland’s boom and bust. Moreover, *Gæska* also looks Icelandic nationalism for the most part straight in the eye, and in doing so positions itself better to critique the gender norms with which nationalism has a symbiotic relationship. The enthusiasm for elves and the associated image of the Fjallkona discussed above provides as good an avenue as any into examining *Gæska’s* irreverant rethinking of Crash-culture.

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Eiríkur Örn’s cheerfully unrealistic portrayal of the all-women post-revolution government takes the bull of gender essentialism by the horns: what if Iceland really did put women in charge? The resulting picture is positive but not simple. After the revolution, Millý, as Iceland’s new prime minister, is called upon to negotiate with the head of the International Monetary Fund, Aimé De Mesmaeker, a suave Frenchman whose name is presumably to be understood as “loverboy the mess-maker,” a thinly disguised version of Dominique Strauss-Kahn, IMF director general from 2007 to 2011. The arrival of the IMF is, in the novel as in reality, viewed with a sense of doom, with Iceland fearing that the IMF’s disaster-capitalist policies in the developing world might be visited upon Iceland itself. Indeed, *Hnefi eða vitastola orð* opens with “Kreppusonnettan” (“the crisis sonnet”), whose first eight lines, in an explosion of iambic pentameter, comprise only the syllables “IMF!” and “OMG!” At one level, of course, these mean “International Monetary Fund! Oh my God!” They evoke the horror but also the chatroom hysteria at IMF intervention in Iceland. In performance, however, Eiríkur rattles through the alternating syllables at a pace evoking the strong alternation of on- and off-beats in hardcore techno music, in turn evoking the frenetic pace of electronic financial transactions and the economic realities they cause. Against this backdrop, Aimé arrives in Reyjavík, subtly demanding that Millý have sex with him in return for the IMF’s assistance — both a comment on the personal morality of the world’s elite men and a metaphor for the prostitution of Iceland, with Millý, like the Fjallkona, personifying the country. As Aimé seduces Millý — or, we might equally say, outlines to her the terms of IMF assistance — he asks

hví að eyðileggja jafn fagurt kvöld með prósentureikningi? Ég hef aldrei komið til Reykjavíkur áður og himinninn yfir borg yðar er svo fagur, Millý. Ég vil sjá þennan heim — sýnið
mér álfa og ég skal færa yður allt sem þér óskið. Hvar eru norðurljósin og hvar er Björk?37

Why waste such a beautiful evening calculating percentages? I have never been to Reykjavík before and the sky above your city is so beautiful, Millý. I want to see this world — show me elves and I will bring you everything you wish for. Where are the northern lights, and where is Björk?

The fact that Aimé is speaking in French here, and therefore his foreignness, is emphasized by his use of the defunct honorific second-person plural, used to recall the French votre. Aimé emerges as the borealizing outsider willing to pay handsomely to see Iceland and Icelanders perform the identity constructed by their tourist brochures and international media profile. Indeed, Björk, herself frequently portrayed as elf-like in international media, has commented that “a friend of mine says that when record-company executives come to Iceland they ask the bands if they believe in elves, and whoever says yes gets signed up.”38 Accordingly, when, absorbed by the throes of adulterous sexual passion that follow, Millý is described fleetingly to escape a long list of things which normally demand her attention, the list is crowned, with glorious implausibility, with “álfabyggðir” (“elf-communities”).39 This portrayal, then, echoes images of the rape of the Fjallkona, but gives it not only levity, but also complexity, satirizing the role of supernatural beings in the construction of national identity. Significantly, Aimé’s approach does not work: upon discovering him having sex with a secretary the next morning, Millý exhibits all the rage of the proverbial woman scorned and concludes — to the implicit relief of the audience and to the exasperation of Freyleif — that Iceland is better off without the IMF. Eiríkur Órn’s rewriting of the rape

37 Norðdahl, Gæska, 194.
39 Norðdahl, Gæska, 198.
of the Fjallkona, then, irreverently invokes gender stereotypes, yet develops Millý’s agency and presents the utopian prospect of refusing the IMF’s interventions.

As this account suggests, Gæska is not averse to invoking a range of traditional gender stereotypes, partly for comic effect. The novel boldly follows the poem “Kona” to its logical conclusion by presenting an all-woman post-revolution government. Yet it satirizes the hope that this revolution is a panacea: thus the new government, sporting pearls and short skirts, spends quite a lot of time sitting on the grass of Austurvöllur, picking flowers and having tea parties. Meanwhile, Millý’s husband Halldór Garðar, still in the midst of his pre-Crash identity-crisis, locks himself in his bedroom with his new-found friend Kadír and the two spend their time masturbating in a blunt metaphor for men’s mutually reinforcing self-absorption. While Gæska is knowing, then, its humor visibly rests upon a sense that women are profoundly different from men. This distinguishes Gæska from the altogether subtler probing of gender and other identities in Eiríkur Örn’s later Íllska, which is characterized by musings like

karlar kjósa nasista. Þetta er bara staðreynd, ég er ekki að reyna að móðga neinn. Allar rannsóknir sýna fram á að það eru fyrst og fremst karlar sem kjósa nasista. Það þýðir ekki að allir karlar kjósi nasista eða að engar konur kjósi nasista. Þetta er meira svona almenn tilhneiging en undantekningarlaus regla.

bannar búkur og rekur sígauna úr landi (til þess að fólk þurfa ekki að kjósa Le Pen). Konur eru síður tilbúnaðar til þess að svara spurningunni er ég rasisti játandi, en það þýðir ekki að þær séu síður rasistar.40

Men vote for Nazis. This is just how it is: I’m not trying to offend anyone. All the research shows that it is, first and foremost, men who vote for Nazis. This doesn’t mean that all men vote for Nazis or that no women vote for Nazis. It’s more of a general trend than an immutable rule.

But to make things worse (and ultimately to confuse the whole business), women are (according to the research) not less racist than men. If women and men are asked “would you wish to live next door to a foreigner?” just as many women say “no” as men. If they are asked “could you imagine yourself marrying a foreigner?” just as many women as men say “no.” Women are less inclined to push the boundaries of social acceptability and avoid voting for politicians who are provocative, like Le Pen — and instead the ones who aren’t provocative but nonetheless behave in all important respects as if they were Le Pen — like Sarkozy, who bans burqas and drives gypsies from the country (so that people don’t have to vote for Le Pen). Women are less willing to agree with the statement “I am a racist,” but that doesn’t make them less racist.

Yet Gæska’s imagined matriarchy still leaves space for some subtle probing of Icelandic gender. Freyleif’s frustration with Millý indicates that a matriarchal world is not necessarily a harmonious one. In the face of a 93,000,000-strong refugee crisis, Millý’s innate optimism is represented as fantastically powerful, but when Halldór is finally reunited with her at the end of the novel, his more pessimistic assessment of their achievements in their political career to that point, which finds that most are insignificant and all are ethically ambiguous, suggests that in less

40 Norðdahl, Illska, 168–69.
dramatic circumstances, Millý’s optimism blurs into self-delusion. Freyleif’s husband Óli Dóri, perhaps the closest character to an Icelandic everyman in the novel, is an affable figure who struggles to empathize with the women around him or to understand the subtle workings of patriarchy, yet when put to it is perfectly happy to put his shoulder to the wheel to fulfil their plans for a better world.

Meanwhile, *Gæska* pointedly presents a reasonably well developed female, Muslim, immigrant character. *Gæska* both complicates and adds force to its analysis of Icelandic society by threading through the book the narrative of the Moroccan refugees Fatíma and Kadír, who have fled persecution for labor organizing during the so-called “years of lead” under King Hassan II, and their Iceland-born daughter Amelía. While Kadír and Halldór lock themselves away to masturbate, Fatíma gets on with post-revolutionary work as a feminist activist in the local Muslim Association. I have discussed above how almost every Icelandic writer who presents a female Muslim character calls her Fatíma, and obviously Eiríkur Örn is no exception. 41 One wonders if there is some confusion about what a burqa is too (or whether the Icelandic *búrka* might simply have a wider meaning than the narrow technical sense of *burqa*, a whole-body covering): in Morocco the niqab (face-veil) is uncommon and the burqa all the more so — and Fatíma seems to be able to smoke while wearing one, which seems odd. Nevertheless, Fatíma enjoys some complexity as a character: without remarking on it, *Gæska* presents a woman who wears traditional dress yet smokes, reflecting some of the complexity of real-life adherence to religious ideals; who takes her daughter out for ice-cream and teaches her how best to communicate about Islamic culture with Western left-wingers; whose first encounter with Óli Dóri involves mutual shy embarrassment at a cross-cultural clash of gender norms; and whose political activism leads her to take charge of creating Reykjavík’s first mosque (with minarets, a bone of contention regarding the real mosque to be built

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41 See §3.2.
Utopianism at Sogamýri). Perhaps most importantly, the novel counters the narrative long deployed in racist Western discourses which claims that Islam is inherently misogynistic (thus constructing Western societies as progressive), and that non-Muslim people should therefore oppose Islam or forcibly intervene in Muslim cultures to “modernise” them. This discourse features prominently in Auður Jónsdóttir’s *Vetrarsól*. While at one level, this novel is a satirical romp through the conventions of chick-lit and crime fiction, it has a sinister heart. Its antagonist, Arndís, proves to have few compunctions about “rescuing” a baby from a future living in an Islamic culture, allowing its Moroccan mother Fatíma to die and attempting to shift the blame for Fatíma’s death onto Fatíma’s brothers. Thus *Vetrarsól* puts incisive coverage of Western feminist justifications for Islamophobia and violence in the Global South center-stage, but the focus remains firmly on the Icelandic characters. By contrast, through its own Fatíma, *Gæska* encodes the fact that the Muslim world has its own feminists and activists, whose priorities and goals may not look the same as those of mainstream Western feminism but are ethically no less justifiable.

*Gæska*, then, is unusual in that it not only identifies masculinity as a key problem in Iceland’s Crash-culture, but proceeds to think through some of what it might mean to do anything about this. It explores how the kindness traditionally encoded as a feminine quality is key to a social and political renewal in Iceland: whereas Millý is a politician out of passion and finds the job fulfilling, Halldór has allowed himself to drift into it under the pressure of social expectations, and his existential crisis arises from not understanding the eponymous *gæska* (“kindness”) that needs to be at the center of the job. However, by presenting several quite different major female characters, the novel avoids platitudinous essentialisms, implying that Iceland does not need women in government so much as feminists. The novel

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also hints at how Icelandic masculinity is probably inextricable from nationalism, and how, to rethink one, we must reshape the other. In particular, the novel recognizes that the feminism needed by an increasingly cosmopolitan Icelandic society itself needs to be cosmopolitan, and to nurture feminisms linked to cultures other than Iceland’s mid-Atlantic, Lutheran tradition.

5.3.3 Understanding the Urban

Feminist Icelandic thinking about the Crash sits alongside, and interconnects with, architecture as a way of theorizing the Crash. Like their American counterparts, Icelandic Crash-novels most frequently and consistently express anxiety about social and economic formations through the architecture of domesticity. This fact stands alongside the fact that the history of the post-war Icelandic novel is in a way the history of writers coming to terms with Iceland’s urbanization, with the recent rise of crime-novels, mostly centred on Reykjavík as a site of social disorder, in some ways representing the extreme point of this development. The connections between the boom, building, and the liveability of urban space are the theme of a text by Þórarinn Eldjárn entitled “Draugaborg” (“ghost-town”):

Andstætt því sem flestir hefðu haldið líkar draugum betur að búa í nýjum borgum og borgarhlutum en gömlum. Ástæðan er sú að gamlar borgir og gömul hverfi sprutti af lífi. Á seinni árum hefur það hinsvegar orðið æ algengara að nýjar borgir og ný hverfi fæðist til dauða. Það er byrjað á röngum enda. Í öndverðu var gangurinn sá að fyrst kom fólk og síðan hús […] Nú kom fólkið síðast, og svo fór að bera á einu: Það var ekkert fólk til að fleytja inn í húsin.

45 Þórarinn Eldjárn, Alltaf sama sagan [Always the same story] (Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 2009), 111, 115.
Contrary to what most people have assumed, ghosts prefer to live in new towns and districts rather than old ones. The reason is that old towns and old neighbourhoods were full of life. In recent years, however, it has become ever more common that new towns and new neighbourhoods are stillborn. They’re done the wrong way round. Earlier, the process was that people came first, and then the houses […] now the people came last, and so things proceeded to their logical conclusion: there were no people to move into the houses.

The archetypal ghost-town, then, is the speculative, finance-driven building of the twenty-first century. As in “Draugaborg,” portrayals of architecture in Crash-fiction frequently advert to the merits of older modes of dwelling. The question is whether this promotes a meaningfully utopian vision, with an implied theory of change, or merely nostalgia suggesting the lack of a progressive ideology with which writers can respond to their sense of belonging to a dystopia. Another example of the ideas expressed in “Draugaborg” is, of course, the elf-joke with which this book opened: it evokes the empty new flats associated with the boom and crash, and uses the figure of the elf to express their uncanny character — but the joke also deploys the elf subversively to ask what happens if beings simply appropriate these assets for practical use. Elves’ revenge at road- and house-building is a widespread trope in Icelandic popular discourses, and such stories provide a mode of discursive resistance to destructive forms of economic development. These ideas drive the plot not only of Sumarlandið but also Kristín Helga Gunnarsdóttir’s 2011 children’s novel Riólítreylan, and also put in an appearance in Helga Sigurðardóttir’s Stúfur tröllastrákur, from 2010. “Við błöstu mýmörg ný hverfí, hvert á sínum álfañí” (“a swarm of new districts sprang up, each on its own elf-hill”), as Eiríkur Bergmann puts it, wryly indicating the ubiquity of the

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46 Ibid., 115.
trope. Perhaps the most effective use of these ideas in Icelandic children’s literature is Þórarinn Leifsson’s Bókasafn ömmu Huldar (discussed in Chapter 2), set in a dystopian future in which one bank, Gullbanki, owns almost everything and has reduced all culture to economic exploitation; Gullbanki forces the eleven-year-old protagonist Albertína to work as a living advertisement in Gullbanki’s new block of flats, Gullbúrið (“gilded cage”), which has been rendered unsaleable because everything in society that can be commodified finally has been. The book lingers on describing the soulless, hotel-like character of the block, concisely evoking how global finance is increasingly hollowing out housing markets, turning homes into mere sites of speculation, and increasingly pricing citizens out of one of the most basic necessities for survival. Albertína’s struggle is accordingly characterized by a desire to return to the old, homely house and garden which her indebted parents have been forced to give up, while the beginning of the end for Gullbanki’s regime is the moment where Albertína’s long-forgotten 158-year-old cigar-smoking great-great-grandmother Arnheiður Huld takes over Albertína’s anodyne flat with her rambling library. Huld has a wide variety of subversive traits, but crucially is drawn from Icelandic vernacular tradition: the sinister Christmas-witch Grýla. Thus Þórarinn uses supernatural figures distinctive to Icelandic tradition to criticize the incongruity of the building boom with traditional Icelandic values, and as a fulcrum from which to exert some leverage against the hegemony of the banking sector.

Crime novels tend to complain less explicitly about the style of new architecture; as usual, the exception is Óttar M. Norðfjörð, who integrates a quick tirade into the closing chapter of Áttablaðarósin that recalls “Draugaborg”:

Reykjavík […] var sögulaus borg. […] Þau fáu gömlu hús sem Reykjavík hafði upp á að bjoða áttu raunar í vök að verjast fyrir fólder fólk í veldi ryðja burt gömlu fyrir nýt. Þetta

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Reykjavík […] was a city without history. […] The few old houses which Reykjavík had to offer were actually under threat from people who wanted to clear away the old for the new. This was Icelanders’ view of the world in a nutshell. Icelandic culture was to destroy its culture. Once Icelanders tore up their parchment manuscripts and used them as shoes. Now they tore down their old houses in favor of trendy plate-glass buildings.

However, the worry of characters facing crippling mortgage debt is pervasive, and these novels express anxiety about financialization through a geography of shiny new corporate palaces on the one hand, and on the other through crimes conducted or hidden in abandoned, half-finished homes, or old buildings abandoned to dereliction because of people’s enthusiasm for novelty. A junkie hangs himself in a squat in central Reykjavík while a murderous financier imprisons the people who have uncovered his bloody trail in an unfinished housing estate; a banker is tortured to death in his unfinished mansion; a kidnapped banker’s daughter dies trying to escape the derelict house in which she has been imprisoned.50 More unusually, in Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir’s children’s book Hjartslátur, an unfinished building and the migrant labourers who are inhabiting it becomes an unexpected place of refuge in Tristan’s self-imposed exile — but as he proceeds further into the Reykjanes peninsula, he discovers that his ancestral farm, now his grandparents’ summerhouse, has been made into a hub of organized drug-crime. Anxieties about

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50 Óttar M. Norðfjörð, Áttablaðarósín [The eight-petaled rose] (Reykjavík: Sögur, 2010), 448.
architecture abound in literary adult fiction too. The fungus that infects the city in Óttar M. Norðfjörð’s *Paradísarborgin*, making its buildings unhealthy to live in and eventually structurally un-sound, evokes the power of the commodification of property to corrupt a society. Baldvin Zophoníasson’s 2014 film *Vonarstræti* encodes capital buying the acquiescence of the cultural sector by having the banker eventually succeed in buying the writer Móri’s old wooden house for redevelopment, while *Konur* develops Steinar Bragi’s long-standing interest in domestic spaces (which continues through his subsequent Crash-fiction) by imprisoning its protagonist Eva in one of Reykjavík’s new seafront apartment blocks in a grotesque art installation.51 In Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl’s summary,

the apartment — showy, expensive and in bad nouveau riche taste — turns out to be (almost) alive, an entity of its own, and it starts sadistically manipulating Eva’s life, pushing further and further until the end, when she literally gets sucked into the walls.52

Glauser went so far as to say that *Konur* “nimmt eine noch stärkere Engführung zwischen moderner Stadtarchitektur und dem Zerfall der ethischen Grundlagen der Gesellschaft vor. In diesem Text hat die zeitgenössische Architektur eine geradezu apokalyptische Dimension erreicht und repräsentiert das Böse an sich” (“draws an even deeper link between modern urban architecture and the decay of the ethical foundations of society. In this text, contemporary architecture has reached an almost apocalyptic dimension and represents evil in itself”).53 Standing as a metaphor for the caging and consuming power of finance in Reykjavík’s art scene, and so across Icelandic society more generally, Steinar Bragi’s apartment block recalls the critique

that its real-life counterparts are phallic constructions, over-compensating for Iceland’s lack of the trappings of big capital cities. It also, however, explores the constraining of women both to their traditional domestic sphere, and to an architectural manifestation of the domestic sphere that is brutally in-conducive to domesticity. Thus, albeit in very different ways, Konur and Bókasafn Ömmu Huldar both allegorize men’s capture and destruction of the Icelandic economy by narrating the imprisonment of women in buildings designed by men for economic gain, rather than designed by women to be homes, emphasizing the centrality of discourses of gender to discourses of architecture in Crash-fiction.

Although Crash-novels are generally focused on Reykjavík, their portrayals of finance reach beyond it too. This is very significant, as Iceland stands in this as in many matters as a stark case-study for globally widespread trends. The industrialization of the countryside, which began in Iceland with the industrialization of fishing, is proceeding apace, whether through the construction of power-plants like the Kárahnjúkar dam or, elsewhere, through the robotization of agriculture. This is coupled with demographic flight to the city, and a corresponding shift of rural life to servicing the leisure of visiting urbanites, whether from Iceland or from abroad. Rural property is, therefore, increasingly controlled from the city, increasingly a setting for urbanites’ architectural fantasies, and increasingly open to global financial speculation.

These forces are most diligently mapped by Steinar Bragi’s Hálendið, which moves from Konur’s focus on a city tower-block to a nightmarish house in the wilderness, in order brutally to subvert the nationalist image of a rural utopia. Genetic experimentation and a mysterious unfinished dam haunt the landscape, while the novel makes it clear that the misogynistic hell the characters blunder into in the highlands is ultimately one which they have brought with them from the city. Hálendið resonates with Árni Þórarinsson’s crime novel Morgunengill,

54 Cf. Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson, Phallological Museum, 105.
whose útrásarvíkingur obsessively seeks to win over his disapproving parents by buying their ancestral farm for them:55 The novel ends with the protagonist’s increasingly senile father reciting the classic Icelandic folk legend Trunt, trunt og tröllin í fjöllum, a troubling story about a man who, spending overlong in the wilderness, loses his Christianity and becomes a troll.56 In this novel, the folktale serves primarily to allegorize the progress of Alzheimer’s disease, but it also strikes a suitably disquieting tone at the end of a novel about a society which, like the character in the folktale, is undergoing disturbing transformations — and those transformations are not, this time, happening in the wilderness, but in the heart of the city.

Other Crash-novels also depict urbanites buying rural property, again, usually in a futile bid to reconnect with the family’s ancestral rural patrimony. Sigurðar saga fôts, discussed in Chapter 4, and Töfrahöllin both encode a deep anxiety about financiers buying up rural land, disrupting traditional rural economies and values alike. Likewise, a vengeful Kjartan ensures his financial ruin with an over-leveraged land-purchase intended to deprive his one-time friend Bolli of access to some ancestral land in Mörg eru ljónsins eyru. Whereas popular tales about vengeful elves tend to comment on suburbs encroaching on the surrounding hinterland, in these novels, the corrupting power of financiers’ money reaches out from the city in long filaments of property ownership, deep into the countryside. Not infrequently, those filaments are charted as views of rural properties seen from car windows, evoking how Icelanders increasingly experience and construct their county precisely by driving cars from the Reykjavík area on high-grade roads, witnessing the land from these private and sheltered spaces.57

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55 Árni Þórarinsson, Morgunengill, 42, 52, 214.
Notwithstanding Hálendið’s pessimism, several of these novels sketch rural utopias. Sigurðar saga fóts concludes by giving its protagonist a kind of peace in the mountains of Hazara, which recall the rural forge of his grandfather Siggi stál, and replicate the Iceland of his great-grandfather’s day. Alda Sigmundsdóttir’s Unravelled has the main character rescued from personal crisis by the mythologically named Baldur, who is linked with the rural home of her grandparents, which her cousin Egill has succeeded in repurchasing. The nostalgic tone of her account is unalloyed:

There was a house. On the West Fjords, harboring many of her best childhood memories. Closing her eyes she could hear the whisper of happy voices on the breeze—now, calling. It was a house that her grandparents had owned, that held a part of her within its walls, a place of refuge. It had been there since she was small, not always visible, but permanent nonetheless.\(^58\)

In Hrafnaspark, by Eysteinn Björnsson, the impending delinquency of the teenage protagonist is averted by his stoic grandfather and a bracing encounter with the simple, life-or-death realities of the Icelandic countryside. While Öttar M. Norðfjörð’s Örvitinn eða; hugsjónamaðurinn knowingly situates its utopia in a rural idyll, and self-consciously locates the beginning of its protagonist’s real problems in Reykjavík, the same author’s Paradísarborgin strikes a more sincere tone when the One-Handed Man’s mother finds that the low-tech encampment on Öskjuhlíð of people fleeing the fungus that is spreading through Reykjavík reminds her comfortingly of her childhood home.

These novels imply a similar utopian/dystopian framework to that made more or less explicit by Sigurðar saga fóts and discussed in the previous chapter: that the culture of the banking boom can be rectified by revising the financial structures that

\(^{58}\) Alda Sigmundsdóttir, Unraveled: A Novel about a Meltdown (Reykjavík: Enska Textasmiðjan, 2013), 13.
útrásarvíkingar!

EXCERPT 8
Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl, Gæska, 99–100

“Kæri herra!” hrópaði hún og fleygði sér um furðu lost-na fætur mína. “Hjálpið oss yfirgefnum í öllum bænum Múhameðs.”


Ríkisstjórnin hefur rænt mig foreldrum mínum svo nú má ég lífa á götunni líkt og hver annar rakki og það eina sem verður mér til lífs eru maturleifarnar sem hrynja af borðum yðar umburðarlyndustu samborgara og stöku miskunnsamur samverji sem náðarsamlegast hefur leyft mér að sleikja næringuna af risnu holdi sér.”

provide people with homes; by attending to the habitability of those homes and their associated communities; and by enabling rural economies to stand on their own feet. Most texts add to this the ideal of facilitating more domestic (implicitly feminine) modes of living. Thus, just as many of the Icelandic handlings of feminist critiques of the Crash have struggled to move beyond quite traditional gender structures, utopian thinking on the techno-political axis finds itself firmly at the low-tech end of the scale.

The nostalgic tone of the post-Crash view of the countryside is particularly striking given the degree to which real-world Icelandic responses to the Crash involved prominent rethinkings of social and technological structures, many of which were articulated in mainstream politics by, for example, the Best Party and the Pirate Party. Examples include the Icelandic Modern Media Initiative, a citizen-led grassroots rethinking of the Icelandic constitution, and new thinking about money creation. The protagonist of Óttar M. Nordfjörð’s *Lygarinn* is a member of a team of activists loosely associated with WikiLeaks, but otherwise it seems that writers — unlike Björk in the 1990s — have struggled to develop utopian thought that harnesses rather than rejects technology. The books struggle to imagine different architectures beyond those of either a cosier past or a commodified present, at a moment when factors ecological, social, and financial are all demanding a radical rethink of humans’ environments.

From (urban) domestic architecture, to rural property, Crash-novels often extend these geographies beyond Iceland — albeit usually fleetingly. Examples include Sigurður fótur laundering money from Turkmenistan and fleeing to Hazara; Örvitinn’s triangulation of its rural-urban Icelandic axis with the wider world of the “War on Terror” (Iraq, Guantánamo Bay, and London); Arnar’s explorations in *Samhengi hlutanna* of a London that is, in the structure of the narrative, nevertheless a planet to Iceland’s star; or the geography of Starkaður Levi’s violent journey beyond the oasis of his five-star hotel into the realities of Indian life in *Mannorð* (discussed in §4.7). At these
Fyrsta viðbragð mitt var að taka til fótanna. Sparka stúlkunni lausri og hlaupa burt einsog fætur toguðu áður en nokkur yrði var við niðingsskapinn. Næstu viðbrögð á eftir voru öll keimlík þessu fyrsta, en lamaður af undrum og barinn í duftið af eigin sálarkrísum aðhafðist ég ekkert heldur starði bara í augu barnsins. Þau voru brún og svo stór að mér fannst ég enn einu sinni missa vitið þegar þau boruðu sér blóðuga leið innum sjáöldur mín.

En á þessum fagra degi var svo mikill kærleikur í loftinu að jafnvel mestu gungum gat ekki verið um megn að draga andann djúpt og fylla líkama sinn andlegri móðurelsku í garð heimsins barna. Ég tók stúlkuna í faðm mér og þrýsti henni að mér.

“Hvað heitir þú?” spurði ég eins vinalega og ég gat.

“Ég heiti Amelía, frá Karlsstöðum í Vöðlavík, undir Svartafjalli, þar sem nykrar ganga lausir og draga með sér vitgranna og ógætna í Grænavatn, einkadóttir Fatímu og Kadir frá Augnaborg í Tangers-Tetúan héraði Ma- rokkó — foreldra minna sem nú haft verið frá mér teknir.”

“Dear Sir!” she cried, and flung herself about my weirdly astonished legs. “Help us, the forsaken, by all the prayers of Mohammad.”

I stared in disbelief at this child, this dark-skinned beggar, who I struggled to believe was actually in Iceland and not on the tv or in other countries. Southern Europe. North Africa. The Arabian Peninsula. A Scandinavian documentary. I ummed. Hesitated. “Who are you?” I meant to ask, but didn’t. “What are you doing? What the hell do you want with me? I don’t know you — her — go away!” was even nearer the top of my mind, but, lacking
points, then, Crash-novels are not concerned only with domestic architecture, but also to address profound anxieties about the meaning of a nationalism founded on an insular, rural economy in an economically globalized, urban present. But these explorations, though important, tend to be peripheral and tentative.

It will be clear that architecture and the ways in which rural settlements have fallen into the orbit of Reykjavik are bearers of huge amounts of meaning in Crash-writing, used with varying degrees of self-awareness to explore gendering, financialization, nationalism, tradition, and (albeit usually very implicitly) globalization. It will also be clear that Crash-writing struggles to navigate a course between the Scylla of pessimism (epitomized by Hálendið) and the Charybdis of nostalgia (epitomized by Sigurðar saga fóts). Gæska again offers a refreshing exploration of these straits.

5.3.4 Gæska: Renewing the City
Gæska offers its own take on rethinking the city, but puts the challenging of Icelandic nationalism firmly at the center of this process, helping it both to map the ideologies underpinning the Crash and to reconceptualize Icelandic space in a globalizing context. Following Halldór’s breakdown towards the beginning of Gæska, he emerges bewildered from Hótel Borg, a large hotel on Austurvöllur into which he has retreated, to encounter his society in the wake of the Crash. Halldór finds, gathered in bafflement on Austurvöllur, a conspectus of society reminiscent of the “fair field full of folk” that frames the prologue to the fourteenth-century dream-vision Piers Plowman. Far from seeking a return to rural tranquility, then, Gæska embraces the bustle of the city, but insists, through its imagined crisis, on ploughing the sections of an atomized society together, with the public architecture of the city as their forum. Wandering through this gathering, Halldór is accosted by Amelía (Excerpt 8). In a corpus

any prior notice, didn’t manage to reach the surface of her flood of words.

“The state has robbed me of my parents, such that now may I exist only on the street, like any other mongrel, and all that sustains me are the left-overs that tumble from the tables of thy most tolerant fellow citizens, and the occasional good Samaritan who graciously allows me to lick some sustenance from his erect flesh.”

I had no idea what I ought to do. What I ought to say. Didn’t believe this any more than the rest. Was I still dreaming? Delerium tremens? I felt a powerful nausea seize my body when the girl exerted a desparate, vice-like grip on my tibia, as if to prevent me making a break and running away (which wasn’t far off happening). She dug her nails into the backs of my calves and then ground her teeth with such force that the chilling creaking echoed around the buildings. “Help!” she screamed, so loudly that she seemed to be losing consciousness. “I have been forced to live among wolves solely because my impoverished parents were taken from me, and my whole life has since been scarred by horror. Dear Sir! I have walked barefoot across the wastes in the raging winter with the one hope in my breast that shelter might await me here in the capital, where the unschooled trailer-trash of the countryside cannot reach me—that here I could be free to live my life and even—if the higher powers be not too opposed—attend school and receive education, which would be an honour to my dynasty, since I am, as you can perhaps see, descended from mathematicians.”

My first response was to take to my heels. To kick the girl loose and run away as fast as my legs would carry me before someone noticed the indecency. My next responses were all much the same as the first, but, crippled by amazement and beaten to dust by my own inner crisis, I didn’t manage anything but to stare into the eyes of the child. They were brown, and so big that I thought I would
where it is fashionable to emphasize the non-native language of Iceland's immigrants — a strategy which is realistic yet also tends to make immigrant characters’ utterances more about their immigrant identity than about the content of their speech — it is refreshing to see Eiríkur Órn giving Amelía the scope instead to speak in an elevated, literary prose quite at odds with Hall- dór’s fumbling interjections, and gloriously incongruous with her described demeanor. Like the novels which trace filaments of influence running from Reykjavík to Iceland’s countryside, Gæska here maps a path between Karlsstaðir, on the opposite side of Iceland from Reykjavík, and the capital. But rather than simply watching finance flow from the city to the countryside, the novel instead adverts to the fact that Iceland’s rural settlements have been partly sustained by immigrants willing to take on jobs in fishing and related industries. Rather than presenting the countryside as the true home of Icelandicness, Gæska presents it as a complex, multi-ethnic environment — and if Gæska neglects rural Iceland, it at least avoids fetishizing it. Hereafter, however, the focus of the novel is firmly on the city.

It emerges that Fatíma and Kadír have been seized by the state for enforced acculturation and are being forced to recite the Eddaic poem Hávamál and perform folk-dances in traditional dress before the government at a state dinner, in an allegory for cultural assimilatory policies predicated on a cynically manipulated and essentially fictitious nationalist image of Icelandic identity. Amelía innocently punctures the pomp of Icelandic nationalism by describing how her parents have been forced to wear clown-costumes, with her mother’s hair uncovered in a room full of fat men smoking cigars.60 Halldór realizes, with shame, that he was one of the parliamentarians who supported the assimilation policy. With negligible help from Hall- dór but significant assistance from Freyleif, Amelía rescues her family.

The unfolding stories of Fatíma and Kadír give specificity and depth to the real crisis in the novel, the mysterious arrival

60 Norðdahl, Gæska, 111.
once more lose my mind as they bored their bloody way through my pupils.

But on this beautiful day, there was so much love in the air that even the worst coward could not have withstood drawing a deep breath and filling his body with spiritual maternal affection towards the children of the world. I took the girl into my arms and held her close.

“What are you called?” I asked, as companionably as I could.

“I am called Amelía, of Karlsstaðir í Vöðlavík, which lies beneath Svartafjall, where kelpies wander at large and drag the foolish and the unwary with them down into Grænavatn, the only daughter of Fatíma and Kadír of the City of Eyes, in the region of Tangier-Tetouan in Morocco — those very parents who have now been taken from me.”

of ninety-three million refugees, making Iceland suddenly Europe’s most populous country — with 900 inhabitants per square kilometre (up from 3.2, but still, as Millý points out, markedly lower than Singapore’s 7,000). Their arrival in Iceland partly serves to remind the reader that however sorry Icelanders may have felt for themselves in the wake of the Crash, most people are markedly worse off elsewhere in the world. But it is more interesting to consider the meaning of the refugees in relation to the geographies of the Crash considered above. It is easy to read the silent, undifferentiated mass of refugees, who fill Reykjavík and whose arrival is as startling to Kadír and Fatíma as to everyone else, as simply inscrutable. But they perhaps make sense as an extension of the anxious but tentative probing of geographies beyond Iceland that appears widely in the Crash-fiction corpus. They remind us that the disorientatingly rapid urbanization of Icelandic life during the last century has in fact been experienced globally, with

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61 Ibid., 268.
the explosion of the shantytown, born of the continual impoverishment of the developing world by multinational corporations and financial organizations, the erosion of traditional rural ways of life, and the focalization of the cheap consumer good production so central to contemporary capitalism in the urban areas of poor nations.62

“Í okkar samfélagi er ekki til nema einn glæpur verulega hættulegur [...] og það er að vera ofanúr sveit. Þessvegna munu allar borgir heimsins hrynja” (“in our society, there is no really dangerous crime—except one [...] and that is to be from the countryside. For this reason, all the world’s cities will crumble”), comments the Organist wryly in Atómstöðin.63 Widening its scope to take in the horror of the civilized at the uncivilized on a global scale, Gæska puts the Organist’s words to the test. It seizes on iconic, mediatized images of the overpopulated favelas and slums of developing world, and projects them onto Reykjavík in ways which seem on the one hand entirely incongruous with reality, yet on the other the natural extension of an internal process of urbanization which has by itself generated enormous strains on Iceland’s national self-image, gleefully challenging the anxious and the paranoid to envisage worse.

Gæska’s refugees constitute a thought-experiment in which some of the most pressing consequences of neoliberalism, and the developed world’s power to assist with them, are given the urgency they deserve by being brought not merely to the developed world’s door, but unstoppably into that world. The surreal figure of ninety-three million is important insofar as, despite the misgivings and protestations of several of the characters, it is self-evidently physically impossible for a population of 330,000 to try to close the door on the problem by deporting the arrivals: as Millý recognizes, the only viable response is also the most humane one, which is to welcome them. “Þetta er sjálfsmorð” (“this is suicide”), protests Halldór; “kannski,” replies Millý, “en

62 Walonen, Contemporary World Narrative Fiction, 16.
63 Laxness, Atómstöðin, 215.
Hinn valkosturinn er margfalt þjóðarmorð“ (“perhaps, “but it’s also inevitable. The alternative is multiple genocide”). Musing that some of the new arrivals will probably starve, Halldór ponders how this “gæti farð í taugarnar á Íslandiningunum. Ef þeir dræpust ekki líka. Það var allt eins líklegt. Allt eins réttlátt” (“might get on the nerves of Icelanders. If they didn’t die too. That was equally likely. Equally just”).

Whereas the arrival of a small number of immigrants or the growth of an unfamiliar religion is central to Icelandic anxieties of identity, Gæska explodes these anxieties by exploring how the problem of overwhelming numbers of refugees contains its own solution — the novel’s eponymous kindness, put at the center of a new sense of political purpose.

Moreover, it is Fatíma who delivers the hopeful denouement of the novel, through an intervention in Reykjavík’s architecture. Commandeering the assistance of Óli Dóri, who experiences unease at having a mosque in Reykjavík but finds that helping his neighbours is more fun than worrying about this, Fatíma oversees the raising of minarets on the unfinished Tónlistarhús, the huge, basaltic, glass and steel concert hall conceived by Björgólfur Guðmundsson as a spectacle of yuppie achievement, left half-finished by the Crash. The moment when Fatíma’s Arabic call to prayer rings across Reykjavík encodes a pluralist (and feminist) dawning of hope for the beleaguered island: “röddin sem söng var bæði sorgmædd og glöð, grátklökk og stolt, hokin af þjónustu við Drottin og full vonar fyrir hans sakir” (“the voice that sang was both sorrowful and glad, misty-eyed and proud, bent in service to the Lord and full of hope for his sake”).

In locating true spirituality in Islam, Gæska participates in a well-worn Orientalist trope (and by locating this spirituality in a women, Gæska is also consonant with traditional gender norms). But the novel does not shy from bringing into relief the hollowness of the hegemonic deployment of both traditional

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64 Norðdahl, Gæska, 269.
65 Ibid., 267.
66 Ibid., 264.
and Christian beliefs in Icelandic political discourse. The state
Lutheranism to which the novel alludes extensively is portrayed
as shackled to neoliberal and neocolonial ideologies.\(^67\) The nov-
el’s depiction of a fictitious Reykjavík NATO conference attended
by George W. Bush, for example, rewrites Ephesians 6:10–20 in
a bitter critique of the Bush regime’s invocations of Christianity,
and of Iceland’s complicity in America’s expeditionism in the
Middle East during this period:

Næst dyrunum stóðu friðargæslulíðar með alvæpni og
stóðust vélabrögð andskotans, gyrtir sannleika um lendar
sínar, klæddir brynju réttlætisins og skóaðir með fúsleik til
að flytja fagnaðarerindi friðarins. Á höfðum sér bárú þeir
hjálma hjálpræðis, og þrýstu að brjósti sér hálfsjálfvirkum
hríðskotaríflum hreinlætisins, sem gátu slökkt öll hin eldleg-
gu skeyti þess vonda.\(^68\)

At the doors stood fully armed peacekeepers withstanding
the wiles of the Devil, the belts of truth buckled around their
waists, wearing the breastplates of righteousness, and shod
with readiness to preach the gospel of peace. On their heads
they wore helmets of salvation, and clutched to their breasts
semi-automatic assault rifles of purity, which could extin-
guish all the fiery arrows of the evil one.

Meanwhile, post-Crash Icelandic nationalism has quite fre-
quently adverted to traditional beliefs, not least in elves. I have
discussed some of these above regarding gender in Crash-writ-
ing. The deployment here can be understood through a pregnant
observation in Atómstöðin, when Ugla refers to “huldumanninn

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67 Cf. ibid., 272.
68 Ibid., 64; cf. Kristín Loftsdóttir, “The Loss of Innocence: The Icelandic
Financial Crisis and Colonial Past,” Anthropology Today 26, no. 6
(December 2010): 9–13 at 12; Kristín Loftsdóttir and Helga Björnsdóttir,
“The ’Jeep-Gangsters’ from Iceland: Local Development Assistance in a
31–32.
dýpst í brjóstum okkar sjálfum” (“the hidden person deepest in our own breasts”), where huldumaður is a respectful euphemism for an elf.69 Ugla positions the elf as the true Icelander, embedded (however deeply) somewhere in every true Icelandic citizen. This discourse about elves, arising from nineteenth-century National Romanticism, then serves in Atómstöðin as a mode of resistance to another set of new ideas and external pressures, the modernity of the atómskáld (“free-verse poet”) and the “sólu landsins” (“sale of the country”) to NATO.70 This idea of the “elf within” as the prototypical Icelander within each citizen had put down deep roots in Icelandic culture, sufficiently to be implicit in modern Icelandic folklore.71 Accordingly, Guðmundur Böðvarsson’s celebrated environmentalist poem Völuvísa, with which he closed his 1963 collection Landsvísur: Ljóð, positions elves (and dwarves) as forces policing the boundaries of specifically Icelandic behaviour:

Eitt verð ég að segja þér áður en ég dey, 
enda skalt þú börnum þínum kenna fræði mín,
sögðu mér það álfarnir í Suðurey,
sögðu mér það dvergarnir í Norðurey,
sögðu mér það gullinmura og gleymérei 
og gleymdu því ei: 
að hefnist þeim er svíkur sína huldumey, 
honum verður erfiður dauðinn.72

One thing I must say to you before I die — 
and you must teach your children what I know; 
the elves in Suðurey said it to me, 
the dwarves in Norðurey said it to me, 
the buttercup and forget-me-not said it to me 
and forget it not:

69 Laxness, Atómstöðin, 75.
70 Ibid., 74.
72 Guðmundur Böðvarsson, Landsvísur: Ljóð [Verses of the land: poems] 
(Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs, 1963), 57.
that he who betrays his hidden maiden faces revenge; an ill death will befall him.

This poem has been quite prominent in the wake of the Crash: for example, Brynja Björg Halldórsdóttir quoted the last lines when resigning from the Left-Green Party in 2011; it is the epigraph to Kristín Helga Gunnarsdóttir’s 2011 novel Riólitreglan; and it was quoted on at least one placard in the 2016 protests in the wake of the Panama Papers scandal. Writing a racist letter against the building of a purpose-built mosque in Reykjavík, and against Islam generally, one Stefanía Jónasdóttir invoked similar ideas, signing off with “megi landvættir mínir varðveita land mitt og þjóð” (“may my land-spirits protect my land and people”). Thus people like Stefanía appropriate traditional beliefs in elves in order to naturalize nationalist ideologies: they claim that ideologies such as Islamophobia are rooted in traditional discourse (while in practice adapting traditional discourses to novel ideologies). But Gæska vigorously satirizes the idea of the elf as the Icelander within. Thus Halldór Garðar’s drunken musings on the Icelandic people run:

Heimski lýður.
Nema þetta væri bara brennvínið að tala.

Stupid people.

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75 Norðdahl, Gæska, 77.
Unless this was just the booze talking.

Of course these were the best people. Good to their children. Their grandchildren. Their great-grandchildren. Their relatives. Generous at Christmas and unhesitating in work. *Hard workers.* Unique people. Second to none. Shaped by nature for a thousand years. Champions of democracy, prosperity and governance. Long live the ruffled sea and those who brave it. Long live the pebble beaches and the hidden people. Long live the fish on the coins and the idiots who revere it.

On the surface here, Halldór conflates elves (*huldufólk*, “hidden people”), Icelanders, and Iceland, as the nationalist sources discussed above lead us to expect. But of course in its satirical context the quotation really calls ideals of Icelandicness themselves into question, dispensing unabashedly with the idea that Halldór Garðar is at this moment finding his inner elf, or indeed that there is any inner elf to be found. No less than in Aimé de Mesmaeker’s seduction speech, considered in §5.3.2, Halldór Garðar’s elves are hollowed-out commodities in an economy of cultural and political capital.

Thus Eiríkur Örn’s contrast of commodified elves, compromised Christianity, and a committed Islam exposes the spiritual bankruptcy of Stefánía’s invocation of *landvættir* against the imagined Muslim peril and establishes a humanism in which there is space for a positive reimagining of Icelandic identities in a globalizing world. The novel does use Islam as a cipher for some kind of universal spirituality, but in choosing Islam rather than any other religion for this purpose, it opts for a religion whose adherents are disproportionately representative of the world’s poor. And by giving its primary Muslim character some complexity and agency, and implicitly recognizing the heterogeneity of Islamic theology and its scope for politically progressive thought, *Gæska* avoids presenting a mere caricature of Islam.

It is not coincidental that the site of *Gæska’s* new mosque is the enormous concert hall Tónlistarhúsi (“house of music”), in 2009 only part finished, now called Harpa (“harp”). The har-
Utopianism

The redevelopment of which it was intended to be a part was financed by Björgólfur Guðmundsson, branded “World Trade Center Reykjavik” in Icelandic as in English, and intended *inter alia* to include a new headquarters for Landsbanki. When the Crash hit and Björgólfur plunged into bankruptcy, work halted on the Tónlistarhúsi until the government concluded that it was both fiscally and psychologically prudent to finance its completion; whether the rest of the proposed development ever takes place remains, at the time of writing, to be seen. During the depths of the crisis, then, the unfinished Tónlistarhús stood as a towering monument to boom-time hubris and the parlous state of the economy. Though now a popular building, Harpa’s scale, glitzy mirrored interior, and predilection for English signage over Icelandic continue to memorialize the culture of the Icelandic boom. Meanwhile, the site was exceptionally suitable for Eiríkur Örn to envisage a mosque that would exasperate the people complaining about the supposedly undue prominence of the real-life new mosque in the suburb of Sogamýrri. These points all make the Tónlistarhús a potent setting for the denouement of *Gæska*.

But the Tónlistarhús also symbolizes the convergence of finance, government, and patronage of the arts. *Gæska* is refreshingly light on hand-wringing about what it is to be an author under neoliberalism, instead getting on with challenging neoliberalism directly. Insofar as the novel frets about artists’ complicity in the boom, it does so brusquely and incisively: among the gathered estates around Austurvöllur after the Crash,

undir styttunni af Skúla fógeta stóð handfylli af ósofnum listamönnum, hálfdrukknum, sem allir höfðu fengið höfnun á debetkortin sín þegar spurðist út að Björgólfur væri einkaþotinn úr landi með styrtarpeningana sína. Þeir klóruðu sér í hausnum og veltu fyrir sér næstu skrefum.

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76 See §3.3.
77 Norðdahl, *Gæska*, 130.
Under the statue of Sheriff Skúli stood an underslept handful of artists, half-drunk, who had all had their debit cards rejected when it was heard that Björgólfur was be private-jetted out of the country with his grant money. They scratched their heads and considered their next steps.

Fatíma’s call to prayer from the repurposed Tónlistarhúss, then, does not simply represent the awakening of a spirituality in a land in thrall to mammon. It also represents the discovery of a new identity for the arts in Iceland, repurposing the white elephants of the boom years, perhaps to express some of the characteristics of Fatíma’s call to prayer: sorrow and joy, yearning and pride, service and hope, enabling people at large, like Fatíma’s small congregation, “að draga andann eftir langvarandi kokþrengsli og köfnunartilfinningu” (“to draw breath after choking for a long time, and a feeling of suffocation”). If this is an Orientalist moment, then, it is at least one that can contemplate the artistic heritage of the Islamicate world, recognize that the Islamicate world has its own histories of feminism, and see there the possibility for the arts in Iceland to help Icelandic society to shift into a new and kinder mode. The moment presents a view of boom-time architecture which recognizes its unhomely, alienating character, but does not advocate flight from the ghost-towns of the boom to the countryside of nationalist nostalgia. Rather Gæska embraces the idea that Icelandic society, like most human societies, is now predominantly urban; contemplates the possibilities for reclaiming private space for public use; and imagines repopulating the ghost towns in a newly cosmopolitan mode.

5.4 Conclusion

When the Crash hit, people in Iceland had one framework for critiquing the boom particularly close to hand: a popular feminism that has been diligently nurtured in Iceland for decades.

78 Ibid., 265.
Yet much of the literary commentary on the Crash that has attempted feminist perspectives (which is, I should reiterate, usually by men) has tended to focus on crises of masculinity and has often done little seriously to rethink how Icelandic gender might work—rather it tends to remind us how little some key feminist ideas have actual penetrated much of Icelandic society. Commentary has also often drifted into essentialist ideas that posit that women are inherently better able to run finance and governance than men. These perspectives seem unlikely either to be correct or to help achieve a restructuring of the dominant ideologies in Icelandic culture. At the same time, much commentary on the Crash has considered the home, urban space, and speculative building, linking its analysis of these topics with gender by positing the feminine domestic space as a useful antidote to macho building projects unsuitable for homely life. However, such commentary has tended towards a nostalgic reversion to a pastoral existence fetishized by Icelandic nationalism but at odds with the urban realities of Icelandic society (and, correspondingly, with little power usefully to imagine alternative futures for rural Iceland).

Gæska reflects but also challenges these utopian impulses. It is awkwardly structured, idiosyncratic, and not immune to essentialist attitudes to gender, to deeply embedded racisms, or to stereotypes of the Islamic world. Its humanism leaves little room for contemplating the destruction capitalism had wreaked and continues to wreak on other species. But it is also vivacious, characterful, and willing to present bold thought-experiments that reveal the pettiness or constriction of many responses to the Crash. Gæska not only contemplates gender and space, but tackles nationalism head-on. It shows a continual awareness of canonical medieval and folkloric themes in Icelandic discourses of identity, satirizing the ways they are used in nationalist discourses, and does not hesitate either to laugh at these or to repurpose them to a global context and a progressive outlook. Thus Gæska succeeds in satirizing mainstream feminist responses to the Crash while nonetheless addressing the role of masculinity in causing it, and complicates the tendency of Icelandic femi-
nism to abject the Islamic world by giving Islamicate feminism a significant role and dramatic position in the story. While the text can at one level be read to remind its Icelandic audience in the context of the Crash of how lucky they are, it goes far beyond this to promote a utopian internationalism.

_Gæska_ also implies something like a theory of change. First and foremost, _Gæska_ dispenses wholesale with technocratic, neoliberal governance, seeing the repoliticization of politics as a key response to the Crash. It does this by exploring, primarily through Halldór Garðar’s personal crisis, the corrosive sense under globalized neoliberalism that the only scope (or even purpose) for politics is to tinker with a system largely beyond politicians’ control. _Gæska_ promotes instead a recognition that “free-market” neoliberal finance only exists because states create and maintain the conditions for its existence. Indeed, the novel inverts the neoliberal assumption that it is governments’ job to facilitate the free movement of capital while tightly regulating the movement of labor, helping to expose the artificiality of the constraints within which, neoliberal governments protest, they must act. Unlike novels that lament the emergence of a neo-feudal elite, then, _Gæska_ expresses a basic democratic theory of change, encouraging people to reclaim political and physical space for the public. And while installing a government of women would, it implies, be a good start, _Gæska_ presses for government orientated to a higher purpose than being a kind of middle-manager between global corporations and the proletariat which must, irritatingly, win occasional re-election. Near the end of the novel, a still bewildered Halldór Garðar asks Millý to reflect on the last year of government and says “nefndu mér eitthvað sem allir geta verið sammála um að hafi verið gott. Eitthvað sannanlega gott — einsog það er sannanlega gott að gefa svöngum manni að borða” (“tell me something that everyone can agree has been good. Something truly good — the way that it’s truly good to feed a hungry person”).79 Accommodating the 93,000,000 refugees fits the bill. This utopianism is in

79 Norðdahl, _Gæska_, 263.
many ways simplistic: it is ably summarized in the book’s blurb (which, if not by Eiríkur Órn himself, at least sounds like it is): “Gæska er ótrúlega hugmyndarík og fyndin skáldsaga um allt sem skorti á Íslandi síðustu ár: Jafnrétti, bræðralag og meðal-hóf — og allt hitt sem nóg var af: Græðgi, heimsku og fordóma” (“Gæska is an incredibly imaginative and funny novel about everything that has been lacking in Iceland in recent years: egality, fraternity, and moderation — and everything of which there has been plenty: greed, stupidity, and prejudice”). But, if simplistic, the novel is no less a reminder of common sense in a literary corpus dominated by the jaded resignation engendered by capitalist realism. Coming back to theories of change, Gæska is also unusual in putting Iceland’s post-colonial anxiety, expressed in so many novels through marginal characters or encounters representing the Islamic world, at the center of its story, and recognizing firmly that Icelandic culture needs to square up to this to have a chance of developing a more effective politics.

The philosophy of Gæska is naive. But this cheerful naivety is one part of its resistance to the mode of capitalist realism, whereby only a circumscribed and ultimately brutal Realpolitik is considered suitable subject matter for writing. In asserting its internationalist humanism, Gæska does good work to expose the poverty of neoliberal discourses when it comes to political possibility.