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**Amphibians? Fluid Queerness and Irishness in
Contemporary Irish literature: Jamie O’Neill, Emma
Donoghue, Mia Gallagher, Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill,
William Keohane and Toby Buckley**

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Université de Lille

École doctorale Sciences de l'Homme et de la Société

Laboratoire CECILLE (ULR 4074)

Amphibians?

Fluid Queerness and Irishness in Contemporary Irish literature: Jamie O'Neill, Emma Donoghue, Mia Gallagher, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, William Keohane and Toby Buckley

Par Nemo Gorecki

Thèse de doctorat de **Langues et Littératures anglaises et anglo-saxonnes**

Dirigée par **Fiona McCann**

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Titre : Amphibien.ne.s? Déviance et identités Irlandaises fluides dans la littérature contemporaine irlandaise : Jamie O’Neill, Emma Donoghue, Mia Gallagher, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, William Keohane and Toby Buckley

Résumé : Cette thèse propose une exploration des procédés de marginalisation de la déviance et de l’identité irlandaise au travers du prisme des théories queer et décoloniale et de l’écologie anti-capitaliste. Il s’agit d’analyser l’expression littéraire de cette altérité infligée au travers de la figure de « l’amphibien.ne » dans les œuvres de Jamie O’Neill (*At Swim Two Boys* 2001), Emma Donoghue (*Hood* 1995), Mia Gallagher (*Beautiful Pictures of the Lost Homeland* 2016), Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill (*The Fifty-Minute Mermaid* 2006), William Keohane et Toby Buckley (*Queering the Green* 2021) et autres auteur.rice.s contemporain.e.s . J’interroge l’utilisation de la figure de ‘l’amphibien.ne’ par Mia Gallagher, entre deux nationalités, genres, sexualités, du parallèle proposé par Jamie O’Neill entre identité irlandaise et déviante (et socialisme) et de la métaphore centrale de *Fifty-Minute Mermaid* par Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill : Irlandais=Eau et Anglais=Terre. Cette étude est basée sur la tension esthétique entre l’idéalisme romantique (le sublime) et le grotesque, l’absurde. En analysant les légendes et créatures celtiques évoquant la monstruosité de l’Autre (pathologisé, racisé), les liens entre l’humain, le non-humain et l’environnement urbain/rural, cette thèse met en lumière certains modes de résistances politiques et littéraires actuels en Irlande.

Mots clefs : LGBT – Queer – Irlande – Décolonial – Postcolonial – Ecologie – Sciences humaines et de la mer

Title : Amphibians? Fluid Queerness and Irishness in Contemporary Irish literature: Jamie O’Neill, Emma Donoghue, Mia Gallagher, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, William Keohane and Toby Buckley

Abstract : This thesis proposes an exploration of the marginalisation processes surrounding queerness and Irishness through the lens of queer and decolonial theories and literary expressions of this inflicted otherness through the notion of ‘amphibians’ in the works of Jamie O’Neill (*At Swim Two Boys* 2001), Emma Donoghue (*Hood* 1995), Mia Gallagher (*Beautiful Pictures of the Lost Homeland* 2016), Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill(*The Fifty-Minute Mermaid* 2006), William Keohane et Toby Buckley (*Queering the Green* 2021) and other contemporary poetry authors.

I explore the use of the ‘amphibian’ figure by Mia Gallagher, a figure between two nationalities, genders and sexualities, as well as the parallel proposed by Jamie O’Neill between Irish and queer identities (and socialism) and the central metaphor for the *Fifty-Minute Mermaid* by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill: Irish=Water and English=Land. The analysis of these texts is based on the aesthetic tension between romantic idealism (the sublime) and grotesque, absurd aesthetic/rhetoric. Through the analysis of Celtic legends and creatures expressing the monstrosity of the Other (pathologised, racialised) and the interconnectedness between the human, non-human and the rural/urban environment, this thesis sheds light on some current modes of political and literary resistance in Ireland.

Keywords : LGBT – Queer – Ireland – Decolonial – Postcolonial – Ecology – Blue Humanities

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Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure. Consider also the devilish brilliance and beauty of many of its most remorseless tribes, as the dainty embellished shape of many species of sharks.

Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began.

Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horror of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off that isle, thou canst never return! (299)¹

At fust the things didn't never go onto the main island, but arter a time they come to want to. Seems they hankered arter mixin' with the folks, an' havin' j'int ceremonies on the big days—May-Eve an' Hallowe'en. Ye see, they was able to live both in an' aout o' water—what they call amphibians, I guess. (...) Seems that human folks has got a kind o' relation to sech water-beasts—that everything alive come aout o' the water onct, an' only needs a little change to go back agin. Them things told the Kanakys that ef they mixed bloods there'd be children as ud look human at fust, but later turn more'n more like the things, till finally they'd take to the water an' jine the main lot o' things daown thar. An' this is the important part, young feller—they as turned into fish things an' went into the water wouldn't never die. (890-1)

No I shall not shoot myself – I cannot be made to shoot myself! I shall plan my cousin's escape from that Canton madhouse, and together we shall go to the marvel-shadowed Innsmouth. We shall swim out to that brooding reed in the sea and dive down through black abysses to Cyclopean and many-columned Y'ha-nthlei, and in that lair of the Deep-Ones we shall dwell amidst wonder and glory forever. (922-23)²

Down here all the fish is happy

As off through the waves they roll

The fish on the land ain't happy

They sad 'cause they in their bowl

¹ Melville, Herman *Moby-Dick* London, Penguin Classics (2003)

² Lovecraft, Howard P. *The Complete Fiction of H.P Lovecraft* New York Race Point Publishing (2014)

But fish in the bowl is lucky

They in for a worser fate

One day when the boss get hungry

Guess who's gon' be on the plate?

Under the sea

Under the sea

Nobody beat us

Fry us and eat us³

'Il dit qu'il voit pas le rapport'⁴

³ *Under The Sea* – Lyrics by Ashman, Howard and Henkman, Alan *The Little Mermaid*, Disney (1989)

⁴ *La Cité de la Peur* Bérbérian, Alain (1994) 'he says he doesn't see the link there'

Introduction

As made obvious by these epigraphs, the focus of this thesis will be the sea and sea creatures because they stand as an effective metaphor for patterns of othering, be it racialising or pathologising normal variants in human appearances, origins and behaviours. From the fear of diving into the unknown in Melville, to the longing for the abyss in Lovecraft and living happily in it for Ashman, the relationship with water and the sea presents the idea of embracing a deeper nature, something hidden or forgotten. The protagonist of *A Shadow Over Innessmouth* overcomes his self-loathing concerning his 'amphibian' origins and plans to join in with the creatures of the deep, a moment of relief and acceptance that has been read through the prism of queer theory and, considering the anthropological/racist tones of the short story, can be doubled with a decolonial interpretation of celebrating a culture once seen as revolting/threatening. Howard Ashman, who 'gave a mermaid her voice and a beast his soul'⁶, has given enough lyrical material for decades of queer readings of Disney movies, an ironically very censoring juggernaut.

The various novels, short stories, songs and movies selected in this thesis all gravitate around this unifying water metaphor which also serves our purpose to introduce some fluidity into rigid binaries. Ireland, because of its ambiguous status at both the centre and periphery of the British Empire, is an appropriate space to work on these questions. Moreover, its subversive history of decolonial struggle endows Irish identity with a marginalised status close to that of queerness, and many theorists working on Ireland have been prompt to pair the similar processes of othering (Kieran Rose, Joseph Valente, Patrick Mullen among others). I will be looking at novels, short-stories and poetry collections by contemporary Irish authors such as Mia Gallagher with *Beautiful Pictures of the Lost Homeland* (2016), Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim Two Boys* (2001), Emma Donoghue's *Hood* (1995), Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's *Fifty Minute Mermaid* (2006) and young Irish authors like William Keohane with 'Cratloe Woodlake', 'Buffalo Pound Lake' and 'Three Strands' (2021-2), Toby Buckley's *Milk Snake* (2022), Caitríona O'Reilly's *Sea Cabinet* (2006), the poetry collection *Queering the Green* (2021) edited by Paul Maddern, Jessica Traynor's *Liffey Swim* (2014) and, briefly reaching outside of Ireland, Solomon Rivers et al. *The Deep* (2019) and Lars Horn's *The Voice of the Fish* (2022) and more to come. Such a multiplicity of sources might seem surprising but they display the high frequency of

⁶ Disney, *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), dedicated to Howard Ashman. (End of the credits.)

water as an expansive metaphor to express many issues that will be dissected here. This issue alone is the common thread of all those writings: water, the sea, sea creatures. The texts will be analysed at various levels but all participate in confirming or illustrating the theories utilised throughout the undertaking.

The ultimate aim of this thesis is to dive into the intersection of queer and Irish identities, to identify similar patterns of othering that create a trauma then expressed by an attempt at mythologising otherness. It seems, at times, to be based on the essentialisation of marginalised identities and the limitations of that process will be looked at. I will also mention the concept of borders on land and sea, akin to that of social categories, testing the artificiality of these, the role of the law and science in applying them and justifying them. Furthermore, their application in the unique context of the Hibernian Island will be examined alongside a short history of local queer and decolonial advances. A link between alternative modes of belonging and blue humanities will also be drawn as colonialism brought about the generalisation of the capitalist mode of thinking⁷. In Ireland, it redefined the land as a resource to be exploited, marking it so deeply that it brought about a new geological era. The sea, because of climate change, then overrides its ambiguous nature to become a threat, rising to drown the islands and coasts and displacing millions⁸; it is the ticking time bomb in the background of the novels and poems and will be treated as such in the thesis.

Yet before we get to the theoretical explanations and definitions, it would be interesting to follow Mia Gallagher's example in seeing loose parallels in history. Throughout the novel *Beautiful Pictures of the Lost Homeland* the reader is sporadically brought out of the plot, into a Museum of Curiosities, the *Wunderkammer*, retracing the history of Bohemia/Sudeten and the fight over this region by Czech and German neighbouring forces. The author then draws these 'loose/wavy parallels' with the history of Ireland and its conquest by the British coloniser discreetly, in footnotes, positing that: 'As we all know, Herstory and its variations (history, itstory, theirstory, etc.) never repeats itself; it just mimics, badly. We therefore suggest that you visualise our 'parallels' as loose/wavy, not (Fig.1) straight lines. Think of them as strings on a musical instrument; carrying sound waves which travel at different frequencies.'⁹

⁷ Moore, Jason W. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Oakland, PM Press (2016)

⁸ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/sea-level-rise-1> [13/11/21]

⁹ Gallagher, Mia *Beautiful Pictures of the Lost Homeland* Dublin, New Island (2016), 99. All further page references will be placed in brackets (BPLH) in the body of the text and will refer to this same edition.

I would like to expose, in this introduction, some of the lesser damages of British colonisation and propose a seemingly off-topic case-study. It serves two purposes: first to explain the positionality behind this thesis and to illustrate how knowledge is always 'situated', and second, to introduce some of the historical trends and societal issues that will be then examined in Irish context. Echoing Mia Gallagher's project of lifting Ireland out of its insularity to replace it into a wider European context, it also showcases the specific history of decolonisation in Ireland and its resonances beyond the confines of its island due to its semi-peripheral status.

It first seems important to address several expectations surrounding academic writing, at least in French Academia. The general advice is to treat topics that are not 'personal', to leave political beliefs out of the research and writing processes, to aim for 'scientific objectivity'. It is unfortunately the privilege of a very lucky few to spend their lives in an apolitical fashion when it neatly aligns with the *status quo*. Objectivity, be it in academic, scientific or journalistic contexts, ultimately just highlights a blind spot on one's own subjectivity: a claim to objectivity renders partially invisible the context, influences and history-related biases embedded in a writer's point of view. In Donna Haraway's words: 'There is no unmediated photograph or passive camera obscura in scientific accounts of bodies and machines; there are only highly specific visual possibilities, each with a wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of organising worlds.'¹⁰

Yet if one is to be genuine in this belief, it would only be fair to display how situated the knowledge behind this thesis is. The decision to use de-clawed, white-washed¹¹ versions of queer, decolonial and intersectional theories in academic context has a very easily found origin. There is an interesting, quite recent trend in academia to use autoethnography in research. A personal experience is then analysed with the usual theoretical tools, and this seems appropriate for the introductory case study (though it is not specific to me personally, all Calaisians have had the same experience). Here I would like to draw a loose and wavy parallel between Calais, a small town in Northern France which directly faces the English coast, and Ireland. Both have been, at one time (and still are now, in part) British territory and the same colonial trends applied to the island and the city.

¹⁰ Haraway, Donna 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.' *Feminist Studies*, Autumn, 1988, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn, 1988), 575-599 (583).

¹¹ Bilge, Sirma 'Le blanchiment de l'intersectionnalité.' *Recherches féministes*, vol. 28, n 2, 2015 : 9-32.

English Calais

Indeed, the city of Calais senses, to an extent, the weight of English dominion and this participates in the choice of studying a territory that has endured far greater suffering under this yoke. Calais was conquered and effectively became an English city from 1347 to 1558 after the siege of the town (at the time only the fortress of what is now Calais-Nord) and the public humiliation of the Six Burghers, as represented by the 1885 Rodin statue now facing our City Hall. It is worth noting that it is rather unusual to represent in bronze not heroes but losers of a particular struggle. The six burghers do not even hold the status of martyrs as they were spared by the wife of Edward III when coming to the king 'tête nue, sans chausses, la corde au cou, les clefs de la ville et du château en leur mains.'¹² Failure and the aesthetic thereof are well expressed in the pathetic appearance of once powerful men reduced to (failed) martyrdom: the bodies are knobby and emaciated after months of siege, some of the faces are deeply lined and twisted in expressions of fear and despair. These tragic bronze figures now sit in copiously flowered gardens and, during the winter season, stand surrounded by tinsel woven bears, presents and ice skating Santas. Rodin had said that putting his creation in a garden would be the death of him¹³. Being the first city North of the European continental landmass (or the last, depending on which way you're going) Calais offered a strategic point to the English monarch to spread his influence. This status has not changed to this day.

The act of Union of 1801 between Ireland and England was 'born of violent conquest in the 16th and 17th century'¹⁴ starting with English settlement towns and plantations and the eviction of Irish people from their lands: "See Ireland: Cromwell – catchphrase: 'To Hell or to Connacht'" (*BPLH*, 120) The Lord Deputy of Ireland sat in Dublin Castle as a representative of the British state on Irish soil. Prior to that, the Anglo-Norman conquest had already established Old English influence from the 12th century. Therefore, while Ireland was slowly being colonised, Calais had effectively become English. The Irish population rebelled several times against English dominion but remained unsuccessful until the turning point of 1916, seemingly another failure, but an efficient act of 'armed propaganda'¹⁵ the consequences of which subsequently participated in the turning of public opinion on the question of Irish Independence. Yet like the 'martyrdom' of the Six Burghers, the 1916 debacle is now celebrated in an epic fashion by the song *The Foggy Dew*. O'Neill makes his

¹² Translation: 'no hat, not shoes, rope around their neck, keys of the city and the castle in hands' Luce, Siméon *Chroniques de Jean Froissart* Tome 4 Paris, Librairie de la Société de l'Histoire de France. (1869)

¹³ 'Le monument placé dans un jardin ... c'est me tuer' Haudiquet, Annette *Les Bourgeois de Calais* Paris éd. Musée Rodin (2001)

¹⁴ Crowley, John et al. *Atlas of the Irish Revolution*. Cork: Cork University Press (2017).

¹⁵ Crowley et al., *Atlas of the Irish Revolution*, *Op. Cit.*

protagonists quite biting sceptical about the heroic potential of Ireland: 'Could be like they say, the country is up.' 'Yes, MacMurrough agreed. Because really, the alternative was too awful. A few hundred madcaps in arms in Dublin, and the British Empire ranging to strike.'¹⁶

In the early 1810s, the tulle industry was booming in England (notably thanks to the need for efficient mosquito nets in the colonies) and some of the machines of Lindley, Leavers and Hearthcoat were imported (fraudulently, to avoid taxes) to St Pierre-lès-Calais. Tulle was turned into lace by the addition of the Jacquard apparatus. This marked the beginning of a flourishing English community in the town, so numerous that there were English schools and the Press was edited in both languages. There was another advantage for rich industrials' implementation in the French city: 'In Calais, the British lace makers soon hired French workers, who were cheaper than British labourers and, above all, plentiful, to work alongside British artisans. Marriages between British lace-makers and French women testify to a degree of integration.'¹⁷ To celebrate the link between the two countries across the sea, at the opening the Calais Lace Museum in 2009, 85 kilometres of blue-dyed 'sea-lace'¹⁸ went flowing out of an old factory's windows like waterfalls to plunge into the dirty canal nearby ('rejoin sea water'). The local, lace-related tourism interpretation of these events is thus generally positive but the English industrial settlement was likely rather exploitative of the local population.

Likewise, Karl Marx commented on Ireland's exploitation by England in the 1870s: 'But Ireland is at present merely an agricultural district of England which happens to be divided by a wide stretch of water from the country for which it provides corn, wool, cattle and industrial and military recruits.'¹⁹ The industrial production was mostly developed in the North East, in protestant Ulster. The South, under-industrialised, saw many of its workers leave for England where they were used as cheap labour by British industrials.²⁰

Calais' former conquest and industrial exploitation culminated with its being bound anew by England after the closing of the Sangatte Refugee centre in 2002. Calaisians have been living

¹⁶ O'Neill, Jamie *At Swim Two Boys* New York, Scribner (2001), 616. All further page references will be placed in brackets (ASTB) in the body of the text and will refer to this same edition.

¹⁷ Bensimon, Fabrice 'Calais 1816-2016.' *History Today* 24 October 2016.

¹⁸ Maria Dompé, Sea-Lace/Dentelle-Mer <https://www.mariadompe.com/en/opere/1/la-mer-la-dentellebr-la-dentelle-la-mer/> [last accessed 02-01-2022]

¹⁹ Marx, Karl *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*. London: Penguin Books (1976), 860.

²⁰ Crowley et al. *Atlas of the Irish Revolution, Op. Cit.*, 10.

alongside various exiled populations since the late 1990s. A common view on the *Accords du Touquet*²¹ is that England pays France (and specifically Calais) to stop refugees from crossing the sea. No sum of money is specified in the treaty *per se* but the amount can be renegotiated quite often in any case. The text stipulates: 'The contracting parties take, within the bounds of the present treaty, necessary measures aiming to facilitate the exercise of border control in the sea ports of the Channel and the North Sea situated *on the territory of the other party*,'²² which *de facto* displaces the English border to the other side of the Channel. Hence, a border naturally marked by the sea is now artificially set on land, much like Ireland that could form one unified island, were it not for another displaced English border. The opening sentence of the *Atlas of Irish Revolution* is: 'Geography has worked hard to make one nation of Ireland; history has worked against it.'²³ 'No borders' activists work with refugee help associations and they state, in *Calais face à la Frontière*: 'We do not claim any neutrality: on the contrary, we want to question the existence of borders itself and contribute, at our level, to the struggle against exploitation and all forms of domination.'²⁴

It is possible, on a clear day, to see the English coast from Calais' beach, as only 30 miles separate the twin white cliffs of the Cap Blanc-Nez and Dover, so short you can swim across in 10 hours. This geographical fact will not change anytime soon. Therefore, exiled people, who have themselves suffered from past colonisation and present neo-colonialism²⁵ and wish to get to England, will always transit via Calais. They tend to stay around the roads leading to the harbour and the tunnel (for which the English border was also brought to French soil in 1991 through the *Protocole de Sangatte*) and in the 2010s, they camped and gathered in this area and slowly, the Jungle emerged, hosting up to 10 000 people with several churches, temples, mosques, schools, restaurants and even a sauna. The Jungle essentially functioned as a small village next to Calais, where the associations could centralise food and clothes distribution, process waste, install showers and toilets, and accompany women and children. It was organised by ethnic neighbourhoods to avoid inter-communal tensions. It was a far from perfect system but it worked, and allowed the exiles some

²¹ Décret n° 2004-137 du 6 février 2004 portant publication du traité entre le Gouvernement de la République française et le Gouvernement du Royaume-Uni de Grande-Bretagne et d'Irlande du Nord relatif à la mise en œuvre de contrôles frontaliers dans les ports maritimes de la Manche et de la mer du Nord des deux pays, signé au Touquet le 4 février 2003 to be specific.

²² *Ibid.*, Article 1, my translation. 'Les parties contractantes prennent, dans le cadre du présent traité, les mesures nécessaires visant à faciliter l'exercice des contrôles frontaliers dans les ports maritimes de la Manche et de la mer du Nord situés sur le territoire de l'autre partie.'

²³ Crowley J. at al. *Atlas of the Irish Revolution*, *Op. Cit.*, 10.

²⁴ Collectif *Calais face à la frontière* Openedition Niet! (2017).

²⁵ The majority of refugees in Calais come from Afghanistan, Sudan, Eritrean, Iraq, Iran and Syria, all targets of French or British (and more recently US) imperialism.

respite in between nocturnal crossing attempts. Yet it was dismantled in 2016 for ‘insalubrity and lack of security’, perniciously suggesting that the refugees’ well-being was the state’s topmost priority.

A lot of the Jungle residents were sent out to *Centres d’Accueil et d’Orientation* without any legal help to ask for refugee status or *dé-dublinage*. *Dubliné* means they can be sent to the last country where they applied for refugee status: a major set-back for most people and a good enough reason to burn or scrape off your finger tips to erase finger prints. Naturally, they came back. Now they live in tents, small settlements hidden in the bushes, and are harassed by the omnipresent police. The police and gendarmes are a grim, overwhelming presence in town: their vans are everywhere, they have invaded all the hotels, campsites, restaurants -twice a day- making Calais England’s expensive guard-dog. The mayor of the town, right-wing, praises the link between France and England that Calais is supposed to represent and we are treated to subtle statues of Winston Churchill and Charles De Gaulle (his union with a Calaisian woman supposedly justifies this cult of personality) walking side by side towards a common future. However, aside from the ‘booze-cruise’²⁶, there is not much of a diplomatic link; most people go through the town without stopping, only refugees stay because they are forced to.

Borders

Here it seems relevant to turn to *The Theory of the Border* by Thomas Nail: ‘In practice, borders, both internal and external, have never even succeeded in keeping anyone in or out. Given the constant failure of borders in this regard, the binary and abstract categories of inclusion and exclusion have almost no explanatory power.’²⁷ Given that the British borders on Irish and French soil are routinely crossed outside of its legal, official points, indeed defining a border by its ‘constant failure’ seems appropriate. An English border was imposed on Ireland after the war of independence through the Government of Ireland Act 1920. Mia Gallagher, in the comparison between the Czech-German battle over Bohemia, makes it clear who is getting the advantage in the drawing of this border: ‘Or perhaps it’s because the Germans live in parts that are (a) the wealthiest; (b) the most industrialised; and (c) have the best geographic defences? So – trick question – who’s going to

²⁶ Rascouet, Angelina and Ryan, Charlotte ‘The Great British Booze Cruise to France Ends with Brexit, Virus’ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-03/the-great-british-booze-cruise-to-france-ends-with-brexit-virus> [last accessed 02-01-2022]

²⁷ Nail, Thomas *Theory of the Border*. New York, Oxford University Press (2016). 8

benefit most from division along ethnic lines? See Ireland: partition of, particularly in relation to the linen/shipbuilding Industries of Ulster.' (*BPLH*, 305)

Therefore, Great Britain has a habit of pushing its borders beyond its surrounding seas and seems to always aim at gaining economic or political advantages: to keep a wealthy region under its dominion or keep refugee populations at bay. Coming from Calais, if one studies the history of Ireland, this pattern of invasion, industrial exploitation, and an absurd British border imposed on your soil will sound rather familiar. This thesis is concerned with borders on water and land: the protagonists of the selected novels can, just like Calaisians, see Great Britain across the sea as this looming threat, and there is another very recent development I would like to consider.

The combination of Brexit and COVID measures between 2020 and 2022 have made the displaced borders of the British Isles very unstable. Now the only hope in this situation is that once again, 'England's difficulty' might be 'Ireland's opportunity'²⁸. There are talks of Irish re-unification as a result of the new custom regulations implemented between Northern Ireland and Britain, and of an increasingly likely bid for Independence in Scotland. Cut off from the continent and its first colonies, England seems more and more isolated. EU immigrant workers seem rarer. And more and more, the paid guard dog relaxes its watch on the Channel, letting refugees climb into inflatable boats to their death (27 people died in November 2021, a grim record: the Channel is starting to compete with the Mediterranean), not in order to respect their wish to go to England, but as a means of exerting pressure on the British government. On the beach of Calais, a street art mural surprisingly protected by plexiglass (maybe the council thinks Banksy did it) represents a little girl with a suitcase, looking into a spyglass towards England but a vulture is perched on the spyglass, waiting for her corpse as she will attempt to cross. The 'border purgatory' ('purgatoire frontalier'²⁹, an actual name given to Calais in *La Jungle de Calais*) becomes more permeable but death always taints borders. To sum up, the British government closed the only infrastructure available to host exiled people, destroyed the jungle when they rebuilt a place for themselves and installed permanently repressive forces in the city to watch these populations and disrupt the work of local associations³⁰ trying to help with the meagre means left to them.

There is a deep resentment in Calais towards the British government. All the town's folk know why we are a military occupation zone. 'No Borders' is a common slogan sprawled on the walls by waves

²⁸ Irish Volunteers Force slogan around 1916, Britain being distracted by WWII enabled the rising in Dublin.

²⁹ Agier, Michel *La jungle de Calais : les migrants, la frontière et le camp*. Paris : PUF (2018).

³⁰ Such as Salam (breakfast distribution) l'Auberge des Migrants, Secours Catholique, La Croix Rouge, Médecins Sans Frontières, Médecins du Monde, etc.

of activists coming to work in the associations. Therefore, seeing Ireland through the prism of decoloniality rather than the more consensual stance usually taken in France about Irish history³¹, was inevitable with this background. Calais can be read as a sort of microcosm within France, which only endured a sample of English dominion, unlike Ireland that has suffered its imperialistic ambitions (and that of the Normans) since the 12th century. Ireland itself would become the testing ground for further colonial expansion, one of the first laboratories for the British governments to exploit, racialise and undermine foreign populations and force their culture and language onto them. Reading postcolonial and decolonial theory helps to understand the mindset of a previously colonised territory and being situated in borderlands. One can ponder at the power of borders from a depressing vantage point and be all the more receptive to criticisms of such a notion.

To elaborate on the concern of this thesis with borders, and the seemingly tenuous link with the concept of Amphibians and other sea creatures, this short excerpt from Mia Gallagher's *Beautiful Pictures* explains the central idea:

Budweiser were not the only group that failed to conform to nationalist visions of identity... Others, so-called 'renegades' or 'amphibians' were able to move between [Czech and German] national categories. Recently, scholars have turned their attention to these national outcasts as a way to underscore the flexible rather than the fixed notion of nations... (BPLH, 97)

The several novels and poems selected for the corpus of this thesis gravitate around the specters of the Famine, 1916, ethnic cleansing, turning points of Irish history where alternative futures for the island were envisioned or remembered and how everyday life went on during these key moments, the mythical/spiritual and the trivial coinhabiting. The several novels and poems treated express their political stances in their aesthetics, as said before, linking their literary natures to Irish oral tradition, folklore and the absurdist theatre of Samuel Beckett. *Endgame* (1957) for instance, confronts the reluctant spectator (both on and off stage) with the old and disabled bodies of Nagg and Nell and a type of love-making that could not be further from the tragic thwarted love trope³³. Alexandra Poulain mentions Beckett's old couple to question the limits of empathy from an audience in spectating Otherness (here elderly and disabled bodies) and points to the grotesque treatment of their intimacy. It can be argued that there is a similar absurdist tension between ideal and grotesque in the novels with the protagonists of *Beautiful Pictures of the Lost Homeland*, who lose teeth, bleed, fall, produce snot and spit, transition; the shingles-ridden merfolks' uvula that

³¹ The neutral stance used, for instance in Agrégation preparation courses about the Devolution Party in 2019.

³³ Poulain, Alexandra 'Blue Balls of Fire and the Ethics of Spectatorship: Verlaine, Yeats, Beckett', *Angles* [Online], 11 | 2020

'snaps'³⁴ in *The Fifty-Minute Mermaid*; the deceased partner's dirty underwear which resurface in *Hood*; the protagonists of *At Swim, Two Boys* and their transformation at sea: 'At swim, two boys. And yet not boys but youth itself. Distance detached them, water unformed them, particularities washed away. Nasal whine, feet that smelt, these were accidents of their mundane selves. The sea proposed an ideal, unindividuate, sublime.' (ASTB, 262)

This tension between hyper-realistic grotesque depiction of human bodies and the noble ideal, the sublime, creates a humoristic effect that is used by most of the authors treated in the thesis. This develops an interesting version of self-conscious mythologising that doesn't really take itself seriously and keeps reverting back to the very real humanity of its protagonists. This awkwardness and failure also shroud the history of Ireland in which the protagonists evolve: 'A nation so famously seditious in song, so conspicuously inefficient in deed: it was only the comic that redeemed her.' (ASTB, 615). To better summarise this tension between the sublime and the grotesque/absurd, we can turn to Halberstam's notion of a *Queer Art of Failure*:

Following (...) Crisp's advice to adjust to less light rather than seek out more, I propose that one form of queer art has made failure its centerpiece and has cast queerness as the dark landscape of confusion, loneliness, alienation, impossibility, and awkwardness. Obviously nothing essentially connects gay and lesbian and trans people to these forms of unbeing and unbecoming, but the social and symbolic systems that tether queerness to loss and failure cannot be wished away; some would say, nor should they be.³⁵

To complete and develop this notion, we will also draw on the Nietzschean concept of the Absurd, a cartography of the Sublime, and Bakhtinian grotesque but it will always be the humoristic contrast between the two that will shine in the analyses of the novels and poems. This also creates a friction with the mythologised folklore that imbues these pages, especially since folklore is re-appropriated to explore psychological trauma, as Maureen Murphy puts it in *More Real than Reality*: 'Thus for the Irish, the road to insight often lay not through literalism, rationalism, or logic but through the marvellous and the fantastic.'³⁶ Folklore is then rendered more human and it creates a new, awkward proximity with the reader, having mermaids brush their teeth or amphibian rebel heroes having to use a bedpan. This tension will guide the aesthetic analysis, as will its link with queer, postcolonial and decolonial theories.

³⁴ Poem 'The Assimilated Merfolk/Na Murúcha a Thiomaigh,' Ní Dhomhnaill, Nuala and Muldoon, Paul *The Fifty-Minute Mermaid Loughcrew*, Gallery Press (2006) All further quotes from same edition will be given in brackets (*Mermaid*) in the body of the text.

³⁵ Halberstam, Jack *Queer Art of Failure*, Duke University Press, Durham and London (2011), 97-98.

³⁶ Murphy, Maureen. 'Siren or Victim – The Mermaid in Irish Legends and Poetry' in Morse, Donald and Bertha, Csilla *More Real than Reality: the Fantastic in Irish literature and the Arts* London, Greenwood Press, 1991, 1.

Theoretical Framework

Ireland has a contested place in postcolonial and decolonial theories because of its ambiguous status (especially its Anglo-Irish and catholic elite³⁷) in the British imperialistic project and often the debate is part of a wider question which weighs on these theories as to which imperialistic project can be taken into consideration, either Roman, Norman, British or all of them. Some decolonial researchers seem to grapple to find a clear division between the true national identity and its corruption by colonial forces. National identity itself can be questioned as simply another construct that artificially amalgamates a plethora of local cultures and languages, a pernicious legacy of former imperial projects based on nation-states. This thesis will not attempt to answer these difficult questions, only take them into consideration during the analyses. The role of the catholic Church is questioned by the authors of the corpus and postcolonial authors like Kieran Rose and Seamus Deane while others would see this institution as part of Irish identity. The Irish language and its revival or preservation, its literary potential is also brought about, as I treat Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's writing or, more truthfully, its English translation. The fact that, as a student of Irish literature I can still work without having learned the second official language despite its own decolonial potential is a good indicator of the marginalised status of Irish.

I draw a lot of my analyses from Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*³⁸ which poses its own problematic pattern: he was covering a very different set of countries and populations still racialised to this day, when Irish racialisation has dissolved into whiteness since. In fact, many postcolonial and decolonial authors³⁹ cited here work on countries where the colonial project was on a different scale and usually ended more recently than in Ireland. This, I can only justify by accepting Ireland as an early colony of the British empire, along with Wales, Scotland and other Celtic nations and regions that have been assimilated into Britishness before this tentacular empire expanded its reach overseas, using these new pools of population to settle and maintain its dominions. Indeed, many troops, diplomats, and politicians were sent to various colonies. And if certain of these figures managed to see the parallel between Ireland's plea for Independence and the similar aspiration of other colonies, like Roger Casement,⁴⁰ it does not erase the co-optation of the Empire's politics by some Irish people⁴¹. Yet because Celtic populations were inferiorised by a similar

³⁷ Caroll, Clare and King, Patricia *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory* Cork University Press (2003)138

³⁸Fanon, Frantz trans. Richard Philcox *The Wretched of the Earth* New York, Grove Press (2004)

³⁹ Such as Gayatri C. Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Walter Dignolo, N'gugi Wa'Thiongo

⁴⁰ Mullen, Patrick *The Poor Bugger's Tool Irish Modernism, Queer labor and Post Colonial History*. OUP USA (2016).

⁴¹ Caroll, Clare and King, Patricia *Ireland and Post-colonial Theory*. Cork: Cork University Press (2003).

infantilising/feminising, exoticising and altogether racialising rhetoric as later colonies, it establishes this pattern of domination as the blueprint for later expansions.

I understand postcolonial theory as trying to measure the after-effects of colonialism on a culture, whereas decolonial theory seems to have a more active than diagnostic approach to these after-effects. Decolonial theory fuels new work to overcome the colonial legacy of inferiorisation of certain cultures and languages, exposes the lingering domination of former empires and seeks to oppose it. As a subversive movement with roots firmly set in activism, it shares a lot with queer theory, down to its domestication by academia. In fact, the two movements are useful to combine in order to re-discover local, non-anglophone, types of queerness, to dissociate gender and sexual behaviours and expressions from anglicised labels that have become pervasive⁴⁴. They also offer alternative approaches to national identity, sometimes influenced by inherited or inherent cis-hetero patriarchal discourses. Some initiatives in Ireland can be read as queer and decolonial, such as a Queer Irish dictionary⁴⁵, queer Irish conversation groups, or in certain Irish researchers' attempts to rediscover the queer potential of pre-colonial pagan Ireland⁴⁶. Weaved together they form an ideal framework to analyse the works in this corpus.

The use of another theory/notion also needs to be explained. Intersectionality was originally coined by Kimberle Crenshaw to demonstrate that the unique form of discrimination against black women was not recognised in courts, sexism and racism somehow not being able to combine legally. The notion has passed onto academia and, as Sirma Bilge has pointed out, it only did so at the price of 'double-white-washing'⁴⁷ being appropriated by white female academics who link the theory to white 'founding fathers' of academic disciplines. Bilge argues that only certain practices of subordination then get questioned while maintaining old hierarchies which participate not only in marginalising the persons enduring multiple systems of domination, but also in further embedding a dichotomy in discourses surrounding race and gender.⁴⁸ It only survives in academia as a 'domesticated radical knowledge'. It is interesting to note that queer theory has had a very similar trajectory, from subversive knowledge to domesticated academic discipline. Madina Tlostanova argues that 'An alarming tendency is that too often the subject who speaks of intersectionality is

⁴⁴ Dutta, Aniruddha and Roy, Raina 'Decolonizing Transgender in India' TSQ 1 :3 Duke University Press (2014)

⁴⁵ <https://usi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/AN-FOCL%C3%93IR-AITEACH.pdf> [last accessed 14/09/23]

⁴⁶ Rose, Kieran *Diverse Communities: The Evolution of Lesbian and Gay Politics* Cork University Press (1994)

⁴⁷ Bilge, Sirma 'Le blanchiment de l'intersectionnalité' *Recherches féministes*, vol. 28, n 2, 2015 : 9-32. 'Double-blanchiment', 19.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

not really located in any of the intersections she discusses, but openly or more often surreptitiously stands above as the observer, and remains untouched by the intersection in question.’⁴⁹

As the intersection of queer *and* Irish identities is the focus of this thesis, it unfortunately partially follows this tendency. Moreover, here, not only will the notion be applied to the marginalisation of a European population, it will not really discuss sexism within the usual men vs women dichotomy, but rather in relation to a wider spectrum of gender identities and their interactions with sexual orientation. The notion is then taken completely outside of its original context. The Irish population was in the past racialised by the British because it was an efficient technique to undermine an exploited population and justify actions that a government could not inflict on a people deemed equal to its own citizens.

Yet using these theories will not be an attempt to conflate all previously colonised territories or all racialised populations. It is only that there seems to be a recurrence of this phenomenon that, if the *status quo* is not organised with one’s own social group in mind, then one is more able to see its limits. Therefore, people belonging to a marginalised group or situated at the intersection of several marginalised groups will be more prone to question a system that others them, specifically because it others them and they do not fully benefit from it being in place. With that in mind, postcolonial and decolonial theory, emanating from a disadvantaged point of view, seem more lucid about the short-comings of a capitalist and imperialist system and thus better suited to analyse it. The principles of these theories have been applied to the case of Ireland and developed by Irish authors for the specific case of Ireland and, naturally, these will be drawn on during the analysis too.

Another point of contention that is often encountered in activist literature, and even parts of academia, is that queer theory (and by extension trans-theory) is emptied of its subversive essence when entering the field of academia:

The first step was for the “theory” in queer theory to prevail over the “queer,” for “queer” to become a harmless qualifier of “theory” (...) The next step was to despecify the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or transgressive content of queerness, thereby abstracting “queer” and turning it into a generic badge of subversiveness, a more trendy version of “liberal”: if it’s queer, it’s politically oppositional, so everyone who claims to be progressive has a vested interest in owning a share of it.⁵⁰

It seems that many of the criticisms targeting queer and decolonial/postcolonial theories in academic context follow the same pattern: when the tools designed to advocate for equal rights are repurposed for literary or societal analysis, it can be seen as a form of domestication, not concerned

⁴⁹ Tlostanova, Madina ‘Can the post-Soviet think? On coloniality of knowledge, external imperial and double colonial difference’ *Intersections* Vol. 1 No. 2 (2015): Making Sense of Difference / Special Issue 44. 38-58

⁵⁰ Halperin, David M. “The Normalization of Queer Theory.” *Journal of Homosexuality* (Harrington Park Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc.) Vol. 45, No. 2/3/4, 2003, 339-343.

with the plea for equal rights of the marginalised group that is studied. Keeping all this in mind, I will proceed with caution.

Choice of corpus

The selected works explore the seemingly rigid binaries structuring identity, politics, religion, sexuality, geography, history, and so forth. The notion of *Amphibians*, as quoted from Mia Gallagher's novel, will enable me to confront these binaries and to show how the various authors introduce more flexibility and fluidity where fixity prevails. Some of the binaries explored, such as man-woman/ hetero-homosexual / Irish-English (incl. languages)/ Protestant-Catholic, stem from what Gayatri Spivak calls 'strategic essentialism'⁵¹, the necessity of a unified identity to constitute a more powerful political representation. Yet these tend to oversimplify and erase the multiplicity, diversity and fluidity of these identities, creating artificial borders and categories that divide and limit living experiences. The term *Amphibian* also reflects the omnipresence of water around the Island and the intimate moments experienced by the protagonists of the three novels in and around water (the public swimming for Doyler and Jim, the private baths for Cara and Pen, Geo's ghost's release into the sea and mermaid fascination...) and, on a more etymological level, the simple ability to live in various environments and marginalised identities which sometimes intersect.

The fact that major novels were published in contemporary partly freed Ireland by openly lesbian and gay authors like Emma Donoghue and Jamie O'Neill (while, at the same time, maybe trapping them inside these categories and ignoring other parts of their creative persona) is a testimony to the recent developments for LGB acceptance. However, only a few trans authors have gained enough attention to be published and they will be included in this corpus. Concerning Mia Gallagher's trans protagonist, representation by an author outside of the marginalised group can perhaps build bridges of understanding between cis-straight people and queer-trans communities, yet it also runs the risk of appropriating marginalised narratives and distorting real lives into a set of pathos-drenched stereotypes, giving the books an original or provocative touch thus maybe inviting some compulsory praise for their progressive inclusivity. This is not to say that cis authors should not write about trans experience, only that they should not be the only voices loudly exploring these topics when those of the primarily concerned are still ignored.

⁵¹ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York, Routledge (2006), 205.

Lesbian, bisexual and gay experiences have been through the same treatment historically and provide a route map and some hope to achieve the same recognition, while also revealing how much work still remains to be done within the whole, united-ish queer community. For instance, one could draw a parallel, between, on the one hand, the invisibility of lesbian women and transmen (and AFAB trans-nb folx) and, on the other hand, between the over-representation and criminalisation of gay men and transwomen (and AMAB trans-nb folx). This also highlights that the essence of transphobia is to keep defining trans people according to the sex they were assigned with at birth and not according to their actual gender identity. The limits of queer theory, which includes the notion of performative gender, are also demonstrated by the bodily transition of FtM, X or * and MtF, X or * people as Jay Posser argues in *Second Skins* (1998), hence trans and LGB experiences are not fully comparable to one another. However, the divide between gender and sexuality as commonly accepted in LGBTQIA+ circles, like any other neat division, will also be questioned during the thesis. Jamie O'Neill has smartly drawn the link between queerness and Irishness as a stigmatised Other in the British Empire and sadly hinted at the persistence of homophobia under the Irish Free State due to the omnipresence of the catholic Church. The thesis will strive to look for a common thread and unifying figure that does not erase the ambivalence and multiplicity of identities, and investigate whether the Amphibian could represent these in-betweeners, outlaws, others, marginals navigating several identities presented as opposite, divided yet often mixed and overlapping.

Ambivalent Ireland

Ireland as 'the edge of Europe'⁵² presents such a uniquely ambivalent status too: it is a former white colony of the British Empire which deemed it 'unstable' and 'unruly'⁵³, with a rich history of dissent stemming from its occupation (still on-going in the North). It was among the first populations to reflect on the necessity of decolonisation and even prior to its completed colonisation, had been a site of acapitalist culture and despised for it. The country is also the sole example of European population having evolved so fast past the influence of the Church⁵⁴ towards a greater acceptance of LGBTQ+ communities. Yet Ireland also struggles with the after-effects of colonisation: a 'modern' neoliberal capitalism so pervasive that proving Ireland's economic relevancy in a hyper-competitive European Union is more important to the Fine Gael-Fianna Fáil

⁵²Carroll, Clare and King, Patricia *Ireland and Post-colonial Theory*. Cork: Cork University Press (2003), 157.

⁵³Lloyd, David *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity* Cambridge University Press (2011)

⁵⁴ I mainly criticise the institution of the catholic Church, not the faith in itself.

coalition government than allowing its population affordable accommodation at the heart of its own capital. This neoliberal blight has also proven to superficially integrate and commodify the land's politically subversive movements and marginalised identities (Nationalism and radical Queerness reduced to a commercial and touristic St Patrick's day and over-sponsored Pride month for instance) with an openly gay man at the head of the Irish government.

Ireland as an island, because of its relative isolation and partial freedom from external continental influence, has been endowed with a unique potential for exploring alternative modes of development: pagan, anti-capitalist, socialist, Queer and radical, an anti-modernity that is not a catholic tradition and the core of this potential still remains. It appears in the feeling of 'lazy freedom' (ASTB, 208) felt by MacMurrrough in *At Swim Two Boys*, no matter how vague and clichéd it may seem. This potential makes it the perfect ground to explore, and maybe overcome, the rigid binaries that still codify current Western societies, if only for a moment (the duration of this thesis).

The distinct language of the three novels imbues the texts with a spoken, oral-like feel (recalling Ireland's oral tradition and its survival) as the authors all let the accents, peculiar pronunciations, slang, blithering voices, recordings, and transcripts appear in print. The recurrence of the human body in all its grotesque materiality, triviality also reminds one of the limitations of mythification and high theories about identity and struggle. Behind all these concepts are simple, practical lives, struggling with everyday limitations, bodily functions and necessities. The heavy presence of death and ghosts in these texts also urges the reader to remember the finitude of this life, a most humanising experience. This reminder of basic humanity shines behind all these categories: US vs THEM dichotomies, the toxic in-group out-group instincts that have been so extensively instrumentalised to pit people from the same lower classes against one another to preserve a hierarchised system and ongoing expansion of the ruling elite's wealth. Yet the human experience cannot be contained in categories whether imposed by the status quo or reclaimed by marginalised groups. Even if some of these may be politically necessary to fight back, it still reinforces a dichotomy of oppressed-oppressor where everyone – including the most privileged – sees themselves as the oppressed. The thesis will not pretend to be exhaustive (blind spots will persist on racism and ableism for instance) nor to solve these deeper issues, only to introduce a little bit of fluidity in these concepts and to explore the 'Emerald Isle' crossed out by an artificial border which recall many other socially constructed divisions.

Hopefully something useful will come out of this, perhaps an exploration of alternative ways by trying to tap into all the previous attempts at a non-capitalist organisation (and current attempts with self-sufficient farms and communities based on sustenance agriculture), queer acceptance (the Nation envisioned by the protagonists of O'Neill and in the secret intimacy of Donoghue's couple), the international socialism of Connolly or 'primitive' communism of the *clachán* and other co-operative associations. Then, considering this history, it is possible to pinpoint how these authors sketch out blueprints for what Ireland could have become, could perhaps still become. Eco-criticism transpires through the critique of neoliberal and neo-colonialist capitalism as the flow of capital, goods and services, long distance exports and industrialised agriculture all stem from the currently dominant economic and political model. This, paired with a fixed identity to be a more predictable and targetable consumer and better set with the in-group out-group mentality that prevent the unification of the various exploited classes across the globe, participates in keeping this destructive system in place. Paul B. Preciado speaks of a generalised discontent:

La condition épistémo-politique planétaire contemporaine est une dysphorie généralisée. *Dysphoria Mundi* : la résistance d'une grande partie des corps vivants de la planète à être subalternisés au sein d'un régime de savoir et de pouvoir pétro-sexo-racial, la résistance de la planète à être objectivée comme une marchandise capitaliste.⁵⁵

Maybe it is only necessary to deconstruct and question this system to – at the very least— become a slightly more equal and freer species before going under water.

Plan and Corpus Summaries

The aim of this thesis will be first to establish a (loose and wavy too) parallel between the history of pathologisation of alternative sexualities and gender identities and that of racialization of the Irish, with the same consequences of the marginalised communities' psyche and perceived expandability (I). The way the trauma of othering is channeled through the image of water and sea-creatures, mobilising the legends and therapeutic use of talk-therapy through a blurred oral writing will then be developed (II) to then emphasise alternative ways of belonging, including a form of geological osmosis and urban shivers that maintains the omnipresence of a rising sea level as a background clepsydra and calls for new forms of cyclical, closed-circuit forms of living and cross-struggle advocacy (III).

⁵⁵ The contemporary planetary epistemo-political condition is a generalised dysphoria. *Dysphoria Mundi*: the resistance of a large part of the planet's living bodies to being subalternised within a regime of petro-sexo-racial knowledge and power, the resistance of the planet to being objectified as a capitalist commodity. DeepL Translation Preciado Paul B. *Dysphoria Mundi* Grasset, Paris (2022), 19.

First and foremost, I will include a brief contextualization and summary of the main corpus so the various analyses do not come out of the blue. The *Fifty-Minute Mermaid* (2006) is a bilingual collection of poems containing the translations by Paul Muldoon of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's Irish poems on the *murúcha*, a pelagic population forced to live on land and assimilate (with a central water=Irish/land=English metaphor) and essentially functions as a series of short tales that follows several generations of emigrated mermaids (with the first generation in denial about their origins, the second suffering from the inter-generational trauma caused by this denial and silencing and the general othering of the population by land-folk), yet the water metaphor slowly expands to also include dementia, as the mermaid seems to go back to her element at the end of her life and is finally liberated at death, a way for the poetess (*fíllí*) to consciously avoid essentialising Irish and English identities as she, herself was born in England and was taught Irish only as a second language if from a young age.

Hood (1995) by Emma Donoghue follows Penelope during her first week of unofficial widowhood after the death of her thirteen-year partner Cara in a car accident while on her way back from the airport after a trip to Greece. The less than perfect nature of their relationship and closeted life of the couple leaves place to ambivalent feelings for Penelope who cannot officially mourn her partner and has to cope with her multiple infidelities with the women of the feminist community of The Attic. The presence of Kate, Cara's estranged sister during the funerals' week, also further confuses Pen as Kate was her first (unrequited) childhood crush, before the big sister moved to the United States with her mother and Pen started dating Cara. The novel closes on the protagonist's potential coming out to her mother.

At Swim Two Boys (2001) is the paired love story of Jim Mack and Doyler Doyle under the (ambivalent) guidance of traumatised Anthony MacMurrough, who comes to Ireland bid by his nationalist aunt Eveline MacMurrough after two years of hard labour, punishment for his relationship with a chauffeur-mechanic. Jim is the son of a shop-keeper, Arthur Mack, who hopes to elevate himself and his family socially while Doyler comes from a destitute corner of the banks, his mother originating from co. Kerry and they are the sole Irish speakers among the main characters. Doyler and Jim bond over the common project to swim to the Muglins rock from the forty-foot in Kingstown/Dún Laoghaire in order to claim the island for Ireland. The novel closes on the 1916 Rising as Doyler enlists with the socialist Citizen Army and is drawn into the revolt by Jim, recently converted to Irish nationalism both by the passionate rhetoric of Patrick Pearse (both fictional and historical figures mingle in the novel) and his love for Doyler. Anthony, both a mentor

figure and a third lover to the couple as he starts by buying Doyler's sexual services but then settles to help the couple come to term with their sexuality in a homophobic Ireland, also fights in the conflict and, as Doyler dies in the rising, is left to take care of a broken Jim who will fight in the subsequent war of Independence.

Beautiful Pictures of the Lost Homeland (2016) is a complex juxtaposition of several narratives in various forms:

-the story of Georgia as a little girl (chapters/paragraphs starting with a ☼), who deals with the death of her friend Judith in the Monaghan bombing and the guilt attached to it (as she stole Judith's doll's head – Queen Bess- shortly before her death) by creating an imaginary friend, Elaine, who also helps her cope with her trans-childhood and the death of her mother by cancer and the general feeling of abandonment that results from it.

-the story of Lotte, Georgia's babysitter from England (chapters/paragraphs starting with a timer clock) whose mother was part of the *flüchtlinge* post-WWII in the Sudetenland/Bohemia.

-Sudetenland/Bohemia, a contested territory between Czech and German nationals which is paralleled with the colonization of Ireland in the Wunderkammer/Museum of Curiosities, an interactive museum recalling the violent history of the region.

-The recorded interviews with Julia, the mother of Lotte about her past as a *flüchtlinge* for a TV project.

-The story of David (chapters/paragraphs preceded by a bomb), Georgia's father who thinks he has a son, 'Georgie' and tries to cope with his inadequate fatherhood and the loss of his wife, Aisling, to breast cancer. Aisling seems to be cheating on him with Donnacha O Buachalla/ Dennis Buckley, the architect from his firm and responsible for the collapse of the bank he has to take legal responsibility for as an engineer.

-Present day Georgia, now 45 years old as she records her messages for her estranged father (David abandons her as a child after the death of Aisling) while she deals with her second breast-cancer scare and the loss of her partner Martin, a gay man she had started dating before transitioning. Georgia is now living in Dublin as a video-editor after living in Berlin then Brighton with her ex-partner. These recordings span recollections of her childhood and one very bad day of depression, thinking that 'Mar' has been killed as the video of a dead body in a canal circulates on Youtube and a bomb has exploded in the London tube near Farringdon (date is 200-) on St Patrick's day (supposedly detonated by Lotte). Georgia goes on a 'pilgrimage' in the hills of Wicklow and has a

car accident on her way back, returns 'home' to Marino and her childhood home, then to her friend Sonia's place, lost in her memories and anxiety about the test-results she is supposed to get the next day.

Toby Buckley and William Keohane are young contemporary writers whose works were published, along with others', in *Queering the Green: Post 2000 Queer Irish Poetry* and listed in the *Small Trans Library*⁶³ list. Their poems and short-stories weave expressions of Irish queerness and a keen ecological sensitivity which resonates with the Blue Humanities angle of the thesis. Keohane's writing mostly explores the autobiographical through inter-generational bonds while Buckley's poetry (especially in his pamphlet *Milk Snake* 2022) presents a stark criticism of Ireland's industries and their impact on workers and environment, interspersed with more intimate beats around nature, the bodily and evolution.

Abbreviations

ASTB: Jamie O'Neill *At Swim Two Boys* New York, Scribner (2001)

BPLH: Mia Gallagher *Beautiful Pictures of the Lost Homeland* Dublin, New Island (2016)

Deep: Solomon, R. Diggs, D. Hutson, W. Snipes, J. *The Deep* London, Hodder & Soughton (2019)

Hood: Emma Donoghue *Hood* New York, Harper Collins (1995)

Mermaid: Ni Dhomhnaill, N. Muldoon, P. *The Fifty-Minute Mermaid* Loughcrew, Gallery Press (2006)

⁶³ <https://smalltranslibrary.org/irish-trans-writers/> [last accessed 12/07/2023]



Part I : Loose and Wavy Parallels

Queer – Decolonial – Queer Decolonial



I.1 LGB-T? Q.

This does not mean that we already cannot use the term 'queer' anymore, but that it has already lost the greater part of its subversive weight and cannot still be used to qualify the process of proliferation of resistance-strategies to normalisation. Queer stance has been, in the last few years, recodified by the dominant discourse.¹

In this first subpart I wish to introduce a lot of the theory that I will refer to throughout the thesis and explore various comparable processes of othering. It also serves to test the validity of O'Neill's parallel between queer and Irish identity (and socialism) in *At Swim Two Boys* as he depicts the same level of marginalisation around these two identities in 1915-16 British occupied Ireland. I will dive in the histories of the construct of these identities as the same institutional, pseudo-scientific and political trends intervene in the mechanisms of racialisation of Irishness and pathologisation of queer identities. The aim is to highlight the similarities and then the overlap of Irish and queer identities as they are expressed in the contemporary poetry and prose covered by this thesis. It will also be useful to re-contextualise some of the cultural references found in the corpus' works and the political climates the various characters have to contend with as Irish queer people.

1. Blurred histories – mad or criminal?

Queer

While the term 'queer' might still be controversial because of its history as a slur against gender-variant and homo/bisexual people, it has largely been reclaimed as an efficient umbrella term for many various (and sometimes overlapping) identities that are commonly seen as deviating from the 'norm'. For this thesis, it is favoured because it dissociates these identities from their pathologised limited structures without erasing their marginalisation. Yet at the same time, using one term to make blanket-statements on a wide range of experiences and suffering, lumping together communities that might actually be at odds with each other is definitely taking the risk of erasing the complexities of variant sexual orientations, sex assignment and gender identification. The weaponisation of hormonal treatments, psychiatry and castration by the medical system against one branch of the queer community is for instance cause for some resentment towards the dependence of another to this very institution and sometimes confused with a co-optation of its methods.

¹ Preciado, Paul B *Testo-Junkie Sexe, drogue et biopolitique* Grasset et Fasquelle, Paris (2008) 290-291 my translation 'Cela ne signifie pas que nous ne pouvons déjà plus utiliser le terme queer mais que celui-ci a perdu une bonne part de sa charge subversive et ne peut plus servir aujourd'hui de dénominateur commun pour qualifier les processus de prolifération de stratégies de résistance à la normalisation. L'énonciation queer s'est vue, ces dernières années, recodifier par les discours dominants.'

Some basic principles need to be recalled to establish which notions will be taken as granted for the rest of the thesis. The distinction between gender and sex is a notion that only dates back to the 1960s with the psychoanalyst Robert Stoller introducing this new terminology: sex is biological and gender is psychological. There is a widely spread opinion that transpeople deny biology. 'They do not. Else there would be no need to transition medically' is a popular counter-argument. Yet it erases the experience of trans people who do not wish to/cannot medically transition and biology says nothing so clear as Men=XY and Women=XX. Any argument trying to introduce nuance and a long-winded explanation is doomed to failure by its inability to compete with a short, efficient 'There are only two genders. Men and Women.' Fortunately for now, a thesis-form will enable a deeper examination of the intricacies of this question so we can even have the privilege to say 'There aren't even two sexes.'⁴ Gender and its arbitrary division are explored in the novels in poems as often the protagonists struggle with expectations linked to their recognised genders and end up having to question the binary, like Anthony MacMurrough:

The universality of things abstracted him. ... Let the people be classified into sexes, of which there shall be two, male and female. The criterion shall be generative function, though please to note, this function is ideal and not actual: the prepubescent, the celibate, the emasculate, the nulliparous, the non-generative for whatever reason, shall yet be classified by sex. They shall be male or female. Female or male shall they be, though the greater shall be male. (ASTB,449)

The dogmatic, legal, almost biblical 'shall' repeated over and over in this excerpt attends to the pure arbitrary character of gender despite the irrelevance of categorising, as quoted, the 'non-generative' with a 'generative function' criterion. This absurd 'universality' then excludes people like Anthony MacMurrough, whose 'non-generative' sexuality has to clash with his expected role as male and thus enough to criminalise his desires. This arbitrary distinction, however gets passed off as an unquestionable 'nature' or 'biology'. Likewise, Penelope, the protagonist of *Hood*, gets classified as a 'spinster', as a childless woman, she is supposed to be somehow defective in her role as a woman for not having pro-created past a certain age. In the 1970s, John Money and Anke Erhardt specified that gender is a contingent experience and that 'gender roles' exist, public behaviours that have to be distinguished from a more private gender identity, making 'gender' a variable construct. Judith Butler will develop this notion further by highlighting the problematic dichotomy between a supposedly natural sex and a cultural gender, as this distinction is still co-opting the idea of 'nature'. Their book, *Gender Trouble* (1990) criticises the reinforcement of this male-female division taken as a natural reality: biological sex would then be 'pure', 'real', 'natural'.

⁴ This will not be an attempt to re-appropriate intersex suffering to legitimise non-binary narratives, only to further demonstrate the damage that the extent of bio-power causes and how science's wishful objectivity is influenced by the constructed notion of the gender binary.

In the 1990s, Anne Fausto-Sterling also published her provocative *The Five Sexes* (1993) to open up the dialogue about intersex people and deconstruct even the 'biological' dichotomy.

While Queer theory is generally opposed to normativity, including hetero-normativity, cis-normativity etc., there is some distinction to make between queerness related to sexual orientation and queerness linked to gender: although both can overlap. Sexual orientation and gender non-conformity makes people illegible in widely different ways to cis-het normativity. Lesbian Gay Bi Trans labels (and the many that follow, Queer, Intersex, Asexual etc.) can now more or less be taken for granted, sex and gender are now differentiated, where before there was originally a conflation of many various identities seen as a general deviancy, hence the dated term of 'invert' referring to a gay person having their gender 'inverted' because of their same-sex attraction. Pat Califia, in his history of the transgender movement, refers to Karl Heinrich Ulrich who is considered a pioneer in gay rights activism⁵ and paired the desire for a person of the same sex with a desire to be of the opposite sex⁶. Magnus Hirschfeld dived deeper into the variations of human sexuality and gender identity and coined the term 'transvestite' and differentiated between various forms of expression. Yet even he, at the beginning of his research, considered homosexuals as a form of third gender (covered in his treaty *Berlin's Dritte Geschlecht* 1905). In 1919, Hirschfeld opened the very first Institute of Sexology (which was shut down at the beginning of the third Reich) and worked to normalise same-sex attraction through various publications and a film, *Anders Als die Anderen* (1919) to campaign against the contemporary political context⁷. Most of this research was brought to a brutal end by WWII and homosexuality and other variations were kept safely within the realm of mental illness. In the UK, the works of Edward Carpenter posit the existence of an 'Intermediate Sex'⁸, people who have a balance of feminine and masculine energies and desires and who act as intermediaries between men and women and covers seemingly gender non-conforming people and what is now considered homosexuality and bisexuality. It is interesting to see that the terms that predated pathologising labels tended to blend gender expression and sexual orientation.

By the first publication of the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) in 1952, homosexuality was still considered, and classified, as a 'sociopathic personality

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/01/obituaries/karl-heinrich-ulrichs-overlooked.html> [06-01-2022]

⁶ Califia, Pat *Sex Changes, The Politics of Transgenderism* Paris, EPEL (2003) Trad. Patrick Ythier

⁷ Davidson, Kate 'They're Coming For your Children' *Goldsmiths University Lecture* (7-10-2021)

⁸ Carpenter, Edward *The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women* Gutenberg Project (1908)

disturbance’, meaning psychiatric treatments ranged from talk-therapy to what now amounts to physical torture via electroshocks, harassment and ‘therapeutic’ castration. These past grave mistakes have at best rendered suspect psychology, psychiatry and the medical system in general, and at worst completely discredited them for a significant part of the queer community. Only through the 1970s and 1980s and thanks to gay rights movements was this medical-model partially overcome. This extreme pathologisation and social stigma forced the queer community underground, into private parties, balls and behind closed doors so much so that the recent work undertaken to reclaim it has very little evidence to work with. The intergenerational link with elder queer folk was simply severed, their past erased as if it had never existed before the advent of Gay rights and Stonewall in the 1970s and many people still consider the LGBTQIA variances in human behaviour as a recent phenomenon, further delegitimising their claim for equal rights.

One of the many valuable contributions made by Jamie O’Neill through *At Swim Two Boys* is to replace a queer love story in a historical context, where it tends not to be expected. Only a few queer historical figures have survived and the dearth of representation makes the community fight over the crumbs, trying to reclaim them for either the gay or trans or bi community notwithstanding the historical irrelevance of these categories. For instance:

Bisexuals find themselves erased in history. Many famous people—such as Marlene Dietrich, June, Jordan, Freddie Mercury, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Walt Whitman—have been labelled as lesbian or gay for their same-sex relationships, yet their long-term relationships with different-sex partners are ignored or their importance minimized.⁹

There are many similarities in the way gay and trans communities are pathologised, rejected and posed as a moral threat to society, sometimes even to a comical extent that proves that the strategies of othering are never very inventive. Pathologisation through a pseudo-scientific discourse feeds into the legal system to discriminate against certain populations and legitimise social stigma and a hostile public opinion. For instance, the common tool of moral panic around children being ‘recruited’ into queerness is now used extensively against the trans community like it was (and indeed still is) used against the gay community. This argument posits that all children are born ‘pure’, cisgender and straight before being corrupted by these ‘new’ trends of normalised deviancy. A common slogan in Pride protests is ‘Two, four, six, eight, How do you know your kids are straight?’ calling attention to this -still widespread- assumption. This also perpetually sexualises all queer people, as if their bonds did not exist outside of this supposed hypersexuality, rendering

⁹ *Bisexual Invisibility: Impact and Recommendation* San Francisco Human Rights Committee LGBT Advisory Committee (2011) np

the representation of their relationships inappropriate for children, and making children more unlikely to be depicted as queer.¹⁰

Scare tactics

It is also necessary to recognise that certain notions coined by radical lesbian/gay activists and theorists and now widely used in Gender studies and in social media sometimes stem from authors referenced in transphobic pamphlet. For instance, ‘comphet’, compulsory heterosexuality, comes from Adrienne Rich’s essay (still praised in gay/lesbian/queer studies) ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’ (1989). This notion is incredibly important for the construction of queer folk in understanding the pressures to deny same-sex attraction and conform to prescribed heterosexuality, crucial for the cis and trans women who come out as lesbians quite late in life when coming to terms with this societal pressure, and for trans-women, even more so as their gender’s validity is constantly questioned if they stray from stereotypical (straight) femininity. The notion of Comphet is therefore crucial to many queer people, even if its author might not have agreed with its use by transpeople.

Indeed, *The Transsexual Empire* was dedicated to Adrienne Rich, as a close advisor in Janice Raymond’s work, so she probably did not mean to help what her colleague called ‘transsexually constructed lesbian feminists’ in the *Sappho by Surgery* chapter. And, since outrage against the supposed censoring of ‘Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist’ ideology is quite widespread, there was no attempt to bury this essay in the pages of feminist history, on the contrary, it is even included in *The Transgender Studies Reader* (2013) with context. Another criticism against the notion of comphet is that it delegitimises bisexual experience, arguing that their having had partners of the ‘opposite’ sex is a result of comphet and not of a genuine attraction. Further explanation about the inner divides of the Queer community and the LGB association will be addressed in the last part of the thesis when discussing identity politics. There are infinite layers to this discussion, as this short theoretical discussion has already displayed. Yet, taking some distance from the current discord and division, it is important to recall the confusion in and conflation of gay, lesbian, trans and even intersex experiences in history which justifies, at least partially, this grouped study.

¹⁰ See Linde, Robyn ‘The Rights of Queer Children’ *The International Journal of Children’s Rights*, 2019(4), 719–737.

Professor Kate Davidson, quoted above, developed a study of the incredible similarity in moral panic campaigns, first against LGB people, then against transgender people in her *They're Coming for your Children* lecture. She went through the history of psychiatrisation¹⁶ of same-sex attraction, with the concept introduced (and later abandoned) by Sigmund Freud in 1896 of *Verführung* (seduction) positing that children can be 'led astray' by external forces, causing hysteria or obsession. This lent credit to the moral panic surrounding gay men 'seducing', 'recruiting' the youth into sex work thus constituting a 'danger to the race' and justifying the criminalisation of homosexuality. These penal laws passed under the Third Reich were still enforced after WWII and the idea of 'recruitment' spread. These suppositions continue to have an impact nowadays in the refusal to show anything LGBTQIA-related to children and seeing it as a form of 'promotion' of such behaviours/identities, and this, in the UK for instance, long after the scrapping of Section 28 which banned educational material such as S. Bösch's *Jenny lives with Eric and Martin* (1983) from British schools. By the 1980s, the epidemic of AIDS would, of course, be recuperated and instrumentalised against the gay community and substance users through a conscious campaign of *laissez-faire* by various governments. It will be interesting to compare, at the end of these analyses of Irish and queer identities, the similarities between two occurrences of this phenomenon of government inaction to stop the mass death of either racialised or pathologised groups. The same inaction can be observed during the 1840s during the Irish Famine and we will draw on Foucault's concept of bio-power to highlight this passive massacre of a large portion of an undesirable population: the emergence of biopower meant that the 'ancient right to take life or let live was replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death'.¹⁷

It is disheartening to see that, nowadays, young gay and lesbian people are supposed to be protected from the pressure to medically transition by parents thinking that they will be forced to do so at the slightest sign of gender-non-conformity. Access to medical transition is incredibly limited, with a long process of psychological screening to only maybe have access to years-long waiting lists for Hormonal Replacement Therapy and gender-affirming surgeries. No doctor ever proposes a medical transition, transpeople still need to struggle for years to gain access to it, with only rare exemptions dependent on the good-will of rare anti-establishment doctors. The moral panic is essentially crystallised around children transitioning, yet no permanent or 'irreversible'

¹⁶This painful history between the Queer community and psychology/psychiatry makes it surprising to see a lack of suspicion and ready endorsement of self-diagnosis of various mental illnesses like ADHD, autism, bipolar disorder within that community. One might have expected that the abusive pathologisation of other natural variations in human behaviours should have discredited any further attempts to categorise 'unusual' behaviours...

¹⁷ Foucault, Michel trans. Burchell, G. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*. (2008) 138

treatment are proposed to minors. The only *reversible* treatment available so far is puberty blockers, to leave the child time to figure out their gender identity without being pressed for time by hormonal changes. It is important to realise that, without puberty blockers and if the child/tween/teen is actually transgender, a mild hormonal treatment then becomes heavy surgeries after puberty to remove what could have been easily prevented from developing. The results with HRT are also less conclusive after puberty, with less opportunity to achieve ‘passing’ or stealth¹⁸ if the person so desires. Yet the widely unrealistic claims of forced transition are routinely made by popular children’s literature authors at mainstream level¹⁹ and developed in Academia with pseudo-scientific diagnoses of ‘Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria’, supposedly caught by social contagion or with fear-mongering titles like *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing our Daughters* (2020) by Abigail Schrier. Narratives of ‘transition regrets’ and pressure are thus brought to the forefront in order to increase gate-keeping around medical transition and maintain suspicion around the supposed indoctrination of ‘girls’ by trans support groups and youtubers.

Doing vs Being: the medico-legal trap

To highlight the differences in treatment of LGB and T people, it is relevant to interpret *Hood* (1995) by Emma Donoghue and *At Swim Two Boys* (2001) by Jamie O’Neill as mirror images of one another. O’Neill’s two male protagonists, Jim and Doyler, share a very short time together, out in public beaches, in town and one of the two dies after a mere year of being aware of his feelings for the other. They both participate in a major historical event in Ireland, indeed, their whole love story culminates with the 1916 Easter Rising. By opposition, Pen and Cara meet at roughly the same age and stay together for thirteen years before Cara meets her end in a very un-heroic, very mundane car-accident. Their whole life as a couple is hidden, invisibilised, so much so that Pen becomes widowed without being recognised in such a status. The usual dichotomy applied to the two main sexes, that is to say the public space of males and private spaces for females, is efficiently illustrated in these two novels. Furthermore, the grief at the loss of a partner sprawls only a couple of pages at the end of O’Neill’s novel and inspires Jim to subsequently die heroically in battle during the War of Independence while Donoghue only explores a very intimate, personal, secret tragedy of grief, or denial thereof, throughout the whole novel.

¹⁸ Passing as a woman for a transwoman (Male to Female)/as a man for a transman (Female to Male), there are non-binary transpeople (M/F to X/*), but ‘passing’ becomes a difficult notion then. ‘Living stealth’ is employed for transpeople who live without disclosing their transidentity.

¹⁹ <https://www.them.us/story/jk-rowling-compares-transitioning-to-conversion-therapy> [06-01-2022]

Hence the chronologies are almost reversed: one year of relationship is expanded on in great detail while a thirteen year-long one is introduced with its ending and the reader is only given short glimpses of it in flashbacks. It is as though the time O'Neill's heroes had together is so short that it has to get stretched out over 600 pages while Donoghue's couple's time was so long that it turned into a routine with one allusion to an intimate moment serving as a metonymy for all of its many occurrences. The scenes of bathing/swimming then take on a different importance: Jim and Doyler's moments are recounted at length while only one bath together for Pen and Cara symbolises the other hundreds.

Another usual dichotomy can be found in the invisibilisation/victimisation of female sexuality and the criminalisation of male sexuality²². Lesbianism was not legislated against in the UK (by extension, prior to decolonisation, neither was this the case in Ireland) or recognised as a crime; it was simply assumed not to exist:

Female homosexuality was never explicitly targeted by any legislation. Although discussed for the first time in Parliament in 1921 with a view to introducing discriminatory legislation (to become the Criminal Law Amendment Bill 1921), this ultimately failed when both the House of Commons and House of Lords rejected it due to the fear a law would draw attention and encourage women to explore homosexuality. It was also assumed that lesbianism occurred in an extremely small pocket of the female population.²³

The very real punishment for homosexuality hangs as a looming threat in *At Swim Two Boys* with a traumatised Anthony MacMurrough coming back from England after two years of hard-labour for being found out with a chauffeur mechanic. Interestingly, Anthony MacMurrough comments: '...it's not the *doing*, it's the *being* that's my offence. (...) Doing only offers an opportunity to be caught.' (ASTB,327 my italics), perhaps a reference to the distinct shift in the way of punishing homosexuality, acts (medieval 'buggery' laws) weren't simply an occurrence of crime anymore, but the revealer of a specific type of person: from a 'doing', it became a 'being' as Michel Foucault argues in the *History of Sexuality*. Private sexual practices with (an)other consenting adult(s) came to define:

... a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away.²⁴

²² 'criminalisation politique de la sexualité masculine et victimisation de la sexualité féminine' Preciado, Paul B. *Testo-Junkie Sexe, drogue et biopolitique* Grasset et Fasquelle, Paris (2008) 180 .

²³ <https://www.bl.uk/lgbtq-histories/articles/a-short-history-of-lgbt-rights-in-the-uk> [04-01-2022]

²⁴ Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, (1980) 43.

While the rest of the book argues that sexual orientation will influence a general view of the world, as elaborated on by Sara Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology*, 'It does make a difference for women to be sexually oriented toward women, in a way that is not just about one's relation to an object of desire. In other words, the choice of one's object of desire makes a difference to other things we do.'²⁵ Yet this importance given to sexuality in the construction of identity, in addition to being influenced by the creation of a pathological/othered type of sexual orientation also has the potential to ignore people who do not wish to be defined by sexual practices or desires. The 'doing' is conflated with a 'being' and suddenly, something that feels 'normal'/'ordinary' must redefine your entire identity. Cara, upon confessing her attraction for a woman, directly states:

'But it doesn't make me one of those people,' Cara adds.

'Which?'

'Not gay or bisexual or any of those horrible words.'

'Do you know any of those people?'

'No, but I'm not one of them.'

'Me neither,' I confirm hastily.

'I just feel **ordinary**,' Cara insists, clearing her throat. 'I think it's all very silly. They should just let us get on with it.' (Hood, 98)

The limits of identity politics and of essentially linking sexual orientation (or gender for that matter) to an essence of the self is usually questioned by Queer theory, as Joseph Valente quotes: 'For J(ack) Halberstam, queer "takes the identity out of identity politics," replacing identity position with identity critique'²⁶. To further illustrate the conflation of identities, the protagonist of *Beautiful Pictures* (2016) begins, in her youth, by thinking of herself as a gay man (despite using she/her pronouns throughout childhood): "...when I first explored the possibility that I might have been gay – no, when I first explored the possibility that being gay would explain why I was the way I was" (BPLH,325), which illustrates the porosity between gender and sexual non-normativity. While a strict distinction is what is advocated in Queer activist groups to avoid conflating homosexuality and trans-identity, it cannot be denied that, because heterosexuality is such an essential pillar of gender roles (though less so for womanhood), it is difficult to separate the two notions. Furthermore, questioning gender-roles is perhaps rendered easier when questioning a prescribed sexuality and

²⁵ Ahmed, Sara 'Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology' *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Volume 12, Number 4, (2006), pp. 543-574.

²⁶ Valente, Joseph 'Self-Queering Ireland' *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, SPRING/PRINTEMPS 2010, Vol. 36, No. 1, QUEERING IRELAND (SPRING/PRINTEMPS 2010), pp. 25-43 (26) Jack Halberstam's deadname was corrected.

vice versa. It could also be argued that some transpeople will, at first, question their sexuality because homosexuality is slightly more visible than transness in the Western context (whereas, in Iran, for instance, it seems to be the opposite according to the often transphobic BBC²⁷).

Yet this scientific dichotomy itself was not always taken for granted. In the Middle Ages, male and female were only the two extremes of a spectrum rather than two opposite categories. It is only from the 18th century that this spectrum, isomorphism, mutates to dimorphism as explained in *La Fabrique du Sexe* (1992) by Thomas Laqueur. This dated evolution thus reveals the historically constructed nature of the opposite sexed categories: no longer a natural, eternal and universal assumption that cannot be opposed. This created dichotomy then, is even more problematic as it embeds a hierarchy between the 'two halves' of the population. 'The idea of a natural division, while being very useful economically and politically, is also key in women's oppression'.³⁵ Colette Guillaumin, in *Sexe, Race et Pratique du pouvoir* states that sex is: 'A renewed arbitrary mark which assigns each individual a place as member of a class. This mark can be any somatic form (...). The fact that we belong to a specific class is determined by a conventional criterion of the shape of the reproductive organ'.³⁶ Doctors having to observe many concurring criteria to determine a person's 'biological sex' stems from the binary bias that influenced scientific research into gathering and interpreting this data in order to prove the binary³⁷. Anne Fausto-Sterling, in her book *Sexing the Body* (2000) argues that no man nor woman fits all these criteria perfectly, as they are all a matter of degrees or spectrum (ie, hormone levels fluctuate, men and women all produce both oestrogens and testosterone, genitalia come in all shapes and sizes, secondary sex characteristics do not all develop in the same way for each individual, etc.) than clear binaries; there simply are too many variations in 'nature' to classify it in two neatly divided categories. If one only retains the main argument of chromosomes that 'do not change', ie, XX for a woman and XY for a man, then it is again very easy to undermine the supposition of a strict binary as some people have XY chromosomes but a female body (in case of Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome), some only have an X chromosome (Turner Syndrome) and others have XXY chromosomes (Klinefelter syndrome).

²⁷ The BBC has a history of pushing forward transphobic narratives, like J.K Rowling's essay <https://www.jkrowling.com/opinions/j-k-rowling-writes-about-her-reasons-for-speaking-out-on-sex-and-gender-issues/> nominated for the 2020 Russel Prize or 'We are being pressured into sex by some transwomen' by C. Lowbridge <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-57853385>

³⁵ Bereni, Laure et al. *Introduction aux études de genre* De Boeck, Louvain-la-Neuve (2012).

³⁶ Guillaumin, Colette *Sexe, Race et Pratique du pouvoir, l'idée de Nature*, Paris, Côté-femmes, (1992) 59

³⁷ Bereni *Introduction aux Etudes sur le Genre* Op.Cit.

Ultimately, 'science' is supposed to discover objective natural elements but constructs and interprets them according to a social subjectivity; it constructs a homogenous reality of 'male' opposed to 'female' from widely heterogeneous elements. Natalie Wynn states: 'Now if you're aware of all of this and you still want to insist on strictly binary sexual categories, then you are trying to force reality to fit your preconceived conceptual scheme, instead of adapting your concepts to fit reality. And that is what bad science looks like.'³⁸

Many theories, scientific and academic, present the trans-community in extremely negative terms and they will be analysed in this subpart as this constitutes the background for the advance of trans rights in Ireland (the same has been attempted with lesbian and gay rights and the history of homosexual pathologisation). It allows the reader to resituate the novels in their wider societal context and will also enrich the literary analysis of certain excerpts as these might contain historical, political references. It also serves to partially explain the choices in representation made by the authors of marginalised characters. Inscribed in that very trend of letting societal constructs influence research, one particular academic theory chooses the reductive framework of classifying transwomen according to their sexual orientation.

Ray Blanchard³⁹ posited in 'The classification and labelling of nonhomosexual gender dysphorias' and in a series of related articles around what was then called 'transsexuality' that people who had been seen as heterosexual prior to transition did not have gender dysphoria *per se*, but only a form of self-directed womanhood fantasy. He had concluded that much from pairing the cross-dressing related arousal in these transwomen with their lack of attraction to men. For transwomen being attracted to men, the aim of transition was *clearly* to have more male sexual partners. Yet for transwomen attracted to women, 'pseudo'-bisexual or asexual ones, it seemed that only the pleasure of being seen as a woman and interacting sexually as a woman was of interest to them. This disorder is thus named 'erotic target location error', or paraphilia: the desire to become what you are attracted to. It seemed then logical for Blanchard to classify transwomen's 'types' according to the people to whom they were attracted: androphylic and non-androphylic. There was (thankfully) no such theory for transmen because 'paraphylic' tendencies can apparently(?) only arise in 'males'. As an aside and introduction to the bias in determining sex, Riley J Dennis argues in

³⁸ <https://www.contrapoints.com/transcripts/archives/what-is-gender> [08-02-2022]

³⁹ *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 18, 315–334 (1989a)

her video⁴⁰, that biological sex itself is a social construct, since if one has to analyse a set of traits, ie; chromosomes, genitals, gonads, hormones and secondary sex characteristics (like breasts or facial hair), then post-op transwomen fulfill three fifths of the criteria. One might then wonder why not meeting just one or two of these criteria fully disqualifies an individual to be considered of one or the other sex.

Autogynephilia theory was made popular in the 2000s by the book *'The Man who would be Queen: The Science of Gender-Bending and Transsexualism'* by John Michael Bailey. These notions have been since embraced by 'gender critical feminists' but it is important to remember that 'radical' feminists did not create this pathologising discourse. In the current over-emphasis on 'TERF-wars', there is a tendency to focus on the divide between women's rights groups and absolve the medical and legal institutions for the build-up to such a hostile climate against transpeople.

This 'scientific' theory concerning transwomen was (is) unfortunately favoured because it seemed more developed than the 'feminine essence' theory of 'a woman trapped in a male body' though this had the merit of simplicity. To Blanchard, only 'androphilic' transwomen display this feminine essence because they 'become' heterosexual women post-transition. It is sometimes hard to tell which is of the utmost priority in pseudo-scientific discourse: being straight or being cisgendered. Julia Serano has opposed both theories with the 'gender variance model, which holds that gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, and physical sex are largely separable traits that may tend to correlate in the general population but do not all necessarily align in the same direction within any given individual'⁴¹.

Natalie Wynn, who hosts the Youtube channel *Contrapoints*, has given more visibility to Serano's deconstruction of the autogynephilia theory and they both argue against the unnecessary hypersexualisation of transwomen that this theory suggests. Indeed, it rests entirely on the notion that medical transition is solely motivated by sexual desires ignoring the many other aspects of trans experience, as the new social role of a woman implies an everyday social life, not just intimate interactions. As for the majority of lesbian transwomen that Blanchard surveyed admitting to pleasurable cross-dressing experiences prior to transition in Blanchard's papers, correlation does

⁴⁰Dennis, Riley J. *Transwomen are not "biologically male"* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWVRzGMVxbM> [22-04-19] Riley's work has been crucial to introduce a lot of trans-issues to the general public, hence referring to her channel seems appropriate here.

⁴¹ Serano, Julia M. 'The Case Against Autogynephilia', *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 12: 3, 176 — 187(2010) 179.

not mean causation. As Wynn argues⁴², Blanchard's theory only adds scientific legitimacy to the worst prejudices people have about transwomen well illustrated by the infamous scene of murderous cross-dressing by Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991)⁴³, or, in Mia Gallagher's protagonist's words: 'that psycho from *Silence of the Lambs* ; not Anthony Hopkins, the other guy, the – of course ; how clichéd is that ? Almost as bad as the wrongbody bullshit – crazy tranny.' (BPLH,109)

While scientific and academic researchers contribute to de-humanise transpeople by prying into their intimacy and pathologising what would be considered normal or common in cis people's sexuality, this expansion and justification of prejudice through pseudo-science then feeds into the legal system to create a restrictive framework for non-cis, non-straight people. Because Ireland was long forced to follow British common law and still does in Northern Ireland, it can be interesting to study one specific case that illustrate the spread of transphobic scientific discourse and the material repercussions on transpeople's everyday life. In common law, a precedent can be plucked from another country with a similar system to argue and motivate a decision, as it occurred in the *Littleton v Prange* case (1999) in Texas. The judge then followed a list of conditions established in the British case *Corbett v Corbett* (1970) aimed at declaring a marriage between a man and a transwoman void:

Based upon the doctors' testimony, the court came up with four criteria for assessing the sexual identity of an individual. These are:

- (1) Chromosomal factors;
- (2) Gonadal factors (i.e., presence or absence of testes or ovaries);
- (3) Genital factors (including internal sex organs); and
- (4) Psychological factors.⁴⁴

For context, Christie Littleton, recently widowed, had tried to sue her departed husband's doctor for malpractice but the defendant retaliated by questioning the validity of the Littleton's marriage, since Christie was a transwoman. It was argued, following *Corbett v Corbett*, that her and her husband's marriage was a homosexual union, then illegal in the state of Texas, and thus not valid. The article breaking down the chromosomal factor criterion argued, citing Cheryl Chase, an intersex activist,

⁴² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6czRFLs5JQo&t=2557s> Contrapoints : Autogynephilia [07-01-2021]

⁴³ Actually, the movie's script writer took great pains to avoid the murderer of the story being seen as a 'transsexual': 'DR. LECTER: Billy's not a real transsexual, but he thinks he is. He tries to be. He's tried to be a lot of things, I expect.' Clarisse Starling even references studies done on the incompatibility of 'transsexuals' with serial killer profiles as they are described as 'passive'. These details in dialogue have largely been forgotten however, it seems, perhaps too discreet against the more spectacular cross-dressing and tucking scene.

⁴⁴ *Corbett v. Corbett* - 280 Ga. 369, 628 S.E.2d 585 (2006)

that Littleton was never given a chromosomal test, the court simply assumed she had an XY pair as she had been assigned male at birth:

But it's not that simple. Just ask the international athletic community.

Allegations that certain countries were seeking unfair advantage in athletic competition by disguising men as women led to genetic testing for sex verification in 1967.

Known as the bacal smear, an athlete's mouth is swabbed, and a sexchromatin test is supposed to reveal whether the athlete is XX (female) or XY (male). Inconsistencies immediately surfaced. (...)

"One in every 400 competitors was eliminated in the Atlanta Olympic Games, even though there was nothing unusual about them anatomically," said Cheryl Chase, director of the Intersex Society of North America.

Three dozen medical conditions create sexual ambiguity in the human species, Chase said. These conditions affect between 1 percent and 2 percent of the general population, or in Lone Star terms between 190,000 and 380,000 Texans.⁴⁵

The case then spectacularly displays an overlap of transphobia, homophobia and ignorance around intersex lives and conditions. Here, the courts, on both accounts, dug deep into the intimate, medical and psychological histories of the two women (Ashley Corbett and Christie Littleton) to deconstruct their gender.

In Ireland, it took Dr Lydia Foy almost a third of her life to overturn the transphobic precedent set by *Corbett v Corbett*. She started in 1993 by asking for her birth certificate to be amended in order to recognise her female gender and had to start taking legal action in 1997. She was put under heavy scrutiny by the court, with 'trans vaginal ultrasound, blood tests, psychiatric assessment.'⁴⁶ Yet the courts ultimately had to recognise their inability to try the case before deferring to the legislator. This led to the 2015 Gender Recognition Act, with the Irish government now self-congratulating about having 'one of the most progressive and inclusive transgender recognition laws in the world. The first Gender Recognition Certificate was issued to Lydia Foy in September 2015, and she finally obtained the birth certificate showing her female gender that she had first requested 22 years earlier.'⁴⁷ And, thanks to the long, harassing work of Lydia Foy, Ireland does. For a quick comparison, in France, transpeople still need to send a file with various pieces of evidence and witness accounts to prove that they live as the gender they wish to be recognised as, and go to an intimidating court hearing. The obligation to pay for a lawyer for this process, and to be medically sterilised to be recognised have only recently been abolished. In Ireland, people can get their papers changed in one afternoon by deed poll.

⁴⁵ <http://web.archive.org/web/20080513071859fw/http://christielee.net/saen2.htm>

⁴⁶ Free Legal Advice Centres (FLAC) "A story of great human proportions" - Lydia Foy and the Struggle for Transgender Rights in Ireland Research Report (2018) 36

⁴⁷ https://www.flac.ie/assets/files/pdf/briefing_note_on_foy_case_2015_final.pdf 'FLAC is an independent, not-for-profit organisation which promotes the fundamental human right of equal access to justice for all' in Ireland

Yet, paradoxically, there is little to no effort by the Irish medical system to accompany medical transition and many transpeople are trapped in limbo for up to ten years, this tendency having only been made worse by the COVID crisis restrictions.⁴⁸ And to point out an obvious contradiction here, how are people supposed to live in their recognised gender after a deed poll with absolutely no help to modify their appearance and better their passing? I will expand on that situation in Part III.3, where I focus on the current state of affairs in Ireland surrounding these issues.

Through these brief historical, legal and medical summaries of the societal context in which LGBT+ people live, I have hopefully started to set out the background for our corpus of novels and poems. One unifying factor in the way various protagonists have to live their marginalised identity is to live outside of language: unable to communicate their desires or gender identity in a cis-het normative, oppressive society silencing and erasing their experience. These amiss interactions then often result in a dissolution of language, deep misunderstanding and absurd scenarios proving the ridiculous, kafkaesque oversights of a normative system.

2. Unspeakable

‘The world does not hang upon your misdemeanours. The world is no longer interested.’ ‘Oh but it is, Aunt Eva, to the tune of Church, Parliament, press, the mob, the courts, police, the prisons. It is that I should take an interest that is objected to.’ (ASTB,254)

Gay/straight miscommunication

The two novels written by gay and lesbian writers, despite their widely different scopes, time periods and spans, offer comically similar scenes of gay/lesbian experience being so erased and impossible to fathom that it brings about the complete incomprehension of relatives and authorities. The far-reaching authority of the Church, its creation and enforcement of heteronormative expectations in Irish society are illustrated in the following excerpts: ‘...and so began the centuries-long conspiracy of silence under which those homosexual people not physically hanged, burnt or suffocated were psychologically immolated in the despair of dumb and incommunicable isolation.’⁴⁹

⁴⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-FwZSkBgQQ> Lilith Ferreyra-Carroll for TENI

⁴⁹ Norris, David “Homosexual People and the Christian Churches in Ireland: A Minority and Its Oppressors.” *The Crane Bag*, vol. 5, no. 1, Richard Kearney, 1981, pp. 31 – 37 (33).

The role of the Church in erasing queer experience is brought about by these mirror scenes of misunderstanding between a priest and one of the protagonists: Jim goes to the confessional after his first sexual encounter with a man and Penelope goes to confession at a school retreat. As an introduction to this scene, in *At Swim* the 'problem' of masturbation is depicted as a sin by the Church and its effects on young people. In an attempt to reassure him, Jim's older brother Gordie tells him not to listen to the priest's views on the matter, that it is natural, yet he has a hard time convincing his little brother:

'It's a sin.'

'Suit yourself. It does no harm. Better with a girl is all.'

Whatever about its sinfulness and harmfulness, this last was transpicuously absurd. Jim couldn't imagine doing it if a dog was in the room, let alone a girl. (ASTB,407)

There we have a first example of the utter lack of common understanding about sexuality. Gordie is trying to tell Jim that having sex with a partner is better than masturbation, but Jim, not being attracted to women, does not see them as potential sexual partners, and therefore does not understand the message and thinks his brother is only referring to having a witness during masturbation. Having been made into a taboo subject by the Church, they can only discuss sexuality in euphemisms and innuendos. These, however, get lost in translation if you have a different sexual orientation than the one assumed to be the norm. This is actually a recurring motif in all selected novels: things going amiss, miscommunication. These absurd dialogues will be copiously used by the author to demonstrate the ridiculous blindness that normativity imposes on members of the society. Any alternative to the prescribed sexuality and gender is simply un-imaginable. Hence, an absurd type of dialogue (often quite theatrical and comical) is best to express this frustration: 'The absurd does indeed become a locus of meaninglessness; absurdist plays do then tend to show the absolute *failure of the normal communication* which structures society.'⁵⁰

This situation is thus repeated across novels: a lesbian/gay person speaks quite plainly about a sexual/romantic partner to a supposedly straight interlocutor and the whole conversation goes amiss. A coming out scene from *Hood* is actually comparable in terms of tone: when Pen tries to explain to her co-worker that she just lost her life-partner:

'No, it's not like that.' My heart started to thud, the familiar symptom that meant my subconscious had decided to come out to someone without informing HQ. In a curiously detached way, *I could feel the kite-ribbons of language jerking up to my hand.* 'We were living with Cara's father, it's his house.'

'So you were like a family-friend?'

⁵⁰ MacKenzie, Gina M. 'Theatre's New Threshold: A Review of Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Pinter' *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Fall 2012), pp. 174-176 (175) my italics

'I was *like a lover*, I mean,' correcting myself a little hoarsely, '*a lover, not just like.*'
Robbie's pale eyes bulged. 'Jesus Christ. For long?'
'Thirteen years last May. On and off.'
'But that would have made you just a wee girl when you two...' ...
'How did Cara feel about it?' ...'So she knew all along?' I paused, the cooling coffee at my lips, and stared at him. 'What, that she was a lesbian?' ...
'Hang on a minute. You're telling me you've been having a thirteen year affair with your housemate's father, *and* that she's a lesbian? Was,' he corrected himself automatically, then winced. ...
'Let's take it from the top,' I mumbled, '*I'm the one who's gay.*'... '*Cara too*, though she didn't like the word.
We got together when we were doing Inter Cert, and for the past few years we've lived with her father, who's not having an affair with anyone I know of.' (Hood,181 my italics)

Here again, the irresistible pull of heteronormativity pushes Robbie to the most illogical conclusion of all and the same-sex partner gets dismissed as an outsider third-party to the love affair (the same happens to Jim). The misunderstanding runs deep, and the absurd tone comes from the dissolution of language: Pen does not control her coming out and words end up being too vague, embarrassed, indirect with the taboo still too strong to allow for a plain explanation. Again, euphemisms like 'we were living together' cannot work, as they need common frame of reference to be understood by both parties, yet if one's orientation is heterosexual and the other's is homosexual, the assumed romantic interest has a different gender. Yet, within a context of social stigma around homosexuality, the risk of coming out to a co-worker from Immac (where Pen could definitely lose her job if she was outed) prevents her from directly saying it in clear terms. It is a gradual process in the conversation as she slowly realises that direct, unmistakable words like 'I'm ... gay' are the only way to overcome the misunderstanding. The confessional scenes are particularly interesting, because they occur within the walls of the institution who enforces, creates this miscommunication.

It is important to specify, prior to an analysis of the confessional episodes, the extent of the ravages Jim's psyche undergoes at the hands of the Church. He is groomed by a paedophile priest who himself seems to have suppressed what was perhaps once consensual same-sex attraction for other boys his age but is now abusive groping. He uses his authority over Jim to keep him by his side constantly and pressures him to become a priest as a form of sacrifice to the Virgin Mary to absolve his sin of desiring the boy: 'Receive my gift, love him as I would, pray for my wrung and twisted soul.' (ASTB,169) Therefore, by the time Jim has his first ever sexual encounter with another man on a pier, he has already been deeply conditioned to feel guilty about sexuality. Yet his desperate attempt to confess goes awry:

On Jim's hesitating he prompted, as Jim had known he must, 'Sins of impurity?'

Jim took a breath and in its exhalation outspilt the story, all the horrid notes, in quavers and breves as he stuttered and paused, how the black bushes he threaded between, and the waves splattered the pathway, till

he came to the shelter, and there he waited while the sea in restless motion moved, on and on, unmaning himself with the awful truths, and in his nervousness and dread perhaps not entirely coherently, for the priest interrupted and asked, Was she a married woman?

Jim was startled a moment, so that he answered, No. Was she a fallen woman? It wasn't a woman at all, Jim said. The priest paused. It was a girl, so.' (ASTB,410)

The choice of setting up Jim's confession like an erratic flute play in 'notes', 'quavers and breves' comes from the original idea of O'Neill to express the attraction of Jim and Doyler through their learning to play music together⁵². There are remnants of this metaphor as the two boys play together multiple times and Anthony MacMurrough leads the flute band, thus remaining in his mentor role in both the music and water metaphors for same-sex desires. Here the unmelodious attempt to recount this first sexual experience expresses the difficulty and confusion of Jim to come to terms with that night, as he is still tied to his religious upbringing. This dialogue back and forth goes on for about two pages and a half before Jim gives up and gets shown out of the confessional. Prior to the main misunderstanding between the priest and Jim, the boy's language is already de-structured, focusing on details of the scenery rather than the act itself, so suppressed from speech that he cannot bring himself to describe it in clear terms. Yet when the priest tries to help, it is once again in assuming that Jim is attracted to women. Even as Jim clarifies and confesses directly: 'there really was no girl involved' (ASTB,411), the priest reverts back to referring to 'a woman', and 'the soldier' Jim tries to tell him about gets interpreted as a third party that would only have lured Jim to a woman. No matter how direct Jim tries to be, the thought that he has had a sexual encounter with a man simply does not occur to the priest. Past a certain point, this dogmatic view of sexuality starts to seem like denial, a refusal to deal with this possibility, set so far outside of the prescribed norm and expected behaviour.

This complete misunderstanding is somewhat repeated in the much shorter confessional scene in *Hood*. At this point in the novel, Pen already knows that she is attracted to women, and one notes that she is much more aware and analytical of the dialogue than Jim, who will be even more traumatised by the experience:

Confession was a habit I had dropped from the menu of what the newspaper called A La Carte Catholicism some years ago.

It was on a school retreat when I first went off the whole business. The priest was very busy, and the sight of this long string of adolescent girls prompted him to adopt a novel strategy: instead of waiting for admissions, he asked the questions. ... 'Good girl now. Tell me do you smoke'

'No, Father.'

⁵² See Conner, Marc C., & O'Neill, J. (2007). "To Bring All Loves Home": An Interview with Jamie O'Neill. *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 11(2), 66–78.

'Do you drink?'

'No, Father.'

'Do you give cheek to your mammy and daddy?'

'No, Father.'

'Have you a boyfriend tell me now?'

'No.'

'If you had a boyfriend, would you do bad stuff with him?'

'No.'

'Aren't you a great girl. You have the conscience of a saint. Say a nice act of contrition now.'

While I was saying it he began the absolution, and he was finished before me. I sat on the window-sill outside, bewildered by the unearned compliments. It became clear to me at last that my story just didn't show up in their terms. I never much bothered after that. (Hood,188-9)

Again the priest completely fails to imagine there could be other options. The homoerotic desire that Pen has already discovered in herself, she knows, disqualifies her for the 'compliment' but the Church seems simply unequipped to deal with this situation. A reader, familiar with both novels then has to wonder how many confessions went amiss like this under the Church's authority if they failed to present their flock with the opportunity to even discuss their experience. It speaks once more to the lack of communication in a society that assumes one orientation to be, not just the norm, but the sole possible option. The complete erasure of gay/lesbian experience then throws the protagonists out of language: 'my story just didn't show up in their terms'.

This level of ignorance coming from a figure that is supposed to be trusted with one's most intimate issues and present a form of reassurance through absolution leaves the young girl and boy with no one to confide in. This almost reads as a form of very limited, dogmatic counselling, which will be developed with the *Fifty-Minute Mermaid* and *Beautiful Pictures* and confession resembles a form of talk therapy that is nipped in the bud. It speaks to the limited/dangerous role that psychiatry, in service of Judeo-Christian mores, has played in pathologising these behaviours and its inadaptability to help variant narratives to be processed in other terms than that of a disease/a sin to be cured/eradicated.

The fact that two of the protagonists get through the same experience eighty years apart also displays a serious lack of evolution in the Church's ways. Pen also works at 'Immac' or 'Immaculate Conception' a school governed by nuns. The power of Catholicism is already demonstrated in the pre-Independence era but the Republic also grants a large power to the Church as several archbishops contributed to the Irish constitution and they kept the control of education (and sex education, or lack thereof).

Penelope, like Jim, lives with the constant yoke of Catholicism: she was educated in religion and still works under the authority of the nuns⁵³, yet by the 1990s, it seemed that the sway held over the psyche of the citizens had lifted somewhat. The Nuns of Immac still act as a dogmatic wall that Pen doesn't even try to confront though. Most of her biting rhetoric remains safely enclosed in her thoughts, and, while the reader is privy to her silent rebellion, she does not question the *status quo* for a second. She remains comfortably set in the closet and her untold, decade-long secret relationship, not even telling her mother about the real nature of her bond with Cara. She seems content with the state of things: "Nowadays 'invisibility' was supposed to be the big problem, but the way I saw it was, all that mattered was to be visible to yourself. ... 'the spread of the *quiet epidemic*'. (Hood,60) Unspeakable still. It is difficult to discern if her being content with the situation is linked to denial or stems from a genuine peace with it. Throughout the week, she does not manage to cry a single time after suddenly losing Cara and only does so before, *maybe* coming out to her mother. It could be read as her state of widowhood only becoming real through the increasingly widespread acknowledgement of her former relationship; first from Cara's sister, then Pen's co-worker, then by realising Cara's father knew all along and finally by getting ready to tell her mother. Working at Immac, she cannot ever fully express her grief and when Robbie, her co-worker, offers her *A Guide for the Widowed* the reader feels the weight of the Institution in the suddenly enforced silence that a nun's appearance triggers: 'It's not an Irish book. It covers all sorts of partnerships. There's a section on' — before I could *clap a hand across his mouth* his eyes had swivelled to Sister Luke, descending the steps one at a time above us like a well-fed angel — 'your line of business'. (Hood, 219 my italics) First, it is interesting to note the comment about the book needing not to be Irish in order to mention non-heterosexual partnerships, placing the taboo in its unique national context and further demonstrating the power of the catholic Church on Irish morality. There again, the lesbian relationship has to remain unspoken and euphemised as 'business', the Sisters form a sort of hazy threat around Pen, despite their mundanity somewhat desacralising their spiritual presence; one notes the comical contrast between 'well-fed' and 'angel' jarring with the asceticism required of nuns. Yet this parodic depiction of the Church's diminished ceremonials ('descending the steps one at the time') does not in the least impede on its chastising aura. In the next sub-sub part, a brief history of the role of the Irish Church in the criminalisation of homosexuality will enlighten the analysis and provide an explanation for this persisting fear. The forced silence is so

⁵³ <https://gcn.ie/thousands-irish-lgbtq-teachers-hiding-their-sexuality/> still ongoing [08-02-2022]

normalised in Pen's narrative that she treats it as a mundane occurrence. She only questions the situation in a very matter-of-fact way upon reading a *Guide to the Windowed*:

'Homosexuals mourning their partners often carry a burden exacerbated by *invisibility* and prejudice', and several other sensible statements I didn't need to read. Somehow, what galled me the most was that if it had been a husband, Sister Dominic would have given me two weeks off. On the other hand, it occurred to me now, watching the widow-type opposite (...), losing a husband would have been horribly *public*. I couldn't have it both ways, I supposed, couldn't have my closet and bitch about it. (Hood,248)

The tension between public/private here is again questioned in an ambivalent manner. On the one hand, had she conformed to the expectations of the Church and entered a productive heterosexual partnership, her widowhood would have been recognised by the institution and taken seriously (Sister Dominic gets Cara's name wrong upon the announcement of her death). In this excerpt however, it sounds like staying in the closet is her choice, as if there was an option to officially live with a lesbian bride in 1992, one year short still of the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Ireland. Pen's general lack of concern with equal rights advocacy is expanded on by her being completely cut off from the Attic, an association and living place where her partner used to go to (and find other lovers). Yet, in the end, she will find a form of comfort and support in that very place, seemingly accepting her identity as a lesbian through a subdued bonding moment and her readiness to come out. This is already bringing us to a consideration of the intersection of Irish and Queer identity, as Ireland was one of the last countries in western Europe where the Catholic Church still held such an extensive power over the State. I will develop the notion when discussing the history of Irish colonisation, but Seamus Deane refers to it as the 'double-impact of two imperialisms, British and Roman'.⁵⁴

There are many moments, during Pen's confessional scene, of superposition between the spiritual and the mundane, showing a very business-like catholic Church of mass consumption, like the priest of the excerpt being 'busy' and speeding up the process of confession by 'adopting a novel strategy' and Irish people practicing an 'A la carte Catholicism'. Therefore, the protagonist in 1992 is more detached from the confessional experience than Jim in 1915, who will have a very different interpretation of the lack of imagination of his priest. Nevertheless, for both O'Neill and Donoghue's protagonists, this scene does bring about a certain disillusion with the Church. Jim, upon coming out of confessional, comments: 'The smell in the Chapel had not changed. This was not the odour of sanctity, only of candles doused.' (ASTB, 411) Yet this change within his faith is still not fully in effect, it only is an ineffable shift. But some other explanation will dawn on him:

⁵⁴ Deane, Seamus 'Dumbness and Eloquence – English as we write it in Ireland' in C. Carroll *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory* Cork University Press (2003) 110

It glimmered upon him, over the days that followed, why the priest had not understood his sin. He had not understood – how could he? – for no sin had been named that covered his wickedness? What he had done was so sinful, so unspeakable, of such aberrance, to such unnatural degree, that the Church, for all her far-seeing and deep-searching, her vision and penetration, had not thought to provide against its happening. It was an extraordinary thing that he should have found this chink : he, the son of a Glasthule huckster (...) should in the majestic vault of Christendom a flaw have found. What had marked him with such villainy? (ASTB,412)

The accumulation of negative verb constructs ‘not understood ... not understood... not thought’ and privative prefixes ‘UNspeakable, ABerrance, UNnatural’ emphasises the negation of his experience by an over-praised Church whose hyperbolic, superpowered insight contrasts with the negative view that Jim has of his actions. The hyperbole is further inflated by the bombastic style of multiple intensifiers and subject verb reversal for a dated, almost biblical ‘he ... should in the majestic vault of Christendom a flaw have found’ augmented by the all-encompassing term ‘Christendom’. Here, the simple oversight of a limited priest becomes an overblown metonymy for the whole institution. The limitations of language there occur in the ultimate powerlessness of words to capture the overwhelming shock of the character, despite their exaggerated accumulation. This reaction from Jim also expresses the monumental collapse of a trusted, omnipresent institution in front of this seemingly insignificant ‘chink’ of a homosexual act. Between the ludicrously disorderly dialogues and the weight of silence surrounding homosexuality, queer identities then test the limits of language as a normative construct that only acknowledges and serves a supposed majority. The aim in keeping this possibility unnamed, unspeakable is to make an unwanted ‘type’ feel, as previously quoted from National Gay Federation activist David Norris, ‘psychologically immolated in the despair of dumb and incommunicable *isolation*.’ After this episode, Jim will remain prostrate for months, losing weight, feeling so tainted and corrupt that he will not touch his newly born niece for fear of contaminating her, and only through his budding friendship with Anthony MacMurrough (in Doyler’s absence) will he find a slow path towards self-acceptance. Here again, Jim overcoming this catatonic self-loathing about his homosexuality will be through the process of learning to swim and free his body, further entrenching the link between water and self-acceptance.

The Catholic Church

At Swim Two Boys dives further into the long-term psychological damage that male homosexuality’s criminalisation/erasure inflicts on individuals. Two characters serve as inter-generational case studies and can be read as possible models for Jim to follow. One is the too-far-gone elder figure, brother Polycarp⁵⁵ who tries to make Jim join the brothers, he himself having joined at sixteen (late) and explains the origin of his vocation, all the while inappropriately touching Jim’s neck:

⁵⁵ Etymologically ‘who plucks/picks many’, perhaps suggesting that Jim isn’t his first prey. Also an existing saint, so this may also be just a reference to this hagiographic figure.

'At that time I had discovered in myself a certain sin. It is not necessary I tell what sin that was, save that it was a solitary vice'(...). 'As fouler I grew and deeper in my misery, the temptation rose to share that vice with others' (...) 'my schoolfellows were shocked and repelled by my solicitations.' The hand held now in its span the round of his neck. 'Do you understand solicitation?' – 'I think I do' – 'Would you make solicitation to another boy?' – 'No, Brother.' – 'Would you accept solicitation was it made you?' – 'Brother, your hand is hurting.' (ASTB,137-8)

Here, and long before Jim ever understands his attraction towards men, let alone has any physical contact with them, we have a total reversal of the confessional scene. This time the brother is directly enquiring about any homoerotic bond that Jim could have created, but once again, the language around sexuality is so stifled and obscured by euphemisms that the only logical result is total misunderstanding. Jim does not know the vague term 'solicitation' and is frozen by the physical closeness of the brother. Yet, notwithstanding the utter self-loathing of Polycarp's own homoerotic aspirations, now deemed 'sin' and 'vice' worthy of shock and repulsion from his peers, he now wishes for Jim to exercise the same form of self-control by joining the orders and vowing chastity in order to suppress this desire.

The desire, even while still not confirmed or confessed, is already deserving of physical punishment, as the brother's touch turns into almost a choking motion. Brother Polycarp is also jealous of Doyler and resents his influence on Jim. This toxic tension culminates when Jim chooses to go swimming with Doyler instead of coming to Mass, which concretises the already interspersed equation of water with freedom and self-acceptance. By contrast, Brother Polycarp's self-loathing and denial - which seems to have gradually twisted a healthy desire for consensual homoeroticism into paedophilic, predatory tendencies - is expressed by his hatred of this element: 'Brother Polycarp dizzied, and leaning on a wall he smelt the overwhelming stench of the sea.' (ASTB,169)

Before I go on to examine the character of Anthony MacMurrough, it is worth mentioning that the abuse of children by members of the clergy in Ireland was only perpetrated in total impunity for so long because of the absolute authority that priests represent in Irish culture: we see Jim's father rely on their good word to get out of his brushes with the police, see them raise funds, organise courses and generally dictate whether a parish will be pro or anti-Independence, exercising an overwhelming influence on the people under their 'care'. The sexual abuse seems so common that Polycarp is not even the only figure of the Church to have abused Jim, as he recollects: 'When other brothers had put their hands between his legs he had never really minded. (...) the groping had left him untouched' (ASTB,417). The situation is so common that the teenager is completely desensitised to it, no exact number is given, only a vague plural of 'brothers' and 'hands'. The same

situation is mentioned in the *Fifty-Minute Mermaid*, in 'An Mhurúch agus an Sagart Paróiste' (The Mermaid and the Parish Priest):

Thuig sí go raibh rud éigin suas, ach níor thuig sí aon ní as./ (Ní raibh sí ach haon déag, is í fós dal lar na himeachtaí sin.)/ Ach nuair a tharla an rud céanna, arís di/ ar bhonn rialto seachtainiúil, bhraith sí míusc is míobhan./ Sa deirdreadh, dhiúltaigh sí glan dul ann./ Is rud a bhí an-ait, ní dúirt an bhean rialto faic/ is cuireadh íobartach beag eile chuige thar a ceann.

She knew something was up but she couldn't make out what./ (She was only eleven and still totally ignorant of such things.) But when the same thing began to happen again and again/ on a weekly basis, she felt nausea and self-loathing./ In the end she refused point-blank to go over there again./ To her astonishment the nun made no comment whatsoever, and another little victim was sent over in her stead. (Mermaid,108-9)

Again, the situation seems common and accepted by the nun, as this is a recurring demand from the priest to have little girls sent to his office until they refuse to go anymore. As with the vague plural employed by O'Neill for Jim's abuse, the horror being inscribed in the desensitization of the abused teenager, here the routine turnover of victims seems to be quite straightforward, even if the mermaid still feels 'astonishment' at this cycle. She is not the first nor the last and her refusal will not stop an entrenched abuse mechanism from ploughing on. It is interesting to note that, in the case of the mermaid, other women do not rescue her from this abuse but participate in it, providing new victims, like the nun or her mother who, upon learning of her daughter's abuse after the death of the priest only says: 'An sagart bocht, nach fear é siúd chomh maith le duine.' – 'Oh, the poor priest, isn't he a man like any other?' (Mermaid,111-2). Here adult women stand as agents of ecclesiastical patriarchy, not as figures of solidarity or protection. As the Irish state is finally coming to terms with the mass-abuse committed by the Catholic clergy and questioning the nature of the power-dynamic between the Republic and the Church, all these narratives⁵⁶ are linked to reveal an infinite multitude, symptomatic of a systemic issue and not just a few isolated cases. I will soon expand on the role of the Church in the criminalisation of homosexuality and will for now simply point out (like many others) the irony of an institution condemning sexual acts between consenting adults while protecting serial child rapists.⁵⁷

Mid-way between Polycarp's unhealthy self-loathing and a last chance at self-acceptance is the figure of Anthony MacMurrough, whose post-traumatic stress after two years hard labour and witnessing his cell-mate and dear friend 'Scrotes' die in prison takes the form of a multi-personality disorder. His role as a guide and mentor to the adolescents is not clear at first as his relationship with Doyler is steeped in class power-dynamics: he pays the young man for sexual services, and

⁵⁶ Patrick McCabe's *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998) also depicts a protagonist being born as a result of the rape of a 15 year old girl by the local priest and the trauma that ensues.

⁵⁷ To be clear, again, the catholic faith is not targeted, this phenomenon is a recurring problem within any institution that relies on rigid hierarchies and allows its powerful members this level of impunity.

keeps referring to him as ‘the boy’/’child-like’ (ASTB,181) although Doyler is a sixteen-year-old. This might be a subtle nod by the author at the long years during which sexual majority was set much later for homosexual acts than for heterosexual ones. It is unclear exactly how old Anthony is during the novel, and thus the age-difference between the two remains unknown, though he is often described as rather young himself:

MacMurrough caught his face and it seemed to him a fresh and alarming thing, a hanging fruit among the withered leaves. Such a fruit as the ancients described as having a color as though fit to eat: but if plucked it crumpled in your hands into ashes. *And where they grow by the Dead Sea these fruits are called the apple of Sodom.* (ASTB,188 italics in text)

His youth, it seems, has been spoiled by the religious indoctrination he has endured during his trial for gross indecency in England and the perversity-ridden homophobic discourse he seems to have deeply internalised. He cannot even perceive that, at his age, he is still attractive to sixteen-year-olds, as Jim will tell him much later in the novel. Doyler’s antagonistic relationship with the aristocrat does not stop him from seemingly enjoying his contact and experimenting sexually with him, yet during their first depicted sexual encounter, from Anthony MacMurrough’s point of view, the focus is always put on age-difference, dubious consent or absence thereof:

At one point, his *child-like* hand reached behind and pressed the thigh he found. The touch shot a pang through MacMurrough. *As though the boy would share what Dick knew might only be taken.* In *boyish* throes he spurted. MacMurrough would follow, but just as he did he leant over and kissed the boy’s lips. It *surprised* that they parted and his unready tongue was met by another. (ASTB,181 my italics)

Consent in this scene is indeed lacking, as the young man is still asleep when MacMurrough initiates contact, yet Doyler rapidly becomes involved in the sexual act, taking away from MacMurrough’s attempt to dominate. Every sign that his younger partner is enjoying the intercourse is either met with surprise, disbelief, or even physical pain, ‘a pang’. It has to be predatory, rape, paedophilic because that is the discourse that has been hammered into Anthony MacMurrough about his desires and sexuality and sporadically reminded through the voice of the Chaplain ‘Direct not the eyes at naked flesh, the chaplain admonished.’ (ASTB,177) The abusive power dynamic is established by one of the voices in his head, named ‘Dick’, crude and domineering. This split-personality-like disorder also results in Anthony MacMurrough being almost absent during the intercourse:

‘MacMurrough felt himself depart. In his mind he climbed spiral stone stairs till he entered a draughty turret room. Scrotes looked up from his text.

-I see you have taken to rape now.

-Is it rape?

-Do you need to ask? Or do you need to be told?’ (ASTB,181)

Scrotes is another one of the voices, that of the friend he lost in prison, a sort of moral compass, disapproving of the way MacMurrough initiated what apparently could have been a thoroughly consented intercourse with Doyler. Instead, because his sexuality has been thoroughly criminalised, MacMurrough perpetuates the title he has been sentenced with. In his mind, he still is in prison, as the sound echoes in his head: 'C.3.4, called the warder. Slam. This cannot be. Prison. But it is.' (ASTB,181), hence the more direct comment: 'They only let you out: they never let you go.' (ASTB,182)

Anthony MacMurrough's psyche has been so utterly damaged that it is split into five voices: 'Dick', the predatory, perverted voice at odds with another, namely the Chaplain, a symptom of catholic indoctrination condemning his sins, Scrotes and a motherly 'Nanny Tremble' a more caring, doting voice: 'A kinder voice intervened, Nanny Tremble, to calm the crossness.' (ASTB,177) This last one is more complex as it sits at the crossroads of sexism and homophobia: 'The homosexual signifies the discredited male whose body has been violated and presumably feminised'⁵⁸. He therefore has to deny and externalise any genuine care and affection, stereotypically feminine attributes, he could feel for his lovers. This care has to be suppressed, mocked with a derisive name in order not to further question his manhood. The fact that the condemning voice is called the Chaplain serves our argument about the role of the Church suppressing sexuality, especially the 'non-productive' forms.

Now it seems relevant to elaborate on the role of this institution in the criminalisation of homosexual acts and thus give more background to the various characters' mindset in silencing, criminalising, condemning their own desires for *consenting* partners. The insistence on consent is important here: during the lecture *They're coming for your Children* Kate Davidson had made the same disclaimer, that in trying to validate Queer experience and protest against its criminalisation we should not disregard or excuse homosexual rapes or questionable age-differences. Class difference is another element to take into account in this close reading of Anthony MacMurrough and Doyler's relationship, yet it seems that O'Neill has left enough textual indications of Doyler's consent and enjoyment of the experience to at least allow doubt in the self-accusation of rape by Anthony MacMurrough. I stay safely on the side of ambiguity as we are clearly dealing with an unreliable, self-loathing, traumatised, split-personality narrator for this scene.

With all that in mind, I can now go through the history of Church's control of homosexuality with the impressive article by David Norris, an Irish Gay Rights activist who carried the court case against

⁵⁸ Barry D, Adam 'Theorizing Homophobia' *Sexualities* Vol I (4): 387-404 (1998) 394.

state homophobia to the European Court of Justice in the 1990s and who tried to open the dialogue in the mid-1970s with the Church of Ireland and the Catholic Church through a series of letters and committees aiming for the decriminalisation of homosexuality. The language used in the article might be surprising for academic standards, which makes it all the more precious here. Norris describes how, by changing hands under Henry VIII, the courts went from being the prerogative of the Church to that of the State but in so doing did not adapt their discourse to a more secular, judicial language:

In 1536 Henry VIII, as a consequence of his seizure of the monasteries, assumed to the Government most of the prerogatives of the ecclesiastical courts including the jurisdiction in cases of sodomy. So under the 25th of Henry VIII Chapter VI, homosexuality finally achieved its tragic transition from sin to crime and an essentially religious prohibition was arbitrarily absorbed into the common law.

This complete endorsement of the religious definition of crime has never been questioned. A similar set of laws were 'enacted by the Irish House of Commons on 11th November 1634'⁶⁰, thus applying the same standards to the Irish Isle. Interestingly, this validates the argument of Kieran Rose that 'Homophobia can be regarded as part of the colonial inheritance'⁶¹, although the Republic would not decriminalise homosexuality until 1993, about 71 years into *relative* Independence. After 1634, the law was similar in England and Ireland until the Sexual Offences Bill in England, 1967 and Norris argues that: 'All authority on English law: Fleta 13th c, Coke 17th c, Blackstone 18th c Stephen 19th compensate for a minimum of legal argument with a mass of biblical quotation'⁶², once again pointing to the complete dominion of the Church upon sexual mores and its translation into law, enforced with the full might of the State. This would prove a sufficiently oppressing yoke even to heterosexual couples as, by the 1970s, the Church still opposed the use of contraception within married couples, thus they 'created a new community of interest between young people whether heterosexual or homosexual. Attempts by Church authorities to control "genital activity" by a species of authoritarian theological argument more appropriate to animal husbandry'⁶³. This colourful metaphor by Norris also draws the link between compulsory heterosexuality and the capitalistic notion of productivity, as argued by Barry D. Adam:

The profound social changes associated with the rise of the modern world-system from the 14th to the 20th century have included the subordination of kinship to capitalist relations in the arenas of production, distribution, and consumption. These changes have in turn had far-reaching consequences for the status of

⁶⁰ Norris, David. 'Homosexual People and the Christian Churches in Ireland: A Minority and Its Oppressors' *The Crane Bag*, vol. 5, no. 1, Richard Kearney, 1981, pp. 31 – 37 (33)

⁶¹ Rose, Kieran *Diverse Communities: The Evolution of Lesbian and Gay Politics* (Cork: Cork University Press, (1994) 8

⁶² Norris 'Homosexual People and the Christian Churches', *Op. Cit.*, 34

⁶³ *Ibid*

women, the internal dynamics of families, (self-) determination of prospective marital partners, the invention of sexuality, and the emergence of gay and lesbian worlds...⁶⁴

This completes Norris' article by providing some explanation as to why the State would uphold such a narrow definition of sexuality. Capitalism requires a population whose buying habits are easy to predict and thus, ascribing heterosexuality, monogamy and child rearing as a life plan allows for several industries to prosper on a majority following these steps. It is thus important to note that being heterosexual in this society grants privileges over queer people, but at the cost of your economical and physical exploitation. This exploitation (and thus encouragement) and incredibly tight control of heterosexual partnerships ultimately encouraged them to participate in the push against the Church's influence. Thus, it came from both the heterosexual 'majority' and the homosexual 'minority' in Ireland.

Queer & Feminist responses

In the case of women, it is important to point out that heterosexuality does not protect them if they stray from the path of reproduction and wifely behaviours as the recent final report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes⁶⁵ (2020) fully unearthed the extent of the atrocities committed against unmarried mothers and their children throughout the 20th Century. In fact, Irish art is only recently trying to grapple with the extent of this phenomenon, and an interesting bit of contemporary poetry smartly links the 'sanitisation' policy with the Mother and Baby Homes' treatment of their 'wards' with 'Six Ways to Wash your Hands' (Ayliffe, 1978) by Anne Marie Ní Churreáin:

Rub right palm over left dorsum and left palm over right dorsum

To ensure the scent of infant leaves your skin: the sour fumes
Of bottled milk, triangled terry cloth, ice-cold smears of cream.

The scent of sin can sling for years as potent as a bad dream
Of trade-deals, needle pricks, poppies bloomed on the skull.

The scent of a child in an unmarked grave may get in beneath
Your fingernails and cause all sorts of problems in later life.

(...)

Rotational rubbing backwards and forwards with clasped fingers

Of right hand in left palm and vice versa to wear thin the heart-lines.

Be a sister and repeat the law like a hymn into the sink.

⁶⁴ Barry, Adam D. 'Theorizing Homophobia' *Sexualities* Vol I (4): 387-404 (1998) 396

⁶⁵ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d4b3d-final-report-of-the-commission-of-investigation-into-mother-and-baby-homes/>

Do not commemorate: Do not remunerate. Do not let

The wounded woman or her child speak in a bare tongue.

Wash in this way and rid your hands of Mother, Baby, Home.⁶⁶

The contrast between the rigid medical, hygienist language of hand-washing (double-entendre with 'getting rid of' too especially in the last verse) and the hypersensory depiction of the mother-child bond in early infancy (scent, cold, pricks) especially the smell and touch, held low in the modern hierarchy of senses as they mingle the body and object⁶⁷ that has been absorbed by the Catholic independent State. Thus, the tactile and moving instructions of hand-washing distance themselves from the sensory bond of parenthood, breaking the intimacy of touch. Yet, insidious in the mother-baby touch is the rhetoric of the Church infecting it with the sense of 'sin', desensitising the reader to the 'poppies bloomed on the skull' and the 'unmarked grave' rendered necessary in the population sanitation process of the Church. This rigid rhetoric is also found in the 'be a sister, repeat the law' binding the Church to the medico-legal discourse it has deeply influenced in the independent state. Therefore, in Catholic Ireland, single mothers are on par with any marginalised group whose death and exclusion are part of the biopower control the State exerts on its population for purity purposes, and I will expand on the notion in my last part on the current state affairs in Ireland (III 3. 1).

There often is a form of solidarity between queer and feminist associations and political causes which appears in literature and the media through the many queer narratives that are interlinked with stories of pregnant women and people seeking abortion or being generally threatened by their pregnant state. To only cite a few, *At Swim Two Boys* depicts the case of Nancy and the discrimination she faces being pregnant and unmarried in 1915 Ireland, *Beautiful Pictures of a Lost Homeland* (2016) mentions subtly the abuse, impregnation and subsequent abortion of Lotte, Geo's baby-sitter, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) by Arundhati Roy follows S. Tilottama through her gruesome abortion and the negative reaction of the medical staff at her request, even more recently, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) pairs the love-story of Héloïse and Marianne with the struggle of Sophie to terminate an unwanted pregnancy, as Marianne herself has had to deal with the same situation in the past. This connection between AFAB people's struggles for reproductive bodily autonomy under patriarchy and queer communities, and sometimes the overlapping of both (in the case of bi/pansexuality or pregnant trans-men and non-binary people) shows that

⁶⁶ Maddern, Paul et al. *Queering the Green Belfast*, Lifeboat Press (2021) (276-9).

⁶⁷ Lloyd, David *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity. The Transformation of Oral Space (1800-2000)*. Cambridge University Press (2011)

functioning in the reproductive sexuality condoned by the Church only protects an individual if they simultaneously respect a very strict and narrow set of other rules. Hence the Church prescribes only a tightly controlled version of reproductive sexuality. Kieran Rose commented thus on the links between the Women's Movement and the Gay liberation movement in 'recognising that our shared oppression derives from the abuse of sexuality as a tool of oppression which necessitated strict gender stereotyping and the denial of sexual fulfilment'.⁶⁸

In 1974, the Irish Gay Rights Movement was created, then becoming the National Gay Federation which undertook the laborious task of sending letters to all representatives of the Church, both protestant and catholic, to discuss this societal issue. The Church of Ireland proved itself somewhat progressive and willing to strive for the decriminalisation of homosexual relations between male consenting adults. Although, according to Norris, this law was hardly ever used except for a few high-profile cases like Oscar Wilde and Roger Casement. However, the Catholic Church proved more recalcitrant to meet with the N.G.F: 'our attempts at communication and dialogue with Ara Coeli have since regularly elicited merely the Dalek-like response that "this correspondence is now terminated"'.⁷⁰ The Justice system continued to invoke 'current Christian morality' in Ireland when the constitutionality of laws relating to homosexual behaviours were questioned despite 'the fact that the State was unable or unwilling to produce any witness to give evidence to this effect'⁷¹. This chronology is limited to the 1980s as the article was published in 1981, but is an interesting slice of time in the long-lasting struggle for Gay Rights in Ireland. Homosexuality between two male adults in total intimacy was de-criminalised in the UK in 1967 and only removed from the DSM (list of mental illnesses) in 1990 by the World Health Organisation. Northern Ireland did not repeal the 'gross act of indecency' and continued to criminalise homosexuality. The Gay rights movement also blossomed in the occupied part of Ireland and quickly diversified with lesbian groups branching out. In 1984, the age of consent for homosexual acts was lowered from 21 to 18 years old (for heterosexuals it remained at 16) and it seemed like the situation was improving yet gay rights in Ireland were still seen as incompatible with the constitution.

In 1982, Declan Flynn and Charles Self were murdered in a series of homophobic beatings taking place in Dublin. Yet the violence enforced against the gay community was only seen as an opportunity by the gardaí to infiltrate the gay scene 'for the investigation' into these murders. 15000

⁶⁸ Rose, Kieran *Diverse Communities: The Evolution of Lesbian and Gay Politics*. Cork: Cork University Press (1994) 16.

⁷⁰ Ibid 35, 'Dalek' being a reference to the alien-robots in British TV Show *Dr Who*

⁷¹ Ibid 36

gay men were registered, photographed and had their fingerprints collected; this data then being used as leverage against them. It was clear that the police were more hostile to the victimised community than interested in pursuing its oppressors, since one of Flynn's murderers was caught and only got a suspended sentence, never reaching prison.⁷² The Gay Defence Association was created to federate all LGB associations and fight back.

The Irish state, because of its official religion, kept arguing for the immorality of homosexuality and its incompatibility with the constitution, a hostile attitude that culminated with the utter lack of medical response to the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. However, to imagine that all Catholics and the clergy are opposed to inclusive views on sexuality would be unfair, and it is crucial to highlight the role during the AIDS crisis of Father Paul Lavelle, summed up thus:

Father Paul Lavelle, who was inspired by Vatican II to prod the Church in a progressive direction. As coordinator and voice of the Task Force, Father Lavelle at times contravened Catholic doctrine, asserting that, when worn to prevent viral transmission, condom use was not immoral. He also publicly favored the decriminalization of homosexuality and free access to condoms. The bishops' tolerance toward their priest faded irrevocably when he went the next step to advocate condoms within marriage in an official Catholic publication. The Church immediately relieved Father Lavelle of his position and quickly terminated the Task Force in 1988, leaving a policy void not filled by the Department of Health until 1990.⁷³

These are the only attempts of the Irish Catholic Church to respond to the crisis, which could have legitimised the State to do so, ending the trend of constantly evoking State Catholicism as an excuse for leaving gay men, sex workers and substance users to die. This curious attitude by Father Paul Lavelle in 1987 calls to mind the ironic Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, an order of drag-queen nuns who advocate for condom-use, prep, AIDS testing and generally safe sex practices. The movement was created in 1979 in San Francisco by gay men donning the nun habit. The positive reaction, and the need for a caring presence in the community, motivated them to expand as a movement, several new convents emerging all over the U.S and Europe. They are 'dedicated to the promulgation of universal joy and the expiation of stigmatic guilt' (Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence 1980). They also accompany HIV positive people and their partner(s) to rural retreats for them to relax, reconnect and exchange about their experiences. An Irish branch seem to have been active around 2014-15 too, localising this re-appropriation of the Catholic church's 'love and tolerance' aura for a more accepting, sex-positive form of support that would get nipped in the bud in its members by the actual institution (like in the case of Father Lavelle).

⁷² Ferriter, Diarmaid *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland* London, Profile (2009) 1263

⁷³ Oppenheimer, Gerald M. 'The Catholic Church, AIDS, and Sexuality in Ireland: Uncovering Part of the Story.' *American Journal of Public Health* vol. 108,7 (2018) 850-851.

The European Court of Human Rights eventually had to intervene for homosexuality to be decriminalised in 1993, then implemented by Mary Robinson after a long-standing case between David Norris and the State of Ireland. Yet a strong homophobic establishment was still in place and the climate remained hostile as Panti Bliss (Rory O'Brien) called out the routine homophobia of prominent people in the Irish media in 2014. Yet in a complete logic reversal, RTÉ, where he had been interviewed, edited his statements out of the archive, apologised and paid a hefty sum (85 000€) to avoid slander claims. Symbolically Rory O'Brien was invited to perform a 'Noble Call'⁷⁴ at the Abbey Theater (a long-standing place of ambivalent Irish resistance through the arts) as Ireland entered the decade of commemoration, starting in 2013 with a play, James Plunkett's *The Risen People* about the 1913 Dublin Lock-out, evoked in *At Swim Two Boys* even though none of the characters live through it. Factory owners locked their workers out of their working places to replace them in a turning point of socialist history in Ireland with the mobilisation of the Irish Citizen Army by Larkin and Connolly.

In the original recording of the Noble Call, it seems that the public was somewhat confused by the solemn tone of the story told to them by a fully clad and made-up drag queen. Rory O'Brien argues:

I'd learned many years ago ... that a drag queen grabs people's attention in a way that a guy in a shirt and trousers can't ever hope to compete with. And I knew that, rather than get in the way of my message, drag would *amplify my voice*. ... most of the audience in the theatre ... would probably not be familiar with drag queens, and when I first walked out they would be blinded by my drag. At first, they wouldn't be able to see past it, wouldn't be able to hear past it ... they would expect me to be brash and outrageous and silly ... to be light.⁷⁵

By association with British drag, the expectation is that of humour and entertainment, yet, much like with the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, it can be argued that drag performance and appearance can be used to attract attention to a form of discrimination and oppression while ridiculing the absurdity of the system that perpetuates it. It can be a very serious tool of commiseration because of the contrast between a flamboyant, humoristic appearance and the stern message (akin to the shock of seeing Jim Carrey in a dramatic role like *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*). A new edition of the Noble Call cut off the inappropriate (confused) laughter of the audience and set the intended tone with music.⁷⁶ There is a fine line between political subversiveness and harmless entertainment in drag, and it seems that the interpretations of its political potential vary greatly⁷⁷. In a way, the very parodic nature of drag towards gender

⁷⁴ 'Irish pub tradition, like a party-piece, where everyone must sing a song or recite a poem' O'Neill, Rory *Woman in the Making: A Memoir* London, Hatchett (2014) 384.

⁷⁵ *Ibid* 390.

⁷⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=08tO-0elyfo>

⁷⁷ <https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/11/5/18056558/drag-queens-politics-activism-lgbtq-rupaul> [16-01-22]

stereotypes and presentation serves to highlight the performative-ness of gender. It overacts certain traits of masculinity (drag kings) and femininity (drag queens) to ridicule their performative natures and fully display the artificiality of gender-stereotypical behaviours. Drag can also be used as a powerful experience in realising that behaviours supposed inherent are actually constructed. Paul B. Preciado had participated in Drag King workshops that were about far more than just taking on a male appearance for a limited amount of time:

this shared gender suspicion provokes a subjective shift that Teresa de Lauretis and José Muñoz have called “disidentification.” The drag king workshop doesn’t begin with dressing or making up our face to look like a man, but in becoming aware of the cultural orthopedics that construct everyday femininity, and by disidentifying from the normative nature of politically assigned gender.⁷⁸

This collective experience of deconstructing gender is a more discreet form of what Preciado refers to as ‘micropolitics’ because it intervenes at the scale of the individual through the collective. Another example would be the *Alternative Miss Ireland* pageant that ran from 1987 to 2021, raising funds for various charities like the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, HIV and AIDS related associations, which further demonstrates the political power of drag:

Targets of this gender-play frequently included the comely maiden and virginal tropes entrenched by the Church and state in 20th century Ireland, which Panti herself subtly undermined as a warm but risqué figure; but also normative models of gender and sexuality more generally, including the sanitised, commercialised forms elevated by traditional beauty pageants.⁷⁹

Unfortunately, there is a marked tendency in the carnival-like business of entertainment that all disruptions of the norm are to be temporary, a catharsis for this lust for change, for alternative behaviours which must remain contained within a show, a performance. Thus marginalised, othered people are constrained to the show: people with disabilities in freak shows, black people as musicians in bars where they would not be allowed in as patrons, drag queens or kings to the safe RuPaul Drag Race finite experience. There is this worrying hint that such a spectacle of alterity will only attract disingenuous sympathies, which, past having had their fill of entertainment, may at best display performative allyship but will not question the *status quo* because, as an audience firmly grounded in cis-het normativity, there is no real motivation to do so. To some people with a pre-disposition for gender-queerness, these shows may act as a revealer and help them figure out their identity or taste for disruptive queerness, but for a majority of the viewership, the experience must remain strictly locked into the temporary realm of leisure.

⁷⁸Preciado Paul B. *Testo-Junkie Sex, drugs, and biopolitics in the pharmacopornographic era* trans. Bruce Benderson New York: Feminist Press (2013) 366

⁷⁹ Walsh, Fintan *Queer performance and Contemporary Ireland : Dissent and Disorientation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (2016) 87

After the episode with RTÉ, Panti Bliss partook in the campaign for marriage equality initiated by the case of Katherine Zappone and Ann-Lousie Gilligan, a couple who tried to get their Canadian marriage recognised by the Irish state in 1995 and lost in High Court as the definition of marriage as strictly heterosexual was embedded in the constitution. In 2015, results peaked at an impressive 62% of yes votes in the referendum. It could be seen as a small step for the ‘good gays’ who have wishes easily understood by a cis-het majority, the wish to get married, have children, but *The 34th* documentary makes a point of debunking these assumptions, to a certain extent. One positive aspect of the referendum was to display a concrete, numbered acceptance by the Irish population of LGB couples, as one of the interviewees explained, it felt more reassuring to work and live in Ireland knowing that the people around you had most likely voted yes for marriage equality⁸⁰. Yet many queer people’s wishes are not so easily legible in a normative context. Removed from monogamy and child-rearing, some parts of the community are still marginalised and hyper-sexualised as deviants. This proves the double standard of cis-het normativity when it comes to assimilating or accepting only the least subversive part of the queer community.

It is also important to note that, in Northern Ireland, anti-LGB laws have remained in place due to the continuous grip of the Democratic Unionist Party on Stormont. Kieran Rose argues too that ‘the ongoing war has left little space for social movements such as the lesbian and gay movement to develop’⁸³ lending weight to his previously quoted argument that homophobia is a colonial inheritance. Thus, the bulk of the work remains to be done by an increasingly divided community, in Ireland like elsewhere. Sometimes, the new laws may seem like surface-level, token measures that do not seek deeper changes in education and society. As some European countries have displayed, the believed common acceptance of gay couples, defended by the law and protected by Marriage Equality is still contested in far-right circles, and some of their arguments make it to mainstream audiences. They may be interpreted as a strategy by the more moderate right-wing to contrast with their own conservative stance but still have the effect of making the lack of actual acceptance of ‘Other’ (racialised, pathologised) groups in a sizeable portion of the population.

3. GNC⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Cullen, Linda, Gildea, Vanessa *The 34th COCO* television (2017) named after the 34th amendment to the Irish constitution to permit marriage between two persons of the same sex.

⁸³ Rose, Kieran *Diverse Communities: The Evolution of Lesbian and Gay Politics*. Cork: Cork University Press (1994) 13.

⁸⁴ Gender-non-conforming

This Western culture of ours tends to sacrifice the full range of experience to a lower common denominator that's acceptable to more people (...). And we do that with the rest of our lives. Our spirits are full of possibilities, yet we tie ourselves down to socially-prescribed names and categories so we're acceptable to more people. We take on identities that no one has to think about, and that's probably how we become and why we remain men and women.⁸⁵

Cis/straight passing

As previously conceded, there are limits to the parallels made between gender-queer people and same-sex attraction, as there is the belief that you can achieve 'straight-acting' or 'straight-passing', that sexual orientation is easier to keep secret than gender identity. Yet this is not always the case, as Rory O'Brien (Panti Bliss) wonders in the Noble Call, 'what was it that gave me away?' after being harassed at a pedestrian crossing and insulted with homophobic slurs, prompting him to constantly 'check [him]self' for any sign of gender-non-conformity. For instance, there is a certain type of mannerism designated as a 'campness' in some people (cis, trans, gay, bi/pan, straight alike) that is assimilated to femininity and thus, to homosexuality. There is even a way of speaking that 'gives you away', as developed in the documentary 'Do I Sound Gay?'⁸⁶ blurring the line between sexual orientation and gender-non-conformity. The problem of 'passing', 'acting' in a gender-conforming way, then becomes an issue shared both by gay-bi-lesbian people and transpeople. It is also important to note that some transpeople pass perfectly and have re-integrated society as their actual gender with no issues, living 'stealth'. When these people keep to straight relationships and do not disclose their transness, some end up not identifying as trans anymore or, in the case of straight transpeople, some do not even identify as queer.

Yet a clear distinction between sexual orientation and gender has to be advocated, mostly to avoid conflating homosexuality and transidentity, especially to avoiding 'trans panic' in straight men being attracted to transwomen and suddenly fearing a challenge in their straight identity, often with violent results⁸⁷. As an aside, some cis-gay men and cis-lesbian women also feel threatened in their homosexuality when being attracted to trans-men and trans-women respectively.

Blurred identities

In fact, this very situation is explored in *Beautiful Pictures* by Mia Gallagher, as the protagonist's partner starts off by dating someone who, at first seems to be a gender-non-conforming gay man:

What's your name? (...) I realised I didn't know what I wanted him to call me.

⁸⁵ Bornstein, Kate *Gender Outlaw*. Routledge: New York and London (1994) 36.

⁸⁶ Thorpe, David *Do I Sound Gay ?* Sundance Selects (2014).

⁸⁷'Data indicate a worrying trend when it comes to the intersections of misogyny, racism, xenophobia, and hate towards sex workers, with the majority of victims being Black and migrant trans women of colour, and trans sex workers.' <https://transrespect.org/en/tmm-update-tdor-2021/> [last accessed 15/09/23]

When I was a kid, I'd said at last, I was ... Georgie. Strange, to feel that name again in my mouth.

Georgie? He'd looked up, grinned. Like the football player? No!

I shrugged, glanced away, caught myself in the mirror. I'd arched my back so my chest stuck out: make-believe décolletage. It was a habit I used to practise then, thinking it would make me look more like myself. I was in a skinny phase, the dangerous one where I'd been borderline anorexic, and my hair longish again, framing my face. Under the black dots my shape blurred, soft-focus. Rita Hayworth in Gilda.

Hey, he'd said, bringing his hand to my face. You know, you don't really look like a Georgie. (BPLH,113)

Automatically, Georgia rejects any name being associated with masculinity 'like the football player' but there is an intense blur in Gallagher's account of dialogues, scrapping all common punctuation, so that the reader cannot know exactly who is speaking, or thinking. 'No!' could be in Georgia's head, or something she says, or a cry of disbelief by Mar. All in all, it is a clear rejection of the masculine name Geo received from her parents. However, only when Georgia corrects her posture in the mirror, arching her back and trying to look like 'Rita Hayworth' does her lover switch from 'the football player' to 'you don't really look like a Georgie'. To exist in her real gender, she has to 'look more like [her]self'.

The way she is perceived by Mar, her partner, in the beginning is quite ambiguous, as he says, upon kissing her for the first time: 'I've never –' (113) this dash is a recurring motif in the book and serves as a loud silence to draw attention to a taboo, to something that cannot be said. 'I've never been with a woman?' 'met a transwoman before'? The protagonist doesn't help: 'I'd had no idea what he wanted to say.' (113) What is clear however, is that Mar is a gay man, he cruises⁹⁰, is 'stuck in his club queer ways' and will even seem to become less and less attracted to Geo as her transition progresses: he's put off by her breasts, her new smell and starts to cheat on her, or at least tries to: 'I saw the sand on his boots, smelt the seaweed off his jeans. ... He said he liked it because of the sea, the sky. Bullshit. He only went there to cruise (...).' (BPLH,376) In passing, the link between the sea and queerness is established in this novel as well. Communication slowly deteriorates between the two, as the dashes, amputated dialogues and taboos creep up more and more:

You've got so soft, he'd said, cupping my right breast in his palm. There had been a strangeness in his touch. Something different in the skin-on-skin between us. Is that okay? He said. My Mar, usually so sure with his hands. (...) He flattened his palm, sliding it away from my breast towards the hardness of my sternum. I'd felt his blood pulse, his cock soft against my belly.

Geo, I don't know if –

I'd pushed him away. Oh, fuck off, Mar. (BPLH,321)

⁹⁰ Practice in (mostly) cis-gay community men to meet up in designated public places remote/at night time to find lovers.

The *unspeakable* marked by the dash here can be interpreted as ‘I don’t know if I am still attracted to you as a woman’. The link between the reaction (soft cock) and the exploration of her body (cupping my right breast) and the displacement of his hand ‘away from my breast towards the hardness of my sternum’ signals that Mar is clinging to whatever can still feel like a male torso heralds the end of a relationship that cannot go on between a gay man and a woman. This can be read as an attempt by Mia Gallagher to respect the clear distinction between gender identity and sexuality and highlight the fact that gay men cannot be attracted to transwomen⁹¹, therefore straight men should not feel threatened in their straightness for being attracted by transwomen. This increasing lack of intimacy and attraction will also lead to uncomfortable interactions:

Eugh, he’s said and pulled away. Not then, the time of the softness, but earlier. It was before I’d been able to afford electrolysis and, (...) I still had to shave, so one night there was stubble on my breasts when he’d put his face there. Eugh, he’d said, jerking his head away. Then he’d laughed. I’d stiffened.

That’s a mad place to get beard rash, Geo.

At first I’d felt a bit – disgusting, I suppose. That old inbetweeny thing, that sense of having failed, that I’llneverpass bullshit I’d never felt before around Mar, because he’d always been able to see me, like your mother had, or yes, Lotte. But when I looked down and saw the ginger stubble across my breasts it seemed so ludicrous that I couldn’t help laughing too. (2016:322)

Yet here, the location of the absurd is on the transgender body. What is supposedly humoristic is the incongruence between stereotypically male and female characteristics: ‘ginger stubble’ and ‘breasts’. The grotesque depiction of the transwoman’s body sometimes jars with the descriptions of cis-women in *Beautiful Pictures* yet Georgia’s adult beauty is only reduced to her ‘feminine’ mouth. The few moments of intimacy with her partner are then marked by these negative reactions, ‘soft cock’ ‘Eugh’ ‘laughed’, and these do not encourage the reader to imagine Geo as desirable. The fact that the fictional character also laughs at her body’s inadequacy can be interpreted as internalised transphobia. Dysphoria⁹² around body-hair in transwomen is also often powerful, and the ability to laugh at it with a partner seems disingenuous and might point to Gallagher’s limited understanding of dysphoria. In the confessional and absurd conversation scenes with Jim and Pen, the reader is on their side, laughing at the normative expectations and misunderstanding of the other person, we laugh *with*, not *at* the protagonist.

It is interesting to remember that, first, the novel is written by a cisgender woman trying to imagine trans experience (although she had contacts with the trans community for research). Second, this ‘inbetweeny’ motif surrounds the protagonist from the beginning, yet she seems by all accounts to

⁹¹ It is not that clear-cut, real-life practices care little for official categories or respectful discourse and labels.

⁹² Defined by the NHS as ‘a sense of unease that a person may have because of a mismatch between their biological sex and their gender identity’ <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/gender-dysphoria/>

be a linear MtF transwoman, her gender identity does not seem to be non-binary. That 'amphibian' nature, or in-betweenness is even present in the strange parallel made between her and Lotte's childhood as one of two seemingly complementary magic twins (a hackneyed trope in itself) when Georgia sees a picture of Lotte and Andy as babies:

If she hadn't seen that other picture, she might have thought the photographer had made a mistake and snapped the same baby twice; or (...) she might have thought that every person in the world, *not just her*, is born with a side to them that only some people see. When really, nobody is seeing anything; all they're doing is looking for something that used to belong to them and doesn't exist anymore. (BPLH,359 my italics)

The supposed parallel here is that Lotte and Andy are two sides of the same person, male and female, much like Georgia and Elaine (her imaginary friend) are also two sides of one person, male (?) and female. Further in the novel, Georgia encounters another pair of twins: 'the girl who looked like Elaine but couldn't be and wasn't, of course, and the boy who looked like me or something I used to be, but wasn't, and the thing they made together that was a nonsense but not' (BPLH,117) There is, thus a recurring motif of feminine and masculine parts forming a whole. It is interesting to note that, here, Georgia would represent the masculine part of the duo, which further questions her womanhood. The suggestion of a form of fluidity in everyone might be an interpretation but the protagonist's overarching (and quite difficult to interpret) fear of a gap, a cleft, seems to indicate a sort of irreconcilability between her gender identity and her body. A more uncomfortable reading yet can take into account the fact that Aisling and David lost a child prior to Georgia's birth: 'It had been an adventure, at least up until the miscarriage, five months in.' (BPLH,71) making the other child like a precocious twin and possibly another interpretation for Elaine's ghostly presence around Georgia.

This supposed combination of a masculine and feminine essence is inconsistent with the gender identity of the protagonist as established by the author. This interpretation here would result from a misunderstanding of gender identity, and a conflation of non-binary and linear trans experiences. This further displays the lack of connection and understanding between the author and the community she is writing about. Trans-experience is far from being monolithic, and some transwomen might recognise their own experience in this literary character, but these topics are extremely complex, especially in the context of increasing transphobia (though it was only starting in 2016, when the book was published) and the author takes liberties with the topic that seems, at times, insensitive. For instance, Mar and Geo befriend a gay couple prior to Geo's transition who, upon seeing her after she's started to transition, react thus: 'This type of thing, people wanting to, you know, conform to straight norms because they're not able to handle being gay –' (BPLH19), the dash here indicating that transitioning is then seen as 'selling out' (BPLH19) and conforming. This

brings us back to the argument around people being scared of an imaginary pressure to transition if you experience same-sex attraction.

In the novel, the chasm between Georgia and her family is quickly made clear by a shocking difference in the use of pronouns. Georgia, as a little girl, describes herself saying 'she' and in the scenes recounted from her father's point of view, she is designated as 'he'. Ash, her mother is more ambiguous in this scene told from the baby-sitter's point of view:

She's still *reluctant to use a pronoun*, even though she knows her initial assumption was a mistake. Georgina? she'd said, then, quickly, because as soon as she said it she knew it was wrong, *No, I know. Georgia*. Had she just imagined it, the child's response? A flicker in the eyes; a sense of things settling, somewhere, as if a spell had been cast, or maybe lifted? Then Aisling appeared.

Oh, no. *That's Georgie. Georgie's a boy.*

Had there been a trace of something *unsure* in Aisling's eyes as she said that, a *hesitation* before the naming? Or had Lotte imagined that, so she could make sense of her own *confusion*? (BPLH,139 my italics)

This ambiguity from childhood around Georgia's gender positions her in a particular, in-between state, as she often will play in the liminal space of the lane behind her house with an imaginary friend who can be read as an externalisation of her secret girlhood. But much as Pen and Jim cannot express their same-sex attraction, or get lost in deep misunderstandings and absurd dialogues, Georgia cannot express her gender. She lives her childhood mostly *unseen* rather than *unuttered* but the recurring motif can still crop up in the people denying her gender by calling her with male pronouns, refusing to use her name, like her father:

You'd put my initial on the envelope. G. Madden. Just a G., no name, so you wouldn't be condoning whatever damage you thought I was doing to the life you'd given me. ... I'd torn the whole lot up, letter, card, money, smarmy invitation. (BPLH,319)

This conscious reduction of Georgia to her initial, which would also suit her deadname, is yet another attempt at erasure by the people surrounding the protagonist. This constant denial of someone's actual gender is a common experience in trans people. Relatives, co-workers can be surprisingly creative when it comes to avoiding the use of someone's pronouns too, only using the name for instance. This constant dodging often creates Kafkaesque situations where a person will feel like they're not really part of the conversation or that their gender is carefully avoided at all times not to jar with the persistence of a perceived former social gender. Misgendering, like deadnaming, also has the powerful consequence to deny your entire reality, as in this violent scene after the protagonist has just survived a car crash and her face is covered in blood:

Out ye get, now, sir.'

Sir ?

My chest started to hurt again. I shook my head, 'No, no.' He took my right arm. His touch was surprisingly gentle.

'Come on, now, sir, outta that seat.'

Tears prickled behind my eyes and I bit my tongue to stop them. 'No, no,' I said again, and I wanted to say, Not sir, it's Ma'am, Ma'am, or Ms, or even Miss, or Fräulein or Mademoiselle, Senora, Senorita, if you must, but I didn't have the words in me. All I had was 'No, no' and that shake of my head ... (BPLH,217)

Here, in quite a vulnerable position where she relies on the help of a misguided stranger, she cannot afford to correct, and thus antagonise him. All she can muster is 'No, no' but the explanation would be so long-winded and risky in that situation that it is best to keep silent. Yet this comes with the cost of accepting an unintended form of disrespect. In this, it maintains the motif of the *Unspeakable* in that her womanhood is annihilated by her being treated as a man: 'I didn't have the words in me'. In this scene, through misgendering, the farmer can wipe out all the work, pain, fear linked to her medical transition, negate the long-awaited results and make the depressing statement that nothing is apparent other than the gender assigned at birth. The contrast between the violence of misgendering and the touch 'surprisingly gentle' is all the more tragic that the person inflicts additional pain, while trying to help. This pain even seems somatised by Geo's body as her 'chest started to hurt again'. The unique 'Sir' stands in its crushing simplicity against the avalanche of increasingly desperate counter-options 'Ma'am, or Ms, or even Miss, or Fräulein or Mademoiselle, Senora, Senorita, if you must' and the multiplicity of feminine titles in multiple languages is not enough to dilute the original misgendering. In fact, this whole tirade is silenced by the protagonist whose only defence against the magnitude of an insulting 'Sir' is an almost mechanic, instinctive 'No, no' and a 'shake of [a] head'.

Absurd transphobia

William Keohane, a young writer from Limerick who often blurs the line between author and narrator by writing mostly autobiographic content, describes accurately the feeling of being deadnamed by a family member (or anyone who knows you don't use that name anymore for that matter):

She starts speaking again, but doesn't say my name. Instead, she says the old one.

I hear her saying this, of course I do. But the air is holding the word, the name, the syllables of it, right in front of me. It falls into me and through my lungs where it catches, grains of it slipping into my stomach, tightening, as a knot, the sound pulling down on the muscles in my limbs, tensing. The moment turns solid around me, settles into my body for the rest of our walk.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Keohane, William 'Three Strands' *The Stinging Fly*: Issue 47/Volume Two, Winter 2022-23 39

The feeling of almost physical aggression that deadnaming and misgendering represent is often lost on cispeople who tend to not understand the bad reactions of transpeople after such an ‘innocent mistake’ or ‘simple fact’. On this occasion, the deadnaming is intentional from the narrator’s aunt and comes from a transphobic ideological place, shutting down all possible defence from William: ‘she keeps talking, about how there are distinct and real difference between men and women, and how she won’t call me anything except this old name, the one she keeps repeating.’⁹⁶

At the core of absurdity is the ‘distance between the individual’s perspective and a brute exterior world’⁹⁷ and describes accurately the perpetual fracture between a non-passing or recently out transperson’s self-image, (an image thought to be projected through mannerism, aesthetics, voice and tone) and the reception by others in everyday interactions. There is no possible resolution when the misgendering or deadnaming is unintentional. Gender is more than an inner, psychological identity, it needs to be acknowledged by peers simply because it has a crucial social function. It is supposed to constitute a familiar network of signifiers that will render a person legible and predictable in their behaviour, thus easing the social interaction and steering it in one or the other side of the power dynamics. In *Beautiful Pictures*’ scene of crisis referred to above, the perception of the person helping shifts from helping an injured woman (albeit responsible for the accident, as she is at first called a ‘silly bitch’ (BPLH,215) by the other car’s owner) to an injured, gender-non-conforming (as Geo is still dressed in her usual clothes) ‘man’. The potential for hostility in a moment of dire need is thus revealed by the misgendering. Minutes later, Georgia is restored to her gender by paramedics calling her ‘Miss’, the random assignment of pronouns and titles adds to the absurdity of living in a non-conforming body. During childhood, most people, including her father, treat her like a boy but a few people *see* her for the little girl she is, including her paternal grandmother who calls her ‘Alanna’ and her babysitter who first calls her ‘Georgia’.

In this brief history of LGBT movements in Ireland, there seem to be two conflicting readings of Irish homophobia and homosexuality *vis à vis* the country’s colonial past. Kieran Rose argues that Ireland is homophobic because of British laws and dominion, it is part of the colonial inheritance. Ireland, according to him, welcomed the decriminalisation of homosexuality and the rapid political changes ‘stem from positive traditional Irish values arising from the anti-colonial struggle reinvigorated and amplified by the new social, cultural and economic influences of the 1960s

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Sollars, Michael ‘Kafkaesque Absurdity in the Aesthetics of Beckett and Giacometti’ *Enthymema* (2013)

onwards.⁹⁸ Yet an opposing, Irish conservative view sees *homosexuality* as this elitist, colonialist British trend: ‘...some openly gay Irish men in London in the early 1990s were told by their Irish friends it was ‘an English phase’ they were going through; when one man came out to his London-based peers ‘they just said I was becoming like the English’⁹⁹ Yet to fully comprehend how these two identities are interlinked to lend weight to my contention that these two patterns of othering can be expressed through the same mythologising element, it is necessary to dive into the history of colonial, decolonial, ‘post’ colonial Ireland, and see the process of silencing and negating another identity.

⁹⁸ Rose, Op.Cit. 3

⁹⁹ Ferriter, Diarmaid *Occasions of sin : sex and society in modern Ireland* London, Profile (2009)

I.2 Nationalisms and Nature - Dúchas

Within its frames, pasts that envisaged different futures are detached from any life to come, are fixed in their extinction, furnishing only debris – remnants, whose excavation proves only the inevitability of their passing, their fundamental incapacity to bend into the **onward flow** of history. On occasion though, they trouble history's stream with interference, eddies, and **counterflows**.¹⁰⁰

1. Sea Monsters

Wajinru and murúcha

But the prize for colonial stereotypes must surely go to the British historian Charles Kingsley, who, ... could still remark on a visit to Ireland: 'to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins are as white as ours!'. This caricature of the Irish as 'the white Negro' was to prove pervasive as a legitimising force of colonial superiority...¹⁰¹

Two authors, one Irish, another (or rather others as this is a collective idea) from the US propose such a counterflow by using the sea as a *topos* of pre-colonial alternative utopia. As a disclaimer, there is no question here of comparing the US's history of slavery and the colonisation of Ireland which occupied an ambivalent 'liminal position [as Irish writers] at once belong to both the imperial metropole and the colonised periphery.'¹⁰² This part merely endeavours to explore two strangely similar coping mechanisms within a traumatic history in the form of the merfolk metaphor, allowing the authors to explore the collective psychological implications of dealing with the past (or not) in a mythologised, folk-lore steeped way.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Rivers Solomon weave this rich tapestry of merfolk's histories to explore the trauma of colonisation, slavery and the duty or rejection of memory. In the *Fifty Minute-Mermaid* Ní Dhomhnaill presents the *murúcha*, merfolk as coming from Land-Under-Wave (Tír-fó-Thoinn) which they have left for the rocky shore of England, forgetting their pelagic culture and language, ashamed of displaying any behaviour 'redolent of the sea'¹⁰³ while, by opposition, Rivers Solomon's *drexciya/wajinru* have prospered under the sea, especially because they stayed well away from white supremacist land. For context, this merfolk civilisation was first imagined by the band Clipping, composed of Daveed Diggs, William Hutson and Jonathan Snipes. In their song, 'The Deep' eerie music and water sounds accompany an introduction to the population's lore:

¹⁰⁰ Carroll, Clare and King, Patricia *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory*. Cork: Cork University Press (2003) 46

¹⁰¹ Kearney, Richard *On Stories* Routledge, London (2002) 92

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 130

¹⁰³ Ní Dhomhnaill, N. Muldoon, P. *The Fifty-Minute Mermaid* Loughcrew, Gallery Press (1995) 90-91

Our mothers were pregnant African women
Thrown overboard while crossing the Atlantic Ocean on slave ships
We were born breathing water as we did in the womb
We built our home on the sea floor
Unaware of the two-legged surface dwellers
Until their world came to destroy ours
With cannons, they searched for oil beneath our cities
Their greed and recklessness forced our uprising
Tonight, we remember
Y'all remember how deep it go¹⁰⁴

The use of African American Vernacular English pronoun 'y'all', a second person plural pronoun that doesn't exist in textbook British¹⁰⁵ and American English emphasizes the central notion of collective memory. Solomon, in the expansion of the lore, sometimes uses 'We' instead of 'I' for some of the novella's protagonists who think of themselves as an indissociable collective. The Historian of the underwater civilisation is supposed to bear alone the weight of history and their origins so that the others can live carefree, unencumbered by the heavy past. Yet in return, the historian is assaulted constantly by gruesome images of suffering, their entire selves consumed in this collective history, so much so that they cannot develop an individual sense of identity anymore. This blurring between the singular 'I' and collective 'We' is also present in the Irish merfolk, whose sense of selves is quite similar, according to the poem *Teoranna/Boundaries*:

Bhí trioblóidí speisialta aici i gcónaí i dtaobh teoranna.
Níor fhéad sí a aithint riamh, mar shampla, go rabhamair go léir
Aonaránach is discréideach, inár nduine.
Rithheamair go léir isteach ina chéile, ba dhógh leat uaithi,
Faoi mar a bheadh na dathanna ó smearadh íle
Ar an mbóthar tar éis cith báistí

She always had a real difficulty with boundaries.
She could never understand, for instance, that we were all
Separate and discrete, each and every one of us.
We all ran into each other, you'd swear to listen to her,
Like the different colours in an oily puddle

¹⁰⁴ Clipping. *The Deep* Eponymous album (2017)

¹⁰⁵ 'Yous(e)' exists in Hiberno-English

After a shower of rain (Mermaid,129-30)

Therefore, this boundary between the self and others of the merfolk is notably absent and can be partially explained by the nature of their aqueous, fluid element, signalled by the 'oily puddle'. Yet it also suggests that pre-colonial populations do not share the sense of individualism imposed on them by enslavers and colonisers, the modern conception of human rights that focuses on the individual. According to David Lloyd, the formation of a colonial society arises from 'the uneven encounter between a globalising project founded and still legitimated by Europe's delusion of universality and the multiple and different social imaginaries at work in colonised culture.'¹⁰⁶ This insistence on the collective is therefore part of the process of decolonisation, as Frantz Fanon argues in the *Wretched of the Earth*, when the colonised intellectual sheds colonial values, and:

Individualism is the first to disappear. The native intellectual had learnt from his masters that the individual ought to express himself fully. The colonialist bourgeoisie had hammered into the native's mind the idea of a society of individuals where each person shuts himself up in his own subjectivity, and whose only wealth is individual thought. Now the native who has the opportunity to return to the people during the struggle for freedom will discover the falseness of this theory. The very forms of organization of the struggle will suggest to him a different vocabulary. Brother, sister, friend...¹⁰⁷

Both these imaginary merfolk populations are attempts to deal with the colonial and racist wound by two authors in very unique positions, that of a displaced population torn off from their roots and trying to rebuild a common culture and history in US context, and that of 'foreigners at home'¹⁰⁸ for the Irish monoglots who couldn't communicate with their younger neighbours, raised in the English language. Barry McCrea argues in *Languages of the Night* that around the 1910's, Irish monoglots had, strangely, this experience in common with immigrant families but even stranger for people who had never left the place they were from. The natural, intergenerational bond of language-learning was broken by setting English as the sign of progress and educational advancement and Irish was reduced to a secret, private language. After the revival and its reinvestment by the Irish state, it was artificially set, according to McCrea, to 'dutiful Irish', a language studied, taught, printed in signs and forms or solemn national pronouncements but rarely heard in daily interactions (except in the Gaeltacht). Paradoxically too, the author states that 'the turnaround between the abandonment of Irish as a vernacular and the sacralisation of the language as the lost tongue of the nation's soul was rapid.'¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Lowe, Lisa A. Lloyd, David *The Politics of Culture in the shadow of capital* Durham, Duke University Press (1997) 47

¹⁰⁷ Fanon, Frantz trans. Richard Philcox *The Wretched of the Earth* New York, Grove Press (2004) 47

¹⁰⁸ McCrea, Barry *Languages of the Night: Minor Languages and the Literary Imagination in 20th c Ireland and Europe* Yale Uni Press (2015) 5

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

Before expanding on the *wajinru* and the *murúcha*, I would like to link the topic of lost language and culture to a mournful Irish folk song, *Amhrán na Leabhar*, which narrates an example to rebel against this disappearance. *The Song of the Books* tells the story of a Catholic school master who sent precious Irish books by sea to Portmagee, where he is to teach children in Irish -in secret-, against the orders of the British colonisers who enforced English in schools. The ship transporting the books, however, is lost at sea:

Bhí mórán Éireann leabhartha,	There were many Irish books
Nár áiríos díbh im labhartha,	Which I did not speak of
Leabhar na Laighneach beannaithe	Books by the blessed Leinstermen
Ba bhreátha faoin spéir.	The finest on this earth
An "Feirmeoir" álainn, gasta, deas,	A nice, clever, fine farmer
Do chuireadh a shíol go blasta ceart,	Happy to sow seeds properly
Thug ruachnoic fraoigh is aitinn ghlais	Bestowed heather and shrubs on barren hills
Go gealbhánta féir.	And harvest white hay. ¹¹⁰

The rarity of this forbidden knowledge and the last traces of Irish culture is there lost at sea and the element is no longer a place of resistance, but one aligned with the desires of the colonisers to erase the colonised culture. Despite the importance of water and the sea in Irish identity, it seems interesting that the ambiguous, sometimes threatening nature of this element is also explored in traditional epics. It echoes the drowning scene in *At Swim Two Boys* of Doyle who, sole Irish speaker of the protagonists, is almost taken away by the sea, wrapped in an all-green Irish flag. The ambiguous nature of the sea will be explored in a later part, but the *Song of the Books* allows for a link between the Irish and Pelagic language: if the books fell into the sea, they became the property of the *murúcha* in Tír-fó-Thoinn. Is the sea then to be read as the true Irish nature reclaiming what belongs to her, the Irish language and its speakers? Or as the threat of Irish nationalism, taking the lives of young men (Doyle will eventually perish during the 1916 rising despite shunning it) and drowning the original language and literature in state-mandated teaching of a sanitised, artificially unified language? But then, was catholic Irish even part of the 'true Irish nature', if such a thing exists?

¹¹⁰ *Cuan Bhéil Inse or Song of the Books, Amhrán na Leabhar* by Kerry poet Tomás Rua Ó Súilleabháin (1785-1848) *Traditional Slow Airs of Ireland* Cork, Ossian Publications (1995)

The use of an imaginary pelagic folk in *The Deep* and *The Fifty-Minute Mermaid* also allows for the authors to process the racialisation of black people and (in a former period before they got dissolved into the constructed notion of whiteness) Irish people with a distance and a treatment of the body removed from humanity that allows the expression of the feeling of alienation and animalisation of racialised bodies. By endowing the merfolk and *wajinru* with gills, fangs, fins, a displaced uvula, by exaggerating the grotesque depiction of their bodies and inadequate to life on land/in colonised land or the land of white supremacy, they refer back to scientific racism that sought to justify the inferiorisation of several categories of population building a hierarchy where the British Caucasian (and its descendants in the United States) were always on top:

The Iberians are believed to have been originally an African race, who thousands of years ago spread themselves through Spain over Western Europe. (...) The skulls are of low, prognathous type. They came to Ireland, and mixed with the natives of the South and West, who themselves are supposed to have been of low type and descendants of savages of the Stone Age, who, in consequence of isolation from the rest of the world, had never been out-competed in the healthy struggle of life, and thus made way, according to the laws of nature, for superior races.¹¹²

The 19th Century allowed for a lot of self-taught, self-proclaimed scientists to thrive as the discipline was recent and less regulated¹¹³. This systematic classification mirrored that applied to the animal realm in a wider context of what was then called natural history where now debunked disciplines like phrenology/craniology¹¹⁵ (see the reference to skull shape in the excerpt) could thrive and provide a rationalised excuse for the treatment of human populations as lesser. The black/white binary here appears blurred as the Irish population is likened to an 'African race' yet Irish immigrants in the U.S would later distance themselves from those claims and participate in and benefit from white supremacy¹¹⁶. However, this recalls a former time before the Irish (and Italians) 'became white'¹¹⁷ and suffered the same undermining pseudo-scientific classification. The caricature of the 'simian' Irish was also prevalent in Victorian caricatures, highlighting the racialisation of Irish people in the British colonial discourse¹¹⁸. Because these new systems of classification like taxonomic nomenclature were mapping animal and human races in similar fashions, both authors push this

¹¹² Strickland Constable, Henry *Ireland from One or Two Neglected Points of View* London, Hatchards (1888) 43

¹¹³ Winterburn, Emily 'PHILOMATHS, HERSCHEL, AND THE MYTH OF THE SELF-TAUGHT MAN.' *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, vol. 68, no. 3, 2014, pp. 207–25 208

¹¹⁵ See Bracken, Harry M. 'Essence, Accident and Race.' *Hermathena*, no. 116, 1973, pp. 81–96.

¹¹⁶ <https://openbooks.library.umass.edu/introwgss/chapter/race/>

¹¹⁷ See Ignatiev, Noel *How the Irish became White* London, Routledge (2009)

¹¹⁸ Curtis, Lewis Perry *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature*. Newton Abbot: David and Charles (1971)

trend further by conflating the animal and the racialised human population in the creation of those sea creatures.

For instance, the *wajinru*, who speak of the 'land-dwellers' as their kin, are still depicted as sea creature with a non-human appearance:

She settled for a scream, opening her mouth wide, showing rows of sharp, long teeth, narrow and overlapping. Her eyes and nose disappeared as her mouth expanded, her face replaced with a black, endless pit guarded by fangs. (...) She roared; the ensuing sound so different on land than it was in the water. (Deep,72)

To Yetu, one of the protagonists, her voice sounds scary on land and the difference of pressure between the deep marine trenches where her people dwell and the surface is painful at first. Yet throughout the novella, she interacts mostly with people who are racialised as black and who share a kinship with the *wajinru*, a sort of understanding coming from sharing a traumatic (colonial) past. There is only a distant mention of a war with land-dwellers and the use of under-water bombs against their population. The merfolks' bodies are ill-adapted to life on land (breathing with mouth and nose instead of gills is difficult) and likewise, the *murúcha* suffer from life in an unnatural, hostile environment:

...Dar leo tá goin na ré
Gach píoc chomh holc leis an ngréin á mbualadh;
Gorm a bhíonn siad i ndiaidh goin na gealaí
Is buí i ndiaidh an ghrian á leagadh.

Nuair a thagan an rua orthu is go méadaíonn an braon
Ins na harasaipil níl luibh ná leigheas a thabharfadh
Aon chabhair...
(...)
Caitheann na mná muincí troma thart faoina muineál
Is fearaibh ceirteacha tearga
Nó rud a bith a chlúdóbh rian na sceolbhach.
Deireann an dochtúir liom go bhfil an sine siain
ar lár ina lán acu.

... As far as they're concerned, moonstroke
Is every bit as serious as too much sun;
They turn blue after moonstroke
And yellow after the sun has laid them low

If they happen to get shingles, or when a boil
Comes to a head, there's no herb or native remedy that
will offer any respite...
(...)
The women wear heavy neck-ornaments
While the men favour red kerchiefs,
Anything at all that hides the signs of their gills.
The doctor reports that the uvula
Is displaced in the vast majority of them.
(Mermaid,26-27)

The grotesque details of the *murúcha* bodies (turning blue/yellow, shingles, boil, gills, displaced uvula..) clashes spectacularly with popular sexualised depiction of mermaids as temptresses (the reason for their presence at the cathedral of Clonfert and Irish churches¹¹⁹) and emphasize an almost realistic depiction of a fish-like body out of water. I will expand on this realism and its possible

¹¹⁹ Higgins, Jim *Irish Mermaids : Sirens, Temptresses and their Symbolism in Art, Architecture and Folklore* Crow's Rock Press Galway (2016)

meanings at a later stage but the result is a strange, detached, almost medical-like account of their inadequacies that recalls anthropologic observations of native populations in early natural history.

Both the *wajinru* and the *murúcha*, despite expressing the monstrous nature forcefully mapped onto racialised bodies also depict underwater utopias (even the *murúcha* have abandoned Land-Under-Wave) and therefore functions as a reappropriation of the monstrousness and otherness of racialised bodies. Furthermore, the merfolk act as a multi-purpose metaphor in being forced to abandon their traditional milieu and live on land traumatic transition from water to uncomfortable land life allows the authors to explore the trauma at both a personal level (repressed memory) and public level, diving in the communal notion of trauma brought about by a forced linguistic and cultural transition.

Forget to survive or Remember to belong

Indeed some of the individuals who have gone to land and attempt to survive there suffer keenly from the disconnect from the collective, what Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill describes as the 'collective amoeba'¹²⁰ of Irish culture, a unicellular organism. Brendan Patrick Keane describes for *Irish Central* the experience of listening to Irish poetry reading for Irish-Americans as such:

The group of us concentrate together on the poet's poetry, and receive the incantation, so that something stirs--if only phantom pains--and might even grows back in us, as on a cut aquatic organism. The Irish that was taken from us, like ... the removal of tails, has the strange capacity to grow back in gabbering amoebic communion. It all helps us remember more, to recall and witness together...¹²¹

Curiously, this thirst for knowledge from the Irish diaspora of a lost culture echoes the ceremony of Remembering of the *wajinru* who rely on their historian to reconnect them to their culture and past:

A historian's role was to carry the memories so other *wajinru* wouldn't have to. Then, when the time came, she'd share them freely until they got their fill of knowing. Late as Yetu was, the *wajinru* must be starving for it, consumed by the desire for the past that made and defined them. Living without details, long-term memories allowed for spontaneity and lack of regret, but after a certain amount of time had passed, they needed more. That was why one a year, Yetu gave them the rememberings, even if only for a few days. (Deep,33)

This focus on reclaiming a lost or forgotten culture, history and language also harks back to the colonial production of knowledge reducing the colonised population to a passive object, a resource to be mined by invading powers. In both the denial and repressed memories of the *murúcha* and the more symbolic effort of *wajinru* to relinquish their history once the Remembering is done is essentially because of the deeply painful and traumatic nature of this history due to colonisation and enslavement. In order to live their daily lives, it is necessary for them to distance themselves

¹²⁰ Shay, Cary A. 'Of Mermaids and Others: Remarkable Revelations in "The Fifty Minute Mermaid"' *Nordic Irish Studies*, Vol. 9 (2010), pp. 1-12 (6).

¹²¹ Keane, Brendan P. 'Swimming with mermaids in the Irish ocean of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry' *Irish Central* March 14, 2010.

from the horrors of their collective past. Yet both Ní Dhomhnaill and Solomon argue, in various ways, that to repress this history is to lose a part of yourself, even if being overwhelmed by a traumatic collective past can feel like the loss of your individuality, like there is no existing outside of this victim-status enforced onto your ancestry by colonial forces.

Yetu actually encounters her polar opposite: Oori, whose people are all dead and she makes a tremendous effort to keep the last traces of them in her homeland, whereas Yetu, the current historian of the *wajinru*, has fled the Remembering before her people could transfer the memories back to her because she felt it would kill her:

Above the surface, everything seemed so insubstantial and light. She missed being a part of not just the sea, but the whole world. Without the History, she felt out of place and out of time. She missed being connected to all.

But connection came with responsibility. Duty choked independence and freedom. (Deep,83)

This constant dilemma structures the novella: individual happiness at the cost of forgetfulness or belonging at the cost of intergenerational trauma. Yetu constantly relives the drowning of the foremothers, the pain of the enslaved at the bottom of the ships and this permanent suffering has reduced her to a meagre, fragile shell. By leaving the ceremony, she dooms her people to remain trapped in those past ordeals and lose their minds. The following debate between Oori and Yetu then highlights this dilemma of repression or sacralised memory of the collective past:

If the past is full of bad things, if a people is defined by the terror done to them, it's good for it to go, don't you think?" said Yetu.

I would take any amount of pain in the world if it meant I could know all the memories of the Oshuben. I barely know any story from my parents' generation. I can't remember our language. How could you leave behind something like that? Doesn't it hurt not to know who you are?

... your whole history. Your ancestry. That's who you are."

"No. I am who I am now. Before, I was no one. When you're everyone in the past, and when you're for everyone in the present, you're no one. Nobody. You don't exist. (Deep,95)

This infinite tension is ultimately resolved when the history is shared among all the *wajinru* who have managed to survive the Remembering without leaving its whole burden back to Yetu. They finally understand her suffering at living constantly with this past and acquire a better understanding of their people. Much like the first generation of *murúcha*, the founder of the *wajinru* civilisation had decided early to keep all the knowledge of their past concentrated to one person, the historian:

'Some things ... weigh. I fear if they know the truth of everything, they will not be able to carry on ... I do not want them to learn. ... When I pass, you must tell them my wish for them,' we say. "That they live lives of togetherness, in the present. That the many of them who started out their lives in loneliness and solitude, they must put it away, and remember where we are now. Together. Safe.' (Deep,63)

This forgetfulness of the first generation seems necessary for survival, like the very creation of this underwater utopia (which nevertheless feels the attacks of the land dwellers in other ways¹²²). The poetry form of the *Fifty-Minute Mermaid* does not allow for such a direct questioning of these mechanisms, instead gets muddled, the original metaphors of water = Ireland and land = England paradoxically dissolve into other signifiers for mental illness, dementia and other individualised problems that might derive from collective trauma, but are never quite outwardly depicted as such. Yet unlike the *wajinru*, they have left behind the utopia of the abyss: ‘By now they’ve clean forgotten/the dizzying churning of the deep currents/ and, from the abyss, the whales’ antiphonal singing. Tá dearmhad glan déanta acu/faoin am seo ar shuathadh mearathail na gcaisí doimhne/is ar chlaisceadal na míol mór sa duibheagán’(Mermaid,26-27). This coping mechanism is merely expressed by the silence stretched around it and only surfaces on rare occasions, in ‘tiny clues’ (*Leide Beag, Leide Beag Eile* - two poems 90-92) by something a merperson will let slip, like an embarrassing sea lullaby or prayer or by a ‘Remarkable Admission/ Admháil Shuaithinseach’:

Only one time ever in my life

Did I get as much as the slightest inkling
from one of them

That they had gone through some sort of ethnic cleansing
And that it was to some other place altogether, far, far
away,
They really belonged.

Aon uair amháin riamh i mo shaol

A fuairesas oiread is an leide is lú ó bheal

Aon duine acu

Go raibh saghas éigin cineghlanadh gafa tríd acu

Is gur ó áit éigin eile ar fad, i bhfad i gcéin

A thángadar.’

(Mermaid,86-87)

The emphasis on the rarity of these moments of ‘admission’, clues or inkling is poignant, ‘only one time ever’ from ‘one of them’ subtract the opportunities for such a slip up by any of the *murúcha* and the disproportion of the horror they endured ‘ethnic cleansing’ justifies the preceding silence. Much like Mia Gallagher with the ‘loud silence’ habit of dashes interrupting the dialogues before taboos are enunciated, the only moment of the poems that overtly speaks of ‘ethnic cleansing’ and lack of belonging is in the form of this partial admission by one of the merfolks: ‘Níl aon ainmhí dá bhfuil ar an míntír, ar sé,/’nach bhfuil a chomh-maith d’ainmhí/sa bhfarraige. ... Go dtí an duine féin, agus tá sé sin ann leis./’Sé ainm atá air siúd ná mhurúch.’ There’s not a single animal up on dry land/That doesn’t have its equivalent/In the sea. .../Right up to the human being themselves, and they’re there too./The name they call them is the sea-person.’(Mermaid, 87-9) Note that the merperson doesn’t actually say he’s part of them, simply that humans also exist in the sea in the

¹²² ‘We built our home on the sea floor/Unaware of the two-legged surface dwellers/Until their world came to destroy ours/With cannons, they searched for oil beneath our cities/Their greed and recklessness forced our uprising’ Clipping. *The Deep* Eponymous album (2017)

form of ‘ná mhurúch’. Right after this ‘remarkable admission’ however, the merman disappears like he has let on too much and before the narrator can tell him that it is scientifically impossible. By de-humanising colonised populations and classifying them in the same way as animals (Iberno-Irish types¹²³), it conferred a moral justification on the colonisation process. The importance of forgetting the inferiorised culture can then be seen as a form of denial. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill has spoken on the subject in an interview with RTÉ: ‘First generations don’t want to be reminded of what was left behind – maybe it’s too painful.’¹²⁴

2. Decolonising Irish history

Bearing all that in mind, I now wish to remember Ireland’s past, at least in part to explain better the context of its nationalism. It is important to emphasise the revolutionary history of the island, as it was ongoing from the plantations to its independence and re-contextualise the sense of ‘freedom’ that Jamie O’Neill’s characters, especially for Anthony MacMurrough who the author has said to be closest to his own persona¹²⁵. Exploring the history of resistance also introduces all the powers at play and sometimes contradictory currents of rebellion where different interests and classes clashed over the autonomy of the land and will be useful for a later part where I wish to detail the varying forms of Irish nationalisms that co-inhabit in 1915 and 1916 during the events of *At Swim Two Boys*. It goes to explain how the tensions in Ireland became crystallised around the now well-known dichotomy of Catholics vs Protestants, thus blurring the historical traces of protestant revolutionaries and obscuring the current class struggle in Ireland. As Ruggiu argues in *Histoire des Îles Britanniques*: ‘In the course of the 16th century, the island underwent administrative centralisation, military conquest and a policy of Anglicisation which tended to separate the Protestant elite, often born in England and placed at the head of the administration and of vast landholdings, from the Catholic, Gaelic and Old English population, which was progressively dispossessed of its lands.’¹²⁷

¹²³ See Strickland Constable, Henry *Ireland from One or Two Neglected Points of View* London, Hatchards, (1888)

¹²⁴ Póirtéir, Cathal RTE radio 1 Doc Archive ‘Mermaids out of Water- Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill agus an Mhuruch’ 26th of March 2003

¹²⁵ Conner, Marc C., & O’Neill, J. (2007). “To Bring All Loves Home”: An Interview with Jamie O’Neill. *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 11(2), 66–78. 67

¹²⁷ Ruggiu, François J. ‘Chapitre XI – Équilibres et crises politiques’ (v. 1560 - v. 1640) *Histoire des îles Britanniques* (2013) 373 DeepL translation

Epic Failures with French 'help'

As it is still colonised to this day, it seems appropriate to recall the prominent role of Ulster in the long history of resistance to colonisation. The Ulster rebellion took place in 1641 at the time of English and Scottish plantation in Ulster and the eviction of Catholics. Settlers were confiscating the land and building walled-tenements, leaving the locals dispossessed. The local population was led by the Catholic landed gentry seeking to reclaim their property from the settlers. This introduces an important historical distinction between three communities: the Gaelic Irish, the Old English settlers, also called the Presbyterians or Dissenters and the New-English who were Anglicans also named the 'Protestant Ascendancy' from 1691 and the battle of Boyne opposing catholic James II and William of Orange.

The presence of Scottish Lords from the lowlands also further complicates what is usually presented as a simple dichotomy between two groups, the Irish Catholics and English Protestants. However, it is around the period of the first plantations in Ulster that the biblical narratives were utilised to exacerbate the separatism between the 'Saxons' and the 'Celts', according to Richard Kearney in *On Stories*. Kearney underlines this separatism as artificial, constructed for the purposes of building national identities with a convenient other to build against for the British and a reaction to having their identity undermined for the Irish:

What both narrations masked, however, was that the colonial settlers, no less than the Irish natives, were descended from the same mongrelised mix of successive ethnic invasions and migrations – Viking, Anglo-Norman, Scots, Celtic, Mile-sian, etc. As recent research has shown, the peoples of both islands share virtually the same gene pool. But even regardless of genetic considerations, I think it is true to say that since the act of reciprocal narration in the fourteenth century, the Irish and the English have evolved like twins, inseparable in their loves and hates, joined at the hip of Ulster and for ever bound to a common story of conflict and reconciliation.¹²⁸

The settlers were living in fortified separate settlements and a range of anti-Catholic legislation had passed in the recent years leading to 1641. The revolt was limited to Ulster where the plantations had been the most successful and they were easier to reach for dispossessed locals. There was also an opposition between the leaders of the rebellion, who were the former native elite whose land had been granted to English and Scottish nobility, and the actual dispossessed people: the elite simply wanted a recognition of their titles to recuperate their privileges while the people wanted the settlers out. Frantz Fanon encapsulates this phenomenon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, yet he was exposing French colonialism in Algeria, which goes to display the eerie similarity in colonial

¹²⁸ Kearney, Richard Chapter 8 'Britain and Ireland: A Tale of Siamese Twins' in *ibid* 92

processes as the settlers always find or build up a local elite willing to collaborate in exchange for privileges. Fanon points out:

The national political parties never lay stress upon the necessity of a trial of armed strength, for the good reason that their objective is not the radical overthrowing of the system. Pacifists and legalists, they are in fact partisans of order, the new order—but to the colonialist bourgeoisie they put bluntly enough the demand which to them is the main one: "Give us more power." On the specific question of violence, the elite are ambiguous. They are violent in their words and reformist in their attitudes.¹²⁹

This dynamic remains throughout the history of Irish rebellions, and will later impact the 1916 forms of nationalism. This Papist conspiracy of 1641 was said to seek to overthrow the plantations and it was quickly presented in an anti-Catholic rhetoric. Under Cromwell, during the 1649 depositions that were taken to analyse the events of 1641, the testimonies collected were almost exclusively protestant building up a protestant versus catholic binary¹³⁰.

This dichotomic rhetoric would be deconstructed throughout the 1770s as Catholic accounts of the events were published thus rebalancing the accounts of murders on both sides. However, Daniel O'Connell would, in the 1840s, seek to reverse this early 'catholic conspiracy theory' version of the events during the campaign to repeal the 1800 act of Union, focusing on the protestant-led massacres and once again erasing the nuanced accounts of the revolt.

Henry Grattan, another opponent of the Union Act campaigned for an Irish parliament and it was granted in 1782 through a push from the Protestant ascendancy who wanted to regain power over Westminster. Here it was the force of the settlers seeking independence from the motherland, that granted this proto-devolution: 'In this sense, the Irish elites were not 'colonial' elites, but it is indisputable that the Irish political system was controlled by Britain for its own benefit, at the expense of both Catholics and Presbyterians of Scottish descent in Ulster.'¹³¹ It was indeed an highly corrupt system as control was maintained from Westminster through bribery. Meanwhile tensions were rising in the rural areas, subject to rack-renting and eviction from often absentee landlords. Peasant associations and secret societies defended the rural populations through threats and attacks to limit the landlords' excesses. However, Protestant sectarian societies were fighting back, resulting in a general unrest especially in the north.

In 1793, Catholics were actually finally allowed to vote for this parliament as a reward for defending Britain during the war with France, which will also sound familiar as the same technique was used

¹²⁹ Fanon, Frantz trans. Richard Philcox *The Wretched of the Earth* New York, Grove Press (2004) 59

¹³⁰ See *The Irish Rebellion* by Sir John Temple's subtle subtitle: *Or, An History Of The Attempts of the Irish Papists To Extirpate the Protestants in the Kingdom of Ireland; Together with the Barbarous Cruelties and Bloody Massacres which Ensued Thereupon* (1646)

¹³¹ Ruggiu, François 'Chapitre XIII – La Grande-Bretagne sous les Hanovre (1714-1815)' Ibid 441

during the Home-Rule campaign and World War One. However, Catholics could still only vote for Anglicans. The Protestant liberals and carefully push for better rights for Catholic and formed a society of United Irishmen, Presbyterian Catholics and Anglican alike would put forward democratic reform for full Catholic emancipation. However, this surge was quashed by Westminster and all radical societies were forbidden.

The Society of United Irishmen (non-sectarian) then had to go underground and consider an armed insurrection with French help negotiated by Theobald Wolfe Tone. The SUI connected various rural secret societies to defend the dispossessed and raid Anglican-owned farms. In 1796 the French launched the Irish expedition under the general Hoche's direction with 14,000 troops but they were lost in an unexpected sea storm, and never even landed in Ireland to the general hilarity in Britain. Ireland, however was to be punished for organising and attempted invasion. Martial law was declared houses were burned and the people tortured especially in Dublin and Ulster. The loyal element of the Orange Order was created by the British crown in 1795 to control the unrest in Ireland. Still, the United Irishmen planned a rising to take Dublin without French help in May 1798 but through informants the British army was made aware of it and arrested all the leaders. The counties surrounding Dublin, who were supposed to constitute reinforcements rose still and what should have been a quick victory sank into bloody guerrilla the war over several months and was sustained sporadically until the 1800s.

With the Act of Union of 1801, the Irish parliament was dissolved as a response for this ongoing climate of rebellion. The Protestant Ascendancy begrudged this end of their privileges while the Catholic majority briefly hoped that, as British citizens, they would gain rights equal to the Anglicans', but, if they could vote, they still couldn't be elected. Therefore, the Protestant-Catholic divide usually presented glosses over a lot of nuances in history. There would be another rebellion in 1838: the Young Ireland rebellion minimised in British press as the 'Cabbage Garden Revolution'. It was an insurrection led poorly-fed and armed people in a difficult Famine context. The movement had grown out of Daniel O'Connell's repeal of the Union Act campaign. He had tried to achieve independence through constitutional agitation and monster meetings to mobilise both the urban working class and the rural peasantry. However, in 1843, the meetings were banned by the British government. The question of the use of violence and insurrection, then split the Young Ireland movement and that had been created by O'Brien in Davis. Furthermore, the deaths of Davis and O'Connell beheaded the movement and prevented inadequate nationalist response to the great famine of the 1840s and the 1850s. The Irish Diaspora spread out to England and its colonies

throughout the rest of the century and beyond: 'In Britain, most immigrants came from Ireland, particularly from the 1840s onwards. About a quarter of Irish emigrants went to live in British cities: some 500,000 before the Famine, another 1 million between the Famine and 1914.'¹³²

The main historical sources for this thesis come from *The Atlas of the Irish Revolution*¹³³ which allows for a version of history from the Irish vantage point as a colony participating in the British Empire's extension, with an ambiguous status, later discussed in more details of 'both of the centre and the periphery of the British Empire'. However, this history of rebellions that should confirm the subversive side of the Irish isle and be a source of national pride gets summed up and thoroughly undermined by Jamie O'Neill when Anthony MacMurrough and Doyler understand that the Easter Rising is not going according to plan:

Whatever about that, t's gone off half-cock.'

Well of course it has, MacMurrough thought to himself. It wouldn't be an Irish rebellion else. There had always been something whimsical, even Punch-like, about Ireland at war. One thought of Emmet, the handsome romantic, and his long-laid plans confused by a riot. Of the Young Irelanders whose Tyrtean anthems and Philippic gush could rise no further, push coming to shove, that the Battle of Widow MacCormack's Cabbage Patch. Of the Fenians, when the rebel force, numbering some hundreds, finding itself lost in the fog, surrendered to a dozen astonished constabulary; their captors then precluding any escape by the ingenious expedient of removing the men's braces. (ASTB,615)

This sarcastic account of the countless attempts of Ireland to overcome the yoke of British occupation emphasises the ridiculous situations, the mundane circumstances of rebellions. However, I would argue that in 2022, as an increasing number of so-called 'Eco-terrorists' attempt various bizarrely spectacular media hits (throwing soup at paintings in elitist museums, gluing themselves to roads etc¹³⁴) there is always this deep unease around people's militancy that might stem from this dissonance: 'There is an enormous contradiction between what they claim to want, and the misery and the ineffectiveness of what they do.'¹³⁵ It is even used as an example by Albert Camus in theorising the absurd: 'If I see a man armed only with a sword attack a group of machine-guns, I shall consider his act to be absurd. But it is so solely by virtue of the disproportion between his intention and the reality he will encounter, of the contradiction I notice between his true strength and, the aim he has in view.'¹³⁶ Countless moments in protests feel horribly awkward (when do we stop to chant this particular sentence?) illegitimate and the mockery of those watching

¹³² Bensiom, Fabrice 'Chapitre XVIII – L'« atelier du monde » (1815-1875)' in Ruggiu, F.J *Histoire des îles Britanniques* (2013) 373 DeepL translation

¹³³ Crowley John et al *Atlas of the Irish Revolution* Cork University Press (2017)

¹³⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/14/environmental-activists-throw-soup-over-van-gogh-sunflowers> [last accessed 10/01/2023]

¹³⁵ Organisation des Jeunes Travailleurs Révolutionnaires (OJTR) *Militancy — Highest Stage of Alienation* (1972)

¹³⁶ Camus, Albert trans. Justin O'Brien *The Myth of Sisyphus* Penguin books, London (1955) 33

from the safety of the sidewalks emphasises that feeling. Yet all efforts to defend rights questioning the *status quo* have been specifically endowed with this undermined image to disqualify the message and render any threat of escalation impossible.

Again the absurd tension can be felt in the aesthetic treatment of rebellions, often recuperated and sold as a commodity, as it is bitterly displayed in *Beautiful Pictures* with one of the characters building his fame from the photographs of the *Troubles* and the Palestinian struggle:

No, Blessed Eoin was saying in his mixed up Dublin-London accent (...) They cut to a book jacket; his latest coffee-table offering. A photo of a handsome boy with sideburns lobbing a flaming rag at a phalanx of British soldiers. It looked like Belfast ... He'd made a recent comeback taking pictures of suicide bombers in Palestine (BPLH,16-17)

Here the 'Dublin-London' accent belies the early anti-establishment diatribes of Eoin in his youth: he has become an anglicised sell-out. The parallel drawn between the *Troubles* and Palestine is not a moment of recognition or sympathy between two colonised states, but the cynical observation that people are only interested in the aesthetic of rebellion, while its political core is often, at the time, embarrassing to be around. Yet maybe the sublimation of the violence during the rebellions, sung in ballads and remembered in commemorations participates in the build-up of what Jack Halberstam calls 'imagined violence': 'Imagined violence create a potentiality, a utopic state in which consequences are imminent rather than actual, the threat is in the anticipation, not the act.'¹³⁷ By building up the usually infantilised or feminised colonised state's potential violence, it re-empowers it and constructs the possibility of further revolt.

The educational and media effort to ridicule opposing forces is surprisingly efficient at throwing this shade of 'whimsical' onto various movements. Likewise, the Easter Rising was widely unsupported by the masses in 1916, the damage cause to the city of Dublin and the risks taken for the locals was denounced. The only aspect of the rebellion that made it efficient, it seems, is the unwise reaction of the British state to execute the leaders of the rising, thus rendering the ridicule tragic. This acrid humour by the authors then only lends a more human-like quality to the rebellion, a more mundane and realistic tone than epics like *The Foggy Dew*, the lyrics of which boldly claim: 'And the world did gaze with deep amaze on those fearless men but few/Who bore the fight that freedom's light might shine through the Foggy Dew'¹³⁸ when, in truth, 'the world's' gaze would have probably been on the battle of Somme and the heavy losses of WWI. Mia Gallagher playfully reduces Irish history to actual footnotes in her novel *Beautiful Pictures* to emphasise the inconsequential

¹³⁷Halberstam, Jack 'Imagined Violence/Queer Violence: Representation, Rage, and Resistance' *Social Text*, Winter, 1993, No. 37,pp. 187-201

¹³⁸ MU-sb-1600 National Library of Ireland

nature of local history in its wider European context while O'Neill clearly calls attention to the discrepancy between the epic songs of rebellion and the failures of the uprisings themselves: 'it was all a little local madness, nothing strange in Ireland, every second week sure, hotheads and firebrands, demonstrations in the streets, parading with arms, an imitation of violence, a longing even, but never realized, shrunk from at the brink. ... He felt the truth had not made up its mind: the signs were contrary everywhere.' (ASTB,569) This harks back to the tension mentioned in PI.1 between the ideal and the grotesque in the aesthetic treatment of Ireland's nationalism and revolutionary moments.

The anticlimactic treatment of the rising and Irish history itself by the various authors of the corpus might be interpreted in two different ways: either the inferiorisation of Irish culture under British rule has left deep stigmas still resounding in contemporary literature or this way to celebrate affectionately the country's inadequacies is deployed on purpose to create a much-needed counter-nationalistic narrative. This lauded failure, as Patrick Pearse put it in *The Murder Machine* (1916), Ireland's ability to 'fail nobly or ignobly'¹³⁹ is seemingly common in formerly colonised countries¹⁴⁰, as Jack Halberstam analyses with Renton's speech in *Trainspotting* (1993):

The polemic extends also to the structure of colonial rule within the United Kingdom. In a scathing diatribe against the English for colonizing Scotland and the Scots for letting them, Renton rants in defense of his maniacal and violent friend Begbie: 'Begbie and the like are fucking failures in a country ay failures. It's no good blaming it on the English for colonising us. Ah don't hate the English, they're just wankers. We are colonised by wankers. We can't even pick a decent, vibrant, healthy culture to be colonised by. No. We're ruled by effete arseholes. What does that make us? The lowest of the low, the scum of the earth. The most wretched, servile, miserable, pathetic trash that was ever shat into creation. I don't hate the English. They just get on with the shit they've got. I hate the Scots.' (78) Renton's diatribe may not win points for its inspirational qualities, but it is a mean and potent critique of British colonialism on the one hand and of the falsely optimistic rhetoric of anticolonial nationalism on the other.¹⁴¹

Most of the novels, short-stories and poems of our corpus manage to avoid the easy binary as Gallagher ironically summarises: 'Protestant/Czechs ≈ Catholics/Irish/nationalists (Colonised) – or, (...) 'Good'/Catholics becoming protestants/German ≈ Protestant/ British (Colonisers) - 'Bad' (BPLH,120) since she replaces Ireland in its European context by examining the state of Bohemia/Sudetenland and the warring factions (Czechs and German) for its dominion suggesting, as I have recalled earlier, loose historical parallels (note the wavy '≈' signs, not an exact equivalent '=') between this region and Ireland by adding footnotes of comparisons like the one cited here.

¹³⁹ Pearse, Patrick *The Murder Machine and Other Essays* Mercier Press (1976)

¹⁴⁰ 'At the dawn of History, India started on her unending quest and trackless centuries are filled with her striving, the grandeur of her successes and her failures' PM's speech after India's Independence, quoted by Sandeep Bakshi during an international conference held at the Université de Lille (31/01-01/02 2019) organised by S Ben Messahel and F McCann and entitled *Dissensus in the Post-colonial Anglophone World : History, Politics, Aesthetics*.

¹⁴¹ Halberstam, Jack *A Queer art of Failure*, Durham and London, Duke Uni Press (2011) 91

Paradoxically, the Protestants of Bohemia are then equated with the Catholics of Ireland while the Catholics of Germany are equated with the Protestants of Great Britain and to address the confusion, she sets the warning 'Be aware that conflating 'ethnic', 'sectarian', and 'political' identities has been known to create more problems than it solves.' (BPLH,120).

Socialist alternatives

Paradoxically, it also renders the cruelty of the Empire against the revolutionaries of 1916 even more disproportionate considering the lack of seriousness of the affair. Heather Laird, in her presentation *Remembering Partition*¹⁴² criticises the tradition in historical studies to consider history as the sum of key events led by exceptional people based on whatever had the most impact, in other words, a bad habit of reading history backwards, which, given the actual circumstances of the 1916 rising is quite on point. Having hindsight into the violent reaction of the British government and the subsequent 180 turn-around in popular opinion led historians (and nationalists) to reappropriate this debacle as a key moment in Irish history, yet it seems like most of the revolutionaries died facing a complete failure of their plans for the republic. This is both tragic and a source of hope as many currently embarrassing political movements (for independence elsewhere, for trans rights, against climate change...) only seem like failures because of the lack of political hindsight. However, the failure of 1916 did tremendous damage to a potential socialist Ireland by disposing of its main driving force: the citizens' army and Connolly. O'Neill himself argued: '1916 killed the labor movement. Killed it dead. The representation of the leaders who were executed afterward immediately took on a Catholic tinge.'¹⁴³

Heather Laird also posits that decolonising Irish history can consist in considering each moment as one of possibility, as one of potential alternative. Therefore, I would like to mention one blip on the radar that could have led to a myriad of decentralised similar organisations. In 1823, socialist Robert Owen visited Ireland, drawing in well-to-do inhabitants because 'Socialism was the fad of the rich instead of the faith of the poor'¹⁴⁴ and the short-lived Hibernian Philanthropic Society was set up to carry out his ideas:

...one of the members, Mr. Arthur Vandeleur, an Irish landlord, was so deeply impressed with all he had seen and heard of the possibilities of Owenite Socialism, that in 1831 (...) he resolved to make an effort to establish

¹⁴² Drawn from Laird, Heather *Commemoration* Cork University Press (2022)

¹⁴³ Conner, Marc C., & O'Neill, J. (2007). "To Bring All Loves Home": An Interview with Jamie O'Neill. *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 11(2), 66–78. 75

¹⁴⁴ Connolly, James 'Chapter XI An Irish Utopia' *Labour In Irish History* Independently published (2019) online version, np.

a Socialist colony upon his property at Ralahine, County Clare. For that purpose he invited to Ireland a Mr. Craig, of Manchester, a follower of Owen, and entrusted him with the task of carrying the project into execution.

Though Mr. Craig knew no Irish, and the people of Ralahine, as a rule, knew no English – a state of matters which greatly complicated the work of explanation – an understanding was finally arrived at, and the estate was turned over to an association of the people organised under the title of The Ralahine Agricultural and Manufacturing Co-operative Association.

In the preamble to the Laws of the Association, its objects were defined as follows: –The acquisition of a common capital./The mutual assurance of its members against the evils of poverty, sickness, infirmity, and old age./The attainment of a greater share of the comforts of life than the working classes now possess./The mental and moral improvement of its adult members./The education of their children.

The association wrote its own set of regulations, used its own currency and instigated freedom of religion, the crime rate was effectively null. James Conolly concludes: ‘Had all the land and buildings belonged to the people, had all other estates in Ireland been conducted on the same principles, and the industries of the country also so organised, had each of them appointed delegates to confer on the business of the country at some common centre as Dublin, the framework and basis of a free Ireland would have been realised.’¹⁴⁵ Here, despite it being only a partial experiment as the land still belonged to Mr Vandeleur, is a glimpse at another type of utopia than the pre-colonial underwater tribes of Gallagher and Solomon. Ralahine is also coincidentally situated in county Clare, where Doyler, O’Neill’s most staunchly socialist character, comes from.

To dive more thoroughly in postcolonial and decolonial thoughts as applied to the specific Irish case, it is necessary to recognise that these theories emanated from other geographical areas as Gurinder K. Bhambra efficiently sums up in her article ‘Postcolonial and decolonial dialogues’:

The traditions of thought associated with postcolonialism and decoloniality are long-standing and diverse. Postcolonialism emerged as an intellectual movement consolidating and developing around the ideas of Edward W Said, Homi K Bhabha and Gayatri C Spivak. While much work in the area of postcolonial studies has directly addressed issues of the material, of the socio-economic, there has also been a tendency for it to remain firmly in the realm of the cultural. In contrast, the modernity/coloniality school emerged from the work of, among others, the sociologists Anibal Quijano and María Lugones, and the philosopher and semiotician, Walter D Mignolo. It was strongly linked to world-systems theory from the outset as well as to scholarly work in development and underdevelopment theory and the Frankfurt School critical social theory tradition.¹⁴⁶

Decolonial theory was thus predated by a more measured and now criticised notion of ‘postcolonial literature’ which Joseph Lennon expands on in his chapter ‘Irish Orientalism’. He borrowed from Edward Said to explain the colonised-coloniser dynamics in representation and saw in the Celtic origins of Ireland a form of Irish Orientalism which arose in the literature of the 18th century with the two different models the Scythian (biblical) and the Phoenician. These varying models of Irish pedigree had two wildly differing interpretations: one validated the antiquity of Irish culture, seeking a form of legitimacy in this history, and the other choose to see it as a sign that Ireland

¹⁴⁵ *ibid*

¹⁴⁶ Gurinder K Bhambra, ‘Postcolonial and decolonial dialogues’ *Postcolonial Studies* (2014) 17:2, 115-121 115

possessed a savage and barbarian culture. Therefore, in these two opposing (British and Irish) points of view, the coloniser then either corrupted a noble civilization or civilised a barbarian culture that needed to be exterminated. In British context, the usual child-parent or male-female binary was applied to colonised countries to justify a domination that also reveals the brutal constructed opposition of gender roles and paternalism of the notion:

English and French Orientalists habitually represented Asian and West Asian cultures as sensual, exotic, and primitive, often discussing their lack of skills for self-governance both as cultures and races – categories that often elided into one another. Such linked portrayals of diverse colonised peoples aided both colonial administrators and imperialist sympathisers in justifying and administering colonial rule across the globe. Likewise, nineteenth-century English pundits and imperialist administrators, as well as French and English Celticists, characterised ‘the Celtic Races’ as feminine, unintellectual, natural, and pre-modern, particularly the Irish, and especially in the decades around the Irish Famine. Two seminal works from the 19th century on the Celtic races –...-- treat the ‘Celt’ as essentially feminine and, therefore, complementary to the more masculine Germanic or Teutonic races (emphasizing the Saxon influence in English society). For Arnold, the Anglo-Saxon and the Celt formed a sort of family – with the Anglo-Saxon as the stern, unimaginative parent and the Celt as the ineffectual, intractable, and dreamy child – (always ready to react against the despotism of fact’).¹⁴⁷

The Celtic origins of Ireland are seen by Lennon as a form of reappropriation of this infantilising dynamic. The self-exoticisation then reveals the liminal position of Ireland as both of the centre and the periphery of the British Empire, both colonised and the coloniser. Mia Gallagher addresses this blurring of the usual binary: ‘Be aware that conflating ‘ethnic’, ‘sectarian’, and ‘political’ identities has been known to create more problems than it solves. Moreover, as some of or other curiosities show, being Colonised or Coloniser (therefore ‘good’ or ‘bad’) is not a fixed state’. (BPLH,120).

The Gaelic Revival thinkers borrowed from oriental mythology and legends, creating allegories of Ireland to imaginatively distance themselves from England. It constituted de-europeanised country with Orientalist images of a non-British, non-industrial, non-urban Celtic Gaelic Ireland.¹⁴⁸ In Clare Carroll’s work, this self-exoticisation was also a way to recognise a sameness in a cultural other, best expressed in the poetry by Yeats. He viewed India as a unified culture that had not been ruined by modernisation, a model that was then ideal for a burgeoning Irish nation.¹⁴⁹ The notion reconnects Ireland to its pre-colonial, pre-Catholic roots and Yeats, displayed their dual allegiance an ambivalent form of nationalism, which could also be read as a form of cultural decolonisation.

Pagan or Catholic nationalisms

In more recent years, there has been an extensive re-appropriation of the pre-Catholic roots of Ireland like the pagan celebrations of Bealtain at the hills of Uisenach, Lughnasa at Tailtiu and

¹⁴⁷ Carroll, Clare and King, Patricia *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory* Cork University Press (2003) 136

¹⁴⁸ Ibid 150

¹⁴⁹ Ibid 151

Samhain at Tara, all important geological points in Ireland. Naturally in contemporary Ireland this reconnection with the pagan had to be commodified but there is the argument made that twenty five years ago, these celebrations would not have been possible because of the omnipotent role of the catholic Church in the Irish state.¹⁵⁰ There is also some interesting educative work being done through children's media in the animated movies by Tom Moore *The Secret of Kells* (2009), *The Song of the Sea* (2014) and *Wolfwalkers* (2020), albeit very cautiously, as the pagan legends of selkies and wolf-people are always condoned or surrounded by the catholic Church. Indeed, the two children of the *Song of the Sea*, Ben and Saoirse (a selkie like her mother, hopefully in a consensual marriage, unlike most of the folk tales) wander often and even dive into a holy well laden with religious imagery to remind the viewer that most of the pagan legends were safely assimilated by Catholicism:

From at least the 5th Century onward, Christian missionaries began to visit Ireland from overseas to commence the process of converting the resident populace to the new faith. In an effort to appease local sensibilities and give credence to the new belief system, existing centres of pagan devotion, particularly holy wells, were re-named and altered to better conform with Christian beliefs. In addition, folklore and legends surrounding these sacred sites were amended to attribute the supernatural origin or powers thought to exist there to a local saint or holy person.¹⁵¹

Likewise, in 'Beannachtaí na Lá Féile Pádraig' the little wolfwalker, despite admitting that there might be a 'more ancient form of wisdom' than catholic faith in Ireland, also specifies that 'it's thanks to Pádraig that I'm here today' as St Patrick would have either cursed or blessed the pagan wolf-folks that would not listen to his preaching.¹⁵² This strange cautiousness around exploring the pagan roots of Ireland lets the viewer think that, unlike what Mr Clarke, owner of the hill of the Uisenach (and profiteering of this pagan revival) seemed to suggest, the power of the Catholic Church still weighs on these attempts at reconnecting with a pre-colonial (both Roman and British) past. In fact, the tension between Ireland's pagan past and Catholic tradition sometimes results in strange acts of vandalism. The statue of the Celtic sea god Manannán Mac Lír, overlooking Lough Foyle between the counties of Derry and Donegal, was cut off from its plinth by Christian radicals and replaced with a wooden cross bearing a clear message: 'You shall have no other gods before Me.'¹⁵³

Ireland was geographically European and Roman Catholic but racially other, considered as natural servants and the Irish island was used as a training ground for building colonial discourse to be applied to other colonies. Even after the Act of Union of 1801, Ireland was still treated as a colony

¹⁵⁰ Célébrations contemporaines sur la colline d'Uisenach – Néopaganisme/Folklore identitaire 03/02/2021
Presentation by Frédéric Armao at the Irish studies seminar organised at the Université de Lille (CECILLE)

¹⁵¹ Branigan, Gary 'The ancient pre-Christian holy wells of Ireland' *Irish Post* April 29, 2022

¹⁵² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xkq5Ne6sbgU> [last accessed 28/11:2022]

¹⁵³ McKinney, Sean 'Manannán Mac Lír statue back in place at Binevenagh' *The Irish News* February 2016

and the status of its catholic majority still firmly undermined, which makes a decolonial effort feel irreconcilable with figures of protestant revolutionaries like Wolfe Tone and Casement. O'Neill documents the attempts at assimilating even those by the supposedly rebellious and martyred Irish catholic Church: 'Father O'Táighléir gave a lesson on Tone He warned the boys that it was a Protestant grave they would be visiting ... but that, though born a heretic, Tone had served for many years as secretary to the Catholic Committee. It was too late now to prove or disprove them, but rumours persisted of his deathbed conversion.' (ASTB,225) Much like the holy wells, the sacred figures of past Irish revolutions must be assimilated by the catholic Church¹⁵⁴.

In *Languages of the Night*, the notion of White Martyrdom was explained as the reverse process than that of English-speaking authors choosing to write in the minor language of Irish, thus repurposing a minor language as a literary medium when you were raised in a major language. White Martyrdom was to go into exile from one's homeland and community (unlike Red Martyrdom which was to be killed for one's religion). The first notion comes from the oldest existing sermon in Old Irish: 'Is í bán martra do dhuine, an tan scaras, as son Dé, re gach rud a charas/ This is white martyrdom to a person: when they renounce everything they love for God.'¹⁵⁵ Which intrinsically links Irish language to Catholic faith in the sacrifice of exile. Yet it seems to be a habit for structures of power to recuperate and assimilate anything that will enhance its legitimacy and status.

As previously mentioned, most of the characters of the corpus have a deep mistrust for the authority represented by the Church because of its omnipotence and consequential impunity in Ireland, before and after Independence. In the first chapter, I analysed the deep traumas inflicted onto Jim, Anthony MacMurrough, Polycarp to an extent, and the cold disappointment of Pen (in Donoghue's *Hood*) by the institution. In *Beautiful Pictures* only Geo's father mentions being taught at the Brothers and the rapid glimpses we get of those years are extremely violent: 'A shrill peal. The bell. The Brothers pour out, a black river swirling with books, canes and belts. *Schnell, Schweine, schnell!*' (BPLH,70) in the short extract, the reader understands that the canes and belts signify routine physical punishments and the extremely insulting outburst in German 'Hurry, you pig, hurry!' sets the tone for what the typical day at the Brothers' must have been like. Yet I would like to dwell on that 'black river' metaphor which, once again reveals the ambiguous nature of water (Ní

¹⁵⁴ This capacity for assimilating and re-appropriating even traditions and phenomena that oppose Christian religion is eerily similar to the capacity of capitalism to absorb even its stauncher criticism to re-package it as a declawed rebellious aesthetic.

¹⁵⁵ Translation slightly changed from 'man' to 'person' as I recognised 'dhuine' as neutral, not masculine. Wagner, Heinrich *Linguistic Atlas and Survey of Irish dialects* (1958) 53

Dhomhnaill's metaphor for Irish) when in close proximity with the Catholic Church, as with the sunken knowledge of *Amhrán na Leabhar*.

Maybe there is a particularly nefarious intent in the appropriation of Irish (and education in Irish) by the religious institution. Jim, we know, is abused sexually often enough that the number of brothers that have molested him blur into a vague multiplicity. Ní Dhomhnaill's mermaid also endures a similar abuse at the hands of the parish priest, who, she specifies: 'Labhair sé as Gaeilge léi./ He spoke to her in Irish.' A strange detail to include in the poem since the whole collection is written in Irish and we assume everyone involved in the poems is speaking the same language, therefore there should be no need to specify. Also, the metaphor or 'Irish as water' is suddenly dropped as Irish re-appears as a language distinct from the Pelagic language of the *murúcha*. That is the only time this happens in the poems, which decidedly attracts the reader's attention to the signification of a paedophile priest speaking Irish to the merchild while sexually abusing her. Perhaps the greater, overarching narrative that one can glean from these accumulated negative interactions with priests and brothers is that they use the influence and power of religion to abuse the Irish population. It throws the catholic usage of Irish into doubt as well.

Thus, there is this strange, ambivalent role the catholic Church in Irish nationalism, at once rebellious in nature, and systematically abusive in its institution. It used to be a form of martyrdom and a way for the people to distance themselves from the Protestant, rational capitalism of their colonisers. Indeed, Seamus Deane argues: 'Ireland had claimed a kind of internal independence predicated on a spirituality that distinguished it from its oppressor'¹⁵⁶ but the more the time passes, the more flaws are found in the institution. In fact, the Church abuses its power about as much as the British coloniser it is supposed to oppose.

Many decolonial thinkers acknowledge that there is a saturation of Ireland with English language that rendered daunting any process of cultural and intellectual decolonisation. Luke Gibbon talks of 'a fragmented and discontinuous subaltern nationalism'¹⁵⁷, through a long history of popular insurrections and unofficial oral culture of popular ballads in Ireland. Declan Kiberd in his book *Inventing Ireland*¹⁵⁸ borrows from Frantz Fanon's theory of the three stages of decolonization, whereby a colonised people has to first recognise the attempt of assimilation of its population by

¹⁵⁶ Deane, Seamus 'Dumbness and Eloquence English as we write it in Ireland' in Caroll, Clare and King, Patricia *Ireland and Post-colonial Theory* Cork University Press (2003)

¹⁵⁷ Ibid introduction III

¹⁵⁸ Kiberd, Declan *Inventing Ireland, Literature of the Modern Nation*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press (1995)

the occupying power. Second, the native intellectuals have to return to their history and the importance of their native culture. And third, they must reawaken the native through cultural and literary revival.

Frantz Fanon also warns of the danger of a bourgeois nationalist class that will reproduce the colonial structures of power in a freed state: independence is not liberation. He opens his prescient chapter 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness' thus:

History teaches us clearly that the battle against colonialism does not run straight away along the lines of nationalism. (...) This fight for democracy against the oppression of mankind will slowly leave the confusion of neo-liberal universalism to emerge, sometimes laboriously, as a claim to nationhood. (...) National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people, instead of being the immediate and most obvious result of the mobilization of the people, will be in any case only an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been.¹⁵⁹

Again, Fanon is talking about the process of decolonisation in former French colonies yet he can summarise and schematise each beat of this process (with local variations) in a present tense of general truth as the same pitfalls occur in all the newly independent countries. This uncanny schematisation also can be applied to Ireland with the crucial difference that the Irish diaspora later benefited from being absorbed into 'the white race' where it had previously been excluded as lesser both in Europe and in North America, mostly by rejecting racialised black people.¹⁶⁰

As an aside, this trend of marginalised groups upholding hierarchies by rejecting an inner subgroup to access or maintain a relatively more privileged status (in this case Irish and Italian immigrants rejecting racialised black people in the U.S to access the benefits of white supremacy) finds a worrying echo in the queer community. Indeed, white middle-class LGB (as they usually reject the term 'queer') groups, better assimilated, are becoming increasingly vocal¹⁶¹ in their rejection of trans people out of fear that their limited and very conditional acceptance within cis-hetero patriarchy would be threatened. I do not mean to equate the discriminations endured by non-white racialised people with those endured by transpeople, as they are wildly different origins for these discriminations but the repetitive nature and familiar echoes one finds in studying trends in marginalisation and resistance is striking. Beyond the notion of intersection, which is also crucial and sadly illustrated by the disproportionate number of black transwomen in the victims of transphobic crimes, the processes of othering and creating a hierarchy in these 'others' to further divide them and place them in competition for acceptance and rights within the dominant

¹⁵⁹ Fanon, Frantz *The Wretched of the Earth* New York, Grove Press (2004) 148

¹⁶⁰ Again, see Ignatiev, Noel *How the Irish Became White* London, Routledge (2009)

¹⁶¹ Gentleman, Amelia "'Lie of gender identity' spurred founding of LGB Alliance, court told" *The Guardian* 14 sept 2022

oppressive group are analogous. I will expand on the matter in III.3, where I return to a current state of affair in political trends.

There is also an argument to be made that the political and power vacuum that occurs after the withdrawal of the coloniser forces is then usually filled by a power that is already structured like the Church. The United Kingdom has the added habit of accentuating the sectarian divides before withdrawing (partially), ensuring a long period of political instability and violence. It certainly was the case in the Free State of Ireland and for India and Pakistan. The failure of state nationalism to realise the cultural transformation that decolonising nationalist radicalism had envisioned is also revealed by these periods of conflict. Seamus Deane in *Strange Country*¹⁶² examines how Irish writers participated through the revival in the production of a tradition of Irish culture, construct a myth of a nation that would then be politically utilised to encourage independentist ideas. A nation however, can exist without a nation-state, furthermore, Adrian Hastings argues that 'the will to create a nation state arises chiefly where and when a particular ethnicity or nation feels threatened in regard to its own proper character, extent importance either by external attack or by the State System of which it has a here there to form the part'¹⁶³. Yet 'nation' in a globalised context is a limited lens as through the economisation of cultures, local cultures are obliterated in a unifying movement. For example, the Irish language is often treated as a monolith forgetting the various regional dialects and its plurality.

In the *Angel of Progress* Anne McClintock smartly remarks: 'Ireland may, at a pinch, be post-colonial but for the inhabitants of British-occupied Northern Ireland, there may be nothing 'post' about colonialism at all.'¹⁶⁴ The term post-colonial is also criticised as it reduces the nation to the sole after-effects of colonial rule and limits the reading of a culture through the linguistic lens of that invasion. The post-colonial label also fails to distinguish between the various forms of colonialism: settler-countries, where the indigenous population was mostly exterminated like New Zealand, Australia, the United States and Canada and non-settler countries like India and Pakistan, which raises the difference between the oppositional and complicit postcolonial. The Unionists of Northern Ireland are usually descendants of settlers and if the native population was indeed

¹⁶² Deane, Seamus *Strange Country Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, (1997)

¹⁶³ Hastings, Adrian *The Construction of Nationhood Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* Cambridge University Press (1997)4

¹⁶⁴ McClintock, Anne *The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term "Post-Colonialism"* No. 31/32, *Third World and Post-Colonial Issues*, pp. 84-98 Duke University Press (1992) 294

segregated and discriminated against but according to Clare Carroll, 'it was not subjected to an active wholesale campaign of extermination'¹⁶⁵.

The Famine, however, was definitely held as a boon by the likes of Charles Trevelyan, even if the potato blight was not engineered by a British government. In fact, it is important to emphasise that there is indeed a difference between non-settlers and settler colonies but Ireland definitely suffered heavy losses through starvation or exile, because London-based state intervention was dominant from the 1800s, especially between 1830 and 1914. The famine decimated mostly Southwestern rural areas between 1845 and the 1850s after the Poor law, implemented by Britain had set the entire burden of relief on individual Irish unions, making the system unworkable. The British elite could then put the blame on the Irish people deemed 'lazy and incompetent' and refused to raise funds for relief during the famine. One million people died and two and a half million fled the country in ten years while evictions carried on to auction the land of the dying to a Protestant elite. The small tenements could then be gathered into bigger farm complexes to raise cattle and sheep, further cementing Ireland as a territory solely destined to wield commodities for the British Empire and not one that could feed its own people.¹⁶⁶

3. Irish and Dúchas

Tostach/closed-mouthed

In the previously mentioned *Languages of the Night* (2015) Barry McCrea explains that, in addition to most of the victims of the famine being Irish monoglots, English being enforced in schools and working life as the only way to access financial prospects broke the inter-generational transmission of Irish, as parents thought they would hurt the children's future prospects by speaking Irish to them. The scholar's grandmother was part of that generation who had Irish-speaking parents but did not know the language themselves, while her granddaughter had to learn it as a second language in school, now under the governance of the independent Irish state. Therefore, by skipping one generation, Irish ceased to become the natural communication language between parents and children to become a compulsory discipline at school. Clare Carroll argued: 'Coercion helped to kill the Irish language and compulsion helped to abort its revival.'¹⁶⁷This was enough to turn it into 'the language of night', where only old folks speak it, unseen. Oral Irish saw a slow decline as it was pushed from East to West in the 18th century, confined mainly to rural areas. It quickened through

¹⁶⁵ Carroll, Clare and King, Patricia *Ireland and Post-colonial Theory* Cork University Press (2003) 8

¹⁶⁶ See Crowley, John et al *Atlas of the Irish Revolution* Cork University Press (2017)

¹⁶⁷ Carroll, King *Ireland and Post-colonial Theory* Op.Cit. 121

the Famine years until 1870 where even the remotest places of the isle rarely had monoglots. In 1922, when Ireland gained independence, only 10% of Irish speakers remained and were often bilingual. The Gaeltacht, those districts that kept speaking Irish through isolation, poverty and lack of education took on a collective, exceptional identity.

During the 1910s, the Gaelic League had strived to conserve the language (often going to the contact of Irish speakers to learn 'authentic Irish' as is parodied in *An Béal Bocht* by Myles Na gCopaleen) but the bulk of its efforts were spent in the promotion of the study and use of Irish among educated English speakers. In twenty years, ironically, language revival had become easier than language preservation which concerned mainly a fragile ecology of remote, poverty-sticken rural communities. This unbalance in priorities was the result of the language ideology of the independent state and reflected a moribund classicism, as second speakers tended to be the educated urban elite and the native speakers were from the poor regions of the Gaeltacht. Hence, to reconstitute a language whose native speakers had been largely forgotten was a problem in the new state: most of the population of the Gaeltacht was illiterate and thrived on oral tradition, making it difficult to establish an Irish literary standard. The aim was however to apply spoken Irish as a basis for the literary language to recreate the 'caint na ndaoine', the speech of the people. Yet Irish is declined in a multitude of local inflections from village to village or even hamlet to hamlet. These small units were few and far between, isolated in rural areas and had access to an impressive oral literary tradition which was essentially unwritten and rife with divergent idioms. This did not make for an efficient basis to work out a unified, national literary standard. Prior to independence, interestingly, the Irish revival was often led by protestant figures focusing on the preservation of the language, but the Free state shunned this legacy to put forward state-Catholicism and through the standardising, modernising zeal, to build a modern, catholic, Irish speaking state. Throughout the 1930s and 50s, the language question was a controversial one, with the surviving hope of a mass restoration, seen as either regressive or empowering. In the middle of those debates, however, the Gaeltacht remained blighted with poverty and emigration and they would only create the Language Freedom Movement in the 1960s to support native Irish speaking novelists and oppose the compulsory Irish of school and bureaucracy.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ McCrea, Barry *Languages of the Night: Minor Languages and the Literary Imagination in 20th c Ireland and Europe* Yale Uni Press (2015)

In this ambivalent climate, the miserabilist Blasket autobiographies thrived on the mythologising of a dying tradition and language. This relentless detailing of peasant poverty and tragedy was ridiculed by Flann O'Brien in previously mentioned *An Béal Bocht* (1941) but there is an argument to be made in the self-loathing of tragedy in Irish literature.¹⁶⁹ Indeed, it seems like the absurd and the parodic is always applied to collective tragedies and 'nothing', then, 'is sacred'. Most recently, in the very popular series *Derry Girls* (2018-...) by Lisa McGee the horrors of the Famine are summarised with this one sentence by Michelle: 'We've got the gist. They ran out of spuds. Everyone was ragin'.¹⁷⁰ Maybe the utter powerlessness to resolve an unjust system and history gets tedious with time and the humorous spin on tragedy is the only approach left to a dolorous past. This form of dark humour was theorised by Natalie Wynn as such: 'The darkness is my name for what I consider to be the highest form of comedy, where you take your own worst feelings, traumas and anxieties and twists them into a source of pleasure. (...) If you can make these low points funny then you're gonna be okay, you're gonna survive, you're gonna make it through life.'¹⁷¹

Yet there is another argument when the self-deprecating humour is expressed by people from marginalised communities (here people from a previously colonised state ridiculing its painful past), it is that this self-awareness also stems from the feeling of inferiority that pushes one to undermine the pain, in order to signal to a dominant audience that they do not take this pain and trauma seriously nor have a strong political stance on it (which would be close to an embarrassing form of militancy). To quote Wynn again: 'Hannah Gadsby, who in her stand-up special "Nanette" said that when self-deprecation comes from someone who exists in the margins: "It's not humility, it's humiliation." (...) "I put myself down in order to speak, in order to seek permission to speak."¹⁷² And therefore this constant parodying and undermining of the difficult past of Ireland in our corpus and in Flann O'Brien's (*Myles Na gCopaleen's*) novel can be read in both ways, as navigating this perpetual tension between needing to reappropriate the pain and twist it into a form of comical pleasure, and the self-loathing for a historically undermined culture. Yet despite the lack of preservation and the relative failure¹⁷³ of revival, Irish permeates Hiberno-English in its expressions, accents, vocabulary, like a subconscious thought: 'the disappearance/threat of disappearance lends those languages an imaginative power for modernist literature'. Irish does 'acquire unusual

¹⁶⁹ *ibid* (2015)

¹⁷⁰ McGee, Lisa *Derry Girls* S1E3 Channel 4 (2018)

¹⁷¹ Wynn, Natalie 'The Darkness' *Contrapoints* <https://www.contrapoints.com/transcripts/the-darkness>

¹⁷² *ibid*

¹⁷³ 'Of the 1,761,420 persons who answered yes to being able to speak Irish, 418,420 (23,75%) indicated they never spoke it, while a further 558,608 (31,71%) indicated they only spoke it within the education system.' CSO Central Statistics Office Ireland (2016)

properties for poetic imagination: dream of another, lost, more perfect language hidden beneath the surface of English-speaking Ireland'¹⁷⁴. It makes Irish a prime tool to access the repressed trauma of ethnic cleansing.

In the memoirs of North Donegal 1889, Ireland post-famine is described as shrouded in a 'loud silence' the tradition of 'caoine', keening, that is the performance of loudly mourning the dead, a professional practice led by old women seen by the coloniser as a sign of cultural and political instability was evicted from the public space. The famine was, in essence, the destruction of oral culture. This trauma transcends generation and leaves traces in the process of mourning in contemporary Irish literature. The image of hunger and emaciated bodies crops up in Gallagher and Donoghue's characters; Elaine, Georgia's childhood imaginary friend born of the guilt of stealing her friend's doll shortly before her death in a car-bomb in Monaghan is a starved waif: 'It's just a trick of the moonlight, refraction, an optical illusion, but for a moment, she thinks she sees the shape of a child standing there, skinny and girlish, teeth bared in a skeleton smile.' (BPLH,172) Elaine represents both the shadow of Aisling's cancer and a deeper, inter-generational trauma of the Famine and the Troubles. Georgia starts piling up food, hiding it under her shirt to feed that imaginary friend. Later in life, she will develop eating disorders before understanding her need to transition medically as when she meets Mar, she is thin, unhealthily so: 'I was in a skinny phase, the dangerous one where I'd been 100nstrument anorexic, and my hair longish again, framing my face.' (BPLH,113) This emaciated form allows her to access the same androgyny as her imaginary friend Elaine, creating a ghostly link between historical periods of heavy losses in Ireland at the core of Georgia's femininity.

This complicated relationship to food and starvation also grips Penelope (in Donoghue's *Hood*) when she needs to cope with her hidden, unofficial widowhood. She cannot cry and barely eats after the sudden death despite being a round girl who usually finds solace and comfort in good food. She ends up throwing up after seeing a vision of Cara in a bus after having fancied a stranger in the street:

I didn't want to hurt and heal and survive like any animal. If this love thing was to be repeated over and over, how could the words stay fresh or even halfway sincere? How could I wrench any of it back from Cara and give it to someone else, with it all still reeking of the grave? ... Coffee, raspberry tart, pain-au-chocolat, grapefruit juice and coconut macaroon were going to splatter all over somebody's shoes. (Hood, 192)

¹⁷⁴ McCrea Op.Cit. XIII

The usual pattern of routine treatment of tragedy enlightens this visceral reaction at the thought of death, the fancy food list being somewhat tainted by the 'reeking of the grave' that precedes and corrupts it, making Pen throw up like food and death are incompatible. She also states earlier in the novel, after having just received the news of her lover's death: 'I was hungry, but under the circumstances it seemed vulgar to do anything about it.' (Hood,22)

Throughout her grieving, the lack of food and tears are constantly intertwined signalling the suppressed ghost of the Famine and its seeping in individual, even secret forms of mourning, as if the collective trauma will never cease to impact each inhabitant of the Island and the diaspora. Feeling the connection, the protagonist wishes they would all embrace it and discuss this universal threat openly: 'It made no sense for us to be talking about anything else. And why did we pretend to be strangers when we were all webbed together by the people we had lost and the short future we had in common?' (Hood, 288) David Lloyd offers a clue on the necessity to voice the common fear of death that has been suppressed since the 1840s: 'the repression of the Famine in subsequent Irish culture, connecting this with our deeply embedded habit of disavowing the personal and cultural damage, is the legacy of our colonial past'¹⁷⁵. In *Hood*, the suppressed grief will only be vented once Pen comes out as a lesbian to her mother, finally officialising her widowhood, another form of exorcism passing through the unlocking of silenced speech.

I will expand on the suppressed keening of Pen in part II 3. 2 but I meant to clearly flag this enduring presence of the Famine in Irish grief, no matter how far removed. Likewise, the Irish language is suppressed from the funerals and grief until Pen finally joins with the lesbian collective that Cara used to frequent. Yet during the queer ceremony, Pen appears quite detached: 'After some stuff about the four quarters, a teenager in lycra running shorts knelt up and sang something in Irish. It sounded sad, but so did most Irish songs; it could have been about donkeys for all I could tell.' (Hood, 293) The casual demystification of deep Irish roots matches the protagonist general disregard for Catholicism as both forms of nationalisms, pagan and religious glammers seem to leave her unimpressed. Gallagher likewise sometimes uses an irreverent stance around the Irish language, only used sparsely and disingenuously by unlikable characters of the novel, like Donnacha O'Buachalla, calling David (Georgia's father, who just lost his wife to cancer) by the Irish version of his name in a drunken slur, rummaging through the cupboards of the house for more alcohol during the funerals: 'Daithi! Cá bhfuil mo chara? Where's my pal? Come to me, my friend, so we can drown

¹⁷⁵ Lloyd, David *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity The Transformation of Oral Space* Cambridge University Press (2011) 49

our sorrow.’ (BPLH,262). Only David’s mother seems to use her Irish spontaneously, reminding the reader that David can actually speak it too, though he never does, not even to secure his position in an ‘compulsory Irish’ state like Donnacha does:

At one point, during a taut, silent hiatus, he heard his mother begin to croon and his body flooded with fear. Sick in case Jan would hear too, butt in with one of her sweeping statements, upset Georgie. Hush, he prayed, but his mother didn’t. Instead her voice rose, calling for her grandchild: *‘Come here, alanna. Oh aren’t you the beautiful little thing, will I teach you to dance, a stór, so you can dance with all the boys, come on alanna, dance, aren’t you a little beauty, who’d have thought, Davey, you’d have been able to make such a dote – She can see under the surface, you mum, Lotte said. (...) David had nodded, though he normally hated that kind of talk. When I was a lad, she used to say she could see right through me, into the valley of my heart. Had he said that aloud?’* (2016:263 italics in the original)

Interestingly, ‘alanna’ (‘an leanbh mná’ female child, an endearing term) is contained in the indirect speech of the mother (no quotation marks, as is common in the novel, blurring the line between dialogue and narration) as it stays in its anglicised version and common use but ‘a stór’, treasure/love stands out like a break in the dialogue in a reverse APA/Chicago styles use of italicising non-English words. ‘Treasure, love’ then is highlighted at the heart of the grandmother’s crooning, like a single Irish core to the intergenerational love and understanding between her and Georgia. Irish then becomes the language of belonging, understanding at a deeper level that sees ‘under the surface’ or ‘straight through [you]’. The clichéd nature of this statement is reluctantly underlined by the author in David’s speech ‘he normally hated that kind of talk’. The physical reaction of David ‘flooded with fear’, ‘sick’ that foregrounds this genuinely sweet moment of recognition also harks back to the shame of Irish and the true nature of his child: Georgie/a is his daughter, not his son. The fear of judgement by Jan, a child psychiatrist who had already detected the gender non-conformity of Georgie/a, is uppermost in his mind but as he thinks of silencing his mother ‘hush he prayed’ the mother escapes this attempt at hiding Georgia’s nature expressed in the Irish endearing terms ‘instead, her voice rose, calling for her grandchild’ where there should be silence, there is the voice rising and the intergenerational bond celebrated in the call of the ‘grandchild’, an intently neutral designation even in David’s thoughts, indicating that, despite his denial in treating Georgia like his son, he knows what the child’s actual gender is.

Hidden nature/dúchas

The shame of the ‘deeper nature/dúchas’ is also prevalent in the two poems by Ní Dhomhnaill ‘Leide Beag’ and ‘Leide Beag Eile’ that I mentioned before. A mermaid thinks she is alone with her baby and starts singing a sea-lullaby:

Ní tú éan gorm na mbainirseach,
Ní tú dearrcach glas na gcaobach
Ní tú coileán an mhadra uisce,
Ní tú lao na maoile caoile

An suantraí a bhí á chanagh aici
Ach do stop sí suas láithreach bonn
Chomh luath is a thuig sí
Duine eile a bheith ar an bport

Tuigeadh dom gur ghlac sí náire
I dtaobh é bheith 103nstrume agam in aon chor.
Tuigeadh dom chomh maith go raibh blas an-láidir
Den bhfarraige air mar shuantraí ar an gcéad scór.

You’re not the blue-green pup of the seal.
You are not the grey chick of the black-backed gull.
You’re not the kit of the otter
Nor are you the calf of the slender hornless cow

This was the lullaby she was singing
But she stopped short
Immediately she realised
Someone else was in the neighbourhood.

I had the distinct sense she was embarrassed
I’d overheard her in the first place.
I also came away with the impression
The lullaby was, to put it mildly, redolent of the
sea. (Mermaid,90-91)

The lullaby’s lyrics define the merfolk child’s identity by the negative: ‘Ní tú’ listing all the animals and colours that they are not instead of claiming a positive identity. During the discussion of the ‘Multilingual Mermaid’¹⁷⁶ that launched the book of translation of the *Fifty Minute Mermaid’s* poems, two interpretations were suggested according to which translation would be chosen for the ambiguous ‘maoile caoile’ (two apparent adjectives close to ‘slender and hornless’, ‘cow’ only coming from the suggestive ‘lao’, calf or the usual association ‘maoile’ as ‘hornless cow’). Some translators chose to translate it by a marine mammal like a blue whale (whose offsprings are also called calves) then making the lullaby a clearer rejection of the sea, telling the merchild that they must forget their pelagic origins. Indeed, after the seal, otter and black headed gull, all sea birds or sea creatures, the ‘hornless cow’ is the odd one of the list. If ‘maoile caoile’ is indeed the ‘hornless cow’ suggested by Paul Muldoon’s translation, then this self-loathing and spurring for assimilation becomes less clear. In the end, the mermaid silences herself when she finds out they are being watched, as anything ‘bhfarraige’/‘redolent of the sea’ has to remain hidden. Furthermore, in *Leide Beag Eile/ Another Tiny Clue*, the merchild’s said to have ‘c[o]me into the world before its time and [...] in serious danger of death’. The mermaid then panics and gives the child a ‘baisteadh urláir’, an emergency home baptism which reveals her pelagic traditions as the unusual prayer includes:

‘Tonnán dod’ chruth.
Tonnán dod’ ghuth.
Tonnán dod’ chumas cainte.

‘A wavelet for your lovely form.
A wavelet for your voice so warm.
A wavelet for the gift of eloquent speech.

¹⁷⁶ EFACIS roundtable sessions: launch of *The Multilingual Mermaid Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill in Translation*, Gallery Press edited by Peter Sarr 30 November 2022

Tonnán dod' rath.
 Tonnán dod' mhaith.
 Tonnán dod' shaol is dod' shláinte.
 Tonnán dod' sciúch.
 Tonnán dod' lúth.
 Tonnán dod' ghrásta.
 Naoi dtonnán dod' fhíorghrásta.'
 (l. 92, 94)

A wavelet for good luck.
 A wavelet for moral pluck.
 A wavelet for a safe haven within your reach.
 A wavelet for your throat.
 A wavelet to help you float
 effortlessly and with ease,
 effortlessly and with the greatest ease.
 (Mermaid, 93,95)

In this moment of panic, the mermaid then forgets to hide her true nature (dúchas) and calls upon the almighty power of the sea (after the Holy Trinity) to save the dying child's soul. Siobhán Madden gives a thorough analysis of this poem and deconstructs the liberties taken by Paul Muldoon in the English translation to reinstate the full force of the original Irish:

The sound of 'wavelet' is devoid of the deep resonant drum-beats of 'tonnán' (pronounced thu-nawn, with stress on 'nawn'). Through this sound, and the water thrown over her shoulder, the mermaid connects the newborn to the power of the sea. 'Tonnán' sets an insistent bass rhythm, and a surging resonance through three sets of three. The cumulative effect is confirmed in the almighty climax of 'Naoi dtonnán dod fhíorghrásta'. This literally means, 'nine wavelets for true grace', with the long vowel of 'naoi' (pron. Knee) moving us to an arresting new rhythm. This is no water on the brow. On the contrary, the trinity of 'the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit', along with the rational brow, is subverted in this spiralling 3x3 which summons up all the power of connected waters for this vulnerable new life. For the mermaid, this is the answer for the child without soul.¹⁷⁷

Hence the urgency of the dying child instantly reconnects the mermaid to a long suppressed, long denied belief in the power of water. Much like the excerpts of Gallagher and Donoghue, death, grief and the threat of death tends to blast through centuries of ethnic cleansing and undermined culture, bringing to the fore a long-forgotten language (Alanna/ a stór), the intergenerational trauma of the Famine and suppressed keening (for Pen), a long-denied Pelagic (Irish) identity for the mermaids. This one time, for exceptional circumstances of grieving and loss, the shame and fear of having an audience to their revealing of a deeper nature (for the mermaid, Georgia and David) is suspended and the need to reconnect with it becomes stronger. Ultimately, as Ní Dhomhnaill concludes in *Leide Beag Eile*:

Anois, muna dteaspáineann sé sin
 Go raibh dúchas na farraige
 Go leathan láidir inti
 Dá mhéid a bhí sé ceilte
 Is curtha faoi chois aici,
 Ní lá fós é !

Now, if you think that doesn't suggest
 How firmly implanted in her
 Was a sense of the sea,
 However much she tried to hide it
 Or how deeply she'd repressed it,
 You've another think coming.

In am an ghátair a bhriseann an dúchas.
 Cad a dhéanfaidh mac an chait nuair is treise dúchas ná
 oiliúint'.

When times are hard heredity will out. What would
 you expect when nature is stronger than nurture?
 (Mermaid,94-5)

¹⁷⁷ Madden, Siobhán *THE MERMAIDS DIVE FOR FREEDOM: VOICES OF FEMINIST COMMUNITY ACTIVISTS PLUNGING THROUGH NEOLIBERAL TIMES* PhD thesis NUI Maynooth (2017)161-2

This recurrence of a 'true nature' being hidden for it always to resurface in various ways in times of crisis, or as an apparition, hallucination or imaginary friend means that this silencing does not erase it, just makes it manifest in other forms. The interesting notion of 'dúchas na farráige' (nature/sense of the sea) and the common motif of the 'unspeakable' and denial also evokes the silence in the loss of the Irish language (water) and the repressed trauma of ethnic cleansing. The phrase 'The Great Silence' from Séan de Fréine's 1960's pamphlet 'refers to ... a surprising dearth in discussion ... of the massive language shift from Irish to English that took place in Ireland'¹⁷⁸ A notion referenced in *Beautiful Pictures* sheds further light on this phenomenon: trauma cannot be expressed by language. In the short chapter entitled 'Wipe' the notion is developed thus: 'With regard to the surpassing disaster, art acts like the mirror in vampire films; it reveals the withdrawal of what we think is still there.... (...) One should record this nothing, which only after the resurrection can be available.' (BPLH,205) This gothic image of the vampire is also often present in Irish horror literature acting as an expression of repressed colonial fear. Yet, linking back to the 'double colonialism' theorised by Seamus Deane¹⁷⁹ about the roman and British colonising of Ireland, this image of the vampire is mostly used by the protagonists of my corpus to designate the catholic clergy.

Nationalisms in 1916

To expand on the theory I am using to analyse the corpus, it is argued that the current issues faced by those states make the label of 'post-colonial' somewhat obsolete, as more recent movements (queer, decolonial,..) now seem to be needed. The critique of national identity does not equate to 'all nationalisms are bad', as that would be another gross oversimplification. Nationalism, like all fixed, rigid identities is a useful political force to drive out colonisers or fight back oppressors in small occupied and exploited countries or for marginalised groups. This is the 'strategic essentialism'¹⁸⁰ Gayatri Spivak speaks of. However, once Independence or equal rights are achieved, this national ideal/rigid 'unified' identity should dissolve instead of hardening, like a blunt tool that should be discarded once the job is done. For nationalism, once Autonomy is achieved, Sovereignty is just Supremacy:

'National culture' [is] a concept based on a sense of social cohesion that simply does not reflect reality. (...) The construction of the nation-state, and the organisation of 'national culture', is based on a conflictive model that

¹⁷⁸ Slomanson, Peter 'On the Great Silence: A Gap in Irish Historiography and Consequences for Language Education in Ireland.' *Nordic Irish Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2012, pp. 95–114 95

¹⁷⁹ Deane, Seamus 'Dumbness and Eloquence – English as we write it in Ireland' in C. Carroll *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory* Cork University Press (2003) 110

¹⁸⁰ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York, Routledge (1995)

centers hope for the future in the rational and teleological organisation of a social utopia. This lineal model of modernity, originating in Europe and influenced by Hegel, assumes that no matter what the crisis in the present, modernity will overcome the obstacles that it faces, and lead in the end to a future social utopia, be it capitalist or socialist.¹⁸¹

For this segment I would like to focus on the nationalisms in Ireland 1916 as depicted in *At Swim Two Boys* (2001) even though it is fair to say that all of these different branches of nationalisms were intertwined, and working together, especially in the context of the war against Germany with the sudden change in circumstances as 'England's difficulty would be Ireland's opportunity'¹⁸².

Jamie O'Neill seems to have created a series of parallels between actual historical figures and his own fictional characters, to help the reader to explore these various branches of nationalisms. For instance, Doyler is very close to Connolly's socialism: 'Jim blinked. 'You've turned a right Sinn Feiner,' he said. 'Sinn Feiners, me arse. I'm a socialist, never doubt it.' (ASTB,69) He will join the Citizens Army, live in Liberty Hall and even actually meet Connolly in person. Doyler is part of the working class, he is an exploited worker as he explains he is replacing adult workers: 'Most the men were laid off. Employed a grush of boys in their place. Half the wages and the same blow they proves their loyalty to the Crown ... Sure what hope has the men but they list in the army? The contractors is held a great example.' (ASTB,48) Here the interaction between the capitalistic exploitation of younger workers and forcing the adults to enlist in order to survive seemingly supporting the war effort and consolidating the allegiance to the empire, reveals how many of these societal issues were interlinked. To Connolly, British imperialism was not merely an armed occupation of Ireland, it was the expression of a highly developed form of capitalism. He did not align with the 'romantic nationalist history of Grattan and O'Connell (which is expressed in the novel by Doyler's scepticism during Patrick Pearse's speech) but saw the national revolution as a pre-requisite for a socialist revolution. In fact, Doyler's socialism can (like Connolly in the early days) be entirely divorced from nationalism as he sees that the English working class knows the same struggles as the Irish, and that an international solidarity of the working class is more efficient than nationalism, recalling the help that came from England's labour families during the 1913 Lockout:

'... the foodship *Hare* that had carried food from the workers of England to the starved and locked-out workers of Dublin. (...) He could not pass along the Dublin quays without thinking of that ship. Imagine it, a ship to bring food where families was starving. Was there ever such a thing? He felt a great tearful love for the people of England that they'd defy everyone, their union bosses even, and come to the aid of their Irish fellows. (ASTB,477)

¹⁸¹ Sanjinés, Javier 'The Nation: An imagined community?' *Cultural Studies*, 21:2-3, 295-308 (2007)

¹⁸² Attributed to Daniel O'Connell 1856

Marx and Engels did both couple the implementation of the landlord system and the commodification of Irish soil with its colonisation from the 12th century. To the theorists of capitalism, Ireland needed first to be self-governed and then enter an agrarian revolution to protect its resources from England. In *Interpreting Irish History*, Ciara Brady suggests that this project was undermined by the heterogenous character of the Irish nationalist trends, as it saw two main trends in the 1860's: an agrarian branch, rooted in the peasant secret societies and an urban bourgeois branch who wanted to recuperate its former power usurped by the implemented British gentry. Yet she also claims that the bourgeoisie needed the social muscle of the peasantry to lend weight to their own demands, but only sought to confine agitation within bounds that would not disturb their class privileges or rouse social forces they could not control¹⁸³. This historical instrumentalization of nationalism by the elite sheds a different light on the MacMurroughs' nationalism.

The MacMurroughs, and especially Eveline, can be equated to Constance Markievicz's nationalism and Roger Casement's to an extent as members of the elite upper class who developed nationalist sensitivities. Roger Casement, whom 'aunt Eva' fully supports and works with, was himself a liminal figure of Irish nationalism: an imperial administrator in Congo and a promoter of human rights and national struggles in Europe's colonies. He eventually realised the hypocrisy of his position and promoted reforms in Africa, South America and Ireland. Eva's infatuation with the historical figure is also a strange whim on O'Neill's part as Casement's homosexuality was well-documented¹⁸⁴ (quite literally so in the *Black Diaries*) and would therefore be unrequited. Generally, Eveline's character receives an ambiguous treatment by O'Neill as she is set aside from a revolutionary war 'inevitably male'(ASTB,543) and seemingly fully powered by homoeroticism (as the figures of Casement, Pearse, whose assumed heterosexuality is apparently debated, Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde and Edward Carpenter are cited).

Anthony MacMurrough is paired with Oscar Wilde several times, as he was, like him, an Anglo-Irish aristocrat sentenced to prison for his homosexuality (Wilde's cell number was C33 while Anthony MacMurrough's in C.3.4¹⁸⁵ highlighting their closeness) and is directly equated with the historical figure in the notable dialogue with Tom Kettle: 'Damn it all, MacMurrough, are you telling me you are an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort?' 'If you mean am I Irish, the answer is yes.' (ASTB,309)

¹⁸³ Brady, Ciara *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism, 1938-1994* Irish Academic Press, Dublin (1994) 293

¹⁸⁴ Mullen, Patrick *The Poor Bugger's Tool Irish Modernism, Queer labor and Post Colonial History* OUP USA (2016) with Casement occupying a full chapter.

¹⁸⁵ *At Swim Two Boys* (2001) 181

Anthony MacMurrough's nationalism is mostly inspired by his aunt's (like Oscar Wilde's own mostly stemmed from his mother's involvement with the Independence movement). Anthony's more remote interest for the revolt is also displayed in his intent on fleeing to France after his aunt is arrested, his belonging to Ireland feels fleeting.

Constance Markievicz was also an aristocrat, but she took an active part in the 1913 Lockout, and was present in the food kitchens to feed the families of the workers on strike, like Eveline in the novel. She was closely involved with socialist movements and even met and worked with Conolly and Larkin. Therefore, it seems that Eveline MacMurrough was modelled after Countess Markievicz: she is aware of the economic gain that the Irish *feis* can represent for the working class: 'The duplicity you remark has given employment to fifty men. That is fifty tables with dinner tonight.' (ASTB,301) Therefore, despite being part of the elite, she still considers the interests of the lower classes. However, Constance Markievicz was part of the Anglo-Irish Protestant aristocracy while Eveline MacMurrough is a Catholic; she works with the Father O'Taylor, if only for utilitarian purposes: '... a spinster of the parish, of whatever means or dignity, has little sway without a priest at her side.' (ASTB,302) Also, unlike Markievicz, she will not make it to the Rising but will be arrested beforehand while trying to smuggle in rifles for the volunteers. The reader only gets to the deeper reasons of her nationalism once she is arrested and rendered ineffectual despite a first burst of proto-feminism (she's a single woman motoring and shooting in the 1910s):

'Ireland might go forward, she might go better forward and faster to freedom, by ballot, by committee, constitutional reform (...) But nothing suchlike would assuage that spirit. The hurst were ancient, they were deep in the land. That spirit was a flame whose tallow was blood. War was its cry: no hand-fed Home Rule, but liberty asserted by rights of arms. My name is MacMurrough, my patrimony the mountains. Over the hills would I go, over the military road.' (ASTB,541)

The use of pompous verb-subject reversal is difficult to pinpoint with O'Neill as sometimes, it seems like a genuine lyrical moment, sometimes it is a mockery of the lyrical. Based on the interviews he gave about his writing process, the reality seems even more complex, as he speaks of the disconnect he felt at time with his most lyrical excerpts: 'There were times when I'd be trying to change something, and I'd read it, and it was like saying a prayer – I knew all the words and they were divorced from meaning completely, I just could not get it.'¹⁸⁶ Yet when the author speaks about his relationship to Catholicism, he states: 'I love Catholicism – but the problem is I view it as an abstract, more or less how I view Latin, which I view as mathematics (...) it's just a kind of equation, imaginary

¹⁸⁶ Conner, Marc C., & O'Neill, Jamie (2007). "To Bring All Loves Home": An Interview with Jamie O'Neill. *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 11(2), 66–78. 71

numbers... Generally, I look at words and it's just beautiful.¹⁸⁷ Which would indicate an aesthetic pleasure gleaned from the beautiful form of lyrical writing with a disconnect for its meaning. This dissociation would therefore grant the writer enough ironic distance, then, to suggest he mainly uses the lyrical as parodic, yet a form of homage more than outward mockery.

Circling back to Eveline, it is quite condescending that the blood-thirsty motivation of his stereotypical strong female character only comes out once she has been neutralised, seemingly squashed under the weight of her time's patriarchal yoke, as she is described thus: 'Harridan Harpie. (...) Making a spectacle of her name and sex. Had ought to wear a cap and sew at home. It's easy known why no man would have her. Would live in mortal fear for his trousers.' (ASTB,541) This imagined criticism takes place in Eveline's head, she knows that her political motivations and military actions will be ignored to put her back in the domestic space and potential attractiveness to a husband, the place she was expected to occupy. This might be a reference to the fact that, likewise, Countess Markievicz was not shot with the other instigators of the Easter Rising but sent to prison and 'set to work sewing and cleaning.'¹⁸⁸ After the Rising has been crushed, Anthony MacMurrough seemingly meets her, though she is not referred to by name, simply as: 'this incongruous banditti who was second-in-command of their troop: like no one so much as his aunt, but his aunt corrected, unfettered to the past.' (ASTB,638) Perhaps the overreliance of Eveline on the name and fortune of her father limits her revolutionary possibilities to an extent.

Father O'Toiler represents the Catholic branch of nationalism as he wishes for:

'a Catholic rising Again Ireland must rise, isle of saints and scholars, to shine a lamp among the nations. And her spiritual empire, that empire of the soul ... Pray Mr Mack, pray God your son may so be exalted as with these joyful martyrs to die. For already in heaven the saints prepare the welcoming feast. ... I was at Boland's mills with Commandant de Valera, a rigorous man and pious...' (ASTB,568)

This chaotic rambling also finally reveals the full extent of the priest's illuminated blood thirst and reveals Eamon de Valera's programme for a 'freed' Ireland. The foreboding comment on the flag: 'Mr Mack might remark the republican flag which was a third of it orange in generous acknowledgment to the Protestant north... a little Irish weather would soon fade that orange to Vatican yellow.' (ibid) also reveals what will happen to the memory of any protestant revolutionary in an independent catholic Ireland.

To this character, Catholicism is the essence of Irish nationalism, given its martyred oppression status under British protestant rule: 'God and Mary and Patrick be with you. Such is the response

¹⁸⁷ Ibid 74

¹⁸⁸ Creative centenaries resources 'Countess Constance Markievicz'

appropriate to my greeting, indeed the only response for an Irishman. For, as ye know or had ought to know, the Irish tongue may not speak but it utter a prayer' (ASTB,92). However, several of the other characters seem to display at best some form of scepticism towards the catholic Church's power, at worst an overt, steady mistrust, like Doyler upon relating the lack of the catholic Volunteer's involvement in the 1913 lockout: 'Sure the Volunteers is in league with the priests and the priests is in league with the bosses and they're all agin the working man. No better than horneys is the Volunteers. There were agin us in the Lock-out and we'll never forget them that.'(ASTB,234) Furthermore the Catholic Church reappropriating the Irish language and nationalism seems that it's only a bid to increase its own power in a future free state: 'Mind, there's something afoot if the priests is turning patriot. Them was never known to cheer a horse but it was at the winning-post.' (ASTB,104)

Jim, arguably the main protagonist, is closer to Patrick Pearse: he wants to be a teacher, the same career as his role-model. Patrick Pearse was a fervent catholic with a close spiritual connection to its moral values. Jim is first destined to be a brother. His queerness is also debated as he relates his cross-dressing experiences in the short-story *The Priest*¹⁹⁰ which, according to Anne Markley's preface was a way for Pearse to relate his own experience of boyhood. Jim is very sensitive to Pearse's dangerous speeches at Wolfe Tone's funerals:

Men who die to free their people have no need for a prayer. We pray for Ireland that she may be free. We pray for ourselves that we may free her. A moment – then all of a glow the sun is on Jim's face. He looks up where the clouds have parted. The sun shines and bathes the world, and the land trembles at the touch. How green are the fields, how lush the grass. ... How rich is this land. It is a rich and a rare land. Why wouldn't it be rare, fed on the martyred dead? (ASTB,229)

Patrick Pearse is described as a very powerful orator, capable of stirring a heroic death-wish in young impressionable boys, much on par with the British army in their recruitment efforts for, as it is, the opposite purpose. There is a tragic mirror-image in Gordie, Jim's older brother being lost to England's war while Jim himself is slowly converted to the martyrdom image of independentist Ireland. British rhetoric has the same argument, minus the spirituality and somehow, Gordie too, in a letter he writes from the front, is persuaded to be fighting 'Ireland's fight. It is 'a long way to Tipperary' from the Aegean shore but the Irishmen everywhere are 'doing their bit'. Father Murphy put it this way to us that we are fighting for Ireland through another like the French brigade of old.' (ASTB,343) O'Neill uses the interesting device of putting these sacrificial discourses of opposite camps to the test by giving the reaction of two other, less impressionable characters to them. Doyler

¹⁹⁰ Íosagán, *agus Sgéalta Eile* (1911) in Campbell, Joseph, Markey, Anne *Short stories / Patrick Pearse* University College Dublin Press (2009)

reacts to the British wartime propaganda of a recruiting poster thus: 'Full steam ahead! John Redmond said/That everything is well, chum./Home Rule will come when we are dead/And buried out in Belgium.' (ASTB,69) and Anthony MacMurrough, at first taken in by Patrick Pearse's sacrificial speeches, snaps out of it immediately in horror: "Precious is life in my limbs, in my soul. Gladly I will spill it to a noble end. Anthony took a step back. He blinked in the red of the sun. This man is dangerous.' (ASTB,325). Therefore Patrick Pearse is depicted as an ambiguous historical character, who used an Irish nationalist version of militaristic propaganda to lead Irish youth to an inevitable massacre that would serve to turn Irish opinions in favour of independence. This is a controversial take on a historical figure still held as a heroic martyr revolutionary of 1916.

Jim develops an almost spiritual connection to nationalism where he believes that this this utter faith in his brothers in arms and especially his loyalty to (and love for) Doyler will endow him with an aura that makes him almost invincible in the conclusion of the novel: 'Will I tell you what he says to me yesterday' Doyler tells Anthony MacMurrough on their way to the Rising, 'There's nothing to fear says he. We're immortal. His very words – We're immortal. The sky had told him so.' (ASTB,608) And surely enough, during the shooting in St Stephen's Green, both Doyler and McMurrough get shot but Jim remains untouched by the bullets of the British constabulary. This might be in the character's head or the writer giving weight to his illuminated belief, shifting away from realism.

Tom Kettle represents another branch of nationalism that is clearly the constitutional change prone Home-Rule party, whose relatively efficient (the bill was introduced in 1912) campaign was interrupted by WWI. Prior to this, the various devolution parties had managed to render themselves crucial to tory and labour successive governments to form coalitions, solely based on the high number of voters in Ireland. John Redmond's branch of nationalism, wanted to support the war efforts thinking that Ireland will be recognised for her participation, and will deserve devolution if not independence. The party then encouraged the Irish population to kowtow with the war effort which somehow would play in in Ireland's political favour.

O'Neill then efficiently exposes a non-Irish reader to the myriad of branches of nationalisms that co-existed in 1916 while giving them a personal link through the various fictional characters that one follows through the 643 page epic. His clever blend of fiction and historical facts then breathe life into distant (for mainland European readers geographically and temporally removed) Irish history, escaping the single-mindedness of official state history with the heroic and catholic depiction of the 1916 heroes. O'Neill also proposes an alternative view of the events, not through a list of great names or dates, but through the personal, the routine lives of everyday people and how these

events impacted them at the time. He does that while remaining set on the revolutionary moment and all its potential, without the hindsight of a future events or by weighing the Rising with its significance as a turning point in national history.

These first two subparts were meant to put in parallel common beats in the processes of othering, marginalising specific traits or origins and the forms of resistance that oppose these processes. In the next part, I wish to focus on the intersection of these identities and expand on the similarities between queer and decolonial movements in Irish context, as they respond to resembling patterns of systemic and institutional violence.

1.3 Aiteacht

‘A queer flag, in equal divisions, green white and orange.’ (ASTB,562)

‘Two, four, six, eight – how do you know St Patrick’s straight?’¹⁹¹

After having studied in depths the similar patterns of othering and marginalisation of queer and Irish identity, it is now necessary to study the combination of the two and how they relate on a deeper level. The argument of Kieran Rose, seeing homophobia as a colonial inheritance in Ireland seems all the more valid if we take into consideration what Seamus Deane described as ‘the double impact of the two imperialisms. Kieran Rose mentions an interesting occurrence in the Irish diaspora that illustrates this very intersection: ‘For seven years the Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization in New York, ILGO, has protested their exclusion from the St. Patrick’s Day Parade and the denial of their right to protest the exclusion.’¹⁹² Ironically, the LGB part of the Irish diaspora used to be commonly seen as freer to come out than the LGB community in Ireland: ‘about half of the Irish lesbians and gay men who are ‘out’ are living outside the country. This forced emigration had resulted in a difficult relationship of guilt and resentment between the Irish at home and abroad, with a tendency to ignore one another.’¹⁹³

In *Hood* by Emma Donoghue, there are plenty of little jabs that Kate (Cara’s sister who comes back to Dublin for her funerals) and Pen throw at each other playfully (or not): ‘... Ireland has nothing but a past tense. Did you know there are more Irish living in America than in Ireland? ‘-Not real ones.’ (Hood, 102) This jibe seems to confirm the reactionary environment of the independent state, Pen being still in the closet herself but there is also the mark of a dolorous past in the diaspora outnumbering the original population, doubled with a hierarchy between ‘real’ Irish and ‘fake’ ones abroad. Pen is constantly on the lookout for any Americanisms that would have crept into Kate’s (Cáit) speech after decades of living in the United States, same for Georgia who, as a child, despises American-born Saoirse, the father of whom seems to have doubled-down on his Irishness, Gaelicising his name to Donnacha O’Buachalla and naming his daughter Freedom.

Yet if there seems to be a hierarchy in authenticity between the island and the diaspora, there is also a form of snobbery, as expressed by Kate in this quote and, by opposition with Donnacha, a form of spite for the Gaelicisation of names by Irish people: ‘He and Mom weren’t even Irish-speakers, you

¹⁹¹ Mullaly, Una ‘The struggle for LGBT inclusion in US St Patrick’s Day parades’ *The Irish Times* March 15 2020

¹⁹² Roundtable Presentation by Maxine Wolfe, "Inside/Outside the Academy: The Politics of Knowledge in Queer Communities." *Forms of Desire*. The Seventh Annual Queer Graduate Studies Conference. April 3-5, 1997. Held at CUNY Graduate School, Proshansky Auditorium, New York City.

¹⁹³ Rose, Kieran *Diverse Communities: The Evolution of Lesbian and Gay Politics* Cork University Press (1994) 31

know' murmured Kate. 'Totally false nostalgia, this Celtic Revival shit. Cara, Cáit, Cáity, coochy-coo; it's always bugged me.' (Hood, 89) It seems like, as Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill suggested when broaching the subject of immigration, the first generation seems to want to forget whereas later generations try to reconnect with their origins, feeling somewhat a lack in their identity. This could explain the excessive conservatism of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, who when organising the parade, had 'adamantly refused to allow the gay group to march on the grounds that homosexual practices are against the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.'¹⁹⁴ The diaspora proved more conservative than the nation-state as LGB groups were accepted at the St Patrick's day parade in Dublin. In 1992 (although the article isn't clear on the chronology):

'In court in Boston, a Boston City Council member, James Kelly, said the Irish-American Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Pride Committee of Boston "was a front for the militant homosexual groups ACT-UP and Queer Nation." Eventually, a federal judge refused to grant an injunction forcing the AOH to allow ILGO to march, and they were effectively banned from the parade.'¹⁹⁵

The ban was only lifted in 2016 almost ten years later. This would seem to counter Rose's theory and present Irish and Queer identities as antithetical. Ireland being seen as a conservative, catholic country was also what made the study of queer representation in its contemporary literature interesting, as the topic in itself dismantles a pre-conceived notion of the country. Furthermore, because the thesis explores parallelisms between various forms of othering, I would like to take two major catastrophes in the Irish and Gay histories to see, once again that the State (colonial and heteronormative) deals with its others and marginalised communities then see what treasures of irony these communities had to deploy in order to demonstrate the absurdity of their treatment by dominant structures.

1. Necropolitics

'But do you know, there is a surprising complication with tulips. Every now and then, nobody seems to know why, a perfectly decent yellow will break into the most alarming variegation. There are people who become very excited by it. They take pride in the display. For myself, however, I find it spoils the effect. As I say, it is their conformity one prizes.' (ASTB,199)

Queer Ireland

Kieran Rose neatly draws the link between the pre-colonial life of the *clachán* and a somewhat less rigidly homophobic Ireland marking the Famine as a brutal end to a (maybe idealised) pagan past: 'The Brehon laws regarded 'homosexuality' non-judgementally as one of the reasons for divorce. Early and medieval Irish poetry is frequently homoerotic, and the pre-Famine era is generally

¹⁹⁴ O'Clery, Ciaran NY parade in jeopardy as gay group fights exclusion *New York Times* 1980

¹⁹⁵ Mullally, Op.Cit. 2020

accepted to have had a more open attitude towards sexuality.²⁰⁹ I would like to dive a little bit deeper into that argument as there are indeed mentions of poets sharing beds with their patrons but it has been debated as being simply a 'literary conceit':

...we are cautioned by Prof Pádraig Breatnach that "the guise of 'spouse' could be adopted by a poet towards several patrons at once". The poet's "full assumption of a feminine role" occurs within terms of an established literary "conceit", and "we must be wary of drawing hasty conclusions as to his psychology..." A parallel study by Prof Katherine Simms draws attention to the contemporary "traditional role of the poet as in some sense his patron's spouse or lover". However, "the bard has no intention . . . of implying a homosexual relationship with his patron . . . Bed-sharing was a general mark of esteem and trust in this society, peculiarly appropriate between a king and his poet."²¹⁰

However, the journalist is not convinced by this old academic denial of homoeroticism, and concludes: 'In the final analysis, if something quacks, waddles, has webbed feet and is partial to water, then it seems reasonable to conclude it is a duck.'²¹¹ There is even research concerning the druids of Pagan Ireland that has taken the 'The multiple gender systems present in the shamanistic traditions of many native North American peoples' as a starting point to reflect on the gender fluidity of the druids and druidesses of Celtic societies²¹². Going even further back in time, to the Scythian origins of Ireland²¹³, there are traces of gender-fluid priest.esses described by Herodotus: 'Herodotus does the same when describing the Enareës as a small subsection of Scythians; his Scythians are already Other, and the Enareës are further distanced by fact of their gender variance. The fact that androgynoi is the word Herodotus uses for the Enareës supports a gender-variant interpretation for their identity.'²¹⁴

Now in the 2020s, it seems that Ireland is more comfortable discussing 'pre-famine' queerness (as it can hardly discuss it in its Catholic independent Ireland period) even in content targeted at children (which is more than the US-based Disney studios are willing to do so far) and even in subtle ways. I have previously mentioned *Wolfwalkers*, the 2020 animated movie by Tom Moore which dives back into ancient Irish pagan folklore and presents an interesting parallel between the extermination of the wolf population and pagan traditions in Ireland of the 1650s under Cromwell. It is rather foreboding as the movie is situated just on the cusp of the disappearance of these populations, combined in the community of wolfwalkers, close to werewolves except their human

²⁰⁹ Rose, Op.Cit. 8

²¹⁰ Lyne, Gerard J 'Poets, patrons and homosexuality in medieval Ireland - History may have concealed the homoerotic bond between chieftains and men of letters' *Irish Times* Mon Aug 20 2018

²¹¹ *ibid*

²¹² Aldhouse-Green, Miranda 'Gender Matters: Druids, Druidesses and Gender-Crossers', *Caesar's Druids: Story of an Ancient Priesthood* (New Haven, CT, 2010; online edn, Yale Scholarship Online, 31 Oct. 2013)

²¹³ Though there are also theories that Irish people are descended from the Phoenicians see Clare Carroll (2003) as previously cited

²¹⁴ <https://classicalstudies.org/neither-men-nor-women-failure-western-binary-systems> [last accessed 04-01-23]

bodies are left behind, frozen while their spirits roam the Irish forests in wolf shape. Yet this 'condition' can be transmitted to others, and Robyn, the English daughter of a wolf hunter in Kilkenny is turned into a wolfwalker by accident by Mebh, almost the last of her kind as her mother has been captured by Cromwell. The movie avoids easy Manicheism (especially for a children's movie) between the English and the Irish by pointing out the gender-based discrepancies in Cromwellian English society as Robyn, as inspiring hunter like her father, is set to slave away as a maid at the castle. Even her father, set by his profession against the wolf population (even though the wolves keep avoiding his traps with the help of Mebh) is eventually turned into a wolfwalker as well and abandons the English fortified settlement to live on the roads of Ireland with Moll, Mebh's freed mother and the two daughters. The relationship between Mebh and Robyn is depicted as close, with a scene where Robyn brushes Mebh's hair and cleans her or puts flowers in her hair etc. Originally, the character of Robyn was supposed to be a boy, but the gender was switched:

'According to Moore, one unforeseen result of having a girl Robyn is the queer subtext present in the film. "The [film] editor at one point said, 'This is a coming out story — this could be a real first crush, queer romance' ... [and] reinterpreted the whole movie," said Moore. "We didn't lean into it, but we were aware it was there. It was kind of gratifying to see that some people saw that."²¹⁵

Therefore, *Wolfwalkers* is quite subversive in its themes: a (subtle, some interpreted it as a sisterly bond) queer romance in pre-Union Ireland with a reflection on separatism, gender-roles and even eco-criticism as the fate of pagan Ireland is linked the extinction of the last wild fauna of the island, symbolically forcing the country into colonial modernity and British capitalism. An Irish association for reforestation actually uses a surprisingly radical language and argues that, by replanting the pre-colonial forests of Ireland and re-introducing the wolf population to the Island, 'each of us trying to improve biodiversity is not only something that helps the environment and helps the planet – but it's a radical act of decolonisation!' The link between deforestation of Ireland and colonisation is even emphasised in the first line of the historical account: 'The British empire was conquered by the British navy. The British navy was built on Irish oak. The colonial thirst for timber devastated the wildlife & the woodlands of Ireland.'²¹⁶ The parallel illustrated by *Wolfwalkers* is also mentioned:

1609 Ulster plantations begin, with the province's prime lands assigned to British undertakers. Often the planters' first act was to deforest the land to make it suitable for grazing and to monetise the timber. The idea of plantation had come from Machiavelli's 'The Prince' of 1513. One would assign prime plots of land of the country you were seeking to conquer to loyal subjects from the home country. These 'planters' would, by virtue of their new land, become over time the economic and then subsequently, the political elite. The idea is put into effect in Ireland throughout the 17th century.

²¹⁵ Brown, Tracy 'How 'Wolfwalkers'' filmmakers pushed the expressive potential of hand-drawn animation' *Los Angeles Times* Dec. 31, 2020

²¹⁶ <https://www.wolfgangreforest.ie/irish-forestry-history/>

1610 A Lord Blennerhassett “recommended periodic manhunts to track down the human wolves to their lairs”. The ‘human wolves’ he is referring to are Irish warriors who resided in the forests. These warriors are seen as a threat to the new ‘planters’²¹⁷.

They also mention Brehon laws in praising terms, like Kieran Rose: ‘In pre-Christian Irish society, Brehons or judges laid down the law. This early body of law is now recognised as the oldest known European example of a sophisticated legal system. Brehon laws promoted the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature.’ Therefore, Christianisation and British colonialism seem to have essentially extinguished an eco-friendly, queer-friendly pagan Ireland, which might run the risk of idealising pre-colonial times somewhat. Brehon law was also abolished by Norman invasion in the 12th Century, even though it had survived early Christian times.

However, despite the queer potential of pre-colonial Ireland and its celebration in recent times, Kieran Rose recognises that Ireland, even after independence had lost this ‘non-judgmental’ view of homosexuality compared with the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution abolishing anti-gay and abortion laws, he quotes Kevin O’Higgins: ‘We were probably the most conservative minded revolutionaries that ever put through a successful revolution.’ He argues that, after the Civil War, the Catholic Church and the New State ‘formed a close alliance to forestall political and moral chaos as they saw it.’²¹⁸ His work is also important to remind the reader that the Irish State’s response to AIDS was comparable to that of the US if not worse as homosexuality was still criminalised in the 80s Ireland:

In the absence of a measured state response to the growing HIV/AIDS crisis, Ireland’s LGBT+ community pioneered a public AIDS education campaign. This was despite the many restrictions they faced. It is worth noting that laws existed at this time criminalising sexual activity between males. In fact, the Irish government were in the midst of defending these laws at the European Court of Human Rights and even considered using AIDS as a justification for the maintenance of the laws.²¹⁹

In January 1985 and despite this hostile climate, Gay Health Action was founded yet many of their actions were limited or vetoed by the Department of Health because gay sexual practices were ‘contrary to criminal law’. In 1990 the GHA disbanded leaving ‘no agreed and determined response from the gay community to the continuing AIDS crisis and, again reflecting a worldwide pattern, the needs of gay men, including the thousands who emigrate, were sidelined by both the voluntary and statutory sectors.’²²⁰ Kieran Rose also recalls RTÉ’s refusal to air Department of Health advertisement about condoms, shielding themselves behind their catholic ethos. Ireland’s institutions combined efforts to leave the gay population with no available care: ‘While the Church

²¹⁷ Ibid

²¹⁸ Rose, Kieran *Diverse Communities: The Evolution of Lesbian and Gay Politics* Cork University Press (1994) 34-5

²¹⁹ <https://gcn.ie/put-condom-willy-early-hiv-aids-activism-ireland/> [last accessed 04-01-23]

²²⁰ Rose, Op.Cit. 24

and lay right groups were not able to halt all change, they were able to delay law reform, AIDS initiatives, progress for young people and direct public funding for our community services.’²²¹

Bio-power and Necropolitics

This phenomena can be enlightened by Foucault’s notion of bio-power which allows states to maintain their sovereign power of life and death over their citizens by inscribing the right to ‘let die’ in an evolutionary, biological logic of purity and preservation of the race:

Basically, evolutionism, understood in the broad sense—or in other words, not so much Darwin's theory itself as a set, a bundle , of notions (such as: the hierarchy of species that grow from a common evolutionary tree, the struggle for existence among species, the selection that eliminates the less fit) naturally became within a few years during the nineteenth century not simply a way of transcribing a political discourse into biological terms, and not simply a way of dressing up a political discourse in scientific clothing, but a real way of thinking about the relations between colonization, the necessity for wars, criminality, the phenomena of madness and mental illness, the history of societies with their different classes, and so on.²²²

Biopower in itself aims to control ‘the random element inherent in biological processes’²²³ to mainstream an increased production of lives. The use of State-racism, Foucault claims, is a result of the overlap between a society mainly concerned with blood (as a symbol of sacrifice, purity, heritage) and one mainly concerned with sex, the primary tool of biopower. It can be defined as a set of ‘mechanisms of power [that] are addressed to the body, to life, to what causes it to proliferate, to what reinforces the species, its stamina, its ability to dominate, or its capacity for being used.’²²⁴ Most importantly, he expands on this notion of control as applying not only to people of other ‘races’ but also to ‘the abnormal’: ‘The fact that the other dies does not mean simply that I live in the sense that his death guarantees my safety; the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer.’²²⁵

This notion ties a sanitising, normative discourse to the justification of colonialism and the criminalisation of non-reproductive sexuality and explains how the British state and several western states justified the killing of Irish people then queer people, sex worker and substance users. Foucault specifies: ‘When I say "killing," I obviously do not mean simply murder as such, but also every form of indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on.’²²⁶ It is important

²²¹ Ibid 30

²²² Foucault, Michel *Society Must be Defended’ Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-76* Picador, New York (2003) 257

²²³ Ibid 259

²²⁴ Foucault, Michel *The History of Sexuality* Vol.1 Pantheon Books, New York (1978) 147

²²⁵ *The History of Sexuality* Vol.1 *An introduction* Op. Cit 255

²²⁶ Ibid 256

to state clearly that the forms of oppression for a colonised, enslaved, marginalised people function in the same way to respond to the same need for control, the exercise of biopower by the State through a normative discourse that necessarily needs an Other to define itself against and justify the continued right of life and death (sovereignty) by the state. The concept of ‘necro-politics’ by Paul B. Preciado, more centered on the process of killing off unwanted communities is also useful in this context and he clearly states that it applies to racialised, colonised and queer bodies alike:

A l'époque du sida, les techniques de gestion nécropolitique – c'est-à-dire la gestion de certains corps par des techniques de violence, d'exclusion et de mort – étaient réservées aux pédés, aux peuples des ex-colonies, aux corps racisés, aux migrants, aux trans, aux travailleurs du sexe, aux personnes avec diversité fonctionnelle ou cognitive, aux junkies...²²⁷

This common link will also help to determine why queer Irish researchers see this commonality in the enforced shame and oppression of these two aspects of identity. The similar treatment of the Famine and the AIDS crisis effectively illustrates and supports their theories.

However, I wish to introduce some nuance into this statement: queer Irish researchers seem to grasp the similarities in the treatment of Irish and Queer people and draw on this kinship to suggest theories, like Kieran Rose's, that would have Irish homophobia be a colonial inheritance. By opposition, Irish researchers do not usually equate the plea for an independent Ireland with the plea of its queer community²²⁸, indeed, through the reaction of the Ancient Order of the Hibernians and the Independent Irish State's response to AIDS (and its pre-existing criminalisation of homosexuality) the similarities of treatment are simply ignored.

2. Intersections

To introduce the intersectionality of transphobia and colonialism, it is relevant to reach outside of our corpus, into Luxuria's mermaid tale which suggests that empires erased a potentially free queerness present in the pre-colonial era. This combines both destructive missions of the coloniser: it erases non-conforming gender expressions and sexualities and dismantles the societal organisations of the colonised culture²⁴⁶. The solitary protagonist of *La Sirenetta nel Cemento* muses

²²⁷ Preciado Paul B. *Dysphoria Mundi* Grasset, Paris (2022) 26 'At the time of AIDS, the techniques of necropolitical management – meaning the management of certain bodies by techniques of violence, ostracism and death – were reserved to queers, people from the former colonies, racialised bodies, immigrants, transpeople, sexworkers, people with physical or cognitive diversity, junkies...' DeepL translation

²²⁸ Unlike other political movements like black liberation as instigated by the Black Panther party, which openly supported Gay liberation associations in the 1970s, the refusal of AOH to include LGBT associations in the St Patrick's day parade dating from the 1990s...

²⁴⁶ Similar claims are made in Hindu India about Hijras: that the anti-gay/gender non-conforming bias came from the colonisers.

that, in other, pre-colonial times, her transidentity would have been celebrated, not rejected in Esperagna, perhaps a fictional stand-in for Latin American countries which recalls Kieran Rose's argument of queerphobia being a colonial legacy:

... i conquistatori dall'Esperagna, infatti, molti anni prima, erano sbarcati sulla sua terra e avevano imposto i propri suoni e la propria religione sterminando interi villaggi pacifici, violentando le donne, uccidendo vecchi e bambini, riducendo in schiavitù i giovani e bruciando vivi quelli che come Manuelito si comportavano e vestivano da donna, vite umane che nella loro cultura antica e dispersa non erano considerati né distruttori né malati da curare, ma anzi erano visti come intermediari tra gli uomini e gli dei.

... Esperagna's conquerors, in fact, many years before, had landed on his land and had imposed their own sounds and religion, exterminating entire peaceful villages, raping women, killing old people and children, enslaving young people. They were also burning alive those who, like Manuelito, behaved and dressed as women, human lives that were before that not considered as disruptive or as a disease to be cured, but on the contrary, were seen as intermediaries among the men and gods.²⁴⁷

The erasure of alien gender-systems by colonialism is an inherent part of the forced cultural replacement imposed on colonised countries. The multi-reappropriation of Wa'Thiongo's notion of 'decolonising the mind' makes sense as Western colonies enforced a patriarchy based on a rigid binary and cis-normativity, hence why the notion of intersection is crucial to the converging of struggles: it links all forms of marginalisation as facets of the same oppressive system and allows people situated in several forms of othered identities to reflect on their unique forms of amalgamated marginalisation. The mermaid of Vladimir Luxuria then perfectly embodies a literary strand of trans-decolonial sensibility described by Vazquez as such:

The trans-decolonial is not a movement for recognition within the spectrum enabled by the given framework, somewhere in-between maleness and femaleness. It is, rather, breaking away from its parameters to enact relational forms of personification that are often not only in a fluidity of genders but also in a non-individualised position, in a fluidity between the communal and a plural self, and a non-anthropocentric position, in a fluidity between earth and the communal.²⁴⁸

Trans Empire?

By opposition, failing to see the link between imperialism and cis (het) normativity, one of the founding texts of trans-exclusionary radical feminism (TERFs) actually wields the language of empire and colonialism against trans-people, massively overstating the influence and power of the trans-community. Indeed, this curious semantic choice appears directly in the title: *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1979) by Janice Raymond. I only briefly mentioned in the first

²⁴⁷ Luxuria, Vladimir 'La Sirenetta nel Cemento' *Le Favole Non Dette* Rome, Bompiani (2016) 26

²⁴⁸ Coleman, Daniel.B. and Vázquez, Rolando 'Precedence, Trans* and the decolonial' in Steinbock, Eliza, Szczygielska, Mariana, Wagner, Anthony C. *Tranimacies: Intimate Links Between Animal and Trans* Studies* Abingdon, Routledge (2021) pp 38-45

sub-part of this chapter. To briefly sum-up her disturbing views, she considers transwomen as 'eunuchs' who have 'gained prominent and dominant access to feminist political circles barred to other men' as 'keeper of women' and Raymond is the author the now (in)famous 'all transsexuals rape women's bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves'²⁴⁹

Sandy Stone, ironically titling her essay *The Empire Strikes back, A Posttranssexual Manifesto* (1987) had responded differently to Janice Raymond's essay as she was named and personally attacked by it. She chose to reverse the power-dynamic proposed by Raymond in calling out the resemblance between two mechanisms of colonialism and transphobia in their de-humanising processes:

I wish to point out the broad similarities which this peculiar juxtaposition suggests to aspects of colonial discourse with which we might be familiar: the initial fascination with the exotic, extending to professional investigators; the denial of subjectivity and lack of access to the dominant discourse; followed by a species of rehabilitation.²⁵⁸

There a parallel can be formed with the exoticising of racialised women in colonies and the over-sexualisation of transwomen, the professional investigator would refer to scientific discourse justifying the dehumanisation of a community, once again following the same patterns of oppression I have previously mentioned for colonialism and queerphobia in general. Stone also integrates the borderlands figure of Gloria Anzaldua, *la Mestiza*: an 'illegible subject living in the borderlands between cultures, capable of partial speech in each but always only partially intelligible to each'²⁵⁹ which accounts for the difficulty to communicate efficiently about trans issues with transphobic cispeople and also recalls the notion of the amphibian. Transpeople could also be seen to live in the 'borderlands' between accepted depictions of maleness and femaleness and struggling to communicate with either cismen or ciswomen. Kate Bornstein, trans non-binary activist, also refers to 'the transgendered and related border-walkers'²⁶⁰ using the same metaphor of manhood and womanhood as countries. This can, in turn be put in parallel with the border between British-occupied Ireland and the republic, as the people who live in the borderlands have to contend with the absurdity of living between countries that actually are one and only island.

As a transwoman evolving in a 'post'-colonial country, the protagonist of *Beautiful Pictures of the Lost Homeland* is often adrift in this fluidity between genders, earth and the communal. She is

²⁴⁹ Raymond, Janice 'Sappho by Surgery' in Stryker, S. Whittle, S., Aizura, A. *The Transgender Studies Reader* 1 Routledge (1995) 131

²⁵⁸ Stone, Sandy *The 'Empire' strikes back : A Posttranssexual Manifesto* Austin, University of Texas (1993) 229

²⁵⁹ Ibid 232

²⁶⁰ Bornstein, Kate *Gender Outlaw* Routledge, New York and London (1994) 60

strongly linked in her shapes to the geological form of Ireland, her imaginary friend from the liminal space of the lane between houses, with whom she seemingly merges to become 'Georgia +', a full person, Elaine is composed of many people, men and women, dead or alive, Irish and English and her transition allows her to live (willingly or not) as at least two genders. Georgia even escapes the usual 'optimistic rhetoric of anticolonial nationalism'²⁶³ as she never voices any pride for her Irishness, and displays a low opinion of superficial celebrations at St Patrick's day parade. For context, when Georgia is a little girl (and seen by most as a boy), she visits the Conyngham children whenever she goes to her grand-parents' house in the North. The children, Judith and Adam, it seems, cooperate to make Georgia fall from a pony because they feel that she is different:

Fear sends her heart pounding. Thunder cracks. Her eyes settle. She's looking at Adam.(...) and in his eyes is the same spark she saw earlier, after the fall, but now it's cold instead of hot, and no longer quite so confused. 'You're stupid', he says. 'I'm never going to let you play with my Subbuteo or my bow and arrow ever again. You're a stupid fat -'²⁶⁴
Georgie stares.
Adam's tongue darts, searches for the word. His fist twitches.
Georgie pulls her hood and pushes past him, her face burning. Violence hums between them, a telephone wire of missed opportunity. (BPLH, 146)

After this scene, Georgia steals the head of Judith's favourite doll (*'I'd die if anything happened to her'* BPLH, 41) and we understand that Judith actually dies later that year in the Dublin-Monaghan bombings of 1974. Georgia is thus full of guilt because she thinks her stealing of the doll's head made her friend die and she externalises this guilt, alongside with her femininity, in the form of Elaine, her imaginary friend who lives on the lane (another in-between space behind her house). Elaine only disappears once Georgie returns the doll-head to the sea by the border, near her grand-parents' house:

Elaine has turned into nothing. She is everywhere and nowhere at once; whatever membrane separated her from the rest of existence has melted. Georgie + Elaine = Georgie plus. The bits of her that might have once been human have been vaporised, stripped of their material value. Memories only, fragments for a Golem to be cobbled together in Georgie's imagination, scavenged from the people she knows. Lotte's cheekbones, Aisling's illness, David's long limbs, Joanie Flynn's voice. Gone, all turned elemental. While the truest source was the only material fragment that the Golem never had: Judith Conyngham, blown to pieces on a pretty Monaghan street one glorious summer evening. Gone, Elaine, gone. Your hair the grass and your face the stones and your voice the wind and the sea (...) and the shimmering, quivering hum of the Border stretching around this quiet land. (BPLH, 444)

There again we see the link – albeit more tenuous – between the gender-non conformity and the border-walker nature of Georgia, as this part of her is composed of both male and female characteristics and of the border itself, with the friend who died there. Elaine's composite nature

²⁶³ Halberstam, Jack *A Queer art of Failure*, Durham and London, Duke Uni Press (2011) 91

²⁶⁴Note the use of the dash (-) to silence what cannot be said (like violence): 'Boy? Girl?'

also portends to re-assemble Judith's body, 'blown to pieces' and mends both the colonial violence that has torn Ireland for centuries (by absorbing the border) and nationalist violence's collateral damage (by absorbing the death of a child killed by a car-bombing). Elaine also transcends time and space as the composite Golem (uniting Czech and Irish histories) between the dead and the living: she takes on Aisling and Judith's traits. This is part of a long deconstruction of time and space within the novel as it keeps exploring alternative timelines and Schrödinger-like experiments with the character's stories. Moreover, Gallagher's ecological sensitivities transpire through the integration of natural elements into Elaine and Georgie's fusion 'the grass', 'the wind and the sea'. I will expand on the ecological elements of the corpus in part III.

Yet Georgia is a transwoman written by a cis-woman and this poses some limits on her ability to describe trans experience. Indeed, Mia Gallagher's writing suffers from what Julia Serano describes as 'cissexual gender entitlement'²⁶⁶, whereby cispeople consider transpeople's gender as artificial. Gallagher often describes Georgia's surgeries and body in gruesome details and embraces the 'stereotypically feminine' transwoman trope with Georgia's friend, Sonia whose diet is strangely described as 'women's food, girly food, salad, eggs, white wine, dark chocolate' (BPLH,381) and it becomes, as times, very uncomfortable to see a ciswoman puppeteering a fictional transwoman to voice feminine stereotypes, transphobic slurs or self-loathing. While it is important to depict the harsh experience of transwomen in Ireland, limiting this fictional character to self-loathing and stereotypical assumptions about womanhood does little to represent the wide variety of trans experience and never addresses resilience or resistance mechanisms through community building and mutual aid. There is no mention of TENI or support-groups, and Georgia only has one trans-friend who also displays a rather stereotypical behaviour.

Irish = Queer

The work of Joseph Valente has been crucial to this thesis, putting clear concepts and analysis on the dense, often lyrical novel of Jamie O'Neill. The central concept of parallelism between queer and Irish identity is most clearly explored in this novel which, with Valente's deciphering, essentially functions as the corner stone of this thesis, even though the goal is also to expand its principle to transness and gender non-conformity in Irish context. One of Valente's articles on the matter focuses on institutionalised shame which forms a common experiential ground for ethnical and

²⁶⁶ Serano, Julia *Whipping Girl A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, New York, Seal Press (2016), 172.

sexual abjection. He sees shame as a tool of normativity rendering both the Irish language and Homosexuality 'Unspeakable', as I have dwelt on in the previous sub parts of this chapter. Unspeakability to him serves as a moral intensifier and pragmatic qualifier, expresses the inability of speech to redress or intervene usefully in a given state of affairs under the terms of the prevailing socio-symbolic order. Sexuality has a 'universal potential for shame as it implies a loss of control that (...) infringes on normative values of subjective sovereignty, therefore people attempt to rid themselves of sexual shame by projecting it onto others whose erotic preferences differs from their own. This allows them to secure a morally and aesthetically hygienic margin for their own sexual life. Hence why most of this chapter is articulated around the notion of silence and the unspeakableness of the Other.

Pairing homosexuality and racialised bodies (as the Irish are 'racially denigrated whites'²⁶⁷) he argues that this trend 'created as a set of constitutional traits, tendencies and limitations, race functioned to predetermine and explain colonial departures from metropolitan norms of civilisation much as a certain imputed and embodied sensibility, gender inversion, came to explain homosexual deviance from the genital norms of virtue'²⁶⁸ And yet, it is still difficult to join those two threads of oppression, they still seem to be running parallel despite how they overlap for Irish queer people. He also recognises that despite possibly overlapping, these two sides of identity are not interchangeable but 'the respective constructions of Anglo-Irish and hetero-homo difference not only shared a broadly discriminatory and hierarchising function but served to manufacture comparably distressed and disadvantaged subject-positions'²⁶⁹ so there are 'ideological affinities between dissident sexual identity and ethno-colonial identity in an Irish context'²⁷⁰. It is difficult to make those parallels meet as even the gendered language of colonisation alternatively seeing the colonised as effeminate, weak and perverted that the masculine, rational colonising state must discipline. Yet sometimes, the coloniser's rhetoric will present the colonised state as lazy, brutish, violent (male) and threatening to overcome the virginial purity of the coloniser which then is represented as a female allegory (like Britannia). Hence by alternating between a female weakness to conquer or a masculine threat to fight back it is difficult to equate colonising language with a generally misogynistic homophobic language 'reducing' gay men to women. Only when personified by actual figures (whether historical or fictional) does it become slightly clearer how the two

²⁶⁷ Valente, Joseph 'Race/Sex/Shame: The Queer Nationalism of At Swim Two Boys' *Éire-Ireland* 40(2), 58-84(2005) 59

²⁶⁸ Ibid 71

²⁶⁹ Ibid 73

²⁷⁰ Ibid 58

marginalised identities can overlap and intersect, hence the reliance on the ghostly presence of Oscar Wilde within the novel, a paragon of 'Irish eccentricity and homosexual deviancy' or, to a lesser extent, Roger Casement, who is either 'framed by the British' or an actual gay Irishman. This fallacious (or not) accusation of homosexuality is appropriated by the character of Eva MacMurrough to explain the charges of indecency and the imprisonment of her nephew in England to the Irish gentry: 'How the English, to traduce your grandfather's memory, concocted the charges against you. You will find society only too willing for so happy an éclaircissement.' (ASTB,196) Yet Anthony is not convinced of the possibility of such a parallel: 'Even for Ireland it seemed too extravagant to equate his plight with the humdrum consequences of nationalist agitation. And yet he was Irish – as much as he was anything much.' (ASTB,194) Therefore there is a perpetual tension on how to reconcile Irish nationalism and queerness, despite the broad similarities between the two forms of oppression. In previous parts it was also determined that the equation is further complicated by the overt rejection of the Irish state of queerness and the acceptance of queerness being alternatively seen as a corruption by the former coloniser (remember gay Irishmen being told they were going through an 'English phase') polluting the Irish catholic (straight) values or as something inherently Irish that was corrupted by the coloniser (see Kieran Rose).

To further test this tension, I would like to briefly analyse another fictional character Patrick/Patricia Pussy Braden from *Breakfast On Pluto* by Patrick McCabe, who unlike most of the protagonists of my corpus does travel to London (and during the Troubles) and is confronted with a blend of homophobia and anti-Irishness. This is still tempered by the fact that they also suffer from homo (trans?) phobia in their native village in Ireland, but neither Pen, Cara, Jim, Doyler, or the *muruchá* suffer from this unique blend of anti-Irish queerness. Usually, they will experience Irish homophobia or external anti-Irishness. Only Rivers Solomon solves the tension by also setting their underwater utopia in *The Deep* as generally unconcerned with sex and gender with the first historian and founder queen Zoti first mating with a woman, the historian-warrior Basha, leading the wajinru to war against land-dwellers encouraged by his lover Ephras and Yetu asking about two-legs genitalia because: 'Wajinru bodies didn't tend to have differences along those lines, but like two-legs, there were men, women, both, and neither. Such things were self-determined, and Yetu wondered if two-legs had body self-determination too.' (Deep,116) Maybe the *murúcha* function similarly but Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill doesn't specify it in the poems, it is only known that she resuscitated the neutral grammatical gender of '*murúcha*' to avoid 'merman' or 'mermaid' and have instead the rough

equivalent of 'merperson/people', she simply said 'it's nice because it's not gendered so you can have a wider amount of the population in it.'²⁷² Maybe as a reference to non-binary people.

In *Breakfast on Pluto*, the protagonist (also written by a cis-person, so with a limited view of the queer experience he wishes to relate in his novel) oscillates between the current definition of a gender-non conforming gay man and transwoman with pronouns, easiness with their own body varies throughout the novel. They illustrate effectively the notion of intersectionality²⁷³ coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, originally a precious legal tool to describe the unique combination of sexist and racist discrimination by employers in 70s America, the notion has been expanded (and bleached) to address all possible combinations of marginalised identities but also mainstreamed and recuperated to 'only contest certain practices of subordination while maintaining current hierarchies, this doesn't only erase marginalised people enduring multiple systems of domination, it also dichotomises the discourse on race and discourses on gender'²⁷⁵. Yet here I am using this notion to address (racialised²⁷⁶) whiteness and queerness. As an Irish AMAB person in London during the Troubles, the protagonist is highly suspicious and will indeed be taken by the police for questioning after having been in a nightclub during a bombing. Prior to this occurrence, however, the threat of her Irishness seems mostly diffused by her queerness in the eyes of state authority, like the two are antithetical: 'Do you have ID? let's have a look at you, Pat!' Look you up and down then, winking at their mates, giving you old mince mince, hand on the hip routine. 'Lots of little fairy boys like you back home then, Pat! Not just murdering bombers then, after all!'²⁷⁷ This light-hearted attitude changes after the bombing when she is brought to hospital and they 'discover her little secret'²⁷⁸, having been called up until then an 'Irish bitch'²⁷⁹ so assumed to be a cis woman. When she is found out to be AMAB however, she becomes a threat again: 'nothing would convince them that the baby-faced male bomber they now had firmly in their grasp was anything other than a wicked little fucker who would stop at nothing in his determination to mutilate and maim, even going so far as to disguise himself as a tart'²⁸⁰ Upon being violently questioned by the police, she ends up ironically

²⁷² Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill at the University of Nebraska at Omaha 2013 Reading Series UNO Writer's workshop 27 april 2011 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIOVuDnN8i0> [last accessed 07/09/23]

²⁷³ Crenshaw, Kimberle "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," University of Chicago Legal Forum: Vol. 1989: Iss. 1, Article 8 139-167

²⁷⁵ Bilge, Sirma 'Le blanchiment de l'intersectionnalité' Recherches féministes, vol. 28, n 2, 2015 : 9-32

²⁷⁶ The term 'blahdy bog arabs' is used in the novel by an anti-Irish English character in McCabe, Patrick *Breakfast on Pluto* HarperPerennial, New York (1998) 87

²⁷⁷ *ibid* 72

²⁷⁸ *ibid* 142

²⁷⁹ *ibid*

²⁸⁰ *ibid* 143

confessing to planting the bomb 'But of course I did, my darling! Of course I did – and I have planted hundreds!'²⁸¹ yet is still taken seriously and slips in a fantasy throughout the next chapter (or is it an actual memory? The narrator is proven several times to be completely unreliable) where she is indeed the 'adored leader'²⁸² of an IRA active service unit in Hammersmith and is on the brink of giving up a job because she can't find anything to wear. Imagining a queer military leader, while oddly empowering, is probably meant to serve a humoristic function by highlighting the contrast between the IRA machismo violence with a high femme leader²⁸³. The humour stems from the contrast between, supposedly, the pinnacle of manliness (as embodied in the chapter before the bombing takes place) and that of queerness that cannot possibly combine. Yet this little fantasy still remains a better overlap of queerness and Irishness than the what the police assumes: a bomber dressing up as a transvestite specially to avoid suspicion still hanging on the impossibility to resolve this tension between the two -threatening in wildly various ways- identities.

Jack Halberstam also reads another parallel between the incomprehension and misrepresentation of independentist para-military groups in Ireland and of trans-people in his analysis of Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992), which also proves the validity of a parallel between various political identities and their othering by mainstream society and media:

There are three major narrative strands in *The Crying Game*, all of which seem bound to alternative political identities, but none of which actually live up to their own potential. In the first strand, which involves the IRA, we expect to hear a critique of English colonialism, English racism, and the occupation of Northern Ireland by England. Instead, the film uses Jody [a racialised black British soldier] to critique Irish racism and Fergus to deligitimize the IRA. The second narrative strand, which concerns the romance between Fergus and Dil [a trans-woman and Jody's ex-girlfriend], seems committed to a narrative about the "naturalness" of all types of gender expression, and here we expect to see the structures of heteronormativity exposed and the male gaze de-authorized. Instead, *The Crying Game* uses Dil's transvestism only to re-center the white male gaze, and to make the white male into the highly flexible, supremely human object who must counter and cover for the gender rigidity of the transvestite Dil (rigidity meaning that she cannot flow back and forth between male and female; she insists on being recognised as female) and the political rigidity of the IRA "fanatic" Jude. The triangulations that prop up each half of the film create the illusion of alternatives, but return time and again to the stable political format of white patriarchy.²⁸⁵

This lengthy quotation highlights how much a piece of media that poses as a deep-dive into alternative points of views usually only does so from a safe, mainstream vantage point to propose a judgmental and moralising lesson on the impossibility of alternatives. The insidious use of Jody's racialised body to shield British Imperialism and racism from critique is also particularly hypocritical

²⁸¹ Ibid 144

²⁸² Ibid 146

²⁸³ ²⁸³ Mulhall, Anne 'A Cure for Melancholia? Queer Sons, Dead Mothers, and the Fantasy of Multiculturalism in McCabe's and Jordan's *Breakfast on Pluto(s)* In Giffney, Noreen, Shildrick, Margrit (eds) *Theory on the Edge. Breaking Feminist Waves*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York (2013)

²⁸⁵ Halberstam, Jack *In a Queer Time and Space* New York University press (2005) 80-81

as it essentially puts at odds two anti-racist/decolonial causes to annihilate any potential for what would be a logical alliance.

Yet it seems like Neil Jordan does his utmost to avoid the racialised black soldier's blood ending up on the IRA's hands, as, in a cruel ironic twist, Jody is not killed by the IRA member but instead is crushed by the wheels of the British army's trucks coming to massacre the occupants of this IRA's secret hideout. In fact, both the IRA and the British army seem but a negligible backdrop to a mostly just misogynistic plot that has Jude, the woman who lured Jody to the IRA, being seen as the sole responsible for the whole operation by both Jody and Dil (his girlfriend) who will actually kill her at the end of the movie. The sexism of *The Crying Game* curiously reverses the usual hierarchy set by patriarchal standards on cis and trans womanhood as Dil, a transwoman, is deemed superior to Jude, a cis-woman. Jody compares the two women with a clear disdain for Jude, who he sees as dangerous while the rest of the IRA members being violent towards him is casually dismissed as simply 'part of their nature'. This allows Jody to forgive and befriend Fergus while remaining hostile towards Jude, creating a strange homo-erotic bond and competition between Fergus and Jody over Dil.

Pride and Shame

By opposition to Patrick McCabe, Jamie O'Neill does not borrow from absurd humour when it comes to writing queer fighters in paramilitary groups. And, in all likelihood, some of the participants of the 1916 rising were queer. Unlike Patrick McCabe, queering history for O'Neill is not a quirk or meant to be humoristic. He chose to pair the two coming of age narratives of Jim and Doyler with that of an Ireland as a nation, reclaiming some identity consciousness after the execution of the leaders of the poorly attended rebellion, re-signifying a queer nation through the analytic and prescriptive tracks of Irish nationality, queer sexuality and linking them in their revolutionary political demands.²⁸⁶ Jamie O'Neill also pairs the subversive identities by having them mistaken for one another through the figure of Oscar Wilde and Anthony coming out as Irish in a very on-the-nose moment: 'Damn it all, MacMurrough, are you telling me you are an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort?' 'If you mean am I Irish, the answer is yes.' (ASTB,309) The dialogue between Anthony MacMurrough and Scrotes is revealing too, as the older ghost tries to persuade the young man to guide Doyler and Jim in self-acceptance – the reader knows Jim needs it, Doyler we only see struggle shortly before seemingly accepting it – Scrotes encourages Anthony:

'Help them make a nation, if not once again, then once for all.

²⁸⁶ Valente, Joseph (2005). 'Race/Sex/Shame: The Queer Nationalism of At Swim Two Boys'. *Éire-Ireland* 40(2), 58-84

-What possible nation can you mean?

-Like all nations, Scrotes answered, a nation of the heart. Look about you. See Irish Ireland find out its past. Only with a past can it claim a future... Only a language of its own can speak to it truly. What does this language say? It says you are a proud and ancient people. For a nation cannot prosper without it have pride... The struggle for Irish Ireland is not for truth against untruth. It is not for the good against the bad, for the beautiful against the unbeautiful... The struggle is for the heart, for its claim to stand in the light and cast a shadow of its own in the sun.

-Help these boys build a nation of their own. Ransack the histories for clues to their past. Plunder the literatures for words they can speak. And should you encounter an ancient tribe whose customs, however dimly, cast light on their hearts, tell them that tale; and you shall name the unspeakable names of your kind, and in that naming, in each such telling, they will falter a step to the light.

-For only with pride may man prosper. With pride all things follow. Without he have pride he is a shadowy skulk whose season is night. (329)

Jamie O'Neill uses a lot of biblical-like grandiose paragraphs with subject and verb thrown to the end of the sentence and complement first, this mention of pride (for only with pride may man prosper) there means nationalist pride and, to a current reader will automatically call to gay pride. It retraces the revival efforts of the Gaelic league at the time, trying to link Ireland back to its Celtic, precolonial past. Likewise, it helps Jim and Doyler build their own queer nation (even if it is just on the tiny rock of the Muglins, the aim of their swim, for a few hours) to let them know that homosexuality was accepted in the past. It allows the two young men to imagine a future where societal norms would have shifted again, as they would then know these norms are historically constructed and not eternal. Yet when this grandiose speech mode is employed, no matter how genuine it may seem, it must always be held as a foreshadowing of its own self-defeat. It seems almost that the usual elements that make a nation, in the sense of nation-state: history, pride etc are ill-adapted to this 'nation of the heart'.

MacMurrough will actually 'crumple inside' when Doyler is exposed as a socialist (another marginalised, taboo identity being likened and mistaken for queerness or Irishness) by Father O'Taylor, beaten and cast out of the band. Doyler had only worn his 'larkinite' badge of the red hand because MacMurrough had told him he could wear it 'with pride' (ASTB,296) in his garden. This of course instantly renders the previous internal dialogue hollow as he sees its direct consequence: being beaten and cast out. MacMurrough's own 'confession' of homosexuality before 'coming out as Irish' to Tom Kettle also backfires since Father O'Taylor clearly knows about it and chastises him before he can take Doyler's defence. Joseph Valente argues that there is a problem to begin with in 'dispelling the social stigma of perversion through assertive self-disclosure'²⁸⁷ as it is akin to accepting guilt, and confessing a crime. He draws on Eve Sedgwick's notion of reflective pride, which is simply seen as shame turned inside out, a denial of shame that consolidates its insidious power.

²⁸⁷ Valente, Joseph (2005) 'Race/Sex/Shame: The Queer Nationalism of *At Swim Two Boys*' *Éire-Ireland* 40(2), 58-84 77

Even group pride, it is stated, is mortgaged to the existing structure of social norms for contours. Despite these grim assertions, Valente is right in arguing that Jamie O'Neill filled a need for anti-normative Irish nationalism.

3. LGB Islands

Jim and Doyler

Maybe pride, like belonging to a nation is a much more modest and fleeting affair in *At Swim Two Boys* by opposition to an eternal, stable identity claimed by traditional nationalism. It seems that, throughout the novel, only a handful of moments and a small group create this 'queer nation', even if Jim still confuses it with Ireland:

'But what is Ireland that you should want to fight for it?

'Sure I know that too.' ... 'It's Doyler,' he said.

'Doyler is your country?' ...

I don't hate the English and I don't know do I love the Irish. But I love him. I'm sure of that now. And he's my country.' (...)

'You're part of my country too now, Mac Emm.' (ASTB,435)

Thus, instead of claiming a kinship with the whole of Ireland, the trio manages to create a microcosm of this queer nation and will sometimes recognise others, happily or not, like the gay owner of Lee's, a shop where Anthony MacMurrough gets Doyler a suit. In context, however, it mostly just seems like two rich men exploiting younger, poorer men even though a dubious age-difference and problematic power dynamics are not unique to gay duos. It does not fall into the trope of queer 'found families' because all three have sometimes ambiguous but loving family members who either know about their queerness or who seem to suspect it but could be open to accepting it: Jim's father ends up accepting Nancy despite his conservative values and his fear of social opprobrium, Doyler's mother seems quite unconcerned with her son's activities in general but remains supportive and Anthony's 'Aunt Eva' knows about his imprisonment but chooses to take him under her wing anyways. The mentor role of Anthony also seems to bleed into that of a third lover to Jim and Doyler as they both either sleep with him (once he abandons the power-imbalance of monetised sex with Doyler) or are openly attracted to him sexually. While there seems to be some competition between Doyler and Anthony over Jim, the latter knows that the two are involved sexually and simply glad they had each other. Therefore, maybe O'Neill's queer nation is only found in smaller units and fleeting moments, as Jim reckons after he swam to the Muglins with Doyler:

They had this together now. They had their island. Whenever a thought crossed or a look met, if a hair but brushed a finger, this was where they would be. No one could take it from them, chance what might, nor he could nor Doyler. He had to bring Doyler here because Doyler didn't know to come on his own. This was the

light the Muglins had shone all those years. It was here was their home, it was in the sea, an island.
(ASTB,534)

Thus the 'nation' in itself if self-contained, bottled in the memory of their afternoon and immutable, independent of either his or Doyler's will. The reader knows that the 1916 rising is coming and many deaths occur, threatening our protagonists and so the temporary nature of this 'home' is very clear, and this recalls the notion of queer temporality and finite moments as theorised by Jack Halberstram. He argues that, especially in times of crisis: 'Queer time (...) exploits the potential of what Charles-Pierre Baudelaire called in relation to modernism "The transient, the fleeting, the contingent."²⁸⁸ Note that 'the sea' is also part of this moment as it completes the fluidity of this queer nationalism imagined by O'Neill. Therefore, this queer nation, the island, is defined by this fleetingness.

The Island is also a microcosm, a miniature Ireland hosting only the two lovers declaring their territory's temporary independence to the HMS *Helga*, a British ship that passes the Muglins:

So they hauled out the flag, Jim holding the bottom corner and Doyler, standing a little above him, the top, while he kept an arm about Jim's neck. The breeze took the green and flapped it mildly. A sailor was leaning over the rail. He watched them a while, then another sailor came. Jim thought they might be laughing. Then both sailors came to attention and brought their hands to salute. And so the King's ship passed and the green flag flew from the Muglins.' (ASTB,528-9)

This small act of defiance and mock recognition of the independent island (as the sailors are laughing but still salute) recalls the treatment of Patrick Braden, who, despite being recognised as Irish, is not taken as a threat due to her apparent queerness. Here, Jim and Doyler stand proudly, naked, as a couple but they might simply be read as two adolescent friends jesting, the act so small and contained that it is never taken seriously. This short moment of recognition might also be a partial attempt by the author to explain the botched shelling of Liberty Hall by the *Helga* as it was clearly ordered to fire at the Irish Transport and General Workers Union's headquarters, and recorded the order to proceed up the Liffey and the firing of 24 rounds on Liberty Hall in the log. And yet the building only sustained minimal damage. While historians puzzle over this (feigned?) incompetence²⁸⁹, O'Neill seems to be taking the party of a secret collusion between the ship's crew and the independentist project of a portion of Irish people.

²⁸⁸ Halberstram, Jack *In a Queer Time and Space* New York University press (2005) 2

²⁸⁹see Barry, Michael 'The Helga and the shelling of Liberty hall' *The Irish History* March 2016 and De Courcey, John 'The Sea and the Easter Rising, 1916' *Maritime Institute of Ireland*, 1966
<https://www.theirishstory.com/2016/03/24/the-helga-and-the-shelling-of-liberty-hall/>

However, Jim takes a strange lesson from the Muglins, he tells Doyler who is slowly recovering after almost drowning on the way back: 'You know there's nothing to fear, don't you? If only you might have come swimming today you'd know it for sure. The Muglins are there and the great sky above – we're immortal. We're no more than filling in now.' (ASTB,586) As previously inferred, the spiritual vocation he never fully developed for Catholicism was bolstered by Patrick Pearse's oratory gifts and fully peaked after his achievement and symbolic declaration of independence on the Muglins, strongly tied to his intense feelings for Doyler. Doyler, paradoxically, has by this point in the novel already backed out of the revolutionary agenda and sees with a critical eye the blending of socialism and nationalism.

Anthony MacMurrough, after the death of Doyler will also try to propose an Island to Jim, a shelter from his grief but Irish nationalist anger had replaced the small, self-contained nation of the heart he shared with the other young man. Anthony cannot rebuild it:

He was kind was MacEmm to think of these things. And he would try to be with him on his island when he could. But he wouldn't be swimming no more. He would be a stone and he would sink. (...) They had to do this to learn how to hate. They had forgotten to hate the British. Now they'd learn. And they wouldn't be playing soldiers no more. Next time would be murder. (ASTB,637)

Grief has rendered Jim's fleeting nationalism more tied to Ireland and revealed a concrete enemy where, before, he didn't know 'if he hated the English'. At the end of the narrative, his own island/nation has collapsed in the Rising, shot by British soldiers and he rewires the odd spiritual connection he has to this queer belonging into a military, bloodthirsty nationalism. It is not by accident, also, that he synthesises the effect of the Rising on Irish public opinion: nothing in itself, a joke almost 'playing soldiers' but the disproportionate retaliation of the British colonial state has the effect intended by the leaders of this 'armed propaganda rather than an attempt to seize power'.²⁹⁰ Maybe it is to avoid calling it a failed attempt to seize power, but many historians talk about a 'staged affair'²⁹¹ and in an interview, Jamie O'Neill has discussed the use of indoctrinated youths as meant to shock public opinion even more when they would inevitably die in the Rising²⁹².

When Jim is with his troop, surrounded in St Stephen Green, a motif keeps reappearing every two pages for almost the whole chapter and Jim, despite trying to be useful in battle can never quite ignore it: 'the boy at the park gate was dead still' or some variant comes back page 609, 610 and

²⁹⁰ Crowley, John et al *Atlas of the Irish Revolution* Cork University Press (2017) 240

²⁹¹ Ibid 283, whole chapter named 'Staging the Rising' by Wills, Claire (283-290)

²⁹² Conner, Marc C., & O'Neill, J. (2007). "To Bring All Loves Home": An Interview with Jamie O'Neill. *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 11(2), 66–78. 76

twice page 612, registering the shock underneath Jim's belief in his own immortality. Fearghal McGarry also concedes, in their account of British reaction in 1916: 'Although it is difficult not to discern a colonial dimension to the decision to deploy field artillery and gunboat in what was nominally a major UK city, the military's heavy-handed response was largely shaped by wartime considerations, which ensured that little thought was given to domestic political consequences.'²⁹³ This will also prompts them to execute the leaders with speed and secrecy, shifting public opinion in a matter of days, and, with a semantically interesting choice of words: 'Irish Party leader, John Dillon, ineffectually warned the House of Commons: "You are washing out our whole life work in a sea of blood."'²⁹⁴ The attempt to later impose conscription to the Irish population in 1918 also participated, according to McGarry, to popularise republicanism however, but the importance of the rising in the slow historical process towards independence cannot be understated. In the novel, Jim has already lost his brother Gordie to military recruitment before he loses Doyler in the Rising. Therefore, it seems grief is a much stronger stimulus for his nationalism than Patrick Pearse's rhetoric, which only endows him with a spiritual awakening that simply replaces what Polycarp was trying to pass off as a 'vocation'.

Greening the Greek

Jim, determined to participate in the revolutionary effort, steals bed-ridden Doyler's uniform to go to the Rising in his place. This scene, Jim going in Doyler's place using his uniform is a strange reminder of Patroclus going to war in Achilles' stead by taking his armour: 'if you are privately deterred by some prophecy, some word that Zeus that your lady mother has told you, at least allow me to take the field with the Myrmidon contingent at my back, if perhaps I might bring salvation to the Greeks. Give me your own armour to fight in, so that the Trojans take me for you and break off the battle.'²⁹⁵

The motif of immortality only somewhat displaced and Doyler limping like Achilles' heel (ankle) has already been struck, this immortality lost while Jim glows with a sort of spiritual aura after reaching the Muglins. Based on that and if the reader ignores the foreshadowing of Doyler almost drowning wrapped in the all-green flag of the independence cause, signing the death of a socialist (and queer) Ireland alongside with the death of Connolly, one could expect that Patroclus' stand in, Jim, will die. A short scene where his aunt Sawney watches him go like she saw Gordie until he died at war also seems to constitute foreshadowing: 'But she still said nothing, only stared her face out the window,

²⁹³ Ibid 254-5

²⁹⁴ Ibid 257

²⁹⁵ Homer *The Illiad* London, Penguin Classics (2003)

that same window on that same strip of lane where these years she had watched her good boy go, come and go, come and go, till he never came no more. And now she had watched the little man too with the black fellow's gun to his shoulder. (ASTB,590) He is also the most innocent, naive character of the trio, bearing a sort of perfection that, in a lot of narratives would make him the ideal sacrificial lamb to bring Anthony and Doyler closer together as they have just started bridging the gap in their relationship and gone on a more equal footing (Doyler topping Anthony MacMurrough for the first time the preceding night, making even the sexual relationship more reciprocal).

I insist on the Patroclus/Achilles Jim/Doyler parallel because there are many references to ancient Greek history scattered throughout the novel, with an insistence on the Spartan society cited in *A Nation Once Again* as the 'ancient freemen'. Anthony tells Doyler that their soldier citizens 'considered disreputable if [they] did not have [their] lover' and that 'it was an Irishman who first made this point. In print, I mean. Chap name of Mahaffy, in his Greek history. (...) He taught Wilde.' (ASTB,297-8). Therefore, the link is emphasised in the novel to propose an alternative nationalism to Doyler (and later Jim) that does not reject homosexuality but on the contrary seemed to almost institutionalise its practice (for it would not have existed in name back then). Furthermore, to circle back to Achilles and Patroclus, there is a pre-existing link with Irish myths as their relationship has been compared to that of Cuchulain and Ferdia: 'Lillis O Laoire acknowledges the homosocial nature of the relationship between Cuchulain and his foster brother, Ferdia, in the Gaelic epic the Táin, partially evidenced by Cuchulain's grief-stricken lamentation over Ferdia's death'²⁹⁶ Their epic, the Táin Bó Cúailnge has even been called a 'Celtic Iliad'²⁹⁷ but strangely, O'Neill only refers to Greek mythology, maybe not counting on pre-colonial Ireland for queer representation like Kieran Rose.

Ancient Greece and its history or myths also permeates Emma Donoghue's *Hood* though it focuses on the domestic, the mundane routine and what happens behind closed doors as lesbianism was often ignored by legislation and not considered as threatening as male homosexuality. The protagonist is named Penelope and her lover dies coming back from a trip (an odyssey?) to Greece, shortly before reaching home yet, in a way, Cara has always been distant and off on various adventures while Pen, wife-like, was waiting for her to come back home in Ireland, the metonymy for this dynamic (and their relationship in general) being the boat pendant that Pen possesses, a recurring motif in the novel.

²⁹⁶ Lapointe, Michael P. *Between Irishmen: Queering Irish Literary and Cultural Nationalisms* MA, McMaster University, 1994 59 cites (229-30; 1 2 Kinsella 199-200) in this extract

²⁹⁷ Blank, Deanie Rowan. 'Cuchulain and the Táin Bó Cúailnge: A Celtic Iliad.' *Prairie Schooner*, vol. 86, no. 1, 2012, pp. 150-60.

Hood shifts the narrative focus of the epic adventures of the *Odyssey* to what Penelope could possibly have been doing all this time on her own, the protagonist even comments on it:

And why had my mother given me such a wifey name anyway? The original Penelope should have run off to an island with the wittiest suitor, or woven a fabulous tapestry that would spread her fame, or just taken the dog and run along the shore. Why sit at home for years in one long nightmare house-party waiting for her true love, who is probably changed, grizzled, faded, and even if they are the same, how dare they expect you to have waited that long?(Hood, 174)

Note the use of 'they' pronoun as a neutral that could mean either Ulysses or Cara as both Penelopes, the mythical and very real one (in the novel so fictional but real in the story) merge into one with increasing realistic and mundane set of activities offered to the forlorn wife (runaway with another, artistic fame or just walk a dog). Pen resents Cara and, to avoid being consumed by her unofficial widowhood (they were on again off again together for thirteen years and Pen has never been with another), she only remembers the difficult times together, the arguments and the bitterness she holds for this imperfect relationship. This subtle use of Greek mythology by both Donoghue and O'Neill might be an indication of their wish to establish a link between a very cis hetero normative Ireland and a time more accepting (or simply indifferent) of homosexuality. This might also lend a respected form of legitimacy to the secret queer nation they both propose in their novels, paralleling the same strive encouraged by the Gaelic revival, to find ancient roots to their community and build up an Irish brand of queer class consciousness.

Pen and Cara

The tone of *Hood* is almost too sober for a narrative focused on grief, Cara (paradoxically named 'dear/friend' in Irish) becomes so unlikable, seen through Pen's memories that the reader ends up wondering if it's not a good thing that she is dead as it frees up Penelope so she can finally move on (even though nothing stopped her from putting an end to the toxic relationship when Cara was alive).

One review of the book argues:

But this novel is not what you might expect (...); it's neither a sour, miserable journey of bereavement nor a stiff polemic on rights for queer people using a partner's death as a way into this argument. *Hood*, I think, does ultimately maintain an argument for queer rights, but it's not through any politicizing; rather, it's from the very strategy that only seems remarkable or odd to straight reviewers: she presents an utterly flawed queer character in all her glorious and everyday humanity.²⁹⁸

The literal distance between the two lovers is established from the very first page with Cara running away from Pen and generally feeling suffocated by the latter's consistency in feelings and loyalty.

²⁹⁸ <https://caseythecanadianlesbrarian.wordpress.com/2013/09/17/i-was-more-alive-than-i-could-bear-a-review-of-hood-by-emma-donoghue/> [last accessed 28/04/23]

Yet for all this bitterness, the novel also proposes a small, secret nation hidden away within, this time, independent Ireland. MacMurrough was watching over the two boys' swim and exploration of the Muglins and catches Doyler on time before he drowns in the sea, weighed down by the green flag. Another mentor-like figure, Mrs Mew, the Art teacher (again, the age difference) Cara is in love with, gives her the key to the rooftop where she will first kiss Penelope. This transgressive moment of intimacy between the two school girls transforms the mundane rooftop into, to Pen: 'our own island of concrete and iron, floating above Dublin.' (Hood,28) This scene displays the same isolation from the rest of the world and, much like the Muglin's tiny sea-weed covered rock, doesn't seem like a nice place (concrete and iron), only becomes special as a place of firsts, the desire the young people feel for each other seems to embellish the dreary surroundings. This mention of the rooftop can also be read in contrast with Ireland as an even less appealing island, described by Pen as: 'this dog-shaped island and all of us foolish enough to cling to its wet ridges.'(Hood, 10) worthy of spite from the US diaspora in her mind. The rooftop is one of the very few times the girls share a moment in public, as their relationship is mostly encased in the domestic space of Cara's father's house, in fact they comment on it:

'Once in the twilight, we nearly did it. We were lying together behind the rocks in our long coats, beginning to feel internal music. I was leaning up one elbow, angled over Cara, my mouth hovering above her eyelids, when a straight couple walked by. We kept our faces together and didn't move. 'We'll be alright if one of us looks like a boy,' whispered Cara. 'But not both,' she added as an afterthought, 'we're bugged if we both do.' And then at that word we got the giggles, of course, and lay there shaking until the couple were out of sight. (Hood, 209)

Penelope, by opposition to Cara is not politically engaged about queer rights yet by recalling this particular moment, she does realise that straight couples have more freedom in public spaces, even if this grave state of affair is uplifted by the crass pun on 'buggered' if they look like a male gay couple. Obviously, the tone in *Hood* does not borrow from the same quasi-biblical lyrical tone as *At Swim Two Boys*. For O'Neill, even if the tone maintains a certain ironic distance with its form, it still allows for genuine moments of drama, whereas Donoghue drowns almost all of it in a routine, business-as-usual type of denial that borders on indifference, perhaps eager to distance herself both from queer militancy and the airy romantic tone often reproached to women writers. Yet the scene on the rooftop can be seen as the girls' 'queer nation' moment, even though unlike Jim and Doyler, Pen and Cara will have many more years to share. The women get a lifetime before one of them dies suddenly in a car accident, to the point where the island seems to isolate more than protect them: 'Somehow over the years I had slipped into being unsociable. Between the straight schoolfriends I had inched away from, and the dykes I met only through and with Cara, I found myself on a kind of island. As long as Cara was around it seemed full of voices; living with a Gemini, one was never short of

company. But now I had no idea how to go about filling the evenings.’ (Hood, 173) But like for the two boys, the first kiss on the rooftop is a key point moment of the girls’ relationship: ‘This rooftop is no longer attached; it has become our flying carpet, nine miles above the convent, sailing nearer to the sun... I would do anything for this girl. I will make her smile, make merry, make up for it all.’ (Hood,31) if the boys’ island is set on the sea, the girls’ is in the air, with the sea still implied in the ‘sailing’ close to the sun, although that does make it a foreboding, Icarus-type of image.

I opened this subpart with an example of Irish diaspora’s institution (the Ancient Order of Hibernians) rejecting openly its queer part but I would like to close on a more positive depiction of another such institution. I have been gravitating around the London Irish Center since 2020, for the useful resources of their library, Irish lessons and events and I was surprised when the first night ‘Reeling in the Queers’ was announced at the centre, and at their renewed partnership with London Irish LGBT network³⁰⁴ for the screening of the documentary on the 56th amendment for Marriage equality that I previously mentioned. The queer nights are now quite regular and some of the queer artists also show up for other LIC events like céilí nights. Clearly, at least for the LIC (and the Hammersmith centre) queer and Irish are no longer antithetical.

It is now time to expand on the sea/water metaphor that I have briefly touched on throughout this first part. The parallelism between the marginalisation of the Irish and the queer community has hopefully been demonstrated though it is still hard to make two parallel lines meet in theory. The poetic, lyrical and even satirical language of contemporary novels, short stories and poetry, though, brook a smoother blending of the queer and Irish struggles as this imagery is wide enough to include multiple issues and opens a questioning of the process of dealing with trauma through a re-appropriation of myths and legends. The importance of oral tradition, the expression of (both queer and Irish) otherness through the water/sea creature image will also be explored next.

³⁰⁴ <https://londonirishlgbt.com/>



Part II : Ambiguous Water

Bond – Reveal/Release- Drown



II.1 Bond

‘the sea always wants things to change, the land wants them to stay the same. Everyone finds their own balance, and sometimes they get it right. But sometimes -far more often- they get it wrong.’¹

In this second chapter, rather than presenting the observation that othering patterns tend to be quite similar and illustrating the various forms these processes take by drawing on the corpus, the analysis and micro-reading of the texts will take a central place, since the similarities between the othering of queerness and Irishness has been established especially by O’Neill and backed with historical and political elements. The monstrous crops up a lot in the grotesque depictions of marginalised people and their intimacy, throughout the corpus. This form of abjection is best described by Thomas M. Stuart as:

Instability, transience, transformation, and reorganization describe these creatures down to their very function within these texts. They are foreign, Orientalized, and—according to Edward Said— thus figured as female; yet they penetrate deeply into England and its conservative sexual culture. Indeed, the boundary-crossing that marks these characters as supernatural antagonists extends far beyond gender transformation, but, for a Victorian audience obsessed with taxonomies and sexual categories, it is this trans- impulse that establishes their monstrosities.²

The focus now is on seeing how these patterns of othering and monstrosity are expressed through the metaphor of the water, the sea creature, the fish out of water. This monstrosity, though is recuperated by the Irish (and or queer) authors as signs of empowerment, of alternative pathways to beauty and intimacy celebrating a grotesque too often set as the opposite of idealisation, yet working wonders while in tension with it. This part will also concern itself with how these multi-levels metaphor allows the various writers to explore queerness and the deep link to the Irish isle, thus countering the othering processes with a form of aqueous belonging that takes on new, fluid rather than fixed forms of identity. In her article ‘Common Senses’ which ‘considers how engagements with water are experienced and interpreted within these specific cultural contexts’³ Veronica Strang argues that ‘[w]ater diversity is ... a key to its meanings. Here is an object that is endlessly transmutable (...) It has equally a broad range of scales of existence.’ These qualities of mutability ‘are crucial in that they provide a common basis for the construction of meaning’⁴.

¹ Logan, Kirsty *The Gloaming* London, Penguin (2018) 69

² Stuart, Thomas ‘Out of Time: Queer Temporality and Eugenic Monstrosity’ *VICTORIAN STUDIES*, Volume 60, Number 2, pp. 218–227 221

³ Strang, Veronica (2005). “Common Senses: Water, Sensory Experience and the Generation of Meaning”. *Journal of Material Culture*, 10(1), 92–120. 92

⁴ Ibid 97-8

As the uses of water, the sea and aquatic creatures are mapped, we get a better grasp of the background legends and mythologies that appear in the corpus, and explore the way they are used. Moreover, because all these folkloric figures stem from the oral tradition of Irish and Celtic culture, this part also calls for an examination of the oral-like writing of the various authors. In re-appropriating the mythical/legendary figures to express trauma, part of the writing process of the various authors also acknowledges the nationalist, cis-het patriarchal instrumentalization of these figures. As both Ní Dhomhnaill and Donoghue argue, myths and legends are powerful imagery and their ideology can be changed to include new voices: 'On the subject of lesbian literary history in Ireland', Donoghue has said, 'we may have no myths of our own, but our writers often re-fashion myths'⁵. I would also like to apply what I will strive to establish as the grotesque-ideal aesthetics⁶ to understand the mundane, realistic treatment of the myths and legends' rich bestiary. Ní Dhomhnaill has also clearly stated that the *Fifty-Minute Mermaid* rests on a central metaphor of Irish=Water and English=Land, which guides this entire thesis. Indeed, in a public reading of her works she stated that her merfolk came from the 'amniotic liquid of Irish and land[ed] on the hard rocks of English.'⁷

Water is to be taken quite broadly for the analysis, it encompasses rain, the sea, lakes, rivers and other bodies of water, even, indeed, bodily fluids, all of which connect the multiple strands of identity I have explained as similarly marginalised, the ductility of the image of water facilitating the joining together what theory often sets as parallels that never really intersect as Jack Halberstam points out: 'This foundational exclusion, which assigned sexuality to body/local/personal and took class/global/political as its proper frame of reference, has made it difficult to introduce questions of sexuality and space into the more general conversations about globalisation and transnational capitalism'⁸. Whereas theory is still rigid in its depiction of marginalised identities, so much so that even Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality⁹ sets blackness and womanhood in a white supremacist and sexist society as identities (whether reclaimed or imposed onto the individual) depicted as straight rigid lines that intersect. These imaginary 'lines' representing identity often simply, at least in the language of a lot of the critics used in this thesis, run as parallels. This frustrating inter-

⁵ O'Brien, Kathleen 'Contemporary Caoineadh: Talking Straight through the Dead Author(s)' *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Spring, 2006, Vol. 32, No. 1 59

⁶ Part II, II.1.3 161

⁷ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill at the University of Nebraska at Omaha 2013 Reading Series UNO Writer's workshop Youtube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIOVuDnN8iQ> 40:39

⁸ Halberstam, Jack *In a Queer Time and Space*. New York University press (2005) 5

⁹ Crenshaw, Kimberle "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*: Vol. 1989: Iss. 1, Article 8. 139-167

exclusion is only overcome through individuals, communities or in fiction and, as is the interest of this thesis, in the water metaphor as a fluid, flexible image that reconciles parallels, 'loose and wavy' as they may be. Those images and allegories mix identities, allow them to overlap and generally dissolve in poetic and prosaic language to permit the mind to better process these aspects of identity together. In *At Swim Two Boys*, the water reunites Anthony MacMurrough, Doyler and Jim, three strands of Irish nationalisms (or anti-nationalisms) in their queerness to create the fleeting queer nation, the island treated in the previous chapter. To emphasise this point, I will draw on Gaston Bachelard's *Water and Dreams* as he has tried to grasp in theory: '[a]ll of these disparate images, which a realistic doctrine of metaphor can do so little to explain, have real unity only through the poetry of reflections, through one of the most fundamental themes of the poetry on water'¹⁰.

First I would like to demonstrate how the authors of the corpus use water as the fluid location of queer and decolonial bonds, I have already explored the idea of underwater Utopias in *The Deep* by Rivers Solomon and *The Fifty-Minute Mermaid* based on Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's poems, though we do not get to see the *murúcha* when they are in water, most of their recollections of it seem positive: they invoke the power of water to save a newborn's soul, feel empowered when they allow its memory to come back to them later in life (on the brink of dementia) and return to it after death.

1. Trans-Celtic

Oral tradition

In the first part, I studied the impact of the Famine on Irish grief, its enduring ghosts linking the lack of food and silence to death. David Lloyd argues that the famine inherently reorganised the Irish space along the modern hierarchy of the senses, favouring a distanced vision and hearing over close contact touch and taste, resulting in a total control of the Irish mouth, both what it consumes and the rhetoric it produces. Likewise, the ban on Irish and keening, this enforcement of silence ultimately displaced Irish orality into spaces of modernity, in particular literary loquacity. Writing is considered as expressing a dignified, self-reflective interiority while the oral tradition channelled

¹⁰ Bachelard, Gaston trans. Farrell Edith *Water and Dreams. An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*. The Pegasus Foundation, Dallas (1983) 43

the communal. Literacy is always seen as a sign of modernity and a useful tool of assimilation¹¹, even though oral and written modes tend to co-exist and interact in most civilisations. However, this oral element acts as an active, recalcitrant counter-space of modernity and I would like to analyse this curious orality of writing in the various pieces of the corpus in this light. I have already touched on the role of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's poems for the Irish diaspora and the general connection it harked with various coastal populations that recognised a commonality of experience in those Irish lines. It calls back to the preponderant role the *filí* used to fulfil in Irish society, through its diffusion through English and other translations, other countries:

It is a commonplace that in pre-Christian Ireland *file* implied magical and religious powers and responsibilities which made their holders second only in real wealth and influence to the rulers, the kings. They were the memory of the people, the voice of its identity, and, finally, its spokesman to and link with all natural and supernatural powers. They could recall everything of interest and value, they could celebrate and give significance, they could curse and bless, blast and heal.¹²

Thus, the porosity between written and oral in the poems, often read aloud by Ní Dhomhnaill and enjoyed as such beyond those who can understand Irish (the poet often seems surprised at the numbers who flock to hear her readings¹³) revives this old aura of *file* and the ductility of her main water metaphor for othering, for collective trauma has spread beyond the Irish shore, creating an international bonding through her poetry of water.

Lloyd goes further in acknowledging that Ireland presents a 'bizarre and unruly lack of proper boundaries, an unsettling fluctuation between inadequately differentiated psychic and economical states to the modernised observer. (...) It constitutes a dynamic interface between literary and oral formations.'¹⁴ This explains why the written language in the novels of the corpus often sounds like spoken iterations. There is even a conscious blurring of the concepts with characters openly addressing the reader or seeming to be talking to 'you', whether the second person is addressed to an imagined audience (the particularity of English in making this pronoun both plural or singular and making several interpretations co-inhabit), to the individual reader, or to an intra-diegetic character like Georgia, recording her voice to send tapes or files to her father as he has lost his vision: 'Helen says in her letter that your sight is almost completely gone; that explains the handwriting. (...) I wonder what it will be like for you, listening to this. (...) I'm still just a new radio, learning to tune

¹¹ Denvir, Gearóid. 'Decolonizing the Mind: Language and Literature in Ireland.' *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1997, pp. 44–68 45

¹² Lucy, Sean 'Presences and Powers' Review of *Mount Eagle*, by John Montague in *The Irish Literary Supplement* 8,2 (Fall 1989), 21.

¹³ See Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill at the University of Nebraska at Omaha 2013 Reading Series on Youtube

¹⁴ Lloyd, David *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity. The Transformation of Oral Space (1800)2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2011), 72.

myself in.' (BPLH,471) This already confuses the sense of reading a transcript of the recording as each part starting with Recording finishes with <save> until the last one <send>. The reader is then supposed to imagine the spoken chapters as they are, the only locus left for Georgia to reconnect with her father, a therapeutic use of a proxy talk-therapy with a purpose. Yet this literary device also creates an odd distance between the reader and these recordings as they are overheard while meant for someone else. From time to time, the distance is again increased through other devices: for instance, the first time the reader 'hears' Geo's narrative voice, she recalls her eighteenth birthday from a photo that Mar had found: "I'd been eighteen in that photo, at that awful age where I'd convinced myself I'd be able to fit in, as I was, with no intervention." (BPLH, 7) Intervention can be read in two ways: surgical intervention or intervention in the etymological sense of coming between (lat. *inter-venire*), coming, at least temporarily, between genders, in a transitive way. This in-between will be taken up again in the idea of the amphibian a few lines later. Moreover, the distance between the reader and the moment of the first observation of the amphibian is enlarged by the number of levels (for lack of a better term) in the story:

Level 1: this is a recording of Geo's voice as the chapter title indicates <recording>, yet the recording has been transcribed since it is written down: one can therefore wonder by whom it has been transcribed and if it was done faithfully or with an agenda (as in *The Handmaid's Tale* by M. Atwood).

Level 2: It is a memory: the memory of their disastrous move from Berlin with Mar that takes place in the past (Mar has already left Geo when the novel opens).

Level 3: Mar's memory of showing this photo refers to another, even more distant memory of memory of Geo when she was eighteen years old.

Level 4: In this memory in a transcribed recording, the amphibian makes its appearance: the Lacoste alligator.

The novel multiplies in fact the degrees of *mise en abîme* from the beginning to the end and thus creates a distance between the narrator and the various events, here the memory of Geo. The latter quickly becomes elusive, herself a narrator with a point of view warped by her emotional torment (due to the separation with Mar) and her physical state (sick with a cold or maybe showing the first symptoms of breast cancer). This elusive and blurred nature of the various stories contributes to this theme of fluidity that is embodied by the protagonist. This talk/writing is also used to make meta statements about the novel, where it seems like the author is bypassing the characters to talk directly to the reader:

Is there a better story I should be sharing with you? A tale from a parallel universe? One of those books you used to read when you were my father; a sci-fi epic with a big cast of characters and interwoven plots? A story that jumps from place to place and spans decades, that's packed with gizmos and technology, heroes and villains and enough alien life-forms to keep even you listening? Instead I offer you this: a hotch-potch of memories, my own talking head intercut with observational footage from a day in the life. (BPLH, 311)

The same transgression of separation between narrator and reader is used in *Hood* though it is never explained dietetically. Sometimes the protagonist interrupts the narrative to remark: 'I'm blithering, amn't I?' (Hood, 4) or, talking about the arguments she was having with Cara, as if to pull the reader onto her side in the judgement of domestics: 'You see, I was better at them.' (Hood,59) and warning us that her own accounts of her late unofficial wife are not to be trusted: '(Or was it just the kind of thing she would say? Was I her ghost writer now, putting words in her mouth?)' (Hood,8) Again, we have a blurring of speech, as the words are put in Cara's 'mouth', and writing, a 'ghost writer', paradoxically reversing the roles of alive and dead and signalling an unreliable character. Moreover, Pen(elope), the author's tool for writing, is also personified, built into a character so that the writing can come across as a voice, talking, 'blithering', 'rabbiting'.

Jamie O'Neill opens *At Swim Two Boys* from the point of view of Mick, Doyle's adoptive father, and the two sentences are noteworthy because of the prosody and rhyme: 'There goes Mr Mack, cock of the town. One foot up, the other foot down' (ASTB, 3). This introduces with mock-pomp the father of Jim, as the two men's friendship first established the link between their sons, whose love-story we are about to witness. This is the only moment in this long novel where Mick Doyle's point of view is expressed, as he mostly blends into the background as a secondary character after this. Yet he opens the novel with an elaborate Dublin phrasing and implicitly addressing an audience in the street) 'Wait and I tell you' (ASTB,4) this time using a clear Hibernian English plural and forming a community of the readers, thus pulling them from the individual experience of reading and recasting them as a group of listeners.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill makes a jibe at Blasket Island miserabilist autobiographies in her poem 'Na Murúcha agus an Litríocht'/'The Merfolk and Literature', with the same reference as the opening of Flann O'Brien's (Myles Na gCopaleen's) *An Beal Bocht*: 'ní dóis liom so mbeidh a leithéid arís ann/ I know my likes will never be seen again'¹⁵. Ní Dhomhnaill writes, 'Is cé nach mbeidh a leithéidí arís ann/And though their likes will never be seen again' to claim the parodic legacy and her siding against Blasket literature, with the *murúcha* point blank refusing to write anything. The poem mostly describes their relation to literature by the repetition of the negative verb particle: 'níor

¹⁵ Na gCopaleen, Myles and McCloskey, J. *An Béal Bocht - Leabhar Grafach* Claremorris, Clo Mhaigh Eo 5

thairricíodar/not pen’ ‘níor luídar/not set down’ ‘níor chamadar/not compile’ ‘níor cheapadar/not compose’ ‘níor chuir/not afflicted’ ‘níor dheineadar/not attempt’ (Mermaid:38-39) ironically forming an entire poem on their refusal to write. The resignation of the merfolk might be a way of keeping their literature in an oral form (as they are heard singing lullabies or uttering pelagic prayers) but avoiding literature as a way to commodify their misery or rendering their culture legible to the land-coloniser. I have cited Frantz Fanon’s work before to argue about the pre-colonial notion of a collective being erased in a colonialist-enforced individualism. Yet as Walter J. Ong argues, orality can also play a role: ‘Primary orality fosters personality structures that in certain ways are more communal and externalised, and less introspective than those common among literates. Oral communication unites people in groups. Writing and reading are solitary activities that throw the psyche back on itself.’¹⁶ Re-connecting with a collective consciousness is a crucial part to start decolonising the mind, in a way and start organising to resist colonial powers. It seems that primary orality is another way to access this collective, the defence of this orality becoming a prime tool of decolonial resistance. Now through the very use of folktales and legendary creatures and their rewriting, all authors link back their writing to the oral tradition of Ireland and Celtic nations in general, interlinking their rewritings with a long tradition of re-telling, modifying, personifying of those tales, among which the merfolks, both half-fish half-humans and the selkies (seal people), the changelings, all related to the sea or the water, blending the oral weaving of the novels, poems and tales with the fluid and ever-changing forms of the creatures.

Water borders/joins

The sea is also the link between Alba, Breizh, Erin (formerly Banba¹⁷), Cymru, Kernow, Mannin¹⁸ in a pan-Celtic, trans-Celtic¹⁹ celebration of their history through organisations like the Celtic league, founded in 1961, though there are mentions of a previous Pan-Celtic league dating back to 1901²⁰, whose main aim is ‘to win or to secure the political, cultural, social and economic freedom they need for their survival and development as independent nations.’²¹ It sprung from the connections made by local independentist movements during WWI and was interpreted as a form of ‘racial

¹⁶ Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy The Technologizing of the Word* London, Routledge 2002 67

¹⁷ Scott, Michael *Irish Folk and Fairy Tales Omnibus*. London, Sphere (1984).

¹⁸ Scotland, Brittany, Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, Isle of Mann

¹⁹ <https://www.transceltic.com/about-celtic-nations> [last accessed 14:01:2023]

²⁰ “The Pan Celtic League.” *All Ireland Review*, vol. 2, no. 24, 1901, pp. 181–82.

²¹ <https://www.celticleague.net/constitution-of-the-celtic-league/> [last accessed 2023]

solidarity²². Various events and partnerships like the *Festival Interceltique de Lorient* (FIL) or *Hands across the Sea* combine the research of scholars from the Highlands, the Islands of Scotland and Western Brittany. Many figures of folklore or legends crop up in various Celtic nations and regions like the selkies, changelings, mermaids, or fairies, weaving a common mythical tapestry attesting to this shared culture and Gaelic language root. It is illustrated by, for instance, the mention of Tír-fó-Thoinn/ Tir fo-Thuin, Land Under Wave²³ (where Ní Dhomhnaill's merfolk come from) in Kirsty Logan's novel *The Gloaming*, which also explores the theme of belonging in the Scottish isles and the love story between two mermaids, Mara (named for the sea between the islands Islay -her big sister- and Barra-her little brother-) and Pearl which I will refer to in this chapter.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill is conscious of the dangers of myths and the role they had played in militant fascism²⁴ and the distorted, Christianised versions of old Irish myths. Indeed, participating in the project of nationalism to build up a distinct identities, myths and legends could be mobilised as an oppositional force:

In the shifting frontier zones of Irish–English relations – no less than in those of Dane, Swede and Geat recorded in Beowulf – the inaugural scene of ‘pure people’ versus ‘impure monster’ raised its hoary head again and again. What we might call a Mythological Return of the Same.

The Irish, of course, responded with their own narratives of self-conscious national pride. From the early Middle Ages on, we witness many local poets and bards spinning powerful tales of the virginal motherland being raped and plundered by the invading Sasanach. And this widening gender opposition between Ireland as feminine victim-virgin (Roisín Dubh, Caitlín ní Houlihán, Spéirbhean) and England as masculine master (fatherland, King and country, etc.) was accentuated by the emergence of a powerful national literature which underscored the separateness of both peoples.²⁵

Yet the legends around water and sea creatures also create a common pool of narratives and symbols for the various Celtic nations and regions, and perhaps this form of reactive nationalism (under the threat of othering) is what prompted the Celtic nations to reconnect with a distinctly un-British past and literature. Wales and Scotland still harbour these forms of regional independentist nationalisms with an emphasis on language in Wales and the Scottish National Party being the most successful, left of Labour party that has managed to pierce through even to Westminster. Ireland however, through its (partial) access to independence, has moved onto the more traditional frame of nationalist myths. Frantz Fanon has also pointed out the importance of nationalist literature in the build-up to decolonisation:

²² Stover, Justin D. ‘Modern Celtic Nationalism in the Period of the Great War: Establishing Transnational Connections.’ *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 32, 2012, pp. 286–301. 286

²³ Logan, Kirsty *The Gloaming*. London, Penguin (2018), 221.

²⁴ See Zipes, Jack ‘The Battle over Fairy-Tale Discourse: Family, Friction, and Socialisation in the Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany’ in *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*; London, Routledge (2006).

²⁵ Kearney, Richard *On Stories* Routledge, London (2002) 94-5

...now the native writer progressively takes on the habit of addressing his own people. It is only from that moment that we can speak of a national literature. Here there is, at the level of literary creation, the taking up and clarification of themes which are typically nationalist. This may be properly called a literature of combat, in the sense that it calls on the whole people to fight for their existence as a nation. It is a literature of combat, because it molds the national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons; it is a literature of combat because it assumes responsibility, and because it is the will to liberty expressed in terms of time and space.²⁶

In the first chapter, I have already evoked the concept of pride as an inverted shame, still limited by the hegemonistic norm that defines the very terms of the othered identity one can supposedly re-appropriate. The queer community by, often controversially, re-appropriating slurs, offers an example of such an inverted shame. Likewise, there is something of the same pattern in the re-appropriation by Ireland (and other Celtic nations) of this depreciated Celtic identity that was wielded against them to suggest that 'the Irish, like women in general, were constitutionally ill-equipped for the dispassionate pursuit of state and social policy and were for that reason properly dispossessed of any real historical agency.'²⁷ This led to a form of counter-literature by 'Pearse, Moran, Griffiths, Gonne, Robinson and Yeats (...) adducing the virility of the Irish warrior tradition, including its latest avatar, petty bourgeois familialism (...) by tapping into the history and traditional lore of Ireland to produce the codes and institutions of a native patriarchy.'²⁸ This rhetoric was aiming to oppose British accusations of 'feminine' irrationality with a form of hypermasculinity. For women writers both in Ireland and Scotland to work with Celtic myths requires changing its ideology and de-mystifying the female figures of the legends, which results in an interesting middle-way as Angela Carter had thoroughly rejected the use of 'mythic versions of women' all of which:

'from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsenses; and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth, anyway.(...) If a revival of the myths of these cults gives women emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life. (...) Myth deals in *false universals*, to dull the pain of particular circumstances.'²⁹

It is necessary to be cautious in applying Carter's theory to the re-writing of Celtic myths as her problematic depiction of Irish characters in her novels hints at an inherited British colonialist sense of superiority.³⁰ Yet the re-writers of Celtic mythical creatures bring them back down to earth, to the mundane of everyday tasks in first-person narratives that avoid the 'false universals' aside from

²⁶ Fanon, Frantz *The Wretched of the Earth* New York, Grove Press (2004)

²⁷ Valente, Joseph 'The Myth of Sovereignty: Gender in the Literature of Irish Nationalism' *ELH*, 61(1), 1994, 189–210. 190.

²⁸ *Ibid* 193

²⁹ Carter, Angela *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography*. London, Virago (1979), 5-6 my italics

³⁰ See Finn and his incestuous brother and sister Francis and Margaret in *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) Though it is called out by Finn, Angela Carter's depiction of an all red-haired, poor and 'illiterate' to mute cast of Irish characters can be seen as rather stereotypical.

death and the general limitations of bodily materiality. The various writers blend continental and Celtic fairy tales (German *Märchen* and Arthurian cycles in *Beautiful Pictures* and *Hood*) but I would like to focus on their re-appropriation and use of Celtic mythical figures (though by the very nature of folklore, they travel and would not be found only in Celtic nations and regions).

In order to briefly refer to the effort of Jim and Doyler 'To claim the Muglins for Ireland' (ASTB, 505), and to highlight the geographical reality of proximity between the Celtic parts of the islands, the smallest distance between the Irish isle and Scotland is of 35km³³ or 21.4 miles³⁴, so short in fact that many people have swum across the Northern Channel in about 13-15 hours or two ways in 29 hours as a relay swim. The (tourism-office) legends surrounding the Giant's Causeway³⁵ also point it out as the remnants of an ancient bridge between Ireland and Scotland. The physical aspect of long rallying swims is explained by O'Neill for the stretch between the Forty Foot and the Muglins (for about 4-5km): 'Soon as Jim found his stroke, the ache was back in his arms. Only it was doubled now or trebled, the way the hurt had been storing all the while he rested. And for all he strove, such small return: the Muglins refused to budge.' (ASTB,526) For all its symbolic charge, the 'extraordinary' feat that the boys have to accomplish still takes a dangerous and demanding toll. This contrast illustrates well the mundane treatment of symbolic acts in the novels and poems which lends them an irreverent comical tinge. The water itself, more than proposing the boys' 'ideal', as I have previously mentioned, also reveals the physical distance and concrete resistance of a water border. Symbolically, the boys rallying England from Ireland, by taking over the tiny island in between are showing the limits of the border, defined by Thomas Nail as a 'constant failure', since they 'have never even succeeded in keeping anyone in or out.'³⁶ Yet Nail denies the difference between natural and artificial borders: 'throughout history "natural" borders as borders were always delimited, disputed, and maintained by "artificial" human societies.'³⁷

In contemporary times, the fluid notion of borders continues to be explored in art, as the project LACUNA (2015-2021) by artist Kate Nolan, at the Gallery of Photography in Dublin in 2017 proved, this time for inland, borderlands waters, it focuses on Pettigo (situated in counties Fermanagh and Donegal and straddling the border), Carlingford Lough and South Armagh, through audio-visual installations. The artist argues:

³³ About 32 km between Calais and Dover by comparison, another swimmable distance often crossed as such.

³⁴ <https://www.ildsa.info/north-channel/history/> [last accessed 27/01/23]

³⁵ <http://www.irelandsmythsandlegends.com/the-giant-s-causeway> [last accessed the 01-02-23]

³⁶ Nail, Thomas *A Theory of the Border*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2016), 8.

³⁷ Ibid 7

Borders are confused spaces: artificial divisions, lines drawn on maps for political or colonial expediency, with little consideration of the natural or cultural realities and distinctions. From Donegal to Armagh, I have experienced many versions of this liminal space collaborating with children forgotten in the politics of boundaries. In 2015 I began LACUNA in the small village of Pettigo. The River Termon, flowing through the centre of the village, marks the physical border finding Pettigo both in Donegal and Fermanagh, Ireland and the UK, and soon, inside and outside the European Union. Three bridges span the river and at places where it narrows, often, without realising, you can step across into another country. In collaboration with young people, we explore the notion of the border as a place in flux.³⁸

Interestingly, Mia Gallagher's characters debate the meaning of 'Lacuna', landing on different conclusions about the flux it represents, this time, the 'gap' (or the border) is linked to sorrow, grief and tears (both liquid and as gaps): 'For ages, I though lacuna meant 'tear' – as in weeping – until Mar corrected me. (...) That's lacrimosa, Geo. Lacuna is a gap. Later, Sonia told me he was wrong; lacrimosa means sorrowful, girl. Lacrima is the Latin for 'tear'. But a 'tear' can be a 'tear' too. A rent, a rip. A gap. So not that stupid a mistake.' (BPLH,375) Three voices then give different interpretations: for Geo it is a tear, for Mar a Glaswegian man living in Ireland and thus separated from his island (and mother) by the very 'gap' he mentions, it is linked to 'lacrimosa' the sorrowful, and for Sonia, another transwoman who lives away from her family, the gap is linked to 'tears', 'lacrima'. As Gallagher subtly depicts the quiet violence 'humming' through borderlands this overlapping misunderstanding of lacuna, lacrimosa, and lacrima blends the three notions in the smart polysemantic 'tear' and keeps it in its fluid, liquid element as the first depiction of the border given to the reader in *Beautiful Pictures* is that running through -probably from the proximity of Omeath- Carlingford Lough, treated by Kate Nolan's LACUNA: 'there is plenty to see: boats chugging into the Lough; cars and armoured trucks speeding out of Warrenpoint, along the far bank of the invisible border that stretches like a humming wire through the water; the flash and whirr of British helicopters; the shining glints that are the Flagstaff towns, Warrenpoint, Rostrevor(...)'(BPLH,27) The stop-start rhythm of this descriptive list emphasises the unnatural break in the landscape with an overuse of cutting punctuation and a focus on the man-made contraptions surrounding the loughs: boats, wires, cars, helicopters, towns as human movement and occupation has overtaken this area of key importance and passage. The natural elements of the 'Mournes themselves, their woody flanks green-black..' comes last, a simple backstage to the commotion around the lough. Hence, to quote Nail again, 'so-called artificial borders always function by cutting or dividing some "natural" flow of the earth or people (who are themselves "natural" beings'³⁹.The water border then displays the ambiguous nature of the border, both a bond and a cleft in the landscape and people, to be easily overcome through swimming or questioned by the people of the borderland. It also displays

³⁸ <https://www.katenolan.ie/info> [27/01/23]

³⁹ Nail *Theory of the Border* Op.Cit. 7

a trans-celtic bond through the shared sea-related legends. I will now focus more on the intersection of Irishness and queerness in the creation of those aqueous bonds.

2. Queer Baths

Family frogs

Contemporary Irish poetry and short-prose writers who dwell in the sea/water themes create an interesting continuity with what Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill established as part of a sub-aqueous Irish identity (Irish=water)⁴⁰ and, even though they work with the English language, they expand on this theme and re-appropriate it for queer experience, thus blending the two sides of identity to dissolve them altogether. Both Toby Buckley and William Keohane pause to look at the metamorphosis of tadpoles, symbols both of transition and intergenerational links as the numerous offspring of a big family. They display the bond through water by both being a big family and offering a family activity of collective caring for and observing the creatures:

... The bath is observed
With an analyst's eye as jelly becomes
Tadpole becomes froglet gurgling up
Until the house comes under siege
By fifty or seventy tiny frogs
Looking impossibly human, impossibly
Like smears of dark toothpaste.
The smears glint and pulsate for days
on the lawn, in the flower pots.
Most are picked off by local cats,
The rest grows into bumpy men
blinking their triple-lids, blaring
their fleshy vocal sacs
and slipping into the family
wellies, left unguarded on the doorstep.⁴¹

The humanisation of the frogs (“impossibly human”/“bumpy men”) suggests a similar capacity for metamorphosis in humans. The human body is then suggested to have the same origin as an amorphous blob (jelly) only vaguely shaped by an influx of hormones in and out of the womb, another aqueous environment of transformation. This metamorphosis is also seamless as each state

⁴⁰ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill Writer's Workshop YouTube, *Op. Cit*

⁴¹ Buckley, Toby 'Bufo' in Maddern, Paul (ed.). *Queering the Green Post 2000 Queer Irish Poetry* Dublin, The Lifeboat Press (2021), 30.

(jelly-tadpole-froglet) is only bound by the active verb 'becomes' expressing the constant state of evolution for the small amphibian. These creatures overcome this duality in nature (passing from one gender to another, from an aquatic tadpole to a frog capable of walking on land) and relocate it in the familiar and routine experience of many cis people, a way to re-anchor trans experience in the cocoon of the traditional nuclear family (garden, wellies, cats, houses, the passing of a grandfather and the privileged bond of father and son). In a way, this avoids disrupting structures that are constantly seen as threatened by Queer experience. Buckley makes this apparent in the 'house comes under siege', something that is exaggerated to look like an invasion (an image redolent in transphobic and homophobic discourse, as was noted in the first chapter) yet is contrasted with the inconsequential presence of the frogs that are actually quite vulnerable (they get picked off by cats).

A similar family moment occurs for Keohane in *Cratloe Woodlake* after remembering the recently passed grandfather:

We do not die, we just become another thing. I imagine the grains of him, travelling up through the heather, the grass, the roots, the trees. Up into the spruce needle canopy above, watching us, watching the tadpoles. My father hands me a metal pail and I dunk it in the stream to collect the jellied globs, a cluster of unseeing eyes. He helps me to carry them down the hill and we settle ourselves into the car again. (...) And oh, how they change. Each day, I come outside to watch them turning into frogs. First, the little stumps, the legs. Slowly, the tails segment and fade; they shed themselves and learn to move in their new shapes. They grow. The parts they do not need fall away. We will gather them back into the bucket again, in time. Bring our small frogs to the woods and leave them off. For now, I sit and wait and watch them changing, becoming something new.⁴²

William Keohane focuses more closely on the mutation of the tadpoles' bodies ('stumps, legs, tails'), and the process of growing and shedding parts 'they do not need' and 'learn[ing] to move in their new shapes' makes the link to medical transition clearer. The image of the amphibian (and fish as we will later see) is quite useful to express and ponder on transition as the animals carry on their growth and metamorphosis outside of their eggs, which can mirror both puberty and 'second puberty', a term often employed in the trans community to describe the changes obtained through hormone-replacement therapy (HRT). The aqueous *milieu* also allows for this perpetual metamorphosis as some species, like the axolotl, benefit from regenerative powers through their continuous existence in the water, powers they lose (with their external branches) if they stay on land⁴³. By linking transition and amphibian metamorphosis, trans-writers reveal the natural aspect of transition which many would disqualify as synthetic or artificial by opposition to cisgender bodies' evolutions, even when the latter also utilise (sometimes the same) surgeries and hormone-therapy.

⁴² Keohane, William *Cratloe Woodlake*. Cork, Banshee Press issue 12 (2021) 81

⁴³ Vieira, Warren, Wells, Kaylee, McCusker, Catherine "Advancements to the Axolotl Model for Regeneration and Aging". *Gerontology* 2020;66: 212-222.

Paul B. Preciado expands on this argument by retracing the historical invention, development and use of synthesis testosterone and anabolic steroids in sports, Viagra, the progesterone based contraceptive pill and oestrogen patches for menopausal women, he emphasises the colonialist, eugenicist and racist history of the pharmaceutical testing of those products before making them available to the general population. Moreover, he points out that these technologies, as long as they are used to augment a chemically constructed heterosexual cis-femininity and cis-masculinity, can never make cis-people's gender lose their 'natural' qualifier:

... the techno-Barbie, remaining eternally young and supersexualized, almost entirely infertile and nonmenstruating but always ready for artificial insemination and accompanied by a sterile supermacho whose erections are technically produced by a combination of Viagra and audiovisual pornographic codes emitted through computerized digital channels. Finally, pharmacopornographic heterosexual fertilization is happening in vitro.⁴⁴

The depreciative language used by Preciado is effectively a reversal of the discourse usually wielded by cis-people against trans-people, a discourse that emphasises the artificiality of 'man-made' genders, the mocking 'sappho by surgery,'⁴⁵ without ever pausing to consider the media and pharmaceutical constructiveness of their own 'natural' genders and sexuality. Therefore, there might be a defensiveness in the use of natural metamorphosis in trans-writing, an attempt to deconstruct this hypocritical discourse permeating 'debates'⁴⁶ around trans-identity. Furthermore, these amphibian/fish similes also highlight the interconnectedness of humans and animals of the environment in a non-anthropocentric way. I will expand a bit more on this notion of interconnectedness in Part III 1. and 2. The familial bonds they share is also strengthened by the action of caring for the tadpoles-frogllets-frogs, and perhaps also easing confused family members into the trans-sons' metamorphoses by exemplifying the change. Outside of familial bonds, two novels of the corpus focus on romantic couplings (or more) and thus prompts the analysis to cover the budding and developing relationships of Jim and Doyler and Anthony MacMurrough in *At Swim Two Boys* and Pen and Cara in *Hood*. Water takes a crucial place in their moments of intimacy and is expressed by the writers as a powerful bonding agent for their characters.

Choosing the sea/Doyler

⁴⁴ Preciado Paul B. *Testo-Junkie. Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*. Trans. Bruce Benderson New York, Feminist Press (2013), 220.

⁴⁵ Raymond, Janice 'Sappho by Surgery' in Stryker, S. Whittle, S., Aizura, A. *The Transgender Studies Reader 1* London, Routledge (2006) 131

⁴⁶ Purporting that there is a debate reframes trans-people as the defendants in a case that forces them to justify and explain their existence to a cis-jury that has given itself the power to deny it if they are not convinced. Hence positing there even is a 'debate' is incredibly violent towards the trans-community.

One of the antagonists of the novel displays an interesting disgust for the symbolic element that O'Neill builds up as a place of romance and open queerness and sets up a denial and resentment of this queerness as an inherent part of the Irish catholic institution, as I previously analysed (in Part I 1. 2): 'But the boy turned and down a lane he went, a lane that turned from the chapel to the sea. The other boy came and his arm was on his shoulder. Brother Polycarp dizzied, and leaning on a wall he smelt the overwhelming stench of the sea.' (ASTB,169) This negative reaction signals that Polycarp rejects queerness, his own and that of others because of his religious upbringing and career. The first obvious excerpt illustrating the bond through water is the first swim of the two 'boys' (in fact, adolescents as they are sixteen) which remains uncertain until brother Polycarp, who has been grooming Jim and pressuring him to become a brother himself, insisting that he has a 'vocation', undermines his own authority and unwittingly offers an alternative more appealing to Jim, who until then was following the only path proposed to him as a path of least resistance (and because the brother insists his deceased mother would have wanted him to join the orders). Brother Polycarp resents the blooming (anew) friendship between Jim and Doyley and perceives the romantic potential at once⁴⁷, warning Jim against 'solicitation' from another, as I have dwelt on in the first chapter. It is this increasing antagonism and an absurd misunderstanding whereby the brother calls Jim 'supercilious' and gets the etymology and meaning of the Latin word wrong that prompts the young man to question the all-knowing nature and authority of the Church. The choice of the debated word is also ironic as it highlights even more the ignorance of the institution and its incomprehension of non-normative lives.

Doyley has invited Jim to swim on Sunday, the day he is supposed to go to Mass with Polycarp but Jim makes a symbolic choice. Instead of staying within the church's walls and Polycarp's sphere of influence, he breaks away from it to go swimming and bond with Doyley instead. There is a clear spatial representation of Jim's decision with two possibilities he contemplates on Sunday: 'By the chapel he pauses where the lane leads astray, and all the people throng him by, and the sky is clear after Saturday rains, and the pavement glistens under the sun. The lane leads to the sea, the beckoning, sparkling, reckless sea.' (ASTB,153) This renders the situation more concrete, Jim was on the way to church, ready to enter the orders and submit to its authority, like 'all the people' around him, a synecdoche for the Irish population following Catholic values set like a large flux ('throng by') one has to set themselves against. Jim, by stopping in the middle of the crowd's flow breaks away from the path of least resistance to choose a different path, the lane that 'leads astray' borrowing

⁴⁷ Brother Polycarp stands in stark opposition to Father O'Taylor, who even when Jim confesses to having had a sexual encounter with a soldier, will still cling to the heteronormative possibility that a soldier led him to a woman.

from biblical language around sin and temptation, used unconsciously by Jim (displaying how deeply he had absorbed the discourse and worldview) to describe the lane that leads to the sea.

Furthermore, the 'beckoning, sparkling, reckless' qualities of the sea seem to stem from the first time Jim sees Doyler after he came back to Kingston (Dun Laoghaire): 'Then the lad's gaze lifted and he saw Jim watching from above. His eyes were dark as night, not dull, but gemmily shining. The smile broadened as though in invitation, as though the rocky shore and the birds and the blue were his to share.' (ASTB,45) Hence Doyler is equated with the sea (the blue) from the beginning of the novel, it is his place and he wishes to share it with Jim. There is a direct link from his eyes 'shining' to the 'sparkling' of the sea, the 'invitation' set in the 'beckoning' and 'reckless' which also applies to the dark young man, who constantly moves, runs and fidgets: 'His hands wouldn't settle, but swept along a wall or slapped against any lamppost he passed. He scrunched stones underfoot or scooted them away as though they posed an obstruction. (...) the eyes were the windows of the soul: Doyler's rarely rested: proof of a giddy and unstable character.' (ASTB,95) Like the sea, Doyler disrupts, clashes against his environment, any obstruction overcome or displaced. Hence Jim endows the sea with the same qualities he perceives in his friend.

Moreover, as a foreshadowing of his choice, the rain has coated the pavement, permeating the path to the sea with the same element, to ease Jim into it, in a way. Once the connection with water is established, it comes across in the physical description of Doyler: 'Jim looked straight into the laky black eyes. 'I don't suppose I ever had much of a friend.' Doyler's brow creased, like ripples in a sand. 'You're a queer one, Jim Mack, I don't mind me saying.' (ASTB,155) The proximity between the 'laky' black eyes, the sand-like crease on his face and the adjective 'queer' also links queerness to the element of water. O'Neill plays a lot on the double meaning of words, both current and Edwardian, *double-entendre* and misunderstandings, the most recurring one being 'Are we straight so? – Straight as a rush' (ASTB,97)⁴⁸, the Irish Brotherhood secret code that both Jim and Doyler share through their decidedly not straight blooming romance and friendship.

Jamie O'Neill presents the water in his novel as an element exclusively inhabited by men (the Forty Foot Gentlemen's bathing club is a recurring spot in the novel). The sea is the constant, omnipresent background (backwater?) and destination of the plot, a place of bonding, self-acceptance, challenge and death (although the ultimate death of a character will not take place there, only on land). The tides, for instance are constantly referred to as if to mark diegetic time, and the writer himself has

⁴⁸ Repeated about 26 times throughout the novel, it's a running joke.

stated that he gave it a lot of thought.⁴⁹ This emphasises the inter-connectedness of Ireland which, despite being on the brink of a historical turning point towards independence is still tied to mainland Europe throughout the events. In fact, had Great Britain not been at war during the Easter Rising, the government might not have executed the leaders of the Rising prompting a sudden swerve in public opinion on independence. The constant presence of the sea both isolates (in a protective way) Ireland as an island but also connects it to other islands (including, not without tension, to the British Isles) and to the continent. Moreover, it links bodies between them and to their environment, as the following excerpts will hopefully illustrate.

Squilde Swim

Water even becomes the subversive locus of political contestation where there could have been superficial bonding as Anthony MacMurrough rescues Sir Edward Carson, a historical figure who combines anti-Irishness as ‘leader of the Orangists’ and homophobia as ‘Wilde’s prosecutor’ (ASTB,306). After saving him from drowning at the Forty Foot, Anthony MacMurrough kisses Edward Carson:

Yes he had kissed him, clamped his mouth on that awful mug, lips on rubbery lips he pressed, propelling his tongue inside the portals, kissed for all he was worth. And Carson had staggered away, spitting and spluttering as though the Irish Sea had vomited into his mouth. And MacMurrough had laughed like a schoolboy, and he heard now his aunt was laughing too. (ASTB, 441)

Here, in a parody of reconciliation, not only does Carson owe his life to an Irish gay man but he also suffers his physical assault, and the Irish Sea becomes the harbinger of abhorred Irish queerness ‘vomit[ing] in his mouth’ avenging two ills at once, after almost killing the historical figure altogether. The disgust expressed by Carson is then likened to that of brother Polycarp for the symbolic element of queerness: ‘Brother Polycarp dizzied, and leaning on a wall he smelt the overwhelming stench of the sea.’ (ASTB,169) In Gallagher’s novel, the mother of Georgia’s babysitter Lotte, who used to be a gender-non-conforming child (or at least thinks she is, cutting Lotte’s hair short and dressing her in her twin-brother’s clothes one summer) and also remarks on her dislike of the element: ‘The sea I have never liked. It moves, always changing. Like clouds, but more dangerous. For me, always, I see things underneath. The big fish, or monsters. The children laughed at me for having fear. (...) Water babies they were. Born in Juni. Under the sign of the crab, if one believes such. (BPLH,200) Interestingly, a psychological explanation of homophobia and

⁴⁹ Conner, Marc C., & O’Neill, J. (2007). “‘To Bring All Loves Home’: An Interview with Jamie O’Neill”. *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 11(2), 66–78.

transphobia (or any form of Other, as we will see with the Irish Caliban) likens this attempt at morally elevating your disgust by giving it an ideological explanation as a 'mal de mer', seasickness:

Anything that undermines confidence in the scheme of classification on which people base their lives sickens them as though the very ground on which they stood precipitously dropped away. The vertigo produced by the loss of cognitive orientation is similar to that produced by the loss of physical orientation. Philosophic nausea, certain forms of schizophrenia, moral revulsion, negative experience, the horror of having violated a taboo, and the feeling of having been polluted are all manifestations of this mental *mal de mer*, occasioned by the sudden shipwreck of cognitive orientation which casts one adrift in a world without structure.

People will regard any phenomenon that produces this disorientation as 'disgusting' or 'dirty'. To be so regarded, however, the phenomenon must threaten to destroy not only one of their fundamental cognitive categories but their whole cognitive system.⁵⁰

The ugliness of Edwards Carson is also emphasised in the rescue scene through 'awful mug' and 'rubbery lips' to also reverse the power-dynamic as, during the trial, Carson had quite unnecessarily and judgementally commented on the physical appearance of Oscar Wilde. MacMurrough remembers the court case thus: 'Why, sir, did you mention this boy was ugly? Why, why, why? Until the poetry was beaten from him and he was just a fat blustering man. Squilde. It is the worst case I have ever tried. Two years' hard. Next.' (ASTB,306) Carson also was one of the instigators of the Solemn League and Covenant signed in 1912, with the participation of both the Ulster unionist party and the British Conservative Party, against the 'conspiracy to set up a Home Rule parliament in Ireland.'⁵¹ This, despite the fact that Home Rule itself was largely considered anti-revolutionary compared to the Easter Rising's independentist forces. Here O'Neill seem to have mixed fictional and historical characters in order to propose a humorous avenging moment against Carson, altogether not altering the historical course of 1916 but only making parts of it more visible (queer people too participated in the decisive moments of Irish history) or suggesting alternative piques and endowing historical names with a touch of humanity.

Early on in the novel and in order to see Jim regularly, Doyler proposes a challenge: to swim out to the Muglins and train for it together 'to you find your feet, or your fins I should say, I reckon come Easter next we'd swim out there together, and I'll show you the place...' (ASTB,160) One notes that the 'fin' joke also equates swimming with personal evolution and self-acceptance. The challenge being set for next Easter also pairs the peak of their friendship to the 1916 Rising that most readers would know is coming in a year. Joseph Valente, as I have previously mentioned, has stated that

⁵⁰ Davis, Murray S. *Smut : Erotic Reality/ Obscene Ideology*, 1983 cited in Bornstein, Kate *Gender Outlaw*. New York and London, Routledge, (1994), 72.

⁵¹ Crowley, John et al. *Atlas of the Irish Revolution*. Cork: Cork University Press (2017), 153.

O'Neill thus pairs the coming of age of the two adolescents (through this ritual) with that of Ireland as a nation but I would like to emphasise that the sea is constantly set as the bonding agent. Early on too, the novel distinguishes itself from many other boyhood coming-of-age stories that have become cliché in nationalist literature by setting the homoeroticism as overt instead of covert (and sometimes unconscious). I would like to specify, for instance, that the Libretto (publishing house) French translation has Doyler calling Jim 'mon frère'⁵² instead of any equivalent to 'pal of my heart' ('Cara macree' in phonetic Irish, as Jim remembers page 102), burying the early romantic potential under a strange veneer of incestuous brotherly love. Jim is clearly physically attracted to Doyler from the beginning: 'It awed him that Doyler was not bemeaned by his life as Jim felt bemeaned by his. The lithe and wind-tanned body awed him too, so that he dared only glance at it obliquely. Glance and blink, squeezing his eyes.' (ASTB,159)

Another dynamic could have been intended for Jim, an envy to embrace a bolder type of masculinity that Doyler seems to personify: self-confident, adventurous, and daring but once again O'Neill subverts the hackneyed clichés by also setting Doyler as a figure of brotherly and tender care to his baby sister: 'Give us here little Missy,' he said. The shawl unwound and he took the bundle in his arms.' (ASTB,212) The baby gets his medal out of his shirt, the one he will eventually break in halves so as to give one to Jim, like she's tugging at his heartstrings. He goes on to fuss over the infant's fragile health, wishing to pay for a doctor or milk, even prompting an unlikely saying from his mother: 'Tis the handsome man and him with a child. I did always think that' (ASTB, 215), since child-rearing and caring is overwhelmingly associated with the domestic, feminine sphere. His caring nature also naturally extends to Jim, even at a younger age, for instance when '[h]e put leaves on Jim's leg after he was stung by nettles.' (ASTB,79) and does not simply display the type of protective behaviour more associated with manhood like defending him physically against bullies. It is quite refreshing to find such unusual depictions of man, once again displaying the will of the author to use clichés only to subvert them. To go further, after failing to sleep with another young man, Doyler confesses that he cannot stop thinking about his friend: 'I try to make him go away, for I'm a soldier now and I'm under orders. But he's always there and I'm desperate to hold him. I doubt I'm a man except he's by me.' (ASTB,498) Despite the nonchalant depiction of the character, O'Neill does not let him slip into another easy trope of having him stoically deny his romantic feelings for another, in fact, Doyler goes so far as to define his manhood by his love for Jim, the ultimate reversal of all the homophobic discourse I have recalled in the first chapter that would have his manhood discredited

⁵² O'Neill, Jamie *Deux Garçons, la Mer*. Translated by Chichereau, Carine Paris, Libretto (2005). 83 onward

by that same love. Those feelings are also tied to the sea, as what precedes this confession is: 'Doyler sighed, and with that breath spilt all the tide of his loneliness and fears.' (ASTB,498) As he rushes back to Jim, once again water imbues the urban surroundings, announcing the closeness of the sea: 'It was raining hard when he got to Kingstown.' (ASTB,499)

Before he leaves for Dublin, Doyler and Jim spend every morning swimming and the very act is described as freeing: 'It's different in the sea, don't ask me why, but you don't find the same anywhere else. There's a freedom I can't explain, like your troubles was left in your pile of clothes. There's how many waves to wash you, sure they wash right through your head.' (ASTB,141) Aside from this vague feeling of freedom (akin to 'A lazy freedom which you don't really know what to do with' (ASTB,208) evoked by MacMurrough several times) and the hint that the two young men will be swimming in the nude, there is a certain reluctance to describe much of the interaction of bodies in water. Most of the staring/touching seem to occur either on the floating platform they reach, the island or at the Forty Foot once the two young men are outside of the water: 'Doyler had no shyness at all. (...) Jim liked to watch him then, when the morning light hazed about him, fuzzing with gold the hairs of his outline. (...) It seemed a glorious place in the morning, an extraordinary grace to be allowed there, where man and nature mixed and lost each other, one in the other like the land in the sea.' (ASTB,233) The focus here is set on the afterglow of the swim once the effort is overcome and, despite the lack of possibility for closeness due to the public nature of the Forty Foot, Jim already notices Doyler's shapes. The morning light wraps the other young man, signalling the near-divine idealisation of first love. There is also a suggestion that the land(scape) of Ireland and Doyler are blending in Jim's mind, early hint of his future love-fuelled nationalism. As an aside, it is interesting to note that Anthony MacMurrough bonds with Jim over his teaching him to swim at the Kingston baths (inside) a more controlled or domesticated form of water, materialising Anthony MacMurrough's class (who can afford the bath's fee) unlike the chaotic, wild sea that seems to better embody Doyler.

Pen's quiet rebellion

As was established in the first chapter, the scale of *Hood* by Emma Donoghue, is much different from O'Neill's *At Swim* where the two young men bond near the 'coming of age' of Ireland, on the brink of a Rising of epic (local) proportions, or at least one that gathered the momentum for Irish independence in its consequences. By opposition, the two women are bound by the domestic space, subverted by their unofficial partnership and 'quietly rebellious' (Hood,60) Where Jim and Doyler

enjoy public swims at the Forty Foot over just one year, Pen and Cara share thirteen years' worth of baths in the secrecy of the Wall household:

I am leaning back against the enamel, my flesh a wet padding for the bath. My left hand is skewed under the weight of a book; the fingers strain to keep the pages open and the hard corner off Cara's freckled shoulder. She is lying back against my breasts, her head weighing on the skin below my neck which is beginning to soften as I near my thirties. Her hair, darkened to a peat by the water, lies in chilly strands across the dip of my collarbone. She is drifting, snoozing, rising and falling as I breathe. Every now and then I reach for a bigger breath and she rises an inch through the steaming water. ... She gives a little shiver and rears up with a splash, leaning forwards to turn on the hot tap. I take advantage of this pause to shift my position, lifting a bit of skin that was stuck to the back of the bath. I slide down a bit lower in the water. The tap runs cold under Cara's fingers at first – she hisses disapprovingly – then it starts to steam and she lies back, her head on the expanse of belly, water covering her ears. Tentacles of hair steam out behind her. ...

I reach behind me for the glass jug, scoop up warm water and rinse her with it. The suds flee to cling to where the water edges our bodies. I raise the jug and douse her from a height, the water falling harder, its stream twisting like that waterfall in Wicklow we climbed once. ...

In the early days, perhaps in our first few hundred baths, we used to talk. Nowadays, there is no need. (Hood,124-6)

Water in the two women's intimacy seems to replace words, as they sometimes seem to have difficulties communicating and put an end to their arguments: 'water lapping all language away.' (Hood,63) In fact, they seem to bond at a more physical level (their moments of intimacy, compared to those shared by Cara with other lovers are described as more fulfilling) while constantly disagreeing on values, the nature of their relationship (open or monogamous) or of their queerness (Cara takes a more militant stance while Pen is content in the closet). The description of this intimate bath better conveys their comfort and physical familiarity than most of their dialogues which are often quite tense. The weight and tactile sensation of each thing is measured by the description ("against the enamel", "wet padding", "hand skewed under the weight", "hard corner off shoulder", "head weighing", "soften", "chilly," "shivers") their intimacy seems deeply embodied as the two women merge in hot water, Pen's breathing making Cara's body rise and fall like she's breathing for both. The water also serves as a metonymy for the Irish landscape, invoking the 'waterfall of Wicklow' in the privacy of their own home and setting a history of their past exploration together. Amongst the anxiety of hidden grief and prickly conversations between the two, or scenes of discontent, this is one of the rare moments of peace the reader witnesses between them, set in water. Cara, through her fleetingness and constant movement could, like Doyler, be allegorised by water, hence her 'tentacles' of hair also described as 'blood red', a liquid when a reference to 'fire' would have been so easy. In fact, her hair in general is turned liquid by the metaphor used when Pen tries to go see Cara at the mortuary as goes to the wrong slab: 'My first wild thought was that death had drained Cara's blood-red hair to a muddy blonde.' (Hood,25)

Like water that once frozen to snow halts all movement, so Cara cannot escape Pen's grasp anymore (in relation to other lovers, to political work, to other countries) and is forced to cocoon with her girlfriend, so they stay in 'bed for a three-day breakfast. If I closed my eyes now ... there, framed in the small window, was the garden muted with snow, the pear tree dozing under its load, and Cara's hot flank against mine.' (Hood,11) Intimacy again remains bound to the domestic space, this time exacerbated by the weather keeping them indoors and the contrast between the frozen silence and 'Cara's hot flank' also encourages this cosy hibernation. Altogether, Pen, whose point of view dominates the novel, seems to have gotten comfortable in the closet and only her unofficial widowhood wrenches her out of the toxic, and at times claustrophobic, relationship with Cara. The water in *Hood* comes mostly as freshwater, rain and domestic baths or swimming pools rather than the open sea of Doyle, Jim and Anthony MacMurrough.

3. Lover Stratum

I pull Cara's hand away, holding her soaked fingers still. Our bodies are stuck together like the pages of a book left out in the rain. (Hood,213)

Grotesque Ideal

Before I explore this particular topic of bodily fluids and because it is quite graphic, I will briefly introduce notions and theories that will be used to analyse and understand this aspect of the novels and poetry. The aesthetic particularities of each writer (O'Neill, Gallagher, Donoghue, Ní Dhomhnaill) are difficult to grasp and describe but I have touched on the 'absurd' in many dialogues between queer protagonists and a cis-heteronormative society, emphasising the dark humour of it. There is another common use, between the four writers, of the grotesque aesthetic in the description of bodies, the mundanity of everyday life constantly held in tension with the sublime, the ideal, the romantic. Donoghue uses this humoristic tension most often to bring the spiritual aura of Catholicism down to the mundane: '... as we trundled past a shopping centre. Its white-and-blue shrine was positioned beside the bus stop, as if Our Lady was waiting for the 39A.' (Hood,191) but also death: 'I wanted to remember Cara alive and exasperating, not floppy in a box, (Hood,115) and grief: 'If this was grief, it felt more like acute appendicitis than anything else in my experience. (Hood,163)

Jamie O'Neill often uses the contrast between biblical speech and mundane concepts but also deconstructs the epic, poetical throes of sacrificial nationalist rhetoric (be it in its British imperial

colour to draw young men to the trenches of Europe or the Irish independentist cause demanding the blood of its youth for Erin).

Homophobia is expressed in incredibly varied and wide-ranging forms, much like transphobia, and both are often reduced to open hatred and violence towards gay and transpeople, which tends to invisibilise other, more subtle expressions of these trends. These can range from fetishisation to idealisation which remains an act of othering under the thin veneer of acceptance. Thereby depicting gay and lesbian pairings in Irish contemporary literature is a difficult balancing act (other than because of obvious state Catholicism) between public perception of same-sex coupling as alien and the routine reality of relationships. The accent is then put on the mundane, on human frailty and defaults to create full, complicated, ambiguous protagonists and characters, romantic dynamics that escape idealisation or perversion (either end of the spectrum in homophobic perceptions of those relationships). Kathryn Hume describes this as a form of augmented realism⁵³ but the writers go further in this process, broaching on fantasy through the mythologisation of water and the creation of ghosts to enrich their plots and focus, at times, on the bodily experience of characters. Hume argues that the bodily is undermined in our perception of reality since, for her, human consciousness acts as a reducing valve, filtering and omitting sensations sometimes restored to us through fiction: 'To be reminded of the sensations we automatically exclude can be a pleasant gift of the unexpected, even if the sensation is a trivial one.'⁵⁴ Hence why there is such an emphasis on smells, tactile sensation, bleeding teeth, lips getting caught in front teeth, sweat cooling in the summer air, bellies full of ash etc. Yet simple trivial augmentation of mimetic realism sometimes comes dangerously close to veering into the territory of grotesque realism.

I have already broached the subject, but that same depiction of an ambiguous trans character by a cis author raises different questions. The grotesque mundanity, the self-loathing of Georgia in *Beautiful Pictures* if it does humanise the trans character also sounds suspicious coming from outside of the community and has the effect to present transness as anything but a viable option to the reader. I will expand on this ambiguous treatment of Geo throughout the thesis. What O'Neill and Donoghue do for their characters however, is more to pluck them back out of the safe, distant idealisation many cis-hetero people have of gay and lesbian pairings by emphasising the triviality of their everyday life, the humanity of their bodies and parodying the idealisation of these bodies. Therefore, it counters the othering processes I have recalled in the first chapter. This tension

⁵³ Hume, Kathryn *Fantasy and Mimesis : Responses to Reality in Western Literature* London: Methuen (1984)

⁵⁴Ibid, 85.

between two aesthetics, one parodying the other is best displayed in Anthony MacMurrough's description of Jim and Doyler in *At Swim Two Boys*: 'Shit-shoveller and comfort for the troops, *Arcades ambo*.' (ASTB,284) This refers to Doyler's job of emptying septic tanks⁵⁵ from houses as the sewers were not installed in Kingstown/Dun Laoghaire in 1915 and 'comfort for the troops' are the socks that Jim's father knitted for men on the front and that his son brought to the MacMurrough house to be sent on. These mundane appellations for the two young men are then contrasted by the reference to the Arcadian models, the epitome of the sublime. This grotesque or mundane appearance is also 'washed away' by the sea, according to MacMurrough: 'At swim, two boys. And yet not boys but youth itself. Distance detached them, water uniformed them, particularities washed away. Nasal whine, feet that smelt, these were accidents of their mundane selves. The sea proposed an idea, unindividuate, sublime.' (ASTB,262) The sea is then embedded by this quote as a queer ideal, yet one that appears grotesque through heteronormative eyes (Polycarp and Edward Carson) as stench, vomiting, and so on. It could then be argued that the queer idealisation of boys is seen as grotesque by heteronormative onlookers. Hence the water, through the ductility of the metaphor, applies a cure of idealisation where overt homophobes would see ugliness.

To further explore and explain this tension, it is useful to draw on Bakhtin's definition of grotesque realism: 'the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity,'⁵⁶ which can efficiently define the parodic processes employed by O'Neill, Donoghue and, to an extent, Gallagher in their aesthetics. It also gives a starting point about the changing aesthetics. In *Rabelais and his World* Mikhail Bakhtin argues that medieval crass humour was wrongly interpreted:

Images of the body are offered, moreover, in an extremely exaggerated form but inadequately interpreted with moral values of the 19th century, seen as either "gross physiologism," or "rehabilitation of the flesh" characteristic of the Renaissance in reaction against the ascetic Middle Ages or a bourgeois "rehabilitation of the flesh" characteristic of the Re-naissance in reaction against the ascetic Middle Ages.⁵⁷

He then works to reinstate the grotesque to its former, more positive connotation: 'The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed.'⁵⁸ Therefore the body ageing, digesting, eating, consuming becomes a synecdoche for a healthy humanity in osmosis with the cyclical time

⁵⁵ In addition to, I assume, parodying excrement-related homophobic slurs.

⁵⁶ Bakhtin, Mikhail trans. Iswolski, Helen *Rabelais and His World*. Indianapolis, Indiana University Press (1984), 19-20.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

to birth, death, rebirth. In short, it is a very different kind of universal (digestion, birth and death) than the Eurocentric universality enforced on colonies: all bodies are connected to their environment as one body, one world in a tone reminiscent of eco-criticism. Since Bakhtin refers to sexuality (though mostly in its reproductive setting), the overflowing exaggeration of the bodily functions as depicted in grotesque realism also emphasises the interconnectedness of human bodies. This regenerative power of the grotesque is translated in the literary text as abuse and degradation, bringing sacred and serious topics (Greek mythology, biblical epics) down to the lower levels of crass laughter but always with a creative, regenerative intent marked by class: 'Moreover, it is the popular corrective of laughter applied to the narrow-minded seriousness of the spiritual pretence (the absolute lower stratum is always laughing); it is a regenerating and laughing death.'⁵⁹

However, Bakhtin argues that a paradigmatic, aesthetic shift operated around the Renaissance where a more linear, historical vision of time (by opposition to the ever fruitful and decaying cyclical time) took over and with that, strict boundaries were established between the body and its environment (age, birth, digestion all becoming taboos to be contained or hidden) with a brief period where the two aesthetics overlapped and battled in an ambiguous tension:

Two types of imagery reflecting the conception of the world here meet at crossroads; one of them ascends to the folk culture of humor, while the other is the bourgeois conception of the completed atomized being. The conflict of these two contradictory trends in the interpretation of the bodily principle is typical of Renaissance realism. The ever-growing, inexhaustible, ever-laughing principle which uncrowns and renews is combined with its opposite: the petty, inert "material principle" of class society.⁶⁰

And this era defines, according to Bakhtin, Rabelaisian humour, which walks the line between blasphemy and celebration of the spiritual. He then argues that, in current times (so the 1930s for him) the degradation and grotesque have lost most of their positive connotation and have been reduced to the negative with only a slither of its former meaning:

Our "three-storied" oaths or other unprintable expressions degrade the object according to the grotesque method; they send it down to the absolute bodily lower stratum, to the zone of the genital organs, the bodily grave, in order to be destroyed. But almost nothing has remained of the ambivalent meaning whereby they would also be revived; only the bare cynicism and insult have survived. (...) A vague memory of past carnival liberties and carnival truth still slumbers in these modern forms of abuse. (28)

This vague memory of past carnival liberties, it seems, has made it into queer culture in many forms, through drag, camp aesthetics, the likes of John Waters' movies, and re-appears in these examples of contemporary Irish literature as a subversive celebration of the characters' humanity and

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁶⁰ *Ibid* 24

mundanity. The tension between idealisation and grotesque is also found in the language of desire the characters have for one another, Pen has (brief) moments where she describes Cara as a 'dryad', focusing on her beauty and sensuality before getting back to the annoying aspects of her; likewise Anthony MacMurrough, in his desire for both Jim and Doyler, can celebrate their beauty while also perceiving their defaults. If that is not unique to queer relationships, there is still another layer of meaning in expressing this desire in elevated, idealised forms when these desires are perceived as perversions of the heterosexual modes of pairing. And perhaps because these desires have been depicted as grotesque or perverted in history, it expands the boundaries of positive queer aesthetics, as a form of re-appropriation, to a certain extent, but also, when something natural to you is seen as perverted by others (in the case of adult and consensual relationships) then this counter-aesthetic can be mapped onto other elements of desire. Bakhtin argues that grotesque realism focuses on places of opening and penetration, consumption and waste: 'The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world.'⁶¹ Therefore, they connect through these openings with other human bodies too and the novels depict key bonding moments through bodily fluids to transcend the negative connotation of the grotesque, I would argue, and to instil some of the fluidity and flexibility present in the recurring motif of water in the characters relationships.

Sharing fluids

Astrida Neimanis (2017) in her figuration 'bodies of water' (...) argues for an embodied hydrological cycle that imbues all bodies of water into a 'more-than-human hydrocommons' — an intricate system of intake, expulsion, relinquishing and imbibing. As water is taken up and dispelled across bodies, it becomes involved in processes of repetition and cyclicity that make tracing its origins and disseminations impossible.⁶²

Jim and Doyler have met several years before the action of the novel, as they were the only two pupils to get the scholarship to go on to college. Their friendship was starting to bloom before Doyler left for county Clare after a fight with his step-father (Doyler's mother had him before she married Mick Doyle): 'One time he called Jim *cara macree*, which he said was Irish for pal of my heart, and he took a thorn and pricked their palms and smeared their blood together.' (ASTB,79) This exchange, quite clichéd in its depiction of a friendship declaration, is echoed ('smeared' is used again, only the fluid changes) when the two adolescents agree to swim to the Muglins by Easter 1916, yet introduces

⁶¹ Ibid 26

⁶² Rae, Caroline Emily 'Uncanny Waters' *Feminist Review*, vol. 130, 2022, pp. 61–77, 63.

an element of physical desire to queer the cliché: ‘Doyler spat on his hand and Jim did likewise and their palms rubbed the smear. “The crawl it is,” said Doyler and he slipped from the raft. Before he joined him and the sea would wash it away, Jim sniffed his wetting palm. A private smell. Like leather, bodily, raw.’ (ASTB,161) There, on a platform floating in the sea (surrounded by the element) they further emphasise the omnipresence of the element by mixing their spit in their hands, years after mixing their blood. The gesture, ordinarily quite divorced from its intimate connotation, is reinstated as such by Jim sniffing the mix of fluids he has formed with Doyler as something beyond a tool to seal an agreement: ‘a private smell’, something both their bodies have produced mixing together, opening the possibility for the future entanglement of those same bodies (and the mixing of other fluids).

Generally, Doyler is often depicted as spitting in the novel, to either express pleasure or discontent, so much so that Jim ends up unconsciously copying his behaviour when they meet again: ‘His mouth had watered and it surprised him to find he had spat. His spittle pearled in the draining sand.’ (ASTB,98) As a college boy, it is quite out of character for Jim to express himself in the same way as Doyler (though he will also copy his grammatically incorrect speech until Doyler remarks on it) which can have two connotations: one is that Jim has only just barely escaped belonging to the same class as Doyler thanks to Aunt Sawney’s shop being passed onto Mr Mack by his marriage with Estella and he knows that, to the other college boys, he is perceived as being of just as low class as Doyler. Propriety, good behaviour and speech are enforced by Mr Mack who wishes to ‘elevate’ himself and his family socially yet Jim sees through the futility of such attempts and prefers to reconnect with what comes naturally to him (like calling him ‘da’ instead of ‘papa’, something his schoolmates have taunted him for). Yet Jim’s spitting, quoted above, could, again, take on a deeper, desire-oriented meaning of depicting one fluid in place of another, which would highlight the ‘pearled’ consistency of the ‘spittle’. This, like the mixing of spit before, heralds the potential physicality of the young men’s bond.

I now will turn to more explicitly sexual episodes of *At Swim Two Boys* and *Hood*. According to an interview he gave for the *New Hibernia Review*, Jamie O’Neill stated: ‘I sold the rights to *At Swim* when I was about halfway through, and they started saying, you know, “We don’t want any sex,’ (...) So I actually took a loan out of the bank and bought the rights back...’⁶⁴ Therefore the sex scenes must have been important, key moments of development in the relationship of the characters,

⁶⁴ Conner, Marc C., & O’Neill, J. (2007). “To Bring All Loves Home”: An Interview with Jamie O’Neill. *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 11(2), 66–78. 66-67.

enough to warrant a close-reading of some. There is no indication that the publishers banned sex scenes from O'Neill's novel specifically because they were aware of the gay love story at the centre of the project or if that was a general rule. This might be a more politically charged re-appropriation by the author of his manuscript to gain the freedom to bolster representation of non-heteronormative sex in mainstream (as the book sold well) contemporary literature.

The exchange and interaction of fluids also functions to offset the power imbalance of the early relationship between Anthony MacMurrough and Doyler, corrupted by the payment by a rich man for the sexual favours of a young man from the working class. Yet Doyler seems determined to use these monetised encounters to explore his own sexuality, by-passing the presence of MacMurrough altogether in certain moments. This recollection intervenes shortly before the sex scene that was analysed in the first chapter, where a traumatised Anthony MacMurrough still disturbingly calls Doyler 'the boy':

'Just at one point, the boy had pushed him away and gone down himself between MacMurrough's legs. There was a speculative look on his face while he contemplated his purpose. He closed his eyes and brought the shaft to his lips (...) Not a perfect pleasure because MacMurrough had a suspicion of authority undermined. The boy flushed when he opened his eyes and saw he was watched, as though to have forgotten there was company present. (...) But proportion was duly returned when MacMurrough pressed his hand on the boy's head and forced his measure upon him. Then he fetched in the boy's mouth and prettily it dribbled till the boy swallowed, popping his apple. 'Gluggary,' said he, 'like egg gone off.' That had made MacMurrough laugh. (...) his gameness was amusing and his smile beguiled that smelt of MacMurrough's comings. (ASTB,178-9)

Doyler's sexual curiosity and exploration comes across as he takes the initiative, even manipulating Anthony MacMurrough physically (pushed him away) to get to the parts he wants to explore. The aristocrat is also reduced to sexually connoted body parts, even if he is still protected by his title and illustrious name, ('between MacMurrough's legs/shaft') to the point where Doyler disconnects the body parts he enjoys from the person he dislikes: 'he had forgotten there was company present'. This inscribes MacMurrough's body in the literary close-up technique focusing on single sexualised body parts typical of fetishization⁶⁵ according to Laura Mulvey's essay on *The Male Gaze*, here applied to another male body⁶⁶. Even though the sexual exchange is narrated from Anthony MacMurrough's point of view, Doyler has 'a speculative look' and 'contemplates', which establishes him as the subject of desire. Even when he closes his eyes, it seems to focus more on his sexual experience while excluding MacMurrough from the moment.

⁶⁵ Mulvey, Linda 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', Oxford Journals, vol. 16, n^o 3 p. 6–18 (1975)

⁶⁶ Mulvey established that the fetishistic scopophilia is satisfied in film by the fragmentation of the female body via close-ups, transforming woman into the perfect object.

It is worth quoting at length because a power-struggle (authority undermined/proportion returned) is taking place during this interaction that is only suspended once the fluid had passed from one body to another. On one level, this fluid seals Anthony MacMurrough's sexual domination of Doyler, yet this conquest is completely undermined by the young man mundanely commenting on the taste and consistency of Anthony MacMurrough's semen, instantly reversing the object-subject hierarchy of the sexual exchange. In fact, Scrotes, one of the multiple voices in Anthony MacMurrough's head, comments on the impossibility of dominating Doyler: 'For you know there can be no power over him who freely gives what another would take.' (ASTB,188) The tension and power-struggle are also defused by the act of grotesque (because inherently tied to the body and its production) laughter, as Anthony MacMurrough is ultimately amused by the experience.

In another such passing of fluids, the two adolescents increase their bond by imagining a future together, Jim and Doyler becoming teachers, having a barren house together and getting used to each other's presence:

'Listen to me. When you'd touch me, I won't be jumping, I won't be startled, won't hardly show if I felt it even.'

'What about it?'

'I'm just thinking that would be pleasant. To be reading, say, out of a book, and you to come up and touch me – my neck, say, or my knee – and I'd carry on reading, I might let a smile, no more, wouldn't lose my place on the page. It would be pleasant to come to that. We'd come so close, do you see, that I wouldn't be surprised out of myself everytime you touched. (ASTB, 583)

Yet just when Jim tries to imagine the familiarity of touch, Doyler performs fellatio on him to remind him they have much more to explore before getting to that point. This intimate moment links not only Jim and Doyler but also Anthony MacMurrough (again, more akin to a third lover than a mentor figure) and the whole of Ireland on the brink of the Easter Rising: 'He didn't need to ask where Doyler had learnt this. In this same bed – oh my gosh. The love he felt was extraordinary. The sense of its power astounded him. That all this should happen, and then Ireland to rise! That he should not be separated from any he loved. He felt humbled and a little awed.' (ASTB,583) Here, the mix of fluids recalls the original exchange of blood and spit, then what happened on the island with increasing stakes and the strengthening of the bond between the two. As it is the last intimate moment they share before the death of Doyler, it also functions as the peak of their relationship, this sexual moment freed from the heavy symbolism and pressure of the Muglins and set in the imagined familiarity they could develop in a future together, this is as close to a routine or a mundane moment of intimacy they will get. As the previous exchanges of bodily fluids have sealed their friendship, then the challenge of the swim, then the achievement of it, this one exchange seals the love they

briefly share, indeed, love being described as yet another fluid: 'a great emulsive flow of love'. (ASTB,508)

Because of their link to life and death, the bodily fluids (while flowing proving life, once stopped heralding death) are like inner waters of the characters and, to emphasise their importance in the flow between bodies and the life/death cycle it imbues, I will draw again from Gaston Bachelard:

One cannot bathe twice in the same river because already, in his inmost recesses, the human being shares the destiny of water. Water is truly the transitory element. It is the essential, ontological metamorphosis between fire and earth. A being dedicated to water is a being in flux. He dies every minute; something of his substance is constantly falling away.⁶⁷

This effectively completes the grotesque realism theory as the cyclical nature of bodies, in birth and death and in their consumption has the same pattern as water in constant movement. In the two main pairings (by two or three) present in the corpus, Cara and Doyler, as we have established, both fleeting, restless and closer related to water, both die in the novels by Donoghue and O'Neill. They are both beings in flux, in this ongoing process of dying. *Hood* opens on Cara's death and only keeps her alive through flashbacks, maintaining her in that perpetual dying process, each memory where she is alive overlaps with the present tense of the narrative where she is dead. This process is actually further muddled by the constant time slippage as all the memories are narrated in present tense while the 'present' is in narrative simple past, obscuring the temporality of Cara's life and death to trap her in a grotesque-realism-like cycle.

Meanwhile, *At Swim Two Boys* is coursing towards Doyler's death (and the Rising) and closes on it, therefore the restless character is also a transitory element. Doyler, in the excerpts analysed above, receives, mixes and gives bodily fluids thereby leaving something of his fleeting essence with Anthony MacMurrough and Jim after his death without being tied to heteronormative modes of reproductive sexuality like Gordie, Jim's brother, who dies after impregnating Nancy and leaving little Estella behind. The trio, by opposition, is defined in queer temporality as 'a moment', 'a persistent present (...) at once indefinite and virtual but also forceful, resilient, and undeniable.'⁶⁸ Furthermore, at least in the sharing of semen, the trio also divorces this particular bodily fluid from 'reproductive and familial time' to utilise it in its fleeting, moment-based queer time for its sole sexual value.

Cara leaves traces of bodily fluids after her death, as Pen finds a dirty piece of underclothing behind the bed: 'A faint smile of yellow marked the tired cotton', a 'mock[ing]' (Hood,162) trace of her once

⁶⁷ Bachelard, Gaston Trans. Farrell, Edith *Water and Dreams An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*. Dallas: The Pegasus Foundation(1983) 6.

⁶⁸ Halberstam, Jack *In a Queer Time and Space* New York University press (2005), 11.

alive and functioning body. The intimate bond between the women is also expressed in their comparing it in their production:

It was Cara who taught me to love the body's infinitely varied soda fountain. She used to nuzzle under my breasts after a long day's work, and sample the back of my ears with her tongue. Her own liquors were so faint – she faded off my fingers as fast as they dried – that she envied mine. She liked to see my clothes stick to me in summer; she used to trace the patterns of salt water made... (Hood,190)

More obviously redolent of the sea, the 'salt water' they share and consume off each other links their sexuality to food and drink in a blurring of bodily needs and functions, the reference to the emission of body fluids as a 'varied soda fountain' or 'liquors' also invoking the intoxicating nature of this consumption, its addictive nature.

Cara has often shared with Penelope another bodily fluid also closely related to life while at the same time celebrating the marked absence of pregnancy and signalling the absence of reproductive sex: menstrual blood. Furthermore, this display of queer bonding over bodily fluids outside of reproductive sex is especially subversive in Ireland, a country so marked by the catholic injunction to sex as a simple means of reproduction and an island surrounded by seawater and imbued with rainwater, coursing with fluid, like the bodies of the characters. Therefore, the two women in *Hood* also bond over shared bodily fluids, although, since their relationship extends longer in time, they have time to build up to it, get used to it and then have to renounce it for safety reasons.

The development of sexualised menstrual blood consumption is foreshadowed in the peach juice, shared in another bath, the water element permeating the environment around and in the two bodies: 'I was briefly troubled by a memory of a picnic bath I'd shared with Cara a summer or two ago; a peach had fallen in and bobbed along beside us, cooking slowly, until I'd wiped it on the towel and bit in, spilling the hot juice, and Cara had leaned over to lick the drops from my throat. (Hood,253) The licking of fruit juice off another's body echoes *The Goblin Market* by Christina Rossetti. In this poem-folk tale, two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, hear the call of the goblin-men selling their fruits, the whole language ripe with sexual undertones and one of the sisters caves in and goes to 'buy' the fruits, paying with a lock of hair and absorbing copious amounts of fruit juice. She then becomes dependent on the goblin-fruit juice and withers away in withdrawal when the goblin men disappear, leaving her craving. Yet they re-appear to lure in the other sister, who has never given in to eating their fruits but will do it to save her sister. She buys the fruits without eating them, even when the goblin-men force the fruits into her mouth, thereby pressing the juice all over her and, when she finally gets home, she lets her sister lick the fruit juice off her to cure the withdrawal:

...Hug me,

kiss me, suck my juices
Squeez'd from goblin fruits for you,
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
Eat me, drink me, love me;
Laura, make much of me;
For your sake I have braved the glen
And had to do with goblin merchant men.⁶⁹

After consuming it off the other girl's body instead of from the fruit directly, she is cured and goes back to being a happy child and a loving sister. Thereby this particular consumption of juice can be interpreted like a curing of Cara, who, in the beginning of her relationship with Pen, thought it was just a phase and left her to date boys. These heterosexual relationships do not seem to have been particularly successful though, as she always goes back to women and to Pen especially. She eventually seems to have given up on her heterosexual/bisexual phase, maybe exemplifying the previously mentioned notion of compulsory heterosexuality. By this logic, it would be possible to interpret the fruit juice scene possible as the curing of Cara from the (goblin) men. The memory of the 'picnic bath' comes back to Penelope shortly after she realises she has got her menses, thus linking the abandoning of reproductive heterosexuality for the long-term sexualisation and consumption of menstrual blood, antithetical to fruit juice.

The sharing of blood is a practice the two women share in their early years, before they become aware of the AIDS-related risks for women. This new awareness then reduces menstrual blood to a vehicle for disease they now need to avoid. As the trio of *At Swim Two Boys* evolves in 1915-16 in the pre-AIDS era, it is important to note that semen and blood exchanges do not carry the same meaning and that casual sex with other characters of the novel are completely devoid of threat. Indeed, O'Neill does not mention any other sexually transmissible diseases that could otherwise threaten the trio's fictional explorations. But *Hood* is set in 1992, when the AIDS epidemic was known in Ireland and lesbian circles despite 'how little scientists had bothered to discover about woman-to-woman transmission. Instead of barrier methods ... we agreed to give up the taste of blood. For a while Cara sulked, like a vampire denied her prey. (Hood,257) As lesbian vampires (like Carmilla⁷⁰ a trope actually first found in Anglo-Irish literature) are mostly used in literature written by men for titillation purposes, this is an interesting re-appropriation of the trope for a practice which, I would argue, has been a huge oversight for male writers fetishising female vampiric sexuality. The intimate scene that best expresses the importance of the practice for the two women occurs after they have decided to give it up, which exacerbates the craving:

⁶⁹ Rossetti, Christina *Complete Poems* London, Penguin Books (2001) 17

⁷⁰ Le Fanu, Shéridan *Carmilla* 1872 London, PushkinPress (2021)

The drop glints in her curls like a hidden ruby. (...) I want to arch my neck and take the drop between my lips like nectar. (...) The delicate folds will spread wide as I shut my eyes and burrow in the red; they will keep my whole face warm. I want to take Cara into my mouth so that no danger can find her, no monster can terrorise her, where there is no lack or draught or hollow, nothing but heat and pressure and the safety of knowing that every drop of you is wanted. (Hood,258)

If grotesque aesthetics are used to celebrate the cyclical renewal of human bodies and humanity in general, then menstrual blood is encompassed in its sphere. Yet, as I have recalled, these aesthetics have taken on a mostly negative connotation, with only fleeting, carnivalesque memories of their joyful nature. Through these moments of intimacy between queer bodies, it transpires that bodily fluids, that would be encompassed within the sphere of the grotesque, the overflowing of bodies that has had to be contained since the Renaissance shift in perspective, are reconnected, albeit briefly, to their former meaning. Moreover, 'every drop' of Cara, who seems to be closely linked to the water in the novel, is also accepted by her partner. Donoghue masterfully navigates the tension between menstrual blood being famously stigmatised⁷¹ and lesbian and female bi-sexuality being fetishised⁷² by straight men (while gay and male bi-sexuality is increasingly sexualised by straight women⁷³) to depict a type of practice that defies fetishization, leaving only a genuine intimate moment between the two characters that no voyeurism can encroach on or drain meaning from by recuperating it for sexual gratification. At the core is Cara's life essence being transmitted to, or at least wanted by, her lover before she dies prematurely. In fact, the interruption of her flow is put in contrast with that, still ongoing, of Penelope, as a lifeforce and a cycle that continues uninterrupted despite the death of her intimate partner:

How many months and years did I have to bleed on my own now? How many spoonfuls of blood could the body lose before the river of it would sweep me up to Cara, before I felt her mouth on me again? I shut my eyes tight, heaved on to my side and composed myself for sleep. I was throbbing; it shook the bed. I was more alive than I could bear. (Hood,259)

The shared consumption of blood is implied in the 'spoonful' measurement of the time they will spend apart. This sharing of fluids and bonding in water emphasises the interconnectedness of those queer bodies and their alternative modes of sexuality and pairing. It also highlights the fleeting temporality of their bonds, and even, since both novels treat the grief of a loved one, the limited temporality of their lives that lends its structure to the novels. Yet water also reveals or releases parts of identity that are suppressed, allowing the bonds to strengthen.

⁷¹ Van Lonkhuijzen, Renske Mirjam 'The Stigma Surrounding Menstruation: Attitudes and Practices Regarding Menstruation and Sexual Activity During Menstruation' *Women's reproductive health* 1- 21 pp 2329-3691

⁷² When researching a sociology article to back this up, I got porn websites suggestions within the third page of results which actually proves the point...

⁷³ Often in the form of Slash or shipping fanfiction with graphic sexual depiction, see an *Archive of Our Own* <https://www.themarysue.com/fetishizing-slash/>

II.2 Reveal/Release

The idea that water reveals a ‘deeper nature’ or ‘heredity’ (dúchas) had been recognised by Ní Dhomhnaill as a risk of essentialism. It also conceals the constructed notion of ‘nature’ by opposition to ‘culture’ in a binary that often gets muddled through its representation through water, as Stefan Helmreich summarises:

Water oscillates between natural and cultural substance, its putative materiality masking the fact that its fluidity is a rhetorical effect of how we think about ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ in the first place. Water as nature appears as both potentiality of form and uncontainable flux; it moves faster than culture, with culture often imagined in a land-based idiom grounded in the culture concept’s origins in European practices and theories of agriculture and cultivation. (...) Water as nature appears as that flowing substance that culture may be mobilised to channel – think of canal locks, dams, and irrigation networks. Water as culture, meanwhile can materialise as a medium of pleasure, sustenance, travel, poison, and disaster.⁷⁵

Water therefore already confuses the binary by standing for both culture and nature. Helmreich then argues that it can be utilised to rethink the nature-culture binary yet in most of the corpus, the sense of this binary comes across as being maintained to convey more simply a discussion around complicated, intersectional identities. I will work on deconstructing both the idea of nature and identity at a later stage (III.3.2), but for now I would like to focus on how the notion is wielded in association with the image of a fluid element, and how it can be used to blend facets of constructed identities. The particular choice of water and water creatures to represent otherness in Irish (Celtic) contemporary literature partially stems from the role of merfolk in folktales:

In his detailed study of Gaelic Fairy Folk written in 1691, the Reverend Thomas Kirk refers to the mystic spirits of the sea as ‘the subterranean people’ and ‘the abstruse people’. Many stories of the sea are told that refer to these creatures simply as ‘them’.

‘They’ fish just like us.

‘They’ have animals just like us.

‘They’ carry out daily chores just as we do...⁷⁶

As an unseen othered folk within an othered nation, Irish folklore already channelled the feeling of exclusion and marginalisation by creating a sub-other, a ‘them’ to oppose and build up their ‘us’ and translate the rising threat of colonisation. Yet Irishfolk use this figure of the other as an alternative way to treat marginalised populations, offering a counter-example to their colonial domination. Indeed, in those stories, there is more curiosity and love for this particular form of ‘other’, as many

⁷⁵ Helmreich, Stefan “Nature/Culture/Seawater.” *American Anthropologist*, vol. 113, no. 1, 2011, pp. 132–44. 132

⁷⁶ Padraic O’Farrell *Folktales of the Irish coast* Cork, Mercier Press (1978) 47.

Irish folk would marry, let their children suckle or exchange children with the merfolk, claiming their legacy while maintaining a shroud of mystery around this subcategory of their population. Projecting this other into the sea is also a telling move, since the vastness and uncharted nature of the element generates an unsettling uncanniness, rife for the production of strange creatures.

Caroline Emily Rae notes:

the affective capacity of the uncanny to destabilise epistemological and ontological certainties, and therefore undermine any notion of anthropocentric mastery implicit in narratives of human/ocean interactions. At its core, 'uncanny water' is concerned with the potential of uncertainty and the inability of humans to fully know or comprehend the ocean.⁷⁷

Furthermore, as we have started to emphasise, all the authors at least flirt with magical realism in their writings, calling onto the old tradition of the sea creature, the water itself being other and the fantastic as a boundary-crashing device, suggesting in the same breath the othering and the overcoming of the boundaries separating 'us' from 'them', as Rosemary Jackson said of Yeats' and Beckett's plays: 'To introduce the fantastic is to replace familiarity, comfort ... with estrangement, unease, the uncanny. It is to introduce dark areas, of something completely other and unseen, the spaces outside the limiting frame of the 'human' and 'real'.'⁷⁸

After exploring the Irish queer bonds through water, it now seems important to analyse the ways the authors use water and the sea as a revealer of identity, or to release guilt in order to accept a deeper 'nature'/dúchas long suppressed. The monstrous aesthetic is then reclaimed and a distinct re-appropriation of Irish legends as figures of queerness permeates the corpus.

1. Half fish Half human

Monstrous mermaids

The presence of merfolk in Irish culture has long been established through their appearance in legends, family crests and claimed ancestry, church bas-reliefs, hagiography (Saint Muirghen/Li Ban)⁷⁹ even if the symbolism evolved from a point of pride and pelagic origin to a figure of dangerous sensual temptation or of conversion of pagan figures, the seal people (selkies), and so on. This legacy, the myths and legends, constitute a raw material that can be reworked with a new voice, and can be personalised to explore collective and individual trauma.

⁷⁷ Rae, Caroline Emily 'Uncanny Waters' *Feminist Review*, vol. 130, 2022, pp. 61–77 62.

⁷⁸ Jackson, Rosemary *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. London, Methuen (1981), 179.

⁷⁹ Higgins, Jim *Irish mermaids : sirens, temptresses and their symbolism in art, architecture and folklore* Galway, Crow's Rock Press (1995)

The mermaid figure as I have suggested in the previous part, is also strongly associated with transness, as a story of metamorphosis, bodily inadequacy and otherness. The British association supporting trans-kids is actually called *Mermaids* and I mentioned Vladimir Luxuria, an Italian trans-activist who has rewritten Hans Christian Andersen's *Little Mermaid* in her book, *La Favole Non Dette* (2009), [The Untold Tales]. Luxuria proposes a modern, decolonial retelling with 'The Mermaid in Cement'. It is a crude, violent tale drenched in pathos but presents the ultimate argument against the constant media depiction of transwomen as perverted serial killers: 'non uccidiamo nessuno, amiamo soltanto!'⁸⁰. Ending with the protagonist's suicide, it replaces the transwoman within the traditional abnegation expected of women in a lot of fairy tales. A sadly realistic⁸¹ retelling, if not a very empowering one, but then the Andersen version was hardly a female empowering tale either, and Luxuria follows the various beats of the Danish tale. A lighter text, *Julian is a Mermaid* (2018) is a short picture book by Jessica Love exploring gender non-conformity in children. Nat Hurley analyses the popularity of mermaids for trans-girls thus: 'The fantasy image allows the child to live beyond the boundaries of her own body, in a gender form recognisable to others, while also permitting to exist in a kind of in-between state'⁸³.

The grotesque depiction of several of the mermaids, Georgia, the *murúcha* is representative of the absurdity of transphobia (PI.1) and scientific racism (PI.2) but another aspect of the ugliness of mermaids can be read as a demythologising attempt by the various authors (Gallagher, Ní Dhomhnaill, Logan, O'Reilly) to re-appropriate the figure of the mermaid while challenging the usual, sexualised depiction of the sea creature. Historically, in Ireland and elsewhere, the figure of the mermaid was appropriated by the Church to signify the dangers of sensual temptation, hence their depiction on several churches like the North and South of the Collegiate Church, the cathedral of Clonfert and Galway, in Kilcooly, Tipperary and Bermingham⁸⁴.

The mermaids were often depicted holding a mirror, the symbol of vanity and narcissism so often attributed to women, a trope described by J. Berger as such: 'You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting "Vanity," thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for you own pleasure.'⁸⁵ That

⁸⁰ [We don't kill anyone, we only love.]' 43

⁸¹ As transphobic radicals love to point out, the community sports a whopping 40% rate of suicide. Rather than considering that this may have to do with the lack of access to medical transition or ambient transphobia, it is often interpreted as proving the pathologic nature of the trans-community.

⁸³ Hurley, Nat 'The Little Transgender Mermaid: A Shape-Shifting Tale' in Reimer, M. et al *Seriality and Texts for Young People* London Palgrave Macmillan (2014) 260

⁸⁴ See Higgins, J. *Irish Mermaids, Op. Cit.*

⁸⁵ Berger, John *Ways of Seeing* [1972] Penguin Modern Classic, London (2008), 51.

is, if any voyeuristic pleasure can be gleaned from the rough stone shapes of the cathedral bas-relief, the point being that the accusations of vanity in women and its allegorisation through the mermaid figure never efficiently conceal a hypocritical loathing for the object of desire. As mentioned, I wish to explore the pan-Celtic interconnectedness of sea-related legends in this part by including a Scottish author and Kirsty Logan's novel *The Gloaming* indeed explores the ambiguously attractive threat of the mermaid figure is summarised thus by one of the protagonists of the novel:

In the whispering dark, Pearl told Mara stories. Mermaids: those sinister, shifting fish-girls who want to sing you to your death. Who want to drown you in salt water. Who have shark-teeth and fingernails like claws. Breasts hard and cold as carved ice, a belt of sharpened shells slung over hips more scales than skin. Forget that. For a woman, there's no living to be made in death and glory. Think instead of pretty little sea-maids. Think sweet smiles and beckoning fingers. Think crowns of starfish and combs of clamshell in hair the colour of childhood.⁸⁶

The two women are discussing the best image to present for their performances as show-mermaids all over the world, having to conform to a prescriptive view of femininity that is childlike and innocent rather than risking any invocation of the threat of the sea creature. The two purposefully divorce their performance from any realism as the aim is to monetise a harmless vision of womanhood in their colourful wigs, costumes and tails, revealing this type of expected femininity for what it is: a commercial, sexualising, artificial masquerade. Pearl⁸⁷ and Mara know full well that 'No one can be a mermaid all the time. Eventually, the show ends, the performers go backstage, the costumes are discarded.'⁸⁸ Despite this excerpt signalling Mara's disillusion towards Pearl's glamour after two years of being in a relationship, it echoes Judith Butler's work on the performance of gender, as 'mermaids' have already been mapped onto general femininity:

Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.⁸⁹

Similarly, the mermaid/femininity is depicted by Kirsty Logan as a costume one can discard, suggesting that gender performativity is generally overcome by the protagonists, even though the pressure of heteronormativity pushes Mara to still consider its theatrical dimension before abandoning them as such since 'with Pearl, she didn't need to be someone else,'⁹⁰ implying this

⁸⁶ Logan, Kirsty *The Gloaming*. London, Penguin (2018), 136.

⁸⁷ Who can be read as a transwoman based on that moment: 'She said Pearl's name, the secret name, the one she'd given up long ago and never claimed again. The silence after Mara spoke was sticky and thick', *Ibid.*, 282.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁸⁹ Butler, Judith *Gender Trouble Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London, Routledge (1999), 173.

⁹⁰ Logan, *Op.Cit.* 165.

performance of femininity is not actually part of the protagonist's personality. They suggest further: 'In daylight, everyone gets blackheads. Everyone wakes up grumpy. Everyone has to pay their taxes and keep receipts in chronological order to send to the accountant.'⁹¹ This deconstruction of both the feminine glamour and the mythical figure of the mermaid, re-inscribing it in the mundane and routine or even the ugly and grotesque (blackheads) is the very tension I try to detect in the aesthetics of the various writers of the corpus.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, for instance, has said in interviews about the *murúcha* that the pain of the mermaid, in Hans Christian Andersen's version of the tale, the stabbing she feels in her feet and legs with every step, was the only realistic part⁹² and therefore she made a point of depicting the physical pain that galls the fish-like creature on land. This play on the mythical and the mundane actually recalls a sort of 'demythologising business', as defined by Angela Carter: 'I believe that all myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice. I'm in the demythologising business. Myths ... are extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree.'⁹³ In that sense, I would argue that feminist authors first had to re-appropriate the figure of the mermaid and demystify it by focusing on the bodily grotesque, the ugliness of it before using the creature to explore womanhood. This process of reinstating what is essentially a sexualised object within a paradoxically humanised mundanity can be found in Gallaghers' depiction of Georgia: 'I still had to shave, so one night there was stubble on my breasts when he'd put his face there. Eugh, he'd said, jerking his head away.' (BPLH,322) In Solomon's depiction of Yetu: 'She'd been withering away, and now there was little left of her but the base amounts of outer fat she needed to keep warm in the ocean's deepest waters.'⁹⁴in Ní Dhomhnaill's depiction of the merfolk: 'The women wear heavy neck-ornaments...Anything at all that hides the signs of their gills...the uvula/Is displaced in the vast majority of them.' (Mermaid,26-27) and even, reaching out to another Irish poet, Caitríona O'Reilly, and her collection *Sea Cabinet* in which she fully deconstructs the sexualised mermaid by describing a stuffed mermaid in the eponymous cabinet as such:

Her post-mortem hair and her terrible face...
She has the head and shrivelled tits of a monkey,
the green glass eyes of a porcelain doll, a pair
of praying mantis hands, and fishy lips

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 248.

⁹² Póirtéir, Cathal RTÉ radio 1 Doc Archive "Mermaids out of Water- Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill agus an Mhuruch" 26th of March 2003.

⁹³ Carter, Angela 'Notes from the Front Line' *Shaking a Leg* London, Penguin Books (1998), 37.

⁹⁴ Solomon, R. *Deep Op.Cit.* 3

open to reveal her sea-cave mouth, her rare
ivory mermaid-teeth...'⁹⁵

The disjointed structure, all in frustrating enjambed lines that never conclude, matches the disquieting qualifiers for each body part of the stuffed mermaid either negatively associated (“of a monkey”, “of a porcelain doll”, “of praying mantis”) or pejorative (“post-mortem”, “terrible”, “shrivelled”, “fishy”) and acts as a parody and counterpoint to many loving descriptions of women in romantic poetry. O’Reilly also refers to previous sensual depictions of mermaids by Herbert Draper, a British Victorian painter, or the tales of selkies turning into beautiful women to be abducted and forcefully impregnated by human men. Indeed, if contemporary authors and poets are to rework the image of the mermaid, there is a heavy patriarchal past to wrench their creatures from.

To circle back to the demythologising project of Angela Carter, it matched these authors’ endeavours by restoring the same mundane humanity to sexualised, mythified figures of women: the sex worker, the racialised black woman, the cabaret dancers get wrenched back from the men who described them (like Jeanne Duval⁹⁶) and given a voice, a realistic body with all its human frailty (farting, pissing, ageing) to finally tear those women from their sexualised, mystified pedestal and acquire a cheeky, ambiguous, complicated personality. I would argue that the authors all undertake this work before using old folklore to explore deeper collective and personal trauma. Angela Carter also wielded the notion of ‘decolonialising’: ‘it is so enormously important for women to write fiction as women - it is part of the slow process of decolonialising our language and our basic habits of thought.’⁹⁷ The phrase ‘decolonising the mind’ is usually attributed to decolonial thinker Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o in his 1998 book that focuses on the neo-colonial stigmata of French, English and Portuguese-speaking African countries whose writers have continued to write in the language of the coloniser and uphold their literary canon. It describes the damages done to the multiplicity of African cultures by the colonial education system and the forced teaching of their language: ‘The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation.’⁹⁸ This book is actually his farewell to the English language as he states: ‘From now on it is Gikuyu and Kiswahili all the way.’⁹⁹

⁹⁵ O’Reilly, Caitríona *The Sea Cabinet*. Hexam, Bloodaxe Books (2006) 46

⁹⁶ Carter, Angela *Black Venus* London, Chatto and Windus (1985).

⁹⁷ Carter, Angela *Shaking a Leg* London, Penguin Classics (1998) 42

⁹⁸ Wa Thiong’o, Ngũgĩ *Decolonising the Mind The Politics of Language in African Literature* Zimbabwe Publishing House, Harare (1998) 9

⁹⁹ *Ibid* xiii

This same notion is wielded by both decolonial and feminist thinkers which shows the same urgency in having to overcome the interiorisation of subaltern group and their indoctrination by the dominant discourse of colonial and patriarchal values. That is not to say that there was an understanding between these political movements, white feminism is famous for ignoring the plight of racialised women and women from decolonised countries¹⁰⁰, they simply used the same notion of having internalised their own subordination. In the specific context of Ireland, feminism and decolonialism are bound thus: ‘Womanhood and Irishness are metaphors for one another. There are resonances of humiliation, oppression, and silence in both of them and I think you can understand one by experiencing the other.’¹⁰¹ And as I have argued, there are links between the feminist, queer and decolonial projects, therefore this incredibly useful notion can be wielded by various marginalised and othered group to deconstruct their inferiorised, othered identities.

In the Irish context for Gallagher, Donoghue, O’Reilly and Ní Dhomhnaill, and to an extent, O’Neill through Nancy and Eva MacMurrough, the novel treatment of female body becomes a site of decolonisation. The added re-appropriation through folklore figures like the mermaid also consolidates this attempt as it puts to the fore the Irish oral tradition while also extricating it from its bourgeois nationalist patriarchal distortions¹⁰².

Indeed, there is also the argument that myths, folklore and tales have to be reclaimed from the nationalist, hyper Christianised versions that played a role in militant fascism. Ní Dhomhnaill champions rewriting the myths as they hold a deep, sacred reality and for her, contemporary writers can change the myth’s ideology. For instance, she advocates that Irish is less patriarchal in its expression, more natural, has a less prudish attitude to the body and sexuality and enables a revision of the trope of a de-sexualised Mother Ireland trope based on the binary concept of womanhood conveyed by Irish Catholicism¹⁰³. Patrick Pearse’s *Mise Éire* (1912), a monument of state Irish poetry, is a good example of such trope:

Mise Éire	I am Ireland:
Sine mé ná an Chailleach Bhéarra	I am older than the Old Hag of Beare.
Mór mo ghlóir:	Great my glory:
Mé a rug Cú Chulainn cróga.	I who bore Cúchulainn the valiant.
Mór mo náir:	Great my shame:
Mo chlann féin a dhíol a máthair.	My own children who sold their mother.
Mór mo phian:	Great my pain:
Bithnaimhde do mo shíorchiapadh.	My irreconcilable enemy who harasses me continually.

¹⁰⁰ Hamad, Ruby *White Tears/Brown Scars: How White Feminism Betrays Women of Colour* London, Trapeze (2020)

¹⁰¹ Boland, Eavan *A kind of scar: The Woman Poet in National Tradition* Dublin, Attic press LIP Pamphlet (1989) 106

¹⁰² *Angela Carter’s Book of Fairy Tales* London, Virago (2005) xiii

¹⁰³ Schrage-Früh, Michaela *Emerging Identities: Myth, Nation and Gender in the Poetry of Eavan Boland, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Medbh McGuckian*. Trier, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier (2004) 99

Mór mo bhrón:
D'éag an dream inar chuireas dóchas.
Mise Éire:
Uaigní mé ná an Chailleach Bhéarra.¹⁰⁴

Great my sorrow:
The crowd in whom I placed my trust has expired.
I am Ireland:
I am lonelier than the Old Hag of Beare.

Rendered into English by Oilibheir Álain Christie.

Typically here, Ireland is personified by a sorrowful ageing mother figure that stands undefended by her children against the (British) enemy. She has birthed a heroic generation like Cuchulainn but the current population of Ireland does not deserve her. This is a common propagandistic guilt-tactic supposed to spur nationalists into action. In fact, there is an easy parallel to make in *At Swim Two Boys* between British propaganda trying to shame¹⁰⁵ young men into joining the army. Jamie O'Neill actually disrupts this trope and argues through his characters that even Patrick Pearse himself did not really believe in it:

'...which is his country? It is scarcely the tired old hag of the songs, nor yet the beautiful woman of the prophecies. No, thought MacMurrough, that is not his Ireland. -See, said Scrotes, his Ireland is on the stage. Yes, there it was in the boys, those gossamer boys who thumped on stage. The soft barbarish Gaelic chanted his love to heaven and earth. By flaming torch the garden told it. A queer music hummed it to the sea. His steadfast gaze from the wings, their glances to him. Here was his Ireland, his drama, his love.' (ASTB,326)

That recasting of Hibernia/Cailleach as 'gossamer boys' participates in the novelist's queering of Irish history (or simply revealing the queerness that was always there). In his collections of short-stories in Irish *Íosagán agus Sgéalta Eile* (1907) and *An Mháthair, agus Sgéalta Eile* (1916), Patrick Pearse focuses mostly on the rebellious sides of boys and reducing women to their mother, this aspect might have inspired this comment by O'Neill through Scrotes.¹⁰⁶ Contemporary authors then tend to draw upon folklore and myths of sea creatures to explore this othering, the ethnic cleansing. The underwater utopias of the *murúcha* (before they come onto the shores that is) and the *wajinru* both posit an ideal, pre-colonial civilisation that has thrived in spite of the affairs of the landed world. It becomes a worthy imaginary place to develop what could have been, what could be in the future. More than a temporary poetic balm to ease the pangs of an enduring colonial wound¹⁰⁷, a 'talk therapy' coming back to the oral and collective nature of their erased culture, Ní Dhomhnaill and Solomon set a course for the collective. Oscar Wilde had this to say about this literary (and political) device: 'A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for

¹⁰⁴ <https://ireland-calling.com/mise-eire/> [last accessed 05/12/2022]

¹⁰⁵ <http://ww1centenary.oucs.ox.ac.uk/material/the-first-world-war-in-posters/> [last accessed 05/12/2022]

¹⁰⁶ Campbell, Joseph, Markey, Anne *Short stories / Patrick Pearse* University College Dublin Press (2009) V

¹⁰⁷ Mignolo, Walter D., Vazquez, Rolando "Introduction to Decolonial Aesthetics: Colonial Wounds, Decolonial Healings." *Social Text Periscope (Web Publication)*, Social Text, 2013, pp. 9–9.

it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias.¹⁰⁸

I have already mentioned the hidden *duchás* of Georgia and the merfolks that emerges through the Irish language in the previous chapter. To expand on the topic, I would like to draw from the corpus again to see how water is utilised as a revealer of suppressed parts of the fictional selves in the protagonists. In *Beautiful Pictures*, Mia Gallagher often describes her protagonist, Georgia, a transwoman, as an 'amphibian'; her connection to mermaids is a recurring theme as she draws the creatures when she is a child and goes so far as to say :

The chance of a male – or for the sake of exactitude, let's say, a person born with XY chromosomes and a penis and testicles – contracting breast cancer is 1 per cent. Low, but if you take genetic mutation into account, possible. Was this the cost of heredity? I'd asked myself. The price of being seen as my mother's daughter? I had laughed at first, those horrible days of my first scare (...) Ironic. A tragic irony. (...) Then I'd got angry, because it was typical, wasn't it? A tranny-tale if ever there was one, the he-she punished by her own body, her desire to be what she's not supposed to be. Just like the Little Mermaid; the price of getting those feet everlasting agony any time she took a step. (BPLH,462)

In this acrid monologue about feeling punished by your body for transitioning, the narrator equates the difficult physical condition of the mermaid with medical transition. It becomes a sacrifice to gain a new life yet the passing from one element to another (water to land/ male to female). In this case, Georgia identifying with the mermaid, a sea creature, is a revealer. A few hints are scattered throughout the novel, but the overt parallel comes for the first time through this excerpt. Prior to that, there is a copious number of references to the fact that Georgia is an amphibian; she draws mermaids when she is a child, is strangely drawn to the Lacoste alligator on the clothes she wears when she tries to 'fit in' before transition, she is referred to as 'androgynous', 'fluid, fishy, powerful' a strong swimmer. She even has, quite explicitly, this conversation with Sonia, her friend (and another transwoman): 'Did you used to like mermaids too? I asked Sonia once... No, she said, eventually. Seahorses. Such delicate little amphibians we are.' (BPLH, 380) The idea of the amphibian also comes up regularly to signify the dichotomy of the body in transition. The heavy symbolism of the Lacoste alligator on clothes is explored as Geo smells her freshly laundered polo shirt, long before she transitions: 'At that moment, the alligator caught my attention. I hadn't noticed it before. I knew it was there, I'd bought the clothes because of it, but I hadn't *seen* it.' (BPLH,8 emphasis in the original) Georgia has bought the clothes from this brand in an effort to 'fit in' as a basic male persona but quickly noticed the symbolic charge of these shirts: 'They were talismans, of sorts.'(BPLH,8) Thus, the reader can quickly infer that her ultimate attempt at

¹⁰⁸ Wilde, Oscar *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* New Lanark, Midpoint Press (2001) 359.

conformity is doomed to failure since these objects display a clear sign of her nonconformity, of the in-between, the amphibian.

The motive of being 'seen' also makes its first appearance here, from the first pages and will be strewn throughout the novel: to be seen will mean for her to be recognised as the woman, the amphibian that she is. She continues: 'I reached my finger. One small step. I closed my eyes and let my finger move along the humps and bumps of the little amphibian's fabric body, his long snout, his single bright eye. Softly I thought to myself, imagining him twitch in his sleep. What if he wakes? I thought. What if he wakes and bites me? Oh, wake alligator wake.' (BPLH,8) The simplest interpretation of this long contemplation of a detail on a garment would be to see the sleeping alligator as the part of femininity in Geo, ready to wake up but whose awakening involves a risk. Moreover, this movement going through the 'humps and bumps' of the small fabric body with the help of the touch is repeated a little further on her own body: 'Out of habit, my hands reached for my belly. It gave way, soft as a marshmallow. I let my palms slide down till they were holding the outer sides of my thighs, the fleshy bits near the hips. That shock, again, of finding things exactly as they were supposed to be.' (BPLH,13) Thus, the same body-exploration takes place on her own amphibian shapes. If the fact that she has transitioned is not yet clear at this moment, it becomes explicit a few lines later: 'I looked in the mirror and the body I was born with looked back at me. The body you helped make, with variations' (BPLH,14). Here, the writer clearly avoids the old cliché of 'a woman born in a man's body', even if the 'variations' are quickly explained:

My belly seemed flatter. Maybe the new diet was working. Or maybe, after all the years, those hormones were finally starting to do their job and shove the fat down to my ass, where it belonged. I squinted; saw a long-legged oblong. Tilted up my chest, sucked in my gut, squinted again; this time, saw a wide-waisted hourglass. Either way, an Amazon. Against my palm, my left breast was small and soft. I couldn't feel any grit, much less a lump. (BPLH,14)

It is interesting to note how much the reader is - despite the narrative distance - supposed to feel with the protagonist: descriptions mobilize all the senses and project them onto Geo's body. Here, the image of the naked woman looking in the mirror does not have the usual voyeuristic connotation, at the service of the male gaze (Laura Mulvey). It is a cold and medical examination. Georgia often treats her body in these distant terms confirming the strangeness of the amphibian. Hedwig Schwall, in her review of *Shift*, the collection of short-story by Mia Gallagher, had also remarked on this method as she argues the author 'systematically foregrounds the more 'immediate' senses such as the olfactory, gustatory and tactile perception, rather than the optical and aural' this uncommon use of the senses then constitutes 'subtle clues to ease the reader into the character's mindset, providing a realist grounding for the magic of their perception. Often

protagonist-narrators are unsettled, drunk, suffering from lack of sleep, a bereavement or a mental condition'¹⁰⁹. Indeed, the absence of distance between the various bodies that form a single 'we' is introduced in the *Startpunkt* (prologue to the novel) which describes people cramped in a tube carriage shortly before its explosion: 'Our hands are damp; our palms prickling. We all have sweaty, prickly palms, even those of us who aren't nervous. [...] We are packed tight but obeying the formalities; our eyes avoid each other, notwithstanding the millimetre-thin membrane between arse and cock, tit and elbow, mouth and forehead. We drink in each other's scent.' (BPLH,2) This oddly sensual interpretation of compulsory closeness in public transports accuses a perceived hypocritical avoidance of gaze when all the other senses are overwhelmed by other people's physical presence, as if the last bastion of dignity and distance remains in the 'eyes avoid[ing] each other'. Yet the author pushes deeper into physical discomfort and multiplies, throughout the book, detailed accounts of the characters' bodily experience. Nothing is spared to the reader, from the bleeding gums after the loss of a tooth and the sinuses that get blocked to the episodes in the toilet and flatulence, forcing the reader into this same uncomfortable physical closeness as the anonymous mass in the tube that opens the novel and invoking the Bakhtinian grotesque again.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, in one of the opening poems of the collection, sets her mermaid in the same medical setting of waking up after surgery. No magic has taken place to give her legs, and the situation is reduced to a common medical procedure which clashes with the fantastic origins of the tale and also could remind a current reader of gender confirming surgeries that occur in the process of medical transition, finding new or changed body parts and getting used to them:

Dhúsigh sí
 agus ní raibh a heireaball éisc ann
 níos mó
 ach istigh sa leaba léi
 bhí an dá rud fada fuar seo.
 Ba dhóigh leat gur gaid mhara iad
 nó slaimicí feola.

'Mar mhagadh atá siad
 ní foláir,
 Oíche na Coda Móire.
 Tá leath na foirne as a meabhair
 le deoch
 is an leath eile acu
 róthugtha do jokeanna.

She awoke
 to find her fishtail
 clean gone
 but in the bed with her
 were two long, cold thingammies.
 You'd have thought they were tangles of kelp
 or collops of ham.

"They're no doubt
 taking the piss,
 it being New Year's Eve.
 Half the staff legless
 with drink
 and the other half
 playing pranks.

¹⁰⁹ Schwall, Hedwig "Review of Shift, by Mia Gallagher". *Review of Irish Studies in Europe* 4 (1):197-99 198 (2021)

Mar sin féin is leor an méid seo,
is do chaith sí an dá rud
amach as an seomra.

Ach seo í an chuid
ná tuigeann sí —
conas a thit sí féin ina ndiaidh
'cocs-um-bo-head'.
Cén bhaint a bhí
ag an dá rud léi
nó cén bhaint a bhí aici
leosan?

An bhanaltra a thug an nod di
is a chuir í i dtreo an eolais —
'Cos í seo atá ceangailte díot
agus ceann eile acu anseo thíos fút.

Cos, cos eile,
a haon, a dó.

Caithfidh tú foghlaim
conas siúl leo.'

Still, this is taking it a bit far."
And with that she hurled
the two thingammies out of the room.

But here's the thing
she still doesn't get—
why she tumbled out after them
'arse-over-tip'
How was she connected
to those two thingammies
and how were they connected
to her?

It was the sister who gave her the wink
and let her know what was what —
"You have one leg attached to you there
and another one underneath that.

One leg, two legs...
A-one and a-two...

Now you have to learn
what they can do."
(Mermaid,34-35)

The new pair of legs that the mermaid does not seem to accept as hers (talking about them as 'rud/things') because they are specifically set to walk on land and the central metaphor of English=land/Irish=water, could be seen as a forced surgery by the coloniser, like an unnatural language forcefully transplanted onto the Irish body¹¹⁰. The dissociation the mermaid feels towards these new body parts was inspired by, according to the poetess, *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* by neurologist Oliver Sacks, to express the equivalence she sees between the loss of language and a 'radical change in body image'¹¹¹. This poem can be put in parallel (cautiously, since the leg surgery does not seem consensual) with the strong emphasis on the surgeries Mia Gallagher's protagonist goes through: 'In the reflection of the unshattered window I saw my face. It was a mask of red (...) I looked like (...) I'd looked in Thailand, after the surgery in 2006, when they'd lowered my hairline and softened my jaw and broken my nose and lifted my eyelids ...' (BPLH,218). She also subtly refers to a vaginoplasty during a reflection on abandoning Latin despite the words having 'tasted different to English; perfect somehow. Even after I gave them up, their taste stayed with me, while their meanings dissolved like atrophying muscle tissue; like the tissue that makes erections, that you have to keep making erections with, even if you don't want to, so that when they turn that

¹¹⁰ Which then makes it more akin to the mutilation intersex babies suffer in infancy at the hands of doctors forcing them in the male-female binary.

¹¹¹ Ní Dhomhnaill, Nuala 'Cé Leis Tú?' *Éire-Ireland* 35(1), 39-78 (2000) 52

part of you inside out, it still works.’ (BPLH,375) The *simile* seems somewhat abrupt and irrelevant and only serves to attract the reader’s attention to the graphic medical transition of the protagonist. Gallagher excessively refers to the protagonist’s private parts: ‘They give you a catheter if you have a penis.’¹¹² (BPLH,220)/ ‘a person born with XY chromosomes and a penis and testicles’ (BPLH,462) and constantly brings up the effects of HRT to emphasise that this particular mermaid is highly medicalised. This tediously problematic depiction, with an over-emphasis on the medically constructed quality of a transwoman’s body can, at times, distract the (at least trans-) reader from the masterful weaving of patterns and motifs in *Beautiful Pictures*.

Either way, both Gallagher and Ní Dhomhnaill could be seen to use the mythical figure of the mermaid in modern settings (the hospital/medical establishments) to reflect the contrast between the Celtic legends that built Irish identity and the neoliberalist aspirations of the country that peaked during the Celtic Tiger, a modernisation project inherited from colonialism. It can also recall the scientific racialisation of Irish bodies through phrenology and general de-humanisation as the medical setting objectifies the characters, reducing them to body parts (tail/legs/privates/jaw/hairline/nose/eyelids). Legends and folklore figures then clash with their surroundings and depict, through the mermaid’s surgeries, an Irish society in transition (imposed or sought). Nat Hurley, however, whose article on transgender little girls’ fondness for and identification with the mermaid figure (so much so it could be added to the arsenal of dysphoria diagnostic tools) I previously mobilised, criticises these reductive narratives (at least in the context of trans identity) thus:

They position the mermaid figure as a story of trans-childhood that corresponds to transsexuality as a wrong-body narrative, a redeployment that often inserts the mermaid within one dominant, highly medicalised story of transsexuality, without taking up the details of the story that fail to fit dominant narratives of gender and their imbrication in global, classed networks of privilege distribution.¹¹³

Alternating with this aesthetic of the grotesque, medicalised body, the ‘amphibian’, the motif of the monster, echoing the idea of the Irish Caliban, appears quickly during a brief glance with an introduction to the notion of ‘Wunderkammer’ in Gallagher’s novel: ‘Glamour. From the old English, meaning magic. I imagined the pile shifting shape, all its chaotic bits organizing themselves into a single form, a hulking patchwork beast that needed the love of its maker to bring it to life. Frankenstein’s sad creation. The mud-doll Golem that the sorcerers of Prague turned into an

¹¹² And yet, interestingly, there is not one mention of the cis-women’s vaginas.

¹¹³ Hurley, Nat ‘The Little Transgender Mermaid: A Shape-Shifting Tale’ in Reimer, M. et al. *Seriality and Texts for Young People*. London: Palgrave Macmillan (2014), 262.

avenging demon' (BPLH,10) This hotchpotch of references (which will recur throughout the novel) suggests the transformation of 'lost little girl Georgie' (BPLH,13) whom Lotte, her baby-sitter, calls 'Monster' (BPLH,192), her classmates see as 'Hulk' (BPLH, 412), and whose imaginary friend will be described as a 'golem' (BPLH,444). Geo's adolescence is narrated quickly, in a single sentence, in a flashback 'I felt dull and stupid, like I hadn't in ages - weeks, months, years. Worse than in secondary school when everything, including my voice, began to betray me, dropping and spouting and spurting ...' (BPLH,13). Several parallels can be drawn here: the "hulking patchwork beast" could be Georgie's feelings during her early years of puberty. She embodies, in a sense, 'Frankenstein's sad creation', because like Victor Frankenstein, David Madden, Georgia's father, abandoned her as a child. The emotions attached to these creatures (Mermaid, Chimera, Hulk, all names of the chapters concerning Georgie's childhood) are mostly pejorative: sadness, revenge, chaos and the need for love, all mixed up in this magical aura of glamour. The whole image is charged with an almost Lovecraftian aura, a monstrous sea creature from the abyss, incomprehensible and disturbing. The trans woman is thus treated in Gallagher's writing via either the grotesque or the fantastic even gothic aesthetic.

The fluidity of human bodies is also explored at a chemical level. Georgia's father, David, wonders about this: 'Is this how I've been made? How Georgie will be? Shaped by time, bit by slow bit, so nobody can tell anymore where the start is?' (BPLH,89) The possibility of change is set up thus: 'It was something that fascinated him as a schoolboy, how tiny adjustments in internal structure can lead to massive changes on the outside. Tweak the molecules in an apple, and it becomes a banana. (...) Mess away with a person's chemistry and...' (BPLH,63) This theme of change, originally introduced because the chemo treatment changes (Geo's mother) Aisling's scent is prolonged as the Hormone Replacement Therapy slowly changes Geo's body: 'Tiny changes in chemistry; big changes on the outside.' (BPLH,68) Just like bodies, the land too can change, it is in perpetual motion. Change, infinitely slow, is depicted at an extremely small (chemical) scale and paralleled to the extremely large (geological) scale. Applied to the whole of Ireland, we will see what it entails. Georgia, often likened to a mermaid, can be read as an allegory for the Irish isle (she has a protestant mother and catholic father) and her link to the Irish language is established through her father, an Irish-speaker, who abandons her as a child and later (implicitly) becomes fully estranged from her when she comes out as transgender. Mia Gallagher thus explores Georgia's childhood and her fascination with mermaids and other amphibians as an early sign of the protagonist's trans-identity. Similarly, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill uses the merfolks' exile on land as a

metaphor for the loss of the Irish language and forced assimilation in *The Fifty-Minute Mermaid*. This re-purposing of tales by both authors follows in the footsteps of endless re-telling and re-inventing inherent to oral literature. Moreover, to an extent, they preserve the orality of the original stories surrounding the merfolk through various literary techniques examined in part II.1.1, linking this orality to a sort of talk-therapy for their protagonists' therapeutic use.

Mermen

As I have mentioned Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989) in the introduction of the thesis, it seems fair to evoke a more recent addition to the studio's pieces. Enrico Casarosa's *Luca* came out in 2021 and has actually been compared¹¹⁴ to Tom Moore's *Wolfwalkers* as it focuses on the blooming friendship and possible romance between children with a common message of self-acceptance. The potential (future) coupling of Luca and Alberto or Robyn and Mebh, is not actually necessary to depict a queer experience : the idea of reaching out to an othered deeper nature and facing parental and societal resistance while doing so is close enough to coming out and queer self-discovery. Because of the setting in Italy, the Pixar movie has also been interpreted as a loosely similar PG 13 version¹¹⁵ of Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me By Your Name* (2017) a more mature love-story set in Italy. The colonialist subtext also vanishes in *Luca* as the two protagonists choose to go on land on their own to discover land-culture (in a muddled metaphor that has this exploration meeting parental disapproval while the general existence of sea-monsters hiding their identities meets land-societal disapproval). One interesting choice in the design of the merfolk is that they sport both a tail and a pair of legs making them amphibians without any magical intervention, the change occurring upon their drying up being purely aesthetic. It seems, therefore, that the queer (othered in general) sea-monster metaphor is spreading to more mainstream media.

William Keohane, by opposition, proposes the sea as a site revelation, of finding your true nature and *duchás* through the fluidity of identity, like one of Ní Dhomhnaill's *murúcha* that would choose to return to their original element:

I know there is another life. I've heard about the ones who leave, who venture into unknown space and claim new words, but I can't understand how they could choose to live that way. I think I might even hate them. For leaving. It isn't fair. Why do they get to escape? Why can't they stay here, safe in pain, like me? It's cold and I don't want to be here anymore. (...) the sea that just keeps going, on and on, until you come ashore on another land, beyond. I cannot see it, but it's there. However many miles away. Maybe I could swim that far. Maybe I could make it.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/luca-wolfwalkers-animated-childrens-films-explore-queerness> [last accessed 01/02/23]

¹¹⁵ <https://www.theringer.com/movies/2021/6/18/22539045/luca-pixar-call-me-by-your-name-similarities> [last accessed 01/02/23]

¹¹⁶ Keohane, William 'Three Strands'. *The Stinging Fly* Issue 47/Volume Two, Winter 2022-23, 37.

Here, like a merman high and dry/a thiomag, William suffers from being trapped in this place, wrongly socialised as female (after one of his classmates comments on his hair: ‘She keeps going, though, she wants me to know how lucky I am, how many of the girls spend hours trying to recreate my type of curls, and each day at school, I’ve tied them up and kept them hidden’¹¹⁷) and envies those who have departed/transitioned. The shore in itself becomes a place of revelation according to Alain Corbin:

The romantic creators, the first ones to hold a coherent discourse about the sea, have powerfully enriched the modes of enjoyment of the beach and accentuated the desire inspired by this indecisive border (...) the romantics made the shore into a privileged space of self-discovery. In the perspective of the sublime-aesthetics (...) standing on the beach allows for a peculiar vibration of the self, born of the exalting perception of a confrontation with the elements.¹¹⁸

The sea here represents the in-between of fluidity that restores the body to another shore of the true gender and shape, revealing it to itself and suggesting another liberating swim. As I have mentioned before, the sea/water is an ideal environment to rethink transition as it offers another aqueous environment, like the womb¹²⁰, and it protects the body as it gains a different shape via the influx of hormones and repairs what could or should have happened in the womb. Gaston Bachelard proposes the sea as a maternal, receptive element which allows for growth and transformation, the figure of ‘Aquamater’ that has also been reclaimed by feminist theorists¹²¹. Indeed, many theories around water and the fear of the unknown fall into the essentialist trope of feminising the element, drawing on Luce Irigaray’s and Barabara Creed’s work on the fear of re-assimilation by the archaic mother:

I connect the masculine fear of the archaic mother to the fear of the ocean and a fear to return to ‘primary matter’ that would eliminate the masculine and his discrete individualism. The ocean’s characterisation as female body, epitomised in the mermaid and her monstrous sisters, is therefore underpinned by a phallogocentric fear of subsumption, of a destruction of his self-containment and engulfment by the ‘other’.¹²²

These Freudian metaphors linking a ‘phallogocentric fear of subsumption’ to masculinity reduces it to one particular set of external, penetrative genitals while reducing feminine to another, internal, ‘engulfment’ set frozen in a heteronormative view of relationships limited to penile penetration of

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹¹⁸ Corbin, Alain *Le Territoire du Vide. L’occident et le désir du rivage* Paris, Flammarion, 1998, 187

« Les créateurs romantiques, les premiers à tenir un discours cohérent sur la mer, ont puissamment enrichi les modes de délectation de la plage et accentué le désir inspiré par cette indéfinie frontière (...) Les romantiques font du rivage un lieu privilégié de la découverte de soi. Dans la perspective de l’esthétique du sublime (...), la station sur la plage autorise une vibration particulière du moi, née de la perception exaltante de sa confrontation aux éléments. » DeepL translation

¹²⁰ Bachelard, Gaston trans. Edith Farrell *Water and Dreams. An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*. Dallas, The Pegasus Foundation (1983) 119.

¹²¹ Hawke, Shé, Jackson, Leonie “Aquamater: A Genealogy of Water”. *Feminist Review*, 103(1), 120–132 (2013)

¹²² Rae, Caroline Emily ‘Uncanny Waters’ *Op.Cit.* 72

a vagina when, in reality, anyone from any gender with any set of genitalia and sexuality can ‘engulf’ (be penetrated). Also the existence of trans-individuals disrupts these essentialist views and reductive psychoanalytic readings as women can, and always could, be born with an external set of genitals and men with an internal one. Ideally, these reductive dichotomies should be set aside and should never have taken on such a ubiquitous symbolic value in the first place. It locks the feminine and masculine into a necessarily hostile, hierarchised, and oppositional struggle that overwhelmingly naturalises female (often victimised) passivity and male (often violent) active qualities, essentialising a constructed power-dynamic that falls apart the minute one takes trans and intersex people into consideration. Furthermore, equating the womb with a necessarily feminine figure (mother) is quite limiting, as transfathers (like the sea-horse wrongly equated with Sonia, a transmother evoked in *Beautiful Pictures*) and non-binary parents can also carry their children while transfeminine people can breastfeed¹²³, when some transmasculine people cannot¹²⁴, thus disrupting other supposedly essential attributes of bodies in parenthood. Stefan Helmreich, upon reviewing trans* theory about the constructivism of ‘nature’ agrees: ‘Thinking about “sex” and “gender” as they are assigned and undone with respect to nonhumans – as chaotic nature, trickster God, waves, flows of marine toxins – might render the analytic of gender freshly ‘at sea’, as Mother Ocean becomes Other Ocean.’¹²⁵ Hence the womb becomes a neutral place of birth and rebirth, like the sea which, I have argued, can take on an exclusively masculine aura (like in *At Swim Two Boys*) despite its culturally transient¹²⁶ but current association with the feminine.

The sea is also an interesting environment for trans-writing as many fish species pass from one sex to the other. In *The Voice of the Fish*, Lars Horn goes on to list the Clown Fish: ‘Born male, all clown fish live and die within a single gender, all except the most dominant male, who, reaching this position in the shoal, transitions to female’; the Parrotfish: ‘Highest in the social order of parrot-fish is the adult “super-male”, a role fulfilled solely by the most dominant female of a mating group. Following the death of a “super-male”, the dominant female changes sex’; and the *Turritopsis Dohrni*: ‘In the face of starvation, physical threat, or bodily impairment, the *Turritopsis Dohrni* species of jellyfish can revert to an embryonic state and reproduce asexually. During this process,

¹²³ <https://www.them.us/story/trans-women-breastfeed> [last accessed 05/02/2023]

¹²⁴ If they have had top-surgery, that is.

¹²⁵ Helmreich, S. Op. Cit. 36.

¹²⁶ Sea deities were paternal figure in Greco-Roman mythology (Poseidon/Neptune) and Celtic legends (Lír).

the jellyfish's cells transform entirely: muscle becomes nerve or sperm or egg; biological time reverses; and as for the body – supposedly singular thing – it shatters, multiplying.¹²⁷

Furthermore, upon realising that a lot of aquatic species change sex or reproduce asexually, Astrida Neimanis argues: 'We can find such examples among terrestrial species too, but genderqueer lives are particularly abundant in the water. Might we then wonder, along with Roughgarden, what it is about aquatic environments that is so accommodating – and even facilitative of – diverse actualisations of sexual difference?'¹²⁸ Maybe it is simply irrelevant to map 'male' and 'female' categories onto species that are as alien to human mammals that they might just as well be from another planet, or maybe it can serve as a good indication that a binary, sexual dimorphism frame limits the way we observe and explain bodily variations in animals and humans. For instance, when describing as male a dolphin with no external genitals and a penis found in a genital slit that (unless erect) is covered by flaps, so much so that 'this genital architecture, although "normal" in dolphins, would be considered a very exceptional intersex morphology in humans'¹²⁹, it really appears as if 'human' dimorphism is forced to fit where it barely makes sense, proving the societal bias of 'objective' science when describing 'natural' phenomena. The constant changes of certain species of fish and jellyfish support the interpretation of the sea (an 'intensive morphogenetic element'¹³⁰) as a space of infinite fluidity of bodies and metamorphosis and transition as a natural process, again, dissociating transbodies from charges of artificiality, counterfeit and fakeness best described by Julia Serano:

Because cissexuals have a vested interest in preserving their own sense of cissexual gender entitlement and privilege, they often engage in a constant and concerted effort to artificialize transsexual genders. A common strategy used to accomplish this goal is trans-facsimilation – viewing or portraying transsexual genders as facsimile of cissexual genders. This strategy not only mischaracterizes transsexual genders as « fake », but insinuates that cissexual genders are the primary, 'real' version that the transsexual merely copies.¹³¹

Therefore, both amphibians, fishes and, to an extent, other animals like reptiles (a snake shedding its skin) and insects (caterpillar to butterfly) are all useful imagery to re-think and explain transition along those natural, non-anthropocentric lines and this transpires in trans-writing. Yet beyond medical transition, the fluidity, the possibility of change, metamorphosis can be a useful notion for cisgender people, to rethink their own relationship to the body, identity, gender and growth. During

¹²⁷ Horn, Lars *Voice of the Fish, A Lyric Essay*. Minneapolis, Graywolf Press (2022), 18-19.

¹²⁸ Neimanis, Astrida *Bodies of Water. Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology Environmental cultures series* London, Bloomsbury Publishing (2017), 130.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹³¹ Serano, Julia *Whipping Girl. A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Seal Press, New York (2016), 172.

the panel 'Writing While Trans' of the IASIL conference in July 2022, the various writers pointed out that if transpeople have a vantage point to work on the questions of gender and sex in various disciplines, the insight they bring about can also be useful to cisgender people to deconstruct suffocating gender stereotypes and societal pressures linked to gender. All can benefit from discovering the possibility to live in one then another or no gender for certain people as it exposes the glaring constructivism of many of the norms linked to gender while also eroding the fictional qualities of sex as binary, natural and immutable. Obviously, the work on the fluidity, rather than fixity, of identity is also present in Gay, Bi and Lesbian liberation movements, yet the trans-equality movement also reworks the body with the same fluidity. Henry Abelove in *Deep Gossip* argues: 'The Gay Liberation Front was not predicated on a commitment to a suppositiously stable or definite identity. It was rather predicated on a commitment to a worldwide struggle for decolonisation and its potential human benefits.'¹³²

2. Water Creatures

Selkies

They 'had dark eyes of the seal and ... the seal's longing for the sea'¹³³

The selkie is another stereotypically female figure who was reclaimed by the authors of the corpus. This shape-shifting woman needs to put on her magic coat/seal skin in order to transform into a seal and rejoin the sea. As a seductive aquatic being, it is relatively close to mermaids and, sometimes the two sea-creatures blend to become one (in the case of Kirsty Logan and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill) reflecting the unprecise, shifting nature of oral folktales. Pearl, for instance, is equally described as a selkie or a mermaid and, because she grew up on those tales, Mara always expects her to leave, to return to the sea despite mostly hearing the sanitised versions: 'The selkie decides she doesn't want the skin after all, because she loves her husband and her wee ones too much. She gives up her other life and stays with them. Happily ever after.'¹³⁴ Instead of the usual 'The selkie takes her skin and puts it on, and she goes back into the sea. Her husband and children never see her again. Sometimes the husband wanders the shore feeling sad and missing his wife.'¹³⁵ In the very reworking of the tale, with the ending that can change according to the person, Logan could be

¹³² Abelove, Henry *Deep Gossip* Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press (2005), 88

¹³³ Yolen, Jane *Greyling*. New York, Collinsworld (1968), 34.

¹³⁴ Logan Op.Cit. 30.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

celebrating the oral tradition of folktales, ‘the great mass of infinitely various narrative that was, once upon a time and still is, sometimes, passed on and disseminated through the world by word of mouth - stories without known originators that can be remade again and again by every person who tells them...’¹³⁶ and there is some of that, which I will expand on later. However, here Signe dispossesses the selkie from the little agency she has in the folktale: there is no escape from enforced motherhood and straight marriage. Incidentally, the one correcting Signe’s version of the story is Mara’s first and only boyfriend, as, taught through the heteronormative tales of her overly straight parents (her father’s a boxer and her mother’s a ballet-dancer, both incarnating the paragons of masculinity and femininity) she reproduces the same pattern and dates the first non-descript boy her age on the island (she doesn’t even remember his name, it’s just ‘J’).

The same sanitation of the tale seems to have occurred for the children’s movie (understandably so) *The Song of the Sea* (2014) where Bronagh, the mother selkie, already has her magic coat in the opening (so she has not been taken prisoner through the suppression of her coat) and simply disappears the night of Saoirse’s birth on a vague ‘I have no more time, I have to save our baby, I’m so sorry,’¹³⁷ this version also replacing the selkie’s bid for freedom with appropriate motherly self-sacrifice (her disappearance is equated with dying in childbirth). Altogether, Kirsty Logan extracts the selkie tale from its heteronormative framework by proposing an alternative to a love which forces one away from their natural element. Instead, Pearl and Mara both take to the water even if Mara is still in the process of deconstructing her comp-het education: ‘This story. It was everything she thought she wanted. She’d wanted to be the selkie, not the fisherman – and yet here she was with her sea-love. Still, perhaps it didn’t matter. There didn’t have to be a fisherman at all; two selkies could love one another just fine.’¹³⁸

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill also uses the figure of the selkie applied to an aging mermaid, and suggests a different kind of liberation, akin to a decolonial release from a disciplined, rationalised mind that has bought into ‘science’ her whole life and denied her magical, pelagic origins. After she has started slipping into dementia, ‘The Mermaid Returns to Land-Under-Wave’/’Filleadh na Murúiche ar an dTír-fó-Thoinn’ to go off ‘swimming ... in some deep subconscious ocean where none could follow her/is í ag snámh amach in aigéan éigin fo-íntinneach nárbh fhéidir le héinne again í a leanúint ann.’(Mermaid,142-3)

¹³⁶ Carter *Angela Carter’s Book of Fairy Tales*. Op.Cit. xi.

¹³⁷ Moore, Tom *The Song of the Sea* Cartoon Saloon (2014).

¹³⁸ Logan, K. *The Gloaming*, 239.

Another way to remove the selkie figure from an unequal gender power-dynamic is the gender-bending of the creature. Though some selkies represented the people lost at sea, in certain legends, the most common iteration is the kidnapped woman, hence male selkies are unusual. O'Neill's descriptions of Doyler can be read as a more subtle coding of the young man as a selkie: he has 'laky' black eyes (like a seal's) and black hair, and I already established his connection with the sea in Jim's mind. Doyler's name also connotes an alien origin: 'Ó'Dubhghaill or dubh ghall, the dark stranger or foreigner'¹³⁹ which could suggest pelagic origins. Moreover, his mother originates from an island in Co. Clare and it is made clear that Mick Doyler is not his biological father, maybe hinting at a more supernatural parentage. It was indeed common for some Irish families from the coast to claim seal ancestry: 'Tá na róna gaoilte leis na muintir Conghaile, the seals are related to the Coneely people.'¹⁴⁰ Yet Doyler and Jim, like Pearl and Mara, present a different couple dynamic that the legends' pairings as they bond in water willingly instead of one forcing the other on land.

Mia Gallagher uses a similarly subtle coding for Mar(tin), Geo(rgia)'s lover, although both their names suggest sea and land. Geo, as I have demonstrated is heavily equated to the 'amphibian' which perhaps denotes her ability to cross the gender binary and leave water/queerness. As a woman attracted to men, she remarks, upon feeling attracted to a garda: 'I realised he was straight and I was too and that made everything okay' (BPLH,219), she is now simply a straight woman. Mar, on the other hand, as a gay man, retains his sole link to the sea: I have mentioned before that the character repeatedly goes to Booterstown: 'I saw the sand on his boots, smelt the seaweed off his jeans. ... He said he liked it because of the sea, the sky. Bullshit. He only went there to cruise' (BPLH,376) Already the word 'cruise' naturally likens male sexuality to sea navigation but this is further emphasised through the location of the cruising place on a beach. He is Glaswegian, and it is established that both Scotland and Ireland share selkie legends.

Gallagher then gender-bends the original tale by making Mar the selkie and Geo keep his coat throughout the novel until she throws it in the sea, mirroring the land dweller stealing and keeping the magic coat of the selkie. From the beginning of the novel, Georgia is afraid that the body found in the canal and whose video leaked on Youtube was Mar (as he has gambling debts) and indeed, other legends surrounding the creatures 'mak[e] them souls of the drowned at sea'¹⁴¹, hence blending two sets of legend in the couple dynamic of Mar and Georgia. Yet the insistence on the

¹³⁹ <https://www.irishcentral.com/roots/history/who-were-the-black-irish> [02/02/23].

¹⁴⁰ Murphy, Maureen 'Siren or Victim: The Mermaid in Irish Legend and Poetry' Morse, Donald and Bertha, Csilla *More Real than Reality* London, Greenwood Press (1991) 35

¹⁴¹ ibid

coat marks it more as the tale of forced abduction from one's natural element and, in a way, by transitioning into a woman, Geo is seemingly forcing Mar into a heterosexual pairing and away from his natural queer element. Georgia also instinctively hates the 'magic coat', the queer/pelagic soul of Martin:

'I have always hated that coat ... a battered black leather monster...After we moved to Brighton, I'd kept on at Mar to get rid of it. He told me I was being paranoid.
It's oany a coat, Geo. Don't know what you're so threatened by.
Threatened? Don't be ridiculous.
I couldn't explain why I hated it so much, but *oany a coat* was a lie. The way he'd clung to it, you'd think it was part of his soul. He'd worn it less in Brighton, though, and when we moved to Ireland, hardly at all. ...
You can't get rid of things that easy, Georgie.
... I hoisted it up, put it on. (BPLH,109-110)

Chronologically, Geo's transition starts in Brighton when she 'dressed up, a little' (BPLH,19) when by opposition, Mar wears his selkie coat, less and less as he appears more and more to be in a straight relationship. He still endures homophobia despite this new status: 'Put it away, hen, Martin used to call out at the muffin-top pyjama girls in Inchicore, taunting them when they slagged him off for being a queer, though by then he was living with a woman.' (BPLH,320). During the novel, Georgia seems to use this 'part of his soul' to get closure on their failed relationship and talks to it like a person until its release back into its natural element, the sea. The fact that she puts it on with no effect also grounds her as a non-queer land dweller. This reading is comforted by one of the final arguments the couple shares, and Geo accuses Mar thus: "You want this, I'd shouted. You want me to get cancer. Because then I'll have to stop taking hormones, and my tits, whatever's left of them, will disappear and my stubble will grow back and my voice will drop again and I'll turn back into a fucking man –" (BPLH,462). By 'turning back into a man', Geo would then allow Mar back into a gay relationship and allow him to rejoin his queer element, water. The use of the selkie-figure might be way more subtle in Gallagher's novel, but the complex interlinking of symbols seems to spur the analysis into this strange direction: water, the sea is queerness and Mar is divorced from it through Geo's transition. He is not attracted to women, nor wants to be in a straight relationship. Hence, Geo is trapping him (she keeps his coat) in an unwanted relationship creates a gender-bent version of the tale. The novel does end on the symbolic release of the coat in to the sea signalling that Georgia is ready to let go of an impossible relationship.

Siren

To touch briefly on a recent addition to contemporary Irish literature, *The Fire Starters* by Jan Carson depicts a lonely doctor, Jonathan Murray who meets a mermaid/siren (her voice can compel, like the Odyssey's sirens'), supposedly, as the unreliable narrator mechanism warns the reader this

might all be happening in his head, that he is simply mystifying his excessive attraction to a woman. She leaves him shortly after giving birth to Sophie. As soon as Dr Murray realises that his daughter will one day speak and be able to beguile people like her mother and bend them to her will, he becomes afraid that her 'nature' will endanger others. The baby's love of water is seen as a sign that she is closer to her mother's nature (she lived in the bath during their brief relationship, only absorbing liquids as nutrients). His solution is to cut off Sophie's tongue to 'fix' her, bringing to mind parents and medical institutions, blended into one character of a doctor-father, who mutilate intersex children in order to make them fit a socially constructed sex binary. Indeed, these 'corrections'¹⁴² are routinely performed on intersex newborns and children, without their consent or regard for their future intimate life¹⁴³. The 'support group' for parents of 'Unfortunate Children' is organised around the absence/presence of Dr Kanuri yet the vague term of 'kids who aren't normal'¹⁴⁴ with various powers or unusual appendices (like pterodactyl wings) could stand for any children who are considered disabled in one way or another. The only element that consolidates my interpretation of an intersex baby is the father's obsessive planning to cut off an unwanted part of her mouth (which mirrors another lower opening): 'the bloody stump of your severed tongue'¹⁴⁵ of her or to 'seal [her] up'¹⁴⁶ to fix her as it has been the practice in the US and most European countries since the 1930s. Doctors have indeed 'found it imperative to catch mixed-sex people at birth and convert them, by any means necessary, to either male or female'¹⁴⁷. Thankfully the father gives up on 'fixing' his daughter but it is left ambiguous. It is up to the reader whether her first word is a manifestation of her mind-controlling powers or if he is just overcome by guilt at what he was planning to do to her when she says 'da' for the first time. Either way, he drops the needle and hopefully becomes a less abusive parent to Sophie. The intersex or inter community (the label being debated) is part of the LGBTQ/A+ community and some people might recognise themselves in the queer label¹⁴⁹, but as a dyadic student, my perspective on the subject is severely limited.

¹⁴² In the form of early surgeries and hormone treatments *imposed* on individuals, which puts into perspective conservative rhetoric around trans children, who, by opposition, *ask* but only may have access to puberty blockers in certain cases.

¹⁴³ Guillot, Vincent 'Me dire simplement' in Évelyne Peyre éd., *Mon corps a-t-il un sexe? Sur le genre, dialogues entre biologies et sciences sociales*. Paris, La Découverte (2015) pp. 296-301.

¹⁴⁴ Carson, Jan *The Fire Starters* London, Penguin Random House (2019), 164.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁴⁷ Fausto-Sterling, Anne *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. New York: Basic Books (2000), 40.

¹⁴⁹ There also used to be porosities that might seem problematic, like Del Lagrace Volcano, a transman who called himself 'Intersex by Design' in *Dublin Pride 2001 : Lesbian - Gay - Bisexual - Transgender - Queer*. Dublin: Dublin Pride, 2001. Print.

Changelings

Another Irish folktale figure is used to signify queerness, mental illness and suppressed identity, but this one centres the experience of the relatives rather than the person being othered. The changelings are commonly women or children taken by ‘the good people’, the fairies/*Pucaí*:

‘The changeling motif ... is predominantly a Germanic and Celtic one ... In summary, the changeling is the sickly infant left by the “good people” who steal the healthy human child. The changeling resembles the human baby but is identified by one or a combination of the following attributes: constant crying; insatiable appetite; unusual physical features oversized heads or deformed limbs; dark wrinkled or wizened skin. They are generally mute refusing to speak or laugh unless tricked into doing so and changelings sometimes exhibit supernatural powers or musical talents (Mac Philib) ... To recover the human child, the changeling must be made cry, be beaten or burned, thrown on the fire or on a dunghill, or left to drown, although in most accounts to no avail since the original child is not returned.¹⁵⁰

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill has also explored the folktale figure¹⁵¹ in her poetry and the fairy-folk have a connection to the merfolk: ‘Na cinn a thit ar an dtalamh/Dhein na púcaí díobh/Is na cinn a thit san uisce/Dhein díobh treabh na mara’ / ‘The ones that fell on the ground became the pookas or land-fairies (in their underground mounds) and those that fell into the sea became the sea-people. (Ní Dhomhnaill *The Fifty-Minute Mermaid* 48-49) The fairies are then, like the grotesque merfolk depicted in our corpus, quite different from the child-like mainstream representations of the creature and are actually used in Irish horror. *You Are Not My Mother* by Kate Dolan (2022) set around Samhain, marking the beginning of winter and bonfires in North Dublin, focuses on Char(lotte), a lonely teenager whose family is reputed to be deeply superstitious, (her grandmother having performed a pagan ritual on her as an infant after she disappeared by a river) and feels neglected by her mother. Char finds out about this ritual that left a burnt mark on her face and her mother’s behaviour starts deteriorating from mild but permanent depression-fuelled neglect to abuse. She disappears by the same river and is found days later; the movie emphasises water as a portal between worlds, Char’s mother even walks into a park’s stream at the height of her depression and erratic behaviour, prompting her daughter to follow her until she drags her away. Both women disappear under the surface to highlight the change that occurs in the element. In a museum about Irish folklore and land an eerie video installation explains:

You are now in a liminal space, an in-between place. Why were these sites considered sacred? These fell places were seen as a space between our world and the other world. In folklore rivers, bogs, lakes and caves are often seen as places where faery folk could enter the human world or lead humans to

¹⁵⁰ Ní Fhrighil, Ríona ‘Of Mermaids and Changelings: Human Rights, Folklore and Contemporary Irish Language Poetry’ *Estudios Irlandeses* Special Issue 12.2, 2017: (107-121), 110.

¹⁵¹ ‘Thar mo chionn/On my behalf’ in *Féar Suaithinseach Maigh Nuad: An Sagart*, 1984. 72-74 and ‘An Bhatráil’/‘The Beating’ in *Feis Maigh Nuad: An Sagart*, 1991 14 (in Ní Fhrighil, *Op. Cit.*)

theirs. These sites have been revered and feared throughout time. Still to this day they are not something we fully understand ...¹⁵²

The ambiguous relationship between humans and faery folk then appears in the reverence of the portal places being laced with fear. In the movie, the mother's strange (to violent) behaviour is not confirmed to originate from fantastical properties and the changeling figure then becomes a way for the family to cope with the mental illness and changed attitude of a loved one. However, the intense control they (the grandmother, uncle and Char) exercise on the mother, Angela, also draws attention to the fact that fantastical intervention seems to excuse any degree of abuse on the 'changeling' as it is marked as alien, safely removed from familial bonds and thus a fair target for violence. This reliance on folklore also enables the families to reject a person in need of support as it becomes easier to think that the person you knew has been swapped for a *Púca*(Faery) instead of recognising the trauma or mental illness that alters the personality of a loved one. The relatives coping via folklore rarely yields positive results however, in fact it mostly seems to constitute an excuse for infanticide or femicide as the murder case of Bridget Cleary suggests. Her husband claimed she was a 'changeling' and burnt her alive in Clonmel in 1895¹⁵³. This recontextualises the use of the changeling figure by Eva MacMurrough about her nephew, shortly after which Anthony MacMurrough has this interior dialogue: '-What did your aunt intend, Scrotes asked, when she spoke of the good people taking you away? -The fairies, MacMurrough answered. They take the beautiful boy and leave a changeling brute in his place.' (ASTB,262) Because of the now established tendency of O'Neill's to play on the modern and older use of words, the reader can wonder which fairies are referred to: those from the folk tales, the current homophobic slur of 'fairies' or those responsible for taking Anthony MacMurrough to Wandsworth gaol?

The narrative shifts briefly to Eva's point of view prior to this explanation: 'The line of his moustache was unmoved by the smirk. (...) His humourless eyes. It was pitiful to see the affliction behind. There were times he was not handsome at all, her nephew – he but wore a mask. And now when she looked, he was not lean and agile as a glance told, but thin, gruelled, his clothes another's. (ASTB,127) This alienation from his old self (the mask, another's clothes) emphasises the physical consequences of two years hard labour as the body seems to have degraded from 'lean and agile' to 'thin', the appearances barely maintained 'as a glance told'. The moustache, being a 'mask' of old age, in addition to his calling adolescents 'boys' makes the age difference between them seem

¹⁵² Dolan, Kate *You are not my mother (Samhain)* Fantastic Films (2021) 00:55.

¹⁵³ <https://www.nationalarchives.ie/article/behind-scenes-bridget-cleary/> [last accessed 08/12/2022]

greater. This then allows him to comfort his internalisation of the equation of his desires with paedophilia. Symbolically, this facial hair that ages him is removed as the character chooses the therapeutic role of mentor to the young couple (seemingly as a redemptive gesture) and retracts to a platonic love for Jim instead of a physical desire: 'MacMurrough stroked the raw trace on his upper lip. The boy glancing saw and his smile freshened, brightness itself.' (ASTB,376) With the changeling mask removed, Anthony MacMurrough is poised for recovery.

Kirsty Logan also uses the figure of the changeling in *The Gloaming* to deal with another form of familial trauma, and once again the focus is mostly on the reaction of the relatives as Mara is never aware of this notion her mother has of her. Signe was supposed to have triplets and name them after two islands and the sea in-between (Mara) but two of the three died. Later, when pregnant with another daughter, she decides to use the name for the next baby, even though it was meant for another: 'Signe shifted her hands in the dishwater. She watched the witchery of girlhood, the casting of spells. She watched this Mara who was not that Mara. Her misnamed girl, her changeling.'¹⁵⁴

The selkies, mermaids, changelings are then re-used in contemporary literature, re-written to access (or reveal) deeper, psychological coping mechanisms about one's identity or about relatives. Sometimes this reclaiming takes the form of a subtle reference: the authors might only borrow a few telling aesthetic traits and bask their work in the backwater of shared folklore. Sometimes they overtly re-appropriate the figure and in both cases, it results in a masterful blend of old, traditional oral literature and postmodern writing styles. Folktales are also used as a conduit for more contemporary common knowledge about psychology, trauma, blurring the line between superstition and rationalisation for unique, unsettling character studies.

3. Developer

Let The Sea Take It

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the smooth spaces, by opposition with striated spaces, are heterogenous spaces that allow for multiplicity, are non-metric, a-centered, rhizomatic, and generally non-organised and therefore more suited for nomadic movement and exploration:

For the sea is a smooth space *par excellence*, (...) or before longitude lines had been plotted, a very late development, there existed a complex and empirical nomadic system of navigation based on the wind and

¹⁵⁴ Logan *The Gloaming* Op.Cit. 172.

noise, the colors and sounds of the seas; then came a directional, preastronomical or already astronomical, system of navigation employing only latitude, in which there was no possibility of "taking one's bearings," and which had only portolanos lacking "translatable generalization" instead of true maps.¹⁵⁵

The sea then, for them is the space that best exemplifies the 'smooth' space that has become 'striated' literally on which a grid of latitude and longitudes has been imposed so as to better navigate it. It has been likened to gender and sex (as artificial grids) superimposed onto the human bodily variations by Lucas Crawford in their 'Transgender without organ' article. The sea, like any smooth space, then presents a higher coefficient of deterritorialization, a process by which the basis of one's identity is eroded.¹⁵⁶ Hence it is better suited to explore and reveal facets of characters' identities.

As the water can reveal *duchás*, it can also release: 'It is said of la Noche de San Juan that, as you dive, you must speak to the water, relinquish your fears and regrets. You are to ask for benediction, that sickness be replaced with health, weakness with strength, you are to trust the waters will wash you out of one body and into the next'.¹⁵⁷ In this process of cleansing, the characters can rid themselves of the unwanted memories, misdeeds and the lies that choke their 'true self'.

This process is illustrated well by the opening of Kirsty Logan's *The Gloaming*, the chapter aptly named 'Let the Sea Take It', with the two sisters, Mara and Islay confessing their worst deeds to the sea 'The things I took that weren't mine, the things I said that weren't true – let the sea take it! Let the sea take everything!'¹⁵⁸. This oddly spiritual connection to the sea evolves throughout the lives of the protagonists, as these confessions do not simply remain misdeeds but unspoken truths they don't dare utter to each other, and it is addressing the sea which allows the unspeakable to be spoken. For instance, years after Barra's death (the last-born son of the family) by drowning, Mara confesses: 'I think it's better, ... that Bee is gone. It's better that he's gone from this world because it wasn't right for him. It was too big and too loud and too cruel. I think it's better but I still want him to come back.'¹⁵⁹ She might be referring to the fact that Barra (Bee) was neuroatypical 'He flinched at loud noises and unfamiliar voices (...) he didn't move towards walking and pottying as quickly as her girls had (...) during a tantrum he sometimes got so hysterical that he stopped breathing'¹⁶⁰. The family had moved onto the isolated island to give him a more adapted, quiet

¹⁵⁵ Deleuze, Gilles, Guattari, Félix trans. Massumi, Brian *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press (2005), 479.

¹⁵⁶ Crawford, Lucas 'Transgender without Organs? : Mobilizing a Geo-affective Theory of Gender Modification' in Stryker, Susan, Aizura, Aren *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*. London & New York, Routledge (2013), 478.

¹⁵⁷ Horn, Lars *Voice of the Fish, A Lyric Essay*. *Op. Cit.*, 183-4.

¹⁵⁸ Logan *The Gloaming*. *Op. Cit.*, 6.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 283-4.

environment. Signe, the mother of the three, in turns utters another unavowable truth: 'I would have traded one of them -any one- for Bee.'¹⁶¹ In the case of Mara, this ritualistic unburdening to the sea, a spiritual presence around the island that can give and take anything, is followed by her first acceptance of the element after the drowning of her little brother. She has become infatuated with a selkie/mermaid (for performance, not a real one) and finally allows herself to swim: 'she let the sea soothe her, the pressure of Pearl's hands on her forearms, the slow pound of water against her ears ... just when she ran out of breath, ... there was Pearl, pressing her lips to Mara's breathing into her mouth.'¹⁶² Incidentally, that night, Mara also unwittingly reveals to her mother, Signe, observing her daughter from afar, that she is dating Pearl (the 'selkie') and re-connecting with her element, the one she's been named after.

This process of releasing something into the sea is also found in *Beautiful Pictures*, with Geo first letting go of her guilt, personified by her imaginary friend (who can also be seen as her externalised girlhood) Elaine. Elaine is a composite ghost of the in-between, first imagined in the lane between the houses in Georgia's neighbourhood and appears after Georgia finds out about Judith Conygham's passing. This childhood friend of Georgia had died in the Monaghan bombing, shortly after Georgia has stolen her favourite doll's head; Queen Bess is very important to Judith as she insist 'I'd *die* if anything happened to her.'(BPLH 41, italics in the original) as previously mentioned. Since Georgia has effectively decapitated Queen Bess, she superstitiously thinks that Judith died because of her. I now would like to focus on the very process of throwing into the sea the stolen doll's head containing the newspaper article that revealed the death of the Judith to Georgia:

Georgie's nose fills with clean country smells: cow poo and dead winter grass, rotten leaves, skeleton-thin trees. Seaweed and the lonely bones of mermaids. She thinks that will be the right place for Queen Bess and Judith, the sea. ... the saltwater will clean off all the old dust and wash away the black type, and maybe even keep them afloat for a while. Besides, Judith always wanted to go on adventures. Georgie swings her arm, lets go. The doll's head whirls up through the air, pauses for a moment, then drops. A splash. Gone. (BPLH,443)

In Gallagher's writing, the sea does not have the overt spiritual presence it has in Kirsty Logan's but the same ritual occurs twice and endows the landscape with a decaying, death-like presence: be it dung, 'dead', 'rotten', 'skeleton', 'bones' here the land comes into opposition with the cleansing sea, which 'clean[s] off', 'wash[es] away' the objects, erasing the news of Judith's death, while also announcing a new departure in the 'adventures' never taken by someone who died in their early years. The process of letting go allows Georgia to finally feel '*whole*' (BPLH,465) thereby linking a

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹⁶² Logan, *The Gloaming, Op. Cit.*, 152.

turning point in the acceptance of her true nature (and merging with Elaine to be 'Georgie +') to the release in the sea.

Much later in life (in her mid-forties) and mourning the loss of her relationship with Martin, Georgia seems to once more reconnect with her deeper self by a therapeutic release into the sea of an object metonymically linked to a character: Mar's coat. I just analysed what the coat might represent in Martin, and now would like to cover the meaning of this scene for the character of Georgia. The two release scenes are linked in text: 'Had I ever dumped it, like I'd once dumped a doll's head, wishing to be shot of Martin's soul and all the pain I associated with him? Or had I just thought I had, and unconsciously, without realising, bundled it into a bag and shoved it up in our attic..' (BPLH,466) A satisfying aspect of Gallagher's writing is the way the puzzle is mostly spelled out if the reader has a good memory. On a first reading, though, the repeated motifs, symbols and half-remembered patterns repeat themselves creating an eerie feeling of 'déjà vu'. On close inspection, the intricately woven networks appear more clearly. Here, the protagonist gets rid of a second symbolic object by throwing it in the sea. This then signals a new turning point; indeed upon searching her friend's apartment, the coat is gone: 'just in case I'd picked that up too when I'd been sleepwalking on the beach, looking to reclaim my mobile. But it was gone.' (BPLH,467) This riddance also suggests a potential new acceptance of herself through the amphibian most associated with her: 'The sea choppy and the sun was darting off the waves. Little silver knives. I thought of mermaids, ones with tails, not feet, and grey hair, happily frolicking underwater, and – believe it or not – my fingers itched to hold a crayon.' (BPLH,468) The insistence on the 'tails, not feet' seems to suggest that those mermaids did not accept the sea witch's deal of walking on land painfully. Yet if one follows the map of meaning woven by Gallagher around this idea equating the mermaid's pain with being punished for transitioning, it is difficult to grasp whether this signals an acceptance of her transidentity or a regret of transitioning (the mermaids she envisions during her liberating moment have tails, not feet, ie they did not transition). However, the metaphor, like all water-based metaphors, is muddled enough and does not have a clear one to one equivalent with any concrete idea, that being the interest of those images. Perhaps because of its vagueness and its ductility of use, it has been criticised as such by Philip Steinberg:

For scholars in this second, poststructuralist, group, the ocean is not so much ignored as it is reduced to a metaphor: a spatial (and thereby seemingly tangible) signifier for a world of shifting, fragmented identities, mobilities, and connections. While metaphors provide powerful tools for thought, spatial metaphors can be pernicious when they detract attention from the actual work of construction (labor,

exertions of social power, reproduction of institutions, etc.) that transpires to make a space what it is.¹⁶³

The ocean is a surprisingly useful image in literature, yet although despite its constructed quality, few other can enable the blending of multiple meanings overlapping and enriching each other in their concepts. The use of water-based and sea-creature metaphors is pernicious enough that to ignore the way authors utilise it to express these 'shifting, fragmented identities, mobilities and connections' would be missing out on the intricacies they managed to render through this malleable image.

Coming out?

The process of 'reconnecting to a deeper nature' through bodily transformation (or not, by simply deconstructing parts of the normative pressures set on one's psyche and body) is also a liberating and celebratory moment. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's mermaid, upon recalling her true nature, feels

elevated, grown:

An Mhurúch ina hAthbhreith

(...)

Ansan de phreib ruthaig bíonn sí MÓR MÓR
Is í ag siúl gan dua tré hallaí arda marmair
I dtreo an tsolais; boghaisíní áthais is creathaí aitis

Ag gabháilt stealladh di gach re sea.
Ina matáin is mó a bhraitheann sí é seo
Is ní ina ceann. Cuimhne chorpartha is ea é
Seachas ceann intleachtúil. Tosnaíonn an codladh grifín
Ag bun na méar agus snámhann drithlíne sámhnais
Is eagla i dteannta a chéile aníos a corp
Go mbuaileann siad sa cheann í.

(...)

Ní gá dhi seisiúin d'aon tsórt teiripe holagrafach
Chun teacht go furasta ar an gcuimhne bhunaidh seo.
Tá sé go feillbhinn cheana aisi ina hanam agus ina corp.

The Born-again Mermaid

(...)

Then all of a sudden she was BIG, BIG,
Walking effortlessly through high marble halls
Towards the light; shuffles of pleasure and
Shudders of apprehension
Were hitting her in alternating waves.
She remembers this is her actual physical makeup
And not in her head. It's a muscle memory
Rather than a mental one. The pins and needles start
In her fingers and toes and twinges of pleasure
And fear together sweep up through her body
Till they hit her in the head.

(...)

She doesn't need to take part in holographic therapy sessions
To summon this basic primal memory
She already feels it through and through, in her soul and body.
(Mermaid,120-1)

The 'basic primal memory' is that of water, which has been appearing to the mermaid as a suppressed intergenerational trauma and the taboo of water had only managed to twist the connection to the element into hallucinations and an inability to express something inherent to her identity. Yet the rediscovery brings about these intense feelings and therefore it could be read as a metatextual expression of joy of the writer to be able to wield the language that has been taken

¹⁶³ Steinberg, Philip 'Of other seas: metaphors and materialities in maritime regions', *Atlantic Studies*, 10:2, 156-169 157. (2013)

away from her ancestry. The poems have by now transcended Irish-speaking Ireland to be translated into many other languages beyond English, and even if this contributed to their fame, the glamour of the 'lost' language of Irish also played into it. As Barry McCrea infers: 'disappearance/threat of disappearance lends those languages an imaginative power for modernist literature.' Because the language is not widely spoken anymore, it will 'acquire unusual properties for poetic imagination: dream of another, lost, more perfect language hidden beneath the surface of English-speaking Ireland.'¹⁶⁴ It is therefore appropriate that the *filí* chose a mythical sea creature to express the state of the Irish language as it pertains to the same glamour as a 'lost' language, the mixed emotions and sensations at the re-discovery and wielding of water/Irish are ambiguous: "boghaisíní áthais is creathaí aitis"/ "shuffles of pleasure and Shudders of apprehension". The old language and element have a duality about them which, despite how natural and deeply ingrained they feel still presents a threat: 'Cuimhne chorpartha is ea é seachas ceann intleachtúil' / 'It's a muscle/body memory rather than a mental one.' As I have drawn on the notion of collective trauma before, this recalls the duality between the painful remembering to belong and the easier forgetting to survive, where reconnecting to Irish is both a joy and pain.

In order to link Irishness and queerness in the reconnection with a deeper nature, I wish to mention the curious circumstances of Brendan Behan's learning of Irish, with Séan O'Briain, a native Irish speaker and schoolteacher. His first contact with the language was while in prison and he perfected it later with Máirtín O'Cadhain, another fellow prisoner when he was interned in Curragh. Researchers have speculated a link between learning a marginalised language and expressing a marginalised sexuality: '... given the fact that Behan first learned Irish from a cellmate, perfected it in the barracks of the Curragh internment camp, and that his masterpiece *Borstal Boy* is, in part, a touching evocation of a homoerotic attachment in prison, we might speculate that the longings Behan projected onto the Irish language were linked in some way to homosexuality.'¹⁶⁵ Displaying a clear link to the ambiguous figure of Oscar Wilde, the pinnacle of Irish scandals, Brendan Behan seems to link both identities as othered as his homage to the writer is expressed in Irish: 'Dà aoibhne bealach an pheacaidh is maírg bas gan beannacht. Mo ghraidhn thù, a Oscair, bhi sé agat gach bealach./Sweet is the way of the sinner,/Sad, death without God's praise./My life on you, Oscar boy,/Yourself had it both ways.'¹⁶⁶ However, the reading proposed by

¹⁶⁴ McCrea, Barry *Languages of the Night: Minor Languages and the Literary Imagination in 20th C Ireland and Europe*. Place of publication, Yale University Press (2015), XIII.

¹⁶⁵ McCrea. *Languages of the Night. Op. Cit.*, 65.

¹⁶⁶ Behan, Brendan trans. By O'Connor, Ulick 'Oscar Wilde, Poète et Dramaturge, né à Dublin le 15 Octobre 1856, est mort dans cette maison le 30 Novembre, 1900' *The O Scholars* 34, March 2007.

Barry McCrea enters a strange, dubious territory by positing that the appropriation of Irish by a non-native gay man expresses a longing for a 'natural', traditional life rooted in heterosexuality that he cannot access:

For Pasolini and Behan, adopting a rural language of which they were not native speakers was a means to express a more generalised sense of not being at home in the world. (...) Behan [saw] the native speakers of south Connemara and west Kerry, ... as a gay man might fantasize about heterosexuality, as a state in which one would be fully at home in the world, an insider to both society and nature, or of an alternative world in which homosexuality would be felt and lived as being at one with natural rhythms and the spontaneous cycle of life.¹⁶⁷

His interpretation seems deeply rooted in heteronormativity and the injunction to reproductive sexuality as it posits that queer people regret not having access to 'spontaneous' child rearing and a traditional nuclear family and would express this regret through the appropriation of minor languages. The idea of not being an insider to 'nature' feels dangerously close to the homophobic views that homosexuality goes against a natural, heterosexual and reproductive sexuality.

I opened the thesis with quotes from Lovecraft's short story 'Shadow over Innsmouth' and the lore conveyed about the frog/fish like creatures of the town. They have the capacity to breed with humans and their descendants can join them in the sea is because 'everything alive come aout o' the water onct, an' only needs a little change to go back agin'¹⁶⁸. A similar argument is made in *The Deep* by Solomon and Clipping. : 'Was it the ocean itself, the progenitor of all life?'¹⁶⁹. The basis for these underwater civilisations, kin to humans, is that all creatures on earth originally sprung from the water and can return to it, in one form or another. Thereby, the water can allow humans to reconnect with a deeper, eldritch nature, and the idea that nurture cannot overcome nature developed by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill in her poem series implies the same argument. It seems then that this can constitute a literary trope to make water the *topos* of reconnection with one's deeper nature.

In *At Swim Two Boys*, with Doyler away in Dublin, Jim is left with an unexplored desire and on the night his niece (Gordie's baby, Estella) is born: he sleeps with a soldier by the sea, which becomes an unleashed expression of this desire, overcoming the denial and mirroring the birth of Estella¹⁷⁰. It is however a painful and half-subconscious event that will not bring about true acceptance. The motif of Jim's interaction with the water, the sea and swimming mirrors the various stages of his

¹⁶⁷ McCrea. *Languages of the Night*. Op. Cit., 69.

¹⁶⁸ Lovecraft, Howard P. *The Complete Works*. New York, RacePoints (2014), 890-1.

¹⁶⁹ Solomon, Rivers *Deep* Op.Cit. 60.

¹⁷⁰ Estella herself is named after Gordie and Jim's mother who died on the ship coming back to Ireland and was buried at sea, completing her own death/rebirth cycle within the usual heterosexual time phases.

self-acceptance: half drowning the first time he swims with Doyler, the stormy sea of his first sexual experience and the gentle baths as a form of acceptance, finally swimming and working with the element. During his first time having sex, the wild nature of the sea, likened to Doyler prior to that and thus signalling who the true object of desire remains throughout the encounter, takes on a chaotic aura:

He closed his eyes and he saw himself in that sea, far far out, released from his bounds, riding the crest of billowing waves. He felt it in the pit of his stomach, the exhilaration of the deep, and the mystery of the deep reaching up to take him. (...)

Before him in columned panorama the sea surged, grey with trouble and white with thrill. The same thrill and the same trouble boiled inside him. He felt a bursting to be known, to be born, that would no longer be delayed, but whose labour had come. (...) Through his fingers he felt the wall behind and he was struck by the strangeness of concrete things: the ledge, the columns, the floor to his feet: things that did not move while the sea never ceased.

He had not long to wait. A soldier had followed him. A match struck, a cigarette was lit. The red glow was offered in Jim's direction. (ASTB,398)

The 'release from his bounds' is noteworthy, as Jim is straining against his catholic and heteronormative upbringing to live out a desire that is never spoken or considered in his society. This 'unspeakable' quality of homosexual longing, however, endows it paradoxically with a 'mystery of the deep' that increases the 'thrill' of discovery. Sexuality in catholic Ireland in general was long suppressed, especially for younger people outside of marriage, but the complete inexistence of overt same-sex bonding grants it an added aura of rarity, doubling the transgression of a first sexual experience with another man. The ambiguous nature of water and lust also transpires through the opposite but alternated nouns for the water 'trouble/thrill' directly paired with the feelings 'inside him'. Tactile, physical sensations through 'his fingers/to his feet' are centered in the scene, though he had learned to dissociate from this sense¹⁷¹ through his abuse by Polycarp and other brothers. Prior to this, he had only begun to reconnect with it through 'brushes'/'light touches'¹⁷² with Doyler. The anonymity of the soldier (on notes the use of the indeterminate article 'a' before 'soldier' and 'cigarette') also emphasise that the identity of the body with which he will have his first experience matters little, as it is only a conduit for frustrated desire after the departure of Doyler. Only 'the red glow', the tip of 'a cigarette' that can be read as an image for the one place of interest offered to Jim that matters. Even his own person is anonymised, as it is offered 'in [his] direction', not to him

¹⁷¹ 'He was sensible of the detachment in Brother Polycarp's room when the brother would roam his hand on his skin: he did not feel but he saw himself felt. His mind's eye watched a boy.' (ASTB,146-7) This is an avoidance coping strategy against trauma or its memory.

¹⁷² 'it was this way whenever their bodies met, if limping he brushed against him or laughing he squeezed his arm. The touch charged through ... until it wasn't Doyler he felt but what Doyler touched, which was himself. ... he did not think he had felt himself before, other than in pain or in sin.' (ASTB,97)

personally. It can be a tentative, unsure offer (that may not be taken, Jim's presence in a common cruising spot might be interpreted as accidental by the soldier who followed him) or simply a general offer that would have been made no matter who was present there. All in all, this episode recounts an imperfect first time that initially brings about mixed feelings, then after the absurdist confessional scene, a deep self-loathing, a return to the notion of sin prompted by a catholic upbringing.

However, water can also be a gentler place of acceptance in *At Swim*, notably when Jim is healing from fever and the guilt-trauma of his first sexual encounter. For weeks afterwards, he fasts, prevents himself from sleeping or touching himself by binding his hands with rosary beads, puts pebbles in his shoes to suffer with each step and expiate his desires for men as they are so unspeakable that the Catholic church doesn't even recognise it or name it. Doyler too has a period of self-doubt and self-loathing (though not as harrowing as Jim's) after failing to have sex with another young man: 'He was scared to be with Jim. (...) he didn't know could he be trusted. If he made Jim do what he made this boy do. And worse, if Jim would let him.' (ASTB,498) At the time, their desires still only seem like a perversion instead of a gesture of love or attraction. But by confessing his love for Jim, Doyler seems to better associate the longing for physical closeness with love rather than lust (which he apparently deems degrading) and goes to him.

During his period of penance, Jim doesn't even want to see Doyler anymore. After a dangerous bout of hallucinatory fever, Anthony MacMurrough rescues him, in a way, from this self-loathing and in the safe, contained environment of the Kingstown's baths, the adolescent learns to relax and swim again under MacMurrough's guidance:

His moment had come the first week of their swimming together, that magical moment when the mind lets go and the body is released. You'll find it, MacMurrough had promised him, you'll feel it when you do. The he slipped into the pool one time, and something in??the way he moved, with an ease, almost a grace, MacMurrough could see he did not strive against the water. Rather, the water had received him and he joined in its fluency. The puzzle on his face when he looked back. 'I don't know, it's different today'.

'You're swimming,' Macmurrough told him.

He swallowed water, but he came up beaming. 'I think I am too!' He turned and plunged, thrashing his arms. It's easy, sure!' Later, he said, still suffused with wonder, 'I never knew. I never thought it could be like this. It's the most wonderful thing.' He stayed long in the water that day. He had found his element. He was in the swim. (ASTB,427)

The chaotic thrill/trouble ambivalence is likened to a 'strive against' the water while swimming is being 'received by it', water becoming the subject of the verb and taking over Jim. The 'fluency' and 'suffused' nature of the moment suggests the rigidity and resistance of Jim's upbringing relaxing, becoming more flexible with a practice of self-acceptance that has been a long and painful process

for the character. As queerness and Doyler are associated with water, the fact that Jim 'had found his element' signals that, the next time he will meet with his lover, he will not be afraid (he refused a kiss before). MacMurrough's guidance through this difficult process, alongside swimming, also involves teaching Jim about 'Spartans, Alexander the Great, the sacred Band of Thebes. Even the Gaels, that they had a ceremony, two men if they loved each other.' (ASTB,507) to prove to the young man that, at another time, homosexuality was so common it was not even a term or a practice separate from heterosexual practices. These historical examples both serve to demystify these desires and give Jim the hope that, as these societal constructs have shifted through history, mores might once again shift to a general indifference around the sex or gender of one's partner. As Anthony MacMurrough summarises: 'Jim had grasped instinctively that significance: that more than stories, they were patterns of the possible.' (ASTB,607)

After Doyler nearly drowns, Anthony MacMurrough puts the two things in parallel for Jim, urging him to fear the water, even if he can now swim (fear homophobia now that he has accepted his homosexuality): 'You ought to, Jim. And you will need to be careful with other things too ... and that fellow with you.' (ASTB,541) Again, water is paired with the relationship in a homophobic Ireland, and even after self-acceptance it will remain dangerous. This is emphasised by Anthony MacMurrough recalling why he learned to swim, in a foreboding anecdote that can be read as the dangers of queer waters in a homophobic society: 'I was in a boating accident some while before that. The others, there were two others, well they drowned. I didn't.' He waited. 'Perhaps we are drawn to what frightens us.' (...) 'I just liked to be by the water.' (ASTB,549) This sets up the ambiguous role of water reflecting the ambivalence of marginalised identity, at once empowering and freeing but also dangerous by their marginalised quality. The drowning can then be read as homophobic killings of the two others, the random choice of victims flattening their individual lives into the single-minded targeting of marginalised sexuality. If re-appropriation and empowerment is possible, this reminds the reader (if one follows the equation of queer water) that these identities are primarily an excluding pathologising label for behaviours that occur ordinarily in human beings. Drowning individuals and reducing them to this identity is thus already set as a problematic factor, and a threat Anthony MacMurrough tries to convey to Jim. When he tells this anecdote, Doyler has just survived a drowning himself and only through Jim and Anthony MacMurrough's intervention. Marginalised identities can also 'drown' in the sense that one side of an individual's vast personhood isolates them in society to the point of suicide, by-passing direct action by

homophobes/transphobes and killing indirectly. I will further analyse the potential dangers of water at a later stage.

Likewise, water also heralds the end of *Hood* with a final gesture of self-acceptance (or at least the possibility of one) for Penelope. The title of the novel itself can refer to the hidden identity of the protagonist, who avoids talking to her mother during the whole week of Cara's death and funerals. Pen is equally unable to come out or to erase her relationship with her partner by stating the loss of a simple friend and housemate. The process of coming out of the closet to her mother is painful, as she has been there for over thirty years.

A short cough from my mother made me look through the kitchen. She was leaning over the sink. Lying was too easy; this particular closet door came prefabricated, with smooth edges and a sealed diamond window. I almost wished my secret was visible: a brand on the forehead, say, from Cara's last kiss as she struggled out of sleep to kiss me goodbye the morning she was going to the airport. But no, nothing showed at all... I tugged at the sailboat out from under my collar. ... I wanted to shut my eyes and float away on it, past the neck of the woods, down the estuary, out to sea. (Hood,308)

Here the water almost passes off as another opportunity to evade the confrontation. Yet in the same gesture, as she is imagining the boat to be an escape, it paradoxically provides the 'brand', the visible mark of her secret, as Cara has given her that boat pendant for their first anniversary. Her Mother notices the pendant, which prompts Pen to come out: 'All of a sudden, I couldn't see; my mother slid into a fish shape, the table melted into a pool. It had been so long, I'd forgotten what tears felt like. The first drop touched the skin under my eye as the sky opened and sent down the rain'. (Hood,309) In a less joyful depiction of self-acceptance, the reader leaves Pen on the brink of coming out (maybe) and joining with the pelagic element too as her mother slides 'into a fish shape' and the table melts 'into a pool', like the memory of water surging through hallucinations of Ní Dhomhnail's mermaid. The tears that Penelope has withheld throughout the weeklong diegetic time of the novel surrounding the death of her unofficial wife finally come out. This means she has found the 'safer time' (Hood,156) needed for her tears, through the modicum of comfort provided by the feminist community of The Attic, her coming out to a friend, and her potential coming out to her mother.

II.3 Drown

‘The Fates sat holding the inch-thick rope of life, one behind another, their black eyes gloomy but by no means malevolent. Their hands were palms outermost, as if to ask, what do you people expect of us anyway? Water gushed from the rock they were sitting on.’ (Hood,184)

1. Ambivalent Grief

‘idir dhá uisce’

Finally, and to emphasise the ambiguous nature of the element, water also expresses grief and death on multiple occasions throughout the novels. Before focusing again on the corpus, I would like to take the interesting example in *The Gloaming* of Barra’s death by drowning, the most obvious link between the sea and death. Barra, or Bee, Mara’s little brother, is also the only inhabitant of his island not to go to the cliff to turn into stone at his death, signalling his disappearance could be temporary within the logic of the novel. Bee is said to have been, after his birth, brought to the island, a quiet, private space where ‘he could catch a glimpse of the other world he’d left to enter this one.’¹⁷³ Regarding this other world, ‘he would never fully emerge from it – and then, too soon, he would be back in it. That other place, the barrier between the worlds, membrane-thin and yet a thousand miles away. The land of dreams and magic and terrible, awful beauty.’¹⁷⁴ Therefore the sea (like the womb as a likened aqueous environment) becomes simply the gate between worlds, refusing death as a final point in a linear narrative time. In fact, Barra returns in the narrative time, at the end, speaking in the first person and addressing the reader directly. In her article about Kirsty Logan, Marie-Odile Pittin-Hedon argues:

When Bee takes over the narrative, he metaphorically punctures the membrane separating him from the other characters, and is therefore able to puncture another barrier, that between the narrator and the reader ... therefore linking the real world where we sit, reading about the magic realist world where people turn into statues, to the world where a bundle of bones speaks to us, illustrating Zipes’s claim ... that fairy tales are telling us truths in the real world that we share not with characters, but with books, and narratives.¹⁷⁵

After the death of her little brother, Mara undertakes to read the entire content of an abandoned bibliobus but only stories where characters die: ‘Behind her eyes, stories flickered – death after death, forward and backwards, nothing done that couldn’t be undone.’¹⁷⁶ In a meta-narrative that

¹⁷³ Logan, *The Gloaming, Op. Cit.*, 284.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁷⁵ Pittin-Hedon, Marie-Odile ‘Selkies, Kelpies and Fairies: Kirsty Logan’s Contemporary Sea Creatures’ in Tri TRAN *L’Eau en Écosse - Water in Scotland*. Besançon, Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté (2022), 89.

¹⁷⁶ Logan, *The Gloaming, Op. Cit.*, 63.

binds the books' power to make and unmake deaths, like the sea that takes away Bee only to restore him to his world, likewise most narratives of the corpus are articulated around the death of a character: Cara, Doyler, Judith and Aisling, the mermaid, and they can be read in a non-linear way to restore them back to life.

Each novel/poem collection also proposes a suspended place of in-betweenness, where death or time is disrupted in the narrative, borrowing again from Caroline E. Rae's notion of 'Uncanny water':

This uncertainty denies closure, thus holding the reader in a state of suspension and uncertainty. It is this moment of uncertain suspension that compounds all of uncanny water's prerogatives: by denying any sense of mastery or control over the text's effects, the reader is held in a state of ready responsiveness that shows how embracing unknowability might offer new possibilities for being and becoming as a body of water. I argue that this sense of suspension is a deterritorialising—de-terra-torialising—impulse that reorients bodies towards water and deprivileges the human as the primary site of embodiment.¹⁷⁷

In *Donoghue* the woods by the Wall household take on this quality for Pen: 'The very best about these woods was the suspension of time (...) in the thickest part (...) it could be any date I chose, and sometimes it seemed to me that all the years were one, a handful of seasons repeating themselves, the conversations like snakes swallowing their own tails.' (Hood,61) which even proposes a cyclical instead of linear view of time and allows Pen to relive her conversations with Cara before she realises: 'There were few things more pointless (...) than arguing with a dead person.' (Hood,63)

I have drawn on the notion of grotesque realism (II.1.3) to explain the tension in the various writers' aesthetics, but one aspect of the Bakhtinian grotesque comes across especially in *Hood*, the most grief-focused novel of our corpus. The week after Cara's death is dilated into 306 pages, (which will justify it being more central to the analysis for this part) and offers a cyclical view of time, hence: 'The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming.'¹⁷⁸

The narrative sets up Cara's death as a strange rebirth, prompting Penelope for the first time to discuss her mother's pregnancy and delivery of her, as if setting her up for a new birthing of her daughter as a known Other (a lesbian). The first phone call Pen gets announcing the death is also described as emanating from 'the umbilicus of the phone line'(Hood,22), heralding this cyclical binding of death and rebirth. Pen reflects on not participating in this cycle in a heteronormative way, expecting her to produce children like her mother did: 'She always said that (...) each generation should be glad to raise and pay for the next. "But Mammy," I told her, "I don't have children, so why can't I help you instead?"' (Hood,307) opting instead to support the last generation. The only thing

¹⁷⁷ Rae 'Uncanny Waters', *Op. Cit.*, 67.

¹⁷⁸ Bakhtin, *Op. Cit.*, 24.

Pen will birth (maybe) is a statement of her marginalised sexuality and widowhood, her potential coming out: 'This birth is long overdue, mother. It'll be a tight squeeze. You'd better open your arms to this screaming red bundle, because it's the only one I'll ever bring you.' (Hood,309) One notes the switch from a familiar, casual 'Mammy' to 'mother' un-capitalised but more solemn, preceding the reversal of the death-birth cycle in its topsy-turvy toss of the hierarchy in values. 'Mammy', the close, familiar being capitalised is thus given more importance unlike the solemn, distanced 'mother'. To emphasise the hierarchy-topple, the solemn 'mother' is also mocked instantly by the 'squeeze' supposedly describing the 'confession'. The 'screaming' qualifier of the 'red bundle' might also announce a final, 'overdue' keening as, we will see, it has been suppressed throughout the novel.

The Muglins island in *At Swim Two Boys*, as I have detailed before, has this liminal/cyclical quality for Jim, as a place of almost magical, spiritual properties. What occurs there stands outside of reality and cannot be altered: 'They had this together now. They had their island. No one could take it from them, chance what might, nor he could nor Doyler.' (ASTB,534) After the death of Doyler, Anthony MacMurrough proposes another such island, 'No man'¹⁷⁹ as means of survival for the partially destroyed queer nation: 'One day surely the wars would end, and Jim would come home, if only to lie broken in MacMurrough's arms, he would come to his island home. And MacMurrough would have built it for him brick by brick, washed by the rain and the reckless sea (...). For maybe it was true that no man is an island: but he believed that two very well might be.' (ASTB,642) Here the sea and rain, the established queer elements of the novel, participate in the building of this new queer nation of ruins, a more melancholic project than the political conquest of the Muglins. This 'no man' island only exists in MacMurrough's imagination, though, unlike the concrete (if idealised) rock of the Muglins, and only serves as a temporary flight from reality, a form of denial located in the familiar refuge of the sea yet concretely unrealisable, mythified, as Jim is 'to lie broken in MacMurrough's arms' staging a queer Irish version of the Pietà, Jim being the next sacrificed youth in the Independence process.

Georgia develops a fondness for liminal spaces as a little girl, all of which seem to grant her some form of invisibility or quiet, a refuge from the concerned or hostile looks that stare but do not see her, in the established sense of the novel that is being seen as the little girl she is. The first such liminal space evoked appears near her grandparents' house and is the path she must take to go to

¹⁷⁹ A pun on 'No man is an island', meant both to jest in order to comfort Jim and to warn him he cannot isolate himself in his grief.

the Conyngham household: 'She likes going along the back path (...) It's like walking into an adventure. She likes it too that she can hear things through the hedgerows ... though they don't realise she's there. It makes her feel as if she's something magic, a sea-creature swimming under a ship with a one-way mirror for its floor.' (BPLH,36) and clearly ties to the pelagic, plunged into her natural queer element that protects her from prying eyes, the 'ship with a one-way mirror ... floor' containing cis-het people in a self-reflective dead end where they can no longer take the queer other as an entertaining/terrorising spectacle. The child also sets up another magical/scientific place near her house, always locating these liminal shelters close to a familiar space (her house, her grandparents' house, her working desk for the recordings) for a quick escape. The lane between houses thus hosts a similar phenomenon: 'Something weird began to happen when she went in there... It felt like she'd pushed through an invisible curtain and was somewhere else, a place where nobody could see her. Later she would think of it as going through a portal' (BPLH,174) and Elaine, the imaginary friend that comes from it, like Bee who navigates between worlds, can also go through it: 'Elaine has turned into nothing... whatever membrane separated her from the rest of existence has melted' (BPLH,444).

Later in life, as Georgia is waiting for test results, anxious in case she may have inherited the breast cancer that deprived her from her mother at a young age (and again, thankfully the author avoids any correlation between the loss and Georgia's femininity as an easy psychiatry-oriented explanation for her transidentity) and records the messages for her father after he sent her the torque necklace he had once gifted to his wife, signalling that he has finally, and belatedly (as Geo is now 45), understood he has a daughter and not a son. The last recorded message states, in reference to the test-results: 'I think knowing an outcome would have made this, talking to you, impossible. You know: the awful gush of relief, the sickly ooze of grief, they can get in the way. Whereas a limbo, that inbetweeny place where Schrödinger's cat is both alive and dead – Well.' (BPLH,472) Georgia continues to set liminal time/spaces as a shelter for comfort, therapeutic talk-therapy (whether with Elaine or her father). This almost closes the last chapter spent with Georgia except for 'Till the next, David.' (BPLH,472) This last sentence refuses a proper closure, inscribing the whole recording as an on-going process of reconnection, or a starting point for reconciliation between father and daughter. This strand of narrative doesn't even close the novel as another, final chapter opens on Julia, Lotte and Andy's mother, who ends the interview to go watch TV and the news, maybe catching the news about her daughter's blowing up the London tube at Farringdon station, thus closing the loop the novel opened on.

Georgia's inhabiting liminal spaces also translates into a strange fascination with death, even as a little girl, a field of open possibilities, a fork in the road that could have been explored even being the theme of one very short chapter 'Split': 'In all stories, when a man is faced with alternatives, he chooses one at the expense of the others' (BPLH,371) taken from Jorge Luis Borges *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941). Schrödinger's cat and its death are also a leitmotiv of the book, Georgia becoming the (un)dead cat at several points:

I closed my eyes and saw the same thing I used to see after Martin left; a flash image of myself lying dead in a parallel universe. (...) as if the existence I thought I was leading was just a shadow of the original, while the real me was laid out cold and stiff on a gurney in Wicklow, broken to pieces by the collision. The first time I got that image was that February, in 1977, after you had made us go our separate ways. I began imagining that the real Georgie had died, drowned at sea, or in a train crash, and what I thought was me was just a leftover, a ghost-recording. (...) Sometimes I wonder how many more me's, Georgies and Georgias and Geos, have been strewn in my wake; killed in bike accidents or freak waves, or heart attacks brought on by using the wrong drugs at the wrong time. (BPLH,379)

This meta moment of the novel allows the author to hint at the difficult labouring over this complicated novel where a myriad of various timelines are seemingly considered then discarded. Indeed, there is a whole part of Geo's story that disappeared in the writing process: 'In early 2008, I made my first radical decision. I cut the original au pair story out from all the material that had mushroomed around it. (...) I still had tons of work to do: years more research, writing, rewriting and thinking. But the first cut, by removing certain possibilities, let me see other, more interesting ones.'

¹⁸⁰ As such, Georgia becomes a mere tool of the narrative, with no agency of her own, to which the plot happens, no matter which of the Schrödinger options the writer will throw at her, even accepting the possibility of a parallel universe where she doesn't transition, remaining her parent's 'Georgie' or Mar's 'Geo', instead of becoming Lotte's 'Georgia,' always defined by others, never choosing either a path or a name for herself. This complete acceptance of her many potential deaths also resonates with the guilt she feels towards her childhood friend and reveals the abandonment issues she projects onto her romantic relationship, glimpsing at the possibility of her death only when someone, her father (February 1977) or lover (Martin left), walks out of her life. More than a cyclical time, then Gallagher proposes many alternate and simultaneous universes like so many rejected drafts of her novel, always meekly discussed by her protagonist who is left self-consciously vulnerable, depending on an outcome she has no power over.

¹⁸⁰ Gallagher, Mia 'Difficult second novel? Mia Gallagher on 12 years it took for follow-up to HellFire' *Irish Times* 4th May 2016 np

However, to find comfort in another liminal space, Lotte and Georgie(a) both share the amphibian nature, both feeling a release in the sea but also seemingly called to ponder on their own death in the marine environment. The first excerpt is from Lotte's point of view:

She takes a breath, closes her eyes, sinks. Coldness snakes around her legs and the soft flesh of her belly. Bladderwrack drifts towards her. She feels it brush her hands, her hair, her face. Her eyes open. She sees nothing. *If she was to sink now, if she was to let go...*
She opens her mouth, releases bubbles. Her lungs contract, collapse.
For a second all it feels is empty and all that feels is familiar.
Then panic seizes her and she kicks herself up, breaks the surface, gasping.
Between her isolation and the shoreline bobs a lone figure in green trunks, arms outstretched, hard white belly facing the sky. Georgie. (BPLH,148 italics mine)

Already the child seems to have adopted an Ophelia like posture of floating 'arms outstretched, hard white belly facing the sky' or like a dead fish, belly up, and seems to have been in the same morbid mood as Lotte. The yearning for death, invisibility and isolation comes from both of the characters' pasts being permeated with death. In addition to her friend Judith's death in a car-bomb attack, Georgia's mother is dying of cancer in the midst of an affair that has her questioning her paternity, an uprooting of her identity and what might explain her dislike for the architect's daughter (Saoirse). Lotte, having suffered sexual abuse at the hands of her mother's partner, 'the Captain,' and having had a subsequent abortion, has also lost someone in an explosion, though a self-inflicted one. Both characters are therefore deeply traumatised, seeking the water as a refuge and a possible exit. Another scene occurs, this time from Georgia's younger self's point of view:

In Howth, on the treacherous north pier, where ropes lie curled around the bollards like snakes, ready to trip up unwitting passers-by, and fronds of seaweed clutch the uneven cobbles like mermaids' fingers, and slimy fishscales coat the ground in silvery, slippery armour, David helps her to get up on the high steps so they can look out at the view. As he hoists her up, she feels the force twisting through her father's arm, triangulated by gravity, and *wonders what would happen if she let go*. Would he let her drop, crash back down onto the cobbles while he stood there, laughing? Or would he turn white with shock and scream 'Geeeoorgieeeee' -- just like the doctor does in *Black Beauty* when something bad happens to Jenny, his daughter?
Stupid Question. (BPLH,182 italics mine)

The mistrust the child feels towards her father (whose subconscious at least seems to be questioning his paternity of Georgia after picking up, loosely on the connection between his wife and his co-worker) here imagines a way to test of her father's love. The sea shore that should be a comfort for the amphibian child is laced with threat 'treacherous', 'snakes ready to trip up passers-by', 'mermaid's fingers clutching' etc. Her father's weakness is emphasised at several points of the novel, insisting on his inadequacy, his fear and inability to protect his daughter, culminating in his abandoning her after the death of his wife. His passion and role as an engineer are briefly recalled through the oddly geometric 'force twisting'/'triangulated by gravity' as he has mentioned bridges collapsing in the same terms before. Once again, several outcomes for this test are perceived by the

child: drop and laugh/scream existing in parallel universes along the reality where Georgia does nothing and stays alive. Note the same wondering, in the same words as Lotte what would happen 'if she let go', bringing closer two characters who are depicted to understand each other, and are likened in melancholia and amphibian morbid fascinations.

The sea itself constitutes death/dementia and the in-between in the *Fifty-minute Mermaid* as confused people and the dead, like in French (*entre deux eaux*) can be suspended 'between waters': 'D'fhág sé ar snámh mé idir dhá uisce./ He left me hanging there like a drowned man between waters.' (Mermaid,87-9). For each character, these places of the in-between, the suspension of time or of odd phenomena are all located within the familiar (the woods by the house, the lane by the parents' house, the sea one's used to swimming in), a fact which creates a contrast between these places of un-familiar, disorienting attributes and the familiar, a tension that Caroline E. Rae calls the 'Uncanny Waters': For the uncanny to arise, in Freud's terms, it relies on the subject to establish a familiarity with something, only for that to be subverted.¹⁸¹

The reliance of these uncanny liminal spaces allows the various authors to create a friction in the narrative between realities and explore the finite nature of some of the protagonists as relative, simply one option existing alongside many others. This is why the dead speak from beyond the grave: Jim keeps seeing Doyler in his typical 'dead walking away' dreams, Pen still argues with her partner, Judith speaks through Elaine, Geo still speaks to Mar through his anthropomorphised coat, and Barra narrates the end of the book.

Green drowning

Jim's grief however, will prevent his swimming altogether, the water drowning instead of receiving, no longer the familiar element of bonding in queerness. The 'crack in his face' weirdly recalls the dead of Logan's Island, who gradually turn to stone as they age then go up to the cliff and take their final pose, intertextually signifying a partial death for Jim:

Jim smiled, feeling a crack in his face ... he wouldn't be swimming no more. He would be a stone and he would sink...

MacEmm's breath was in his ear, telling him it would pass, it would all pass, it would one day be over. 'You won't forget any of it, my dear, I promise you that. But you'll swim again and smile. I swear it.'

But no, it would never be over, Jim knew. This was only the beginning. They had to do this to learn how to hate. They had forgotten to hate the British. Now they'd learn. (ASTB,637)

Anthony MacMurrough seems in deep denial about the effect that Doyler's death will have on Jim and, only a day after the event, is already imagining his recovery, maybe to offer support. However,

¹⁸¹ Rae, C-E. 'Uncanny Waters'. *Op. Cit.*, 65

he is an ambivalent character and is deeply infatuated with Jim, making his predictions seem like a self-interested projection of the future, where Jim, once he has moved on from his grief, will turn to MacMurrough as a new lover. Yet Jim's grief is not merely at a personal level, it is also anchored in the wider context of decolonisation (as the author has chosen to pair his love story with the 1916 Rising), a cause in which Doyler believed (as inscribed in the socialist project that starts with the independence of small nations) and a belief which Jim inherits with his death. Only this act finally seems to radicalise Jim in his approach to nationalism, as before, he mostly seemed to embrace it partially by mimesis. Living through the violence of the uprising, seeing the death of soldiers younger than him and finally, the death of the 'pal of his heart' has finally hammered home the pernicious, invisibilised violence of colonisation.

O'Neill's novel then also refuses closure but establishes itself as but a first step in a long process, as the independence of Ireland will only come after the 1920s. The author uses his queer nation as a micro-level study of the impact of the Rising's deaths. Furthermore, by presenting this end (of Doyler's life, of the Rising, and of the novel) as a beginning, O'Neill disrupts the narrative time and re-inscribes 1916 not as the end of a failed rebellion, but as contributing to the beginning of a shift in public opinion that pivots on the deaths of the leaders by execution which allows the Irish population to remember 'how to hate'. The sinking of the very side of Jim's identity he has taken so long to accept can also be read as the erasure and monolithisation (a stone) of national identity to turn it into a more politically united force. The often quoted 'strategic essentialism' is useful here, a notion Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak introduces thus:

Reading the work of Subaltern Studies from within but against the grain, I would suggest that elements in their text would warrant a reading of the project to retrieve the subaltern consciousness as the attempt to undo a massive historiographic metalepsis and 'situate' the effect of the subject as subaltern. I would read it, then, as a *strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest. (...) The strategy becomes most useful when 'consciousness' is being used in the narrow sense, as self-consciousness. (...) Class-consciousness on the *descriptive* level is itself a strategic and artificial rallying awareness which, on the *transformative* level, seeks to destroy the mechanics which come to construct the outlines of the very class of which a collective consciousness had been situationally developed. (...) The task of the 'consciousness' of class or collectivity within a social field of exploitation and domination is thus necessarily self-alienating.¹⁸²

In the context of queer citizens who would fight, unseen, for Ireland's independence, it seems that, like Connolly's socialism, their queerness would be set aside for the Irish population to gain this collective (and reductive) self-consciousness, by the same process upholding the dominant hierarchies inherited by a subaltern group within itself.

¹⁸² Spivak, G. C. *In Other Worlds* Op.Cit. 205.

Doyler's death itself can be read within the same logic, foreshadowed by the near drowning with the green flag when Anthony MacMurrough rescues him: 'He saw the cloth, a dark jelly-fish below. Beneath it, the boy had stopped struggling. In silence, dreamily, MacMurrough unwound the cords that had wrapped themselves round, propped the imponderable weight to the surface.' (ASTB, 535) If the water itself (in this novel) is drowning its own creature, it is only because of the flag's weight, and this could have two meanings: first, as Jim made that flag and will go to the Rising forcing both Doyler and Anthony MacMurrough into its midst, it is the danger the relationship represents for them, since Jim seems illuminated by the new idea that swimming to the Muglins has made them 'immortal' (ASTB,608). Second, because Doyler is drowning in an all-green flag (no orange for protestants nor white for peace) it might be the weight of catholic nationalism overcoming the Gaeltacht through obligatory revival instead of preservation (again, Doyler being the only Irish speaker) and reappropriating the language for itself and suppressing 'Larkinism' and the socialist branch of Irish nationalism. Yet Doyler does not die from this incident, not yet. A machine gun switches position and fires just as Anthony MacMurrough and Doyler find Jim by the Shelbourne hotel: 'Here you are at last, and Doyler flung into him. The breath thumped out of Jim. He fell flump on the road with Doyler on top. Doyler said something that sounded like Oh-oh. Jim lifted his shoulders. The head hung limp.' (ASTB,631) Again, in the now established recurrence of the *non-dit*, Doyler's death is not plainly stated, only hinted at, expressing the time-lag between the event and the realisation. In the confusion of events, it seems that Doyler has protected Jim from the bullets, even though they systematically veer off his course prior to his friend's intervention, as I mentioned, crossing into magic realism and lending weight to the strange faith of Jim in his own immortality after the island. Altogether then, water and the 'dark jellyfish' of the green flag announce the death of Doyler by a combination of nationalism (he dies at the Easter Rising) and love for Jim (he only went there to join him).

Yet as each of the main characters represents a specific class: lower, middle and upper, it is difficult not to read Doyler's death as the systematic sacrifice of the poorer classes in any military venture by the state, whether decolonial or colonial. Furthermore Doyler permits a redemptive arc for MacMurrough, who recovers from his post-traumatic stress and internalised homophobia by re-establishing equality in their (at least physical) relations. Doyler's mother, who washes the dirty sheets for the MacMurroughs is seen as 'the grey washer at the ford,' who 'when you passed she held up her washing and it was your shroud she held with the marks of your sins upon it' (ASTB,219). Following that logic, she washes the sins/stains off the sheets MacMurrough and Doyler slept in

(before Doyler, horrified, takes on the task himself) and is thus presented as a forgiving figure. The (unnamed) mother also reveals to Anthony MacMurrough the beauty and sense of Irish freedom in a very clichéd scene where she is singing while carrying away the dirty sheets:

Her song was of a swan on a lake but her singing held the sadness of Ireland, the lost lonely wastes of sadness. He saw the black water and the declining sun and the swan dipping down, its white wings flashing and slowing and slowing till silver ripples carried it home. It was a scene which seemed the heart of this land. The lowering sun and the one star waking, white wings on black water, and the smell of rain, and the long lane fading where a voice comes in the falling night.
- Ireland, said Scrotes.
- Yes, this is Ireland. (ASTB,210)

As established, when O'Neill's writing moves into lyrical or poetic tones, it is always suspicious as the often ironic twist of the book pushes the reader towards a disingenuous interpretation of the idealised moment. The overly melancholy image 'sadness', 'black water', 'lowering sun' and the contact of white purity and dark waters evoking trouble to come, spoiling the said purity could be read as the noble aura of Irish nationalism tainted by the injunction to the youth's blood sacrifice coming about, announcing the years of war (lowering sun) and leading to a small hope ('one star waking'), albeit disappointing in the end. As Seamus Deane stated in *Atlantis*: 'Ireland has had many rebellions but no revolution ... The Irish, in fact, find themselves in the unenviable position of recognising that parliamentary and constitutional agitation never got them very far, and that violence never produced what it was designed to do.'¹⁸³ In this scene, therefore, MacMurrough perceives the 'core' of Ireland, the sadness, the struggle to come, all in a romanticised way through the song of a washerwoman providing two services at once (clean sheets and a revealing song).

Consequently, here, the poor family serves the rich to re-connect with a sense of true national values, of beautified simplicity. By opposition to material capital, they are depicted as having an abundance of affection and social capital (the bond between Doyler and his mother, despite being ambiguous, is strong). They can then help the rich man from a stunted, propriety-obsessed background (Anthony MacMurrough's parents have been absent since he went to gaol). Furthermore, Doyler helps Jim discover his sexuality and his nationalistic purpose, despite Jim never quite letting go of his disdain for the black-haired boy's destitution. Indeed, Jim even recognises his own hypocrisy in this excerpt:

How many times had Doyler invited him to his home and he made excuses not to go? (...) But Jim had dreaded the squalor he would find. (...) And when Doyler would ask the meaning of a word, in Latin, say, or in the French of Madame MacMurrough, Jim would pretend not to know. And saying 'do be' and using 'was' for 'were' – as though he'd please his friend with his ignorance. (...) Oh sure right enough, he'd follow Doyler to war, but he wouldn't stoop to visit his home. (ASTB,361)

¹⁸³ Deane, Seamus 'Mugwumps and Reptiles'. *Atlantis* 2 (October 1970) 3-10 5

Jim's own father has barely escaped the same squalor only by joining the army and marrying Estella, whose aunt had the shop, thus giving Mack access to upward social mobility. This disdain Jim feels for the poor might stem from some form of transgenerational class shame, for, at least in college, he is perceived as close to Doyler's class. However, the difference in their living conditions is quite clear as both their homes are described and their fathers' healths contrast sharply. The concrete consequences of Doyler's poverty are in no way ignored by the narrative: his father is on his way to an early grave and one of his sisters (the 'bundle' of the excerpt I close-read in the first subpart) dies in infancy¹⁸⁴. Doyler is the only main character sacrificed by the novel, once his duty of enriching the lives of two characters above his class is fulfilled, he can die, and further cement Jim's nationalism on the way out. By James Somerton's definition, these elements together qualify Doyler as an 'emotional support poor'. For instance, one could argue the novel spends more time depicting Anthony MacMurrough's point of view (and Jim's) than it does Doyler's. The author himself confessed to having had trouble finding Doyler's voice ('Doyler was the most difficult'¹⁸⁵) and struggling to write the chapters covering his time in Dublin and the Citizen Army, alone and away from Anthony MacMurrough and Jim. In his video essay, *The Tragedy of Being Rich*, James Somerton argues that, usually, the audience is expected to connect more with the rich characters, like the prince of the series *Young Royals*¹⁸⁶:

The show goes to great lengths to describe how and why we should empathise, maybe even pity this literal prince, BECAUSE he's a prince. From the very clear neglect and distance he feels from his parents, the strain of having to do things he does not want to do, struggling to keep what he wants at arms' length because he knows he will not be allowed to have it...¹⁸⁷

And, to compare, we do see in *At Swim Two Boys* the same pressure around Anthony MacMurrough, almost an Irish nationalist royal through his very illustrious name, capable of socially surviving his prison sentence and being re-instated into genteel Irish society provided he keeps his desires at arms-length and agrees to marry, but he does have the opportunity to still live in comfort and inherit his aunt's wealth and influence. Were Doyler (or probably Jim) to be found out, no such re-establishment would be possible, and they never know such circumstances to begin with. Likewise, according to Somerton's reading:

Wilmhelm has money, but in order for him to become a functioning human being, he needs someone to help him navigate all the emotions he's not allowed to have. Enter the poor person, for whom emotional intelligence

¹⁸⁴ 'Always sad to see the little coffin.' (ASTB,89)

¹⁸⁵ Conner, Marc and O'Neill, Jamie (2007). "To Bring All Loves Home": An Interview with Jamie O'Neill. *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 11(2), 66–78. 68.

¹⁸⁶ Ambjörn, Lisa, Beckung, Lars, Holter, Camilla *Young Royals* Netflix series (2020)

¹⁸⁷ Somerton, James 'The Tragedy of being Rich' *James Somerton* Youtube (2022)

is in abundance. Simon's family life is almost a night-and-day foil to Wilhelm. Little in the way of expendable income, but wealth in emotions, and having an open, honest line of dialogue with his mother.¹⁸⁸

Hence the similarities between this situation and the Anthony MacMurrough/Jim-Doyler trio keep cropping up to suggest a similar dynamic. Doyler's often calls out this very dynamic but even the subversive re-appropriation of his monetised encounters with the rich young man is defeated as, ultimately, the situation still benefits Anthony MacMurrough. Indeed, the latter is always condescendingly amused at the 'scandal' provided by this rebellious poor adolescent.

Moreover, the depiction of Doyler and his mother still matches the cliché of the honest poor who would never stoop to steal, even to eat, never thinking of actually cheating a system that places them at the bottom of the hierarchy while other families (like the MacMurroughs) hoard a wealth then can never have access to. Two scenes in particular throw the subversive self-consciousness of O'Neill's politics off course. MacMurrough has the disingenuous self-awareness to quote Oscar Wilde's *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891): 'The best amongst the poor are never grateful. They are ungrateful, discontented, disobedient, and rebellious. Wilde again; his observation concluding: They are quite right to be so.' (ASTB,295) Yet, ignoring that, the narrative still has Doyler being too honest to steal. As a child, he returns the soaps he has taken from Jim's father's shop, preferring to take a beating by his own step-father, who *forced* him to steal, telling Jim: 'I didn't want you thinking me a thief' (ASTB,79). Later in boyhood, his mother forces him to eat alone and pay for a piece of meat he stole to feed his family. Even Doyler's half-drowning, his own element turning against him, only presents an opportunity for MacMurrough's redemption as he saves him, and Jim to take care of him, both making amends for their low consideration of his condition before the ultimate death of the character, once his purpose has been fulfilled.

To circle back to the loss of water as an element of queerness, Irish identity, then, had to rigidify around a single-minded hatred of the coloniser that temporarily (yet for far too long after Independence) would erase the struggles of its queer population, marginalised even within the margins. Yet Jamie O'Neill, in his depiction of Doyler, also proves the intersection of class, queerness and Irishness as he ends up depicting a character who cumulates three types of marginalised status as expendable.

Eros and Thanatos

The notion of Eros/Thanatos is mentioned as such in *Beautiful Pictures of the Lost Homeland* as Lotte begins her relationship with her neighbour, Eoin 'the poet', on the night of Aisling's (Georgia's

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

mother) funeral: 'For weeks they circled each other like sharks, him looking, her avoiding, then, one drunken night, stoned and randy after Aisling's funeral – Eros/Thanatos; *quelle surprise* –' (BPLH,270) Yet, further in the chapter told from Lotte's point of view, the repetition of 'Eros/Thanatos *quelle surprise*' (ASTB,298) reveals another reaction to Aisling's death as it seems that David, (Geo's father) moves closer to Lotte during his wife's funerals. This is supposedly contextualised by his suspecting an affair between the Aisling and his friend Donnacha. This duality stems from Freudian psychoanalysis and is firmly anchored in heteronormative, productive views of life and sexuality: 'The life instinct can be seen as simply the desire for the body to develop, grow, thrive, and procreate. Freud referred to the life instinct as Eros, and the death instinct as Thanatos (Freud, 1949). Eros serves mankind through growth, and prosperity of the body.'¹⁸⁹ In the case of the Lotte David/Eoin pairing, it seems to work as Lotte will unwittingly become pregnant after her encounters with 'the poet'. In this part, however, I will seek to divorce the notion from its Freudian (largely debunked) basis as the dual death/sex drives might match a queer temporality of fleetingness and express a coping mechanism in the face of a sudden loss.

Douglas Crimp even addresses this reductive view of the dual impulses and expands on the definition of the mourning process: 'Freud tells us that mourning is the reaction not only to the death of a loved person, but also "to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as a fatherland, liberty, and ideal..." Can we be allowed to include, in this 'civilised' list, the ideal of perverse sexual pleasure itself rather than one stemming from its sublimation?'¹⁹⁰ The blur of lust and grief also runs through two other deaths of the corpus as the authors veer away from idealisation and the simplicity of a grief. Water then seeps through inappropriate bonds that appear in a context of funerals or recent loss, emphasising the ambiguous role of the element, not simply as a revealer of complex identities or a bonding agent, but a pervasive sign which heralds and complicates the grieving process.

As I mentioned briefly, Anthony MacMurrough proposes another island to Jim shortly after Doyler's death, as if the main obstacle to their relationship has been lifted, linking the death of a main character with the potential amorous closeness of two others. Only because of Anthony MacMurrough's guilt does he stop himself from trying to sleep with Jim. When they meet each other again and before Anthony MacMurrough shifts to a mentor figure for the younger man, he thinks

¹⁸⁹ Miller, Ryan D. 'Thanatos-Eros, Being-Non Being: Psychoanalytic - Existential Connection' (1999) University of Nebraska at Omaha Digital Commons 17-18

¹⁹⁰ Crimp, Douglas 'Mourning and Militancy' in *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* Cambridge, MIT Press (2002) 11

of Jim as an easy quarry: 'How wonderful it was this coming to know, certain of the knowing to come.' (ASTB,377) This delayed pleasure is abruptly cut off when Jim mentions Doyler and the suit, a clear reminder of the sexual services MacMurrough has bought from him and he realises that the feelings Jim has for Doyler are the only thing motivating him to talk to him. The sea, as the element associated with Doyler, re-asserts itself during the conversation to prove that this is the upmost thing in Jim's mind: 'MacMurrough saw it from far off, coming, a wave over the sea, spraying the outlying rocks, unmindful, aimless, parting and merging, onward ever coming. And I thought that I-' (ASTB,377). Here the sea reminds the reader of the various struggles Jim and Doyler's relationship has endured 'parting and merging', as Doyler, like the tide, has come and gone by Jim's side: 'twice we were great and twice he's left' (ASTB,379) first to Co. Clare and then to Dublin, the spraying a reminder of his constant spitting and suggesting the young man might come back again to Jim 'onward ever coming', each delay and separation only temporary. The sea embodying Doyler coming between Anthony MacMurrough and Jim is further signified as an insistent presence: 'On came the waves, and MacMurrough watched it, feeling the lumbering land's insignificance to the sea. The wave splashed carelessly on the rocks below, drenching him in the knowledge of his inconsequence. That I should have thought that I – How could I have thought that I-?' (ASTB,379) MacMurrough is equated here with the land and Doyler with the sea, Anthony MacMurrough feels his 'insignificance' and 'inconsequence' as Jim keeps talking about Doyler, and he knows the young man is not attracted to him romantically. The silencing of what MacMurrough has been thinking through the interrupting dashes 'I –' express his shame 'God but I'm an egoistical bastard' (ASTB,379) and it triggers a shift in Anthony MacMurrough's priorities. He chooses to protect the love between the two adolescents to avoid them growing older with the same self-loathing as his.

However once Doyler is dead, MacMurrough hopes for an island he will share with Jim (like the Muglins he shared with Doyler) and even if it can be read as a form of denial on MacMurrough's part, he also hopes they will swim together, although, tellingly: 'In the living stream they'd swim a season,' (ASTB,641) divorcing the swim from the sea, which remains Doyler's element. This echoes the multiple swims that Anthony MacMurrough and Jim previously shared in the Kingston baths, though always in domesticated waters, and always in order to prepare Jim to swim to the Muglins with Doyler. Yet this dedication of Anthony MacMurrough to the couple's success is limited by his love for Jim, which is not entirely platonic and mostly contained by Doyler's shadow: when Jim asks Anthony MacMurrough about the next step in their relationship after the Muglins, it reaches the limit of his benevolence: 'does it mean anything with marrying, MacEmm? Doyler and me.' 'No Jim,

you can't ask me that.' (ASTB,550) MacMurrough decides to enlist in the ongoing war to escape an oppressive love triangle and states to Jim, after sharing his decision: 'And don't you know I love you too much? Far too much to interfere between you and your pal. But I couldn't bear to watch you with another always. It's too much for me.' (ASTB,575) However, O'Neill does not let the ambivalence of the character slip into sentimental selflessness, as the death of Doyler reopens the window of opportunity. Yet this usual trope of Eros and Thanatos offering the potential of another bond through water, the swim in 'a living stream' emphasising the desire of life after multiple deaths have occurred, highlights the ambivalence of water, that heralds death (for Doyler) and new, bittersweet beginnings for the remaining members of the trio. The swim in the stream is said to only last 'a season' as Anthony MacMurrough knows that Jim will fight and die in the wars after the Easter Rising.

Likewise, Penelope has muddled feelings upon disclosing her past attraction for Cara's sister, Kate, which participates to the motif of an ambiguous water. The water strengthened Pen's bond with her partner of thirteen years in their quiet baths but also wraps Pen and Kate together as they bond after Cara's funerals. This displaced lust is introduced by Pen having an erotic surge during Cara's funerals, as her mind keeps wandering to intimate memories of their life as a couple, as it seems to be a habit for her at the best of times: 'I used to spend the greater part of each mass in this pious position when I was a youngster, face closed over the most lurid of sexual fantasies. (Hood,135) This habit then heralds the lacing of Eros and Thanatos during the funeral mass and, in Pen's habit of 'quiet rebellion,' seems like a secret way to subvert her time spent at church under an institution that does not recognise her desires. The paradox of erotic lust during a bereavement is also stated as the intimate memories pursue Pen in her dreams after the funeral: 'How dared I lie here feeling, thinking, desiring, when she was in a box underground? What made me want to be alive more that I wanted to be with her?' (Hood,153). Remembering her first crush for Kate seems both a survival technique and a low-key revenge on a partner who repeatedly sought the company of others while Pen herself never managed to see anyone else (erasing the phone number of another woman by mistake when the opportunity presented itself). Pen's attraction for Kate is spelled out thus in the novel: 'The only useful thing about remembering her was that it distracted me from her sister. It almost convinced me that I had an independent self, a Pen who pre-existed (and so might even survive) Cara.' (Hood,79)

As the first time Pen was invited into the Wall household was after swimming ('we'd bumped into each other at the pool,' Hood, 109), the strange flirtatious scene in the swimming pool echoes this

first time in Kate/Cara's private home. This symmetry in time is emphasised by the changing of bodies, from ages fourteen to thirty: 'Our bodies had changed in the doubling of years since we met here in the water' (Hood,232). This already signals the increasing closeness of the bodies that become joined in the 'ours', the gap of the years passed bridged. Throughout the novel, small accidental brushes occur between the two, and always Pen withdraws sharply 'My legs drifted towards hers, and one of my feet brushed against one of hers, cold and light. I doubled over, sending my legs out behind me.' (Hood,233) Despite using this attraction between them as a distraction from her grief, Pen seems to be refusing these touches, even in the bonding element of water (as she shared private baths with the younger sister, she shares the public baths with the eldest) until she allows this moment of fantasy to rise: 'I put my face in the water and made my legs do all the work, letting my arms float out behind like seaweed. When I raised my dripping face Kate was at the shallow end of the lane ... I had never kissed this woman and never would. But it still gave me some obscure pleasure that the same water was on both our lips.' (Hood,234) The established queer image of the sea makes its way through even chlorinated swimming pool water as Pen's arms 'float out behind like seaweed' and the sharing of 'the same water' eroticises the public swim. This temporary relief from grief settles a holiday mood for the penultimate day of the novel and Kate even seems to be flirting with Pen as she comments afterwards: 'I'm not getting at you, honestly. I think, you know, in that fringed shawl of yours, you look magnificent.' (Hood,236). The fantasy is pushed quite far as the two even bond over a shared memory of the rigid sisters of Immac: 'We were laughing so hard it bent us double. Kate was leaning on her seat-belt, gasping for breath. Her head hung a few inches from mine. Below her curls I could see the curve of her open mouth.' (Hood,237) Knowing this scene occurs on Friday and the funeral has taken place on Wednesday adds to Penelope's ambivalent reaction to Cara's death. This uncomfortable situation culminates as Penelope masturbates after coming back from the swimming pool and the thoughts of Kate interrupt her usual fantasy:

No good hostess steals her guest's image and rubs herself against it. (...) I tried to convert the image into Cara, but couldn't visualise the face clearly; all I could do was add a tangled sheet of red hair, and you could still see the dark roots under it. She shook it back and looked at me, then her breath was against my ear, murmuring honeyed insults. You know who I am, she whispered. I was the first, a year before my little sister. I was the very first to make you wet. (Hood,243)

The ambivalent ('honeyed insults') presence of Kate muddling the memory of her sister twists the fantasy further claiming a sort of chronological hierarchy between the sisters despite the asymmetrical amount of time spent with each. The fact that Penelope is forgetting Cara's face and rushing to replace her with distractions of her first crush also recalls her suspended widowhood. As

barely anyone knows she actually just lost her partner of thirteen years, going through the usual or even logical motions of grief is impossible, an interrupted mourning fumbling with the official steps, chronologically unstructured and trying to skip to the escape. For instance, upon learning the stages of grief 'numbness, anger, regret, loss' (Hood,223) she concludes 'Damn the experts and their stages and their emotional clocks; this thing was such a mess, no one could impose order on it. (Hood,224) No comfortable narrative of idealising the deceased or propriety in mourning is offered by Donoghue who subverts every expectation for a novel about queer (now more in the sense of strange) grief.

Interestingly, the protagonists who survive in the novels all seem to locate the site of Eros and Thanatos in water, but of a kind different to the one that is the prime locus of bonding. Anthony MacMurrough wants to share the 'living stream' with Jim, avoiding the sea, redolent of Doyle and the Muglins' symbolism while Penelope returns to her first site of bonding with Cara's sister, her first real crush in life, leaving the domestic, private baths behind. As those flirtations or hopes are tightly tangled with the occurrence of sudden deaths, they seem little more than temporary escapes and denial, yet all are channelled through the medium of the same ambiguous element which serves to highlight the same ambiguous behaviour of Penelope and Anthony MacMurrough.

2. Silent Drought

Tears in the rain

Yet water also expresses the grief Pen denies, as her inability to cry throughout the week builds up as a physical pain, recalling the galls of the *murúcha* high and dry, divorced from their element and scorched by the winds, and becomes a recurring, lancinating motif throughout the novel:

'My cheek stayed dry as paper. The tears were dammed up in my head, scorching me from the inside.' (Hood,25)

'But oddly enough I felt in no danger of tears. My skin was parched, that little dry spot on my right eyelid beginning to itch again. The trick seemed to be to remember only the irritating times. The good times were dangerous. (Hood,59)

'My eyes were still dry. I leaned them on my knuckles, trying to break the seal that kept back the waters.' (Hood,68)

This lachrymal drought is paralleled with the sunny weather of an unusually (for Ireland) warm summer, mocking the funeral process with a holiday mood, and this contrast is also underlined: 'just when the sky should rightly have let down tears of acid rain, didn't the sun come out. (...) a full honest-to-god radiance through a patch of blue sky' (Hood,143) The same lexical field sprawls

through Pen's physical description and the weather, giving the impression that the whole world revolves around this arrested grief, the summer heat likewise 'scorching', 'parched', the 'itch', the 'dry' all build up a keen loss of a vital element pairing tears and open grief with a life that cannot move on before it is expressed. However, this sentimental interpretation, though suggested by the writing, is overtly denied in the text: 'Cry it all out', we were told, as if grief was a simple toxin that could be converted into liquid and drained out of the body.' (Hood,156) Emma Donoghue seems determined to subvert the expectations for a novel articulated around a funeral week, producing a life-like realism where neither the weather nor reactions match the grieving atmosphere.

The tears Pen withholds during her first week of hidden widowhood seem to come out in the form of torrential rains when she argues with Jo, a woman from the Attic, about the significance of their relationship in Cara's life despite her having other lovers. The rain pools and floods the courtyard: 'I don't want to alarm you but you're four inches under out there. -I'm what? -Your drains must be choked.' (Hood,70) the misunderstanding beat allows the reader to consider for a moment that Pen herself is underwater, the choked drains seemingly another mundane expression of suppressed grief. The 'theatricals' around Pen's widowhood are often suppressed to favour a more matter-of-fact depiction but water still permeates the scene and symbolically unloads Pen's barrelful of tears that, she says, are 'misaid in the back of some emotional warehouse. Maybe if I started I'd never stop till I filled the big house and drowned all who came in the door.' (Hood,156) Behind this mundanity remains the destructive potential of her grief, constantly suppressed until the close of the novel. She continues, overtly linking her delayed crying to the rain this time: 'Maybe I was saving the tears for some safer time, waiting for some delayed reaction that would bring them on as water spills in glittering strings from the roof of a bus shelter, ten minutes after the rain.' (Hood,156) This happens after the downpour around the tense discussion with Jo (and again at the end of the novel when she finally does cry, as previously mentioned) encouraging the pairing between the two sources of water. This scene, suggesting the same equation, also occurs shortly after Kate (Cara's estranged sister) has noticed, at the funeral:

'You were a couple, weren't you?'

'What, me and Cara, you mean?'

She nodded warily.

'Yes,' I said, 'of course we were.'

...

'I kind of wondered, when I realised you'd been living here for years,' she said. 'But I wasn't absolutely sure till I saw you at the grave, looking sort of weighty. (...) No, I mean responsible. Like, widowed.' The words created a little *pool of silence* round it. 'I should have picked up on it before...' Kate's voice trailed off. (Hood,150, my italics)

This is the first time in the novel that Pen's widowhood is acknowledged, and again the water that had bound Pen and Cara's bodies in rare peaceful (and wordless) baths erupts as a 'pool of silence'. Between the silence of her hidden status and the suppressed tears, water seems omnipresent around Pen's grief to signal repeatedly a natural force that is being constrained, the right to mourn a lover in a non-heterosexual pairing, the water of the Irish rain channelled through the mundane urban elements of drains and bus shelters. One meta way of interpreting the 'Fountain Pen' (Hood,269)'s dryness is that Emma Donoghue, though indicating this novel was partially autobiographical, also stated she 'hadn't (and still haven't) experienced any major bereavement'¹⁹¹ and had limited material to write about grief, thus Pen, the writer's medium lacks ink/tears to nourish the novel. It is paradoxically limited to the traditional Irish funeral week, trapping the character within the ceremonial constraints of grief while not allowing her to express it to the natural intensity of mourning a partner of thirteen years; she can only mourn a friend or worse, a housemate, and only for the appropriate week-long event.

Keening and anger

The suppressed tears are to be paired with a silenced caoineadh/keening, described by Kathleen O'Brien as a social practice that went beyond a funeral performance of mourning the dead 'in a series of poetic verbal phrases into which soft-spoken utterances and piercingly loud sobs were interjected' and acted as a site of female expression, a public tribunal where:

On one level, the oral caoineadh performances encouraged the community gathered for death rituals to confront the usually clandestine workings of other-worldliness. On other levels, the temporarily expanded social limits provided venues to address dubious behaviours that otherwise lacked appropriate format for public censure in male-dominated clan-based power structures. Within *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire and other laments*, we find references to abusive domestic relationships and other difficult social dynamics including explosive frictions between families or intensified political resistance to government authorities.¹⁹²

Within local social structures, then keening used the time of death and mourning as a liberation of women's voices and a time of reckoning for the various tensions that were revealed in the suspended week surrounding death. Yet despite the strict containment of these types of expression within Irish society (only on funeral weeks), the coloniser took it as an epitome of Irish chaotic barbarism:

Thus, while, individual keens and keening women had significant impacts on their communities and transmissions of cultural memory, they also exist as powerfully iconic figures in centuries of English writing where they became emblems of an emotional wildness and unpredictable violence in Irish oral cultures. In turn,

¹⁹¹ <https://images-eu.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/I/81Hs-9t%2BgRL.pdf> 11 [last accessed 08/02/23]

¹⁹² O'Brien, Kathleen 'Contemporary Caoineadh: Talking Straight through the Dead Author(s)' *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Spring, 2006, Vol. 32, No. 1 56-63, 57.

feminised orality in the Irish "national character" came to stand as evidence for the need to "civilise" Ireland within the project of British empire...¹⁹³

David Lloyd makes a similar argument in the chapter 'Closing the mouth: disciplining oral space' stating that after the Famine, keening in mourning time was replaced by a 'loud silence'¹⁹⁴ and, as I already established in the first chapter, Penelope's grief is linked to this mass extinction through her changed relationship to food during the week following Cara's death. Lloyd argues that, after the Union in 1800, English desire to integrate Ireland into a more 'civilised' Britishness involved the eviction of sentiment from the public space to bring a feudal Ireland into colonial modernity and that included a ban on keening. Yet he also argues that Irish literature can be seen as a 'site of resurgence of spectres of older orality'¹⁹⁵ and Penelope's 'quiet rebellion' and suppressed widowhood her constant silence and closeted life can be seen as the legacy of modernity in Ireland, that still influences the population long past Independence and only finds a modicum of release through 'literacy loquacity', a limited form of cultural bonding as the form differs: writing and reading being individual, self-reflective and silent forms of expression while the oral tradition belonged to the loud communal. I have argued the various writers find a compromise between written and oral expression by employing a form of oral language in their writing and speaking directly or indirectly to the reader in a personal use of 'you'/'yous', but Penelope during the mourning week seems like she has not quite moved past the legacy of silencing and relegating of her anger, grief and love to the closeted domestic space and to her closed mouth.

I have touched on the 'humility as humiliation' in the first chapter and emphasised that for a marginalised community to mock the trauma they endure is a way to seek a form of acceptance with mainstream audiences. A review even congratulated Donoghue for avoiding 'a stiff polemic on rights for queer people using a partner's death as a way into this argument'¹⁹⁶. Yet the novel does, (too) subtly, quietly remind the reader that Pen losing Cara "'must be like when a husband or wife dies. Only less...official". I nodded. My throat was full of angry words, but they weren't for him.' (Hood,182) When Robert, Pen's co-worker is finally made aware of the actual relationship between her and the deceased, it takes a while for him to equate it to the loss in a heterosexual pairing: 'Thirteen years, you said. I just can't imagine what it would be like if I was with Sheila for ten more years and then she...' (...) '-It's good when someone tries to understand.' Even if it takes a death to

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ Lloyd, David *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity The Transformation of Oral Space*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2011), 55

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid* 59

¹⁹⁶ <https://caseythecanadianlesbrarian.wordpress.com/2013/09/17/i-was-more-alive-than-i-could-bear-a-review-of-hood-by-emma-donoghue/> [last accessed 28/01/23]

reach parity, spat the back of my brain.’ (Hood,182) This sets a different light on the ‘quiet rebellion’ of the protagonist: much like her grief as a widow and her imposed ‘identity’ as a gay woman her anger at the inequality in rights seems, at best, contained. The angry part of her, ‘the back of [her] brain’ spits retorts and her throat is ‘full of angry words,’ but nothing is uttered. The same ‘pool of silence’ that surrounds her widowed condition also seems to have extinguished any vindication for her rights and relationship. In relation to keening, Pen even has, according to the history pointed out by Kathleen O’Brien, internalised colonial modernity when she participates reluctantly in the unofficial wake for Cara at the Attic, the feminist and lesbian community. Her disdain echoes centuries of criticism by non-Irish observers who viewed the demonstrative emotions by *na mná caointe* at traditional wakes of the past:

All the women crying, except Sherry, were ones I'd never met before. Maybe tears were in inverse proportion to how well you knew the person the wake was for. Maybe these were volunteers who did the rounds of women's parties, keening or cheering or laughing depending on what was appropriate. (Hood, 21)

This coding of lesbian emotion thus takes yet another twist when considered within a trajectory of Irish cultural identities. Besides anger for her unfaithful partner, Pen never voices any emotions and that anger, past the death of its object, is quite irrelevant (like in the woods where she realises she is arguing with a dead person). Her own potential keening is also silenced as she runs to the woods to scream when the death of Cara is announced to her:

A scream too wide to let out bulged behind my teeth ... I must have had some notion of finding a space big enough for such a scream... When I got to the woods there was no more room than in the big house, and I had no breath left. ... I opened my jaw again but only managed to produce a little gasp, a sort of yawn of pain. I realized that I was such a tame conditioned creature that I couldn't scream, even under circumstances that should have allowed for anything.’ (Hood,22-23)

The physical presence of the silenced scream that bulges, needs space to be expressed is a fit allegory for her unrecognised widowhood having no space to be let out. Like her anger, her grief is reduced to ‘a little gasp/a yawn’ as discreet as possible, her ‘tame conditioned’ nature stemming from both the suppression of ancestral keening through colonisation and the heteronormative societal erasure of her romantic bond with another woman. However, as established, the grief might also not be fully expressed as Cara’s cheating complicates Pen’s feelings of loss and longing. The ambivalence towards her less than perfect lover might not simply be a product of internalised colonialism and homophobia but also due to the un-avowed relief to have found an unexpected exit from a toxic relationship.

Amiss

The impact of death too becomes 'unspeakable', un-recorded, the suspension of normal communication, of therapeutic talk, more than the keening, the entire statement of the death is not expressed: 'I went about all my immediate duties, including telling Mr Wall, though now I came to think of it, I could not for the life of me remember what ghastly words I had chosen, and I would never dream of asking him. (Hood,22) And later: 'I wondered why Mr Wall wanted to see his daughter's body. It was not something he and I would ever bring ourselves to talk about.' (Hood,23) There's the double-notion of a '*non-dit*' here, already in the impossibility to express the recent death in words and the fact that they cannot talk about it as a widow and father-in-law, the official bond severed by the closeted nature of the relationship.

As I have emphasised in the previous parts, only very few moments of actual grief are drowned in the mundane dealings with death and this results in Pen's mourning being displaced, amiss, not finding its place in an absurd world that assumes she simply was her wife's housemate:

I composed my features into a pleasant tired mask so that nobody would ask me what the matter was, or remember about the funeral. I did not want to disown Cara by **diluting her** into my 'housemate'. Of course, I had done that very thing over and over while she was alive, but it seemed wrong now that there was no longer any possibility of calling off the lie, now that there was no chance that I would ever bring her on my arm to a staff Christmas party and say, this is my beloved... (Hood,175)

It is interesting to note that the 'closet' doubles as a 'mask', all participating in hiding the true nature of her relationship with Cara, yet the notion of 'diluting' a lover as a 'housemate' paradoxically recalls their principal bonding element through the many baths they have shared over thirteen years, emphasising the fact that the hidden, domestically confined nature of the intimate baths has contributed in 'diluting' their bond's public expression. The closing window for a potential reveal is also in opposition with the ongoing maintenance of the memories (in the present tense) alive in Pen's mind, as if to keep the opportunity open to make things right in her head.

Schrödinger's cat is also used there, if not in name, at least in concept, in relation to her not coming out to her mother to keep her mother's love and acceptance in this in-between: 'Ah don't give me that philosopher's bullshit about the cat that doesn't exist until you open the box and look at it.' (Hood,241) This refusal to accept the opportunity of coming out leading to a lifetime of suspension in this in-between is in fact voiced by Jo, for whom another death has closed the possibility: 'I always figured Mum sort of knew but didn't want to know for sure. Then she got cancer. Died nine years ago, and I've been coming out to her in my head ever since, but I don't think she can hear.' (Hood,241). Therefore, unlike in *Beautiful Pictures*, death forecloses possibilities instead of opening them, losing one option definitely in the 'fork path', no matter how much the possibility of it is kept

open through the imagination and inner monologues or memories of the characters. For instance, Pen tries to maintain Cara's life through the denial allowed by the fact that she never came back from Greece, hence refusing to go to the Chapel of remains she muses: 'I just felt no need to see it, the thing they would call the remains. I knew it was more true to say that she was still wandering round the Aegean, buying postcards but no stamps. Not getting around to coming home, but not to be thought of as any less real that she ever was. (Hood,18) Interestingly, the sea is not overtly mentioned, just reduced to 'the Aegean' to constitute the unspoken backdrop to Cara's haides, keeping her 'real' and somewhat alive until her postcard arrives, with 'a black cat basking on a whitewashed wall' (Hood,269) on it, once more recalling Schrödinger's who is about to be found dead indeed. The postcard arriving shatters this denial daydream of Pen's as it proves that Cara did buy the stamps and got back to Ireland, into the car crash on the way back from the airport. This divorce between her and her heteronormative environment has already been analysed in her failed coming-out scene to her co-worker, her coming out to her mother is left suspended at the close of the novel. She is trapped in the same 'Schrödinger cat' non-space, a space in-between where it both happens and doesn't.

Likewise, a surreal confusion surrounds her grief, she first refuses the news of the death, hanging up on the nurse: 'When she told me first, I thought, what poor taste, they say the best thing to do with hoaxers is to put the phone down on them straight away. But when she rang back (...) I apologised over and over for having slammed down the phone, and she kept telling me it was understandable. But there was nothing understandable about any of it.' (Hood,21) The limitations of language to express death, stated in the omission of the word, Pen's inability to discuss it with her father-in-law or to recall how she announced it is also reflected in the time slippage of the novel, as the narrative present is used for memories. All put together, these clues point to the inadequacy of language and chronological deconstruction participates in making the first week of grief surreal, blurry, many things going amiss, which recalls this description by Lemony Snicket's *Reptile Room* in *A series of Unfortunate Events* for the general disorientation caused by a sudden death:

It is a curious thing, the death of a loved one. We all know that our time in this world is limited, and that eventually all of us will end up underneath some sheet, never to wake up. And yet it is always a surprise when it happens to someone we know. It is like walking up the stairs to your bedroom in the dark, and thinking there is one more stair than there is. Your foot falls down, through the air, and there is a sickly moment of dark surprise as you try and readjust the way you thought of things.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ Snicket, Lemony 'Chapter 7' *A Series of Unfortunate Events: The Reptile Room* London, Egmont (2012), 96-97.

The same confusion permeates the narrative and mirrors Pen's, as Cara is always amiss during the week following her death: Pen at the mortuary walks up to the wrong slab, although she later concedes 'no slab would be the right one' (Hood,25) following the lack of sense surrounding the event for her, then Sister Dominic, the matriarch at the 'Immac' school mistakes Cara's name for 'Tara' (Hood,38), Kate's suitcase arrives at the house and Pen thinks it's Cara's with the surprise of finding contraceptive pills in it. Hence these awkward, amiss moments keep multiplying through the narrative: wrong slab, wrong name, wrong suitcase, emphasising the surreal quality of the loss. The newspaper ad announcing Cara's death also misspells: 'Ciara Wall' (Hood,90) and offers no moment of realisation to Pen as she reads it: 'I read the words right through twice more, trying to believe them, but they sounded more fictional every time.' (Hood,45) This tension between reality and fiction laces the whole narrative and, like Georgia's meta-musings, attracts the attention of the reader to the paradox of this tension in a work of fiction. It culminates in Pen's monologue: 'None of this was real, not a bit of it. These names, even this doppelgänger 'Ciara Wall', were strangers to me. I could feel the appropriate things but only at a distance, as if reading a book which, however moving and engrossing, would be put aside as soon as there was a knock at the door.' (Hood,91) Through this deconstructed meta-narrative, the author seems to have meant to emphasise the disconnect, the dissociation felt by the character surrounding the death of an ambivalent lover.

3. Peaceful floating?

Silenced monsters

As previously discussed, towards the end of the novel, Pen goes to the swimming pool, a first reconnection with the suppressed element that precedes her potential coming out to her mother. Pen remembers she 'always found refuge in water' despite the people gawking at her large shape 'I could not see myself as anything but Nessie, all lime-green billows.' (Hood,232) Interestingly, equating a marginalised (large, queer) body with that of an aquatic monster (the Loch Ness monster) was also a technique used to parody and undermine the Irish body. There is some legendary precedent to this equation, in the children of Lir: "'My Lord, your queen has borne you two lusty male children.' She held one of the boys to the light and Lir could see the sharp elfin features, the slanting eyes and the green tinged skin. The midwife held up a tiny, perfectly formed hand – with webbed fingers. For Lir was of the Tuatha De Danann and the Lord of the Sea.'¹⁹⁸ There might be a

¹⁹⁸ Scott, Michael *Irish Folk and Fairy Tales Omnibus* London, Sphere (1984), 58.

reference to the pelagic nature of the Irish in Victorian caricatures of the colonised people, though this time to denigrate and highlight their otherness. In *Apes and Angels* Lewis Perry Curtis retraces the graphic evolution of British propaganda caricatures of the dissident first colony, the simian traits are often associated with various sea or reptilian creatures like the 'Irish Devil-Fish'¹⁹⁹ a 'prognathous monster [with] scales'²⁰⁰ or a Melusine-like reptilian monster with scales facing an Andromeda Hibernia²⁰¹ the rebellious side always depicted through monstrous and sometimes amphibian traits, perhaps also to assert the Irish as a threat coming from the sea, as mass emigration came over to the industrial cities of England. Therefore, this image of monstrous sea creatures can be effectively used as a repulsive image for any marginalised community, be it the racialised Irish population in the 19th century or the pathologised and undermined large queer bodies. Pen's self-denigration in seeing herself, an Irish queer woman, as 'Nessie' then effectively blends these two institutional, historic processes of inferiorisation. Yet the monstrousness could be reclaimed through parody, even if Pen has to self-admonish: 'You're not ugly, I told myself in the habitual formula, you're a grand girl' (Hood,232). Yet Paulina Palmer, in her article on the gothic fairy tale argues:

By parodically reworking in their [...] stories the grotesquely misogynistic representations of femininity such as the witch, the mermaid and the giantess that fairy tales inscribe, they likewise engage in an attempt to renegotiate and resignify the boundaries of the abject, thus helping to redeem the lesbian from the image of the 'monstrous feminine' which homophobic culture projects upon her.²⁰²

It could be argued that this parodying of queer Irish bodies as sea creatures then takes on a double form of re-appropriation. Jack Halberstam has overturned the negative connotation of 'monster' to re-inject its subversive charge while studying horror movies and their depiction of gender-non conformity and, drawing on the figure of Adolf Eichmann and Arendt's notion of the banality of evil, he argues:

modernity has eliminated the comfort of monsters because we have seen, in Nazi Germany and elsewhere, that evil works often as a system, it works through institutions and it works as a banal (meaning 'common to all') mechanism. In other words, evil stretches across cultural and political productions as complicity and collaboration and it manifests itself as a seamless norm rather than as some monstrous disruption.²⁰³

¹⁹⁹ Curtis, Lewis Perry *Apes and angels: the Irishman in Victorian caricature*. Newton Abbot: David and Charles (1971), 44.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 169.

²⁰² Palmer, Paulina 'Lesbian Transformations of Gothic and Fairy Tale' in Emma Parker (ed.), *Contemporary British Women Writers*, 2004, 139-53, as cited by M-O Pittin Hedon, *Op. Cit.*, for *The Gloaming*. 143

²⁰³ Halberstam, Jack *Skin Shows : Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* Durham, London: Duke University Press (1995), 162.

To expand on the monstrous Irishness as a sign of inferiorised peculiarity, another child of Lir, the (unnamed) mermaid of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill only returns to Land-Under-Wave in dementia states or death. This reconnection with an erased past, however, has no celebratory connotation, as the mermaid is simply isolated in this recollection and completely silent, the narrator argues: Ba chuma liom/nuair a d’fhill thar n-air ar an dTír-fó-Thoinn/dá mbeadh sí sona a dóthain ann./Ach ní raibh ná í./ I wouldn’t mind so much/had she returned to the Land-Under-Wave/and found her share of happiness. / But she didn’t. (*Mermaid*, 148-9) and argues she never really laughed during her traumatic life, only in morbid laughter, mocking the unfortunate. The pelagic and Irish languages are both removed from her song/speech in the end, only the ‘ech ech ech’ sound comes and goes like the tide. The final loss of identity culminates after a life-long suppression of her origins as she can only be described through a series of negatives:

Níl sí anseo nó ansúd.	She’s neither here nor there.
Ní hiasc is ní feoil í.	She’s neither fish nor flesh.
Uaireanta searann sí polláirí a sróine	Sometimes she has a sharp intake of breath through her nostrils
I slí is go dtuigféa go b’ann a bhíonn sí	That would make you think
A bá san aer	she’s drowning in air,
Faoi mar a bheadh breac go mbeifeá air le slat	Like a trout you’d caught with a rod
Is go leagfá aniar ar an bplhort é.	And taken to the bank.
	(Mermaid,150-1)

Another form of silenced monster, the mermaid is reduced to a prey ‘a trout/breac’ of colonisation that has forced herself to make a living in a hostile environment where she cannot even breathe, ‘drowning in air’/ ‘A bá san aer’ a very literal fish out of water and an allegory of Irish identity drowned in Britishness and its anglophone legacy.

Morbid baths

Penelope does re-join with the element and uses it as a space of re-appropriation of her body which, free of gravity can expand and relax: ‘I let my face sink into the silky water. I hung there for a while, limp as a suicide, my shoulders sloughing off the weight of the week. My thighs drifted in the wash of a passing swimmer. My breasts floated free of gravity. (Hood,233) The touch-based sensory experience of water is set as a positive and peaceful moment for the anxious protagonist, confirming the element as her ‘refuge’ as she relinquishes the tight control with which she has held onto her behaviour and demeanour over the funerals’ week ‘sloughing off’, ‘drifted’, ‘floated’ hence making

water the only place where she can abandon this rigid, calculated posture that condenses her grief to appropriate levels for a non-amorous relationship (hiding her actual state of widowhood) but which has had the side-effect of completely blocking off her ability to cry at the death of her partner.

As an aside, the widely debated but quite interesting Aquatic Ape Theory²⁰⁴ (which would explain, for instance, the subcutaneous fat distribution that differentiates humans from apes as a temperature regulation mechanism we would have developed in the semi-aquatic phase) and general aquatic origin theories could be integrated into anti-fatphobic rhetoric, as Astrida Neimanis argues: 'Our buoyancies constantly thwarted, dry land proved too unbearable for some, and not all what it was cracked up to be. Some of us – whales, dolphins, proposes – mutated into a cetaceous state.'²⁰⁵ Since cetaceans possess buoyant and isolating blubber (currently used as another insulting terminology for 'fat'), this theory of the origins changes the quality of fatness into something positively connoted, on a par with survival in natural aqueous environment and re-inscribes, here, the queer fat body into an element where its expanse is beneficial: 'my breasts floated free of gravity'. Penelope, stared at for her 'billows' (though it is the only instance of fatphobia in *Hood*) here floats all the better for her large shapes. Furthermore, cold water swimming like the Polar Ice Mile (a northern sport practiced in, notably Scandinavian countries) is generally better survived, not with a lean 'swimmer's body' but when the swimmers put on weight (which is even recommended to them by doctors monitoring their progress²⁰⁶). James Somerton²⁰⁸ has retraced (though in the context of gay communities) the fascist origins of the obsession for lean muscular bodies, prominently celebrated in Riefensthal's propaganda movies under the Third Reich²⁰⁹, inscribed in the logic of eugenics. Yet paradoxically, this body-type is nowadays widely favoured in the mainstream queer communities (as proven by the ubiquity of 'swimmer's body' on dating applications), that tend to exclude and shame fat, expansive bodies²¹⁰, though Somerton agrees that is not unique to the queer community.

To expand on this reading of fat bodies and their increased resistance and resilience, I would like to draw on the story of Icelandic fisherman Guðlaugur Friðþórsson who was the sole survivor of the shipwreck of the *Hellisey* off the coast of Iceland in the 1980s. The man swam in 5° C cold water for six hours and trekked for three more upon finally reaching the land (it was -2° outside), it is estimated

²⁰⁴ <https://theaquaticape.org/human-evolution/aat/> [last accessed 06/02/23]

²⁰⁵ Neimanis, Astrida *Bodies of water Posthuman feminist phenomenology* London, Bloomsbury (2017) 137.

²⁰⁶ <https://www.arte.tv/en/videos/101369-000-A/into-the-cold/> [last accessed 06/02/23]

²⁰⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BHKm-qcfvM> The Gay Body Image crisis [last accessed 06/02/23]

²⁰⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20150324-hitlers-idea-of-the-perfect-body> [last accessed 06/02/23]

²¹⁰ Along with racialised, femme ones..

that he survived only thanks to his insulating fat, akin to seal blubber, that protected him in freezing waters²¹¹. His miraculous feat is now commemorated in the form of a bathtub on the Heimaey island, at the time a cow trough where he finally drank after hours of swimming and walking²¹². This augmented capacity for survival and buoyancy in extreme conditions can also guide an interpretation of the choice of Donoghue to centre a large girl as a protagonist in a difficult relationship, plunged in the chaos of overwhelming grief. The sea remains a background motif in *Hood* in the subtle shape of the boat pendant which Cara gives to Pen early on in their relationship. It is also a reference to Penelope's appearance: 'Spanish Armada somewhere in my ancestry, Cara remarked when she hung the gold boat on the chain around my neck on our first anniversary.' (Hood,93) Pen will cling onto it throughout the novel, especially in times of crisis like their first break-up: 'At night I held on to the gold boat on a chain Cara had given me, and dreamed of a crack in the timbers, of water rising and washing across the deck, sucking at the sailors' feet.' (Hood,177) It becomes a sort of metonymy for the relationship at times, as Pen imagines their future: 'Ever since she invited me to live with her I'd been sure that the pair of us would be together until we were ninety and as creaky as our rocking-chairs. (...) But I did fancy the adventure of a lifetime's journey in this unpredictable craft. (Hood,194) Ironically so, one can suspect, as Cara is the one that does most of the travelling and roaming around while Pen only keeps the potential for these rebellious wanderings frozen in the golden trinket, enclosed in the domestic space of the Wall house (a name signifying perhaps, the dead-end of the closeted relationship). Yet Pen's body and love for food might have been what helped her survive the many 'shipwrecks' of her relationship, to thrive despite the unpredictability.

In the swimming pool floating scene, the ambiguous nature of the element also infuses redolent traces of grief within a relatively peaceful moment. The invocation of the river 'suicide' conjures a familiar Ophelia presence described by Gaston Bachelard as a profound melancholic image that endows the water with a deep, death-like quality as, unlike other elements, water is its own dissolution (whereas fire has smoke and earth has dust)²¹³. The weightlessness and release of Pen's body then takes on a morbid tinge (she has to throw away sleeping pills earlier in the novel to eliminate the temptation of suicide) instead of a freeing connotation as the body is numb to its own

²¹¹ See the opening of Bonnie Tsui's *Why We Swim* London, Penguin Random House (2021)

²¹² Ragnarsdóttir, Regína Hrönn *A modern-day Viking – the Heroic Deed of the Fisherman Guðlaugur Friðþórsson in the Westman Islands* GuidetoIceland.is <https://guidetoiceland.is/connect-with-locals/regina/a-modern-day-viking-the-heroic-deed-of-the-fisherman-gudlaugur-fridthorsson-in-the-westman-islands>

²¹³ Bachelard, G. *Water and Dreams*, *Op. Cit.*, 112.

physicality. Therefore, Penelope's bath, despite allowing for a relaxation of her body, also reconnects her to the grief she has had to suppress all week. The link between death and water is also often treated in the collections of contemporary Irish poems included in the corpus. They reflect both on eco-anxiety and the specifically Irish experience of deaths by drowning, as the kilometres of coasts have seen their own share of fishing boat wrecks. An equally eerie bath occurs is found in *Milk Snake*, the poetry pamphlet by Toby Buckley, an Irish writer who grew up in Inver and is now working in Belfast. Buckley's poem 'Pickling', sheds a darker light onto Pen's floating:

My head under water in the bath sounds
The same as it does in every house
I've lived in, like heartbeats, muffled voices,
Machines whirring far away.
In here, I must try hard not to think
About body parts jarred in formaldehyde,
But bends in the water make my vessel
Look corpse-ish, bloated and wrong.
I am almost as hollow as a water wing
Because when I breathe in my body
Floats up to the surface but my base
Stays on the bottom like a set of eggs.
It's a welcome sign that the sulphurous gases
Haven't filled me that I'm not yet rotten.²¹⁴

The time suspension accompanies the body suspended, as it is between waters, between the states of life and death. The poem opposes the 'heartbeat' and familiar sounds of life, though muffled and far away, with the dissected 'body parts'. The water distorts live limbs' shapes endowing them with 'corpse-ish' qualities despite the breathing that maintains its movement in the water. Body parts aren't named as such but rendered impersonal, inorganic like a 'vessel' or a 'base' despite the possessive pronouns. The eggs could, however, spark a sign of life in this morbid depiction of a bath, as fresh eggs sink, indeed a 'welcome sign' as, if they had floated, that would indicate their rotting. The smell, however, whether they are fresh or bad, is always paired with the 'sulphurous gases' connoting the morbid rottenness that closes the poem.

²¹⁴ Buckley, Toby 'Pickling' *Milk Snake*. Birmingham, The Emma Press (2022), 26.

Through the complicated interlocking of leitmotifs, themes, recalls and offshoots, another morbid bath occurs towards the close of *Beautiful Pictures* as well:

Suddenly I could smell again. Sewage. Sea-salt. Petrol fumes. Burnt omelette. And closer again, on my own skin, the unmistakable reek of marzipan. Sonia's bath oils had been scented with almond essence. I staggered up, doubled over, retching. My hands flailed, grabbing for support. They landed on Mar's coat and under the dead dog stink of that soulless object I smelt him too, as clear as if he was in the room beside me. It was then, I think, that I began to cry. (BPLH, 390)

Here, all gathered into one swirl of smells are the multiple deaths, both potential and factual that occur in the novel. After the protagonist wakes up in a cold bath (she passed out) at her friend's and her sinuses unclog, the myriad of smells suddenly overwhelms her. They are all powerfully connoted for her: the 'marzipan/almond oil' is a clear reminder of Judith's favourite food which the two little girls share before Georgia steals Queen Bess's head. The 'whiff of almonds' (BPLH,2) also connotes explosions, as it opens the novel with the bomb exploding in the London tube and 'the smell of almonds, the smell of gelignite' (BPLH,401) an explosive used to dig tunnels for hydroelectric dams, David's first job where his mistake resulted in the dismemberment of one of his co-workers. Hence the single mention of 'almond essence' conjures up thousands of deaths/maiming by explosion, whether in tubes, cars, tunnels and, as they permeate the bath through 'bath oils,' they corrupt both a familiar sign of comfort and a usually welcoming aqueous environment for the protagonist. The other smells also participate in shifting the meaning of the mundane bathing activity, further saturating Georgia's intimacy with traumatic memories: the 'sea-salt' signalling the burnt drawings of mermaids (BPLH,182), the girlhood she was forced to hide from the watchful eyes of judgmental adults, the 'sewage' evoking the dirty canal where she thinks Mar's mutilated corpse has been thrown, further emphasised by the 'dead dog stink' and his actual smell, still in the coat. Even the seemingly inconsequential if unpleasant 'burnt omelette', because of the eggs having 'two yolks. Twins. Little freaks' (BPLH,380) comes to signify the twins Lotte and Andy, who both blew themselves up as a political statement, one decades prior, one just as the novel opens in the London tube, the news of the event flashing in the background TV that accompanies Georgia's day. The overwhelming presence of multiple deaths, augmented by her own recent car accident triggers this violent rejection motion 'retching'. The grotesque aesthetic can still mobilised here as food consumption and regurgitation depict the overwhelmed state of the character.

This moment summarises the various Schrödingerian options proposed by the novel and, through the medium of deaths, propose another portal invoked by bath water (reeking of almonds) to recall to the protagonist the only way to break free of the current death (Mar's) haunting her. The link is then established with the release of Queen Bess's head to break free of the ghost of Judith: Mar's

coat too, can be released into the sea to free Georgia from Mar (and by returning his coat to his element, in a way, free him).

Through the recurrence of morbid baths in the corpus, I hope to have established the ambiguous link of water and death as we move onto another image that links it to eco-criticism and blue humanities: that of the clepsydra, displayed in the rising sea levels as the passing of geological time and currently a looming threat for island and coastal populations (which is also the object of the thesis). In order to highlight this link, another significant image can be pointed out, that of another place of suspended time in the landscape of Ireland and associated with a common anti-Irish slur²¹⁷: bogs. With their 'cold, acidic, oxygen-free conditions that persist beneath peat bogs and which prevent decay and mummify human flesh'²¹⁸, they sometimes return bodies pickled for thousands of years that deteriorate upon discovery, oxygen instantly destroying what has been preserved for millennia. Penelope has a premonitory dream, years before Cara's death, about Kate, the long-gone sister who will only return to Ireland for Cara's funerals, constituting her then as a harbinger of death: 'In the dream, her hair's blowing across her eyes, and when she pulls it back the face is all dark, like those leathery bodies they found in the bog (...) in the dream it isn't frightening.' (Hood,12)

These other types of morbid baths preserve the skin and sometimes the facial features of 'fleshed' (by opposition to skeletons) bodies dating back as far as the Early Bronze Age. Séan Hewitt, an Ireland-based poet has also pondered at this suspension in time by bogs, these strange places that preserve traces of civilisations so ancient (the Iron Age started in 1200BC) that they seem alien to us with, customs, symbols and values that have now taken on new meaning. The poet proposes a contemporary interpretation of the Old Croghan Man's body, only the mangled torso of which was recovered, and the traces of violence that persisted on his flesh, in a way that re-instates a sensual homo-eroticism to what was, thousands of years ago, a formal kingship ritual:

Old Croghan Man

'their nipples were cut, thus rendering them ineligible for kingship... the suckling of a king's nipple was an important gesture of submission' Eamon P. Kelly, 'An Archeological Intepretation of Irish Iron Age Bog Bodies'

Only a torso now, the head

Long-severed from the neck, pelvis

Twisted off like a stubborn root.

Remember the worn jacket

Of his body pressed

²¹⁷ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/bog-trotters-1.283938> [last accessed 08/02/23]

²¹⁸ <http://irisharchaeology.ie/2011/08/irish-bog-bodies-recent-discoveries/> [last accessed 31/01/23]

in the bog; (...)
And under each nipple
A deep incision, blade-width.
Even then, they needed boys
Like me – to leave power
In our wake, to dip our heads
And take to the soft
Pink mound. I would have felt,
Then, the making of a king;
Known God, through my lips,
Entering the body.²¹⁹

The dead man's body, despite having survived for thousands of years is reduced to a dismembered object that fused with the peat that preserved it (a torn root), his skin, reduced to a garment, to be worn by another (a jacket). This, slipping into the skin of an Iron age man, is exactly what the contemporary poet does as he imagines the curious ceremony from a 2020s point of view and mends the violence of the incisions with a sensual (soft, pink) suckling, taking on a homoerotic tinge as he specifies that this act of submission is done by 'boys' (though there is no such detail in the archaeological article, it simply mentions 'subordinates'²²⁰) This contemporary reading of the bog-body's wounds re-instates the (long) deadman's body to a living, sensual creature, allowing for a moment of intimacy to cross three thousands of years through the lines of the poem. It highlights the shift in the ways we consider certain gestures and contacts, from ceremonial, to sensual and proposes an Iron age homo-eroticism that might have simply been customary in a long-gone civilisation.

This suspension of time in death and decay (as peat is decaying plant matter) which doubles as a source of life and warmth through peat fires efficiently illustrates, one last time, my concept of ambiguous water and closes this chapter to allow the analysis to move onto geological osmosis and city shivers, opening the next part with eco-criticism and blue humanities.

²¹⁹ Hewitt, Seán *Tongues of Fire* London, Jonathan Cape (2020) 39

²²⁰ Kelly, Eamon P. 'Bog Bodies – Kingship and Sacrifice' *Scéal na Móna*, vol. 13, no. 60, December 2006, 57-59



Part III : CthulHucene

Sceptical Sublime – Clepsydra – Rafts



III.1 Sceptical Sublime?

The title plays on Donna Haraway's notion of the Chthulucene, developed in *Staying with the Trouble*¹ yet instead of proposing an era of cooperation between the human and non-human, I draw on Lovecraftian horror to address the existential crisis brought about by eco-anxiety and the expression thereof in Irish contemporary literature. It combines this dread of abyssal monstrous forces, metonymising rising oceans and the 'absolute hatred'² of Howard Philip Lovecraft as a catalyst to unite queer, decolonial and ecological thoughts against one common homo/xenophobic antagonist. This part then focuses on ecological sensitivities, based on the dual notion of climate change as "everything change"³ coined recently by Canadian author Margaret Atwood. She emphasised the interconnectedness of natural sciences and human sciences, calling for a new epistemological shift, a redefinition of disciplinary categories. To this should be added the constructed boundaries between genders, countries, sexualities, a generalised no-border movement where the in-between is no longer smothered, hidden between categories and barely existent. However, dismantling these comfortable social markers seems like such an impossible task that even the literature that seeks to undo it sometimes perpetuates binaries. The gendered language or an animal-human binary then still crop in or, as we have seen, a nature-nurture fallacy that encloses language even as the authors attempt to liberate it.

Yet we will see that through a writing of the geological, the sea and the shore, writers do push the boundaries of the possible by centering the landscape, or at least its interaction with the body and what it means for imagination. Environmentalist Bill McKibben has expressed his frustration at the absence of art from the climate debate, arguing 'though we know about it, we don't *know* about it. It hasn't registered in our gut; it isn't part of our culture. Where are the books? The poems? The plays? The goddamn operas?'⁴ Yet in this part I will argue that Irish contemporary literature has definitively seized upon the subject, from Ní Dhomhnaill as early as the 1990s to the latest poetry and cinema, the myths, queer and decolonial sensibilities are entangled with ecocriticism. Ireland in its *Isola* surrounded by the sea borrows from the notion of blue humanities in particular. Young Irish

¹ Haraway, Donna *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* Durham and London, Duke University Press (2016)

² Houellebecq, Michel tr. Khazeni, Dorna *H.P Lovecraft Against the World, Against Life* San Francisco, Believer Books (2005) 57

³ <https://medium.com/matter/it-s-not-climate-change-it-s-everything-change-8fd9aa671804> [last accessed 05/02/23]

⁴ Cited in Henderson, Caspar 'Climate Change, Imagination and Culture, Part 1: 'Klaatu Barada Nikto' *Climate Change and Other acts of Imagination* (2007) <https://jebin08.blogspot.se/2007/10/climate-change-imagination-and-culture.html?m=0>

writer William Keohane, in fact is currently working on a project centering water, as his native land is saturated with loughs carved by ice, salt and freshwater, rain water constantly permeating the island. Water rises as a silent clepsydra for humanity, forcing a reckoning of this interconnectedness that, if it has started imprinting some sensibilities, is still far from widespread.

I would like to argue in this part that, through contemporary images of technologies, of the commodification of natural resources, the flattening of the human-animal-vegetal-geological hierarchy is slowly gaining ground in Irish literature, the 'crisis of imagination' stated by Lawrence Buell in the human mind's inability to grasp the enormity of the ecological catastrophe that has just begun. Yet the Lovecraftian cosmic horror of this change does leave a space for the untold, the unspeakable, as I have repeatedly pointed out in this thesis, the dash – the *non-dit*, the silence or the absurd, the utter disconnect where language manifests its limits sometimes best express the catastrophe. This growing sensibility of geological time, of a connection between the human and its environment, resonates throughout the corpus and through the water metaphor I have tried to present as binding people, revealing and drowning identities in its all-encompassing rise. Paul B. Preciado has suggested that the planet, in its increasingly violent reaction to its exploitation, echoes the resistance of marginalised bodies to be reduced to subaltern position under a petro-sexo-racial regime of knowledge and power⁵. Hence the queer, racialised bodies, the general Other is bound to the planet's reaction to its destruction through capitalism. Not that these populations will suffer any less from its consequences, in fact disadvantaged groups and nations will bear the brunt of climate change⁶ but the same affinities in resistance to systematic oppression and commodification of humans and their environment run through queer, decolonial and ecological movements. Writers re-connect their characters to the geological time and molecular changes, from the infinitely small to the infinitely large and create an osmosis that enriches every description of the landscape, the sea, the mind of the characters. Global warming has happened before, to a lesser extent, during the Paleocene-Eocene Thermal Maximum⁷, which also highlights a cyclicity in geological-time, instrumental in awakening eco-sensitivity in contemporary literature (as exemplified by the concept of geological-glamour). The vision of earth and the environment at the scale of eons allows writers to better conceptualise the ongoing changes surrounding and reflected in their characters.

⁵Preciado, Paul B. *Dysphoria Mundi* Grasset, Paris (2022)

⁶ Islam, S. Nazrul and Winkel, John 'Climate Change and Social Inequality' *Department of Economic & Social Affairs Working Paper* No. 152 October (2017)

⁷ Carmichael, Matthew J. et al. 'Hydrological and associated biogeochemical consequences of rapid global warming during the Paleocene-Eocene Thermal Maximum' *Global and Planetary Change*, Volume 157, 2017, Pages 114-138 (introduction)

Geological glamour, coined by Mia Gallagher's protagonist is a rough equivalent of the Sublime in Gothic literature, defined as such in *A companion to Romanticism*:

Romantics are interested in natural experiences that utterly consume human existence, perhaps overwhelm it, and give a humbling sense of wonder and majesty of the natural world. They are not restrained to the definitive meaning of beauty, which implies symmetry and balance. The modern sublime shifts away from the classical aesthetic emphasis on regularity and harmony, to emphasise irregular, even chaotic forces.⁸

The same 'humbling sense of wonder' is present in Geological glamour, yet is aware of it as an illusion. The 'glamour' is used in its old Scot meaning of 'magic', suggesting a fallacy of which characters are semi-conscious in their awe. It can be defined thus: 'old magic (...) the same magic big empty places always work on the small human mind. Geological glamour; the illusion that landforms, unlike us, never change. That this is how it is, was and always will be. Bullshit. It's always changing, just slower.' (BPLH,107-8) I will come back to this excerpt in III.1. 2 but this definition guides the analysis for this first part. I will try to demonstrate that the Sublime/glamour is not limited to rural or geologically grand areas. As it is with queer and other border politics, the urban and rural binary quickly proves irrelevant with rising waters making the Liffey overflow, when the rain falls or when the sea being so nearby means both the rural and the urban are equally doused. I will first borrow the notion of Shivers from the video game *Disco Elysium*, an urban equivalent of the geological glamour but where natural elements are contained by the cityscape. This non-pastoral form of Sublime is also connected to water as the phenomenon relies partly on the changes in the atmosphere, the rain, the night, the snow, a lowering in temperature or water rising with a warm column of air to form a cumulus. These shifts in atmosphere prompt moments of city contemplation and reveal the interconnectedness of bodies with and within anonymous urban settings. As most of the protagonists of the corpus are part of the queer spectrum, their anchorage within urban cityscape also recalls a certain metronormativity of the community, discussed by Cy Lecerf Maulpoix in his recent work *Ecologies Déviantes*⁹. He explores various queer rural communities like the Radical Faeries of the U.S, and UK, the Bloomsbury group in Charleston, U.K and other gardens of the bourgeois artists while also being lucid about the fact that only the elite's attempts at founding these communities in the past have left enough traces for research, and even then, their queerness was either downplayed or denied.

⁸ See Trott, Nicola 'The picturesque, the beautiful, and the sublime' in *A companion to Romanticism*. ed. Duncan Wu, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell (1998) 154

⁹ Lecerf-Maulpoix, Cy *Ecologies Déviantes Voyage en terres queers* Paris, Cambourakis (2021)

His work inscribes itself in the lineage of *Deep Gossip*, by Henry Abelove, who gives a queer reading of the famous Thoreau cabin in the woods and *Walden*. Lucas Crawford also advocates for alternative ways of living one's queerness in rural spaces and together, these academic works deconstruct the popular equation of queerness with urban spaces. This deconstruction is crucial, since this false equation lends weight to arguments of eco-fascism that sees in this phenomenon the confirmation of the un-natural quality of non-cis and heterosexual partnerships and bodies.¹⁰ The rural, natural, traditional is deemed by this ideology as the exclusive realm of reproductive heterosexuality while the city is equated with artifice, the excesses of technology, wealth and perversion. I use once again the concept of 'nature' in this part while shifting gradually to a necessary criticism of the notion, so often wielded against queerness.

I will draw on these theories throughout this third part but first I wish to dilute the binary of urban-rural environment to begin with, as the authors of the corpus blend the cityscape with the sea, the rain, the forest and connect their protagonists' stories to variations in the surroundings, proposing an osmosis and a deconstruction of the human and non-human hierarchies often posited by eco-criticism as a necessary step to come to grips with the enormity of climate change.

1. Shivers

'Tune in to the city'

I have borrowed a lot from Jack Halberstam's work throughout the thesis, notably because he uses all available sources and media, whether they are considered 'high-brow' or 'low-brow,' so as to break down the barrier of elitism in academia. Following a more open way of analysis, he perceives the widespread influence of mainstream media like blockbusters, cartoons, series and others as far-reaching and formative in our current cultural landscape. It then becomes interesting to draw on these images and notions, beyond or in combination with the usual suspects of academic writing (Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, Foucault, Bakhtin, Barthes etc whose works are still mobilised by subversive movements within academia like queer and decolonial studies) to explore social trends based on a media that reaches, by its nature and relevance to the current cultural climate, more people in numbers than literature, here novels, short-stories and poetry. Yet the porosity between

¹⁰ Lecerf-Maulpoix, C. *Ecologies Déviantes Op. Cit.*

literature and media studies¹¹ is worth probing and I now wish to mobilise the notion of Shivers to highlight several excerpts from the corpus.

This notion comes from a currently popular detective-investigation style video game. It is worth noting, however, that Robert Kurvitz, the Estonian creator of the game, set the plot in a fictional world he had first tried to explore in his novel *The Sacred and Terrible Air* (2013),¹² which only sold a thousand copies before the writer received the advice to convert this world-building into a table-top role-play type of video game¹³. With the last, fully voiced version of the game totalising one million words of dialogue¹⁴, the game is effectively an interactive audiobook (or ‘conversation simulator’) blurring, like the novels and poems of the corpus, the boundary between oral and written literature. I will explain a bit more about the game to point out why it is relevant to this thesis’ topic and provide some context around the notion of ‘Shivers’ and the ‘Pale’, which I wish to use for this subpart.

The narrative mostly focuses on exploring the alternative history and geography of Elysium, the crime-solving a mere and imperfect conduit for this exploration. Moreover, the policing role of the protagonist is constantly questioned in-game by multiple dialogue options and it is specified that the Revachol Citizen Militia was originally constituted by the communist revolution and is only tolerated by the MorallIntern, the colonialist forces that invaded Revachol¹⁵. Indeed, the decolonial element is prevalent in the brutal history of the failed communist revolution of the district where the game takes place: Martinaise. The communist revolution originally opposed a monarchy but was overcome by the colonialist powers of the Coalition. The district, albeit reminiscent of Southern France in its name and French-accented characters (two characters even play pétanque in a crater) is however set on a lately discovered *isola*¹⁶ surrounded by water and currently caught in winter ice, the whole of its coastline frozen with icecaps, which clashes with the Southern French atmosphere. The revolution is understood to have been violently repressed by the imperialistic capitalistic forces of the Coalition: ‘And, at the farthest reaches of the bay of Revachol – the shadow of Coalition Warship Archer, on perpetual patrol duty, ready to unleash artillery fire if you were to rise up against the

¹¹ See Carayol, Martin ‘Quand l’échec d’un roman aboutit à une réussite vidéoludique. Le cas de Disco Elysium.’ *Romanesque* 2021, Hors-série. Jeu vidéo et romanesque. 41-56

¹² Kurvitz, Robert *Püha ja õudne lõhn* (2013) Estonian, untranslated

¹³ <https://www.thegamer.com/disco-elysium-novel-sacred-and-terrible-air/> [20/02/23]

¹⁴ <https://clutchpoints.com/disco-elysium-final-cut-edition-features-one-million-words-of-spoken-dialogue> [17/03/23]

¹⁵ Kurvitz, Robert et al. *Disco Elysium* London, ZA/UM (2019) Ending ‘Meeting the Posse’

¹⁶ Isolans are continents of matter, enveloped on all sides by the pale. Insulinde, where DE takes place is an Isola mostly comprised of water.

market. You shudder.’¹⁷ All in all, the history of the alternative world of Elysium blends several strands of geopolitics, history and events that sometimes sound similar to existing events (like the ‘Commune’, name of the Insulindian communist revolution seemingly blending the 1917 Russian revolution with the 1871 Commune de Paris and many others) and act as an unsettling funhouse mirror to our world’s history. This allows the player to be introduced to political and historical concepts once removed from reality, in a sufficiently distant and fictional way. The game also recalls Gallagher’s notion of loose/wavy parallels in history where this alternative reality sounds plausible because of its uncanny resemblance to real history, a style dubbed by some as ‘Naturalistic Un-Realism’¹⁸, the Insulindian *isola* effectively functioning as a blank canvass to propose a schematic history, condensing events and trends for a sandbox experience of political currents and the social conditions that fuel them. The *isola* was uninhabited before the suzerainty, for instance, so it does not stain the region with indigenous massacres and the focus is put on post-industrial struggles around capitalism, communism and imperialism of industrialised countries. The game still acknowledges colonialist massacres by listing colonial atrocities committed on other *isolas*, however, and works on those issues at a more distant, metaphorical level.

The revolution, through its brutal defeat also recalls the 1916 Rising (and many others) and violence has permanently marked the city: bullet holes stud the façades and entire floors of building have been shorn off during bombings. The climate-change anxiety also contributes to grounding the game in the current *Zeitgeist* (which could partially explain its popularity) by proposing a visible, if somewhat blurry notion of *The Pale*, a white mist sprawling between *isolas*. By isolating the continents from one another, it can also represent the division between the North and the souths and the international division of labour, as theorised by Gayatri Spivak:

The contemporary international division of labour is a displacement of the divided field of nineteenth century territorial imperialism. Put simply, a group of countries, generally first-world, are in the position of investing capital ; another group, generally third-world, provide the field for investment, both through comprador indigenous capitalists and through their ill-protected and shifting labour force.¹⁹

This isolation between the spaces of investment and production and investors prevents unified social movements by breaking apart the chain of production-consumption. As this intended division through delocalisation is part of the legacy of colonialism, the Pale in-game gathers the multiple

¹⁷ Kurvitz, R. and SeaPower *Disco Elysium* London, ZA/UM (2019)

¹⁸ <https://www.brokenhandsmedia.com/blog/2019/11/26/Disco-Elysium> [last accessed 11/04/2023]

¹⁹ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ in Williams, P., Chrisman, L. *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory* ed. Columbia University Press (1994) 83

effects of colonialism and capitalism in one englobing notion that re-unites concepts often separated by the media and treated as separate entities. It speaks to this general feeling of disconnect between various parts of the world as well as the growth of an all-encompassing threat. The Pale is described in rather vague terms (thus allowing for it to become this global metaphor for several issues and for players to project any number of current societal anxieties) by an in-game character who constantly has to navigate it. The bourgeois Wild Pines negotiator set on a sailboat throughout the game thus describes it in these terms:

Achromatic, odourless, featureless. The pale is the enemy of matter and life. (...) It is the transition state of being into nothingness... It is still hard for humans to navigate the pale without getting lost. Or having our minds damaged.

The pale outweighs reality two to one – there is more pale than there is matter. And the ratio is slipping. ... One day the pale will cover everything – but this sort of talk is mostly left to extremists. (...) Most people... and indeed most private and government sector organisations; entire civilisations and religions even – find handy ways to ignore, or downplay that knowledge.²⁰

The growth and spread of this quiet threat being ignored by governments and the private sector does force the comparison with global warming and the rise of sea levels, yet it also damages people who travel through it, like herself by sailing it and the truck drivers (immobilised in Revachol by the dockers strike) constantly crossing it, which also mirrors the devastating effects of pollution on people's health. There is also a spiritual element further blurring the metaphor as the Church of Moralism (centrist) as the construction of churches is said to have held back the spread of the Pale. I will come back to this notion in the next part as it is an efficient representation of climate change anxiety.

What interests me the most for the purpose of the analysis is the notion of 'Shivers' which is described as: 'Raise the hair on your neck. Tune in to the city. (...) Shivers come when the temperature drops and you become more keenly aware of your surroundings. It enables you to hear the city itself, to truly belong to the streets. It is a supra-natural ability; old wrongs play out in present time, scenes across the city happens in front of you.'²¹ Thus, when the weather changes to rain or snow or when the temperature shifts, this skill allows the protagonist, Harrier Du Bois to contemplate the city of Revachol to the four cardinal points and beyond, expanding his perception capacities beyond what actually meets the eye to make him experience other inhabitant's moments in the city and the city's past (the revolution, the massacre by the Coalition forces).

²⁰ Kurvitz, R. and SeaPower *Disco Elysium* London, ZA/UM (2019)

²¹ <https://discoelysium.fandom.com/wiki/Shivers> [last accessed 20/02/23]

Shivers is, I contend, a good notion to describe any moment in literature where a character's senses expand to take in the city, prompting a quiet moment of narrative description and osmosis with the surroundings, especially during a shift in weather that prompts a renewed perception of the character's environment. It can be utilised to further the plot, set up or increase an atmosphere, or even for more utilitarian purposes like transitioning from one character to another's point of view in the narrative while re-inforcing both the interconnectedness of lives within urban spaces and the affinity of bodies with their surroundings. O'Neill utilises such moments in *At Swim*: 'Way up Glasthule road, through Kingstown and its breezy streets, a smack of industry hits the sleeping town. Outside a black-brick bakery, in the fallen light from a window, a young lad crouches. He looks to be reading, but in fact he's nodded off. The book slips from his hands and slide to the road.' (ASTB,56) This camera-like tracking shot and zooming onto one specific scene in urban setting, is reinforced by the use of present-tense (also used exclusively in the Shivers description of *Disco Elysium*) to express the simultaneity of several plot threads. It introduces other sides of the city that some characters do not interact with and highlights the class divisions between districts of Kingstown. The narrative then refocuses on Doyler within this specifically charged environment that emits the 'smack of industry' and the 'black-brick' suggests the perpetual stain of coal soot that used to cover most buildings around industrial areas in the early 20th century²², signalling that he is part of peripheral Dublin's working class.

Julian Novitz, in his article dissecting *Disco Elysium* through the prism of Gothic aesthetics, has argued that the derelict urban setting of Martinaise is threatening and unfamiliar, inextricably linked to capitalism which constantly produces ruins: 'the rise of the city is inevitably linked with capital and its accumulation, and the history that is hidden beneath its seemingly familiar, ordered, and progressive surface is often one of irrational destruction and exploitation.'²³ This is an important element to temper Shivers and prevent it from becoming an un-critical contemplation of the city for its simple aesthetic value: it expands empathy for the often destitute people who inhabit a derelict cityscape, reflecting on this misery without glamorising it. There is a deep melancholy often associated with these suspensions in time where the characters, despite loving their city, can still see what it is doing to its people.

²² Apparently so much so that certain species, like the Peppered Moth, mutated to a fully black hue for camouflage purposes in urban setting. <https://www.echo.ie/nature-on-our-doorsteps-evolution-in-action/> [last accessed 05/03/23]

²³ Novitz, Julian 'Disco Elysium as Gothic fiction' *BALTIC SCREEN MEDIA REVIEW 2021 / VOLUME 9* 38.

The general air of destitution of Martinaire is conveyed by failed businesses, boarded up shopfronts and partially demolished buildings. Likewise, this 'gothic Marxism' aesthetic transpires in the depiction by Mia Gallagher of the Dublin suburbs, although the terminology of class-struggle has changed since the advent of neoliberalism in the 1980s:

The weather had been terrible all winter, cold, grey with snow and floodings, a perfect backdrop to the bone-deep misery of the recession. (...) Scattered showers, sunny spells, some wind. It was a day straight out of my childhood, straight out of those radio forecasts you used to listen to, Irish to its marrow. Grey clouds were chugging over the pewtery roofs of my adopted townland. To the west, I could see shreds of blue in the sky, against them the branches of the sycamores in the church grounds, clawing like the fingers of famine victims. Beyond that, out of sight, lay Dublin's Wilder West. Graffiti, dogshit, hoodied teenagers, burnt-out cars and the occasional, lethal shooting. Inchicore, Isle of the Snout, the townland the Tiger had ignored. (BPLH,19)

In this Shivers-like description, the cooling weather suspends the narrative for a moment of contemplation where time blurs (childhood/Famine victims) and the cardinal points (West, Wilder West) direct the gaze to detail the derelict cityscape, marked by its exclusion from the neoliberal project of Ireland's right-wing governments. These moments of time-suspension allow the protagonist to connect with the city and expand empathy with the other urban inhabitants, caught in various degrees of destitution. Moreover, the weather being appropriate for a recession tunes it to the mood of the city which in turn is affected by the harsh weather, creating a sort of positive feedback loop between the townland and the weather. This suggests a sort of interlinkage between 'nature', or what little there is of it in urban settings, and the city.

Dublin and its suburbs Glasthule, Inchicore, the woods near the unnamed Wall household neighbourhood are depicted in 1916, in the 1990s and the 2010s by the three novelists, displaying the evolution of the city and the echoes of its past and acting as characters in their own right. The weather also changes according to narrative beats in the novels and the interconnectedness between city-dwellers is emphasised in moments of contemplation. The historical past also irrupts several times in the narrative, highlighting the enduring memory of cities, for instance Pen nods to the statue of Countess Constance Markievicz:

I nodded to Con Markievicz as I passed; her bronze head was almost hidden in holly and purple leaves. I had always loved the story of her setting her citizen army to dig trenches here in 1916 without thinking how easily they would be gunned down from the windows of the hotels that overlooked the Green. ... Maybe she knew what would happen but wanted to keep her men busy, like the games I made up for my Immac girls on sleepy afternoons. (Hood,184)

Here Pen identifies with the historical figure by recontextualising her heroic deeds into the mundane everyday tasks of her teaching in Immac. The statue being 'almost hidden' also suggests some

lingering embarrassment for what can still be considered a failed revolution (with books about its main actors sometimes using paradoxical titles like *The Triumph of Failure*²⁴) yet also foregrounds an approachability of this heroic past that encourages the protagonist's identifying with the past heroine. The statue is also permanently set in Stephen's Green, the very theatre of failure described by Pen, marking the park with the events of 1916 and collapsing various periods of history into the same space and, as Shivers trigger these recollections, 'old wrongs play out in present time'. Hence, I would argue that Shivers, in urban settings, participate to the various forms of nationalisms discussed previously or replace them as the intangible sense of belonging that nation-states might draw on but do not necessarily create. As *Hood's* narrative is set far in the aftermath of post 1916 and Independence, the flippant tone (if Pen's admiration for Markievicz is genuine) clashes with the epic description by O'Neill of the same event and the epic apparition of unnamed Constance Markievicz, simply referred to as the 'incongruous banditti' (ASTB,638) unphased by the prospect of arrest and potential execution.

Both authors set their protagonists differently in the history of Dublin, choosing different angles to revive a turning point of their country, which also reveals the persistence of the past within the stone of the city. As has been established, most of the authors of the corpus toy with the time-space continuum by suspending time or offering alternative timelines for their narratives (through the use of Schrödinger's cat theory, see PII.3) this technique reinforces the bond of the Dubliners with the past and their surroundings, they establish the greater belonging to the island as a geological entity and the sea surrounding it.

Weatherworks

The urban settings' glamour and sense of belonging tends to be brought about, according to Shivers, by shifts in temperature or weather, hence by the cityscape's feel being modified by the last of its mostly uncontrollable natural elements. However, during extreme events, the weather too ends up being affected by land affairs:

The nights were drawing in. Mary Nights, when asked, was emphatic about it. The fields were still in their ricks, and winter came. They had never known such storms. Even Aunt Sawney could not recall the like. People said it was artillery barrages in France that disrupted the upper airs. Day after day the rain sheeted and grey lumbering clouds, like continents of night, heaved through the sky. The sea crashed on the sea-wall, shattering its waves in blizzards of foam. Seaweed lay everywhere. And when Jim went down there, in the howling wind, he felt the lawless solitude of weather too wild.

A sailing-ship stuck by Sandycove Harbour. In the intervals of calm, in a pewter sea, tarnished and burnished by turns, bathers swam out to the wreck. (ASTB,349)

²⁴ Edwards, Ruth DudleyPatrick Pearse: *The Triumph of Failure*. Dublin, Irish Academic Press (1979).

Mary Nights, as I will expand on shortly, can be read as the *genius loci* of Dublin as she is constantly seen walking back from the city when the night comes, announcing the various states of equinox or solstice according to the nights' lengthening or shortening, but also matching the long nights with the more sombre beats of the story. The war is dragging on, disrupting the 'upper airs' and spreading the effects of World War I even to the territories relatively sheltered from its direct destructive effects. Through the multiple deaths occurring on the continent, Ireland too is impacted by the slaughter, as Jim's father sees the cards multiply on windows, displaying the names of the soldiers who have fallen in the trenches in France or at Suvla. Because the weather is also another narrative tool available to the author to set the mood, the sky here becomes a map of Europe at war: 'the rain sheeted and grey lumbering clouds, like continents of night, heaved through the sky.' Nature here mirrors industrial warfare through extreme weather, the violence transcribed by 'crashed', 'shattering', 'howling', and culminating in the shipwreck in Sandycove Harbour. Even the sea, the omnipresent element around Dun Laoghaire, loses its positive diegetic quality to become a destructive force, causing the shipwreck through storms, as it turns to metal ('pewter'), the changes in colours described as 'tarnished and burnished in turns', indicating that the metallic war permeates the environment.

Yet a more literal reading is possible as well, which would align with eco-criticism as extreme events do in fact impact the weather in other areas of the world, highlighting the inter-dependencies between humans and the environment. The best and most telling example of this is a theory that concretely ties decolonial and ecocritical movements. According to Alexander Koch et al. the colonisation of America partially caused the Little Ice Age in the 16th and 17th centuries. They conclude in their 2019 article: 'the Great Dying of the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas led to the abandonment of enough cleared land in the Americas that the resulting terrestrial carbon uptake had a detectable impact on both atmospheric CO₂ and global surface air temperatures in the two centuries prior to the Industrial Revolution.'²⁵

I will further expand on the use of the weather in the various novels to set the mood, or to ironically contrast with the narrative. At times, the rain matches the turmoil of characters, the war, yet sometimes the authors chose to set a mocking sun over dramatic events. Interestingly, the use of weather to emphasise the mood and tone of the narrative is most notable when there is an ironic discrepancy and a cheerful sun oversees dreadful events, as is the most common occurrence in the

²⁵ Koch, Alexander, Brierley, Chris, Maslin, Mark M., Lewis, Simon 'Earth system impacts of the European arrival and Great Dying in the Americas after 1492' *Quaternary Science Reviews* Volume 207 (2019), pp. 13-36. 30

corpus. Drawing once more on the notion of Shivers, one could argue that if rain, shifts in temperature, snow and clouds, in short, water allows the characters to connect with their surroundings, the sun opposes their mood or the events so drastically that it divorces the characters from their surroundings. The most exemplary piece of the corpus is the chapter in which the sun is pouring over Ciara Wall's funerals and burial, denying the grief of Pen's suppressed mourning. I have evoked this passage in chapter II. – 3 -2 arguing that that rain and water allow the protagonist to release her grief, jarring with her inability to cry, mirrored in turn by the dry and warm weather of that week (again, unusual for Ireland, as the protagonist states herself) but I now wish to take the analysis in another direction and quote at length the funerals scene:

Just as Mr Wall stopped at the plot half-full of Wall doctors and lawyers, just when the sky should rightly have let down tears of acid rain, didn't the sun come out. ... full honest-to-god radiance through a patch of blue sky, making a pool of light that caught the white headstones and angels for hundreds of yards around. This was weather for the last trip of the year to Brittas Bay, or a picnic in the heather above Lough Dan. Instead we were standing round a rectangle of earth, watching a box being lowered on ropes. (Hood,143-4)

From the beginning of the citation, the mood of the grieving widow is interrupted by the class differences between her and her deceased lover: Cara was upper-middle class, coming from a stock of 'Wall doctors and lawyers', her family name even suggesting the cul-de-sac of their relationship (partially) due to that gap. The use of the spoken-English colloquial structure 'didn't the sun come out' (subtly marking Pen's class) also seems like a last attempt at negating the inappropriate weather. The sun highlighting 'white headstones and angels' points to the forced cheerfulness of a loved-one's ascent to Christian heavens contrasting with the grief and sense of loss of the relatives as Donoghue has repeatedly exposed the hypocrisy of the Irish business-like Catholic Church. The 'honest-to-god radiance' of the sun confirms the connivance between the inappropriate sunlight and this idea of Catholicism forcing a resigned or even optimistic view of death. Likewise, Glasnevin cemetery constitutes an elegant, tamed botanic garden and sits in direct opposition with a wilder Brittas Bay and Lough Dan. These places of uncontrolled nature appeal more to Pen alongside the nostalgia of 'trips' and 'picnics', a holiday-like, freedom feeling she most associates with Cara (preferring to imagine her still on a Greek island, or during heavy snow days, or even still flying free out of the car upon impact but never landing). The surroundings therefore highlight the fake, stunted nature of these ceremonials, felt as inappropriate or inauthentic to the person being mourned. The newly deceased is indeed stated as antithetic to these formal proceedings around her death as, ironically: 'she's always said that she wouldn't be seen dead in a church again' (Hood,140) yet her funeral is held there by a priest. Cara also detests cut flowers and Pen specifies 'no flowers' in the newspaper note yet many relatives and neighbours bring them anyway. Cara's coffin is seemingly

surrounded by strangers, even her pall-bearers are unknown to Pen. In fact, this sunny day seems in continuity with the long list of inadequate ways to force a routine Catholic sacrament on a queer woman who overtly rejected them while she lived. Donoghue then seems to emphasise the sun's incongruous presence in an Irish cityscape and narrative whereas rain, in the corpus, is often preceded by the qualifier 'Irish'²⁶ and mostly positively connoted.

These weather-based mood indicators or ironic twists, because they come from, as I argued, one of the last uncontrollable elements in cityscapes, therefore infuse geological osmosis into urban settings. The contemplation both in urban and rural/uncontained landscapes is akin to the awe caused by an 18th century type of sublime, yet barely conceals the disillusion of marginalised characters. None of them really seem to suffer the same confrontation with their 'own impotence' in facing grand landscapes, as Kant argues. Richard Gilmore decrypts the Kantian idea of the Sublime thus: 'That is, for Kant, our confrontation and identification with illimitable nature causes in us extreme anxiety, say, fear and pity, about our own purposelessness.'²⁷ As the marginalised characters all seem to find empowerment in the sea, the ageless forest and rain and never ponder about their own purposelessness, the Sublime then is expressed in a different, sometimes irreverent, sometimes genuine poetic tone.

Jim exemplifies this awe or lack thereof in a Shiver-like excerpt that illustrates several notions I have just mentioned. It counters the sombre mood of the character with a bright sun, proposes to link the weather to the character for another sign of this interconnectedness between the human and non-human while describing both the city-scape and the sea-scape that blends into it but ultimately deconstructs the whole process:

The tide was half-way down and he listened to the lazy rush of its waves. Stragglng rocks creamed in the sun, melting to tan, to umber in the sea. Dark weeds chained them. He smelt the breezy air that was like ozone through the school latrine. Farther along, towards Kingstown, urchinous boys were scraping for bait. Their cries mingled with the cries of gulls that hungrily wailed above. The sea glistened in the bay, a blue sheet that was hardly blue so sharply it shone, nor yet a sheet so spangled its surface. A calm upset by light alone. You carry your weather with you, his father was fond of saying. Yet the day was glorious. (*ASTB*, 42)

The unnerving brightness of sunlight upsets the colour of the sea and the calm it usually denotes, reducing the powerful element to 'a blue sheet' but humanising the rocks 'stragglng' by describing an untidy group with skin colours 'cream', 'tan', 'umber'. The rocks also paradoxically tan in cold

²⁶ See in *At Swim Two Boys*: 'that particularly Irish rain which soaked without apparently wetting' (517).

²⁷ Gilmore, Richard 'Philosophical beauty: The sublime in the beautiful in Kant's third critique and Aristotle's poetics' *The Paideia Project* Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy, Boston, Massachusetts (August 10-15, 1998) np

water while being whitest in sunlight (unlike human skin which tans in sunlight) in a double reversal of the human-non human, sun and sea. They are also 'chained' by seaweed, offered to the sea in an ironic upending of the Andromeda myth, with the human element implied but distinctly absent. The very air of the sea is denatured to a chemical-smelling 'ozone' as it is filtered by the 'school latrine,' the proximity of the urban and natural elements set as antagonistic except in their hunger and destitution. Indeed, the 'urchinous boys' are put in parallels with the gulls, both human 'cries' and animal wails blending hungrily to signal that neither is benefiting from this post-industrial proximity of overcrowded urban areas and natural elements. This confusion and disconnect, heralded by the 'tide halfway down', is meant to introduce Jim early on in the novel as a shy boy whose coming of age and self-discovery the reader will accompany. He is defined by this in-between state, dithering between social classes, between religion and atheism yet taking on a spiritual kind of nationalism, and hesitating for a long time to live out his desire for Doyler. His father has by this point already been introduced as confused and traditionalist, reaching for a respectability that his class usually does not grant access to and he often spouts misguided advice or sayings although sometimes unwittingly hitting notes of wisdom. According to Jim's own misreading of the saying, the weather is supposed to reflect Jim's sombre mood of despondency (before he meets Doyler again) yet it actually means that he darkens the mood wherever he goes, his own demeanour affecting others. This is therefore a heightened use of the usual weather-working by authors around their narratives in the corpus.

O'Neill too, then, presents the sun and brightness as antagonistic, emphasising the disconnect between the characters and their surroundings whereas cold/rainy weather seem more natural to Ireland. This even takes on an (unconscious) decolonial tone in another expression by Arthur Mack, Jim's father: 'sure Ireland is England's umbrella' (ASTB,150), the supposed protection of one island by another reversing the usual colonial rhetoric of a protective empire. Moreover, this comment is occasioned by a heavy rain dousing the festivities of Empire Day getting the Union Jacks 'sodden', seemingly siding with Irish independence and cheering Doyler up, which is seen by Jim as paradoxical: 'What Cheer, he says. Antiphrosis' (ASTB,150). This proposes a reversal of the dynamic I have described: no alien sun is here pouring over misery, rather rain cheers up characters, as the rightful weather for the island. In fact, this particular rainy day plunges Jim into a deep Shiver-like moment as his mind roams while he is stuck in class, being humiliated by Polycarp and starting to question his 'vocation' to become a brother. I will quote at length as Jim's mind also connects the Dublin suburbs to the rural areas under the rain, proposing a unity in this 'elemental' precipitation:

Jupiter Pluvius lashing at the windows. It splattered into puddles on the sill. So thick it hardly seemed to fall at all, a suspension of glistening threads. The lowering clouds, the sudden chill, the tonant rumour from the hills.

He thought of all the people who would be caught by the pelt. Shopkeepers fussing with their wares, the rails of suits, battered blooms, his father with the Spanish onions, hurrying the crate into the dry. Crowded porches and awnings with the sudden, democratic talk. Flags out for Empire Day, sodden. In the street the dust returns to muck and a horse slithers in the way (...)

Then he thought of the rain in the country, far up on the mountains, not raining really, an elemental wet, below and above and all about, and the sound of the wet in the streams that gushed and the sucky squelch of the turf. A bedraggled sheep who watches, a lone bird in the near sky.

In a dreamy way, he saw the sea and the way the sea was brighter than the sky when it rained. How the drops leapt on the surface like a myriad hungry fish. (ASTB,149-150)

Jim's mind's eye travels from his own situation, to the streets of the suburb, to the country in an emphatic surge that encompasses the other inhabitants: 'people', 'shopkeepers', 'crowded', 'democratic' interspersed with the animals: 'horse', 'sheep', 'bird' outnumbered by people and then the vegetal: 'battered bloom', 'Spanish onions'. All are doused by the *impromptu* downpour. The rain appears paradoxically solid, going beyond a simple weather observation, 'thick', 'a suspension', the 'elemental wet' that joins the mist in the mountains, the city and the sea. The sea itself responds positively to the weather, outshining the sky, the droplets mimicking its inhabitants and presenting a symbiotic relationship with the rain. Humans in the city outnumber the animal and vegetal suggesting their domination of the land. Yet the countryside, at least in Jim's imagination, is devoid of human life, which might be a subtle nod to post-Famine abandoned or depopulated villages. O'Neill exhausts the lexicon to describe the precipitation, from the grand 'Jupiter Pluvius' as Jim is stuck in Latin classes, replacing 'thunder' and 'rain', the 'glistening threads', the 'pelt', 'the wet', joining with the 'streams that gushed', replenished by the showers, the dust turning to mud, the 'sucky squelch of the turf', dry elements 'return' to this mulch as if it were their usual state in a sonorous alliteration. Rain and water then saturate the whole excerpt like they saturate the landscape, cementing water as an inherent and uniting element for the Irish land, and one that subtly opposes the coloniser.

Rain, then consolidated by the author as an Ireland's 'elemental wet' is absent from its first strike for independence, as MacMurrough comments on the ongoing and failing 1916 rising: 'In the incomparable weather of that week, under that bluest of skies after the Tuesday rain, the domes and spires of the city's souls had seemed curious idlers watching a quarrel.' (ASTB,639) Dry weather then signals a disconnect in both O'Neill's and Donoghue's novels yet this does not apply to Mia Gallagher's, as, despite bad weather being described as 'Irish to its marrow'(BPLH,19), the only notable mention of rain is described as 'vicious' (BPLH,116), 'pounding' (BPLH,117) and will

ultimately, in part, cause Georgia to crash her car into someone else's when coming back from the Wicklow mountains.

Mary Nights

At high level, the in game Shivers skill allows Harrier Du Bois to converse with *La Révacholière*, 'genius loci' or protective spirit of the city: 'I am La Revacholière. I am the city. I am a fragment of the world spirit, the *genius loci* of Revachol. (...) The modulations of my voice are noted down with thermometers and barometers. You feel me in your nostrils, on the little hairs on the back of your neck. I also reside in your lungs and vestigial organs. Everywhere there is space.'²⁸ Accounting for the variations in temperature linked to the city's *genius loci*, Mary Nights in *At Swim Two Boys* seems to constitute a similar semi-fantastical recurring figure paired with dropping night-time temperatures. She is established as 'the old woman with the widow's stoop that people called Mary Nights ... her pram of belongings behind her' (ASTB,70), suggesting that she is a homeless widow and maybe a subtle nod to Ireland's formerly numerous population through her belongings being gathered in a pram. Alternatively, it could be seen as Ireland's acceptance of the British capitalist project by the future (pram) being set on an accumulation of goods (belonging), clashing with the apparent homelessness of Mary Nights. Several of the characters will enquire 'What way are the nights this weather?' (*ibid*) except Mr Mack who, displaying his characteristic confusion calls her 'Mary Days' and expands on her strange habit:

Old hunchback on her tramp through Glashule. ... Could set your clock by her, eight on the blow, there or thereabouts. Every night the road to Dalkey, never known to pass the other way back. How she gets to Dublin again we don't know. (...) By rights she'd give out how the days is doing. Half the year they're drawing in, come mid-winter then they're drawing out again. (ASTB,107)

She trumps the modern efficiency imposed by colonial times by not showing up at exact times but at 'eight ... there or thereabouts', Mr Mack's use of the Irish saying also undercutting this colonial modernist precision. Being set on the cycles of nights and the axis of earth compared to the sun (equinox and solstices being tied to the pagan celebrations of Celtic festivals Lughnasadh, Samhain, Imbolc, Beltaine²⁹) the old woman can be read as an allegory of the night falling on the city. Paradoxically, she walks from Dublin to Dalkey, therefore roughly North-West to South-East, but that could be linked to Mr Mack's inability to orient himself in general. She invokes cyclical time, drawing on older pagan roots, christianised then commodified throughout the centuries, yet still set in the

²⁸ Kurvitz, R. and SeaPower *Disco Elysium* London, ZA/UM (2019)

²⁹ Morgan, Rosemary LUGHNASADH- LAMMAS *The Hardy Review*, 7, 146–147 (2004)

ironically mundane figure of an old woman stating the obvious. She can also be read as the whimsical soul of Dublin as her predictions on the length of nights usually match dire events during the narrative and finally, when the Easter Rising has begun, she reverses her usual course: 'Mary Nights not to her hour and her direction Dublin, a thing never known in weal nor woe, come wind or weather, in hail rain nor shine. Her determined old head bent to her course. 'They's drawing out,' said she, 'the nights' (ASTB,570). As the *genius loci* returning to the city, she can also be read as a sort of class consciousness of Irishness returning to the capital through the Rising, arguably the city's very first tentative step towards independence. The emphasis on sonority and Hiberno-English idioms of this rhythmic quote also corresponds to a decolonial re-appropriation of Irish orality.

Because she represents nightfall, she is also subtly linked to the tides through this recurring Irish saying, first appearing in Jim's thoughts in English: 'Where goes the tide when comes the ebb?/Where goes the night when comes the day?' (ASTB,67) then in Doyler's mouth in Irish: 'Cá dtéigheann an taoide nuair thagann an trághadh?/Mar a dtéigheann an oidhche nuair thagann an lá?' (ASTB,101) The *genius loci* of Dublin is then reinforced as a part of a cyclical time, tuned with night and day, equinoxes and solstices (nights are drawing in or out) and the tides. This suggests that Irish independence, signified in the reversal of Mary Nights' course, breaks away from an established pattern of colonialism and subjugation, disrupts the linear course of 'progress' and 'modernity'. Nightfall reversing its course can also metaphorically be seen as Ireland (and the protagonists who are synchronised with its coming-of-age narrative) gaining the pride that Scrotes speaks of when describing the nation of the heart: 'Without he have pride he is a shadowy skulk whose season is night' (ASTB,329) which encompasses both marginalised homosexuality and Irishness.

Within the confines of urban settings, the protagonists thus find various ways to commune with the last unbound elements. Pen remarks on this last stand of 'nature' in the city as decreasing though, thinking of the woods nearby: 'It was one of the only places left in Dublin with a bit of wilderness about it, even if they did pare a couple more trees away every year.' (Hood,58). This 'bit of wilderness' ties neatly with the idea of *duchás*/nature as the protagonist geographically gets closer to the woods by moving into the Wall household, with her girlfriend: 'we used to come here all the time, to chase each other with handfuls of leaves and kiss in the chinks between the rocks' (*ibid*). Their hidden relationship blending in with the last natural elements of the cityscape equates queer love with the natural despite its allegation of being 'unnatural' in homophobic rhetoric. The paradox of this rhetoric is stated by Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson: 'what does it mean that ideas, spaces, and practices designated as "nature" are often so vigorously defended against queers in a society in

which that very nature is increasingly degraded and exploited?’³⁰ Therefore the reappropriation of patterns of the natural, as I have mentioned previously (with transition being likened to the metamorphosis of amphibian or sea creatures), the re-location of queer love from the usual metro-normative premises to the woods in *Hood* and the sea in *At Swim*, constitutes an effective starting point for queer ecological sensitivities.

The presence of the Liffey River, the canals, the trees, the sea and storms or, simply, shifts in temperatures in Dublin, also negate simple urban-rural or nature-culture dichotomies. Breaking down this usual binary introduces the issue of the Sublime’s construction of nature, already defeated in its supposition of virginal untouched quality by its mediation through human literature and description. Shivers-like descriptions of osmosis between characters and their urban surroundings then function as a microcosm of the wider geological symbiosis the authors inscribe their characters in.

2. Geological Glamour

Alternatives to nationalism?

As has been established, the rain and sea are inherent Irish elements in the novels of O’Neill and Donoghue, just as the sea and lakes are in Gallagher’s. Sometimes the sun is even limited to a paradoxical ‘rainshine and sunpour’ (ASTB,517) and I have mentioned this contemporary Sublime might have some correlation with or be a possible alternative to nationalism. To expand on this idea, I want to examine more closely the middle of O’Neill’s book, and specifically the prelude to the second part, which consists of Gordie’s letter, as it occupies a prevalent place in the novel and establishes this tension between the sense of belonging to a land and war-time manufactured nationalism, especially that of the British State which hinges on the grandeur of its empire. Jim’s brother Gordie’s point of view is rarely privileged in *At Swim Two Boys*, yet the middle of the novel follows his experience in a long letter from the front in Gallipoli, drenched in bombastic British military clichés of camaraderie and patriotic thrills in combat. However, one comment stands out that is less typical of the war propaganda rhetoric:

It is curious how one can miss ‘the old sod’. I often do contemplate those last months in Ireland. I recall our route marches along the lanes and the trees that were coming to leaf then. The clouds in the sky gave out their showers. I remember the flowers that were coming up, yellow and blue, and the running of a stream at

³⁰ Mortimer-Sandilands, Catriona and Erickson, Bruce eds.. *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press (2010) 5

every turn. The air had a smell I cannot describe, but if I close my eyes it comes to me. It was awake in a way the land here is not awake, or not for me at any rate. (ASTB,343-4)

This still adheres to the expected nostalgic patriotic tone, yet the 'land being alive', for Gordie is inextricable from the presence of water and the vegetation it sprouts, which comes across as an odd remark. I pause on 'the old sod', which is an informal, British English expression for one's native land which also invokes 'sodden' and matches the theme. Gordie's remark focuses on water ('showers', 'stream' and lush vegetation), suggesting this underlying Sublime/glamour laces his patriotism and he discovers his attachment to Irish land only as he is away from it. In fact, he only finds solace in the water he can find where he is stationed as he states earlier: 'I have swam in the Aegean blue and drank my fill of water' (ASTB,342). More nuance transpires in his words than in propagandistic rhetoric though, as Gordie remarks that the land being 'awake' to him only when it is sodden is not meant as a generalisation: he tempers 'not for me at any rate'. This suggests that, to the natives of this dry land, they might perceive it as 'awake' because they are in tune with this landscape in a way he is not. It also subtly intimates that Irishmen (and other alien troops) should not be there: they do not belong to this landscape which feels dry and dormant to them. This also foregrounds their imminent death as they are divorced from their natural environment: the defeat in Gallipoli will cause 4000 Irishmen to die throughout the campaign³¹. Irish nationalist songs like *The Foggy Dew* make note of this with bitter irony 'Twas better to die 'neath that Irish sky/Than at Sulva or Sud-El-Bar'³² yet this rings strangely as the death of young men as disposable cannon fodder is simply regretted as not having served another cause. O'Neill, by depicting the debacle of the Easter Rising and bloodlust of Patrick Pearse and Father O'Toiler, suggests that, at the time, whether the young men died in a British or a national war, they were seen as expendable either way, even if both causes are far from being as legitimate as one another.

As wartime propaganda and censorship was enforced in soldiers' letters, Gordie may have had to be discreet and subtle in what he tries to communicate to his family: 'Military censors took samples of these letters in order to provide a picture for the generals about what their soldiers were thinking. (...) the censors more often quoted complaints and criticisms than the letters of contented soldiers.'³³ Therefore all the enthusiastic wartime camaraderie found in Gordie's letter is to be taken with suspicion, the reader already knows that Gordie has managed to dodge censorship once before by

³¹ <https://gallipoli.rte.ie/people/death-notice/> [last accessed 13/04/23]

³² <https://www.bellsirishlyrics.com/foggy-dew.html> [last accessed 13/04/23]

³³ Badsey, Stephen 'Notes from the Front' *British Library WWI articles* (29/01/2014) <https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/news-from-the-front>

communicating his training camp's position in England to Nancy using code.³⁴ This is why the letter is worth reading in detail and between the lines, as Gordie may be evading censorship again and trying to send messages that would have been intercepted if he did not mask them with the expected jingoistic rhetoric. For instance, at the end of his letter he states: 'Tell Jim to keep to his books (...) and that he is constant in my thoughts' (ASTB, 344). This might be a roundabout way to tell Jim not to join the army and to keep studying so he will never need it financially; he worries that conscription or recruitment posters might push his 16-year-old brother (technically not eligible) to lie about his age (like he did) and join. Yet there might also be a deeper significance to it.

It is established through Jim's discussions with Doyler that Gordie use to be affectionate with his little brother, even hold him when they were sleeping in the same bed: 'I'd wake in the night and his arm would be there. One time, then, he was lying awake and I think he twigged that I was awake too. He gave the hell of a shove and kicked me down the bottom of the bed. We were sleeping head and toe after that.' (ASTB,532) This rejection of physical affection between brothers prompts Jim to worry 'I suppose it's soft wanting to cuddle always' (*ibid*). The dryness of the land and the death it foregrounds for Gordie, estranged from his own land, is to be put in parallel with Jim's coming-of-age. I have established that water can be a bonding agent between characters in Chapter II.1 yet is mostly a queer element. In symbolic terms then, Jim is thriving in Irish queerness while Gordie is dying in dry, cis-hetero military virility. In this realisation by Gordie of his deeper connection to the 'old sod', though, he seems to reconnect with this part of him that he flushed out in army-enforced rigid masculinity, the 'elemental wet' of Ireland and his fondness for his little brother. Water, then, serves both as a renewed bond between the brothers, suggesting they could have reconnected once Gordie grew disillusioned with the reductive type of masculinity he is trapped in. This (admittedly a bit stretched) potential is contained in 'Tell Jim I will write to him separate' (ASTB,344), but Gordie will be reported as 'missing in action' shortly after, preventing him from writing to his little brother as this separate letter never comes. Through this recollection of Irish glamour/sublime, then, Gordie briefly deconstructs more institutionalised types of nationalism (in this case, British imperialism) by reconnecting with the in-story symbolical element of Ireland and with his family in a more earnest way. This establishes this feeling of awe and belonging to a land as something that goes beyond war-time, conflictual rhetoric. War and state-enemies rhetoric was often used to cement nationalistic sentiments³⁵ to better use a country's youth as cannon fodder for wars that were often about

³⁴ All Love Does Ever Rightly Show Our Tenderness : ALDERSHOT, see (ASTB,36)

³⁵ See Hutchinson, John, 'European War-Making and the Rise of Nation States' in Hutchinson, J. *Nationalism and War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2017).

financial benefits for certain industries, banks and politicians, the territorial advantage sought to be gained often exclusively linked to economical purposes³⁶. In Gordie's case for instance, he died (partially) in order to defend France and Britain's access to the crucial Suez Canal.³⁷

Gordie also specifies in his letter one element of dryness which characterises the alien landscape: 'Amongst the odours one would expect, there is a particular one, of thyme which grows on the ridges here.' (ASTB,344) Further entrenching the dichotomy established in the close reading of the letter, Jim also associates the dryness of the herb with the suspended state of his brother:

In the shop one evening Jim snuck open a canister of thyme and sniffed the warm and arid scent. It told of dusty hills where shrubs took lightly in the dirt. A no man's land where Gordie had stumbled. He was missing now, presumed dead, but still Aunt Sawney would not let a card in the window. They too were in a no man's land. (ASTB,350)

This late familial reconnection through the dry scent of thyme, putting to the fore yet another degraded sense according to David Lloyd (the sense of smell)³⁸, bears in its symbolism the failed attempt and the absent last letter. The dryness also surrounds the lack of closure of the family for a soldier 'missing and presumed dead', an insulting euphemism which belies and tempers the violence of the Gallipoli front as, surely, 'missing in action' was already the equivalent of a casualty statement. Jim is never deceived by these official understatements, though, as he can already visualise the 'no man's land where Gordie had stumbled', placing both the family and the fallen in the same limbo-like desert. This completes the greater weaving of water as Ireland's element and the antagonistic nature of dryness and sunlight in O'Neill's novel, at the same time letting one of its characters and foil to the protagonist (as Jim and Gordie may be read as opposites of each other) realise his attachment to 'the old sod', his family, and re-assert a previously negated fondness for his little brother he does not wish to see follow in his mistaken path.

There is a curious natural phenomenon whereby traces of old henges from Ireland's Neolithic past re-appear during long episodes of drought. This can be put in parallel with Gordie's revealing letter that has him reconnect to Ireland and his family through the memory of water while surrounded by a dry foreign landscape. Similarly, complex circles of monuments re-emerge as the

³⁶ https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/war_profiteers [last accessed 13/04/23]

³⁷ Willmott, Howard P. *First World War* London, Dorling Kindersley (2003), 87.

³⁸ Lloyd, David *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity The Transformation of Oral Space* Cambridge University Press (2011) 59-60

weight of a long-gone wooden or stone structure sank the ground in places, allowing it collect water and grow greener crops which then appear in stark contrast against the rest of the dry field:

Our understanding of the extent and nature of the ritual landscape at Newgrange was to change significantly in July 2018, when aerial archaeological reconnaissance was carried out over the floodplain and across the Brú na Bóinne World Heritage Site. The near-drought conditions across the country produced differential crop growth, highlighting the existence of previously unknown sites and adding significant information about sites that were already in the archaeological record.³⁹

This might seem like an attempt by the National Heritage to gloss over ‘near drought’ conditions to focus on the positive reclaiming of a lost neolithic legacy, but these re-emerging crop circles have also been eerily dubbed ‘ghost markings’⁴⁰ and confirm the thanatic and antagonistic charge of dryness within the Irish context, allowing the dead (individuals or civilisations) to erupt in the living’s landscape and minds. In the corpus, this dryness allows, through the ghost markings of the letter, for the last traces of Jim’s deceased brother to return to the family.

Maps

Mia Gallagher suggests a vision of the geological rather than historical timeline by presenting the maps of the Wunderkammer which depict Bohemia at several points in its history but starting with: ‘we suggest the following activity for truly curious visitors: lay the maps on top of one another and the only thing that will remain the same is the distant coastline, uneven and jumpy. (...) Map One: date? A ragged bowl, jagged on the edges. This map is the Ur-Karte, the original of the species; short on political borderlines, heavy on topographical features.’ (BPLH,51-2) To the reader, this expands the timeline of the region to a time before any contestation for national territory or human anchorage to the land: it has existed long before the conflict. This introduces the notion of a geological time, the infinitely slow and big compared to the micro changes at molecular level, and re-contextualises the protagonist’s changing body in the much larger scale of eons, dwarfing the human stories unfolding within the pages of the novel by comparison. This also suggests the notion of geological symbiosis, which is contained within urban settings to the more subtle sensation of Shivers yet expands as the various characters join in more natural settings like Howth or Dun Laoghaire, the Wicklow mountains’ national park near Dublin (mentioned both in *Beautiful Pictures* and briefly in the bath scene(s) between Cara and Pen in *Hood*) or further afield out of the city.

Another map is presented in the mind’s eye of Arthur Mack, anchored deeper in imperialist history yet ambiguous in its British nationalism. To put the quote in context, Mack was born ‘in the Union’,

³⁹ <https://www.archaeology.ie/sites/default/files/files/bru-na-boinne-interim-report.pdf> [last accessed 14/07/23]

⁴⁰ Kohlstedt, Kurt ‘Ghost Markings: European droughts reveal Hunger Stones and Hidden Henges’ 99% Invisible.org [https://99percentinvisible.org/?s=ireland&post_type\[\]=episode&post_type\[\]=article&paged=1](https://99percentinvisible.org/?s=ireland&post_type[]=episode&post_type[]=article&paged=1) [last accessed 14/07/23]

short for the Poor Law Unions, yet also suggests the Union between Ireland and England and by extension, unionism, a political trend Mr Mack incarnates before its time. Unions were workhouses 'caring' for, among other destitute populations, orphaned children. He was only rescued from this misery by a passing troop of 'red-coats' whom he followed before joining the military prematurely as a 'barrack rat' (all quotes from Chapter 13 of *At Swim* pp.345-370). He therefore feels greatly indebted to the British Army and reveres it blindly through gratitude for elevating him socially from the poor-house to the shop-keeper class. He has been thoroughly converted to imperialistic rhetoric and is even glad that Gordie, his eldest son, joined the war effort in 1915. Yet seeds of doubt irrupt in this statement:

...in the seas around, they were fighting everywhere. From Canada they came to win glory in France, from Australia and New Zealand to knock out the Turk. If you looked at the map you saw the corners folding over, returning the blood of the young dominions to stand in defence of their motherland. It made you feel grand to be a part of it, this great empire at war, its fighting men sent forth not for gain but for honour, and Dublin its second city. But one son was enough. (ASTB,55)

First and foremost, the Empire here is reduced to its dominions: 'Canada', 'Australia', 'New Zealand', all former settler colonies which essentially replaced and almost-eradicated indigenous populations: they only gained a partial form of independence because they were white settler colonies⁴¹. This list of Empire-led countries erases the states of Ireland, Wales and Scotland simply absorbed by Great Britain or 'the motherland' with 'Dublin its second city', signalling the ambiguous status of Ireland as 'both the imperial metropole and the colonised periphery'⁴². This list also crucially omits India and South Africa, who contributed more men than all the 'young dominions' together, after Dr Santanu Das's calculations: 'Among the various colonies of the British empire, India contributed the largest number of men, with approximately 1.5 million recruited during the war up to December 1919. The dominions (self-governing nations within the British Commonwealth) – including Canada, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Newfoundland – contributed a further 1.3 million men.'⁴³ O'Neill's character then presents a fallacious version of British imperial nationalism through a very partial map, one with Great Britain at the centre and the 'corners', the peripheral dominions folding over, all imperialist forces draining back to WWI's fronts. The image of the map 'returning blood' is also significant, as the settlers did indeed come from Europe but the image also unwittingly taints the imperial map with blood. This recalls a recurring malfunction of Mia Gallagher's interactive maps

⁴¹ See Ní Fhlathúin, Máire. 'The British Empire', in McLeod, John (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*. London: Routledge, 2008. pp21-32

⁴² Caroll, Clare and King, Patricia *Ireland and Post-colonial Theory*. Cork University Press (2003), 130.

⁴³ <https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/colonial-troops> [last accessed 12/04/23]

as borders are often tainted with 'brown-red', yet here the map is depicted as an imperial vampiric force that will drain its own diaspora too. This puts the independence of the dominions in question as they are still obligated to defend 'the motherland' at tremendous cost to life. Moreover, the casual mention of 'knock[ing] out the Turk' is dismissive of another state's struggle against British and French imperialist forces. This dedication to the Empire, spouted in the 'great Empire at war' rhetoric, is, however, dampened by the mention of blood, as Mr Mack is thinking about all this while watching Jim do his homework. All this nationalist pride (he wants Ireland to simply be another dominion) is concluded and suddenly opposed by 'But one son was enough'. He sacrificed his own blood out of debt to the British Empire yet he considers his debt fully redeemed with one son, and he is still hoping that Gordie will come back. O'Neill showcases the limits of wartime and imperialist propaganda in the face of potential loss of life, as familial bonds suddenly overcome this sense of debt and patriotism.

In Gallagher's novel, an interesting alternative to national identity is perhaps found somewhere deeper, a geological bond, rooted in the earth, especially the in-betweens, the non-places that particularly attract Georgia like the border. These geological elements that change as much as human beings, but at an extreme slowness, become metaphorical:

Naked, the Gap, and huge. I watched the scorched landscapes pass; its stunted trees, its scrubby bush, all ash browns and muddy blood-reds. Martin used to say going over the Sally Gap was like travelling across the moon. (...) The Gap does feel like an alien place, free of any sign of humans, and that morning, I could sense it working its old magic on me, the same magic big empty places always work on the small human mind. Geological glamour; the illusion that landforms, unlike us, never change. That this is how it is, was and always will be. Bullshit. It's always changing, just slower (BPLH,107-8)

Scorch marks ('scorched') and blood-reds' suggested by the colours of the landscape recall those of the Wunderkammer maps, as if the violence surrounding contested territory has left visible traces on the landscape. These traces are also proof that, despite the fact that borders are imaginary lines, they physically brand the landscape and the lives of the borderland's inhabitants. Furthermore, these landscape descriptions can be read as evidence of the assimilation of gender and national identity. I argued in the previous part that Martin, nicknamed 'Mar' in reference both to the sea he is associated with as a queer element and here his discomfort with the Sally Gap, Georgia's landbound territory according to the symbolic of the narrative, is appropriately the first to remark on the alien-like nature of this space. Georgia, however, belongs to this alien space by association as her babysitter previously commented about an old childhood picture of her: '...the area around Georgie is brighter than the rest of the picture. It looks as if the child is encased in a celestial glow, about to be beamed up to another plane.' (BPLH,139) conferring this other-worldly androgyny to

the child and associating her with the extra-terrestrial, the liminal and, in this case, 'an alien place' like the 'moon'. To Mar, a Scotsman, it is only natural that this space feels alien to him, yet Georgia too shares the estrangement of a national park near her birthplace. This might call back to her flight abroad, avoiding Ireland and her own femininity for decades, a potential abandoned shortly after having finally fully claimed it once she had released Judith's doll-head into the sea and absorbed her imaginary friend to become 'Georgie +'. Gallagher seems to be intimating that Georgia's being abandoned by her father and left to her rigid aunts in Clonmel has forced her to negate that part of herself again before expatriating to Berlin and then to England. This in turn suggests that the reconnection with the land, her geological equivalent in its alien-nature, also brings her closer to her long-denied womanhood. The last sentence criticises the idea of an unchanging and eternal land that has always existed and reduces it to a mere illusion. I will expand on the notion shortly but the focus on 'illusion' and glamour, as the geological landscape is likened in text to Geo(rgia), a transwoman, encroaches once more on dangerous territory for Mia Gallagher. Because Georgia's medical transition is described in the same artificial terms as the glamour, it projects the same suspicion around the trans-body, which is questionable. However, calling out the illusion of an immutable landscape could also question, at the same time, the ideological notion of an immutable 'nature' and 'biology', often weaponised against trans-people. Georgia then disrupts that idea by pointing out that everything, nature, the geological, bodies is in constant state of change and evolution, which legitimises medical transition.

To circle back to the child picture that Lotte finds, she can already perceive the androgyny of Georgia, alongside her alien aura: 'There is something unbearably nostalgic about the faded colours in that part of the photo, the way they highlight the curve of the child's cheek, the pale skin, the full mouth.' (BPLH,139) Even before mentioning the picture she notes 'the large, sensuous limbs, the sulky mouth, the messy hair, she was reminded of one of Caravaggio's angels, those mysterious androgynous creatures...' (BPLH,135) This sense that there has always been this aura of girlhood, or femininity, around Georgia also belies the parallel with geological glamour. This is why Mia Gallagher's potential transphobia (in that she opposes medical transition with a supposed naturalness of cis bodies) is confusing, as she seems to endow her trans-protagonist with a natural femininity that has always been visible to those who know how to look, yet emphasises the artificial nature of medical transition. Another work by Gallagher might bring some light to this confusion between the artifice or natural-ness of transwomen's beauty. She wrote a short-story two years after

Beautiful Pictures, 'Shift', where a young man with, euphemistically, Seasonal Affective Disorder that makes him cross-dress but only in winter. This character's co-worker, Des, pontificates upon seeing him without make-up and feminine clothing: 'this young fella doesn't need to dress up to look like a young one, he's got it already. He's more like a mot the way he is now than with all the slap and high heels'⁴⁴. This would point out to an acceptance of androgynous/non-binary people but a dismissal of transition, both medical and presentation-wise in Mia Gallagher's characters and narratives. Suggesting that trans-people should embrace a 'natural' androgynous appearance instead of medically transitioning or presenting as their actual gender is a subtle form of transphobia, but transphobia nonetheless. It still upholds a supposed hierarchy between a 'natural body' that should be accepted as such and an artificial presentation or medical transition.

William Keohane evokes the idea of a transman's masculinity always being there, a subtle potential present from childhood. He writes about a memory of sharing a moment of recognition with his mother through an old picture:

Some photographs I still struggle to look at. I cannot see myself in them. But I like this one; I could be a boy, a long-haired boy. I could be anyone.

Last time I was home, now a man (...) my mother picked up the frame, held it to my face. She looked at me, at both of me. The past and present tense. 'I suppose you were always...'

She'd let the words slip; she didn't finish. I know what she was trying to say.

I suppose I was, always.⁴⁵

This presents a different narrative altogether as more nuance is introduced: other pictures are still 'a struggle to look at' because not every trans child is lucky enough to have androgynous traits like the fictional Geo in *Beautiful Pictures*. Only one picture suggests androgyny to Keohane and is still so subtle that he could be 'a long-haired boy', the androgyny not even voiced by his mother or himself, preferring the interruption of the sentence to turn into a statement affirming his identity, boyhood and manhood 'past and present tense'. This picture allows him to reclaim a past he did not necessarily get to live nor was aware of at the time by showing hints of his potential masculinity as a constant in his appearance and life: 'I was, always.'

Bodyscapes

⁴⁴ Gallagher, Mia 'Shift' in *Shift* Dublin, New Island Books (2018), 105.

⁴⁵ Keohane, William 'Three Strands' *The Stinging Fly*: Issue 47/Volume Two, Winter (2022-23), 32.

A lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature. The fluvial trees next the shore are the slender eyelashes which fringe it, and the wooded hills and cliffs around are its overhanging brows.⁴⁶

In likening trans- and queer bodies to the Irish landscape, authors rework the passing of time at a geological and human level. This confusion in time sets in bodily changes that usually occur at puberty but will intervene later in a trans-person's life if they wish to medically transition. The blur between bodily and geological evolution and time is evoked in the Icelandic singer-songwriter Björk's album *Biophilia* as the song 'Mutual Core' matches bodily transformations, emotional states and geological shifts: 'As fast as your fingernails grow/ The Atlantic ridge drifts'⁴⁷. The song mostly seems to address a rift between two partners, although the 'mutual core' she tries to build despite 'seasonal shifts', the 'shuffling of columns'⁴⁸ suggested can also be between the planet and the human evolving alongside one another. This matches the 'slow changes' in the strata and in Geo's body (geological body) and, in the case of Georgia, these parallel changes also cause the straining of her relationship, as the further she gets into her transition, the less she is compatible with a gay man: 'We stayed, unmoving, growing more mismatched by the week: two little sparks of nothing in a little red Fiat, stuck like a boil on the face of the world.' (BPLH,107)

Similarly, the slowness of geological change, and, by extension, of vegetal and animal growth above the geological layers, seems like yet another loose parallel to human bodies evolving and shifting in shapes. I established in II.2 that Gallagher operates at macro and micro levels, placing her character's molecular changes (through transition or illness) and the shifting of geological strata in parallel by choosing to shorten Georgia's name as Geo for most of the novel, establishing the symbolic connection. This is further explored in the similarities between the protagonist's bodyshapes and the shapes in the landscape.

Indeed, the same magical aura is present in physical descriptions of the protagonist, imbued with the 'geological glamour' as I discussed in II.1, the same alienation ('alien place'). Moreover, the same vocabulary is used to describe the body of Geo(logical/Georgia) and the landscapes in which she evolves, where she makes her 'pilgrimage' (BPLH,108), taking her former lover's advice on a day she

⁴⁶ Thoreau, Henry David *Walden* [1854] at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/205/205-h/205-h.htm#chap10> [last accessed 05/02/23]

⁴⁷ Björk, 'Mutual Core' *Biophilia*. One Little Indian Records (2011).

⁴⁸ This might refer to columnar jointing, the strange polygonal prism of the Giant's Causeway or Fingal's cave, oddly appropriate in the context of an Irish-Scottish pairing as the causeway used to be a mythological and supposedly geological bridge between the Celtic states.

is feeling unhinged and sickly and after she received a parcel from her estranged father. She drives to the Wicklow mountains and describes the landscape thus:

I peered down at the snowman-shape of the two lakes, the paths along their banks, dotted with the tiny moving forms of people and dogs. The black masses of trees leading up from the water, the dirty white cliffs scarred with the marks of old quarries. Funny little shapes stick out from the grey silhouette of the crest facing me. If I squinted, I could make out the slanting oblong of a water reservoir, the broken thumb of a mineshaft. The colours and shapes hummed, playing tricks on my eyes. At the back of my mind, neurons buzzed, aching to connect. (BPLH,111)

The landscape is brought alive by humanising details like 'scarred with the marks of old quarries', 'broken thumb' as the mineshaft, supposedly, 'sticks out like a sore thumb' in the natural landscape. Note that the quarries and the mines are 'broken' and 'scarr[ing]', old traces of exploitation leaving adverse traces, making it 'dirty', opposing industry and nature in a common dichotomy that becomes (again) problematic if the following interpretation is correct.

The protagonist's 'neurons (...) aching to connect' can be a sign that this sight is reminding her of something she has seen earlier that day, looking at her own body in the mirror, and if boiled down to 'colours and shapes' the parallel emerges: 'I squinted; saw a long-legged oblong. Tilted up my chest, sucked in my gut, squinted again; this time, saw a wide-waisted hourglass.' (Galagher:14) The two forms recurring forms here are 'oblong' and the 'snowman-shape', similar to 'hourglass': the landscape presents the same patterns as Geo's body when she 'squints'. Based on this reading, it is possible to argue that Georgia represents the Irish territory: a hybrid space, alienated (isolated), magical and, above all, in transition.

To summarise what has been building up throughout this thesis as it covers *Beautiful Pictures* extensively, it has been established that: Georgia is an androgynous-looking child with 'naturally' feminine traits, like her mouth, that her medical transition is uncomfortable (adverse hormonal after-effects are constantly referred to) and, at times, ugly (her post-facial feminisation surgery face compared to that after the car-crash/stubble on breasts excerpt), her transition results in her estrangement from her father and lover and maybe exposes her to an increased risk of breast-cancer, which she takes as punishment for 'her desire to be what she's not supposed to be' (BPLH,462). In her symbolically shortened name, she is 'Geo', the Earth, the land, the Irish landscape and allegory. If one pursues the analysis with that logic, perhaps it suggests that her transition mirrors the neoliberalistic economic transition ruining Ireland? If medical transition is to be equated with technology, capitalism, industry, if the former interpretations are correct and encouraged in-text, then what is inferred of medical transition is ultimately rather negative.

The novel in itself, and its memory game technique of scattering motifs and themes throughout, is perfectly geared for analysis and incredibly useful for a thesis (hence why it is part of the corpus), but as the reader slowly solves the puzzle, the result becomes more and more difficult to interpret as trans-friendly. Therefore, I again have to advocate for caution in reading Mia Gallagher's representation of trans-experience as she is perilously speaking from outside of the community about extremely intimate and politically-loaded subjects. The most worrying possibility with this novel would be that cis-readers would consider it as authentic trans-representation and neglect to read trans writer's account of their own experience for contrast.

On that note, it is also unfair to place that burden on a young emerging writer to introduce more positive and healthier representation into the corpus, but William Keohane's work does provide this contrast. His writing also explores a less sceptical version of the sublime as many of his short-stories focus on the inter-generational bonds of his family and, in 'Cratloe Woodlake' he also develops the idea of a geological osmosis between the human and non-human by positing the re-absorption of his grandfather's remains by the Irish landscape:

Along the path, motionless spruces guide us, like signposts, towards the hilltop. The silent watch keeps Donal planted. His memory runs concentric circles inside each one of them. Below, within the soil, a network of roots. Spreading all across the woods, across the whole of County Clare, down the mountainside and into Craughaun Cemetery, where the sediments of Donal's bones are sleeping. We do not die, we just become another thing. I imagine the grains of him, travelling up through the heather, the grass, the roots, the trees. Up into the spruce needle canopy above, watching us...⁵⁰

Again, Will Keohane explores non-conventional, nurturing forms of masculinity by practicing this commemorative way of writing. He summons his deceased relatives' ghosts to linger and mobilises his memories of them to create a persisting image of the moments they shared by committing them to the page. Here, his grandfather Donal lives on through the landscape he grew and revived, planting spruces that reach towards his remains, 'a network of roots ... spreading... into Craughaun cemetery' so that he can continue to nourish them after his death. His grandson imagines that 'his memory runs in concentric circles' measuring human experience with the dendrograph of his spruces, consolidating the idea that human life is intertwined with its environment and further displaying the ecological sensitivity I broached in Chapter II 1.2. This prompts this cyclical view of death and life that Keohane advocates clearly: 'we do not die, we just become another thing.' He refuses to see ashes, but life-giving grains and, in fact, draws on something similar to the death-rebirth cycle developed in the Bahktinian grotesque, yet again shifting away from the negative

⁵⁰ Keohane, William 'Cratloe Woodlake' *Banshee* Press issue 12 (2021), 81.

connotation it took on in later literature. Keohane's work is important as it also solidly huddles a trans-son inside a wider familial group and Irish landscape that protects and roots him, breaking away from the usual misery-drenched narratives of familial rejection that plague accounts of marginalised individuals. This is not to say that these bigoted reactions should be ignored, but the very pervasiveness of these narratives makes it seem like there is only a negative outcome to one's coming out or being found out (as any of the LGBTQIA+ subgroups). As media depiction tends to function as a self-fulfilling prophecy, some people with no strong opinions on the matter might also take cues from the media on how to react to societal phenomena and if the media landscape is flooded with loneliness, death and rejection, this does not bode well. Therefore, the warmth of Keohane's intergenerational, non-anthropocentric celebration of Irish land and sea is a welcome contrast to the loneliness and depression of, for instance, Gallagher's protagonist. The eco-critic tone of his writing invokes more the old sublime, the awe and belonging but, far from the distant, isolated contemplation posited by the sublime,⁵¹ this is a collective, familial synthesis with a sentient landscape. This connection is not unambiguously positive for the author, however, as the weight of something deemed 'natural' is never neutral in trans-experience, no matter how much re-appropriation one can enact through writing.

The terms 'natural' and 'biological' are interlinked with the Earth and, as I mentioned, a certain branch of ecological activism. The landscape can then take on another, prescriptive meaning for the body. For instance, much of the psychological discourse surrounding the pre-transition will encourage an individual to 'accepting their bodies as they are' as they are assumed to be cisgender by default. The celebration of diversity in bodies then becomes antagonistic to a pre-transition transperson, with a lexicon of 'nature' and the 'natural' that sets the body as inherent to one's gender and an inescapable biological determinism that cannot be altered. Therefore, the Irish landscape and sea scape in particular can also take on the opposite, normative connotation. This is why I emphasise the ambiguousness of nature and water as it can be recuperated to serve diametrically opposed strands of rhetoric. For instance, in this excerpt by William Keohane, an 'egg', (a trans person pre-transition) contemplates the shore without any feeling of the interconnectedness I previously detailed:

The waves are breaking. The sea rolls on, and I'm here on the white-veined rocks, and they are glowing pale grey in the dim, and they look like my body, I notice, they look like my hips, the silver growth spurt streaks, the

⁵¹See Clewis, Robert R. *The Sublime Reader* London, Bloomsbury Academic (2018) 404

fractures across my sides where the skin has stretched. I shrug the thought away and hug my knees into my chest.⁵²

At this stage, the egg cannot connect with the Irish landscape as alien forms mirror an alien body ('white-veined rocks' that look like 'body', 'hips' and 'stretch [marks]'), a disturbing reminder of the disconnect with their own body. Because the body acts as the main medium between the inner mind and the outside world, if the bodyshapes are awry or ill-fitting and encourages an inappropriate interpretation of your gender, then they stave off a comforting interconnectedness with the environment. The curves of the rocks, then, negate the possibility of even a sceptical form of sublime or contemplation, as the egg focuses on 'shrug[ing] the thought away' and adopting a protective stance, 'hugg[ing their] knees into [their] chest'. One notes, however, that a happier version of the same person can, post-transition and coming out, reflect on the Irish landscape through the osmotic lens I discussed previously, once the medium to experience the outside world has been re-adjusted to a better fit, one that allows the writer to connect with this previously negatively connoted nature.

This osmosis between the landscape and the protagonist can also be found, to a lesser extent, in Donoghue's and O'Neill's descriptions, although they tend to reflect more the inner turmoil of their characters than their physical shape. For instance, O'Neill draws on the circling flow of the tides (paralleled with Mary Night's cycles) to describe Jim's cyclical train of thought while he is still confused in his thoughts and desires, not ready yet to verbalise them as they are. I will quote it at length just to demonstrate the intense blur of the natural elements and the emotional state of the protagonist:

There were words in the back of his mind, or in the sea that circled his mind, whose articulation, like his father with the Gaelic, his tongue could not get round. He sometimes felt if he would close his eyes and dip below, he might catch these words, they were drifting there in the flotsam, and he would understand what it was that troubled him.

(...)

Only when he was ready, when Doyler would bring him to the island, only then was the time for understanding. But as soon as he got this far, he started over, like he was swimming in his mind and had touched the raft and must head for the cove again, for indeed it was not clear what he should understand, or even that there was anything requiring his understanding. And why wouldn't he just look forward to the day instead of moirdering in the deeps the while? For it might be nothing would await him on the island. Yet the hurry of his heart told the lie of that. And there were words in the back of his mind or in the sea that circled his mind which, if only he would catch them, would tell the truth. And his heart didn't need to be told but knew already that Easter next, all would be clear. (ASTB,353)

⁵² Keohane, William 'Three Strands' *The Stinging Fly*: Issue 47/Volume Two, Winter (2022-23), 35-36.

This strange excerpt blends the unspeakable notion of homosexuality, tied to the figure of Oscar Wilde, as previously mentioned, but also the impossibility to reconnect with the Irish language for the Dublin working or shopkeeper class embodied by Arthur Mack. The ebb and tide of the sea (going seaward to the raft then inland to the cove) that surrounds Ireland, encompasses in its vastness the multiple disconnects of the various characters with their identities, both queer and Irish, and re-inscribes them too in a larger geological (or in this case pelagic) scale. The ebb and flow of Jim's thoughts is also set as cyclical as the beginning of this thought 'there were words at the back of his mind or in the sea that circled his mind' is repeated verbatim to link both the confusion of the character and that of the reader with the temporary illusion of having lost your mark in the page.

The sea (again, connoting Doyler, especially for Jim) is omnipresent in O'Neill's long novel and takes on, in its protean symbolism, the many aspects of the characters' traits, identities and thoughts. In fact, the ductility of the metaphor had occurred to the author, as when speaking of the 'motif of the sea' in interviews he simply states that 'As a metaphor it's just... it's just everything.'⁵³ This explains the various uses of water and the sea in the novel, but concerning the character of Jim, O'Neill was also intent on tying him to an ambiguous state. He is bound in the narrative to the half-tide state of the sea, which reflects the confusion in his desires. Jim has the sharpest arc of evolution to get through during the novel, mostly centred on his own coming-to-terms with his sexuality and attraction for Doyler: '...everything is equivocal with Jim: the tide is never in or out, it's always halfway with Jim (...) nothing is ever clear...'⁵⁴ and this equivocal nature is perfectly captured in the excerpt which also ties Jim to the notion of geological symbiosis, as 'the sea circled his mind' and reflects his thought-process.

Yet this confusion shifts when Jim is training at the Kingston baths with Anthony and learning to accept himself after having sunk into a long bout of Catholic repentance and self-loathing. Through swimming, as it has been established in the previous chapter, Jim embraces his amphibian nature and, as he becomes more in tune with his element, his body takes on geological and animal-like traits that emphasise the natural quality of his sexuality and self-acceptance. Anthony describes his buttocks rising to the surface of the pool thus: 'Slowly, as he relaxed, the navy-clad hillocks rose to break the surface. Fondly lapped lagoon tides upon the tidal creek. One of the more agreeable ruts of life. (ASTB,425) The emergence of this specific body-part is symbolic for several reasons: first

⁵³ Conner, Marc C., & O'Neill, J. (2007). "To Bring All Loves Home": An Interview with Jamie O'Neill. *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 11(2), 66–78. 68.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

because it marks an evolution after his self-loathing, a period during which he is adamant about concealing his body and especially his back as the locus of 'sin' with the soldier, as Anthony noted: 'Not so long ago, when these lessons had commenced, MacMurrough made no doubt the boy would be jumping ten feet from the water (...) if his rear were so much as admitted to, let alone spoken of or, God help us, touched. (ASTB,426) The increasing reluctance to acknowledge this body part is well depicted in the crescendo of 'so much as', 'let alone' and 'God help us' around the verbs considering it, yet Jim is now comfortable enough to let his backside emerge from the water and reflect the seascape of 'lagoon tides upon the tidal creek', even his bathing suit reflecting his element as his buttocks are 'navy-clad'.

This renewed capacity of revealing himself proves he has passed the trauma phase that his Christian education forced on his first sexual encounter and is ready to expose himself again, this time with a friend (be it MacMurrough, or, more likely, as he is still denoted by the sea element, Doyler). Moreover, his buttocks emerging from the water allow him to form the parallel line with the surface which grants him the necessary balance to be carried by the element and be, at last, able to swim. MacMurrough also notes during this scene of gradual self-acceptance that 'the boy was changing rapidly. He was shrugging that old skin; as his confidence grew, daily he shrugged it further. An adventurism pulsed inside, which every so often MacMurrough might trip...' (ASTB,428) here equating the body at peace with its nature as a reptile or amphibian moulting or coming out of its egg, a new life 'puls[ing] inside'. The old skin could also refer to the Christian education Jim is leaving behind. All in all, these two natural elements blend Jim's human body with the geological seascape of Ireland and its animal life in an interesting bid for an 'ecological self' described by Arne Naess as a notion which 'rejects individual selfhood in favor of connections between human and nonhuman nature and between humans.'⁵⁵ This notion effectively sums up this key moment of the novel as Jim accepts himself through his blooming friendship with Anthony and becomes ready to overcome the fear which made him refuse a kiss to Doyler months prior and to finally explore the more romantic nature of their attachment. O'Neill then, through the multiple images invoked by this moment of protagonist transition, also hints at an ecological sensibility.

I have tried to establish a parallel between the sea-swimming in *At Swim* and the baths of *Hood* as the locus for building up intimacy between the couples of Jim and Doyler and Pen and Cara. As Jim unwinds and learns to accept his desires with the help of Anthony in the water, so does Pen begin

⁵⁵ Vakoch, Douglas A. ed. *Transecology Transgender Perspectives on Environment and Nature* London, Routledge (2020)
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to accept the idea of living with Cara's absence. She bathes on her own after Kate has gone, cutting short all easy-fix fantasies around the big sister of her deceased lover. Pen's body, like in the swimming pool, unwinds in a private bath and her shapes are described as a 'landscape' flooding, back to the element where she feels safest, weightless: 'The blood was trickling down the edge of the bath now, so I climbed in and let out my breath in a long gasp as the heat took hold of my muscles, layer by layer, and my breasts began to float. (...) I liked to squeeze my stomach muscles until my belly-button was emptied of water; I would pause a second, then dip my back and flood the whole landscape again.' (Hood,253) Her body keeps going through the usual cycles, ignoring the trauma of grief (or perhaps a bit disturbed by it as her period comes early) and she returns to the place of romantic intimacy, this time on her own after the official part of the mourning has been taken care of and grief can become a more private affair. The focus on her body relaxing incrementally, 'layer by layer', calls to mind geological layers as organic life becomes the landscape, paralleling her lover's body decomposing underground. Yet by contrast, the focus on the bodily (muscles, breast, stomach, back, blood) and life (gasp, breath) proves how alive Pen still is. The osmosis with the landscape then becomes another sign of the ongoing life cycles (the landscape floods 'again') and interconnectedness between the human and non-human, the Irish island and its inhabitants and even calling to greater geological times as the sea level has risen and dropped over the eons, suggesting that she, too can go in this cycle, even after the loss.

The aesthetics surrounding Shivers and the Geological Glamour borrow more from a form of contemporary sublime that seeks to signal a connection between the protagonists and their surroundings. Yet the seeds of scepticism are still present in these aesthetics as they are rarely unambiguously mobilised by the authors of our corpus. Indeed, all of them tend to deconstruct, parody or desecralise the moments of awe and contemplation, oscillating between various tones and aesthetics strands. I would like to return to the grotesque part of their aesthetics now and see how it can at once complete and challenge an older form of sublime in the depiction of the Irish landscape.

III.2 Clepsydra

The Insulindian Phasmid : The pale, too, came with you. No one remembers it before you. The cnidarians do not, the radially symmetricals do not. There is an almost unanimous agreement between the birds and the plants that you are going to destroy us all. (...) Given enough time you would wipe us all out and replace us with nothing – just by accident.⁵⁶

I have attempted to introduce the notion of sceptical sublime in the previous subpart, as the romantic, unironic awe for geological wide spaces, forests and the sea does no longer seem present in my narrow glimpse on contemporary Irish literature. In the corpus, writers always retain an undercurrent of scepticism, a demythologising or a questioning of the 'glamour', as grand natural elements are brought down to mundane human affairs and cycles. In this subpart, I would like to develop how this modern version of the sublime deals with the now widespread knowledge around pollution and climate change and how it expresses the corrupting nature of capitalism on natural elements (bearing in mind the constructed quality of the very notion). If the previous ideas of 'shivers' and 'geological glamour' were sublime-adjacent, this corrupting effect I wish to explore now borrows again from the Bahktinian grotesque. Throughout the thesis, I have emphasised the tension between idealisation and grotesque in the corpus' aesthetics and this often was the product of an ambiguous treatment of marginalised or othered bodies in their thriving, bonding and fluidity as expressed through the water metaphor, the sea monsters. This weaving together of otherness and these bodies' environment highlights the interconnectedness I focused on in the first subpart of this chapter. Moreover, the emphasis on water and the sea stresses two mounting sources of anxieties. I will describe them in this chapter through the short-hand of a paradoxical clepsydra, drinkable water lowering and salt water rising (because desalination is not economically viable in most countries at the moment). This water clock image both expresses fresh water running out and becoming increasingly scarce due to climate change and the rise in sea levels, threatening islands and coastal populations, which concerns Ireland geographically. It also seeps the reader in eco-critical sensibilities as this tension between idealisation/sublime and grotesque seems to operate a shift in aesthetic values.

⁵⁶ Kurvitz, R. et al. *Disco Elysium* London, ZA/UM (2019)

1. Grottesque and Corruption

Young writers like Toby Buckley, Jessica Traynor and many others who find readership through alternative, small publishing houses and journals recurrently endow their words with this peculiar anxiety around climate change and capitalism. This often takes the shape of a hyper-artificialised nature and the paradoxical attraction-repulsion for glittery artifice it creates in its grotesque aesthetics. Water engineering, fish farming and fishery in general, as well as the sea 'Flooding our venom back at us' *Liffey Swim*⁵⁷ are used as examples of the over-exploitation of natural resources and how it corrupts organic, 'natural' cycles and decay, accelerates slow processes to yield always more commodities. Peter Wohlleben sums this up efficiently thus:

The eagerness to engineer environments to fit our way of life comes at a cost: the fertilisers and pesticides we pump into the monocultures designed to feed thousands have now contaminated drinking water for entire regions. Instead of wetlands that would soak up the overflow of rivers and streams, it has now become plainly visible that our praxis of canalising bodies of water into submission backfired, as waterways forced into corsets of concrete leave no space for excess water to drain away, which instead accumulates into torrents swallowing everything in their way.⁵⁸

As a prelude and to contrast with these artifices, a striking example of the death and life cycle is found in the bottom feeders of 'Shoal' by Otto Godwin:

The whale carcass drifts quietly to the seafloor/ceremonious How long does this journey take? The final resting place, a home still unfound the shore is giddy with the tide/salivating silver Lapping at the rockpools, earnest and oh-so-eager slow motion somersaults into graceful decay The trills of decomposition a crescendo of hungry mouths thankful for this darling/donation Hungry/Hungry eyes/mouths teeth/teeth/knives never-before-seen by science and how long does this process take?

And the girl-faced/boy-faced being with dogfishtails – tear with mottled fingers and milky eyes at the banhus/long-house/attic rafters – until they are stained red and satisfied (those beautiful lass/lad/inbetween children are some sight to behold, they feed in a frenzy)

The ocean's dowry to her manywives and manyhusbands and skeletonsandshipwrecks

This gathering/banquet at the bottom of the sea – we come together in shoal and shittle and flock to feast are we graverobbers?

And will the baleen break down without our thoughtful contribution?

Recyclers maybe, maybe guests at this great supper.⁵⁹

This festive banquet scene recalls the Bakhtinian principle of an exaggerated depiction of the body and is a positive representation of a universal and joyful over-abundance: 'The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed.'⁶⁰ The notion of a collective people instead of an

⁵⁷ Traynor, Jessica *Liffey Swim* Dublin, Dedalus Press (2014) 56

⁵⁸ Wohlleben, Peter *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate* London, William Collins (2017).

⁵⁹ Goodwin, Otto 'Shoal' in *Cyphers* 92 Autumn/Winter 2021 14, slashes in original

⁶⁰ Bakhtin, Mikhail trans. Iswolski, Helen *Rabelais and His World* Bloomington, Indiana University Press (1984) 19.

individual also recalls what Fanon described as the rejection of coloniser-imposed individualism⁶¹. Indeed the 'recyclers' thrive on the death of a whale in a collective, undifferentiated crowd proclaimed in the title 'shoal' (with three or more genders) and only plural pronouns are used to signify the absence of individualism at the bottom of the sea. This temporary eco-system has escaped all categorisation or nomenclature as it is protected by the isolation of the deep 'never-before seen by science', undiscovered and thus unlimited. The symbiotic, organic relationship between the feeders and their 'contribution' to the breaking down of the whale's carcass presents a healthy cycle, sheltered from science and commodification and thus an uncorrupted grotesque aesthetic. I would argue that the connotation around cyclical 'graceful decay' and grotesque might be shifting slowly.

Likewise, William Keohane presents a cyclical example of humans utilising their surroundings to hunt in pre-colonial Canada:

'Do you know why this place is called Buffalo Pound?' he asks me, and I shake my head (...) he is pointing into the white distance, the high ridges circling the lake. Before settlers came, he tells me, the people who lived here would herd the buffalo up to the hilltop. A chosen hunter would disguise himself with a pair of horns strapped to his head, a robe of buffalo skin around his shoulders. He would run at them, and they would spread, out towards the cliff edge, over the precipice, into the open air, where they would fall, down and down, towards the shore. Their bodies wouldn't meet the water. They would break on the ground below. The people who were living here used buffalo to feed their families, to make clothing, to keep them warm. They stripped them to the bone. Nothing was wasted.

Beneath the thick crust of ice, in the water below us, all the skeletons are asleep.⁶²

Similarly, to the shoal feeding on a whale carcass, the death of the buffalo is seen as a means of respectful and thorough consumption where 'nothing was wasted', in the contrast with our current Western food over-production resulting in a third being wasted⁶³. The necessity for pre-colonial people to work with their environment for the slaughtering of an entire herd also contrasts with the industrial meat industry yet these former techniques are still presented as ambiguous, refusing to censor the necessary violence of the practice on the non-human. The link between the human and the non-human is also reinforced by the trick employed to lure the herd to its death, whereby a human has to take on the garb of the animals, briefly 'making kin' with the herd in order to live off its product. The non-capitalistic profit from the herd also indicates a harmony with nature in the

⁶¹ Again, see Fanon, Frantz trans. Philcox, Richard *The Wretched of the Earth* New York, Grove Press (2004) 47.

⁶² Keohane, William 'Buffalo Pound Lake' *Banshee Press* issue 12 (2021) 41.

⁶³ <https://greenly.earth/en-us/blog/ecology-news/global-food-waste-in-2022> [last accessed 18/05/23]

water's acceptance of the herd's remains and resting place, refusing to see their death as final, but part of a cycle as they are simply 'asleep' and might wake again.

In Bakhtin's time, when what was celebrated in medieval works like Rabelais' had been downgraded, he argued that 'modern indecent abuse and cursing have retained dead and purely negative remnants of the grotesque concept of the body'⁶⁴. Yet nowadays, the sanitised, industrialised processes that negate these natural cycles seem to gradually lose favour as the bodily, naturally decaying and closed-loop systems re-emerge as a positive. For instance, Donna Haraway uses the figure of the compost several times in her book *Staying with the Trouble* to express the need for collaboration and rebirth: 'The unfinished Chthulucene must collect up the trash of the Anthropocene, the exterminism of the Capitalocene, and chipping and shredding and layering like a mad gardener, make a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures.'⁶⁵ Natural processes, no matter how linked to the once negatively connoted lower strata, are recalled as necessary, a closed, slowly productive loop that should not have been broken in the Capitalocene/Anthropocene. In former chapters of the thesis, I argued that this shift also operates at a human level since various bodies are depicted in this almost positive grotesque realism highlighting the bodily functions and fluids as natural and even sensual, especially in queer contexts. The return to a positively connoted 'natural' grotesque, then consolidates this impression of a shift in aesthetics.

Therefore, in contemporary literature, the negative grotesque is removed from natural cycles of decay to cover a new, inorganic quality, a decay that has been controlled for increased production. Hence, the creative cycle of death and re-birth is disturbed by an artificial element which corrupts its regenerative qualities. This modernised type of post-industrial grotesque seems to have emerged recently in contemporary literature as it deals with the effects of industrialised cattle farming, agricultural and fishery production, waste accumulation, a far cry from the closed loop systems that existed in small sustenance agriculture and 'primitive communism' of cottierism⁶⁶ and what is now advocated by permaculture. I will dive into the specifics of these systems in the next part, but for now what is interesting to analyse is how the breaking of these cyclical systems at a small and large scales is expressed through contemporary poetry and novels.

⁶⁴ Bakhtin *Rabelais and His World* Op.Cit. 28

⁶⁵ Haraway, Donna *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham and London, Duke University Press (2016) 57

⁶⁶ Again, see Lloyd *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity* Op.Cit.

These natural cycles, having resulted from millennia of evolution and adaptation are then broken and polluted by elements of industry which results in an unsettling aesthetic, especially in poetry where the sounds and images are in closer focus. Anna Tsing has extensively applied this notion to invasive species like sea-lice in fish-farming or jellyfish thriving in smooth sea-surfaces. She dubs them ‘non-human collaborators’⁶⁸ of the Anthropocene, as if these species’ displacement/thriving in their current conditions was something conscious when it is only made possible by capitalistic exploitation. She argues that in these new settings, invasive species of animal and vegetal become a threat to the eco-system they have been displaced to, and to humans, most often indigenous populations who learned to function within the unaltered eco-system prior to its disruption. While Anna Tsing and many others in the *Feral Atlas*⁶⁹ interpret this phenomenon as a ‘more than human Anthropocene’⁷⁰, this modification can also be interpreted as linked to capitalism displacing and mixing elements of widely different eco-systems through the globalisation of the market⁷¹.

The *Feral Atlas* project also raises interesting objections to the use of the term ‘Capitalocene’, which I favour in my analysis: ‘A number of scholars, however, have pointed out that both industrial technology and Capitalocene discussions pay too little attention to the role of colonial empires in creating Anthropocene conditions. The Capitalocene definition I work with, however, is somewhat broader and does not start with the Industrial revolution but with mercantilism: ‘Capitalocene signifies capitalism as a way of organizing nature—as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology.’⁷² Using this definition, Capitalocene would date as far back as when the need for permanent growth incited nation-states to seek resources outside of their territory and therefore coincides with what is termed the ‘500 years Anthropocene’. This notion has the Anthropocene start with the genocide of native-Americans and other indigenous populations across colonised territories. I favour the term ‘Capitalocene’ over ‘Anthropocene’ as the latter places the blame on all humans for the deep disturbances in geological strata, regardless of class and power, ignoring that many types of human civilisations and cultures have lived and still live in osmosis with their surroundings and have contributed much less, if at all, to the current climate catastrophe. Why place the blame on the ‘anthropos’ who lived without exploiting the available resources to the point of

⁶⁸ See Youtube - April 6: Anna Tsing, "Anthropocene Patches—Space, Time and Position" See also *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* Oxford, Princeton University Press (2021)

⁶⁹ <https://feralatlantlas.org/> [last accessed 20/07/23]

⁷⁰ Which would then question the relevance of a human (Anthropos) based term.

⁷¹ See Ehrenfeld, David. “The Environmental Limits to Globalization.” *Conservation Biology*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2005, pp. 318–26

⁷² Moore, Jason W *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Oakland, PM Press (2016) 6

disturbing local eco-systems or considering those resources as a commodity for unending growth, as was seemingly the case in, for instance, cottierism systems according to David Lloyd⁷³? 'Anthropocene' also ignores the exploitation of a certain class of humans, their own treatment as a commodity and the little benefit they reap from the over-exploitation of their environment.

The corrupting effect of capitalism applies to the sea, which then becomes a ticking clock, a clepsydra of rising sea levels as the reliance on fossil fuels to power infinite growth melts a (now ironically named) permafrost, clearing a path to more natural gas that will be exploited and increasing the levels of carbon dioxide and methane in the atmosphere. This creates 'positive feedback' accurately described by James Bridle as an estimated 30% of the world's natural gas reserves are in the Arctic: 'Most of these reserves are offshore, beneath less than 500 meters of water, and are now accessible due precisely to the catastrophic impact of the last century of fossil fuel extraction and dependence. (...) This is positive feedback: not positive for life (human, animal or plant) not positive for sense; but accumulative, expansive, and accelerating.'⁷⁴ The fluid and liquid, in James Bridle's book, take on a new negative connotation as thawing ice unleashes dormant bacteria that contaminate, explode and destroy the last traces of past civilisations that may have taught current societies how to survive extreme climate changes. He states:

The melting of the permafrost is both danger sign and metaphor: an accelerating collapse of both our environmental and our cognitive infrastructure. (...) as in Siberia, the sponging of the Greenlandic landscapes reiterates a return to the fluid: the marshy and boggy, the undifferentiated and gaseous. A new dark age will demand more liquid forms of knowing than can be derived from the libraries of the past alone.⁷⁵

The corruption of a usually positively connoted element, it seems, results from an over exploitation of it as a commodified resource and constitutes it as a threat. The same observation can be applied to the societal and theoretical movements that I have used for my analysis: queer, decolonial, ecological. I will expand later on the infinite capacity of capitalism to absorb criticism to transform it into a marketable aesthetic of revolt, but the link I wish to point to now is that, in the same denaturalised manner, it corrupts water and natural cycles to result in this poisonous, unsettling tension that conveys an anxiety-inducing aura to certain strands of contemporary literature. Astrida Neimanis links the corruption of water with the Capitalocene in a quote which introduces this subpart's analysis of eco-criticism in contemporary Irish literature:

Rising sea levels, melting ice caps, parched interiors, rogue storm surges and strange weather, rapid aquifer depletion and massive-scale water choreographies through irrigation, dam-building, and riparian

⁷³ See Lloyd, David 'Closing the mouth: disciplining oral space' in *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity. The Transformation of Oral Space*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press (2011).

⁷⁴ Bridle, James *New Dark Age : Technology, Knowledge and the End of the Future*. Croydon, Verso (2018), 48.

⁷⁵ Ibid 58

'straightening' all remind us that our current epoch's radical terraforming is often explicitly the work of water - and that these are labours in which we humans are variously entangled.⁷⁶

Fish-farms

Indeed, contemporary writers have to work with this difficult tension of showcasing industrial decay and the artifices that limit, control or conceal it while still creating something aesthetically pleasing and disturbing. The artifice is never fully successful and unnatural, ungraceful decay always transpires through the glittery or polished imagery. The most potent example of this nauseous tension is found in *Milk Snake*, the poetry pamphlet by Toby Buckley. He presents his childhood seascape in crude repulsive terms exposing the ugly realities of fish farming and its effects on the workers, their environment as well as the need to gloss over this reality:

In the bay there were five or six
Great dark floating monsters –
Fish farms tended by men in RIBs
Who threw down illegal lobster pots
And slung us Tesco bags of crab claws
Not to tout. Our teas-with-powdered-milk
And Cup-a-Soup cup dinners
All tasted like boat, like purple
Methylated spirits too pretty
To drink, and the dolphins all had gaps
And chunks missing and looked wrong and wild
And not like the real dolphins I saw
On TV. And their wet backs brushed
Slimey against our feet and in school
I lied and made them magic,
Kept the truth in the boot with the lifejackets.⁷⁷

The choice of such a mundane topic as fish farming for a poem about the sea is already interesting in itself as it breaks away drastically with the pastoral atmosphere of the 18th century sublime that holds the natural above the artificial. Here in the 21st century, the distinction between artificial and natural is no longer possible as the Anthropocene/Capitalocene titled geological era has hammered

⁷⁶ Neimanis, Astrida *Bodies of water Posthuman feminist phenomenology* London, Bloomsbury (2017) 160.

⁷⁷ Buckley, Toby 'Inver' in *Milk Snake*. Birmingham, The Emma Press (2022). 2

home the realisation that man-made industry's effects permeate the environment. The illusion of a virginial 'nature' that can be reclaimed no longer exists in contemporary literature and poetry, or at least in the corpus covered by this thesis. One should note that some theorists have moved on from the urge to re-connect with nature, to an indictment to live in the ruins⁷⁸. The fish in *Inver* are suffocatingly penned-in gigantic 'monsters' farms, the lobster is firmly contained in pots, the 'crabs', already reduced to edible 'claws', are locked in 'Tesco bags', the supermarket brand making them indissociable from their consumption. The non-edible sea creatures, the dolphins, simply endure the ill effects of fish farms on their health, becoming 'slimey' with 'chunks missing'. Only their sanitised image is still useful as a commodity, as those on TV are deemed the 'real dolphins' instead of the suffering, breathing mammals that the child sees and feels in *Inver*. This also suggests the precedence of sight over touch in the overly visual-based culture of the current century, as the image of dolphins seems more real than the 'wet backs brush[ing] against our feet'. This omnipresence of glamorised images also pushes the child to censor his own senses and make the dolphins 'magic' when talking about them to other children, the truth being left 'in the boot with the life jackets'. This detail ominously suggests that not exposing the harsh conditions of fish farming and their effect on local marine mammal populations ultimately risks perpetuating the destructive systems. The lack of life-jackets (locked in the boot) also suggests the ultimate drowning of humanity if this denial continues.

Animals then are reduced to food or decay while food is reduced to chemicals 'too pretty to drink', with a nice colour but no taste (as they all 'tasted like boat'). The detail 'too pretty to drink' might also be a reference to the dyeing of methylated spirit purple to mark it as unfit for consumption by people addicted to alcohol⁷⁹. This would then mean that the bright colours of highly processed foods like 'powdered-milk' and 'Cup-a-Soup' signal them as poisonous. The nauseous 'nature' presented here by Buckley in *Inver* then redeems the lies he told his classmates in school and laces with slimey decay the food-industry-based exploitation of his native bay. This poem exemplifies efficiently the recent twist on the Bakhtinian grotesque where natural decay is glossed over, sanitised and/or the result of intense farming and exploitation and therefore non-natural.

To go on with Buckley's exposition of the fish-farming industry, he also accounts for the class-based loss of life at sea. Fishermen are simply mentioned in *Inver* as 'men in RIBs', as the focus there is on

⁷⁸ See Tsing, Anna *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* Oxford, Princeton University Press (2015)

⁷⁹ <https://alcoholrehab.com/alcoholism/effects/dangers-of-industrial-spirits/> [last accessed 04/04/2023]

the non-human suffering under capitalistic exploitation, but Buckley then shifts the focus to human loss and death at work or work-related accidents in 'Waders'. Therefore, the two poems seem to complement each other. He actually reads them together for the Emma Press Youtube channel⁸⁰ in front of the Belfast marina, suggesting this pairing:

That summer one of the boys from the boats
Tumbled overboard and paddled and sank,
Washing up on St. John's Point days later
With his green boots still burping seawater.
They said it was the waders that did it:
The watertight rubber from toe to chest
Gulps the sea, keeps it in and pulls you down,
An anchor strapped on with hi-vis braces.
And the boys from the boats kept their boots on,
Knowing well the disrespect of learning
Too quickly from another man's mistakes.
And the mackerel that summer kept biting,
And the nets were raised and lowered, all eyes
Averted from the place the boy went in.⁸¹

Note that there is only one mention of 'men' working; they are mostly called 'boys', as the magnitude of the dangers at sea dwarfs even competent adults. This could also refer to the neoliberalistic trend of disproportionately using apprentices as cheap (or free) workforce to save on production costs⁸². Those untrained young recruits then tend to be over-represented in work-accident and workplace deaths statistics⁸³. The almost inescapable occurrence of death is also made to seem routine by the logical succession of verbs 'tumbled ... and paddled and sank', the event so common that the date is not specifically set, simply mentioned as 'that summer' and the worker remains anonymous in death, reduced to 'one of the boys'. This blurring of time and identity suggests it could be any of the workers, that this event keeps repeating itself. The poem is steeped in dark irony as it hinges on the twist of a protective garment supposed to keep you from getting wet on trawlers actually making you drown quicker if you fall in. The tone can also be read as a parody of folklore and legends around mermaids drowning sailors with people's eyes 'averted' in fear from the cause of drowning and the

⁸⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gA8ldEnlozk&t=6s> [last accessed 19/05/23]

⁸¹ Buckley, T. 'Waders' in *Milk Snake, Op. Cit.*, 5.

⁸² <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2008/aug/07/1419education.furthereducation> [last accessed 19/05/23]

⁸³ See Lépine, Mathieu *L'Hécatombe invisible. Enquête sur les morts au travail*, Paris, Le Seuil (2023).

typical oral-like formula 'they said it was the X that did it'. No magical or fantastic creatures intervene in this drowning, however, only mundane waders which exacerbate the dark irony of the poem. However, the boots 'burping' and 'gulping' water do take on a monstrous, animalistic aura and drown the worker seemingly out of their voracious appetite for water. Former Celtic legends then seem to fade into the neoliberalist, capitalistic environment that considers the sea as a simple commodity (here yielding mackerels), like the men who work to extract it. All are reduced to an expendable resource and if a man dies, life and the work rhythm will go on (nets raised and lowered). This is an uncomfortable truth the other workers prefer to ignore. This link between the exploitation of the land, inland waters, the sea, the fish in it, in short, the 'natural resources' and the exploitation of men as disposable workforce is quite powerful in that it ties ecological matters to socialist rhetoric. It is crucial as ecological awareness is often seen as elitist and disconnected from the working class's pleas. It flattens the hierarchies between the human and non-human too by equating the exploitation of natural resources with that of 'human resources' as they are often used together in a capitalist race for increased, cheap productivity.

Water engineering

The same argument transpires at the beginning of a chapter in *Beautiful Pictures* entitled 'Singularities,' which opens with the point of view of David (Georgia's father) who used to work on dam building sites in the Black country, in the 1950s. Water engineering and damming is now known to often disregard small rural communities' land ownership and, in some cases, takes on a colonialist tinge, like in the case of the North Wales where villages like Llandwyddyn (1888) and Capel Celyn (one of the last Welsh monoglot communities) were flooded by dams to power English cities at the time of David's narration. There was a surge in Welsh identity consciousness at the time⁸⁴ and graffiti like 'Cofiwch Dryweryn' (remember Tryweryn) still flourish in Wales to this day, sometimes accompanied by 'Cofiwch Aberfan' (remember Aberfan). This second town name refers to the 1966 disaster where a misplaced colliery spoil tip collapsed onto a school killing 144 people, mostly children. Both Aberfan and Dryweryn share the same symbolic meaning of Welsh natural resources (coal and water) being exploited for English benefits, disregarding the effects of this exploitation on the Welsh population.

Mia Gallagher also emphasises the expendability of non-English populations in the United Kingdom as all of David's co-workers are 'the red-faced Paddies and the black-toothed Scots' (BPLH,403),

⁸⁴ Evans, Doug 'Tryweryn – The Welsh village flooded to supply an English city with water' *Herald Wales*
<https://www.herald.wales/north-wales/tryweryn-the-welsh-village-flooded-to-supply-an-english-city-with-water/>
[last accessed 05/04/2023]

frequently used as cheap workforce in Great Britain⁸⁵. The dark history of dam-building and coal mining then underlies David's backstory and highlights the hierarchy between England and its early colonies. Like the footnotes comparing Irish history to that of Bohemia/Sudentenland, the details of the lives of the characters all participate to create a subtle backdrop of Irish resentment for its colonised past and draws on decolonial and independentist sentiments shared by other Celtic states like Wales and Scotland. This colonial exploitation of workers and their land also highlights the interconnectedness between people and their environment established by the 'geological glamour/urban shivers' moments of the previous part: under capitalism, the human, just like the non-human, is exploited and destroyed for profit. It becomes then more difficult to externalise climate crisis or to distance human and non-human victims of exploitation (as climatosceptic rhetoric favours) as the early destruction of the environment is so inextricably linked to the destruction of human life. Furthermore, and this is more prevalent in decolonial literature, the emphasis on populations from colonies ('past' and present) then draws another link between ecological and decolonial theories: because capitalism requires endless financial growth, the confines of a nation-state are often too limited in resources to sustain it. Capitalistic efforts then strive towards other territories and new resources to exploit in order to maintain this growth, and therefore imperialism is the logical outcome and continuity of capitalism. Leon Trotsky explains this phenomenon at length in *War and the International*:

The forces of production which capitalism requires have outgrown the limits of nation and state. The national state, the present political form, is too narrow for the exploitation of these productive forces. The natural tendency of our economic system, therefore, is to seek to break through the state boundaries. The whole globe, the land and the sea, the surface as well as the interior has become one economic workshop, the different parts of which are inseparably connected with each other. This work was accomplished by capitalism. But in accomplishing it the capitalist states were led to struggle for the subjection of the world-embracing economic system to the profit interests of the bourgeoisie of each country. What the politics of imperialism have demonstrated more than anything else is that the old national state that was created in the revolutions and the wars of 1789-1815, 1848-1859, 1864-1866, and 1870 has outlived itself, and is now an intolerable hindrance to economic development.⁸⁶

Wales, Scotland and then Ireland became the first territories to be invaded by Anglo-Norman conquerors to sustain this growth and served as incubators for racial hierarchical rhetoric to justify the exploitation of a people and land that would then expand to trading posts further afield (like the East India Company). The heavy history of colonialism and exploitation is then summoned through subtle notes in Mia Gallagher's 'Singularities' chapter about David's work on dam-building sites. It is also part of the wider leitmotiv around the smell of almonds and explosives, linking various beats of

⁸⁵ See Marx, Karl *Capital A Critique of Political Economy*. Trans. Samuel Moore London: Penguin Books (1976), 860.

⁸⁶ Trotsky, Leon *The War and the International The Bolsheviks and World Peace* New York, Boni & Liveright (1918) Transcribed for the Trotsky Internet Archive by David Walters in 1996, 1.

Irish history like the Troubles and colonial labour exploitation. The chapter states its eco-critical affinities early on, as David works 'underground, blasting earth with a team of Micks and Jocks to make a tunnel for a hydroelectric dam' (BPLH,401), the emphasis being put on the violent explosion digging deep in the earth and disfiguring the landscape. This workplace is also quickly compared to another underground: 'Welcome to hell, shouted an Aberdeeny the first day' (BPLH,402).

Here, the violent exploitation of natural and human resources is subtly linked by the blast of explosives indiscriminately 'blasting earth' and workers bodies. The workers' desensitisation to their own potential maiming and dying is made clear in the routine recounting of work accidents, where workers 'fry' (BPLH,402) because they have to reconnect electricity cables in the dark or end up with 'lost ... fingers' (BPLH,401). The chapter culminates on the gory dismemberment of another Irishman because of David's mistake, an accident which will prompt him to abandon this job:

The last stick exploded just as Gogarty reached it. The blast ripped up the left side of his body, taking off his arm. The mess, the blood and bone sticking out from the side of his body, wasn't the worst. Nor was Gogarty's face, a white blur ripped open by the wound of his mouth. The worst was the silence. David couldn't hear Gogarty's scream. All he could hear was a dead hiss, the aftermath of the explosion. (BPLH, 404)

The silencing of horrors is a running theme of the novel and here, it does not interrupt the taboo, as usual, but supplants the gore. The character deems it worse than the graphic 'wound', 'blood and bone,' struck by the inability of his co-worker to communicate his pain. Indeed, Gogarty's scream is silenced by the same device that caused the scream, also working within the wider decolonial processing of suppressed trauma. The chapter later focuses on David's guilt, which absolves the company, that actually forces workers in these unsafe and appalling conditions, of all responsibility for the maiming of workers. As the plea for worker's rights and environmental issues are often treated separately, it is important that these pieces of contemporary literature bring back their indissociable origins to the fore by superimposing human suffering onto the disfigurement of the land.

2. Existential Horror

Being alone in bed: Nearly all the times I was, I was waiting for Cara. Sometimes (...) I used to wrap up in myself like a whale in deep waters, enjoying the respite. Other times it was hell frozen over. (Hood,219)

Loathe-craft

As nature and water are corrupted by capitalistic exploitation, they lose the positive, comforting qualities I have demonstrated throughout the thesis. Water takes on an unnerving, Lovecraftian shade which, to me, best expresses eco-anxieties. Indeed, despite the fact that (or perhaps because) Howard Philip Lovecraft's writing was shaped by his crude antisemitism, racism, homophobia, in short, an all-encompassing fear of what is different, his writing is exceedingly efficient at expressing deep-seated fears, paranoia and anxieties. His multiple phobias are a grim summary of all the mechanisms of otherness explored in the thesis, as he hated anything that was not aristocratic, white, protestant and Anglo-Saxon. He compared both gay⁸⁷ and racialised black people⁸⁸ to subhuman beasts, despised the Irish⁸⁹ and this thorough hatred crystallised in his great fictional sea monsters. According to his biography by Michel Houellebecq⁹⁰, he was also afraid of the sea and synthesised all his fears and repulsion in one efficient figure. Lovecraft's hatred is an efficient lynchpin to this thesis because it displays that, despite the lack of unity between various marginalised communities, their otherness is often spurned using the same monstrous imagery and the people who sit the highest in the white supremacist, cis-het patriarchal hierarchy will indiscriminately hate all of them equally. This blanket fear of the unknown, so often recuperated and heightened by the alt-right nowadays, is precisely why it could be argued that marginalised groups should reach a form of (at least temporary) defensive understanding.

Lovecraft's overt hatred is useful as it is incredibly direct and unsubtle, baring the near pathological core of far-right 'ideology' when it is nowadays so often obscured under a polished, crypto-fascist/*dédiabolisation* rhetoric. Lovecraft's directness belies the tactical mitigating of far-right discourse to access power or dog-whistle euphemisms like 'concern' or the ethics of 'care'. Lovecraft's fiction fully displays the paranoia, the madness that brews in people who are isolated and sheltered so long from the 'Other' that they mystify, demonise it, only relying on propagandistic hearsay or divisive media depiction and who end up trusting their basest instincts of tribalism. Paradoxically though, his writing has been drawn upon to express the trauma caused by being othered, marginalised in society, be it by non-white racialised⁹¹ or queer⁹² people. Existential horror

⁸⁷ See his poem 'Fragment on Whitman' at https://hplovecraft.hu/index.php?page=library_etexts&id=217&lang=angol

⁸⁸ See his poem 'On the Creation of Niggers' at https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/On_the_Creation_of_Niggers

⁸⁹ Power, Edward 'The hatred of HP Lovecraft: Racist, anti-Irish bigot and horror master' *The Irish Times* (15/08/2020) [last accessed 20/07/23]

⁹⁰ Houellebecq, Michel tr. Khazeni, Dorna *H.P. Lovecraft Against the World, Against Life* San Francisco, Believer Books (2005)

⁹¹ See the series by Abrahams, Jeffrey J. and Peel, Jordan *Lovecraft Country* HBO (2020) though it is based on a novel by a racialised white man.

⁹² Nowell, Marshall *Queering Cthulhu. Reclaiming Lovecraft's Monstrous Others* Milton Park, Taylor and Francis (2021)

seems like a good conduit to explore the unspeakable, the inexpressible trauma of being othered and the absurdity of societal exclusion. Short-stories like 'The Outsider' and 'A Shadow Over Innsmouth' for instance, foreground characters that are estranged from civilisation or suffer the heavy suspicions of their townsfolk. In fact, the reason why his hateful phobic writing has been recuperated by marginalised groups is that it can both express the fear of the Other and the fear of *being* the Other. 'Shadow over Innsmouth' is perhaps the most ambiguous tale in this regard as it can be read in many ways. I will briefly recap the plot and propose three readings, one of which was chosen by a small indie movie to explore queerness in Lovecraftian tales.

'The Shadow over Innsmouth' follows a young man on a journey to New England for architectural and ancestral research. He comes across a decrepit sea-side town shunned by its neighbours and itself populated with reclusive and repulsive-looking individuals. Upon his intrigued visit to the town, he is made to feel deeply uncomfortable and threatened by the locals, who dislike his curiosity about the place and generally dislike all foreigners: 'Furtiveness and secretiveness seemed universal in this hushed city of alienage and death, and I could not escape the sensation of being watched from ambush on every hand by sly, staring eyes that never shut.'⁹³ The inhabitants hold unusual beliefs and pray at the churches of the Order of Dagon, for fish and gold and immortality under the sea, which the protagonist dismisses at first. He learns from the town's drunk that Obed Marsh, the benefactor of this town, learned of the possibility of a pact with deep-sea creatures during his travels in Pacific islands and chose to implement this deal in Innsmouth. Interestingly, Zadok Allen (the drunk) even posits the fish-creature might be linked to mermaid legends: 'They met the things on the little islet with the queer ruins, an' it seems them awful picters o' frog-fish monsters was supposed to be picters o' these things. Mebbe they was the kind o' critters as got all the mermaid stories an' sech started.'⁹⁴ It requires a ritual at a coastal reef, a human sacrifice in exchange for fish and gold which allows the town to quickly prosper. When the locals realise their youth is disappearing, killed off as sacrifice to the fish-frog creatures under the sea, they turn against Obed Marsh and imprison him, alongside the Order of Dagon that rules the town. After a few weeks without sacrifice, however, a horde of creatures invades the town and massacres its inhabitants, forcing a new deal upon the inhabitants; they now have to breed with the fish-frog creatures and live alongside them. Children will be able to slowly turn and take to the waters to live forever under the sea with Dagon, Cthulhu and other pelagic deities. The protagonist barely escapes Innsmouth

⁹³ Lovecraft, Howard P. *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* Project Gutenberg Australia (2015) npn first published Everett, PA, Visionary Publishing Co. (1936)

⁹⁴ *Ibid* np

with his life and pleads to US officials to investigate the town, upon which it gets bombed and burnt, including the reef the creatures have sprung from. Yet, in a final twist, it is revealed that the protagonist himself, for all his repulsion and hatred of the fish-frog creatures, is actually descended from one of them and is starting to turn. At first, he contemplates suicide but then comes to embrace his origins and plan an escape for both him and his interned cousin who had been put away by the family once he had started to turn.

Many interpretations of this tale have been foregrounded over the years, as the reclusive and threatening Innsmouth people might represent queerphobic or racist locals who try to murder the newcomer, and this interpretation was explored in *Cthulhu*, a 2007 indie movie by Daniel Gildark who sets Innsmouth as a cultish town led by the homophobic father of the protagonist Russel. Upon his return to 'Rivermouth' Russel is pressured by his family to procreate, which culminates in his being raped by a local woman who wants to benefit from mixing bloods of families who bear the fish-frog genes and equates the order of Dagon with Christian (and other religions') rhetoric around the duty of procreation. The reclusive and threatening aura of the town is expressed in its homophobia against Russel, who had fled his hometown as a teenager and only returned for his mother's funerals. He also reconnects and plans to escape with a former lover who is taken hostage by his family to be presented as a sacrifice to the creatures. This, along with the monstrous offspring resulting from Russel's rape, is supposed to cement his acceptance of his inheritance of the most powerful local family. The movie ends on an ambiguous note as Russel goes to strike either his lover or his father, thus leaving it up to the viewer to interpret which path he chooses. Climate change and the rise of the sea-levels is also subtly omnipresent throughout the movie to hint at the necessity to embrace this pelagic nature, as all land will be covered by water again soon, expanding the abyssal realm's territory. Hence the exploration of othering through the sea-creature metaphor is neatly tied to ecological sensibilities through the tales of an author who, ironically, cared nothing for marginalised communities nor capitalism and climate change.

Yet the opposite interpretation of the short-story also works well, in which the reader can choose to see the protagonist of 'Shadow over Innsmouth' as a racist and/or queerphobic bigot visiting a foreign and/or overtly queer-friendly town and is repulsed by the 'Innsmouth look' and the local sexual practices, yet comes to accept and embrace this othered part of himself, overcoming what can be read as internalised racism and/or queerphobia. Many online forums⁹⁵ also posit that this short-story might be linked to H.P Lovecraft finding out about his Welsh ancestry despite his own

⁹⁵ See https://lovecraft.fandom.com/wiki/Llunwy_of_Wales [last accessed 20/07/2023]

hatred of Celtic cultures. A letter dated from 1927 (almost ten years before he wrote ‘Shadow over Innsmouth’) states: ‘Well—all this is delightful—but who is this dame that my great-grandfather William Allgood married in 1817? Rachel Morris—yes, I knew that before. But where did she come from? Wales! O Arthur Machen! O Caerleon!’⁹⁶ yet he goes on to boast about the nobility of most of his UK-based family tree to conclude: ‘I swear that the Celtick taint hath not reached my rural Saxon heart!’⁹⁷ and closes on his ‘shocking revelation of hybridism’⁹⁸. In the same letter, he also laments on the ‘Cornish Celts’ in his ancestry.

Finally, a third reading (other than literal that is) can be made of ‘Shadow over Innsmouth’ whereby both the protagonist and the town are bigoted against one another, the visitor because of the people’s origins and customs, and the townsfolk because of this newcomer’s perceived behaviour (no matter that he actually belongs to Innsmouth). This allows me to explore another trend I have only alluded to so far: no matter how marginalised some communities are through white supremacy, cis-het patriarchy and capitalism, it does not mean that they perceive the oppression of other marginalised communities as equally important or as valid as theirs. Hence a person bigoted against the mixed-blood population of a poor sea-side town could be queer or of otherwise racialised descent and still express hatred towards *other* others. The complexities of inter-marginalised group hatred are particularly difficult to reflect on from a liberal/leftist point of view that often tends to flatten ‘the other’, be it racialised or queer⁹⁹, as a pure-hearted victim of a violent hierarchised system.

However, racism can be just as prevalent in parts of the queer community like homophobia can taint parts of some racialised communities, which can also express xenophobia and racism towards other racialised groups¹⁰⁰. The bafflement at the racism of non-white racialised people (though it does not have the same political and institutional power backing it as white people’s racism) or the transphobia of LGB people, with all the variations and combinations possible between class, ability, race, sexuality, sex and gender, reveals the impossibility to consider marginalised communities (and some marginalised people who would not claim to belong to any community) with generalising statements or monolithic descriptions. This ‘inter-minority hatred’ also blurs all these hierarchical

⁹⁶ Derleth, August & Wandrei, Donald *Selected Letters II (1925-1929) - H. P. Lovecraft* Salt lake City, Arkham House (1968), 180.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁹⁹ Or disabled, or destitute, etc.

¹⁰⁰ Matos, Yalidy ‘Confronting Latino Anti-Black Bias’ *The American Prospect*, Oct 6 2022

categories into the complex intersections and sensibilities that weave the real-life experience of the Other.

It is, however, crucial to note that any animosity stemming from a perceived competition between minorities is encouraged and heightened by various policies aiming to strategically divide people of immigrant descent (as well as perpetuate their ostracised status as 'of immigrant descent' no matter how many generations have been born in the state) or even queer compared to racialised people. For a good example of this perceived competition, one could mention Dave Chappelle's Netflix special: 'I'm jealous of gay people ... look at how well that movement is going. And we've (Black people) been trapped in this predicament for hundreds of years.'¹⁰¹ And while his argument that white supremacy protects white queer people is absolutely on point, and racism in the queer community is very much a problem in Ireland too¹⁰², it does present the two types of marginalisation as unlikely to overlap. Chappelle, for instance, as a transphobic person claiming to side with TERF ideology, fully ignores the hyper-vulnerability of black transwomen, at the intersection of multiple forms of marginalisation (transmisogynoir¹⁰³). In the next subpart, I will explore the fact that, in certain activist associations, the focus is on erasing this divide between marginalised groups and on standing with each of them in various forms of protest and direct actions, proving that each type of marginalisation matters to other groups and to build up a political unity in the Irish context.

The point of this thesis is not to generalise on the experience of othering, simply to wonder at the repetitiveness and similarity of these othering processes and ponder the relativity of the Other as, at one point or other in history, many would have been considered part of an inferior minority. The thesis focuses on the racialisation of the Irish before they were absorbed into whiteness because it is a stark reminder of the arbitrariness of marginalisation, which evolves and changes target according to the economical priorities and political landscape of the day. Marginalisation is then time and place-sensitive and can cumulate if a person belongs to two or more othered groups. This also puts the very term of 'minority' in perspective since so many various traits can put an individual in this category, it ends up questioning what the majority/norm actually represents in terms of numbers. In other terms, if that many people are deemed Other/abnormal through class/ability/race/sex/gender/sexuality/origins/religion criteria (with quasi-infinite cumulation and intersection), then how many people are there left in the 'normal' category? H.P Lovecraft's all-

¹⁰¹ Robinson, Russel K. 'Call out Dave Chappelle's transphobia, but don't erase his critiques of LGBTQ racism' *San Francisco Chronicle* 4 Nov 2021 [last accessed 13/06/23]

¹⁰² <https://gcn.ie/sexual-racism-ireland/> [last accessed 13/06/23]

¹⁰³ <https://sk.sagepub.com/reference/the-sage-encyclopedia-of-trans-studies/i7180.xml>

encompassing hatred illustrates the absurdity of the concept of 'other' very efficiently, as even by his own extremely rigid definition, he was also a 'racial' other through his own 'Celtick taint'. I don't pretend this thesis is the first to remark on these mechanisms, only that it is necessary to recall them in a study on marginalisation and its literary representation in order to avoid problematic simplifications.

In *At Swim Two Boys*, the scholar character of Scrotes, Anthony MacMurrough's old friend who died in Wandsworth gaol and who now exists only as a voice in MacMurrough's head, had made it his lifetime work to explain the nature of nature, to explain the hatred towards homosexuality and the nature of this community. But after growing to be a mentor and protector of the young men's budding love, MacMurrough rejects the possibility of reasoning with homophobia as he watches Jim leave, full of worry about what can happen to him now that he is willing to live out his attraction to Doyler:

He walked him to the gates and watched him down the road to Glashule. A terrible fear shook him, a fear for his boy and what the future might hold.

Lest he should stumble and the crowd should find him. For we live as angels among the Sodomites. And every day the crowd finds some one of us out. I know their lewd calls and their obscene gestures. I know their mockery that bides their temper's loss. I have seen in lanes and alleys of Piccadilly faces streaked with their spit and piss, and mouths they have bloodied with boots and blows. For rarely an angel finds a Lot to house him. And I would not my boy should suffer so. (...)

What hates is madness. There's no reason, only madness. (...) Who but a madman could revile this boy? It's all of it mad, a madness to fill the spaces, lovely and comfortable as hating a Hun. (ASTB,520-21)

The reaction of the crowd, there, is a dark echo of the Innsmouth mob chasing the protagonist and, although it is never revealed what they intended to do to him once they would break into his hotel room, it is clear their intentions are negative. Here MacMurrough reverses the usual angel-sodomite biblical dichotomy, equating gay men with angels to reclaim Christianity as a protective force for the outcasts, no matter how much this very dogma is used against marginalised genders and sexual orientations. So far, I have argued that the revealing force of water and the acceptance of one's own identity should be positively connoted but at all times, accepting oneself as the 'other' also means accepting the risk of societal rejection and violence. The biblical references are juxtaposed with lowly bodily fluids 'spit and piss', this time repurposed for hatred and violence, not intimate bonds, and the quasi-onomatopoeic voiced plosive alliteration in 'b' of 'bloodied with boots and blows' transcribes vividly the rhythm of the blows endured by the victim of homophobic violence. The victim is also singled out of the 'crowd', yet 'one of us' for the othered group, and the repeated use of the indistinctive pronoun 'their' expresses a single-minded mass. Finally, here again O'Neill creates a parallel between two Us vs Them dichotomies, namely homosexuals vs heterosexuals and a more ambiguous 'Hun' term. In the WWI context, this could criticise the nationalist propaganda

calling for an indiscriminate hatred of German citizens despite the political game solely played by, and benefitting, governments and industry moguls at the time. More controversially, 'a Hun' could refer to 'Britannia's huns'¹⁰⁴ and poses the question of British citizens being amalgamated with their colonialist government when the working and destitute classes, while benefitting indirectly from the riches of the Empire, have little to no say in their governments' actions and are themselves exploited by the industries that exploit the colonies. Doyler's international socialism here seems to have affected MacMurrough. Altogether, this general atmosphere of threat from an undistinguished, hostile 'crowd' that can 'find' an Other and punish them violently at any time is very redolent of the outsider among marginalised crowd ambiguous dichotomy found in Lovecraft's writing.

It is important to note, though, that in this excerpt MacMurrough mainly takes examples from his own experience in England, citing a specific central area of London. Hence gay men's rejection by society is centred around rigid English moral codes: MacMurrough and Scrotes are imprisoned in Wandsworth gaol, Oscar Wilde was in Reading and only one overt scene of homophobic violence (by a policeman) is depicted as taking place in Ireland. While there is no illusion about the potential acceptance of homosexuality in Ireland in 1915, no direct scene of homophobic violence ensues either for the two young protagonists when most literature and media presenting same-sex relationships usually revels in the violence inflicted against them, this rule even being encoded in law in certain countries¹⁰⁵. When the young men get close to a fight in the novel, it is not acted upon until Doyler is found out as a socialist, leaving the homophobic violence only to institutions like the police (MacMurrough is raped by a police officer in a public bathroom while trying to approach another man¹⁰⁶) and the law, both still colonialist institutions in 1915-16. Jamie O'Neill is not interested in depicting popular or working-class homophobia, and instead focuses his exposure on institutions.

Lovecraft built up a thorough cosmogony and mythology of overwhelming foreign forces far beyond human control in the Old Ones, creatures dormant beneath the sea that can nowadays be interpreted too as the mute threat of rising sea levels, and therefore useful for my proposal of the

¹⁰⁴ Terminology used in Irish song *The Foggy Dew* (lyrics from MU-sb-1600 National Library of Ireland).

¹⁰⁵ See the Hays Code (US) or Section 28 (UK) and while there is no equivalent in Ireland, the criminalisation of homosexuality until 1993 meant that media representation was illegal. Often this resulted in the representation of homosexuality only being accepted if presented as punished/non-viable on screen.

¹⁰⁶ 'MacMurrough had had an interesting brush with one of Dublin's finest, just up there in the lavatory in Stephen's Green.' (ASTB, 447)

clepsydra ticking clock. Moreover, the deep-sea is the last place on earth¹⁰⁷ which is not fully mapped and known and is precisely the place where Lovecraft's mythical beasts reside (with Antarctica, still left partly unexplored), thereby neatly linking the overwhelming fear and seemingly unstoppable threat of climate change with the only remaining space of mystery on the planet:

Lovecraft's pessimistic posthumanism was not overtly concerned with anxieties about ecological catastrophe, but it did emerge out of a recognition of humanity's inescapable imbrication in the nonhuman world (...) [he] anthropomorphised the material cosmos in ways that narrowed the gap between human and nonhuman difference.¹⁰⁸

This also poses the question of this fear of the other as an internalised fear of the other in oneself. This allows for queer, decolonial and anti-racist readings of his tales addressing various forms of othering while keeping this background of existential dread about a potential destruction that lies dormant for now. It can be difficult to find an order to prioritise struggles when various types of discrimination and the destruction of a human-friendly environment all stem from the current capitalistic system. As Cy Lecerf-Maulpoix articulates in *Ecologies Déviantes*, some activists see in queer ecology a paradox that cannot be overcome:

Some criticisms have arisen. They emanate from certain LGBTQI activists as well as from some ecologists for whom this alliance is the sign of a communitarianism pushed to extremes, of a diverting of ecologist stakes for the benefit of minority politics. (...) For others, ecology would be the struggle of those who have time, those who have no other struggles to defend, other oppressions to resist. (...) To understand these modes of resistance and to try to articulate our social and environmental struggles seems essential to be able to build a coherent movement.¹⁰⁹

This echoes in certain interpretations of queer/racialised re-appropriations of Lovecraftian tales, whereby the awe and cosmic horror of a mounting, overwhelming threat is set aside to resist more urgent threats linked to oppression and marginalisation; a necessity to first survive society before being even able to contribute to preserve it. Harris Brewis points out, in his reading of Gildark's movie adaptation of 'Shadow Over Innsmouth':

It turns out that some of the greatest horrors, biggest sources of sadness in our lives, don't come from scope or big questions, but from the tiniest things. If you've ever lost a loved one and had to be involved with the arrangements of their funeral, or if you've ever had to be around someone you've made an effort to cut out of your life because of something abusive they'd done to you, or even something as simple as being reminded, gently, that you're in a place where everyone regards you with suspicion, that you're an outsider to them—

¹⁰⁷ <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/exploration.html> [last accessed 13/06/23]

¹⁰⁸ Sederholm, Carl Hinckley, and Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew, (eds.), *The Age of Lovecraft* London, University of Minnesota Press, (2016) 101.

¹⁰⁹ Lecerf-Maulpoix, Cy *Ecologies Déviantes Voyage en terres queers*, Paris, Cambourakis (2021), 188.

'Quelques critiques voient alors le jour. Elles émanent de certainEs LGBTQI comme de certainEs écolos pour qui cette alliance est le signe d'un communautarisme poussé à l'excès, d'un détournement des enjeux écologistes au profit des politiques minoritaires. (...) Pour d'autres, l'écologie serait la lutte de ceux qui ont le temps, ceux qui n'auraient pas d'autres luttes à défendre, d'autres oppressions contre lesquelles résister. (...) Comprendre ces résistances et tenter d'articuler nos luttes sociales et environnementales semble un enjeu essentiel pour pouvoir construire un mouvement cohérent.' (DeepL translation)

You'll already know that the idea of a powerful cosmic monster out there somewhere beneath the sea can actually be the least of a person's problems...¹¹⁰

In the corpus of this thesis, the necessity of survival is often seen to exhaust the characters' ability to care for ongoing world affairs, as seen by the despondency of Georgia, who barely listens to the ongoing stream of suffering blasting through her TV in the morning: 'Breaking News. More shit happens.' (BPLH,13) or Anthony MacMurrough's lack of concern for the ongoing war in Europe: 'The war, which had seemed so tiresome with its petty news and thuggish holler, which all along had seemed the concern of other people (...) the exigencies of which seemed spiteful' (ASTB,446) and this urgency for survival obscuring ecology and other struggles can also partially explain the blindness of some marginalised groups to the oppression of others. Yet, as I have striven to demonstrate in the first subpart of this chapter, eco-criticism and a particular sensitivity to the characters' environment, their osmosis therein, all transpire through the queer writing of Donoghue, O'Neill, Keohane, Buckley and, to an extent, Gallagher.

While all the writers of the corpus tend to draw on Celtic folklore and legends through the figures of the merfolk, selkies, changelings, and so on, the intense feeling of dread and overwhelming monstrosity that surrounds these outsider creatures results in a strange blend of original local folklore and Lovecraftian 'artificial mythology'¹¹¹. This unique contemporary twist on Irish folklore arguably mirrors the corruption of natural cycles and the necessity to render the unsettling artificialisation of the environment.

Celtic Atlantis(es) and floods

The great sea will be like glass under the sunset
Without a boat sailing or any living sign of a person
Just the last golden eagle up on the edge
Of the world, above the lonely lying Blasket

Beidh an fharraige mhór faoi luí na gréine mar ghloine
Gan bád faoi sheol ná comhartha beo ó dhuine
Ach an t-iolar órga dereanach thuas as imeall
An domhain, thar an mBlascaod uaigneach luite ...¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Brewis, Harris 'Outsiders: How To Adapt H.P. Lovecraft In the 21st Century' *Hbomberguy* Youtube (2018)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8u8wZ0Wvxl> [last accessed 20/07/23]

¹¹¹ John, Engle 'Cults of Lovecraft: The Impact of H.P. Lovecraft's Fiction on Contemporary Occult Practices' *Mythlore*, vol. 33, no. 1 (125), 2014, pp. 85–98, 88.

¹¹² Behan, Brendan 'Jackeen ag Caoineadh na mBlascaod/ A Dubliner Lamenting the Blaskets,' in Kiberd, Declan *An Crann faoi Bhláth/ The Flowering tree Contemporary Irish Poetry*, Dublin, Wolfhound (1991) 108.

The fact that the Old Ones of Lovecraft's mythology have sprung from the last unmapped territories on earth, marine trenches and Antarctica, allows one to compare these entities to identities, behaviour or origins that should not require any justification or explanation yet are constantly categorised by science. Any attempts at explaining or categorising skin colour, sexual preferences, gender identity instantly pathologises and singles out phenomena that should simply be seen as normal variations on the spectrum of human experience and appearance. Any attempt to justify or explain them is simply a way to make them legible to a system that has chosen to see them as deviant. Another noteworthy quality of marine trenches and below the bathypelagic zone of oceans in general is that time does not unfold in the same way as on land or at the upper levels: the environment of this zone is stable, seemingly sheltered from the 'anthropocene,' and hosts organisms that haven't changed in millennia, rendering historically dated social constructions inadequate by comparison. This stability of environment has even been used to explain the high diversity of the deep-sea fauna:

The earliest is the stability–time hypothesis put forward by Howard Sanders of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in the late 1960s. This suggests that the highly stable environmental conditions of the deep sea that have persisted over geological time might have allowed many species to evolve that are highly specialized for a particular microhabitat or food source.¹¹³

In the first chapter of this thesis (1.2), I drew especially on Rivers Solomon and clipping.'s creation of the *drexciya/wajinru*, a people born of pregnant women thrown off slave ships on the crossing to the American or Caribbean colonies. Both clipping. and Solomon who created and developed this underwater civilisation of *The Deep*¹¹⁴ can be interpreted as articulating a response to the disdain of Lovecraft for the sea-born Insmouth folk as racialised other (the narrator focuses on physical descriptions of the inhabitants comparing their walk/appearance to something 'bestial', Lovecraft's go-to comparison for anyone racialised or queer). Lovecraft only seems to use the final reveal and twist of the narrator who actually belongs to the fish-folk he loathed so overtly for shock-value or the 'disgusted desire for Orientalism'¹¹⁵. However, the *wajinru/drexciya* and all uses of sea-monsters as the Other in marginalised settings (like in Pixar's *Luca* (2021), *The Shape of Water* (2017) by Guillermo Del Toro, etc) tend to present a happy return to the sea, and a thorough acceptance of their identity¹¹⁶. This recurrence of a deep-sea civilisation also highlights Ní Dhomhnaill's *Land-Under-Wave/Tír-fó-Thoinn* as a lost utopia, since the merfolk lead a miserable life on colonial land.

¹¹³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/agricultural-and-biological-sciences/abyssal-zone> [last accessed 15/05/23]

¹¹⁴ Solomon, Rivers, Diggs, Daveed, Hutson, William, Snipes, Jonathan *The Deep*, London, Hodder & Soughton (2019).

¹¹⁵ <https://www.theawl.com/2014/09/where-should-we-bury-the-dead-racist-literary-giants/> [13/05/23]

¹¹⁶ Again, see Brewis, Harris 'Outsiders: How To Adapt H.P. Lovecraft In the 21st Century' *Hbomberguy* Youtube (2018).

It is therefore interesting to posit a link between Lovecraft's imagined location for everything he feared and the re-appropriation of the abyssal space by marginalised communities to express the experience of being othered.

To expand on this idea, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill imbues her merfolk, geographically located in the last bastion of the Gaeltacht (in Kerry, around the Dingle peninsula), with a propension to foresee the rising sea levels as another flood of biblical proportions. Yet they are also inherently well-equipped to deal with crisis due to their origins and the resilience they have built up in hostile land. In a playful and early (1990s) blend of folklore, religion and eco-criticism, the merfolk get ready for an unwanted return to the sea:

Na Murúcha I mBun Oibreacha Innealtóireachta

Is dócha toisc an mhéid gur ghaibheadar tríd
Is go bhfeacadar an danger

...

Go bhfuilid an-thugtha d'oibreacha inniealtóireachta.
Thiar ar an mBóithrín Dorcha, in aice le Lúb a'Chaoil
I gCorca Dhuinbhne tá stáisiún dreanála
Agus é lán suas de chaidéil agus de phupanna
Le húsaid i gcoinne na hannachaine.

Tá tuile mhór á tuar, ó lá go lá.

(...)

Níl an fhaisnéis fhadtéarmach róghléineach.

Má tá tóithín á nochtadh féin le cúpla bliain

I mBá an Daingin

Do tháinig tuairisc chughainn le déanaí

Go raibh míol mór le feiscint ar an Maing

Agus báid iascaireachta cheana féin ag tabhairt

turasóirí

Amach ag féachaint air.

...

Más fíor más ea don seanrá

Nach fada go bhfillfidh an fharraige arb harr Shliabh

Mis

De bharr róthruaillithe agus na gásanna úd thigh

gloine,

N'feadhar ag bpointe sin cad a dhéanfaidh siad?

Public Works

I suppose it's because of all they went through (having seen
'peril' up close and personal)

...

The merfolk are constantly concerned with safety and security
issues

And are especially drawn to vast engineering projects.

Back on the Bóithrín Dorcha, near Lúb a'Chaoil,

On the Dingle Peninsula, they have a drainage station

Full of water pumps and all sorts of hydraulic systems

In case of emergency.

They prophesy that there'll be a deluge any day now.

(...)

The long-term forecast isn't too bright.

In addition to the dolphin showing up

In Dingle Bay

Over the last few years

It has been reported more recently

That a whale had manifested itself in the river Maine

And fishing boats are already bringing sightseers

Out to gape at it.

...

So if the prophecy is to be believed,

And it won't be long until the sea returns to cover Slieve Mish

Because of pollution and greenhouse gases,

I wonder, at that point, what stuff they'll be made of.

(68-71)

In a manner similar to Toby Buckley's fishermen and Mia Gallagher's David, Ní Dhomhnaill's merfolk try to manipulate the landscape and natural resources around them, this time not for capitalistic exploitation but to prevent its resulting, detrimental effects. The contrast between creatures of folklore and current concerns around climate change results in a humoristic gap and breaks away from any illusion of glamour or magical aura of the merfolk to create a strange blend of fantasy and science fiction (as no hydraulic pump or drainage system can resolve rising sea levels yet) to brutally replace the reader within concrete and current anxieties. Because the merfolk have lost their ability to breathe underwater, this ironic return of their natural environment is rejected through the very science and technology they have inherited from their rationality-obsessed colonisers. The translation of the poems is unclear in its conclusion, as the poetess asks what will the merfolk do (*cad a dhéanfaidh siad?*) when the sea level rises: rely on technology and science (which they acquired through forced assimilation) or return to their *dúchas*/natural element and go back to water. Note that the water is meant specifically to 'return' (*go bhfillfidh*) above the highest Irish mountain range, Slieve Mish, reminding the reader that all the lands, and not only Land-Under-Wave, were once underwater and that the merfolk have a more direct connection to this early geological landscape. One might also note a parallel between the displaced merfolk and the lost

marine mammals (the dolphins/ whales) who, by opposition, used to have ancestors on land but returned to the sea (as attested to by the presence of skeletal fingers in the cetacean's fins).

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's surprising use of folklore to attract the attention of her readers to environmental issues as early as the 1990s (when the original poems were published without the English translation) finds a more recent echo in a side musing by Georgia in *Beautiful Pictures*:

Jesus, Geo, Mar had said when we arrived in Ireland, if they could build on the fucking sea, they would. Had he been right? What would have happened, do you think, if the Boom hadn't burst? Would my city, that used to be yours, would the small cities of this small island have continued growing, extending out onto the water until they were floating, like Venice, or Lake Titicaca? Can you picture it, the way you told me you could always picture things that hadn't been built yet? People living in tottering high-rises, washing their clothes in the waves, swimming everywhere, or travelling by boat (...) Can you picture the people too, those blithe new amphibians, with their expanding houses and never-falling house prices? Laughing at all the interruptions, while at night their gilly children lie in bed, rocked to sleep by the foundations of their floating cities, dreaming of a past lost to them, when people walked on solid ground and took balance for granted. (*BPLH*, 314 elipsis in original)

The starting point for this utopic floating Ireland is given by Mar's comment as he discovers the surge in building sites that accompanied the Celtic Tiger period and property bubble. As Mia Gallagher centres the notion of 'Amphibians' on nationality, it is safe to assume that the central metaphor posited by Ní Dhomhnaill for the merfolk (Irish=water, English=land) is also valid here, in addition to taking on the fluidity of queer identities. Georgia then imagines a compromise made by modern merfolk, now 'amphibians,' as the island expands onto the sea, blending the binary between Irishness and Englishness (dissolved by years of colonisation, diaspora and inter-marriage). This new type of amphibian recalls Homi Bhabha's controversial concept of post-colonial cultural hybridity which suggests the existence of an 'international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity.'¹¹⁷ This notion is often criticised for erasing the power-imbalance in the supposed cultural exchange between coloniser and colonised people and this criticism is present between the lines of this excerpt by Mia Gallagher. One observes that this new floating Ireland would have only come about if 'the Boom hadn't burst', if neoliberal capitalism did not depend on the fallacious concept of unending growth, ending in absurd situations where potential wealth in the form of promised payment of interests that never will come can be sold as an actual product with tangible value. Georgia then imagines this infinite growth continuing unimpeded in the form of ever 'expanding houses and never-falling house prices' which might well refer to the ongoing real estate crisis in Ireland. Georgia is proposing this imaginary architectural exercise to her father (she is still recording

¹¹⁷ Homi Bhabha *The Location of Culture*. London, Routledge (1994), 38.

messages to send to him) as they can build together this neoliberal utopic city but she is really proposing a hubris-based criticism of Irish society. This imagined Ireland then recalls the early device of fake utopias solely designed to criticise one's own society under the thin veil of fantasy or exoticism, the most appropriate example of which would be Atlantis in the *Timaeus* by Plato, often interpreted as being a criticism of Athens' 'pursuit of unbridled ambition and power'¹¹⁸. Paradoxically though, Atlantis was punished by the gods and sent to the depths of the sea by an earthquake, whereas Georgia's utopic counterexample of a partially floating Ireland is inhabited by 'gilly' inhabitants who have forgotten 'solid ground' and 'balance' and who are thus resistant to this potential threat of flood, which will not come through punishment by the gods but rather through rising sea levels. This might be read as a criticism by the author of an over-reliance on neoliberal economy and technology to solve climate change-related issues by offering this wealthy parodic Atlantis that has done away with the main threat and continues to thrive economically. The hubris criticised by this counter-utopia then covers the neoliberal excesses of Ireland illustrated by the property bubble (which continues to this day, reinvigorated by Brexit¹¹⁹), the disconnect of capitalist systems *vis à vis* climate change and, more indirectly through the 'amphibian' notion, the possibility of accepting the colonial past as a neutral part of Irish culture.

Both Mia Gallagher and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill call upon the figure of the merfolk/amphibian for, seemingly, opposite arguments around climate change and decolonial processes, yet it is interesting to note the omnipresence of rising sea levels in their fictional predictions of utopias, either imagined as a modern, neoliberal and unsinkable Atlantis or abandoned as the original Irish-speaking Land-Under-Wave.

The tension between what I have explored as a form of sceptical sublime or geological glamour and a healthy form of decay in the compost-grotesque of the first subpart finds its point of osmosis in Lovecraft's aesthetics as it compiles both the overwhelming sensation of human insignificance in the face of an all-encompassing threat of hostile alien (underwater) deities and the negative depiction of grotesque monstrous bodies. Some have argued that his brand of loathing sublime/grotesque is especially powerful to express the terror and powerlessness of the individual facing the all-encompassing threat of climate change. By opposition, Donna Haraway has neatly separated her notion of the Chthulucene in *Staying with the Trouble* thus: 'I take the liberty of rescuing my spider

¹¹⁸ Stegman, Casey 'Remembering Atlantis: Plato's "Timaeus-Critias", the Ancestral Constitution, and the Democracy of the Gods' *Political Theory*, 45(2), 240–260 (2017), 251.

¹¹⁹ <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/property-prices-surge-past-celtic-tiger-record-highs/42065870.html>
[26/04/23]

from Lovecraft for other stories, and mark the liberation with the more common spelling of chtonian ones. Lovecraft's dreadful underworld chtonian serpents were terrible only in the patriarchal mode.¹²⁴ This seems like a narrow reading of Lovecraft's weird tales, but the desire to distance the notion of chthulucene from an overtly racist, homophobic, xenophobic writer is perfectly understandable. A comforting point from the biography of Lovecraft is that he never financially profited from his phobic writing (unlike the author of *Troubled Blood*¹²⁵) and died relatively unknown. His work has fully fallen within public domain and, while promoting a definitely toxic mindset, most admirers of his writing often take the time to distance themselves from his politics. Many of his critics also tend to celebrate the recuperation of his mythos by the very people he loathed as another form of the 'rescuing' chosen by Haraway. Eric Fleishmann has dedicated an entire article to proposing an eco-critical reading of the Lovecraftian canon, for instance:

The aforementioned link between the heating of the earth and rising sea levels is specifically the expansion of water when it warms and the deterioration of ice sheets, but certainly the most famous such process is the melting of glaciers. This is all well and widely known, but consider that the oldest glacial ice in Antarctica is possibly 1,000,000 years old and the oldest in Greenland is more than 100,000 years old. This whole affair is not just about the stirring of deep and mysterious forces but also ancient ones, and perhaps no one mulled over the consequences of awakening ancient hibernating entities more than H.P. Lovecraft. 'At the Mountains of Madness', one of Lovecraft's novellas, is written as an account by the geologist William Dyer of his encounter with the strange Elder Things and shoggoths—existing in a formerly-passive state beneath the arctic—in the hope it will deter further exploration. These creatures, like the annual 260 gigatons of water released from glaciers between 2003 and 2009, are being brought back into play, and humanity is now under existential threat because of it.¹²⁶

This expression of eco-anxiety, when laced with a gothic, sublime-like awe, recalls also Lovecraft's treatment of abyssal creatures. Indeed, the Old Ones are a good analogy for rising sea levels and the destruction of the environment by a system so wide and far-reaching that its dismantlement seems impossible (neoliberal capitalism) matches the Lovecraftian impression of an uncaring, overwhelming force. To expand on the aesthetics permeating Lovecraft's tales, he seemed to argue that they belong to their own genre of 'weird tales'¹²⁷ distinct from Gothic horror:

This type of fear-literature must not be confounded with a type externally similar but psychologically widely different; the literature of mere physical fear and the mundanely gruesome. Such writing, to be sure, has its place, as has the conventional or even whimsical or humorous ghost story where formalism or the author's knowing wink removes the true sense of the morbidly unnatural; but these things are not the literature of cosmic fear in its purest sense. The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of

¹²⁴ Haraway, Donna *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham and London, Duke University Press (2016), 174.

¹²⁵ <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/jk-rowling-new-book-troubled-blood-transphobic-killer-charts-robert-galbraith-strike-novel-b552783.html> [last accessed 14-04-23]

¹²⁶ Fleishmann, Eric 'The Land Shall Sink' The Lovecraftian Nature of Sea Level Rise' *theanarchistlibrary.org* (2019).

¹²⁷ See *Supernatural Horror in Literature* by H. P. Lovecraft (Introduction) <https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/essays/shil.aspx> [last accessed 13/05/23]

outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space.¹²⁸

Yet for all his claims of breaking away from gothic tradition, he did develop his skill as a writer copying gothic writers like Edgar Allan Poe and others as emphasised in Aldana Reyes' British Library collection of his 'Gothic Tales'¹²⁹. Bearing that in mind, it is safe to assume that his aesthetics present some correlation with what researcher Vijay Mishra defines as the 'oceanic sublime':

To the rational mind, however, the final horror is that the oceanic sublime is also the end of narrative, and of history, as epic certainty is replaced by Gothic unpredictability. The uncanny logic of this version of the sublime is to be found in the Gothic.

Hence the metaphysics of human superiority espoused by Kant are no longer the conditions of the sublime. Instead, death is embraced contemplatively, and idealism is now tempered by pessimism and human insignificance. Desire becomes a thing-in-itself, and since it is founded on lack (we desire that which we do not possess), the oceanic sublime becomes the desired object.¹³⁰

Contemporary Irish and Scottish writers then draw on this Lovecraftian type of eco-anxiety by infusing an old gothic/cosmic horror aesthetics to their depiction of rising sea levels. The same flood motif is explored at a more local level, contained to Dublin by Jessica Traynor in *Liffey Swim*, her poetry pamphlet and more specifically in 'The Water-Table'. It constitutes an eery echo of 'A Recovered Memory of Water/ Cuimhne an Uisce' by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill where the mermaid's daughter has visions of water flooding her bathroom but cannot describe the phenomenon as a taboo has been placed on her original element by cultural assimilation. Jessica Traynor, then, seems to propose a later generation of Irish merfolk visited by the same visions, yet the eco-critical tone is more direct and water has lost its comforting, original qualities:

On my night-walk to the city
I taste salt in the air;
The Liffey has escaped again.

Below me the vengeful sea
Forms water-table committees
That mutter in the shores,

And the approaching shadow,

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*,

¹²⁹ Aldana Reyes, Xavier *The Gothic Tales of H.P Lovecraft*, London, The British Library (2018).

¹³⁰ Mishra, Vijay *The Gothic Sublime*. New York, State University of New York Press (1994), 37.

Hood up, shoulders rolling,
Could be the death of me –

(...)

Shores shudder beneath my feet
As the city forms new cracks

Along the fault lines I can't see,
As water rises through
Hundred-year-old drains,

Shell-shocked, frostbitten,
As it pours through catacombed rivers
Flooding our venom back at us.

The shadow lunges, laughs, is gone.
Beneath us all, the sea sleeps
Before the next great push.¹³¹

I have established throughout the thesis that water serves as an ambiguous presence in the corpus, yet it seems that, in the context of eco-criticism and because of the clepsydra-like threat expressed through various poems and novels, it automatically loses all positive connotation. Here, the illusion/nightmare is signalled early by a sleep-walking 'night-walk' experience by the Liffey, a familiar presence in the capital that rapidly gains a gothic-like aesthetic as it surges, yet is also personified as a more routine threat for women walking alone at night, 'an approaching shadow, hood up, shoulders rolling' and common urban occurrences of 'drains' failing. The poet then invokes a deeper anxiety hidden under everyday life fears and a pang of guilt at human responsibility for turning a neutral (or at least ambiguous) element into a negative, threatening force as she feels this surge is 'vengeful', 'flooding our venom back at us', and the river 'escaped' all attempts at water engineering, the 'water-table' form 'committees' as if the water fights back against its pollution and exploitation by humans in an oddly bureaucratic way. Yet this is all a vision, seemingly powered by guilt, a simple 'shadow', a potential not yet accomplished, still dormant: 'beneath us all, the sea

¹³¹ Traynor *Liffey Swim*, Op.Cit. 56.

sleeps/Before the next great push.’ This final personification of the sea takes on more Lovecraftian tones, with ‘cracks’ and ‘fault lines’ appearing in the city, letting the morbid water through.

The same personification of a threatening sea coming through rivers is also present in *The Gloaming*, by Kirsty Logan, which, coming from another Celtic state with a similarly colonised past, usually draws on positive legends around water and the sea, yet also eclipses these qualities when exploring eco-anxieties in her protagonists:

Mara listened. Shrill voices raging, hammers on steel, sobbing, whistling shrieks, soft whispers. An army of people, a city, a world.

‘Who is that?’ asked Mara. ‘Who’s down there?’

‘No one. It’s the sea.’

‘But we’re in the middle of the island.’

‘There’s an underground river running right through the middle of the island. Salt-water, fast flowing. It goes from one side to the other, and both sides are sea. It’s underneath us. It’s constantly eating away at the land, scooping it hollow.’¹³²

The voices of the sea take on the same gothic tone as in the Liffey swim, in fact they even appear as a ghost-like apparition in an abandoned church. Yet the nature of the noises suggests the same sea-based civilisation as the counter-utopias of Gallagher and Ní Dhomhnaill, indirectly invoking Atlantis too, as it is recalled through its war with Athens: ‘hammers on steel’, ‘army’ and ‘voices raging’ suggesting this belligerent spirit brooding under the island. This inescapable omnipresence ‘underground’, ‘through the middle’, ‘one side to the other’, ‘both sides’, ‘underneath’ quickly overwhelms the dialogue, the monstrous aura reinforced by its voracity ‘eating away at the land, scooping it hollow’. Therefore, one can note the same paradox of water supposedly being the natural element of queer/colonised people becoming an eerie threat, lacing the ambiguous nature of the element with a more striking negative connotation through its corruption by climate change.

The Pale

A recurring trend in the weird tales is indeed to prevent research and technology in order to discourage any adventuring into the unknown, as what is discovered there is invariably negative. This discourse against the advances of science is also quite overt in Lovecraft’s theory and letters and allows us to circle back to the notion of the Pale, developed in *Disco Elysium*, briefly mentioned in the previous part. Indeed, Lovecraft is famous for this quote, invoked even by James Bridle for the

¹³² Logan, K. *The Gloaming*, *Op. Cit.*, 272.

title of his eco-critical work 'A new dark age'¹³³. This famous quote opens the short story 'The Call of Cthulhu' thus:

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.¹³⁴

This technophobia, as we will see in the next subpart, is often misdirected against contraception, queerness is often linked to an alt-right current of eco-criticism called eco-fascism, which uses the current emergencies around climate change to defend a return to more 'traditional' values, ie. the centrality of (white) heterosexual families and stereotypical gender roles, and the suppression of anything deemed 'deviant'. This rhetoric especially weaponises queer metronormativity (with the usual narrative of rural and small-town queer folks having to get to the city to live their lives to the fullest¹³⁵) and some transpeople's dependency on medical and pharmaceutical industries for medical transition. While Lovecraft might well have felt at home in this rhetoric, the anti-scientific argument presented in this quote is also what has allowed for eco-critical readings of his tales.

Both the 'cosmic horror' aesthetics and proposal that science would doom humanity can now rest on what is now called the Great Filter theory, responding to the Fermi paradox. To simplify, the Fermi Paradox calculated that, due to the expanse of our galaxy, there was a high probability that other inhabitable planets would host other civilisations at various stages of development, some far more advanced than ours. These other civilisations should mathematically be common, yet none has yet been contacted or encountered¹³⁶. One of the many possible answers to the famous 'where is everybody?' paradox is the theory of the Great Filter, a tragic ironic narrative which posits an evolutionary wall. The original calculations that proposed the existence of exo-civilisations were based on the capacity to broadcast into space and to survive a hundred years afterwards, long enough to be contacted back. As Kate Lohnes puts it:

We as a civilization have been broadcasting into space since 1974, so, according to this equation, even if we cease to exist as a species in 2074, there would be 10 intelligent civilizations in our galaxy alone. (...) But what if they couldn't live for 100 years after developing this technology? As we begin to develop our own transmission technology, we also develop nuclear power, advance the warming of the climate, and exhaust our food sources

¹³³ Bridle, J. *New Dark Age Op.Cit.*

¹³⁴ Lovecraft, Howard P. *The Call of Cthulhu*, The Project Gutenberg eBook (1928).

¹³⁵ See Halberstam, Jack *In a Queer Time and Space*, New York, New York University Press (2005).

¹³⁶ Carroll-Nellenback, Jonathan, Frank, Adam, Wright, Jason, Scharf, Caleb 'The Fermi Paradox and the Aurora Effect: Exo-civilization Settlement, Expansion, and Steady States' *The Astronomical Journal*, Volume 158, Number 3 August 20, 2019. Introduction (1-3).

with overpopulation. Is it such a stretch to say that perhaps an intelligent civilization cannot live for 100 years after developing space-penetrating transmission technology?¹³⁷

As a disclaimer, I do not pretend I understand the mathematics behind such hypotheses (and both theories are hotly debated), only that these ideas slowly permeate popular culture and give a scientific legitimacy to the idea that humanity would be doomed because of its intelligence. Having spurred several industrial and technological revolutions that have changed our lifestyle (at least in some parts of the world), an elite striving for capitalistic models has affected the balance between oxygen and carbon dioxide that constitutes a fragile equilibrium necessary for life on earth. The question of science and quantum mechanics through Schrödinger's cat or existential crises of the various characters of the corpus also points to the authors' knowledge of these notions. Akin to the impossibility to returning to a virginal nature, authors now have to contend with a wide vista on the intricacies of the world, from geological to cosmic consideration, as all seeps in contemporary literature.

The concept of the Pale or, humorously, 'death, but for the universe'¹³⁸, in *Disco Elysium*, an anti-matter substance that is spreading and annihilating life slowly, is an efficient metaphor for climate change. The Pale is made of human thought which created the capitalistic system and technology from the several industrial and technological revolutions, it matches the anti-scientific technophobia of Lovecraft that posits human intelligence and science as the poisoned gift of humanity. It allows humans to understand and control their surroundings but dooms any civilisation capable of broadcasting a signal into outer-space, according to the Drake equation and the Great Filter. The human mind is then generally seen as a self-defeating characteristic. The Pale articulates these concepts by equating what generally amounts to an in-game climate change and rising of the sea-levels to human thoughts. While talking about the Pale with the Insulindian Phasmid, the protagonist infers: 'Instead of air, you exhale thoughts. There are no trees that eat thoughts.'¹³⁹ Borrowing the from the usual ecological argument of trees absorbing CO₂, which otherwise heats up the atmosphere, the link is made directly between human thoughts and CO₂. Hence human thoughts are the dangerous, toxic substance that permeates the atmosphere and decreases the inhabitability of the planet for human and non-human animals. This image will be used for a final analysis of a project that articulates the role of literature in eco-anxiety and its link with nature.

¹³⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/story/the-fermi-paradox-where-are-all-the-aliens> [15/05/23]

¹³⁸ Kurvitz, R. et al. *Disco Elysium* London, ZA/UM (2019)

¹³⁹ *ibid*

The Future Library¹⁴⁰ is an art project created by Scottish artist Katie Peterson, due to span between 2014 and 2114 as a forest is now growing in Norway, destined to print out a hundred manuscripts that have to be kept secret until the end date. The idea is to replace literature in a slow growing time-scale in order to avoid its dependence on a usually resource-greedy book publishing industry. Contradicting *Disco Elysium's* assumption that 'there are no trees that eat thoughts', the Future Library actually proposes to grow trees to express thoughts sustainably. First contributor and Canadian author Margaret Atwood has likened the project to a time-capsule:

Science fiction has made art out of space travel – travel to places that the author has never seen, and that may not exist except in the human imagination. Time travel is similar. In the case of the Future Library, I am sending a manuscript into time. Will any human beings be waiting there to receive it? Will there be a "Norway?" Will there be a "forest"? Will there be a "library"? It's hopeful to believe that all of these elements – despite climate change, rising sea levels, forest insect infestations, global pandemics, and all of the other threats, real or not, that trouble our minds today – will still exist.¹⁴¹

This idea of the wishful resilience of humanity and enduring social constructs like the nation-state can be questioned but there is, in this project, an attempt to find a role for literature to play in the chaos of eco-anxiety. Many efforts made around climate-change are at a risk of being recuperated or shaped by capitalism (like green bonds, eco-taxes and other surface-level policies that only monetise the issue without addressing it) and one can only hope that, despite the entanglement of modern art with tax evasion and wealth transmission¹⁴² this project's core is genuine. It is funded by the city of Oslo and, so far, non-profit. It has become near impossible not to study these projects (art with a political agenda) without a thin veil of scepticism as even the most overt anti-establishment projects are often recuperated for profit.

For instance, Henry David Thoreau's experience in *Walden* is described by Diane P. Freedman as such: 'There, Thoreau built a cabin with bed, desk, charrs, and fireplace; kept a garden, received visitors, read, wrote, bemoaned consumerism; and went out in his little boat.'¹⁴³ And, with biting irony, the researcher states what has now become of Thoreau's shelter:

These days, the Walden Pond State Reservation is a near-pristine shrine but with bathhouse, bookstore, and visitor centre, a wooden replica of the cabin, and a bronze statue of Thoreau. Around the pond are walking paths, a map to the house site and granite posts demarking it. At the bookstore, a devotee might buy photos and maps of the area through the decades, biographies, books by Thoreau and his commentators, and t-shirts and tote bags that proclaim, 'Simplicity! Simplicity! Simplicity!'¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ <https://www.futurelibrary.no/> [18/05/23]

¹⁴¹ Atwood, Margaret The Future Library (2014) at *ibid*

¹⁴² Mei, Jianping and Moses, Michael, 'Art as an Investment and the Underperformance of Masterpieces.' *The Economic Review* (2002) 94(5):1656-68.

¹⁴³ Freedman, Diane P. 'Poetic Economies of Walden, Keeping Currency.' in Roulière, Camille, Egerer, Claudia *Water Lore: Practice, Place and Poetic,s* London, Routledge (2022), 182.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.

This perpetual recuperation, assimilation of anti-capitalist movements by capitalism sometimes result in a form of resignation in certain strands of fiction, theory and popular culture (doomerism). Confronted with the overwhelming opaqueness of governments and multinational industries to the many issues ranging from climate change, absurd wealth gaps and marginalisation of othered populations, some former activists or individuals (maybe sometimes protected by their own privileged status) adopt a fatalistic demeanour. This too, is expressed in-game by the Pale in the character of the Paledriver, a truck driver who, due to her over-exposure to the Pale is lost in the memories of the dead and content to be so. She also exemplifies activist fatigue, as in *Elysium*, the communist revolution was violently crushed by the MoralIntern, a thinly veiled equivalent of NATO (a neoliberal, imperialistic international force), and she argues:

‘When you’ve seen it all go *away* like that, rolling off like the sea, and then come back to this...’ She gestures at the square. The broken horse monument, the clanging of machines in the distance. ‘What are we *doing* here? For thousands of years, Gabriel... It doesn’t have to be like this. We can just give up. We can just become vapour.’¹⁴⁵

Embracing the Pale then reads like the resigned acceptance of climate change as a violent and inevitable end. I will expand on this idea in the next subpart, as alternative dwellings can be seen to borrow from the ideals transmitted by Thoreau’s *Walden* to resist the despair in the face of this great existential crisis and oppose it with action, in any shape or kind.

In this subpart, I have tried to draw on the subtle eco-sensitivity of the various authors in the corpus, as their eco-critical message is not overt but results more from a form of aesthetic and interconnectedness between the characters and their surroundings. Moreover, as most of the stories focus on other forms of dread stemming from societal exclusion, climate anxiety becomes more of a brooding presence in the background of more urgent struggles. Because the corpus is most concerned with water and set characters evolving by nature and the sea, the most overt form this eco-sensitivity takes is through the threat of rising sea-levels, as I have tried to demonstrate. In the last subpart of this chapter, I would like to focus on the effect this sensitivity can have, and the possible concrete reactions drawn from awakening this sense of otherness and eco-urgency in the readers, and what forms of resistance the marginalised or isolated communities have organised in Ireland and elsewhere.

¹⁴⁵ Kurvitz, R. et al. *Disco Elysium* London, ZA/UM (2019).

III.3 Rafts

The edge effect is an ecological concept that describes how there is a greater diversity of life in the region where two adjacent ecosystems overlap, such as land/water, or forest/grassland. At the edge of two overlapping ecosystems, you can find species from both of these ecosystems, as well as unique species that aren't found in either ecosystem but are specially adapted to the conditions of the transition zone between the two edges.¹⁴⁶

The study of contemporary literature reveals the anxieties and processing of climate change in the common psyche, with projects like the Library of the Future illustrating new sustainable ways of thinking the objects of books. It also reflects on the role of literature in establishing a new way of expressing the interconnectedness between the human and the non-human. Through water and sea monsters and the rise of sea levels resulting from a corruption of 'nature' under capitalism, Irish contemporary literature creates or develops sensibilities in the reader which binds the plea of marginalised bodies with a corrupted environment, compelling a shift in aesthetics to a new celebration of the grotesque as natural decay and cycles. This also benefits bodies that are pathologised, racialised as grotesque aesthetics are often wielded against them, yet through this shift from a negative to a positive grotesque their variations can be considered more natural and accepted. As literature in the form of poetry, novels and short-stories operates at emotional levels, working with intimate moments and stories, they contribute to a crucial shift in mindsets around otherness and environmental change more than facts and 'rational' debates. The sacralisation of rationality erected by capitalist and alt-right rhetoric often tends to ignore (or feign to ignore as it manipulates fear masterfully) that persuasion is emotional, not rational and minds are better swayed by the use of personal narratives. At the very least, Andrew Leslie argues, it can serve to thematise an issue, that is: 'to make an issue visible to a community – to frame it in such a way that it can become the subject of public debate and argument.'¹⁴⁷ He then proceeds to give a powerful example, the mechanism of which will guide this last subpart:

An example of the power of thematization was the 1984 movie *The Burning Bed*, starring Farrah Fawcett. Based on a true story, it depicted a battered woman who burned her husband to death in their bed while he was passed out from drinking. The movie appeared during a period when some legal theorists were advocating reform of the rules for pleading self-defense in cases where a woman killed her husband or boyfriend, even though that person did not have a weapon and was not immediately threatening the woman's life. It no doubt

¹⁴⁶ <https://deepgreenpermaculture.com/permaculture/permaculture-design-principles/10-edge-effect/> [last-accessed 21/03/2023]

¹⁴⁷ Leslie, Andrew 'How Stories Argue: The Deep Roots of Storytelling in Political Rhetoric.' *Storytelling, Self, Society*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2015, pp. 66–84, 68.

contributed to making public issues of domestic violence for those who were not reading the more technical arguments in law journals.¹⁴⁸

Therefore, it seems that fictional narratives address the more emotional response in an audience to encourage empathy for the characters and humanise or personalise issues that might otherwise seem abstract and distant. Literature, along with other media (sometimes adapting literature) that work on a shorter yet wider scale, sets up a deep, long lasting set of images and narratives as it has more time with its audience to develop its imprint, arguably contributing to the 'gut' feeling advocated by Bill McKibben¹⁴⁹. By embracing a marginalised people's point of view, a reader also gets access to a crucial vantage point on a system that was not designed with said marginalised people in mind. Because these communities (and individuals) do not fully benefit from the *status quo*, they are better able to highlight its omissions and malfunction, revealing its widespread inefficiency as a high number of people fall into the margins of an increasingly small centre. This subpart focuses on what the development of an awareness around climate change and othering and the overlap of these issues can possibly fuel. Therefore, I will cover more praxis, exploring various Irish initiatives which resist and respond to the hostile climate of normativity and oppression in a context of accelerated climate change. The actions of renters' unions, secret clinics, farmsteads and boats will be studied with only a tangential link to water, as it remains in the background in the form of the previously described clepsydra.

This jump from literature to political and associative states of Ireland is operated to cover the practice of all the theoretical issues and their literary representation explored in the corpus. The various authors treat of climate change, new types of dominions that complicate Ireland's independent status and examine the after-math (in the long run) of 1916 throughout the 1990's, 2000s. I can then now highlight the evolution of the status of these marginalised populations and their current political activism. It allows the analysis to explore the present reality of the populations at the core of the thesis and how marginalisation is lived in Irish context nowadays, to see what has become of O'Neill and Donoghue's queer nations, these 'nation(s) of the heart' which proposed alternative possibilities for Ireland. Most examples of the queer ecologists movements however are drawn from the US and UK, which sport an extensive Irish diaspora. This reaching outside of the island was necessary due to the highly specific quality of these groups (queer, sometimes decolonial, ecological, anti-capitalist and intersectional). This also replaces Ireland within its wider European or

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁴⁹ Cited in Henderson, Caspar 'Climate Change, Imagination and Culture' in *Climate Change and Other acts of Imagination* (2007) <https://jebin08.blogspot.se/2007/10/climate-change-imagination-and-culture.html?m=0>

Western context, as anglicised globalisation has had this effect of rendering many of these problematics common in wide geographical areas, though always with local variations that I will try to retain in this subpart.

1. Direct Action

The processing of deep-seated anxieties about the future finds expression in new ways of living that attempt to break away from capitalistic and neoliberal circuits to re-invent or imagine a slower life, with projects aptly entitled 'Living in the Future' echoing the 'Library of the Future' reconnecting with nature and the wild. The names of these projects, as an aside, jar in their optimism with the sad opening to Jack Halberstam's *Wild Things*: 'The wild, I learned too late, is not a place you can go, a site you can visit; it cannot be willed into being, left behind, lost or found. The wild limns our experiences of time and place, past and present, and beckons us to a future we know will never come.'¹⁵⁰

There is a more extravagant strand in ecological movements which, if it does not necessarily present constructive eco-criticism or applicable solutions to climate change, remains entertaining in its irreverence to an often over-polished and Mother Goddess ecofeminist discourse, quite common in alternative communities. Chris Corda, for instance, presents a somewhat amped up version of Donna Haraway's already controversial argument of 'making kin, not babies'¹⁵¹ in *Staying With the Trouble*¹⁵². In the first instalment of *Snuff It*, the journal of the Church of Euthanasia, Corda advocates: 'The church has four core principles, or "pillars", and they are (drum roll please) suicide, abortion, cannibalism, and sodomy. Now, you may ask yourself, why do we support these things? What do they all have in common? (...) the real answer is that they all help reduce the population.'¹⁵³

As an aside, non-reproductive sexuality is often exclusively associated with the queer community, as was established in the first chapter (and Halberstam seems to share this opinion, as depicted in *A Queer Time and Place*), but some straight/bi pairings (or polycules) might not be inclined to procreate either, when they have access to contraceptive methods. Heterosexuals do bear the brunt

¹⁵⁰ Halberstam, Jack *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire*, Durham and London, Duke University Press (2020) X

¹⁵¹ 'Make kin not babies: the difficult balance of recognising racist, colonial and anti-feminist histories of population control, while at the same time arguing that humans urgently need to stop making babies if other species on the planet are ever going to stand a chance.' (Neimanis, Astrida 'Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene', *Australian Feminist Studies* (2016), 31:90, 515-519 517

¹⁵² Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, *Op. Cit.*

¹⁵³ Korda, Chris Issue #1 of *Snuff It*, the quarterly journal of the Church of Euthanasia (1994), Editorial, np.

of reproductive expectations and pressure and when it does not coincide with their plans, this compulsory childbearing might feel somewhat oppressive. These forms of societal pressure can go as far as refusing women and people with uteruses definitive forms of contraception like tubal ligation or hysterectomy under 35 years old and sometimes even beyond¹⁵⁴. Vasectomy can legally be refused simply if the patient is perceived to be 'immature' or 'too young'¹⁵⁵, which reveals that the choices of straight people concerning their bodily autonomy are tightly controlled by medical professionals, no matter which set of genitalia they are born with, if their wishes go against reproductive expectations. By opposition, some queer couples and polycules might actually wish to procreate using medically assisted reproduction techniques and are often denied an equal access under a thin veil of policies limiting said techniques for people who cannot 'physically procreate', or only allowing cis-female couples to access these treatments. A study covering European countries notes: 'Male couples always need surrogacy to become biological parents. Thus, many of the countries target their legislation to "man and woman" or "two women", excluding male couples.'¹⁵⁶ Aside from ignoring gay couples in which transmen would have retained their reproductive systems, the study highlights the discrepancy between gay and lesbian couples in the access to medically assisted reproductive methods. I insist on this point as the idea of 'nature' plays a significant role there again in the policies and political opposition to LGBTQIA+ reproductive rights, and a lot of the eco-villages and off-grid communities function with the notion of 'families'¹⁵⁷ at the core, thereby implicitly, if not excluding at least limiting queer access to those communities.

There are also more positive but no less extravagant queer ecology movements, mentioned by Halberstam, Preciado and others, that distance themselves from the antiquated notion of 'Mother Earth', a patriarchal miserabilist construct that victimises the planet as a female entity and thus essentialises its destruction and exploitation following a misogynistic logic. 'Sexecology' by US-based Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens re-centers Earth as a 'lover' instead, in order to 'create a more reciprocal and empathetic relationship with the natural world.'¹⁵⁸ They claim in their *Ecosexual Manifesto*:

¹⁵⁴ <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/tubes-tied-tubal-litigation-young-under-30>

¹⁵⁵ Uhlman, Gregory 'Incidence of vasectomies refused and reasons for refusal. Survey of clinics and physicians' *Public Health Rep.* 1974 Sep-Oct;89(5):447-50. 450.

¹⁵⁶ Brandão, Pedro 'European policies on same-sex relationships, adoption and assisted reproduction' in *International Journal of Reproduction Contraception and Obstetric Gynaecology* 2022 Aug;11(8): 2306-2314, 2312.

¹⁵⁷ https://www.socioeco.org/bdf_fiche-document-1720_en.html [last accessed 10/04/2023]

¹⁵⁸ <https://watermakesuswet.ucsc.edu/> [last accessed 10/04/2023]

We are ecosexuals. The Earth is our lover. We are madly, passionately, and fiercely in love, and we are grateful for this relationship each and every day. In order to create a more mutual and sustainable relationship with the earth, we collaborate with nature. We treat the Earth with kindness, respect and affection.

We make love with the earth. We are aquaphiles, teraphiles, pyrophiles and aerophiles. We shamelessly hug trees, massage the earth with our feet, and talk erotically to plants. We are skinny dippers, sun worshippers, and stargazers. We caress rocks, are pleased by waterfalls, and admire the Earth's curves often. We make love with the Earth through our senses. We celebrate our E-spots. We are very dirty.¹⁵⁹

The movement has occasioned a journal, workshops, earth weddings and provocative statements and at the very least has the merit of putting a new, sex-positive spin on Ecology. It also offers a less sanitised version of green activism that still incorporates the spiritual element that can already be found in many branches of ecology, only with a more overtly sexual, paganistic tone. Perhaps this ecological movement reconnects with a more authentic version of these religions, before they went through the prism of Christianity that documented and affixed them in written literature, allowing for copious censorship of elements that would have been in opposition with Judeo-Christian values surrounding sexuality.¹⁶⁰ This happened for at least two pagan religions, as Celtic rituals were recorded by catholic erudites and the little we know of Norse mythology was compiled in the *Edda* by Snorri Sturluson, a Christian scholar.¹⁶¹ As the common discourse surrounding ecology usually ranges from guilt-ridden to overwhelmingly alarmist, Eco-sexuality is a welcome, light hearted change in green advocacy.

There is, however a common critique of ecological movements that sees them solely as the plea of white cis-het upper and middle classes, punishing the working classes with new eco-taxes and new sets of unrealistic regulations. Extinction Rebellion is often targeted by such criticisms, as their non-violent modes of action often protect the power structures and their polished rhetoric glosses over the long history of resources exploitation through colonisation. Indeed, an open letter was addressed to them and co-signed by *The Wretched of the Earth*, a grassroots collective for Indigenous, black, brown and diaspora groups and individuals demanding climate justice and acting in solidarity with our communities, both in the UK and in Global South. The name of the association also refers to Frantz Fanon's work of the same name on colonialism. The queer and decolonial groups sought to complete and re-focus Extinction Rebellion's struggle while demanding more inclusivity:

"The Truth" of the ecological crisis is that we did not get here by a sequence of small missteps, but were thrust here by powerful forces that drove the distribution of resources of the entire planet and the structure of our societies. The economic structures that dominate us were brought about by colonial projects whose sole

¹⁵⁹ <http://sexecology.org/research-writing/ecosex-manifesto/> [last accessed 10/04/2023]

¹⁶⁰ <https://www.dochara.com/the-irish/ireland-history/celtic-ireland/> [all last accessed 15/06/23]

¹⁶¹ Sturluson, Snorri *Edda* Vermont, Everyman (2008), xi.

purpose is the pursuit of domination and profit. For centuries, racism, sexism and classism have been necessary for this system to be upheld, and have shaped the conditions we find ourselves in.

Another truth is that for many, the bleakness is not something of “the future”. For those of us who are indigenous, working class, black, brown, queer, trans or disabled, the experience of structural violence became part of our birthright. Greta Thunberg calls world leaders to act by reminding them that “Our house is on fire”. For many of us, the house has been on fire for a long time: whenever the tide of ecological violence rises, our communities, especially in the Global South are always first hit. We are the first to face poor air quality, hunger, public health crises, drought, floods and displacement.¹⁶²

This recontextualization of ecological struggles reveals the deep interlinks between the various issues discussed during the thesis and are also relevant to Ireland as its own colonial history seems to have paved the way for its current exploitation as a tax haven. A lot of the post-independence hangover in Ireland is often said to result both in the reactionary spin given to the constitution by an emboldened catholic Church and the pressure to give in to the GAFAs in order to compete in the wider international neoliberal scene. Ronan Nelson provides an efficient (if uncritical) summary of Ireland’s economical trajectory:

The booming Celtic Tiger economy of the mid-1990s through the mid- 2000s provided a quick glimpse into the potential benefits of modern globalization and put Ireland on the world stage as a model of how a formerly-colonial society can transform itself into a high-tech, high-income society. Ireland’s perceived role as a champion of harnessing globalization for the better of its people, however, remains speculative at best. Rapidly increasing social inequality is challenging Ireland’s ability to maintain steady economic growth.... After hundreds of years of societal stagnation at the hands of a colonial power, Ireland now faces societal stagnation thanks to its government’s prioritization of inequitable economic growth over the need to congruently develop its internal economy to increase the citizens’ quality of life and social equity. Ireland’s initial ascent from agrarian society to the Celtic Tiger and its subsequent descent into socioeconomic stagnation came about thanks in major part to Ireland’s corporate tax structure. Ireland’s highly agrarian economy of the early-to-mid 20th century was not allowed to take part in the international industrial revolution between 1820 and 1840 because of England’s oppressive policies towards Irish economic growth. However, once Ireland found its first opportunity to embark on an independent path of economic policy in the 1980s, it found a direct and attractive fast-cash outlet through the harnessing of foreign direct investment by way of tax incentives.¹⁶³

The Celtic Tiger serves as a backdrop to Mia Gallagher’s novel as the before and after contrast is sharpened by the protagonist’s absence from Ireland during the early 2000s. As a child in the 1970s, Georgia grows in an Ireland that is still considered ‘cheap’ (BPLH,130) to live in by her babysitter, slowly becoming prey to the EEC (former EU) incentives:

Commandeering the other armrest is a sleek Continental in the window seat. A businessman, judging by the sheaf of typed reports stacked in the pocket before him. Some big shot from the EEC, probably fresh from a visit to the Department of Poverty where he’s warned a small nation of the costs and consequences of belonging. (BPLH,231)

Georgia then leaves Ireland for Germany and the UK before returning to a desolate suburban landscape that has been neglected by the boom. Since she can be read as an allegory for Ireland, her absence during the ‘Tiger’ years may signify that Ireland is selling itself to a German-based

¹⁶² <https://www.redpepper.org.uk/an-open-letter-to-extinction-rebellion/> [last accessed 23/02/23]

¹⁶³ Nelson, Ronan ‘Ireland’s Case of Diminishing Returns: How Ireland’s Corporate Tax Policy Fails to Serve the Irish People and Their Democracy,’ *San Diego International Law Journal* [VOL. 23: 373, 2022], 375.

European style of economy, that its power centre has vacated the island. The first signs of the economical shift are also subtly strewn across *Hood* from the 1990s (with the woods receding in increased urbanisation) while the divorce of Ireland from European affairs is articulated by O'Neill as the focus of 1916 is set firmly in Dublin, the echoes of WWI-related loss only indirectly connoted through Gordie and the black cards flourishing in the windows. The authors all present, to various degrees, a sceptical, critical tone towards independent Ireland, showcasing the tight grip of Catholicism and neoliberalism which smother the revolutionary legacy of the island. This is why I would now like to examine how the Irish population currently composes with this situation.

Renters' Unions

'For our demands most moderate are, We only want the earth' (James Connolly 1907)¹⁶⁴

The economical evolution after independence has indeed participated in a disillusionment, that a long history of struggle and revolution would only result in trading off one foreign dominant force for another¹⁶⁵. The emergence of a new class of landlords benefitting massively from the real-estate crisis also negates a long tradition of opposing British absentee landlords in Ireland. If the Irish population has historically been used to fighting back these forces of capitalism when they emanated from colonial power, it is difficult to compose with similar behaviour from other Irish citizens. Where, previously in history, nationality and Irishness could be used to bolster class-consciousness, it is now the rhetoric of class-warfare and the legacy of James Connolly which must be repurposed to oppose a national elite and exploitative practices. Many direct-action associations draw on Connolly's ideas (CATU directly quoting him, with the sentence that opens this subpart). Ireland is a fertile subject of study, not only for the contradiction of its current state as a partially independent tax-haven, but also because it has the historical potential to throw off these dominating forces, as it proved once before through reaching this partial independence. The same pull of history can encourage a new generation of Irish people to fully accomplish this legacy, and this is apparent in the organisation of local unions.

This revolutionary history is evoked by Fiadh Tubridy, an Irish multi-activist involved with the Small Trans Library¹⁶⁶ (present in both Dublin and Glasgow), a trans harm-reduction group and co-chair of the Dun Laoighaire CATU (Community Action Tenants Union) branch. She recalls Irish opposition to abusive landlordism and the various forms this animosity has taken in Irish history like the Land wars

¹⁶⁴ <https://catuireland.org/about/> [last accessed 23/02/23]

¹⁶⁵ See Storey, A. 'In 1916, They Weren't Fighting to Build a Tax Haven' *The Dublin Inquirer* March 30, 2016.

¹⁶⁶ <https://smalltranslibrary.org/> [last accessed 23/02/23]

of the 19th century where people set fire to landlords' houses. She openly criticises the 'parasitic existence of landlords, who do not contribute anything to society and simply hold onto property, extracting value from real estate by making it scarce.'¹⁶⁷ This union has been built to deal with the more urgent cases like mass-evictions and rent increases and renters unions are starting to form everywhere in Ireland (including North of the border), sometimes under the centralised Community Action Tenants Union Ireland¹⁶⁸. There is therefore a push from Irish youth to organise people to fight and improve conditions in relation to housing through membership-based unions that support those with housing problems through collective action. The local Dun Laoghaire branch, for instance, fought successfully against landlords and councils, and managed to win deposits back and to resist evictions in only three years of existence. The CATU branches in Fairview and Marino designed post-cards for renters to send to their previous houses with the amount of rent they used to pay in order to expose the increase in rents to new tenants. CATU was established in 2020 and counted 1300 members in 2022 with several local branches across the island.

Fiadh Tubridy herself has had an interesting political trajectory as she used to live in the UK and was part of a renter's union in London. When she came back to Ireland to face the exacerbated issues of the real estate crisis, she joined *Dublin Housing Action* and *Take Back the City* which focused on the occupation of derelict buildings and other direct actions. Yet the desire to build a stronger, bigger organisation that would be national in scope and draw more people flourished from these early movements, which only constituted a small core of activists. Tubridy deplores on *ConverSayTrans*¹⁶⁹ the 'obscene excesses of the housing crisis, illegal evictions; landlords inflict everyday violence and perform economical evictions when people cannot afford the rent increase'. She also points out that queer people are often in a particularly vulnerable position when it comes to renting, as landlords can afford to discriminate, and transpeople have the added struggle of identity paper discrepancies. The high rent prices can also force transpeople to stay at their family home with transphobic parents or to be unable to move to Dublin to access community and medical care. All minorities are generally at the sharp end of the housing crisis, be it migrants, queer people or women forced to remain in domestic violence situations. She draws on the notion of social murder, a form of dehumanising systematic neglect to qualify the violence landlords inflict on tenants, by threatening them with homelessness.

¹⁶⁷ Alexandra, Jules, Fiadh 'CATU, Renting as a Trans Person' *ConverSayTrans* TheTortoiseShack.ie January 25, 2022. <https://tortoiseshack.ie/catu-renting-as-a-trans-person/> [last accessed 20/07/23]

¹⁶⁸ <https://catuireland.org/about/> [last accessed 23/02/23]

¹⁶⁹ Alexandra, Jules, Fladh, 'Renting as a transperson', *Op. Cit.*

CATU has created internal subgroups to address the specific types of discrimination in housing faced by LGBTQIA+ people and POCs especially, proposing an intersectional approach while presenting a united front¹⁷⁰. The association has also branched out as smaller, local organisations and the *Limerick Renters Union* is one of its offshoots. One of its goals is to advocate for limited-rent zones, according to El Reid-Buckley, one of the founders who is also involved in the *Trans Limerick Association* and the *Writers Union*. In a similar vein, the 2022 *Raise the Roof* movement, according to its manifesto has advocated for:

- Secure, genuinely affordable homes for all who live and work in our society.
- Prices and rents that allow households a decent standard of living.
- Protection from eviction, security for tenants and high-quality public housing.
- A housing system that works for communities, families and individuals, not investment funds or developers.¹⁷¹

This resurgence in class-consciousness and re-connection to Ireland's history of revolution and decolonial efforts seems needed to guide it towards a more complete form of independence, akin to James Connolly's original project for Ireland. In *At Swim Two Boys*, Doyley criticises his detour through nationalism as a prescient commentary on the limitation of an independent state removed from (international) socialist ideals and solely crystallised around the dichotomy Irish vs British. After the Celtic Tiger, the crisis of 2008 and the on-going real-estate crisis that profits only a small portion of wealthy Irish people to the detriment of working class and destitute populations, it seems like the dichotomy has to rearticulate itself politically around class warfare to be efficient at tackling the new forms of domination (added to the still on-going presence of British occupation in the North of the island) that have emerged in the Republic of Ireland and in the UK. The international nature of these unions is reflected in its branches sprawling across the Irish sea to Glasgow and London, often through the Irish diaspora and other Celtic populations.

The Orchi-shed

In Ireland, trans people are invisible because of the everyday practices that result from unquestioned norms and assumptions underlying institutional rules – that everyone is heterosexual and that no one changes their gender.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ <https://gcn.ie/lgbtq-caucus-catu-fight-housing-rights/> [13/06/23]

¹⁷¹ <file:///C:/Users/Nemo/Downloads/RTRManifestoNov2022-1.pdf>

¹⁷² McIlroy, Cat for TENI *Transphobia In Ireland* Research report (2009), 13. https://www.ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/trans_country_report_-_233_transphobia_in_ireland_report.pdf [last accessed 20/07/23]

To expand on this idea of finding loopholes and alternatives to the trappings of a capitalistic, destructive society, beyond the realm of the arts, similar ways to work around the system have been applied to transitions and marginalised sexualities. I have argued that the idea of 'nature' is often used to oppose queer rights and, since a surge in trans-visibility has occurred lately, the ire seems to now focus on medical transition. Transphobic discourse especially focuses on the danger for women (in TERF rhetoric¹⁷³) and children (in Alt-Right/Conservative rhetoric¹⁷⁴) falsely claimed to be emanating from the trans community. One common criticism both found in the TERF seminal text by Janice Raymond and throughout eco-fascist (and, disappointingly, some anarchist¹⁷⁵) rhetoric is the accusation of excessive use of technology. This argument equates trans-people with deluded customers shopping for new bodies in an ultra-capitalistic world that sells simulacra of femininity and masculinity to people who were not correspondingly assigned female or male at birth, echoing and amplifying the usual criticism around cosmetic surgeries. Transphobes imagine a connivence between medical institutions and trans-people, which also serves to accuse the latter of upholding gender norms and benefiting the medico-pharmaceutical industry and cosmetic surgery markets. Yet the reality is often that trans-people have had to fight to get access to these treatments, and work around the psychiatrisation and pathologisation of their behaviours and identity, often having to lie to conform to a cis-imposed diagnosis of gender conformity in order to access treatment¹⁷⁶.

The legendary story of Eilís Ní Fhlannagáin, a US-born Irish woman also poses another, class-related layer to the fight for trans-rights and proposes a powerful alternative and refusal to cave in to medical gatekeeping. As political and medical institutions deny basic access to treatment if one does not pay the price, only a certain class of trans-people has been accepted by official gender-clinics or they have had to pay excessive amounts of money for private gender-care, often dedicating a huge portion of their (or their family's) income to their transition. Some people do not have the resources to go through these expensive processes and multiple appointments, to conform to a biased image of their identity elaborated by cis-psychiatrists and doctors.

In the 1990s US, Eilís Ní Fhlannagáin decided, with the help of a friend who was in med-school, to retrieve a modicum of agency around her own medical transition. She was already on black-market

¹⁷³ See J.K Rowling's BBC Russel Prized essay of (2020) as no quote will be provided here.

¹⁷⁴ Wynn, Natalie 'The Witch Trials of J.K Rowling,' *Contrapoints* Youtube (2023)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmT0i0xG6zg>

¹⁷⁵ Again, see Pièces et Main d'Oeuvre (PMO) Grenoble, 'Du "Transidentitaire" à l'enfant-machine » [online] 9th of July 2019 https://www.piecesetmaindoeuvre.com/spip.php?page=resume&id_article=1152 [last accessed 20/07/23] for conservative rhetoric on the matter, see Steven Crowder, Ben Shapiro, Jordan Peterson, Abigail Schrier, among others.

¹⁷⁶ See Serano, Julia *Whipping Girl A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* Seal Press, New York (2016)

hormones brought through friends across the border or from illegal pharmacies, like many transwomen who are rejected by the official apparatuses of gender-care (and even some that aren't, if only to complete an often-ineffective treatment originally destined for menopausal cis-women) and she could not afford an orchidectomy. Orchidectomy is a poetical name for a type of bottom-surgery that allows a transwoman or transfeminine people to end their dependence on testosterone-blockers (as oestrogen cannot function without this process) and while being a simple surgical procedure, they are often either refused to trans-people or incredibly costly. Therefore, Ní Fhlannagáin asked her friend to perform the surgery at home, with basic equipment. There were a lot of complications (notably because this was the first time her friend had performed such a surgery and the medical instructions they used were created for cis-men) but this allowed them to learn from their mistakes and correct the procedure for future interventions. This decision to perform a surgery outside of a hospital was incredibly dangerous but it allowed her to access medical care quickly and cheaply, outside of a system that often refuses to treat trans patients. By by-passing all official avenues for gender-care, she managed to avoid years of waiting-lists, psychiatric assessments, judgemental and invasive interviews, the bad treatment by medical professionals such as deadnaming and misgendering: she found a way to escape this hostile system, at least partially. This, in itself is an incredibly powerful move and breaks this violent power-imbalance between medical institutions and trans-patients. It is important to remember that doctors often consider themselves as benevolent Pygmalion or paternal figures to trans-women, most notably in early trans-biographies like Christine Jorgensen's: 'Like kindly fathers, she seems to imply, the doctors would care for the other unfortunate people who shared her affliction.'¹⁷⁸ Removing their 'assistance' and removing disproportionate payment from the equation thereby places this crucial surgery outside of another power-imbalance inherent to capitalism. This story is incredibly powerful in the current context of political anti-trans hostility and lack of access to gender care, especially in Ireland where waiting lists for gender-clinics have sky-rocketed from five to almost ten years in some cases,¹⁷⁹ something Ní Fhlannagáin exposes in her interviews as she now lives in Ireland.

She also points out the paradoxical expectation of the Irish system for trans people to live as their actual gender for a year before being allowed to access HRT (hormone replacement therapy) as the now 50-year-old woman recalls that the process was the opposite for her early transition: be on HRT for one year then come out and transition socially, which is a sounder strategy as HRT contributes to

¹⁷⁸ Califia, Pat *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism*, San Francisco, Cleis Press (2003), 28.

¹⁷⁹ <https://gcn.ie/hse-gender-affirming-healthcare-ireland/> [last accessed 11/05/23]

modifying the person's appearance and allows for more comfort in one's social gender role. Fiadh Tubridy, in a conversation with the authors of *Transgender Marxism*, has also exposed this discrepancy in the Irish system: 'But there's this really awful paradox where your gender may be recognized by the state, but when it comes to confront the health system, you still have to go through the medicalised diagnostic process. So when it comes to accessing any forms of actual resources, your legally recognized gender suddenly means absolutely nothing.'¹⁸⁰

After surviving her risky surgery, Eilís Ní Fhlannagáin came up with the idea of the orchi-shed (also less poetically named 'the ball-barn'). With her medical school student friend, they set up a secret clinic to provide trans-women with affordable orchidectomies (adapted to the person's income and never going over 500\$) as, at the time, many transwomen suffered or died at the hands of opportunistic surgeons (or people passing for surgeons) banned from the profession and performing the requested surgeries in dangerously unhygienic conditions for excessively high prices. Ní Fhlannagáin said the orchi-shed was inspired by the Jane collective/The Janes, a feminist underground association that covertly offered counsel and performed safe abortions in the US in the 1960s before *Roe v Wade*¹⁸¹legalised the practice. A similar organisation existed in Ireland in the 1980s and 90s as it is referred to in *Hood*: 'I left the Green by the gate beside the toilets. On the wall in dripping white letters it said *Abortion Information 6794700*. Cara used to wear a badge with the illegal number on it: acquaintances of her father's, meeting her at the supermarket, would bend their heads to read it, then straighten up sharply.' (Hood,185) Donoghue neatly signals the level of stigmatisation around the access to abortion in one simple reaction to the 'illegal' number. The story of the Jane collective itself is garnering attention again as *Roe v Wade* has recently been overturned¹⁸² as a scalding reminder that access to fundamental rights never follows a neat linear and teleological chronology of 'progress' but is fought for in an exhausting pattern of actions, reactions and counter-reactions throughout history. It is important to note that the doctor in training who helped Ní Fhlannagáin and other transwomen with their orchidectomies had planned to work at an abortion clinic after her studies, where she still works to this day.

There is a clear political link between the orchi-shed and the Jane collective, as in both cases women (and other people who can get pregnant) managed to reclaim agency and control over their own bodies from medical institutions that would refuse them crucial surgeries for sexist and transphobic

¹⁸⁰ Tubridy, Fiadh for the *Small Trans Library* 'Interview with Elle O'Rourke and Jules Joanne Gleeson' (2022)

¹⁸¹ The legal case that set a precedent to legalise abortion in the US

¹⁸² <https://www.plannedparenthoodaction.org/issues/abortion/roe-v-wade#scotus> [last accessed 11/06/23]

ideological reasons. Remembering those political initiatives and their parentage is crucial at a time where an increasing amount of pseudo-feminist and alt-right rhetoric constructs the rights of cis- and trans-women as antithetical. The non-judgmental, supportive atmosphere ¹⁸³ of the clandestine/illegal clinics also proves the importance of people caring for their own communities, of providing a service they have themselves needed and experienced.

For two and a half years, both Ní Fhlannagáin and her friend (who wanted to remain anonymous as she still practices in abortion clinics) welcomed and treated transwomen in a tractor shed they had fully sealed and sanitised, equipped with an autoclave and cauterising machine from Ebay. They provided safe surgeries with a zero percent infection rate and electrolysis in the middle of the Washington state countryside on a farm they rented without ever making the landlord aware of the secret but legal clinic (they had passed the Board of Health visits). The rumours around the orchard spread across the trans community, so much so that, years later and on another continent, Ní Fhlannagáin realised that an Irish friend of hers had heard of it in the 2000s in Germany, attesting to the legendary proportions of the story. Once the venture was over, they never mentioned it again, and the Irish American woman now admits that doing transgender healthcare and composing with women in an extremely vulnerable position was as mentally taxing as it was rewarding.

This low-cost, safe healthcare service should have been and should still be provided by the state, not by community members with limited means in a clandestine clinic as it comes at tremendous emotional cost for association workers who often provide these services un/low-paid. However, the breadth of adaptability and resilience of marginalised communities in the face of hostile climates remains impressive. As the medical institutions are especially averse in Ireland (which also legalised abortion as late as 2018) recalling these narratives can be politically inspirational. Underground organisations of pirate labs brewing their own synthesis hormones, of anarchist feminist self-defence and martial arts groups, found families, mutual aids and community soup kitchens maintain a modicum of hope and allow for at least basic survival through solidarity, no matter how limited.

The activist also describes the difficult conditions she encountered in Ireland when she arrived from the US and tried to renew her HRT prescription, even after 20 years in transition. In her long years of activism and service to the trans community, Ní Fhlannagáin has cemented her negative opinion of medical institutions, who gatekeep and complicate access to gender care while remaining fully ignorant or speculative about trans-bodies, transition processes and effects. For instance, the threat

¹⁸³ Rew (pen name) 'JANE: The Abortion Service Transformed into Feminist Practice.' *Off Our Backs*, vol. 19, no. 9, 1989, pp. 17–17.

of infertility was constantly waved around doctors contradicts her friends' experience who, after years under HRT, still retained their reproductive capacities. Her own transmother¹⁸⁴, she argues, was 'murdered by medical neglect' as she refused treatment due to her deep distrust of medical institutions. This distrust resulted from the fact that, no matter the medical issue, a patient's trans-identity is always brought up by health professionals with varying reactions, sometimes with a complete refusal to provide healthcare. Her transmother was one of the first transwomen to build up an online community to help young transgirls and parents sent the police to her with the now common argument 'you're trying to trans my kids', to which she replied 'no, I'm just listening.'¹⁸⁵

Ní Fhlannagáin has now integrated trans activist circles in Ireland and speaks of a convergence of struggles being necessary to break down the isolation between marginalised communities, be it trans-people, travellers or people in direct provision (accommodation for asylum seekers in Ireland). To expand on direct-provision, I will briefly draw on an article by Anne Mulhall provocatively entitled 'The End of Irish Studies' which points out the paradoxical insensitivity in Ireland around refugees' plea, especially given Irish people's long history of emigration and discrimination. She states her frustration at the case of Theophilus Ndluvo, an artist in direct provision who was invited to a conference on inclusion in the arts funded by the Irish Arts council in 2019 and who was still issued with a deportation order by the department of justice in 2020. Mulhall sees this as a typical example of institutions 'seeking to "include" and commodify artists seeking asylum while failing to learn about and confront the brutal political realities of the asylum and deportation machine that are ever present in context of such artists' lives.'¹⁸⁶ More generally, she points to the limitations of academia when the research work is not done in 'close collaboration with social movements, (as distinct from taking social movements or 'subaltern' people as the subject of their research'¹⁸⁷). This seems relevant to the story of Ní Fhlannagáin, as she too sees a contrast between theory and praxis and is a strong proponent of the latter. She argues, about other marginalised groups in Ireland, that 'the same people who hate you are the people who hate us' and encourages trans-participation in protests linked to other marginalised causes, to bolster numbers through ally-ship.

However, she also recognises the limitations of inter-struggle solidarity as she recalls that cis gays and lesbians of upper classes in the 1990s US, who 'worked in banks and lived in loft apartments'

¹⁸⁴ Adoptive mother in the context of queer found families.

¹⁸⁵ ConverSayTrans, *Op. Cit.*

¹⁸⁶ Mulhall, Anne 'The Ends of Irish Studies? On Whiteness, Academia, and Activism' *Irish University Review*, Volume 50 Issue 1, Page 94-111, 101.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

(the 'good gays') accepted transwomen during the 'repeal' movement and agreed to a brief unity but, according to her, 'they say "we'll come back for you" and they never do'¹⁸⁸. The movements for Pride and equal rights, to her, left transwomen on the sidelines. She defines herself solely by praxis and advocates for more participation in associations and 'giving back to the community' whether emotionally, financially or in terms of time to give back to the elders of the movement who fought to secure the basic rights transpeople enjoy nowadays at the cost of tremendous trauma and activist exhaustion. Sharing her story with a new generation of Irish transpeople is a way to recreate a missing or limited intergenerational link, as she points out: 'a lot of us don't have elders because our elders died. AIDS wiped out a lot of them'.¹⁸⁹

The stories of Eilís Ní Fhlannagáin and Fiadh Tubridy signal a crucial need for praxis and direct action in marginalised community settings. Through trans participation in renters' unions, anti-Direct provision movements and against the commodification of Pride, the creation of independent libraries and mutual aid support it seems like trans-Irish people are ubiquitous in alternative organisations. After pointing out the disproportionate involvement of trans-people (though some are perfectly content in the *status quo* or even paradoxically close to conservative circles) in revolutionary movements, *Transgender Marxism* proposes the following reason: 'Transgender life is harsh enough that many are easily led to conclude that our conditions are beyond redemption; that no centre-left party or Third Sector trend can be relied upon to truly loosen the grip of oppression.'¹⁹⁰

This quick-dive into trans and socialist associations in current Ireland serves to explore the continuity in the political issues diagnosed by the corpus through literary expression. In this limited, second-hand accounts of marginalised groups direct actions, associative efforts and attempts at struggle convergence, I hoped to complete some of the theory and artistic exploration with some mention of praxis, as diagnosis can only be a starting point.

Complementary to direct actions, unions and community solidarity or in parallel of these are places where people attempt to imagine alternative ways of life outside of the capitalistic cycle, sometimes marking privilege as they require the possibility to buy property, even at a cheap rate. In some cases set on the brink of homelessness, these alternative dwellings constitute a temporary shelter that, at the very least, constitute an attempt to distance oneself from exploitative and wasteful production-chains and systems.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ ConverSayTrans, *Op. Cit.*

¹⁹⁰ Gleeson, Jule Joanne and O'Rourke, Elle *Transgender Marxism*, London, Pluto Press (2021), 15.

2. Living in Loopholes

Most (not all) of the people who live in alternative ways are under no illusion that they provide a solution to climate change or capitalism, the intent is only that working with reduced resources is good practice and will be useful if/when said resources come to be depleted. Furthermore, they do test out the adaptability and resilience of human living in composing with limited means and hopefully can provide a reassuring prospect for others, that if/when the situation becomes dire enough to reduce access to water, electricity, gas and fuel for the general population in western countries, there are ways to compose accordingly. A lot of the commodified versions of these alternatives are limited to the aesthetics or the spiritual components, often glossing over the concrete (and less than glamorous) aspects of alternative living. In this subpart, I only mean 'alternative living' as anything that does not participate in urban, mainstream avenues of real estate like paying a rent to a landlord or buying a flat/a house in pressure zones in high demand. The people who live in these alternative ways represent what Frédéric Lordon calls the 'deserters', who try to extirpate themselves from capitalist system while unfortunately leaving it unscathed and remaining partially dependent on it. Lordon, however, recognises that these new modes of organisation constitute a form of un-learning of former modes of living and is a starting point to an education in alternatives (he proposes communism)¹⁹¹.

There are numerous ways of composing with limited resources that have re-developed in the recent years, from eco-villages like Cloughjordan in Ireland, Llamas in Wales or Findhorn in Scotland, with various degrees of self-sufficiency and sustainability, French-type ZADs, squats but also nomadic options like converted vans, buses and boats. While a lot of these are often heralded as 'green'(washed) or glamorous ways of life which attract the elite in their most pricey and polished versions, the class connotation also transpires through the many news articles that deem it a cheaper way of living: 'Many people have made enquiries in recent years regarding buying and living on houseboats, says Mr Allen, "because they can't afford to buy or rent houses in the city any more".'¹⁹²

The Republic of Ireland, it can be reminded, has sunk into one of its worst real estate crises¹⁹³ after the settling of the GAFAs¹⁹⁴ and an ironic version of 'Doors of Dublin' by Graham Martin from 2019

¹⁹¹ Lordon, Frédéric *Vivre sans? Institutions, police, travail, argent...* Paris, La Fabrique (2019)

¹⁹² Anon. 'Making a home in a floating world' *The Irish Times* Sep 9, 1999.

¹⁹³ See Hearne, Rory *Gaffs: Why No One Can Get a House, and What We Can Do About It* London, Harper Collins (2022)

¹⁹⁴ Webber, Jude 'Irish property: the boom that shows no signs of slowing', *Financial Times*, December 2022.

heavily features tents next to boarded up houses: ‘This image is a pastiche of the popular touristic “Doors of Dublin” poster and postcard, substituting the polished, colourful Georgian doors with a sight currently all too common in Dublin: dilapidated and boarded-up doorways, indicating vacant or rundown properties, alongside tents and makeshift dwellings occupied by those desperately in need of a home.’¹⁹⁵ The Dáil also voted on a potential lift of the ban on eviction, in March 2023 which would take effect on the first of April. Hence, the surge in alternative (not always in its political sense) living solutions is quite logical.

LGBTQI+ people (alongside other marginalised groups) tend to be over-represented in homeless populations, as Fiadh Tubridy inferred in her interview with ConverSayTrans, and a 2020 report commissioned by Focus Ireland on LGBTQI+ Youth Homelessness in Ireland survey mentions van/car living as a last resort for some of the participants.¹⁹⁶ The link between alternative living and homelessness is not always evident, but financial destitution often influences the choice to move towards rural isolated life or nomadic urban life, the green aspect being only secondary to this decision. It is also worth noting that a lot of the off-grid homesteads offer food and lodging to volunteers and can also respond to a need in accommodation, at least temporarily.

Two concrete examples from outside of Ireland also illustrate the link between homelessness and alternative living, as I wish to emphasise the class element to continue chipping away at the glamorisation of these dwellings. In the London boaters’ community, a lot of people could simply not afford the increasing rent prices and bought cheap, ancient narrowboats or sea boats that turned out to be in extreme states of disrepair, far beyond their technical knowledge. Some new boaters end up living without water or electricity for months or over a year as predatory sellers will often take advantage of their lack of technical skills and propose cheap boat life as a viable alternative, highlighting the low prices (for some, below the price of a deposit to rent in the city) and glossing over the dilapidated state of old or converted crafts¹⁹⁷. For some people in Greater London, boats are the last resort before homelessness, and barely constitute a home in themselves as basic access to water¹⁹⁸ or electricity are sometimes lacking when the craft is not actively sinking. The same predatory practice actually seems to be common in Ireland too, as a 2016 article collected the

¹⁹⁵ Graham, Martin ‘Doors of Dublin,’ *Dublin Inquirer* Issue 38 (May 2019).

¹⁹⁶ https://www.belongto.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/LGBTQI-Youth-Homelessness-Report_FINAL-VERSION.pdf
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¹⁹⁷ Oil rig escape pods are quite common, some retailing for as low as £3500 and highly unlikely to pass the gas safety tests for insurance.

¹⁹⁸ Water pumps are powered mostly by electricity (manual pumps are rare) so if the electricity doesn’t work (because of old batteries or faulty cabling) water cannot get from the tank to the taps. If the engine is down and the boat immobilised, then the boat cannot get to a water point to fill, so there’s no water once the tank is empty.

following account from Irish boater Caroline Nicholson: “I’ve had friends who have bought boats without a survey and then found that they had irreparable problems and that the only resale value the boats had was scrap,” she says. A common problem in older barges is that their hulls are worn thin after years of scraping through shallow waters.¹⁹⁹

A rural-life as alternative project I personally heard of was also established in Northern France by worker-priest Dominique Wiel²⁰⁰ who had gathered several homeless people of his city to combine the little money they got from state benefits and buy a farmstead in the countryside to live off the land. He recounted that the project only lasted a few years as the people had no interest in farm living and were used to urban settings, being only pushed in this project by circumstances. In Ireland, there are politically engaged examples of homesteads seeking volunteers (or not, as some have disappeared from the Irish WOOFing website²⁰¹) like Pól who settled a sandy terrain farmstead on the remote island of Inis Oírr (in the Arran Islands near one of the last Gaeltacht areas) and refused to communicate in English, preferring either Irish or French from his volunteers.

I would then like to examine two of these alternative modes of living as they offer various forms of resistance to the destructive neoliberalist surge in Ireland and compare it with other U.S or U.K based communities to expand on their characteristics and in what ways they respond (or not) to climate change anxieties. The literary study of the corpus has served to introduce several themes concretely addressed here and sharpen the ecological, queer and decolonial sensibilities needed to consider these options. It has shown how these issues, and ways to address them, have been represented in literature. I now want to look at some practical examples which stretch beyond the realm of representation and extend into the material reality of Irish people.

First I would like to dwell on permaculture farming with the specific example of the Lackan Cottage Farm, based in Co. Down, Northern Ireland, in the borderlands. The cyclical way of life is comparable to the tradition of cottierism as described by David Lloyd in his 2011 book *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity. The Transformation of Oral Space*. Because I could not find any traces of an Irish queer eco-villages or even WWOOFING farms, I will have to draw from the history of US-based Radical Faeries to suggest that non-straight and cis communities can also thrive in those rural, alternative eco-farms. Then I would like to mention the small boaters community living on the Irish inland waterways, especially those around Dublin, where the crisis has hit the hardest, and draw a

¹⁹⁹ Molloy, Cian ‘Idylls in the Stream,’ *The Sunday Times* February 14, 2016

²⁰⁰ The French term is *prêtre-ouvrier* and he is one of the people wrongfully accused in the Outreau trials. He was working with Secours Catholique Calais in 2017 when I collected this story.

²⁰¹ <https://wwof.ie/en/host/10529-dix-hectares-de-sol-sableux> [last accessed in April 2023, now defunct]

comparison with the London boaters community working with less strict bye-laws and more facilities. Both alternative modes of (slow) living exist in sanitised versions that are co-opted by capitalism or presented as an elitist trend, yet I will try to display the subversive potential of these communities while bearing in mind that capitalism is extremely efficient at absorbing its alternatives and criticism in order to commodify them. Mark Fisher playfully sums up this phenomenon thus: 'This makes capitalism very much like the Thing in John Carpenter's film of the same name: a monstrous, infinitely plastic entity, capable of metabolizing and absorbing anything with which it comes into contact.'²⁰² The idea in this last part is to wrench back permaculture farming and boat life from their commodified versions to present them more as the beginning of an important reflection on a potential way out. It should not result in an idealisation of these alternative modes of living, nor in presenting them as a clear-cut solution. Obviously, they are not suited, nor desirable for all, and still very much depend on worldwide production chains and outer sources of income. But they at least can serve to open the conversation on future alternatives as extensive bartering, skills swap and even local militia and protection sometimes emerge within these communities. It is also important to mention that these alternative ways of living are simply one piece of a larger deconstruction, they do not replace political activism, direct actions and pressure on governments; they simply offer a safe base for some, a means of escape for others or even mere survival for a few.

The preservation and re-use of water as a precious resource comes across in permaculture and other alternative modes of living which both ties in with the central issue of this thesis and takes on yet a new meaning. More than the clepsydra of rising sea-level, water, this time fresh, drinkable water is a preciously finite resource that is currently used in an infinitely wasteful and ineffective manner. Yet alternative ways of living often adapt to the limitation of resources (either endured or perceived) and design new ways to work around them. Generally, the issue of water, drought and doom, future water-based conflicts need to be tempered (at least partially, since this is still tied to geographical areas that do not generally bear the worst droughts) with a reminder of human adaptability. John Fleck, the author of *Water Is For Fighting Over and Other Myths about Water in the West*, though focusing only on West-US context, effectively illustrates this adaptability in an interview with Vox: 'there was this attitude change that's difficult to measure. You just find people's attitudes toward their lawns or landscaping or low-flow toilets change. This conservation ethic gets hardwired into the community. And it's made a difference.'²⁰³ With the two examples I will present, we will see in

²⁰² Fisher, Mark *Capitalist Realism. Is There No Alternative?* Libcom.org (2009), 10.

²⁰³ <https://www.vox.com/Gallagher/9/1/12718658/water-crisis-west-john-fleck>

what concrete ways the waste of water as an infinite resource can be thought differently. First it seems necessary to probe further into the potential and limitations of alternative living in responding to the anxieties explored in contemporary literature and voiced by ecology-based political movements. Of course, these discussions encompass class struggle and capitalism, the worldwide division of labour and commodification of natural resources as these issues cannot be treated separately. The re-appropriation of these alternative modes of living by queer and racialised people is also somewhat limited for reasons I would like to discuss in this part.

I also wish to specify that this is not to place the burden of climate change onto *the individual* by arguing that everyone should live in these alternative ways to reduce their carbon footprint. This study in the last part of our chapter is more a partial response to the stalemate of political activism and the insignificance of individual efforts. For marginalised communities, activism in its older forms through advocacy for representation, visibility and equal rights has occasioned a push-back from conservative and alt-right forces²⁰⁴ erroneously targeting racialised and pathologised minorities instead of the capitalistic causes of the degradation of living standards in Western countries. Modes of resistance need to continue developing alongside these alternatives.

When it comes to fighting climate change and the overtaking of capitalism and neoliberalism, street protests (against climate change) seem to fail as they only occasion a blank absence of response from governments and multi-national corporations, as illustrated by the recent events in France during the winter 2022-23, the CoP27 summit was sponsored by the biggest contributors to plastic pollution²⁰⁵ and the next one will take place in Dubai, a city that essentially sprung out of the desert thanks to unlimited access to cheap oil. That is not to say that opposition to capitalism and climate change should be abandoned, nor that marginalised communities should stop advocating for their rights, only that defensive and pressure tactics might have to escalate and be more direct in the future, due to the increasingly hostile and violent climate they have to contend with. Direct actions such as sabotage, public disobedience, creation of squats in abandoned buildings held empty by landlords are all part of an array of resistance that I will not cover any more here because, in addition to lacking the sociology knowledge to theorise it, I cannot claim to have enough knowledge to give a full overview of their *modus operandi* and efficacy and, because most of these practices are deemed illegal, they are rarely documented in any mainstream, accessible way.

²⁰⁴ Pahnke, Anthony 'How the far right got a stranglehold on the West' *Aljazeera* March 31, 2021.

²⁰⁵ Sangomla, Akshit 'Irony just died: Coca-Cola, among biggest global polluters, to sponsor CoP27' *DownToEarth* Oct 7, 2022.

Perma-culture farmsteads

Suddenly and strangely, some of the f*ggots began to show a dis-ease. First they cut down the trees which protected the other f*ggots from the wind and rain. Then they burned the earth which fed the other f*ggots. Then they killed the young animals and ate them themselves. Then they began to enslave the women—all the women. As the dis-ease advanced they stopped touching the other f*ggots and at that moment they became the men.²⁰⁶

I have mentioned several times the tradition of the *clachán* or cottierism, based on ‘primitive communism’ of the land and the attribution of one acre for one year to one family as it is depicted in David Lloyd’s book, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity* especially in the chapter entitled ‘The Transformation of Oral Space’. This chapter presents a very un-stereotypical image of Ireland (especially post-Famine) as one of abundance, with milk and potatoes providing a growing population with plenty for limited labour resulting in a ‘largely non-monetary subsistence economy’ that was seen abroad as ‘the root of Irish evil’ and constituted a proof of the inassimilable nature of the unruly Irish in the capitalistic British imperial project.²⁰⁷ The population was then seen as a problematic counter-example for the political insistence on a link between the development of capitalism and the advance of civilisation.

Effectively, this gives an even earlier precedent for the apparition of a sort of proto-capitalist realism which Fisher sets in the 1980s: ‘The 80s were the period when capitalist realism was fought for and established, when Margaret Thatcher’s doctrine that ‘there is no alternative’ - as succinct a slogan of capitalist realism as you could hope for - became a brutally self-fulfilling prophecy.’²⁰⁸ Yet Lloyd replaces the advent of this ‘capitalism as inevitable’ mindset within the context of colonisation, tying it to the notion of modernity theorised by Walter Mignolo²⁰⁹. The link between colonialism, capitalism and eco-critical thought is then highlighted by this former agricultural tradition that was obliterated by the potato blight and the Famine (some have argued²¹⁰, made worse by the colonial powers in place at the time), serving the colonising project of England. Yet cottierism presents a similar system to what is nowadays put in place in alternative homesteads and eco-villages through

²⁰⁶ Mitchell, Larry Asta, Ned *The F*ggots and their Friends between Revolutions*, New York, Calamu Books (1977), 8.

²⁰⁷ Lloyd, David *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity. Op. Cit.*, 25.

²⁰⁸ Fisher, Mark *Capitalist Realism, Op. Cit.*, 12.

²⁰⁹ Mignolo, Walter *The Darker Side of Western Modernity Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Durham, Duke University Press (2011).

²¹⁰ McGowan, Marc G. ‘The Famine Plot Revisited: A Reassessment of the Great Irish Famine as Genocide’ *Genocide studies international* (2017) 11 (1), 87–104.

permaculture. Steve Golemboski-Byrne, one of the founders of a self-sufficient permaculture farmstead, remarks on this cyclical time, as 'Living in the Future' actually involves re-introducing systems that operated two generations ago:

Now I want you to think about the way your life works at the moment: consider for a minute where your electricity, your water and your food come from. What happens to your waste? What do you do if, say your roof leaks or the power goes off? For the majority of people, all these things are taken care of by other people and we're completely reliant on distant supply chains and specialists.

Less than a 100 years ago, that's just two generations, none of this was the case here in Ireland by and large you provided your own water, shelter, heat, light and food and most of the things you needed were locally produced. You were fairly resilient in many respects but over the last century specialisation has changed all of that.²¹¹

The Lackan Cottage Farm has been built with few resources by the Golemboski-Byrne couple in Northern Ireland, in isolated countryside. It relies on the guesthouse for income and is as close to self-sufficiency as it can be in the current system and follows permaculture to take advantage of the local resources efficiently. For instance, one of the 12 principles of permaculture is 'Produce no waste': 'Create closed loops — feed your food scraps to the chickens, they produce manure, the manure turns into compost and is added to the garden, the garden produces veggies to eat and more food scraps.'²¹² Similarly, David Lloyd describes one such closed-loop in the context of the *clachán*, and another characteristic of the system that was used to undermine the Irish tradition, ie the use of what is now called 'humanure' as a fertiliser for their sustenance agriculture: 'Thus to short-circuit the transformation of the food substance back into dung from which it sprang represents a sinful transgression of the boundary that symbolically separates food and life from shit and death and that holds apart the body's orifices according to their discreet functions.'²¹³ This also recalls the notions of the lower-strata as a symbol of rebirth in medieval literature (Bakhtin) and the negative connotation it later took.

Lloyd's interpretation of cottierism as an alternative to capitalism and a viable example of closed-circuit, small-holding agriculture, is interesting: it highlights a fluctuation of values around the very image used to undermine the Irish population in the 19th century. Now, it is also important to note that the organisation of the *clachán* was mainly developed because the Irish populations were pushed to the West coast with the poorest soil as their fertile lands were being monopolised by the coloniser. It was, at the time, more of a survival mechanism than a conscious effort to oppose the British capitalistic project, yet it is striking to see the shift in appraisal surrounding small holdings

²¹¹ Off Grid resilience at Lackan Cottage Farm -Youtube video transcript

²¹² <https://green-connect.com.au/heres-your-guide-to-the-12-principles-of-permaculture/>

²¹³ Lloyd, Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity, *Op. Cit.*, 42.

and the historical roots of what is presented as a recent trend (permaculture being supposedly founded in the 1970s by Bill Mollison and David Hollgren but effectively simply gathering agricultural techniques that far predated this movement). In short, what was once seen as a proof of Irish backwardness and inability to survive (colonial) progress is now seen as ‘Living in the Future’.

Indeed, closed-loop farmsteads like Mossy Bottom²¹⁴ or the Lackan Cottage Farm²¹⁵ (there are many others but they do not document their work as extensively) employ systems often based on archaic techniques of agriculture and ‘simple living’. However, one can quickly see the risk of glorifying a traditional way of life and erasing the disappearance of Famine threats and sudden increase in leisure time that followed the mechanisation of agriculture. ‘Living In the Future’ is a blog and series of videos that introduce people to the principles of permaculture and loosely ties in with eco-feminism (with articles like ‘Rewilding the Feminine’²¹⁶) which at least seems to evade the trap of applying rigid gender stereotypes to homesteads and farm living. There is a growing resurgence of wicca/pagan rituals and rhythms in the same off-grid communities which ties them to eco-feminism and the history of witch hunts as mass feminicides, but this reclaimed witch image and other spiritual inspirations surrounding eco-living can sometimes result in essentialist feminist, cultish organisations or cultural appropriation when they include yoga, the Vedas.

To continue probing the limits of the homestead/eco-villages ideals, I will again draw on the commercialisation of Thoreau’s *Walden*, which I briefly touched on in the last subpart. In an article about the cabin in the woods of the (actual²¹⁷) eco-terrorist Unabomber, itself a replica of Thoreau’s, Mark Wigley argues:

Thoreau was never really isolated. On the contrary, his withdrawal was a very public act described in a best-selling book. The ideology of his cabin was actually constructed in the urban milieu. The settlement always includes within itself what it nominates as its other. ‘Isolated’ is an urban concept. It is a product of the city. To leave the map behind is a uniquely urban fantasy. It is those at the center of the pattern who talk the most about escaping it. But their escapes are usually just extensions of the patten, demonstrations that the city knows no limit.²¹⁸

At all times, isolated farmsteads still rely on international production chains for Wifi, raw materials and to replace lithium batteries (which themselves have a exploitative origins) and solar panels (that have about a ten-year life span) while still generating an income (through BnBs or ‘cash crop’

²¹⁴ Though it should be noted that this farmstead belongs to a British man who bought a cheap Irish homestead, which has dubious historical connotations <https://www.mossybottom.ie/>

²¹⁵ <https://lackancottage.co.uk/>

²¹⁶ <http://livinginthefuture.org/blog/category/feminism/>

²¹⁷ I use the adjective “actual” as the term is now being used by the French minister for Interior to designate peaceful protesters and activists, which in turn only prompts one to see ANY official use of the word ‘terrorist’ with deep suspicion.

²¹⁸ Wigley, Mark ‘Cabin Fever’ *Perspecta*, vol. 30, 1999, pp. 122–25. 124.

production) to survive in their capitalistic context. The notion of 'nature' and its closeness in farmstead modes of living is also debatable, as Wiley points out, and is often of limited access in case of a greater economical destitution that would forbid even the purchase of cheap rural dilapidated farmsteads.

To further probe the celebrated notion of 'nature', I will draw on the work of Cy Lecerf Maulpoix, who has studied eco-fascism in a French context in his chapter 'Les Jardins de l'antitechnicisme' in *Écologies Déviantes*. While there are differences between traditionalist movements of the francophone and anglophone worlds, the general premises and theories echo one another. As an example, the rejection of trans identity as an over-commodification of surgeries and synthesis hormones by the French eco-fascist movement is overly similar to the arguments presented by Janice Raymond in her infamous *Transsexual Empire*, discussed in chapter I. While Eco-fascism is acknowledged in Ireland²¹⁹, little of the conservative racist and anti-queer rhetoric weaponising the notion of 'nature' seems to be recognised as such. More than the medical transition of transpeople, though, eco-fascism also rejects the capitalist, technical 'deviancies' of the modern world. Deviancies, according to this ideology, encompass abortion and the access to medically assisted procreation for non-straight people. Indeed, they view PMA as problematic only for single people or lesbian women, transmen and non-binary parents, hinging on the argument of heterosexual 'infertility' issues to exclude these groups²²⁰. The 'correction' of intersex new-borns using the same technical apparel requested by some transpeople (with their actual full consent and intent) also does not seem to challenge conservative ideas of an immutable 'nature' as the political refusal to ban these practices attests. To be more direct, from a conservative point of view, for intersex people, 'nature' has to be corrected to create males and females using technology, but in the case of transpeople, technology cannot change 'natural' males and females. Conservative rhetoric can only reconcile the contradictions of this rigid binary sex ideology through a carefully filtered adherence to the concept of 'nature'.

Thus, self-proclaimed 'radical ecologists' often use the notion of transhumanism (the possibility of assisting human evolution with science and technology) and selectively shedding the aura of artifice on non-cis, non-heterosexual uses of science and technology to defend a traditionalist notion of nature that always conveniently only protects dominant sexualities and identities. Cy Lecerf-Maulpoix then asks, as a sub-group often labelled as 'unnatural', 'against nature', what is the queer

²¹⁹ <https://www.irishenvironment.com/blog/eco-fascism/> [last accessed 13/06/23]

²²⁰ Lecerf-Maulpoix, Cy *Écologies Déviantes, Op. Cit.*, Paris, Cambourakis (2021).

community allowed to contribute to ecology? The defence of this (white) cis, able, hetero and non-intersex (dyadic) 'nature' often borrows socialist rhetoric against capitalism and neoliberalism and can be found both in left and right-wing discourses, which also makes it difficult for the queer community to align themselves politically with ambiguous allies. Hence the notion of closeness to 'nature' in ecological context is also deeply suspicious from a queer standpoint and complicates the elaboration of queer ecology.

The trans-community then also has the added challenge of having to be weary even of the queer community itself, as subgroups like the LGB alliance can also embrace anti-trans discourse in an attempt to distance themselves from this cause and secure the barebones of their limited privileges. The Michigan Womyn's festival (also mentioned in *Hood*) is a good example of these ecological, feminist niche communities sometimes being unsafe for transwomen²²¹. Even deeper into intersectionality, in the context of white supremacist western countries, racialised queer and trans people have to, in addition, contend with the racism of queer communities which necessitates the creation of intersectional communities and events like Lesbians of Color²²² or Black Pride. Hence, cumulating marginalised identities (again, not willingly, only because certain traits are institutionally othered) often results in some people not being able to feel safe and included in wider marginalised groups. This unfortunately demonstrates the inability of certain strands of an oppressed group to perceive other forms of oppression that do not apply to them personally, far from Eilís Ni Fhlannagáin's wishes for the convergence of struggles. These blind-spotted identity politics could simply result in the most marginalised subgroups having to suppress their own plea for the sake of a wider political unity (recalling the principles of strategic essentialism) or, when the in-group tensions and exclusions are so violent that they cannot be set aside (like racism in the queer community), would divide movements, benefiting a political opponent that would not differentiate between subgroups in the first place. Hence the processes of othering are so efficient that even people who endure them are rendered blind to them when they take on a slightly different shape to oppress other groups, creating multiple hierarchies even amongst *others*.

Further illustrating this issue, the ecology/green movements are often assumed to be leftist, and a generally 'progressive' part of the political spectrum, but as Lecerf-Maulpoix's research indicates, this same discourse can be tweaked with traditionalist, right-wing sonorities by weaponising the

²²¹ The 'womyn born womyn' notion coined then therefore excluding transwomen but inexplicably including transmen.

²²² See El-Tayeb, Fatima 'Lesbian of Colour Activism and Racist Violence in Contemporary Europe' chapter 13 in Bakshi, Sandeep, Jivraj, Suhraiya, Posocco, Silvia *Decolonising Sexualities* Counterpress, Oxford (2016)

concept of 'nature' against perceived 'deviants', which can encompass any unwanted group by the very vagueness and ductility of this constructed concept. The 'radical' credentials of these political tendencies always seem laughably dubious as they often simply re-inforce the *status quo* (ie. upper and middle class, white, cis, straight able bodies at the top of the hierarchy within western societies) while still speaking from a supposedly threatened and oppressed standpoint. Conservative rhetoric then argues that 'deviants' benefit from capitalism and neoliberalism, as if these forces did not operate with white cisgender identities and heterosexuality in mind. At best, capitalist systems only allow for surface-level, token concessions to marginalised groups at worst they monetise a supposed support to progressive causes. The point is that alternative living, eco-villages and green rhetoric is explored at a risk for any member (willing or not) of a marginalised community and throws an aura of suspiciousness on a green, ecofeminist discourse which should, in itself, be seen as a net positive were it not to contain, in its subtle undertones, traces of exclusion.

As an aside, the general contempt surrounding 'identity politics'²²³ by people outside of marginalised groups is also sometimes frustrating, as these identities are not claimed by the marginalised groups themselves, but exogenous, forced onto them by racialising or pathologising pseudoscientific and institutional discourses that undermine behaviours or traits that are simply natural or basic variations of human experience and appearance. Blaming 'identity politics' and 'oppression olympics' for the rise in alt-right rhetoric and the increased propensity of 'cis-het white men' to be seduced by it fails to see the misrepresentation of marginalised pleas for equal rights by a conservative mainstream media. These inferiorising labels, like the slurs that accompany them, can obviously be reclaimed and be defiantly held as a sign of pride, but one should not forget that, originally, most of these labels did not emanate from the communities and individuals themselves. In an academic context that shuns 'political' discourse and only considers apolitical what aligns with (a very politically marked) status quo, Anne Mulhall states: "'political" is perhaps difficult to escape if your existence is itself politicised'²²⁴.

I previously mentioned Edward Carpenter, an English socialist of the 20th century who had sought to explain what is now called homosexual through the existence of an 'intermediate sex' between male and female supposed to restore good relations between decidedly not opposite sexes and who held negative opinions of the imperialist projects of his country at the time. His name is cited by

²²³ See Chua, Amy *Political Tribes, Group Instinct and the fate of Nations*, London, Penguin Press (2019).

²²⁴ Mulhall, Anne 'The Ends of Irish Studies? On Whiteness, Academia, and Activism' *Irish University Review*, Volume 50 Issue 1, Page 94-111, 101.

MacMurrough in *At Swim Two Boys* and his writing was also a source of inspiration for Harry Hay who founded the Radical Faeries in the 1970s. This US-based project of queer reconnection and reappropriation of nature is, to my knowledge, the only pagan queer group of this magnitude to still exist nowadays. It is interesting to note that the Albion branch base their gatherings on solstices (in parallel with Celtic celebrations of Lughnasadh, Samhain, Imbolc, Beltane or midsummer²²⁵). They built rural collectives in the US countryside with spiritual elements borrowed from native American, in turn co-opting indigenous knowledges and proving the point I previously mentioned: that some queer people keep a blind spot on the white supremacist mechanisms²²⁶. Their practices are described thus by Jesse Sanford Oliver, who dedicated his thesis to the study of the movement associated most with Harry Hay: 'faeries engage profound reversals, alternate norms of sexual activity, forms of performance including ritual and drag, the (apparent) rejection of consumerism and embracing of ecology, as well as many other techniques, in order to explore, demonstrate and actualize their own liberation. Clearly, this is a utopian project...'²²⁷ I will not dwell on this project too long as it has essentially expanded in the US and UK and has no Irish branch (yet), but this is one rare example of a convergence of queer and ecological activism, which points out to the cis heteronormative aura of 'nature' and rural alternative areas.

Jack Halberstam addressed this (apparent) disconnect between queer and rural spaces in *In a Queer Time and Place* and undertook to deconstruct what he deemed to be a form of 'metronormativity', that rural queers were expected to migrate to the city to live their lives to the fullest. Carl Wittman also pointed out this trend in the 1970s to highlight the limitation of this 'city as refuge' myth, interestingly (and perhaps insensitively) drawing on another marginalised community's terminology:

San Francisco is a refugee camp for homosexuals. We have fled here from every part of the nation, and like refugees elsewhere, we came not because it is so great here, but because it was so bad there. By the tens of thousands, we fled small towns where to be ourselves would endanger our jobs and any hope of a decent life; we have fled from blackmailing cops, from families who disowned or 'tolerated' us; we have been drummed out of the armed services, thrown out of schools, fired from jobs, beaten by punks and policemen. And we have formed a ghetto, out of self-protection. It is a ghetto rather than a free territory because it is still theirs. Straight cops patrol us, straight legislators govern us, straight employers keep us in line, straight money exploits us.

In addition to recontextualising queer metronormativity as a necessary flight from more oppressive environments, it is important to note that rural queers do exist, finding unlikely lovers, friends and allies in their local context, as Lucas Crawford discusses at length in their article 'A good ol' country

²²⁵ <https://albionfaeries.org.uk/gatherings/other-gatherings/>

²²⁶ Morgensen, Scott Lauria, 'Ancient Roots through Settled Land: Imagining Indigeneity and Place among Radical Faeries', *Spaces between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization* (Minneapolis, MN, 2011; online edn, Minnesota Scholarship Online, 24 Aug. 2015)

²²⁷ Sanford, Jesse *Gathering Kinds: Radical Faerie Practices of Sexuality and Kinship*. PhD thesis UC Berkeley University of California (2013).

time: Does queer rural temporality exist?', in part as a response to Jack Halberstam's. They argue that alternative modes of queerness do develop in rural spaces as some people might not be able or willing to leave for the cities. For other signs of rural queerness, Cy-Lecerc Maulpoix focused his research this topic, if mostly on upper-class rural communities in *Ecologies Déviantes* and even the Tate Museum dedicated an episode to 'Queer Cornwall' about a community of non-binary and lesbian painters (Marlow Moss, Gluck, Ithell Colquhoun), all of which attest to the progressively mainstream ideal of rural queerness. The video 'Queer Cornwall' interestingly concludes:

Lamorna's queer trailblazers held a love for Cornwall that was deep and enduring, if perhaps romanticised. The freedom to live authentically in a rural village while travelling often to London and Paris was made possible by their financial resources as upper middle-class artists. Gluck, Moss and Colquhoun were afforded a social mobility rarely enjoyed by the local population and a world away from the lives of their queer working-class neighbours. It's these queer Cornish voices, some named in the writings of Ithell Colquhoun who were rarely documented (...) ²²⁸

Only upper-middle class records remain of historical queer narratives set temporarily in rural areas, yet these queer upper-class groups always seemed to find local lovers and friends attesting to the resilience and adaptability (and invisibility) of rural queerness. Indirect traces can be found, even in the rural Irish context as, for instance, Patrick Pearse's collection of short stories *An Mháthair, agus Sgéalta Eile/Mother and other tales* (1916), which contains 'Na Bóithre'/'Les Routes' and records the, apparently true, ²²⁹ story of Nora, a child assigned female at birth who attempts to runaway from an imposed domestic life in their village in order to live as a boy on the roads of Ireland. If, in the tale written by Patrick Pearse, the child is returned home and resigns themselves to a life as a girl, nothing suggests they did not attempt another escape later in life. This subtle, well-hidden and promptly snuffed-out spark of queerness in an Irish-speaking rural place also constitutes another attempt at romanticising 'traditional' rural life by a middle-class urban artist. The character of Nora, although attracted to their country's landscape, wishes to flee life in the village, maybe an actual clachán set by David Lloyd as an example of Irish resistance to the British colonialist project. Hence, the discussion of queer ecology and participation in projects like perma-culture and farmstead is complicated by multiple factors of class, metronormativity and the weaponisation of the constructed notion of 'nature' against the queer community. If eco-fascist discourse has found a useful way to

²²⁸ Tate 'Queer Cornwall : Marlow Moss, Gluck et Ithell Colquhoun in Lamorna' Tate Youtube (2022)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaOUUpC2Dzgw> [last accessed 20/07/23]

²²⁹ In the foreword to *Iosagan agus Sgealta Eile*, as in earlier short stories collection, Pearse states clearly the people themselves told him those stories, and the increased use of real topographical details of the region and a self-insert in 'The Roads' of Pearse himself as 'the Dublin-man' suggests he followed the same technique for *An Mhathair agus Sgealta Eile*.

oppose 'nature' to queer people, it also somehow repurposes climate change anxieties to oppose immigration and racialised communities:

A 2021 analysis by academics Joe Turner and Dan Bailey looked at 22 far-right European parties and found that such attitudes of fortified nationalism disguised beneath environmental concerns are rife. Turner claimed that the link between climate and migration is "an easy logic" for politicians as it relates to the longstanding trope that overpopulation in poorer countries is a leading cause of climate change.²³⁰

While environmentalist concerns used to be associated with leftist tendencies, it is important to remember the nationalist origins of this movement²³¹ and to build ecological alternative dwellings that take into account the capitalistic and colonial roots of environmental destruction instead of seeking new forms of purification of the *lebensraum*. By discussing queer and decolonial ecology, I wished to point out that environmental and marginal issues are not always seen as related in mainstream discourse, and I wished to re-highlight the links between causes since alt-right parties and associations are now re-appropriating environmentalist issues to serve their own ideology.

Boaters

Waterways Ireland are in the recreation and leisure business (as well as minding the heritage and environment) and have said that they don't want to be in the property rental business.²³²

Before introducing the notion of boaters and as a related aside, the main contemporary Irish poetry collection used throughout this thesis, *Queering the Green* (for William Keohane, Toby Buckley, Seán Hewitt) was published by the small publishing house called Lifeboat Press²³³, specialised in Irish poetry, who have also published Paul Muldoon, who translated the works of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill for the *Fifty Minute Mermaid* (2006). The publishing house apparently started off as 'a series of poetry readings on a Dutch barge moored in Belfast'²³⁴ before affixing these works in written form. There is thus an interesting if tenuous link between Irish queer and mainstream contemporary poetry and boating life.

I would now like to explore another, lesser-known alternative community, usually seen as 'close to nature' and eco-friendly²³⁵ and focus on inland-water boats. They are usually mainly inhabited by the elderly, as retirement age allows them to explore the full network of the country. While its green credentials are debatable due to the continued use of coal-powered stoves and routine diesel or engine oil leaks into canals and rivers, narrowboats do present exceedingly limited resources in

²³⁰ Anna Ponder 'Eco-fascism and the myth of overpopulation' *The Bubble* February 3, 2023.

²³¹ See Margulies, Morgan 'Eco-Nationalism: A Historical Evaluation of Nationalist Praxes in Environmentalist and Ecologist Movements.' *Consilience*, no. 23, 2021, pp. 22–29.

²³² Email exchange with Colin Becker of the Inland Waterways Association in Ireland (2023).

²³³ <https://lifeboatpress.com/shop/> [last accessed 16/06/23].

²³⁴ <https://www.cuir.ie/whats-on/the-lifeboat-pamphlet-launch-with-dane-holt-and-william-keohane/> [last accessed 16/06/23]

²³⁵ Kendall, Clare 'It's not easy being green – unless that is, you live on a boat,' *The Ecologist* August, 9th 2013.

water (limited by what a water-tank can hold before a refill), electricity (12v, powered by either solar panels, diesel-engines or petrol generators), and gas (continued use of bottles), which considerably reduces consumption while making it easily measurable. While sharing these characteristics with a common campervan, narrowboats are more energy-efficient in carrying and moving the weight of a full dwelling because of its location on water. The nomadic way of life (as Irish boaters must move every five days) also supposedly prevents space-appropriation, combining the temporary use of space with its occupation, unless the boat is safely set in a private marina or acts as a secondary residence (which is rare in case of continuous cruising). The boats set on continuous cruise also constantly occupy public space, and canal/river waters involve facilities regulated by a greater authority, if only for maintenance purposes (bridges, locks, banks, facilities etc.), which limits possibilities of appropriation. A lot of the people who live in the boaters' communities Dublin around Hazelhatch and Sallins, however, are not primarily attracted to the nomadic or greener way of living but have been pushed into it for economic reasons, as some of them have been in the same area for 12 years²³⁶.

The waterways of Ireland (and Great Britain) essentially function as a loophole in the capitalistic system that forces a large portion of increasingly low salaries to be sunk in increasingly high rents, one of the last nooks and crannies that has not been fully commodified and integrated into the system just yet. While slum-boats²³⁷ exist in urban settings, most boats usually belong to the person occupying them, even to people with low income as some boats are relatively cheap (or can easily be used when unoccupied or raised when sunk and then appropriated as there is not much of a paper trail around boat property). Housing prices have been steadily increasing in Ireland since the Celtic Tiger years, with two brief drops during the 2008 crisis and 2020 COVID period, costs now averaging at 1900€/month (all property types) in Dublin and 1058€/month outside of the capital,²³⁸ yet there are precious few ways to escape the rising rents, as I have mentioned while covering CATU. There are 300 people living on the Irish Waterways (though a recent article indicates only 60) and a notable dearth of facilities (like water, refuse, electricity etc.) and a limited amount of residential mooring, all aiming to discourage the practice²³⁹.

What I meant as a loophole or a legal void is quite literal, as technically, the Canals Act of 1986 (Bye-Laws), 1986 do not allow boats to stay in the same place for more than five days: '25. (1) No person

²³⁶ Goggin, Brian J. and Thompson, John 'Livaboards,' *Inland Waterways Association Ireland* March 30, 2016.

²³⁷ Forbes, Sam 'My life in London's houseboat slums,' *The Guardian* Feb 23, 2014.

²³⁸ The Residential Tenancy Board Rent Index Q4 2021.

²³⁹ Anon. 'Making a home in a floating world,' *The Irish Times* Sep 9, 1999.

shall moor a boat—(...)(d) at the same place on the canals, or within 500 metres of the same place, for more than 5 days without the appropriate permit from the Commissioners.’ Yet the small communities around the stations of Lowtown, Hazeltach and Sallins have been able to develop purely because the bye laws are not enforced. However, Waterways Ireland contacted the houseboat residents in Sallins around 2007 to propose the introduction of an annual fee for residential mooring, leaving the policy undefined and setting the interests of the boating community against those of water-based tourism²⁴⁰. Brian Goggin and John Thompson, writing for the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland, do not depict an enviable situation for the rare boaters around Dublin:

Waterways Ireland does not want people living on boats and it supplies no services to liveaboards. There are no public toilets, showers, pump-out stations or facilities for emptying chemical toilets. There is no security, save that provided by the presence of other boats. You will have to make your own arrangements for rubbish disposal. There are few taps and refilling with water may be time-consuming. You will not be able to get electricity: Waterways Ireland (WI) has asked the ESB not to connect any boats to its supply without WI’s permission, which will not be forthcoming. You will have neither a postal address nor a land-line telephone. Access to your boat will be along a canal bank that may be dark and muddy in winter: The main areas are crowded with boats but the best mooring places have been taken by long-standing live-aboards.²⁴¹

To offer a point of comparison, the Canal and River Trust around London offers several eco-mooring and free bookable moorings with electricity access, near a water-point and boaters’ bins and if the CRT does try to cull the number of boaters in London, which have risen to 1615 continuous cruisers, moving every 14 days on an annual license, the National Barge Travellers Association (with ties to the Gypsies, Roma and Traveller’s community²⁴²), which operates mostly in urban areas, is using the force of numbers to oppose new regulations, something the Irish boaters’ community cannot do. The lack of marinas, facilities and clear regulations (it is still debated nowadays whether an annual permit allows a boat to moor indefinitely at the same spot²⁴³) makes it difficult for boaters to fully develop the community as a viable alternative way of living, yet the same solidarity based on skill-exchange and mutual help has found a way to thrive. Ireland-based US poetess Erin Fornoff describes such a community spirit when her Dutch barge started sinking shortly after the birth of her child yet, for her as for many others, it is clear that financial considerations were utmost in the choice to move onto such a high-maintenance house:

My home is a 110-year-old, 55-tonne Dutch barge. We couldn’t afford to buy – or likely, rent – a house, but we were able to buy a boat. It allows us to live rent-free in a grinding housing market and for our toddler to have his own room. We have sidestepped Dublin house and rental prices but have also sidestepped things like endless

²⁴⁰ Goggin, Brian J. ‘Living on the Canals,’ *Irish Waterways History* March 14, 2011.

²⁴¹ Goggin, Brian J. and Thompson, John ‘Livaboards,’ *Inland Waterways Association Ireland* March 30th, 2016.

²⁴² <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/advice-section/advice-for-boat-dwellers/> [last accessed 23/02/23].

²⁴³ O’Brien, Tim ‘Barge owners afraid to make waves for fear of eviction’ *The Irish Times* June 12, 22.

electricity, a double bed, having a refrigerator, or no threat of drowning. Living on a boat without a (precious, rare) spot in a marina means we spend our days moving from place to place.²⁴⁴

Having children on a narrowboat, while not unheard of, is much rarer than in family-unit based eco-villages or farmsteads simply due to the lack of space and, in London at least, seems like an ideal form of dwelling for childless couples, only based on their ubiquitousness in the boater's community (based on observation, there are no such available statistics in the UK, much less in Ireland).

The aim of this last subpart was to provide a partial account of the various means of resistance and alternatives organised in Ireland against the various (aesthetic and) political issues exposed throughout the thesis. While the work of contemporary Irish authors is central to conceptualising the issues and awakening readers' sensibilities to them, it seemed important to also cover the concrete actions and associations built in reaction to these, in order to showcase the current Irish population's way to deal with the situation.

²⁴⁴ Fornoff, Erin 'No one told me that childcare is the true engine of creative work,' *The Journal.ie* Sep 17th 2022.

Conclusion

-If communism keeps failing every time we try it and the rest of the world keeps killing us for our beliefs... what's the point? (...)

-I guess you could say we believe it *because it's impossible*. It's our way of saying we refuse to accept that the world has to remain... like this...

-Broken.

-Yes, that's a good way to think of it, broken, but not irreparable.

-I don't know if I believe it, though.

-You've got to believe in *something*. Otherwise, what are you doing?'

His words aren't really directed at you. He's wrestling with himself now...²⁴⁵

I started the thesis by following the logic of Jamie O'Neill in *At Swim Two Boys* to explore his equating of various marginalised identities like queerness and Irishness. Indeed, the mechanisms of oppression and othering are so similar that one can distinguish general schemes that apply to any form of marginalisation, within limits. I added the double-notion of 'Amphibians' cited by Mia Gallagher which describes people who could move between German and Czech nationalities. The notion can be tracked back to Chad Bryant's article in *Slavic review* and he expands: 'Although often ignored by nationalist historians, amphibians were a visible presence throughout eastern and central Europe (...) Upper Silesians labelled them Water Poles (Wasserpolen); Serbian nationalists called them hermaphrodites (melex)...'²⁴⁶ This, in addition to tying Ireland to a wider European context and blurring Irish identity in a context of British colonialism and extensive diaspora, also suggests another parallel, made by Gallagher between other dual identities. Her use of a trans-protagonist suggests one can be *neither/nor* or *both/and* Czech and German, English and Irish (from the loose and wavy parallels established in footnotes) and (and again, that complicates her view of transwomen) man and woman. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill also established her own literary duality between water and land, Irish and English identities that re-inscribed the mixing of these identities within an imperialist power-imbalance. The crucial distinction had to be made between a simple cultural exchange between two nations that see each other as equals and the mixing of populations originating from colonialist settlements, made to assimilate the local populations. Thrown into a wider historical perspective, as Gallagher's novel suggests, however, it becomes increasingly difficult to track the power imbalances between colonising/invading forces (Normans, Scottish Presbyterians etc) and

²⁴⁵ Kurvitz, Robert et al. *Disco Elysium* London, ZA/UM (2019) Communism track Political Vision Quest Finale

²⁴⁶ Bryant, Chad 'Either German or Czech: Fixing Nationality in Bohemia and Moravia, 1939-1946' *Slavic Review*, 61(4), 683-706 (2002) 684-5

this, in turns, complicates the notion of nationality further. Many empires (not all Western) have risen and fallen over the centuries, new ones emerge today (with the Chinese and Indian governments displaying imperialist ambitions for instance). What distinguishes Western Imperialism (both British and French, along with Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese) is that it firmly set the cultural hierarchies that still corrupt international relationships to this day and continues to have devastating effects on 'former' colonies' resources and populations. It generalised capitalist systems and created inter-dependences to make this system the only viable option worldwide. By consistently eliminating every possible alternative, it also created a fatalist narrative of unavoidability.

British and French imperialisms, along with other European early colonising forces, first sustained the endless growth required by capitalism through exploiting resources of neighbouring countries before expanding to other continents. Yet, ultimately, the national cores of these empires have been overcome by the very capitalistic forces they set in motion. International power does not seem to lie in the hands of 'sovereign' nations anymore, but in those of a handful of corporations that have slowly built up their monopolies by merging and buying out competitors: 'Apple, Facebook, Microsoft, Amazon, and Alphabet (the parent company name for Google) together are worth more than most countries in the world (except the United States, China, Germany, and Japan)'.²⁴⁷ The very basis of neo-liberalism, a free market where competition would drive the prices down and improve services in a deregulated, quasi-inexistent state seems to have only been the smokescreen for these rapidly emerging monopolies. Sovereign states seem simply reduced to buffer zones for popular discontent at the increasingly tight bind of lowering living standards, workers rights destruction and taxes, always evaded by the elite, targeting an increasingly poorer middle-class despite the annihilation of state services. Ireland suffers under a new kind of dominion and while contemporary literature still echoes a dolorous colonised past which endures in the North, even independent Ireland could not fully shake off the capitalist yoke introduced there by the British Empire.

Contemporary literature expresses this disillusion with the incomplete independence of the country as it still exploits or neglects working and destitute classes, the very classes that were at the forefront of independence movements and wars. Ireland's marginalised populations still sink at the bottom of class hierarchy, trying to reclaim James Connolly's legacy for a more socialist country²⁴⁸. State Catholicism was not incompatible with capitalism, in fact it displays a similar tendency to assimilate

²⁴⁷ <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/neofeudalism-the-end-of-capitalism/> [last accessed 17/07/2023]

²⁴⁸ Like the Connolly Youth Movement <https://www.cym.ie/about/> and Community Action Tenants Union <https://catuireland.org/> [last accessed 23/07/23]

and re-appropriate movements, rituals and symbols that would oppose it. Yet the Irish population has already proved its disloyalty to rigid catholic values by acquiring basic rights for women and people who can get pregnant and its queer population, through referenda, the most direct democratic process in the Irish political arsenal. The legacies and contradictions of the Irish island constitute it as the ideal territory to explore the dualities and overlaps of marginalised identities.

Through contemporary literature, authors weave together the experiences of othering, the colonial wound²⁴⁹, the sea and the Irish landscape and, by combining these politically charged sensibilities awake a new rebellious potential which is building up to oppose an increasingly hostile political climate. The authors also operate a slow shift in aesthetics to oppose capitalistic ugliness and destruction hidden under a thin coat of artificial, sanitised beauty. Their writing reconnects with a more 'natural', cyclical grotesque aesthetic which celebrates all bodies, all natural processes, the compost and the ruins. The Bakhtinian grotesque then tends to overcome a dated, idealised form of sublime that no longer seems relevant in the Capitalocene. This celebration of the diverse, the human body and bodily functions also reverses the normalised aversion to pathologised and racialised bodies that lies at the basis of all phobias.

Nathalie Wynn contended that transphobia, homophobia, racism all stem from a form of repulsion, of disgust that tries to elevate itself to the rank of self-righteous 'concerns', then ready to be channelled by the alt-right and other conservative parties into a political cause:

What gender critical feminism really amounts to is a baroque palace of rationalizations built on a foundation of pure disgust. In this respect, it's just like homophobia. You know I came of age when gay marriage was the most contentious social debate and the arguments people made, that marriage was under attack, that the children would be traumatized, that bestiality would be next, that this tiny minority was undermining all our institutions with their outrageous demands, it was all just nonsense.

If you got a conservative drunk, as I used to be able to do (...) he would just blurt out the truth, which was that the sight of two grown men locking lips made him wanna vom. Homophobia and transphobia do not originate in the frontal cortex. They come from the lizard brain disgust response we evolved to deal with blood, infection, vomit, feces, flies, the hairy paw, the stubble burgeoning through the pancake makeup (...) ²⁵⁰

Based on what I have tried to establish around H.P Lovecraft's phobias, the same mechanisms seem to extend to the discomfort some people feel around racialised bodies. By elevating and sublimating what is, at the core, a physical repulsion stemming from the lack of exposure and familiarity with human variation, reactionary discourse fuels powerful and misguided political movements opposing marginalised groups that seek only equal rights. This physical core of repulsion gives tremendous

²⁴⁹ Mignolo, Walter D., Vazquez, Rolando "[Introduction to Decolonial Aesthetics: Colonial Wounds, Decolonial Healings.](#)" *Social Text Periscope (Web Publication)*, Social Text, 2013, pp. 9–9.

²⁵⁰ <https://www.contrapoints.com/transcripts/gender-critical> [last accessed 23/07/23]

energy to people who are essentially fighting against something that actually would not diminish their own rights nor change their everyday life in any shape of form. Hence why this shift in aesthetics operated by some contemporary authors is so noteworthy: it attacks the physical core of phobias, reveals it for what it is, stripped of all 'moral' justifications. This repulsion is only one aspect of what powers reactionary politics, naturally, it also channels other irrational emotions like fear and obsessional mentality or even sexual and affective misery, to an extent. The point is that some Irish contemporary authors, by adopting grotesque aesthetics and re-centering marginalised bodies and sexualities, increase readers' exposure to human variation and thus can begin to dissolve this powerful disgust. By putting the emphasis on the interconnectedness between those bodies and their environment and non-human counterparts, they also develop ecological (and therefore anti-capitalist) sensitivities while building-up an understanding of marginalised groups.

Water, throughout the corpus, acts as an ambiguous force that can express marginalisation in an empowering reclaiming of legends and its creatures yet can also become a drowning threat. Reclaiming marginalised identities, monstrosities, formerly pathologised labels²⁵¹ or racialised phenotypes can be politically useful to an extent but still translates an acceptance to be defined as other by a norm that will always sit higher in societal hierarchy. Hence these groups can remain safely contained within exiled communities, creating parallel, alternative worlds that leave the *status quo* untouched as a default always expected, no matter how many exceptions multiply outside the realm of normality.

Because it serves as a ductile, multiple metaphor for othering, essentialisation and political identity, water is also a force that can be corrupted by the Capitalocene. In this sense, it mirrors the shallow commodification of progressive activism and revolutionary movements, the co-opting of which by Capitalism then makes them a credible target of alt-right rhetoric, as it seemingly proves a collusion between marginalised groups and the very system that marginalises them. Just like water ceases to be a comforting symbol of othering in its Clepsydra form (both the ticking time-bomb of rising oceans and fresh water depletion) political identity is corrupted by capitalism and co-opted at surface level to drain it of its subversive and rebellious essence while at the same time creating the illusion of a capitalist defence of (or control by) marginalised groups, like sponsored Pride, Black capitalism or Irish neoliberalism, trends that will do little to shift an unfavourable *status quo*.

²⁵¹ Note that Gay and Lesbian movements dissociated from the medical term 'homosexual' while Bi and trans terminology still bear this legacy.

Ireland, like many other countries in the recent years has been facing an emboldened far-right movement overtly opposing LGBTQIA+ events²⁵² and refugee centres²⁵³. In a context of repeated financial crises that demonstrate more and more glaringly the limits of an inefficient capitalist system that exacerbates inequalities, it becomes vital for the elite²⁵⁴ to re-orient public discontent towards visible scapegoats like marginalised groups in order to avoid becoming the rightful target of this anger. This division of popular discontent along conservative lines has proven effective in the past and seems to be building up again in the current context. This is not even to solely antagonise the popular basis of conservative movements as their political efforts against refugees, Muslim, Jewish and racialised people, people of marginalised genders and sexualities will do nothing to solve their own destitution and misery. Their anger is merely recuperated by alt-right rhetoric to erase the class struggle at the core of capitalism and divide the destitute classes to dissolve the power of the masses.

I have argued throughout this thesis that the mechanisms of oppression are similar, that the pathologisation and racialisation of others always seems to stem directly or indirectly from capitalist systems: to only celebrate reproductive sexuality within the firm constraints of heterosexual marriage and to justify the de-humanisation, exploitation of a population and the plundering of its environment by scientifically proving its inferiority. The general answer to all these forms of oppression, of destitution and exploitation is to point to an all-encompassing system put in place by one specific class of people to maximise their own power and profits. Yet, as I tried to infer through the use of the 'Cthulucene' in part II is that, akin to the Lovecraftian cosmic monsters of disproportionate and overwhelming power, capitalism as a system seems next to impossible to dismantle on time. The background feeling of clepsydra results in an impression that we are fighting this overlarge monstrous entity in an accelerating and finite timeframe. Hence there is a daunting accumulation of antagonistic forces for marginalised populations to resist and survive: the very system that oppresses both them and another class of oppressors is pinned on their existence, which makes them, at once a double-target of capitalism and the alt-right. Their divisive rhetoric subtracts an entire class of what should have been allies against capitalism. Literature can orient and develop sensitivities (fascists are notably fond of fantasy for instance) it can influence the reader's world view,

²⁵² See GNC.ie covering multiple attacks on Libraries hosting queer events or simply displaying queer content

²⁵³ <https://www.independent.ie/regionals/dublin/dublin-news/gardai-investigating-attack-on-makeshift-refugee-camp-in-dublin-as-protesters-gather-for-second-night/a2076863275.html> [last accessed 23/07/23] but there are multiple other similar accidents

²⁵⁴ An admittedly vague term that covers the GAFAs, the billionaires of a country or neighbouring countries who control media channels and political parties.

but in the current context of political echo chambers, can the voices and representations of the scapegoated Other still reach a hostile audience?

I have tried to give examples of what these sensibilities can develop into, in terms of concrete actions and modes of resistance, even the attempts at deserting capitalistic systems, those can at the very least constitute training grounds for other systems, yet they still depend on capitalism. Maybe the associative efforts and unions in Ireland will thrive and build up to a force sufficient to oppose both capitalistic and alt-right (sometimes combined) forces. Ultimately, the efforts emanating from marginalised groups attempting to operate a convergence of struggle and oppose overwhelmingly hostile forces is a simple way of survival for some²⁵⁵ and a way to 'refuse to accept that the world has to remain... like this...' ²⁵⁶ for others.

²⁵⁵ Depending on how many marginalised identities one cumulates.

²⁵⁶ Kurvitz, Robert et al. *Disco Elysium* London, ZA/UM (2019)

Summary in French- Résumé en français

Introduction

Cette thèse se concentre sur l'image du monstre marin, de la créature de contes et de l'eau en tant qu'outil permettant aux auteur.e.s irlandais.e.s d'exprimer divers états d'altérité imposés par la société sur les identités considérées comme déviant de la norme. La fluidité de cette image évite les binarités simplistes dans la représentation de divers personnages cumulant ces identités et de leurs environnements. De plus, les mécanismes de marginalisation de certaines identités sont désignés comme similaires par certain.e.s auteur.e.s comme Jamie O'Neill, auteur de *Deux garçons, la mer*²⁶⁰ qui propose un parallèle entre l'identité irlandaise et la déviance (queerness²⁶¹), ici l'homosexualité en 1915 à la veille du soulèvement de Pâques 1916, moment clef de l'histoire révolutionnaire de l'île. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, auteure de *The Fifty-Minute Mermaid*²⁶² pose quant à elle une équivalence entre l'Anglais=terre et l'Irlandais=mer comme métaphore centrale de sa série de poèmes sur les murúcha, ce peuple marin (irlandophone) forcé de venir s'échouer sur la terre ferme pour s'assimiler à une culture et un peuple hostile (anglophone), équivalence dont je m'inspire pour le propos de cette thèse.

Ainsi, la grille de lecture pour les nombreuses œuvres de ce corpus se dessine et il s'agit ainsi de réfléchir les déviations de genre²⁶³ et de sexualité pathologisées et la racialisation du peuple irlandais (avant son assimilation dans la supposée race blanche) et le rejet systémique de ces identités imposées. Les similarités dans ces mécanismes de construction de l'altérité se retrouvent aussi dans les contre-réactions qui s'y opposent puisque les auteur.e.s choisis réfléchissent et revendiquent cette altérité au travers du monstre marin, de la fluidité aqueuse. De plus, cette symbiose avec l'eau, élément omniprésent en Irlande de par la pluie qui imbibe ses paysages, les lacs et les rivières puis enfin la mer qui l'encercle, établit un lien entre ces personnages et leur environnement détruit par le même système capitaliste qui impose leur marginalité.

²⁶⁰ Jamie O'Neill, trad. Carine Chichereau *Deux garçons, la mer* Paris, Passage du Marais (2005)

²⁶¹ Traduction du terme anglophone choisie par Cy Lecerf-Maulpoix pour *Ecologies Déviantes Voyage en terres queers* Paris, Cambourakis (2021) que je reprends ici.

²⁶² Traduite en anglais de l'irlandais par Paul Muldoon *The Fifty-Minute Mermaid* Loughcrew, Gallery Press (2006)

Voir *The Multilingual Mermaid Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill in Translation*, Gallery Press édité par Peter Sirr en 2021 pour une traduction française de quatre de ces poèmes.

²⁶³ Car je traite également de la trans-identité.

L'Irlande est un terrain idéal pour réfléchir à ces questions de par son statut ambigu d'ancienne colonie anglaise (au sud de l'île) dont la population a activement participé au projet impérialiste britannique tout en s'en distançant au travers de ses multiples tentatives de révolutions décoloniales. L'île se tient encore dans une situation complexe de décolonisation partielle et de déception face à une indépendance incomplète. Son assujettissement à des forces dominantes introduites (et maintenues dans le nord) par son ancien colonisateur se perpétue de par le régime néolibéraliste qui y sévit aujourd'hui. Les auteur.e.s contemporain.e.s composent donc aussi avec l'histoire et la situation politique actuelle de leur pays dans leurs écrits.

Dans l'introduction de cette thèse, je propose un aperçu du passé colonisé de l'Irlande au travers d'un parallèle « vague » (*'loose and wavy parallel'* notion de Mia Gallagher pour comparer l'histoire de l'Irlande et de la Bohême/Sudentenland, autre territoire contesté en Europe²⁶⁴) avec l'histoire de Calais, ville occupée par l'Angleterre entre les XIV^{ème} et XVI^{ème} siècles et abritant toujours une frontière anglaise imposée. La notion centrale de la thèse, autour de l'image de l'amphibien.ne provient également du roman de Mia Gallagher, qui suggère que la notion de nationalité est plus fluide et flexible qu'il n'y paraît, compte tenu des 'amphibien.ne.s' tchèques-allemands qui pouvaient, en Bohême, se fondre facilement dans les deux identités nationales. La même notion est donc appliquée à d'autres binarités injustifiées entre les sexes sociaux, sexes, races, sexualités, colonisé/colonisateurs etc. avec pour but d'introduire la même fluidité dans ces identités et leurs représentations dans la littérature contemporaine irlandaise.

Le corpus comporte donc principalement les romans de Mia Gallagher (*Beautiful Pictures of the Lost Homeland* 2016), Jamie O'Neill (*At Swim Two Boys* 2001, traduite par *Deux Garçons, la mer* 2005) et Emma Donoghue (*Hood* 1995) mais aussi des œuvres de poésie contemporaine avec *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* (2006) de Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill et Paul Muldoon, l'anthologie déviante *Queering the Green* (2021) en particulier les textes de Toby Buckley et William Keohane mais aussi d'autres écrits d'auteur.e.s non-irlandais qui utilisent également les créatures marines et l'eau pour dire l'altérité.

²⁶⁴ Gallagher, Mia *Beautiful Pictures of the Lost Homeland* Dublin, New Island (2016) p.99 'Herstory and its variations (history, itstory, teirstory, etc.) never repeats itself; it just mimics badly. We therefore suggest you visualize out "parrallels" as loose/wavy, not straight lines.'

'L'histoire et ses variations ne se répète jamais, elle ne fait qu'imiter grossièrement. Nous vous suggérons donc d'imaginer les "parallèles" que nous faisons comme de vagues ondulations et non comme des lignes droites.' (ma traduction)

La première partie sert à dégager les grands axes théoriques et établir les parallèles dits 'vagues' entre la racialisation du peuple irlandais et la pathologisation des déviants de genre/de sexualité en puisant dans les théories *queer* et décoloniales avec pour point de départ les œuvres du corpus. Ce chapitre sert surtout à consolider le parallèle déviant/irlandais proposé par Jamie O'Neill pour en étudier l'expression littéraire par la suite dans les autres chapitres. Le corpus sert ici à illustrer ces théories qui viendront nourrir son analyse.

La seconde partie prend ces parallèles pour acquis puis plonge dans l'étude de son expression littéraire au travers de la métaphore ambiguë de l'eau. L'expression de l'altérité au travers de la fluidité, de la monstruosité peut en effet servir à rapprocher les personnages marginalisés, leur révéler leur identité/différence mais aussi noyer leur individualité dans une identité imposée par la norme.

La troisième partie met l'accent sur les sciences humaines et de la mer, l'écologie et la corruption de l'environnement et des êtres humains et non-humains sous le système capitaliste. Les divers personnages sont donc réfléchis en fonction de leur symbiose avec leurs milieux urbains/ruraux et de leur destruction. Les réactions politiques de l'Irlande actuelle sont aussi exposées afin de traiter de la pratique qui complète l'analyse esthétique de la représentation de l'altérité.

La première sous-partie, LGBT ? Q. rappelle l'historique et l'évolution des termes désignant les personnes de genre et/ou de sexualité non-conforme avec un retour sur l'Allemagne des années 1920 et l'essor de la communauté dite du 'troisième sexe', terminologie reprise par Magnus Hirschfeld et le fondement de son institut de sexologie, des progrès faits en Allemagne à l'époque pour démystifier les communautés 'déviantes'. Ce retour historique contraste avec l'entrée de l'homosexualité dans le manuel de diagnostic des maladies mentales (DSM) dans les années 1970 et la pathologisation de l'homosexualité, de la création d'une identité basée sur un comportement. Il ne s'agit plus d'actes homosexuels mais d'être homosexuel, et les préférences en matière de partenaires définissent graduellement l'identité d'une personne²⁶⁵. Une comparaison des méthodes utilisées par les médias conservateurs afin de politiser l'homophobie et la transphobie est faite autour de l'argument récurrent « il faut protéger les enfants »²⁶⁶ et la peur d'un supposé « recrutement » par les communautés gays/lesbiennes/bisexuelles dans les années 1970-80 puis les communautés transgenres de nos jours. L'argument conservateur sert à limiter l'accès aux droits égaux pour ces communautés marginalisées. On voit donc rapidement la complémentarité des institutions psychiatriques et médicales visant à donner une justification pseudo-scientifique à l'oppression des expressions de genre et aux sexualités déviantes et la traduction légale de ces efforts politiques pour limiter les droits de ces populations.

J'utilise beaucoup la notion d'absurdité, les limites du langage pour analyser l'incompréhension et la fracture entre une société cis-hétéronormée et les personnes non-cisgenres et non-hétérosexuelles. Cette notion permet de lire de nombreuses interactions et dialogues manqués entre les protagonistes des divers romans et leurs amis/les membres de leurs familles, car ceux-ci partent du principe que tout le monde est hétérosexuel et cisgenre et ne comprennent pas les récits des protagonistes. Ces micro-lectures révèlent les nombreuses nuances dans la transphobie et l'homophobie, même venant de personnes bien intentionnées.

Le rôle de l'Eglise, prépondérant en Irlande est aussi introduit au travers de deux scènes de confessionnal où les prêtres présument de l'hétérosexualité des protagonistes et maintiennent cette présomption décalée malgré les réponses des personnages. En effet, le droit irlandais, d'après David

²⁶⁵ Voir Foucault, Michel *L'histoire de la sexualité* Paris, Gallimard (1994)

²⁶⁶ Partant du principe que tous les enfants naissent naturellement hétérosexuels et cisgenres pour ensuite être convertis/recrutés par des communautés soucieuses de grossir leurs rangs...

Norris ²⁶⁷ s'inspire de la définition biblique du péché homosexuel pour criminaliser les comportements homo-érotiques, ces lois émanant souvent du gouvernement colonial de l'époque.

En effet, la question de l'homophobie d'état en Irlande se pose régulièrement car certains chercheurs irlandais suggèrent qu'elle est héritée de la colonisation du pays alors que d'autres insistent sur la responsabilité de l'Eglise catholique pour le maintien des lois homophobes après l'indépendance. Les réactions et l'activisme en Irlande sont donc examinés pour contextualiser l'écriture et la réception des diverses œuvres du corpus et expliciter certaines références.

La seconde sous-partie traite des diverses formes de nationalisme en Irlande et la notion de nature/*dúchas* qui revient régulièrement chez le peuple marin de Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill tentant de dissimuler et d'oublier ses origines pélagiques pour les voir ressurgir dans leurs moments de détresse. Le parallèle est fait avec le peuple marin des *drexciya/wajinru* de la nouvelle *Les Abysses*²⁶⁸ par le groupe états-unien Clipping. et Rivers Solomon, descendant des femmes enceintes jetées à la mer lors des traversées de bateaux d'esclaves. Ces deux formes d'expression de la racialisation traitent de traumatismes collectifs et posent la question de l'oubli en tant que mécanisme de défense et de survie.

J'entreprends ensuite un long historique des révolutions irlandaises tournées en dérision dans le corpus ainsi que les possibles alternatives socialistes pour l'Irlande qui se seraient éteintes avec la mort de James Connolly en 1916 (d'après Jamie O'Neill) et des racines païennes de l'Irlande, récupérées et assimilées par l'Eglise catholique. Étant donné la grande méfiance des multiples protagonistes envers l'Eglise, les nombreuses représentations d'abus psychiques, physiques et sexuels des prêtres et des frères sur leurs étudiant.e.s et la remise en question du nationalisme irlandais catholique, j'emprunte la notion de 'double impérialisme' à Seamus Deane. Celle-ci décrit la colonisation de l'Irlande par la foi catholique et par l'impérialisme britannique pour analyser la place ambiguë de cette institution rebelle/oppressive dans l'histoire décoloniale irlandaise.

La question de la survie de la langue irlandaise est abordée *via* la dichotomie entre sa *préservation* dans les quelques communautés irlandophones du Gaeltacht, souvent isolées et démunies et son *renouveau*, priorisant l'apprentissage de l'irlandais comme seconde langue chez les populations anglophones urbaines et éduquées. La disparition progressive des langues irlandaises (aux variations

²⁶⁷ Norris, David "Homosexual People and the Christian Churches in Ireland: A Minority and Its Oppressors." *The Crane Bag*, vol. 5, no. 1, Richard Kearney, 1981, pp. 31–37 (33)

David Norris est également parvenu à faire décriminaliser l'homosexualité en Irlande en 1993 en passant par la Court Européenne des Droits de l'Homme.

²⁶⁸ Solomon, River *Les Abysses* Bussy-Saint-Martin, Aux Forges de Vulcain (2021)

et dialectes multiples selon les régions) est étroitement liée aux périodes de famine des années 1850 dont le spectre se retrouve dans les associations que certain.e.s auteur.e.s font entre le deuil et la nourriture. L'utilisation de la langue irlandaise, aujourd'hui extrêmement marginale malgré son apprentissage scolaire lui prête une aura que Barry McCrea²⁶⁹ désigne en tant que 'pouvoir imaginaire poétique', sa persistance dans les expressions et accents anglais-irlandais créent en effet un fantôme mythique dans la littérature irlandaise, un inconscient toujours présent malgré sa repression. Cette qualité quasi-onirique de la langue et son lien intrinsèque avec le traumatisme de la blessure coloniale en font donc un outil approprié pour l'exprimer. Ces notions viennent donc éclairer mon analyse des divers poèmes de Ní Dhomhnaill sur le peuple marin échoué en terres anglaises avant de retracer les diverses branches du nationalisme irlandais exposées dans *Deux Garçons, la mer* par Jamie O'Neill.

La troisième sous-partie, *Aiteacht* (« déviant », *queer* en irlandais) entreprend donc d'examiner l'intersectionnalité (notion empruntée à Kimberle Crenshaw²⁷⁰) déviante et irlandaise, tout en admettant le blanchiment de la notion d'intersectionnalité dénoncée par Sirma Bilge²⁷¹ et l'aspect problématique de l'utilisation des théories post-coloniale et décoloniale dans le contexte irlandais. En effet, cette utilisation est souvent sujette à controverse de par le rôle ambigu de l'île dans le projet impérialiste britannique et l'assimilation de sa population dans la 'race blanche'²⁷², diminuant son statut racisé notamment dans la diaspora états-unienne. Les diverses réactions de gouvernements coloniaux et hétéronormatifs sont mis en parallèle dans leurs projets nécropolitiques²⁷³ de laisser mourir une population indésirable par leur inaction totale face aux événements de famines dans les années 1850 en Irlande et de SIDA dans les années 1980 aux États-Unis et en Irlande. Le passé précolonial de l'Irlande et son attitude indifférente à l'homosexualité²⁷⁴ est aussi examiné par contraste avec l'attitude catholique oppressive en Irlande indépendante.

La rhétorique TERF²⁷⁵ des années 1970 est aussi amenée car elle emprunte le vocabulaire d'oppression coloniale, avec le titre de la thèse transphobe de Janice Raymond : *L'Empire*

²⁶⁹ McCrea, Barry *Languages of the Night: Minor Languages and the Literary Imagination in 20th c Ireland and Europe* London, Yale University Press (2015)

²⁷⁰ Crenshaw, Kimberle 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics' *University of Chicago Legal Forum*: Vol. 1989: Iss. 1, Article 8 139-167

²⁷¹ Bilge, Sirma 'Le blanchiment de l'intersectionnalité' *Recherches féministes*, vol. 28, n 2, 2015 : 9-32

²⁷² Ignatiev, Noel *How the Irish became White* London, Routledge (2009)

²⁷³ Foucault, Michel *Society Must be Defended' Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-76* Picador, New York (2003) 257

²⁷⁴ Rose, Kieran *Diverse Communities: The Evolution of Lesbian and Gay Politics* Cork University Press(1994) 8

²⁷⁵ Mouvement 'féministe radical' qui exclut les personnes transgenres.

*Transsexuel*²⁷⁶ je me concentre donc sur la réponse ironique de Sandy Stone : *L'Empire Contre-attaque*²⁷⁷ dont les arguments mettent en valeur une meilleure concomitance entre le discours sur l'oppression coloniale et l'oppression transphobe, contrant ainsi l'épouvantail présenté par Raymond. Les techniques d'oppression de l'altérité se répètent et se ressemblent au fil de l'histoire et, ayant établi ce fait, le parallélisme proposé par Jamie O'Neill sur la racialisation des irlandais en 1915-1916 et la déviance des protagonistes est de nouveau abordé sous l'angle du trauma causé par la double marginalisation, qui finit par se confondre dans la fameuse référence du personnage de Anthony MacMurrough à Oscar Wilde, homme irlandais homosexuel poursuivi et emprisonné par la couronne anglaise en 1895. Lors d'une scène clé du roman, MacMurrough fait donc son *coming-out*²⁷⁸ irlandais à Tom Kettle, un membre du Parti Parlementaire travaillant à une indépendance partielle du pays au travers de réformes progressives, par opposition à une révolution ouverte qui fomente déjà en 1915 : « Bon dieu MacMurrough, êtes-vous en train de me dire que vous être un innommable du genre Oscar Wilde ?

-Si vous voulez dire que je suis irlandais, la réponse est oui. »²⁷⁹ Ainsi la honte de l'identité irlandaise et celle d'être homosexuel est bannie le temps d'un court moment de fierté gay et nationaliste, rappelant également que les deux identités sont habituellement étouffées par l'innommable, le non-dit, passées sous silence. J'entreprends alors d'utiliser cette grille de lecture pour les 'îles déviantes', pour l'île irlandaise et les îlots formés par les couples/groupes déviants des romans de Jamie O'Neill (Jim, Doyler, Anthony MacMurrough) et Emma Donoghue (Pénélope et Cara), qui forment des nations alternatives secrètes qui repensent l'identité irlandaise dans des termes plus inclusifs de la déviance.

²⁷⁶ Raymond, Janice trad. Information non-fournie par l'éditeur *L'Empire Transsexuel* Roubaix, Le Partage (2022)

²⁷⁷ Stone, Sandy trad. Kira Ribeiro *L'Empire contre-attaque: un manifeste posttranssexuel*
<https://docplayer.fr/71858875-L-empire-contre-attaque-un-manifeste-posttranssexuel.html> [11/09/2023]

²⁷⁸ Nom anglophone utilisé pour la révélation d'une identité déviante, généralement trans ou homosexuelle.

²⁷⁹ O'Neill, Jamie trad. Chichereau, Carine *Deux garçons, la mer* Paris, Passage du Marais (2005) 351

La première sous-partie s'attèle à démontrer le lien qui se crée entre les personnes déviantes au travers de l'eau, la nage, les bains qui développent l'intimité et la confiance entre les personnes marginalisées dans le corpus de la thèse. La mer et le lien qu'elle crée entre les diverses nations celtiques de l'Irlande, l'Ecosse, le Pays de Galle, la Bretagne, les Cornouailles et l'île de Man et permet de reconnaître aussi certaines similarités dans leurs langues et une tradition orale partagée au travers de certaines créatures légendaires récurrentes dans les folklores celtiques comme les sirènes, les selkies²⁸⁰, les changelings²⁸¹ etc. Le roman de l'autrice écossaise Kirsty Logan *The Gloaming*²⁸² qui présente la relation de deux selkies/sirènes dans une petite communauté insulaire²⁸³ est donc ajouté au corpus pour cette partie de la thèse. La littérature orale, le commun, le collectif constituent des lieux de pensée décoloniale car ils permettent aux peuples colonisés de s'affranchir de la rationalité et de l'individualisme imposés par le colonisateur, en référence aux théories de Frantz Fanon²⁸⁴. L'intimité que développent les divers couples/groupes des divers auteur.e.s au travers de l'eau est couverte par de multiples micro-lectures traitant de la naturalisation de la transidentité grâce aux rapprochements faits avec les métamorphoses de diverses espèces marines et amphibiennes, la mer comme métaphore de la passion naissante de Jim pour Doyler, les bains de Pen et Cara comme lieu de paix secret etc.

L'amitié de Jim et Doyler se renforce au travers de leur projet de nager jusqu'à la petite île des Muglins, un rocher près de la côte de Kingston/Dún Laoghaire où ils habitent et que les deux adolescents veulent reconquérir pour l'Irlande. Le parallèle entre leurs passions nationaliste et amoureuse rallie donc les luttes pour l'indépendance Irlandaise et la libération gay. L'eau est aussi un lieu de révélation, de résolution car c'est en apprenant à nager que Jim accepte son désir pour Doyler, que Georgia (protagoniste *Beautiful Pictures of the Lost Homeland*) soulage sa culpabilité vis-à-vis de son amie d'enfance décédée dans un attentat à la voiture piégée à Monaghan et accepte sa

²⁸⁰ Personne possédant un manteau/une peau magique lui permettant de se changer en phoque et de vivre dans la mer. Une légende commune présente une femme dont le manteau est volé par un homme, la forçant à vivre sur terre, à l'épouser et porter ses enfants. Elle finit généralement par retrouver son manteau et retourner en mer, emportant les enfants avec elle, ces derniers meurent donc noyés.

²⁸¹ Chanjon/changeling, enfant ou femme maléfique qui prend la place d'un être aimé (volé par les fées) au sein du foyer et tourmente les familles. Le changelin ressemble physiquement à la personne volée mais a un comportement irascible, et seul un rituel violent par le feu ou la noyade peut faire revenir la personne d'origine.

²⁸² Logan, Kirsty *The Gloaming*. London, Penguin (2018)

²⁸³ Pour plus d'informations voir Pittin-Hedon, Marie-Odile 'Selkies, Kelpies and Fairies: Kirsty Logan's Contemporary Sea Creatures' in Tri TRAN *L'Eau en Écosse - Water in Scotland* Besançon, Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté (2022)

²⁸⁴ Fanon, Frantz *Les Damnés de la Terre* Paris, La Découverte/Poche (2002)

féminité, que le protagoniste autobiographique de William Keohane comprend sa transidentité. Dans les poèmes de Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, le souvenir de l'eau resurgit sous forme d'hallucinations dans les secondes générations de sirènes émigrées sur terre, révélant le traumatisme collectif refoulé de la perte de leur milieu naturel, de l'assimilation forcée. La mer, l'eau est donc un lieu libérateur, de révélation, en référence à la théorie de Gaston Bachelard²⁸⁵.

Cependant les nombreuses métaphores autour de l'eau, des créatures marines, aquatiques restent ambiguës car la marginalisation qu'elles représentent peut également étouffer, noyer l'individu sous une identité imposée qui cristallise sa personne autour de traits ou de comportements anodins, qui devraient être jugés comme de simples variations normales dans l'espèce humaine. La nationalité et les nationalismes, les déviances de genre et de sexualité forment parfois des identités monolithes, rigides par nécessité politique de se définir comme groupe uni afin de militer pour ses droits. Cependant, ces groupes effacent par là même leurs propres diversités et inégalités pour présenter un front commun, un message simple. Ainsi l'Irlande, dans son projet indépendantiste a effacé sa population déviante et son projet socialiste, et la communauté LGBT présente parfois les travers d'une homo-normativité exclusive. Ces analyses, toujours portées sur le corpus empruntent donc la notion d'essentialisme stratégique, proposé par Gayatri C. Spivak²⁸⁶ comme un outil imparfait (et qui se doit de n'être que temporaire) de lutte politique.

Ainsi les diverses formes d'altérité comportent d'autres mécanismes communs que les techniques d'oppression qui les créent. L'eau, représentative de l'altérité menace de noyer l'individu car elle érige une notion réductrice de l'identité et fait subir des violences normatives à ces individus : Doyler manque de se noyer, enveloppé dans le drapeau vert d'une Irlande déviante et socialiste qui ne sera pas et qui prédit la débâcle de la révolte de 1916, noie le deuil de Pénélope (la protagoniste de *Hood*, de Donoghue qui vient de perdre sa partenaire après treize ans de vie commune) dont le veuvage n'est pas reconnu en Irlande des années 1990s et doit être passé sous un silence aride : elle ne pleure pas de la semaine, ne reconnaît la nature de son veuvage qu'en privé avec quelques personnes. L'eau est aussi signe de tradition orale car les larmes absentes de Pénélope reflètent le *keening/caoineadh*²⁸⁷ réduit au silence.

Cette partie deux, puisqu'elle se concentre beaucoup sur les micro-lectures de romans ce qui nécessiterait ici d'en expliquer les récits, les divers personnages et leurs dynamiques et les styles des

²⁸⁵ Bachelard, Gaston *L'eau et les rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*. Paris, Librairie José Corti (1942)

²⁸⁶ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty Trad. Bouillaux, Françoise, *En d'autres mondes, en d'autres mots* Paris, Payot (2009)

²⁸⁷ Lamentations traditionnelles de pleureuses durant les funérailles irlandaises, pratique puissante d'expression féminine interdite par l'église catholique puis par le gouvernement britannique colonisateur.

auteur.e.s est difficile à retranscrire sous forme de résumé. Néanmoins, je précise qu'une grande partie de l'analyse s'articule autour des traces d'oralité celte que comportent l'écriture des diverses œuvres et de la tension entre l'idéal et le grotesque bakhtinien²⁸⁸ qui reprend ici sa connotation positive médiévale dans les descriptions de corps et d'intimités déviants. L'eau est souvent un moteur de sublimation des corps grotesques, qui opère le glissement d'un dégoût de la monstruosité déviante et/ou racisée à une admiration de beautés inhabituelles. Ce retour à un grotesque positif, inclusif est important car j'applique cette idée à ma lecture des sensibilités écologiques exprimées par les auteur.e.s dans la troisième partie.

²⁸⁸ Bakhtine, Mikhaïl trad. Robel, Andrée *L'oeuvre de François Rabelais et la culture populaire au Moyen Age et sous la Renaissance* Paris, Gallimard (1982)

La première sous-partie reprend donc la tension entre l'idéalisation sublime/romantique et le grotesque pour poser la question du sublime arcadien (la nature idéalisée au 19^{ème} siècle) dans un contexte de crise climatique et de corruption capitaliste de l'environnement. La littérature contemporaine peine à se raccrocher à la beauté des grands espaces sans trahir un fond de scepticisme sur sa préservation. Cette partie traite le sublime sceptique de l'environnement urbain, beaucoup plus présent dans le corpus que le milieu rural, et remet en question la dichotomie entre urbain et rural/nature en se concentrant sur les derniers éléments naturels non-contrôlés de Dublin, tels que l'eau, les parcs, les variations météorologiques. J'emprunte pour mes lectures la notion de *Shivers*, les frissons, une capacité du protagoniste du jeu vidéo *Disco Elysium*²⁸⁹, Harrier Dubois. Cette capacité le rend sensible aux changements de température et de pression atmosphérique dans le paysage urbain : la pluie, la neige, la tombée de la nuit déclenchent alors des moments suspendus dans le jeu où le dialogue se concentre sur les bâtiments, les habitant.e.s de la ville, le passé historique de la pierre.

Je justifie mon emploi d'une notion de jeu vidéo de par le refus d'une hiérarchie entre la 'haute' culture académique et la 'basse' culture populaire prônée par Jack Halberstam notamment dans *L'Art Déviant de l'Échec*²⁹⁰. De plus, le nombre impressionnant de lignes de dialogue du jeu vidéo *Disco Elysium* et ses origines en tant que roman invendu²⁹¹ de Robert Kurvitz lui donnent une parenté claire avec la littérature²⁹². Les différents personnages du corpus se sentent donc en osmose avec leur environnement urbain sous la pluie (décrite comme élément typiquement irlandais et positif par Jamie O'Neill et Emma Donoghue), à la tombée de la nuit ou au rythme des marées. Iel.les développent aussi une empathie avec les autres habitant.e.s de ce paysage au travers de longs moments de contemplation de leur environnement. Iel.les perçoivent même, par moment, l'histoire violente de Dublin qui imprègne encore les lieux.

J'aborde ensuite le 'glamour géologique', l'idée développée par Mia Gallagher dans son roman *Beautiful Pictures of the Lost Homeland* sur le changement continu du paysage et des humains qui l'habitent en prenant en compte l'échelle de temps géologique, infiniment plus long et qui éclipse

²⁸⁹ Kurvitz, Robert et al. *Disco Elysium* London, ZA/UM (2019)

²⁹⁰ Halberstam, Jack *The Queer Art of Failure* Durham, Duke University Press (2011)

²⁹¹ Kurvitz, Robert *Püha ja õudne lõhn* (2013) *L'Air Terrible et Sacré* non-traduit de l'Estonien à ce jour (septembre 2023)

²⁹² Voir Carayol, Martin 'Quand l'échec d'un roman aboutit à une réussite vidéoludique. Le cas de Disco Elysium.' *Romanesque* 2021, Hors-série. Jeu vidéo et romanesque.

l'importance du temps humain et historique. Cette notion peut être interprétée aussi comme une tentative de voir comme naturel les corps en transition puisque tout change en permanence, même le paysage irlandais (les collines de Wicklow) qui paraît pourtant immuable et éternel. Encore une fois le lien entre les humains et leur environnement est renforcé par le miroir entre le corps, l'intimité déviant.e.s et les formes du paysage. Toutes ces analyses concourent à prouver la sensibilité écologique qui sature même les récits dont ce n'est pas le propos central, signe de l'anxiété générée par le changement climatique apporté par un capitalisme destructeur.

La seconde sous-partie développe cette idée de destruction et/ou d'exploitation de l'environnement comme indissociable de celle des corps qui l'habitent. Je retourne à cette notion de grotesque bakhtinien positif avec une célébration renouvelée des cycles naturels, du compost²⁹³, de la décomposition par opposition à l'artifice capitaliste néolibéraliste qui brise ces cycles naturels afin d'augmenter la productivité des êtres humains, non humains et de l'environnement. Le grotesque, s'il apparaît comme négatif, se concentre autour de l'artifice qui corrompt. Je prends l'exemple des exploitations piscicoles au large de Inver²⁹⁴, décrit par Toby Buckley ou la construction de barrages en Angleterre chez Mia Gallagher, principalement par des ouvriers écossais et irlandais, considérés comme une main d'œuvre exploitable et dont la destruction des corps lors des explosions accidentelles renvoie à la destruction de la roche du *Black Country*. L'aspect décolonial de l'exploitation des humains et de l'environnement reste en toile de fond puisque les ouvriers viennent des premières colonies anglaises et la construction des barrages peut être lue comme un rappel à Dryweryn, le village gallois qui disparut sous les eaux du barrage sensé alimenter Liverpool en électricité dans les années 1950. Cette destruction symbolique correspondit à un regain de conscience nationale au Pays de Galles. Ainsi, l'opposition constante entre les nations celtiques colonisées et exploitées par l'Angleterre est indissociable de la critique du capitalisme, projet éminemment britannique imposé sur les territoires gallois, écossais et irlandais.

Dona Haraway propose la notion de Chthulucène²⁹⁵ (en référence à l'araignée *Pimoides Cthulhu* chthonique donc Chthulu) par opposition à celles de l'Anthropocène et du Capitalocène (que je trouve plus pertinente) avec l'espoir d'une ère de coopération entre l'humain et le non-humain pour une survie sur les ruines du capitalisme. Je reformule le Cthulucène (noter le déplacement subtil des 'h' qui fait maintenant référence à Cthulhu de Howard P. Lovecraft) pour exprimer une crainte de

²⁹³ Haraway, Donna *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham and London, Duke University Press (2016) 57

²⁹⁴ Buckley, Toby 'Inver' dans son anthologie *Milk Snake*. Birmingham, The Emma Press (2022). 2

²⁹⁵ Haraway, Donna *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) OpCit

l'avènement d'une ère plus dangereuse pour les populations marginalisées et la fin d'un environnement favorable à la vie humaine. H.P Lovecraft était connu pour son délire obsidional alimenté par une phobie quasi pathologique de l'Autre (racisé, pathologisé) et de la mer²⁹⁶ et semble exprimer cette peur au travers de figures monstrueuses provenant des abysses²⁹⁷. La monstruosité chez Lovecraft et l'horreur cosmique d'êtres gigantesques (les Anciens Dieux) provenant des océans et capable de détruire l'humanité sont donc utiles à mon propos puisqu'elles synthétisent les arguments de la thèse au travers d'une figure d'adversaire exhaustive. La phobie de Lovecraft retourne donc l'accusation de maladie mentale, d'anormalité constamment utilisée contre les communautés et identités marginalisées, le tout sur un fond de catastrophe apocalyptique rappelant la montée des océans et l'énormité accablante du capitalisme mondial destructeur. Je recours à nouveau au jeu *Disco Elysium* pour emprunter une autre notion de Pale, le gris qui submerge la réalité lentement et dans lequel tout va disparaître, autre expression de l'anxiété climatique rendant ce jeu et les phobies de Lovecraft si adaptées aux préoccupations actuelles.

Néanmoins, je n'emploie pas le terme d'anxiété climatique dans le but d'obscurcir son origine capitaliste, mais au contraire pour en révéler la cause. Le rejet de certaines identités, comportements, origines au cœur du projet capitaliste impérialiste rend une convergence des luttes logique puisqu'elles semblent toutes avoir le même adversaire. La thèse suggère donc que la littérature permet de conceptualiser ces oppressions, ces anxiétés nébuleuses qui, selon les auteur.e.s qui l'expriment parfois de manière subtile et détournée, ont le même point d'origine.

La dernière sous-partie de la thèse passe donc de l'analyse littéraire à une exploration brève des réactions politiques et associatives en Irlande à ces diverses problématiques observées et diagnostiquées par la littérature contemporaine de l'île. En effet, le néolibéralisme exacerbé de l'Irlande actuelle crée une frustration, l'impression d'une indépendance inachevée où les élites locales ont pris la suite du colonisateur pour mettre en place des formes similaires d'oppression capitaliste, et où le discours nationaliste n'est plus adapté à la situation politique. Si un gouvernement irlandais pousse la croissance du pays au détriment de sa population, et surtout de ses populations marginalisées de par leur classe, identités de sexe et sexuelles, origine, statut émigratoire, etc alors la rhétorique nationaliste ne peut plus donner de moteur aux luttes actuelles. Jamie O'Neill fait d'ailleurs une entrave à la binarité anglais contre irlandais au travers du socialisme international affiché du personnage de Doyler. Celui-ci ne croit pas aux nationalismes Irlandais et

²⁹⁶ Houellebecq, Michel *H.P Lovecraft Contre le Monde, Contre la Vie* Paris, Du Rocher (2005)

²⁹⁷ Voir, par exemple, *L'Ombre au dessus d'Innsmouth*

sait que les classes ouvrières anglaises sont exploitées au même titre que les classes ouvrières irlandaises, auquel cas une dichotomie basée sur la nationalité n'est pas utile politiquement.

Des mécanismes de défense se développent donc dans l'Irlande d'aujourd'hui chez les classes défavorisées au travers de syndicats des locataires qui organisent des actions communes et résistent à l'augmentation permanente des prix des loyers, aux expulsions, aux pratiques abusives des propriétaires tout en se réclamant du socialisme de James Connolly²⁹⁸. D'autres initiatives sont étudiées dans cette sous-partie pour couvrir les luttes transgenres, notamment le manque d'accès aux soins et à la transition médicale pour ceux qui le souhaitent. La partie 1 couvrait l'historique des luttes LGBT en Irlande et des avancées en termes de reconnaissance officielle du changement de marqueur de sexe. Cependant, l'Irlande reste dans la situation paradoxale où le sexe des personnes transgenres est reconnu mais l'appareil médical des cliniques de genre reste extrêmement exclusif, invasif et inaccessible. Les listes d'attentes d'accès aux soins se sont étendues à plus de dix ans, souvent pour des traitements hormonaux et des chirurgies qui seraient considérées comme anodines ou routinières sur une population cisgenre.

Eilís Ní Fhlannagáin, une femme Irlandaise-Etats-unienne est aussi mentionnée en tant que figure de résistance trans-féministe à l'exclusion pratiquée par les institutions médicales. Avec l'aide d'une amie en études de médecine, Ní Fhlannagáin a réalisé elle-même sa propre orchidectomie²⁹⁹ aux États-Unis dans les années 1990 lorsque les cliniques de genre étaient peu nombreuses et plus exclusives encore. L'alternative, plus accessible, de chirurgiens non-déclarés était risquée et coûteuse. Les deux femmes ont par la suite fondé une clinique d'orchidectomie clandestine (par des femmes trans pour des femmes trans) qui, durant deux ans, a permis à de nombreuses femmes d'accéder à une opération salubre, à un coût adapté à leurs revenus et dans un respect total de leur identité. Le projet était inspiré des cliniques clandestines du comité Jane dans les années précédant le jugement *Roe V Wade* qui a légalisé l'avortement aux États-Unis. La docteure qui pratiquait les orchidectomies avec Ní Fhlannagáin a d'ailleurs rejoint une clinique spécialisée dans les IVG après ses études.

Les deux groupes de cliniques clandestines présentent donc des femmes qui s'organisent pour reprendre possession de leurs propres corps et accéder à des opérations cruciales que les institutions médicales leur refusent pour des raisons idéologiques sexistes et/ou transphobes. Ní

²⁹⁸ <https://catuireland.org/about/>

²⁹⁹ Ablation cruciale permettant aux femmes trans et aux personnes transféminines de ne plus dépendre des bloqueurs de testostérone (antithétique à l'action des œstrogènes complétant le traitement hormonal de remplacement).

Fhlannagáin vit aujourd'hui en Irlande et a rejoint de nombreux groupes de luttes pour les droits de personnes trans et des populations exilées. Elle défend l'idée d'une convergence des luttes basée sur la simple idée que les mêmes personnes (conservatrices) qui rejettent les personnes trans rejettent aussi les exilé.e.s et d'autres populations marginalisées.

Enfin, la dernière partie couvre aussi, en parallèle des ces moyens d'action directe, les modes de vie alternatifs. Je me penche donc brièvement sur les éco-villages, ZAD, fermes de perma-culture isolés et sur la communauté des bateliers irlandais pour les désigner comme terrains d'expérimentation mais aussi pour en démontrer les limites de par leur dépendance continue au système capitaliste.

Conclusion

Je récapitule les tenants de la thèse avant de revoir la situation politique actuelle de l'Irlande, de l'Europe, du contexte général de capitalisme mondialisé. Le choix des auteur.e.s du corpus dans la représentation de voix et de corps marginalisés s'attaque au noyau central des phobies fascistes et conservatrices, le dégoût et la peur irrationnels de l'Autre, exemplifiés par l'écriture de H.P Lovecraft. Cependant, j'admets les limites de la littérature dans ce travail de représentation puisque, dans un contexte actuel de caisse de résonance politique, elle a peu de chance d'atteindre les populations les plus hostiles aux voix et corps marginalisés. Je clos l'analyse sur une autre citation de *Disco Elysium* qui traite de la question difficile de continuer une lutte face à des forces adversaires disproportionnées. Il s'agit du dialogue entre Harrier Dubois et l'étudiant communiste qui admet que croire en un système alternatif au capitalisme n'est que l'expression d'un refus obstiné que 'le monde doit rester ainsi' qu'il est 'brisé mais pas irréparable'. La conclusion du dialogue, même si elle paraît naïve et simpliste reste la plus positive que je pouvais trouver pour cette thèse : 'Dans les heures sombres, les étoiles doivent-elles s'éteindre, elles aussi ?'³⁰⁰. Même si la situation semble impossible à résoudre (puisque l'on parle d'un système mondialisé qui parvient à assimiler même les mouvements les plus hostiles à son existence) il faut continuer de tendre vers une alternative.

³⁰⁰ Kurvitz, Robert et al. *Disco Elysium* London, ZA/UM (2019) fin de la quête communiste - ma traduction de 'In dark times, should the stars also go out?'

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