

6A. Thin Places

Sara Romero Otero (University of Seville), 'Liminal spaces, memory and the body: Kerri Ní Dochartaigh's *Thin Places*'

Liminal spaces are present in all cultures and countries; borders, traced arbitrarily by human beings, have conditioned an immeasurable number of lives by their mere existence. Kerri Ní Dochartaigh's memoir *Thin Places* explores the way in which the Northern Irish border has shaped not only the island that she was born in, but also her life as the first-born child of a mixed marriage in the deeply divided city of Derry in the early 1980s. Ní Dochartaigh reflects on her experience as someone who lived on the fence during a deeply identitarian conflict, but also on the traumatic experiences that her non-identification brought upon her, both as a child and as an adult struggling with mental illness.

The aim of this proposal is to provide a close reading of Ní Dochartaigh's memoir, focusing on the way political, physical, and social borders are interwoven throughout the narrative. The text will be analyzed through Judith Butler's and Cathy Caruth's ideas on trauma and the expression of grief, but also through different readings of the Northern Irish border and the consequences of partition, such as the one provided by Joe Cleary in *Literature, Partition and the Nation-State*, so as to provide a broader reflection on the way memoir and homeland shape not only Ní Dochartaigh's memoir, but also Northern Irish literature in general.

Bio: Sara Romero Otero is a PhD student in Philology at the University of Seville, after completing her degree in Literary Studies at the University of Barcelona and a Master's in Contemporary Cinema & Media Studies and a Master's in Comparative Literature, Art and Philosophy at Pompeu Fabra University (Barcelona), as well as a Double Master's in Secondary School Teaching and Linguistics, Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Seville. Her work focuses specifically on gender studies and female Irish authors, as well as intermedial relationships between literature and cinema. She has published a fiction novel (*Feroces como el viento*, 2016) as well as her three previous Master's thesis, which can be found in their home universities' online platform.

Loredana Salis and Valeria Strusi (University of Sassari), "'On the land's skin": embodied geographies of trauma and healing in *Thin Places* (2021) by Kerri Ní Dochartaigh'

Complex and multifaceted, the link between locations and human experience is frequently the scene of contentious, culturally charged histories and landscapes whose arbitrary human borders are impossible to superimpose, let alone reconcile with the natural constitution of the land. The troubled geography of the Irish border is one such instance in which an invisible man-made line has very visibly unleashed decades of conflict and bloodshed, etching itself deeply into the country's landscape and the skin of its people.

This article investigates Kerri Ní Dochartaigh's *Thin Places* (2021) with special attention to the way in which that memoir combines the personal, the geographical, and the historical into a single embodied cartography of ravaged human landscapes, in which her journey of growth and healing from addiction and trauma echoes Northern Ireland's history out of the Troubles and into Brexit. In order to reconcile and connect the constellations of embodied fractures, lines, and borders, Ní Dochartaigh turns to nature both as vehicle and as the locus of healing. She thus reconnects with her homeland, its past and present, its language, and eventually her roots. She also peruses a landscape of suffering and unearths hope and a healed awareness of her life, nature, and the island she calls home, traversing her life in "ripples of geography" and encounters with thin places, where borders are truly porous.

Bio: Loredana Salis (MA, PhD) is Associate Professor of English Literature at the University of Sassari. Her research focuses on 19th century gender(ed) narratives, exile narratives and adaptations of the

canon. She has authored monographs and articles on Gaskell, H. Martineau, Dickens, G. Eliot, E. O'Brien, Carr, F. McGuinness, Morrissy, Heaney and C. Markievicz.

Valeria Strusi is a PhD student at the University of Sassari. Her research centres on mapping the relationship between life writing and nature writing in contemporary, anglophone nonfiction from an ecocritical perspective, with particular emphasis on the changing of natural landscapes and personal geographies as a result of climate change.

Carolin Böttcher (Friedrich-Schiller-Universität), 'Borders and Thin Places: using memoir and nature writing to move beyond boundaries'

In *Thin Places* (2021), Kerri Ní Dochartaigh describes the year she was born as “a border out of time” (246) as it, in hindsight, marks the middle of the Troubles. Born to a Catholic mother and a Protestant father Ní Dochartaigh grew up in Derry, never truly belonging anywhere as her childhood and adolescence were marked by visible and invisible boundaries and violence. Her connection to the natural world, however, offers a way to forget and move beyond these human-made boundaries. She writes, “since I returned to Derry—to the land whose suffering I still hold in a cellular, oozy place—I have found myself held by places that simply will not let me disappear under the surface.” Rather, the border is “the thread that has run through my life” and is ultimately “a ghost vein on the map of my insides.” In this paper, I argue that the physical border with its invisible boundaries has shaped Ní Dochartaigh’s life in an almost immeasurable way as her life appears fractured and broken. She finds her anchoring in the disappearance of boundaries within the natural world, the “thin places,” and she writes, “I tiptoe around the edges, and I feel myself outside time, as well as place. Now I am in both and in neither all at once. I gratefully wait on the threshold, holding my breath as the reeds dance, grass goddesses on the hushed dunes, beside an ethereal, exquisite leamhan.” Only in this recognition does she begin to heal the wounds caused by the borders and boundaries that have shaped her life.

Bio: Carolin Böttcher is currently a lecturer in English literature at Friedrich-Schiller-Universität in Jena. She has received her PhD in 2020 from UC San Diego. Her research focuses on women’s writing, literature and science, and the environment and has appeared in *ABO: Interactive Journal Women in the Arts, 1640–1830* and is forthcoming in *European Romantic Review*.

6B. Queering fiction

Andy Carolin (University of Johannesburg), 'Ordinary lives in extraordinary times: Queer sexualities in historical fiction from Northern Ireland'

The political conflict in Northern Ireland, between nationalists fighting for independence and unionists loyal to the British crown, rooted itself as conflict between Catholics and Protestants. This conflict intensified from the 1960s and lasted until 1998. The Troubles, as this sectarian conflict, was known, was characterised by an ongoing low intensity civil war, the sustained deployment of the British army, cross-border skirmishes, assassinations, political detentions, and coordinated resistance campaigns. The hypervisibility of this conflict has come to dominate how the country is constituted in the global imaginary. In this paper, I offer an analysis of Anna Burn’s award-winning novel *Milkman* (2018) and Lisa McGee’s hit television show *Derry Girls* (2018-2022) to unpack the layers of ordinary life that existed despite omnipresent political violence. In this paper, I argue that sex and sexuality function metonymically to mark out the affective and quotidian aspects of cultural life as they are mapped against a prevailing homophobic Christian moralism which, ironically, marks a continuity between Protestant and Catholic political cultures. Queer sexuality in both the novel and the television series are incidental rather than thematic; they are remarked upon but wholly unremarkable. In this, these texts deploy sexuality as a metonymic lens through which the ubiquity of political violence can be disarticulated and complex layers of ordinary lives reimagined.

BIO: Andy Carolin is an associate professor at the University of Johannesburg. His research focuses largely on twentieth and twenty-first century cultural histories of sexuality. He is the author of a monograph titled *Post-Apartheid Same-Sexualities: Restless Identities in Literary and Visual Culture* (Routledge, 2021).

Michael G. Cronin (Maynooth University), ‘Temporality, historical consciousness and the Irish “literary lesbian”’

This paper will examine the place of queer historical fiction in contemporary Irish writing, paying particular attention to recent novels by Emma Donoghue and Lucy Caldwell. Their novels depict same-sex passion between women in Irish cities during war (Dublin in 1918; Belfast in 1941). As such, the novels belong to a tradition of lesbian writing in Irish literature – self-consciously so, in the case of Donoghue – while also striving to make the silences of history speak.

At the same time, their novels remind us that the queerness of ‘queer historical fiction’ is not reducible to questions of representation – what, or who, gets depicted and by whom. Such fiction may take its primary coordinates from documentary and archival residues of the past. Nevertheless, it is most profoundly a dialogue with the dead. In other words, such fiction is concerned with those imagined reconstructions of the past our minds develop for emotional, spiritual and political nourishment.

Like all historical fiction, the objective of queer historical fiction is actively creating usable versions of the past for the present. For that reason, ‘Irish queer historical fiction’ is most importantly a matter of literary style and political perspectives encoded in aesthetic choices. It is about forms of writing which seek to query and queer our historical consciousness; not only our understanding of the past but of the present and the future too.

Bio: Michael G Cronin is Lecturer in English at Maynooth University, Ireland. He is the author of: *Impure Thoughts: sexuality, Catholicism and literature in twentieth-century Ireland* (Manchester University Press, 2013), *Revolutionary Bodies: homoeroticism and the political imagination in Irish writing* (Manchester UP, 2022) and *Sexual/Liberation* (Cork UP, 2022).

6C. The Troubles and Northern Irish Society

Jamie Robinson, “‘A technocratic act of cynicism” - reconsidering the influence of “security planning” on the Belfast Urban Motorway’

In Belfast, mid-century urban redevelopment has been criticised for severing communities, creating physical and psychological barriers, and entrenching inequality. The most obvious product of this redevelopment is the Westlink – the ultimate realisation of the Belfast Urban Motorway plans of the 1960s. From the outset, many have alleged that the severance enacted by this road was a deliberate strategy to contain the violence of the Troubles. Whilst these allegations were traditionally advanced without evidence, the emergence of recently declassified government documents has spurred a new wave of scholarship vindicating this 'security planning' discourse.

Upon closer inspection, however, it is evident that commentators have misinterpreted the key evidence, using it to subsume the urban motorway into narratives of control and conflict, unduly ascribing authorship of the road to the security forces and their control considerations. Doing so relegates an important part of Belfast’s history to being merely 'of' the Troubles rather than situating it within the complex technocratic processes relating to urban redevelopment that occurred across the UK.

This paper calls for the foregrounding of the role of politicians and planners in the pursuit of a 'motor city ideal'. Control considerations are instead seen as a 'reading' or 'negotiation' of built space, allowing us to examine them without affording them undue consequence. Moving out of the expository vortex created by the Troubles, we might then better understand how to faithfully address the spatial impact of Belfast's historical and modern urban redevelopment.

Bio: Jamie Robinson studied at the University of London, University of Cambridge and Queen's University Belfast. After some time spent as a community archivist in North Belfast, he is now part of the team at Ulster Architectural Heritage, where he works to raise awareness of the special character of Northern Ireland's built environment.

Stephen Kelly (Liverpool Hope University), "No tidy dividing line": Margaret Thatcher, Northern Ireland and the prospect of repartition, 1984-5'

This proposed paper investigates U.K. prime minister Margaret Thatcher's hitherto neglected public and private attitude to partition and the Irish border. Specifically, it focuses on Thatcher's outlook towards the prospect of repartition and the redrawing of the boundary of Northern Ireland, including the mass transfer of Northern Catholics to the Republic of Ireland.

Despite being repeatedly informed by her leading civil servants and ministerial colleagues that repartition had the potential to ignite a full scale civil war in Northern Ireland, to borrow former secretary of state for Northern Ireland Douglas Hurd's diagnosis, it is argued that Thatcher harboured a long held misconception that the redrawing of the boundary between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland would greatly improve cross-border security and diminish the threat posed by Irish Republican paramilitaries.

It is argued that Thatcher's naïve interpretation of the repartition question merely reinforced the perception amongst those who worked close to her of her general ignorance of the subject of Northern Ireland. Far too often, to borrow Sir David Goodall's description, Thatcher demonstrated a certain 'primitiveness' towards the prospect of repartition and more generally the British government's Northern Ireland policy, regularly overwhelmed by the complexities of the subject that confronted her.

Bio: Professor Stephen Kelly is Professor of Modern Irish History and British Irish Relations at Liverpool Hope University. He has published extensively in the fields of modern Irish history, British-Irish relations and the Northern Ireland conflict. In 2021, Stephen published his latest monograph, Margaret Thatcher, the Conservative Party and the Northern Ireland conflict, 1975-1990 (Bloomsbury, 2021; paperback edition 2022). He recently finished a new biography, Gerald Boland, 1885-1973: A biography, which is due for publication later this year.

6D. Politics in the Diaspora

David McCarthy (QUB), 'Irish-America and Friends of Sinn Féin (USA) post-9/11'

Scholarly research noted a change in the relationship between Irish-America and republican leaders in Northern Ireland in the post-9/11 period. For example, Cochrane (2007) states: "The relationship between Irish republicanism and Irish-America was changed significantly by the attacks of 11 September 2001."

This presentation examines that common assertion by analyzing the fundraising activity of the US based Friends of Sinn Fein (FoSF). Using the submissions of FoSF to the US Department of Justice, it compares periods before and after 9/11. The presentation compares across the two time periods: sources of funds (e.g., individuals, unions, corporations); donor specific information (e.g., gender and geographic dispersion); and contribution levels (e.g., totals per donor, averages, percentage of totals represented by largest contributions), and organization expenses.

While not actually a member-based organization, FoSF relies on broad-based appeal for its funding, as have other Irish political parties and movements over time. In fact, it received over 7,000 donations over the period examined. Presenting this data across comparative time periods offers new insight into the continued support of the republican movement from elements of Irish America despite more tenuous relations reported at official levels.

Bio: David McCarthy is a PhD candidate at QUB. He has degrees from University College Dublin, Stanford University, and the University of New Hampshire. He serves on the Editorial Board of the Journal of Alternative Investments, and previously served on the Advisory Board of the Glucksman Ireland House at NYU.

Peter McLoughlin (QUB), “OK, let’s do it”: examining the motivations for Clinton’s early intervention in the Northern Ireland peace process’

This paper will look particularly at the role of a new Irish-American lobby group that emerged in the early 1990s – one that helped Clinton to win the White House, and in turn expected him to make radical departures from the US government’s traditional approach to Northern Ireland. The boldest suggestion made by Americans for New Irish Agenda (ANIA) was that Gerry Adams be given a visa to visit the US, arguing that this would advance the tentative peace process emerging in the region in this period. Using archival materials, from ANIA’s own files, and official documents from London, Dublin and the White House, the paper will examine why Clinton first rejected and later moved on the initiatives suggested by ANIA. It will argue that his change in approach showed that Clinton was not simply responding to ANIA, but also political shifts in Northern Ireland, in British-Irish relations, and in the wider international arena. This suggests the careful consideration that Clinton gave to the Northern Ireland issue, explaining why he initially resisted ANIA’s requests to grant Adams a visa, but eventually acceded, and why his cautious but calculated gamble was largely vindicated when the IRA called a ceasefire in 1994.

Bio: Dr Peter McLoughlin is Senior Lecturer in Politics at Queen’s University Belfast. He works in the broad field of contemporary political history in Ireland and Northern Ireland, with a particular focus on the Northern Ireland problem and peace process. His most notable publication in this field is his book on the Nobel Peace Prize Winner, John Hume – *John Hume and the Revision of Irish Nationalism* (MUP: 2010). His work also explores international and diaspora contributions to peace-making, and he will soon begin a research project as a Fulbright Scholar on the role of the US government and Irish-America in the Northern Ireland conflict and peace process.

6E. On the Edge of Home: Performing Domestic Borders on the Island of Ireland

Paula Flanagan (University of Dundee) & Gemma Carney (QUB), ‘Understanding partitions through older women’s everyday activism’

Trish McTighe (QUB), ‘Across the threshold: crossing ethno-sectarian and gendered borders with domestic theatre’

Shonagh Hill (QUB), ‘Generations and feminist temporalities in Alice Malseed’s *The Half Moon*’

Ireland remains a partitioned land. Yet history tells us that such partitions, while representing political designations and agreements made elsewhere, often offer unique spaces and practices that counter

such designations (Samuelson, 2005; Rao, 1999; Yuval-Davis, 1997). This panel offers a range of critical perspectives on the tensions, contradictions, and paradoxes of domestic space as it manifests within the context of a partitioned island. Through attention to lived experience and aesthetic practices, all three speakers apply a feminist critique of the domestic across theatre, performance, and activism in Ireland.

In 'Understanding Partitions Through Older Women's Everyday Activism', Paula Flanagan and Gemma Carney address women's changing relationship with work in and outside the home against the backdrop of the 1937 Constitution of the Republic of Ireland which codified women's role as mothers and home-makers, in particular Article 41.2. They focus on older women, those born after the foundation of the Irish Republic but still alive today, for two reasons. Firstly, older women can share lived experience of seismic changes in gender and sexuality in Ireland since 1922. Second, they want to expand on Flanagan's (2022) doctoral work which raised important questions about the potential of older women to articulate a feminist constitution through their 'everyday activism' (Flanagan, 2022: 25). Through connecting older women's activism in contemporary Ireland, with Ireland's socio-political past, they can chart responses to and reactions against such partitions, where women's everyday responses in the private sphere provide the foundations not only for women's activism today, but valuable insights into Ireland's constitutional future. An important element of this analysis is to explore how women take up space in these borderlands.

In 'Across the Threshold: Crossing Ethno-sectarian and Gendered Borders with Domestic Theatre', Trish McTighe surveys the spatial practices and boundary crossings of a selection of domestic performances that have taken place in Belfast. Big Telly's *The House* (2021) and *The Wedding Community Play* (1999) represent provocative interventions into the nature of (feminised) private space in a post-conflict society. Situating these performances against the broader contexts of domestic performance as site-specific/ sympathetic work in the UK and Ireland and the site-specific practices of several Northern Irish theatre companies, including Big Telly, she explores how theatricalised domestic spaces become testing grounds for novel ways to share space, beyond the ethno-sectarian thresholds that have structured life in the city. These spaces offer a means, variously, to inject complexity into sclerotic social binaries, to explore new forms of hospitality in the wake of conflict and social segregation, and to find ways of dealing, artistically, with a traumatic past.

In 'Generations and Feminist Temporalities in Alice Malseed's *The Half Moon*', Shonagh Hill focuses on gendered and generational experience in Northern Ireland through analysis of Alice Malseed's 2022 play, *The Half Moon*. The play stages the lives of three generations of women from a family in the Tiger's Bay area of Belfast. Within a post-conflict society, the need to engage with community and identity beyond a simple binary is pressing. However, a conflictual binary is at the heart of sustained media focus on generational tensions: the supposed feud between Baby Boomers and 'snowflake' Millennials. Moreover, murdered journalist Lyra McKee has described the 'mocking tone' with which the generational label 'Ceasefire Babies' is used to describe those born after the Belfast/ Good Friday Agreement. Against this backdrop, exploration of *The Half Moon* will focus on generational experience in order to examine continuity and change in Northern Ireland. The paper will examine the ways in which dramatic form and theatrical space shape the domestic and private, gendered sphere, and in turn, explore the possibilities for staging feminist temporalities.

Speaker bios:

Paula Flanagan is a community activist and educator, who has worked extensively across the border region of Ireland. She has recently completed her PhD in Community Education and Development with the University of Dundee. Inspired by the women she has worked alongside over many years,

her thesis explored older women's activism in the context of Ireland as a postcolonial, patriarchal nation.

Dr. Gemma Carney is a social/cultural gerontologist on the ARK Ageing programme based at Queen's University Belfast. She has published on ageing in Ireland North and South. Her book, *Critical Questions for Ageing Societies*, co-authored by Paul Nash, University of Southern California is published by Policy Press (2020).

Trish McTighe is Lecturer in Drama at Queen's University Belfast. Her book, *The Haptic Aesthetic in Samuel Beckett's Drama*, was published with Palgrave in 2013, and she has contributed to the journals *Modern Drama*, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, and *Irish University Review*. She is theatre reviews editor for the *Journal of Beckett Studies*.

Dr Shonagh Hill is an AHRC Research Fellow at Queen's University Belfast, working on 'Feminist Temporalities and Generations in Contemporary Northern Irish Performance'. Her monograph, *Women and Embodied Mythmaking in Irish Theatre* (Cambridge UP, 2019) provides an historical overview of women's contributions to, and an alternative genealogy of, modern Irish theatre.