CHAPTER 20

Sex and Violence in Northern Irish Women's Fiction

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'Murder is respected in Ireland […] It's sex that's the real shocker.'[1]

Introduction

Northern Irish women's fiction is a contested territory. It receives relatively little critical attention and is often considered to be 'just' about domestic or intimate life. This chapter has a dual aim: to reconsider those texts, written during the Troubles, which have not received due critical attention and also to uncover the new energy in twenty-first century Northern Irish women's writing. In order to chart the development of Northern Irish women's fiction, the focus will be on two distinct moments: the mid-1980s and fiction written since 2000. Both of these periods have seen a remarkable vibrancy in creative responses which have attended to markedly different political and literary circumstances. The thematic focus that joins them is the representation of difficult, contentious subject matter (sexuality and violent acts). This chapter will explore writing by Una Woods, Linda Anderson, Brenda Murphy, Anne Devlin, Fiona Barr Bernie McGill, Lucy Caldwell and Jan Carson and others to survey a range of formal and stylistic innovation in the way that these authors deal with contested topics in often trying times.

Women's writing serves to fill the representational lacunae left by the often stereotypical images found in Northern Irish men's writing. On the limited representation of women, Margaret Ward notes that 'Popular culture has no difficulty in continuing to regard women as angels of the home, their political involvement confined to […] providing shelter for the

1 Linda Anderson, *To Stay Alive* (London: Bodley Head, 1984), 17.

fugitive." [2] These woman are confined to the domestic, and kept from political decision making. The other option for Northern Irish women is the sexualised Femme Fatale stereotype: beautiful but deadly. Jayne Steel details some of these representations in the British Press: "'Bomb Gang Beauty' […] 'Terror in Blue Jeans' […] 'Blonde Bomber'".[3] This fetishisation of women's political involvement seeks to undermine the various ways in which women were genuinely committed to action by objectifying them, as with coverage of Bernadette Devlin which focused on her mini-skirt rather than revolutionary ideals. Women's role in the conflict is seen by mainstream politics as an aberration. However, as Gerardine Meaney usefully reminded us in 1991:

> Women are not […] essentially more peaceable, less dogmatic, uninfected by blood-thirsty political ideologies. Women have been actively involved in every possible variant of both nationalism and Unionism […]Women have supported and carried out violent actions. They have gained and lost from their involvement. If patriarchal history has portrayed us as bystanders to the political process, it has lied.[4]

Or, as the officer warns his charges in Linda Anderson's novel *To Stay Alive:* 'Women, in this country at any rate, are as ruthless and as vicious as the men.'[5] Women have been both victims and perpetrators of violence, and their role as been more complex than the stereoptyped dichotomy of Angel of the House/Femme Fatale. In the fiction under consideration, a diversity of experiences is represented and women deal with both public violence of the Troubles or more private conflict in the domestic sphere and the complex ways in which these interact. However, there is currently a sense that this limited understanding of the role of women during the conflict is changing. As Sara McDowell writes:

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2 Margaret Ward, *The Missing Sex: Putting Women into History* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1991), 7.
3 Jayne Steel, "Vampira: Representations Of The Irish Female Terrorist", *Irish Studies Review*, 6 (1998), 273-284, 275.
4 Gerardine Meaney, *Sex and Nation: Women in Irish Culture and Politics* (Dublin: Attic, 1991), 15.
5 Anderson, *To Stay Alive*, 23.

> [Research] has documented the often silenced experiences of wives and mothers following the imprisonment and/or deaths of their husbands and sons […]; the violence orchestrated against women and the rupturing of private spaces and traditional boundaries […]; the participation of women in public protests and peace-building […]; and, more recently, the involvement of women in paramilitary activity.[6]

Women writers in Northern Ireland are caught in a double bind. Northern Irish male writers are not expected to simultaneously represent the specific plight of women in civil conflict, including reproductive and domestic trauma, and be also formally experimental. This attends to what Eve Patten terms in her influential essay, 'Women and Fiction 1985-1990', as the 'abnormally long'[7] adolescence of NI fiction. She laments the use of the realist mode, and critiques the limitations of not engaging with formal experimentalism. However, in Northern Irish women's fiction, the representation of these lives is a radical, experimental act when the social punishment for transgression is so severe. This lineage of using fiction to voice the unspoken of Northern Irish cultural life is unbroken in recent writing. It has taken on this mantle but also become much more formally interesting and shown a more dynamic relationship with the complexity of history and memory, with both subtle and dazzlingly sophisticated results.

'What is the colour of shame?':
Extremes of Sex and Violence in the 1980s

This section will focus on fiction written between the Hunger Strikes of 1980-81 and the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985. As the political ground shifted radically during this period, Northern Irish women's fiction engaged directly with the realities of incarceration, social taboos and street violence. However, writing about fiction of this era, Rebecca Pelan notes that 'The writers seem to be much less concerned with who is at fault than they are with representing the effects of the political conditions on women's lives.'[8] This is not to diminish

6 Sara McDowell, "Commemorating Dead 'Men': Gendering The Past And Present In Post-Conflict Northern Ireland", *Gender, Place & Culture*, 15 (2008), 335-354, 335.
7 Eve Patten, 'Women and Fiction 1985-1990', in *Krino 1986-1996*, ed. Gerald Dawe and Jonathan Williams (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1996), 7.
8 Rebecca Pelan, *Two Irelands* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 59.

their achievement, though, as these women grapple with the aftermath of violence not merely the symbolism of the act. Women writers have been unflinching when representing the abject horror and brutality of violence during the Troubles, in particular the effects of torture on the body, but also on the impact of violence on family, friends and the wider community. This violence is enacted both in public and private. The home, during the Troubles, was traditionally understood as a feminine sphere (as it was elsewhere, of course) but in women's writings it functions as a complex metonym. Extreme revulsion over doorstep shootings, home invasions and violence towards women and children posit the home as an inviolable space in Northern Irish society but women navigate the complexities of domestic space during an era of violent conflict and ask how far this space is a refuge. Domestic violence and sexual assault can ensure that home is not always the safe haven that nationalist rhetoric imagines and consider how far we can push the idea of women's domestic autonomy against the overwhelming force of patriarchal authority in Northern Irish society. The homes that are created in these novels both mirror these processes but can also offer a challenge to fictions of domesticity. In their novels, then, Northern Irish women begin to complicate the sanctity of home and family for both ideologies and show that the home can be both a unsafe site but also one of pleasure.

Una Wood's *Dark Hole Days* (1984) interweaves different narrative styles in its portrayal of two interlinked lives during the Troubles. Joe and Colette's diary entries give way to a third person narrative as they both leave the domestic sphere (Joe to get involved with violence, Colette to imagine a new, multicultural life in Birmingham). The Troubles are a part of the broader picture of life in Northern Ireland during the 1980s: the novella conveys a restless energy of disenfranchised young people. It also reflects quotidian reality of life on unemployment benefits as both characters' parents help them financially. Joe develops a strong attraction to a young woman who works in dole office because he is painfully lonely and craves intimacy but also because she treats him with dignity. Throughout the narrative, the desire for intimacy is tempered with the realisation of its difficulty in the political circumstances. When Colette meets Lin she is unsettled by her easy intimacy with her partner: 'She had her shoes off and her head was resting on Christopher's shoulder. It upsets Colette who thought, we don't do things like that in Belfast. Not in front of people.'[9] She seeks, throughout the novella, to escape and to redefine herself. She imagines possibilities but

9 Una Woods, *Dark Hole Days* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1984), 37.

these are shut down by violence: 'All the people's thoughts. Ideas floating and clashing and breaking and falling and out of the dust another spark, another thought. Another man was shot today.'[10] Her hopes and dreams of starting a new life as a Civil Servant in England are ruined by the violent act at the core of the narrative: 'We're stamped as victims now. We'll always be the victims of the troubles, and I thought I was before.' [11]

Joe is also responding to the climate of fear and uncertainly but, unlike Colette, he chooses to look inside his community and the struggle rather than imagine an alternative life for himself. He consolidates his sense of masculinity through violence, and the rhetoric of defense: 'Protection was a word he understood. It referred to people, to territory, to ideas. To be the protector, not the aggressor was to be on the side of right.'[12] But this public role is directly contrasted with Woods' representation of Joe's craving for intimacy ('At this point I wouldn't have said no to Vera and her Jim Reeves' LPs.'[13]). He creates a fantasy based on seeing the woman from the dole office in the sea at Bangor: 'She turned towards him, shyly at first and then ran, spraying water from each foot in turn, and they were laughing and holding each other in a wilderness where only they mattered […] then, looking around, he realised he had the whole beach to himself.' [14] While this scene appears to fall into the romance genre with over-wrought intimacy, it is clear that it indicates something darker than a wish for intimacy. This is the first indication that involvement in violence has caused Joe's grasp on reality to break down. This is a precursor to the technique employed so dazzlingly in No Bones by Anna Burns as Joe separates himself from the horrors of violence by retreating into his mind and seeking to hide himself: 'He had run away. That was why he had to go under the floorboards.'[15] His comes to him in fragments and self-justifications as he circles around the details of the crime, unsure where dreams end and his waking nightmare begins. This short, powerful novella, then, reflects the experience of victim and perpetrator but, crucially, how possibility and optimism are shut down by political violence.

10 Woods, *Dark Hole Days,* 19.
11 Woods, *Dark Hole Days,* 58.
12 Woods, *Dark Hole Days,* 45.
13 Woods, *Dark Hole Days,* 8.
14 Woods, *Dark Hole Days,* 48.
15 Woods, *Dark Hole Days,* 56.

Published in the same year, *To Stay Alive* by Linda Anderson also deals with the violence and brutality of the Troubles through a juxtaposition of men and women's experiences. The sense of disaffection of Woods' novella is present, but augmented through a focus on the reproductive bodies of women and the victimised bodies of men. The novel both uses the language of violence throughout and depicts violence enacted against a wide range of victims, beginning with a dog shot for target practice ('Death. Nothing but death. The whole fucking city. A necropolis.' [16] Rosaleen's dissatisfaction with her shotgun marriage to Danny, a medical student, is magnified as the loyalties of their small community close in around them and she seeks succor in the arms of a British soldier. Throughout the narrative, Anderson highlights Rosaleen's desires, and how she must temper them to assuage her husband's ego: 'It was her lovemaking that made him uneasy. There was a physical readiness in her, something frank and voluptuous. He likes to hold her for a long time with her clothes on. He wanted some resistance.'[17] In this novel, her desire is considered as much of a destabilising force in their lives as the political conflict. Her husband, throughout, repeatedly brings up her teenage crush who 'had a shifting harem of girls upon whom he inflected his poems and sexual experiments'[18], and Rosaleen is often preoccupied with the disjuncture between her feigned coyness and raw, authentic sexuality. Sex and violence are acutely conflated in her relationship with Gerry, as his obsession begins with seeing her picture at a security briefing and becomes heightened as he hears stories of the dangers of taboo encounters: '"Irish men piss on soldiers' tarts", he remembered, and in that moment, desire flooded him. His prick stiffened and twitched like a diving rod over sudden water.' [19] Their lovemaking is fierce and sudden, and takes the reader quite by surprise, as they initiate intercourse in a cemetery. Despite this charged beginning, he develops a real love for her, and is determined to please her sexually, in one of the few depictions of cunnilingus in Northern Irish fiction: 'He dropped to his knees and raised her night-dress, covering her thighs with kisses and then gently pressing his mouth to her vulva.'[20]. This act of love is strikingly written as an intimate, caring interlude in a novel that is otherwise deeply unsentimental about depicting the most grotesque violence.

16 Anderson, *To Stay Alive*, 7.
17 Anderson, *To Stay Alive*, 12.
18 Anderson, *To Stay Alive*, 7.
19 Anderson, *To Stay Alive*, 27.
20 Anderson, *To Stay Alive*, 191.

The Female Line, edited by Ruth Hooley and published by the Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement, is a striking collection among Irish anthologies of the period. Hooley has collected writing from women from across Northern Ireland which spans genres, but for the purposes of this essay the focus will be the rich selection of short stories. There are 20 prose pieces in the volume, which range from short monologues to extracts from novels. The editor asserts that the publication 'is not putting forward a particular viewpoint or political slant. [It] is feminist in that the book is a women-only publication.' [21] However, one might argue that it is not only this act of anthologising that is feminist, but rather the inclusion of such a diverse range of female experiences which often shatter social and moral taboos. Hooley notes that the thematic preoccupations of the anthology are 'family and personal life' but that these writers often move beyond the 'limitations of the domestic situation' towards themes of 'escape, of the imagination, and more particularly the birth of the self as an independent, political being.' [22] Hooley notes that in Northern Ireland relatively 'few female authors find their way onto reading lists for higher and further education courses.' [23] This collection seeks, powerfully, to move beyond these localised narratives and present some experiences which are common to women across cultures and some which speak to the experiences of women in wartime. While, naturally, the quality varies over the course of the volume, this is a vital document of women's voices which have been lost from the historical narrative.

All of the stories by Brenda Murphy in the collection centre on the experience of violence in and of the body. The first, 'The Curse', is focused on a girl who takes her period in a cell before interrogation. The physical effects are detailed in visceral detail: 'She lay huddled, knees drawn up, face to the wall, eyes closed to block out the constantly burning light […] She coughed and felt the ooze, the familiar ooze, the heat, the wetness'. The violence of the pain is clearly expressed in language like 'ache', 'spasms' and 'burning'. [24] Of course, interrogations in Northern Ireland have been criticised for their use of extreme physical methods[25] but this story foregrounds the eventual interrogation with the additional bodily

21 Ruth Hooley, *The Female Line* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement, 1985), 1.
22 Hooley, *The Female Line*, 1.
23 Hooley, *The Female Line*, 1.
24 Brenda Murphy, 'The Curse', *The Female Line*, edited by Ruth Hooley (Belfast: Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement, 1985), 40.
25 For more on this, see Allen Feldman's *Formations of violence: The narrative of the body and political terror in Northern Ireland* (University of Chicago Press, 1991) and Huw

pressures on women prisoners. The male guard reacts to her with 'disgust' and exclaims "Have you no shame?" to which she does not directly react but thinks 'What is the colour of shame? All she could see was red as it trickled down her leg.'[26] Despite the guard trying to silence her, she continues to express her physical needs, and this leads to the slamming of the cell door and being left for hours while filthy and bleeding. The protagonist tries to appeal for some shared humanity from a female prison guard: 'You know what it's like when you have your period' [27] but is met with a blocked toilet and no soap, hot water or towel. The female officer ignores her, demonstrating that, in Northern Ireland, questions of role in the national struggle triumph feminist concord. Pelan notes that apart 'from an intense sense of confinement and powerlessness, Murphy's story addresses two problematic aspects of gender politics in Northern Ireland: what women are permitted to speak about, and the failed notion of female solidarity.' [28] At no point in the story does Murphy's narrator explain what part she has taken in the conflict, but we know this is not her first time being subject to interrogation. It sheds light on those experiences which are outside of the traditional narrative of the 'struggle' and offers a reminder of what women endured while keeping their mouths shut.

In her story, 'Happy Birth Day', Murphy examines the physical violence and pleasures of the maternity ward and motherhood, beginning by drawing on the story of Eve and the poisoned apple. The narrator details the pain of birth: 'I feel it will rip open the seams of my skin. I will burst like some human tomato […] It's coming out, but it's taking my insides with it. I am consumed now by the urge to push and eject.'[29] This desire to expel the invader is sharply contrasted with the overwhelming sensations of seeing her baby girl's tiny hands and feeling the baby latch on to her breast for the first time. The love she feels for the child is presented as powerfully immediate: 'I fall in love. It has caught me unawares […] A blood-stained, purple-faced little bastard and I love her instantly.' [30] In this story, the juxtaposition of extreme pain and love is outside of the traditional Irish trope of sainted motherhood, as Murphy voices the pain, terror and joy that are part of the experience of life-giving. Murphy's

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Bennett's. "'Smoke Without Fire'? Allegations Against the British Army in Northern Ireland, 1972–5", *Twentieth Century British History* 24.2 (2013): 275-304.
26 Murphy, 'The Curse', 40,
27 Murphy, 'The Curse', 41.
28 Murphy, 'The Curse', 73.
29' Brenda Murphy, 'Happy Birth Day', *The Female Line*, edited by Ruth Hooley (Belfast: Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement, 1985), 93.
30 Murphy, 'Happy Birth Day', 93.

final story in the collection, 'Limbo', shows that she can represent the exquisite pain of desire as well as the horrors of the maternity ward and interrogation cell. Like the previous stories, it focuses the narrative around physical sensations rendered in detail. The narrator leaves her bed unmade and wallows in it to try to 'preserve a while they joy I've had there.' [31] In the story, barely half a page long, Murphy conveys a woman with a troubled mind who cannot settle herself and is agitated and fearful yet capable of remarkable passion: 'This human skin I'm in contains all those emotions, good and bad. It can still surprise me with sudden outbursts of love and lust. Lust for the same person I've loved for years.' [32] All three stories foreground the body as a contested site and overtly come back to the body as permeable barrier covered by skin as a fragile container. Particularly in 'Limbo' and 'Happy Birth Day', the body offers pleasure and possibility alongside the traditional narrative of suffering.

The prolific writer Anne Devlin's contribution to the collection, 'Five Notes After a Visit', considers the power of 'crossing the water' as a Catholic emigrant returns to Northern Ireland after her Protestant partner gets a teaching job. The 'notes' are punctuated with departure gate exchanges as the security forces aim to make sense of the narrator's identity: 'There was a bomb in Oxford Street yesterday. Some of your countrymen.' [33] Two potent shadows hang over the narrative: her lover's ex-wife, who is depicted as unstable, and the omnipresent hum of the conflict. Devlin emphasises carefully the everyday ways in which the violence of the Troubles impacts on the narrator's family: 'There is barbed wire on the flowerbeds in my father's garden. A foot patrol trampled his crocuses last spring.' [34] She is constantly alert to danger, but is eventually given away and rethinks all the moment which might have revealed her identity, whether her name on a letter or picking Liverpool in the football pools. The threat is clear, but is not taken seriously by the police: 'Send your Fenian girlfriend back where she belongs, or we'll give her the works and then you.'[35] Following the threat, she returns to England ('The busker is playing a love song. I am shopping again for one' [36]) but the sense of alertness follows her off the plane as she is immediately paranoid that she is

31 Brenda Murphy, 'Limbo', *The Female Line*, edited by Ruth Hooley (Belfast: Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement, 1985), 136,
32 Murphy, 'Limbo', 136.
33 Anne Devlin, 'Five Notes after a Visit', *The Female Line*, edited by Ruth Hooley (Belfast: Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement, 1985), 60.
34 Devlin, 'Five Notes after a Visit', 61.
35 Devlin, 'Five Notes after a Visit', 64.
36 Devlin, 'Five Notes after a Visit', 67.

being watched and that the milkman poses a threat. Again, she is confined and trapped, but this time of her own making. Devlin successfully depicts a woman unravelling as the IRA's campaign of commercial targets in the UK draws closer ('There were 14 people killed in London, in a bomb in a store') until the final, grave 'note': 'No day. Nodate 1984. I keep myself awake all night so I am ready when they come.' [37] We do not know who the 'they' are, whether the Loyalists who threatened her or the violence which encroaches on every part of her life. This story reveals a woman who loses her relationship, career and possibly sanity due to political violence.

'Reading' identity takes on a different shape to the constant questioning of 'Five Notes' in Fiona Barr's remarkable short story 'The Wall-Reader', in which a middle-class life is rent asunder by one small transgression. The story, mostly focalised through Mary, a new mother, is about the dangers inherent in interpreting the conflict and the ways in which behaviour is controlled and maintained in Northern Irish society. It begins with a barrage of questions and thoughts about the subjects and authors of Belfast graffiti, with the protagonist determined to 'make sense' of the slogans and, by extension, the conflict. The city is a dystopian landscape: 'Dilapidated houses, bricked-up terraces. Rosy cheeked soldiers, barely out of school and quivering with high-pitched fear.' [38] Barr emphasises the different experiences in Northern Ireland: 'The 'Troubles', as they were euphemistically called, remained for this couple as a remote, vaguely irritating wart on their life. They were simple ordinary […] middle class […] Each day their lives followed the same routine.' [39] The protagonist's world is clear demarcation and orientated towards avoiding trouble: 'Life was self-contained, the couple often declare, just like flats. No need to go outside.' [40] However, the protagonist hankers for something more, fantasising about her own name appearing on a wall, thus 'declaring her existence worthwhile'.[41] Barr carefully details her dissatisfaction with her role, and her excitement at what lies beyond her guardian wall, the men 'almost sexual in their arrogance and hatred.' [42] While understanding that her hobby ('Respectable housewives don't read

37 Devlin, 'Five Notes after a Visit', 67.
38 Fiona Barr, 'The Wall Reader', *The Female Line*, edited by Ruth Hooley (Belfast: Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement, 1985), 82.
39 Barr, 'The Wall Reader', 83.
40 Barr, 'The Wall Reader', 85.
41 Barr, 'The Wall Reader', 83.
42 Barr, 'The Wall Reader', 82.

walls!'[43]) is taboo, she continues her voyeurism. In this story, the housewife's malaise detailed by Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique* collides with middle-class fetishism of the violence of the Troubles. Mary marks her daughter's developmental steps alongside the intransigence of the Troubles in the 1980s:

> New political solutions had been proposed and rejected, inter-paramilitary feuding had broken out and subsided, four soldiers and two policemen had been blown to smithereens in separate incidents, and a building a day had been bombed by the Provos. It had been a fairly normal month by Belfast's standards. The level of violence was no more or less acceptable than at other times. [44]

Pelan asserts that the 'woman's boredom, suffocation and her need to escape is enforced throughout the story.'[45] Similar to Murphy's story, the physicality of pregnancy and the overwhelming love is emphasised but also linked to themes of confinement. Mary is similarly uncomfortable with her pregnancy but also falls in love with her daughter instantly, hoping that her daughter will have more chances in life as 'she felt all her hopes and desires for a better life become one with the child's struggle for freedom.'[46] Ronald McDonald notes that 'In particular, the Irish short story form, from Joyce to Trevor, has a tradition of treating claustrophobia, inertia, tedium, punctuated by a moment of insight or epiphany. This opposition could be regarded as encapsulating the condition of living through the Troubles, with the drudgery of day-to-day life torn apart by occasional eruptions of violence.'[47] However, this 'claustrophobic, inertia, tedium' is even more acutely expressed in the writing of Northern Irish women as they negotiate their limited position.

As with Anderson's novel, transgressive relationships in Northern Irish women's fiction focus on female experiences. The tension in this story is between how women's life experiences were limited due to the Troubles and curiosity about the outside world as she enters into a conversational relationship with a British soldier: 'It was a meeting of minds, as

43 Barr, 'The Wall Reader', 83.
44 Barr, 'The Wall Reader', 86.
45 Pelan, *Two Irelands*, 82.
46 Barr, 'The Wall Reader', 87.
47 Ronan McDonald, 'Strategies of silence: colonial strains in short stories of the Troubles'., *The Yearbook of English Studies* (2005), 249-263, 253.

she explained later to her husband, a new opinion, a common bond, an opening of vistas.' [48] This bond occurs by sharing common experiences, from child-rearing to stories of the landscape of home. This domestic space is violated as her behaviour leads to the epithet TOUTS being daubed on their wall. Throughout the story, Barr renders the city as an active part of the narrative, often imagining the buildings eavesdropping. Chief in this story is the desire to write and to be written about, and to ask questions of who gets: 'She wanted to be remembered by writing on walls, about them that is, a world-shattering thesis on their psychological complexities, their essential truths.'[49] Importantly, it is unclear whether the blame for Mary's disaffection lies with her role in patriarchal society or with the quietism that is central to staying safe during violent conflict. Like Devlin's story, this ends with a journey out of Northern Ireland in an attempt to escape the culture of surveillance, fear and the policing of behaviour. The stories in *The Female Line*, then, emphasise the double bind of Northern Irish women during the Troubles as they are not only subject to the prevailing codes of sectarian community formation but also to the dictates of their role in patriarchal society. Ronan McDonald notes that the story adds a 'patriarchal dimension to the persecution and muteness of the heroines profitably complicates a one-dimensional understanding of political oppression in terms of sectarian supremacy.' [50] In exposing the transgressive, in writing back, these women explored vital, difficult issues. It is a shame that other fictions were taken to be more representative of Northern Irish experiences at the time. In this vital time of re-negotiation of political boundaries, this fiction acts a rich document for a generation of women, lost to louder voices.

'She was always bracing herself': Navigating 'Post'-Conflict Sex and Violence

This century has already seen a remarkable flowering of Northern Irish women's fiction against the backdrop of devolved government and the continued efforts to solidify the work of the Good Friday Agreement (1998). Deirdre Madden, following the success of her classic troubles novels *Hidden Symptoms* (1986) and *One by One in the Darkness* (1996) continues

48 Barr, 'The Wall Reader', 85.
49 Barr, 'The Wall Reader', 85.
50 McDonald, 'Strategies of Silence', 258.

to publish challenging novels into the twenty-first century. Anna Burns' dazzlingly inventive *No Bones* (2001) deals with taboo issues in a formally complex novel. More recently, Claire McGowan has published her Paula McGuire novels to critical and commercial success and examples of striking new fiction published recently by women includes Bernie McGill's *The Butterfly Cabinet* (2011), Michèle Forbes' *Ghost Moth* (2013), Bethany Dawson's *My Father's House* (2013) and Kelly Creighton's *The Bones of Us* (2015). These novels share the thematic concern of breaking apart the veneer of domestic civility of the venerated Northern Irish family. They often present intimacy as dark, troubling and fraught with danger for women.

A singular fictional voice to emerge in this period is Lucy Caldwell, born in Belfast but who has lived in England for most of her adult life. Her first novel *Where They Were Missed* (2006) examines the violence of the troubles through the eyes of two young girls, whose adolescent longings are set against the backdrop of political violence that they barely understand. The first chapters offer a sharp contrast between the 'harsh sounds of bombs and guns and ballyclavas[51], lambeg drums, sectarian abuse and Army helicopters and the Irish songs and stories their Mother tells them in hushed voice. The girls are only ever given a partial glimpse at the violence as they overhear stories told by adults or see on the news images of 'men dressed all in black with big black balaclavas pulled down over their faces and only little slits for their eyes.'[52] As the violence spirals, so does her mother's descent into madness. The escapist fairy-tales she tells become increasingly dark as she becomes more detached: she describes 'some great, unspeakable sadness […] it lingered and clung in corners, pooling like mist in the spaces that people left behind as they turned their backs.'[53] The second part of the novel, set in Donegal, presents us with the impact of this violence-blighted childhood but also an attempt by Saoirse to make sense of her mother's mental illness by learning more about her. She discovers about her pre-marriage activism: 'Civil Rights was your mother's burning passion.'[54] Like Caldwell's other novels, this presents the theme of story-telling as Saoirse tries to make sense of both the stories she has been told about her mother and the stories told by her mother. The novel examines the way in which we integrate the disparate facets of our memories and identity. For Saoirse, her positive family

[51] Lucy Caldwell, *Where They Were Missed* (London: Viking, 2006), 41.
[52] Caldwell, *Where They Were Missed*, 24.
[53] Caldwell, *Where They Were Missed*, 46.
[54] Caldwell, *Where They Were Missed*, 104.

memories intertwine with the violence of the troubles and she seeks to reconcile the disparate parts of her mixed-religious background. In a former Anglo-Irish 'big house', her mother convalesces among women who have had similar experiences: 'A lot of our ladies have had terrible traumas in their pasts, and it's in the peacefulness we have here that they find a degree of redemption.'[55] Saoirse achieves her eponymous freedom when he refuses the stories told by and about her family, and sets about creating a new integrated version of her identity which is grounded in her complex past but looks out to the horizon.

Caldwell's second novel, *The Meeting Point* (2011) deals with themes of faith, monogamy and sensuality set against the violent conflict between the West and the Middle East that followed the attacks of September 11th, 2001. A Christian couple from Northern Ireland move to Bahrain but the wife, Ruth, believes that her husband is doing pastoral work when he intends 'to smuggle Bibles into Saudi Arabia.'[56] In small, intimate ways their relationship begins to unravel as Ruth feels vulnerable and distant from her husband as 'Something in her has cracked. A hairline fissure, invisible to the eye.'[57] Their relationship, once so passionate that they abandoned their principles to have pre-marital sex ('the quiet guilt each felt at not having waited until their wedding night'[58] descends into separate lives and infrequent sex. Ruth turns to a local man, Farid, and Caldwell's depiction of their interactions is playful and sensual, particularly her description of Ruth's new experiences of Middle Eastern foods and the markets. One encounter with Farid and a pomegranate leaves Ruth obsessively thinking about knowledge and betrayal in the story of Adam and Eve in the garden: 'She touches her tongue tip to the back of her hand; the sourness of it glisters. Farid submerges the fruit in water for a few minutes, then lifts it out and begins peeling back skins of white membrane, twisting and pushing out clusters of seeds'.[59] She describes her intense lust for Farid as something she has never experienced before. It is something bodily, that she cannot control: 'She feels it low in her sacrum, her pelvis, dark, hidden places: a dull, pulsing ache. She has never felt desire like this before. She has never been so miserable in her life.'[60] Throughout the novel, desire and pain are interlinked and this is rendered in vivid, biblical language. Often, narratives of sexual guilt are rendered in a Catholic context but Caldwell demonstrates how vividly such repressive taboos exist in the Northern Irish Protestant Evangelical

[55] Caldwell, *Where They Were Missed*, 177.
[56] Lucy Caldwell, *The Meeting Point* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), 39.
[57] Caldwell, *The Meeting Point*, 62.
[58] Caldwell, *The Meeting Point*, 6.
[59] Caldwell, *The Meeting Point*, 181.
[60] Caldwell, *The Meeting Point*, 231.

community. The traditional story of deception and betrayal is heightened due to both this and the Middle Eastern setting, which leads to the novel's rich and powerful depiction of sexuality. All of Caldwell's novels are concerned with aftermaths, and this one examines how lost loves live on: 'The pain has risen until it was almost unbearable, a noise rather than a sensations, a howling, hopeless shriek […] It is not a real wound: just the ghost of an old one.'[61] In this novel, then, emotional pain and lustful feelings are shown to be physical, embodied sensations.

Themes from Caldwell's earlier novels are echoed in her third, All the Beggars Riding (2013) which is set in London but takes in experiences from Belfast, Chernobyl and the West Indies. The violence of the troubles intrudes on her English life in the precarious situation of her duplicitous surgeon father. Like her previous novels, a secret is uncovered which has painful consequences but eventually leads to something like liberation. At the beginning of the novel, Lara Moorhouse is grieving for the breakdown of a relationship and her family: 'Feeling, more and more each day that the escape routes out of your current life are rapidly closing down around you'[62]. The novel will centre, like her previous works, around the attempt to construct a personal narrative following trauma: 'Even our own stories, we're unequipped and essentially unable to tell'[63]. Memory is an unstable volatile force in the novel, and quite distinct from the process of crafting fiction. As Lara begins to understand her past, the impulse to recreate it exactly falls away, and she turns instead to the story of her neighbour Mr Rawalpindi and his experiences of immigration from the West Indies and forbidden homosexual conquests. Caldwell's novel extols the virtues of turning outwards from an obsessive recreation of your own narrative towards a reconsideration of the humanity of others. The catalyst for this is a trip to Belfast, which once represented so much pain and trauma to her family: 'If you don't know Belfast, if all you know of it is the litany of murders and maimings, the annual images of marching and rioting, the hardened male voices defending or accusing on the radio, there's nothing to prepare you for how beautiful it is.'[64]

The stories in Caldwell's collection, *Multitudes* (2016), are loosely focused on the theme of coming-of-age and have associations with Northern Ireland, but they are a steep departure from both Caldwell's earlier fiction and previous Troubles writing by women. The conflict isn't foregrounded but is barely there, in traces rather than as a narrative catalyst or backdrop.

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[61] Caldwell, *The Meeting Point*, 401.
[62] Lucy Caldwell, *All The Beggars Riding* (London: Faber and Faber), 74.
[63] Caldwell, *All The Beggars Riding*, 123.
[64] Caldwell, *All The Beggars Riding*, 209.

The stories take place at various times: broadly from the 1990s to the contemporary moment, and are dense in both nostalgic detail and an acute eye for the violence of adolescence and the complex process of negotiating a burgeoning sexuality. 'Thirteen' is a painfully bittersweet account of the pain and pleasure of adolescent longing which is heavy with references to 1990s Northern Irish teenage girlhood ('Strawberry lip balm from The Body Shop or Take That keyring from Athena' [65], or 'her breath warm and damp, reeking and Juicy Fruit and cheese and onion Tayto'[66]). When the narrator is peer pressured into kissing a group of boys and then sexually assaulted, she is ostracised and bullied at school for this supposedly promiscuous behavior. As a result she seeks friendship with a fellow social outcast, Jacqueline. Throughout, their sexuality is uncertain and performative, often based on knowledge from magazines, such as More's 'Position of the Fortnight'. [67] When they meet some young men in the park, one takes advantage of Jacqueline being intoxicated ('completely stocious'[68]) and we are unsure whether the narrator has been physically ill because of the alcohol or unwanted digital penetration. But this is not, however, a diatribe against the evils of teenage sexuality but the narrative moves instead to a contrast between this unwanted teenage sexual experiences and a clear depiction of female desire as the narrator dreamily remembers a stolen kiss with her friend's brother: 'But his lips are pillowy and soft, softer than I've ever imagined a boy's lips can be, and the kiss is perfect, a long, slow pull of a kiss. Afterwards, he inches his sleeping bag even closer to mine, and we lie there holding hands for what seems like hours.' [69] There are depictions of the power of young female sexual desire throughout the volume, particularly in the 'Poison' but also in 'Here We Are', where Caldwell represents lesbian sexuality as a joyous, unselfconscious pleasure. Caldwell was adamant that the sensuality in this story had a distinct narrative purpose":

> It was evident to me that there needed to be a sex scene: the relationship is a sexual one, and consummation of the relationship seemed essential. The fact of writing a sex scene between two schoolgirls, such an 'obvious' trope of male, heteronormative fantasy made me very wary of being, or seeming, titillating; at the same time, I didn't want to be coy.[70]

65 Lucy Caldwell, *Multitudes* (London: Faber 2016), 20.
66 Caldwell, *Multitudes*, 19.
67 Caldwell, *Multitudes*, 21.
68 Caldwell, *Multitudes*, 33.
69 Caldwell, *Multitudes*, 35.
70 Email interview with author, May 2016.

Other stories, such as 'Killing Time' and 'Escape Routes' are unflinching accounts of the pain of adolescence. These two strands, then, of desire and pain are entwined in the bittersweet 'Through the Wardrobe', as a young transgender woman navigates growing up in a developing male body she repudiates. She only has her sister's wardrobes and fairytales for comfort, with the latter's 'thought of all the people trapped inside bodies they can't control or even move, victims of some wicked spell.' [71] The small indignities are carefully rendered by Caldwell, from the discomfort at drag performer May McFettridge to the first pubic hairs of adolescence. The narrator's parents are exceptionally supportive and the story ends on a complex note of both the arduous process of transitioning but also a note of pure hope: 'because no matter what it takes and no matter how long it takes, you will come through.'[72] 'Cyprus Avenue' is also, eventually, a beautifully optimistic story of reconciliation through cultural exchange. It explores the experience of a Northern Irish emigre whose trips home are grudging until a childhood acquaintance, Nirupam Chaudry, brings back both shameful memories of racism in a Belfast playground but also gives her the possibility of appreciating home, particularly 'the starlings that mass and swoop above the east of the city in the evenings.' [73]

The most striking development in recent Northern Irish fiction has been the growth of and innovation in the short story form. As well as Caldwell's collection, the anthology *The Long Gaze Back* (2015) features stories by Charlotte Riddell, June Caldwell, Anne Devlin, Lucy Caldwell and Bernie McGill and the *The Glass Shore* (2016) focuses exclusively on Northern Irish women. This development, as we will see, offers a diversity of viewpoints and narrative techniques and, importantly, allows the lines of connection between Northern Irish lives to be deftly drawn. McDonald notes that 'the short story form both reflects the problems of articulation and representation within that fractious political situation and, with its characteristically wry, elliptical point of view, can be a subversive strategy of understatement.'[74] This imperative, while palpable during times of extreme violence, is arguably as vital now as Northern Irish women respond in creative ways to the changed political landscape through fictions which are by turns sensual, devastating and surreal.

71 Caldwell, *Multitudes*, 93.
72 Caldwell, *Multitudes*, 99.
73 Caldwell, *Multitudes*, 153.
74 McDonald, 'Strategies of Silence', 249.

Bernie McGill explores the possibilities of the short story in her potent volume *Sleepwalkers*. There are a variety of cultural encounters and settings in her novel: it is clear that this Northern Irish short story collection is remarkably outward looking. While loss is often at the centre of McGill's stories, they are also, in places, ripe with sensuality. In particular, landscapes are vividly rendered, from the South of France, Ancona and Andalusia to the Northern Irish coasts. Food, sex and everyday pleasures are explored alongside pain and haunting. The first, 'Home', tells the story of woman who seeks solace from a personal tragedy by escaping to the French coast and having an affair with a younger American man ('She can feel the hairs on his legs against the damp skin of her thighs' [75]). This pleasure is set directly against a vivid retelling of the family accident. In 'The Language Thing', a young teaching assistant meets with a friend from Ireland while they are both on European placement. McGill builds up a picture of details, particularly culinary and domestic, that capture the uncertainty of the protagonist's place and this is compounded by the flashes of violence she sees in dispatches from home ('She doesn't have much Italian but the pictures need no translating. You see a body on the ground, a priest on his knees, catch the word 'Belfast', before the boys close in.' [76] The women attempt to distract some persistent men by speaking prayers in Irish to each other, but the newspaper images persist, despite nostalgic reminiscences on Belfast ('the leaves on University Square in October, the echo of your heels on the tiles when you walk through the Lanyon at night.'[77] In 'No Angel', a daughter is haunted by thoughts of her dead brother and father but the latter spectre is keener on dispensing mundane fatherly advice than rattling chains. The narrator discusses the violence she experienced: 'The eighties were a nervous time, and things were worse after something big: Loughgall, Enniskillen, Milltown, Ballygawley.' [78] Her father insists on his son having an open casket following his violent death so mourners can 'look and know what animals we're living amongst.' [79] Following this act of defiance and reprisals, Annie is relieved that the violence in the city is, by contrast, not 'personal […] Not like a dark car in your own yard at night' [80]. McGill's stories are not all conventional Troubles narratives, indeed one would have to carefully read the signifiers in a few of them to know that legacy which hangs over

75 Bernie McGill, *Sleepwalkers* (Belfast: Whittrick, 2013), 21
76 McGill, *Sleepwalkers,* 35.
77 McGill, *Sleepwalkers,* 37.
78 McGill, *Sleepwalkers,* 43.
79 McGill, *Sleepwalkers,* 43.
80 McGill, *Sleepwalkers,* 45.

them. Indeed, this is a book of aftermaths: after deaths, illness and love. It is collection that deals with carrying the past while fully embracing each detail of the present: of bearing witness to violence, accepting that it colours the present but still drinking in every detail of life. McGill's stories echo what the narrator of 'Islander' imagines her unborn child is telling her: 'We carry the living, and we do whatever it takes to wake the dead.' [81]

Jan Carson's remarkable short story collection *Children's Children* (2016) explores themes of birth, adolescence, sex and death. The stories are playful and experimental in style, and range from lightly absurdist to dazzlingly fantastical. The stories are, generally, difficult to place temporally but it is clear that they mostly take place in and around Belfast. The problems of intimacy are present throughout, and childhood and child-rearing are simultaneously de-mystified and made fantastical. In 'We've Got Each Other and That's a Lot', scammers exploit infertile couples to the soundtrack of Bon Jovi and in 'Contemporary Uses for a Belfast Box Room' a couple deals with unwanted offspring. Several stories feature parents haunted by dead children ('In Feet and Gradual Inches', 'How They Were Sitting When Their Wings Fell Off', and 'Alternative Units'). In the latter, the supernatural exists side by side with the domestic banality of IKEA tubs in the utility room, the bearing of an everyday spectre parsed as 'I didn't ask for a ghost child.' [82] In 'Larger Ladies', a Polish migrant struggles as a single parent in Belfast and finds work tending to women who undergo an extreme weight loss therapy. The women, at their husbands' behest, are anaethistsed for months and vibrated, and Sonja finds their vulnerability comforting: 'They were without make-up in this room, which to say they were defenceless, and also without wigs and false nails and fake tans, without the corsets and girdles and hold-your-belly-in pants they never left home without.' [83] She compares this with the obesity problem of Belfast's men, and suggests they are critical but not self-aware: ' "What is wrong with men in this country? […] They are always wanting their women to be someone else. They are never looking at themselves in the mirror."' [84] The internal, private world of the sleeping women, who she

81 McGill, *Sleepwalkers,* 71.
82 Jan Carson, *Children's Children* (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2016), 159.
83 Carson, *Children's Children,* 11.
84 Carson, *Children's Children,* 22.

describes to her son as 'Mermaids', is contrasted with the masculine outside world: 'Living in Belfast made her twitchy. There were noises everywhere: helicopters, sirens, young men swearing at each other sharply in the street. She was always bracing herself.' [85] Her bond with her son runs parallel with this: she is deeply troubled as he begins to navigate his masculinity through external contact. However, it is clear that despite this dichotomy, Carson's stories brim over with affection for the men of Belfast. A distinct empathy towards the changing nature of matrimonial dynamics is clear in 'Swept' and the emotional life of men is evident during the funeral which begins 'Dinosaur Act', where the narrator describes 'big men with damp skin and proper suits, kept good for funerals and marching.'[86] In this story, the love of Sandra for her husband is raw: 'It was physical like the need for bread, or sometimes, after eating bacon, a Coca Cola, like the times she'd kept herself from Jim before and after the children, too sore to allow him close, too raw to bear his absence.'[87] Her grief is torrid, passionate and all-consuming. It operates on varied objects and demonstrates a palpable emotional and erotic bond beyond that contrasts sharply with the lack of expression.

In Carson's stories, the extremes of pain and pleasure often sit comfortably against the supernatural and the quotidian. 'Floater' features a sexual encounter in an airplane bathroom that is unsatisfying for our female narrator and features a few pointed jabs at her large frame by her erstwhile lover. This results in a weightless, floating child who is eventually untethered by her mother: 'Do not blame yourself. Blame the airplane bathroom and your father, who was only there for the easy part.' [88] 'Shopping' tells the story of a torrid (yet unconsummated) affair among the frozen food aisle in Knocknagoney Tesco: 'evil things had grown inside me and were leaking out: doubt, lies, premeditated lust and an almost insatiable lust for cocktail sausages.' [89] Their intimacy is conducted through putting items in each other's baskets, hands brushing in the frozen food aisle and a shared box of Magnum Ice Creams. The excitement dims when she realises he 'was a civil servant in a BHS pullover, getting the groceries in. He was somebody's husband, much like my own, but thinner.' [90] The collection ends with a story of love and duty, 'Children's Children', were a woman from 'the

85 Carson, *Children's Children,* 20.
86 Carson, *Children's Children,* 169.
87 Carson, *Children's Children,* 180.
88 Carson, *Children's Children,* 127.
89 Carson, *Children's Children,* 145-6.
90 Carson, *Children's Children,* 151.

south' and a man from 'the north' have accepted their fate to be 'married for the good of the island, both northern and southern sides.' [91] 'The island' is a shape-shifting entity, where people leave in droves for the 'mainland'. Rumours and misinformation about the two sections of the island circle around the protagonists' youth, and as they progress towards marriage they 'could not settle upon a side, for the land changed shape the moment you crossed the border' [92]. Both solutions, to move North or to move South, are deemed precarious to the balance on the island and they contemplate abandoning their duty to marry and procreate in favour of something potentially more generative: 'They held their silence reverently and wondered if they loved the island enough to be neither north nor south, foreigner or familiar, but rather a brave new direction, balanced like a hairline fractured in the centre of everything.'[93] This ending of the collection, then, acts as a metaphor for Carson's balancing act throughout, as her quotidian absurdism is neither 'foreigner nor familiar'. Her work is radical and shape-shifting like the island, and throughout borders are navigated and broken, whether formally or between fantasy and reality. This 'brave new direction' accommodates the power of intimacy and the afterlives of loved ones without a hint of cliche, and wears the Belfast setting lightly. In these stories of sex, death, love and loss, there is often fluid boundaries between the acutely pleasurable and the horribly painful and in Carson's curios we find a newly to do justice to the wealth of experiences of Northern Irish men, women and children.

Conclusion

From the darkest days of the Troubles until the present day, women have been unafraid to discuss sex and violence with bravery, curiosity and literary inventiveness. Despite being repeatedly elided from canons of Northern Irish literature and political discourse, they have continued to express the most complexity and difficulty of their situations with often the blackest humour. These women are united by their compelling representation and reclamation of the body: not as a sculpted, inert political imago but the lived body. These bodies can be riven with anxiety, bleeding and bruised or perpetrators of atrocity. But, equally, they can be

91 Carson, *Children's Children*, 184.
92 Carson, *Children's Children*, 190.
93 Carson, *Children's Children*, 190.

centres of pleasure. To read Northern Irish women's fiction is to read the richness that is often left out of narratives of the Troubles and after: the interrelation of the public and private spheres, the moments of joy and, vitally, how the body politic might recover.

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