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**Things don't seem right: The Affective and Institutional  
Politics of Writing about the North of Ireland from the North of England<sup>i</sup>**

To write about Northern Ireland is to be always in the middle of something. This can be the middle of an ongoing, rapidly changing political situation. It can involve navigating a path through the intersections of different academic disciplines. You might be in the middle of an argument of whether you should even call it 'Northern Ireland' or 'the North of Ireland' (Dwyer Hogg 2018, O'Neill 2020). It is this idea of betweenness that I want to poke around in during this chapter. What I am interested in, then, is how this in-betweenness *feels*. I write as a mid-career, newly middle-class, middling scholar. This essay is informed by ten years of working and living in the North of England while writing about, teaching, and doing public engagement activity on the literature and culture of the North of Ireland. From 2018-2023, I was also the Chair of the British Association for Irish Studies<sup>ii</sup>, an organisation with around 250 members in England, Scotland and Wales that was set up to promote understanding of Irish society and culture 'over here'. Some of our members trace a diasporic Irish heritage, some left Ireland after their doctoral degrees to take up work in British institutions and others have an intellectual interest in Irish Studies. A good proportion of these scholars work on the Troubles and 'post'-conflict cultures and, anecdotally, many of them engage in public facing activity on this research. Those of us who work on the North of Ireland do public engagement because these matters are urgent. We often decry the lack of understanding of our culture and politics at both the highest levels of government, such as former Secretary of State Karen Bradley's admission that 'I freely admit that when I started this job, I didn't understand some of the deep-seated and deep-rooted issues that there are in Northern Ireland' (Carroll 2018). While Bradley's comments were particularly notable, there are evident gaps in knowledge across the political spectrum. As we endeavour to remedy this, however, it is difficult to separate our experiences of work and life from who and what we research. The two things I am concerned with in this essay is how institutional cultures affect how we relate to our Northern Irish research and how this relates to our experiences as people with histories and bodies. I want to gesture in towards alternatives, with an awareness of our complicity in hierarchical academic cultures and an acknowledgement that I don't have all the answers, and neither do you.

In *Living a Feminist Life* (2016), Sara Ahmed describes the moments where the individual can no longer tolerate prevailing conditions as 'snap'. While this sounds like something final, she offers

instead generative possibilities: ‘Snap, snap: the end of the line. In a feminist and queer genealogy, life unfolds from such points. Snap, snap: begin again’ (Ahmed 2016, 19). During the pandemic, with a break from old ways of working, many of us looked at the conditions around us and snapped. Institutional strictures and disciplinary cultures urgently need to be questioned if we want to find creative ways of engaging with Northern Ireland that open dialogue rather than close it down. The irony of writing this in a handbook chapter is not lost on the author but I hope this will be part of an ongoing conversation about the things we might like to do better.

### **Institutional Cultures**

It is impossible to decouple the academic research that we do from institutional cultures in which we work – if, indeed, we are fortunate enough to have paid research or teaching jobs. While the cultures within these institutions have been rightly criticised for their roots in colonial (Gopal 2021) and patriarchal (Phipps and McDonnell 2021) practises, I want to foreground specifically how the uncertainty of the twenty-first century institution impacts our ability to do good work. In the age of marketisation and ‘market exit’ in the UK, there is no such thing as a permanent job, and Irish Studies has been particularly hard hit by the vulnerabilities in the sector – from the closure of the Irish Studies programme at St Mary’s University in London to colleagues across the country facing redundancy, particularly in humanities disciplines. If you do not think this is relevant to the state of the field, I ask you to theorise about conflict transformation while being concerned about paying your rent.

Even if you are not currently at risk, then the conditions under which you do your research are also variable – time allocated to academic research varies wildly across institutions and career stages. As does the support for the practicalities of research – there is varied conference and research travel support available. You might have grant writing, budgeting, and impact teams on hand. These things matter – time matters and resources matter, especially for precariously employed and early career staff. You may be also constrained by long-term research strategy planning and wondering how your research on Northern Ireland fits into a proscribed theme. You spin your work one way to get a sabbatical, one way to get funding, you hype up the instrumental dimensions of your work even though you spend your actual writing making things complex and multi-faceted. You disrupt hegemonic accounts of the conflict but not on these forms.

For many of us, our first degree did not have Irish in the title, let alone variations on the ‘North’. We were trained in varied methodologies such as, in my own case, the literary theory and practical criticism of English Literature degrees. Most of us shift between disciplines depending on

where we publish, present, and teach. I move between contemporary literary studies, feminist theory, Irish Studies and publications more specifically focused on the North. Our allegiance to a disciplinary background varies and, indeed, can be intermittent. We may join associations to attend their conference or apply for a prize but have no real attachment to their mission.

In a clear analysis of the development of the field of study, Richard Kirkland argues that: ‘At present, to occupy the space of Irish Studies (as opposed, perhaps, to being a critic writing on Irish subjects) seems to involve holding two or three intellectual positions simultaneously’ (Kirkland 2014 66). The relationship of the critic who works on the North, then, could be argued to be even more complex, many of whom do not feel ‘at home’ in Irish Studies or work on subjects who do not consider themselves to be Irish. So, here we are, in the middle of something again. Our jobs, by and large, do not have Irish in the title. Indeed, looking at my workload spreadsheet for the forthcoming year, I roughly calculate that a third of my time is spent teaching and researching Northern Ireland – the rest is spent teaching Modernism, Contemporary Literature, Literary Theory and doing the jobs large and small that make up a full-time academic job. I am exceptionally lucky to have a full module on the North, *Alternative Ulster*, which explores how literature, film, television, and music underscore the dominant narrative of political history. This is vitally important as a space for me to work out my ideas with my students – at least one student each year on this module writes an essay that changes the way I think. But many other friends and colleagues in the field are only able to teach their specialism briefly on the team-taught survey courses that are growing in popularity in the English system - ‘Troubles week in the twentieth-century history survey course.

The most pressing material circumstance that affects scholarship is precarity. An aggressive individualism is bred into emerging scholars by a system that rewards markers of ‘world-leading excellence’ – from grant ‘capture’ to prestigious publication venues that put scholarship out of reach of everyone but University libraries, to the topics that are considered fashionable to write about. The codes of social media invite the production of a specific kind of academic self, which is more acute for those on the job market. Bernstein and Malone discuss ‘The myth of scarcity created by the ruthless over-recruitment of doctoral students in the post-2008 period’ (2021, 135) and explore forms of resistance but also set out, in painstaking detail, the way precarity shapes participation at every level of the current system. At the time of writing, the most read article on the Irish University Review’s website is ‘On Being Precarious’ from Deirdre Flynn:

We work on trains, in coffee shops, at evenings, weekends [...] And when we're not writing, and researching, we're preparing lectures for another new module in another new institution.

Or we're in the credit union asking for a loan so we can go to that 'must be seen and network at' conference (2020, 53).

While Flynn's article speaks to the specific context of Irish institutions, it is clear they resonate within neoliberal institutions in the UK, North America and beyond. In speaking out about these circumstances while she was precariously employed, Flynn commits a radical act – on precarity, as well as on the other injustices of the profession, we are expected to remain silent.

The places that we practically 'do' our work invariably alter the shape of that work as we tailor our approaches to fit our audiences. These last years have offered a space for reflection about where and how we do our scholarship. Some of the main venues for doing our work among others include the research seminar room, the panel discussion, and the keynote talk. These events often have strict rules and codes of behaviour, never mind the hierarchies of who gets invited to present. Being able to participate in traditional academic events successfully relies on having certain kinds of bodily and institutional privileges. Funding is uneven, time is uneven and the ability of a body to be in a space is uneven. For parents and carers, a conference might be the only place they have uninterrupted time with their research community. For some people with disabilities, a range of events opened up during the pandemic that were previously inaccessible that risk shutting them out again as things 're-open'. Environmental concerns are at the forefront of many people's minds. Hybrid events can be prohibitively costly for smaller organisations. These are complex questions that set twitter ablaze with debates on whether conferences are bad or good. I want us to keep discussing where exactly we do our scholarship and for whom, and what are the practical limitations and benefits of the spaces in which we move so we can build an inclusive, non-hierarchical culture around the academic discussion of Northern Ireland.

### **Bearing the Voltage**

Having thought about the practical considerations involved in researching and teaching in the twenty-first century University, I want to turn to another matter that is of material consequence – how it feels to encounter violence repeatedly in your work. To research and teach on this subject involves bearing witness to acts of violence through images and text – there is no getting away from that. I am in a seminar talking to students about the narrative uses of acts of violence in fiction – I ask them is the violent act a pivot point in this novel? Are there different levels on which violence is enacted? Are there hierarchies of violent acts and how do they interact with more traditional literary devices, like narrative voice, structure, and genre? I discuss violence on an aesthetic level, but I still remember

watching Newsline on BBC Northern Ireland in the 1990s as the ceasefires didn't hold and feel an uneasy sensation in the pit of my stomach.

Teaching, however, is a reasonably controlled environment for academics – we set the texts, select the images, and add the content notices where material has the potential to be disturbing. The academic research seminar room, less so. I think of the Belfast phrase, 'It'll harden you', which is meant to denote that a difficult situation will toughen you up. There will be calloused skin. But I kept thinking – what if you didn't want to be hardened? This figure, the Academic Hardman, reminds me of Ezra Pound's ideal figure of the imagist poet – a macho, masculine machine: 'The best artist is the machine whose machinery can stand the highest voltage. The better the machinery, the more precise, the stronger; the more exact will be the record of the voltage and of the various currents which have passed through it' (Pound, quoted in Howarth 2016, 24). In our context, the voltage is proximity to the violent act. Can you take repeated exposure to the details of violence? What do you carry home with you? I take a yoga class a few days after a particularly vexatious panel and the teacher tells me I am hunching my shoulders so high that I am wearing them like earrings. Sara Ahmed locates this sense of dislocation in physical sensations: 'A body that is not at ease in a world; a body that fidgets and moves around. Things don't seem right.' (Ahmed 2016). Many of us have techniques to deal with working on different topics - minding yourself without falling prey to the self-surveillance of the wellness economy (Mulhall 2016). We pass these short-term tactics onto our PhD students – rest as much as you can, take proper breaks, find the silliest hobbies possible. But there are times to rest and times to act – and if academic cultures repeatedly feel harmful, we must find ways to change them.

### **'More than just yours to bear'**

Many of us who work in Irish Studies have a personal connection to our subject matter. Of all the academic cultures that I have moved through, it is the one where you are most frequently and overtly read for your perceived political allegiance. I imagine that my colleagues who work on Shakespeare or Dickens don't have to repeatedly engage with the perceptions of their own politics. People have asked me prurient questions about my background or the background of my writers - 'This theory is all very well, but are they Catholic or Protestant?' There is a desire for fixity. For many, revealing how your background intersects with your research is fraught and vexed. You may not wish to give part of yourself away, there may be family secrets that are taboo or not yours to tell. In *Thin Places*, Kerri ni Dochartaigh describes the burden of having a history of violence woven into your personal biography and the taboo of speaking about it:

‘There is a weight around your neck that is much more than just yours to bear. That weight seems, at times, so feathery as to be wholly insubstantial. So light and full of nothing that you would feel ashamed to even whisper of it to another; much heavier is the weight carried by so many others’ (ni Dochartaigh 2021, 118).

It is not an unassailable marker of quality scholarship – good work can flourish whether you have a background proximate to the conflict. But there is no getting away from childhood memories of violence or stories passed down over the kitchen table. It is also a different experience to have this background and yet write about it from a remove – there is a danger that your perceptions are pickled in aspic from when you left. For years, my own teaching was frozen in time from when I left Belfast – the writing I knew and was comfortable with, the launches I had been to, the people I had spoken to. My anecdotes were out of time. I want to open the conversation, then, between those with lived experience of the conflict and those who do not but enrich our understanding of it through their work. I want us to keep space for the international scholars who write about Northern Ireland with rigour, care, and sensitivity while at the same time being respectful of the lived experience in the room and our individual capacity to bear violence.

More than once, I have been the only woman speaking at a panel or symposium on the North and heard the endless excuses. I always wondered if they didn’t notice or didn’t care, and which was worse. I can’t imagine what queer people, people of colour and those with disabilities face. If we have established that writing about the North is fraught with emotive and challenging political stances, then to speak about the North in public is to be concerned with regulating not only your own affective state but bearing the reaction of people around you. While those who work with oral history, psychology or in sociology are often afforded training in engaging with people who have experienced violence, this does not extend across the humanities. Often, our public events feature a mixture of academics, the Irish diaspora and people with first-hand experience of violent conflict. Some individuals could be all three. Anecdotal, the exchanges in these rooms have been more heated than any other discipline I have moved in. How does it feel to try and bear anger with a measure of grace? What is it like when someone raises their hand sharply and turns to you with a look of anger? How does it feel to be in the same room as someone who has committed or sanctioned violence? Because if you write about the North, right from the moment you call it what you call it, someone will be angry with you, and they will express this anger in different ways, and it will often feel gendered. Pissing people off is praxis in the study of the Troubles. It is impossible to write anything without pissing someone off. Friends finish articles and know exactly who they will likely piss off. Perhaps you piss

off someone you didn't expect. How does it feel to piss people off? Is it materially dangerous? How hostile will the comments be on Twitter or below the line of your article? Will someone post your identifying details? You might anger the audience simply by your presence in the room – as a woman, as a member of a minoritized group or as an international scholar. Going back to *ni Dochartaigh's* words – this is more than just yours to bear. That angry questioner might be pissed off for a variety of reasons which might be deep rooted in their history. You quickly learn how to read the room or spontaneously alter a talk or a lesson plan. You offer advice quietly to the next generation. You do your best.

### **The Troubles Killjoy in the Classroom**

As soon as you open your mouth people try to read you. A Professor leans over to me 'Oh, let me guess where you're from, your accent is softer than Belfast'. The undercurrents at work in the room – who is reading who, who can read who? I think a lot of Sara Ahmed's figure of the Feminist Killjoy, who brings 'bad feeling' with her by criticising established norms of patriarchal behaviour and is often reprimanded (2010, 2016). But, in this context, everyone has the possibility to be the Troubles Killjoy – the one who brings in the 'bad' feeling or the inconvenient memories. Throughout *Thin Places*, *ni Dochartaigh* offers questions that all of us with lived experience of the conflict might ask: 'What does it mean to come from a hollowed-out place? From a place that is neck-deep in the saga of loss? [...] How deeply can a person feel the fault lines of their home running through their own veins?' (2021, 56) And people who do not have this background bear the questions – how do you get interested in this field? The constant hum that insinuates they have no right to speak about the North when we've all learned so much from scholars who don't have this 'hollowed-out place' running 'through their own veins'.

In my introduction to my third-year module, Alternative Ulster, I do a two-hour lecture summary of what literature students need to know about the events and interpretation of the Troubles. Afterwards, I feel like a wrung-out dishrag. I tether the official narrative in my head to my family history. I can visualise the overlapping timelines as if I have drawn them in different coloured pen. A textbook tells me that the troubles 'broke out' or 'erupted'. I talk to my students about the problems with this passive voice, but I am also thinking of my family as teenagers and how frightening and bewildering the worsening violence must have been for them. While showing endless slides on the Peace Process and the obligatory mocking of Bono's beatific face while he holds Hume and Trimble's

hands aloft, I think of myself a few months from finishing my GCSEs and the horror of the Omagh Bomb is yet to unfold.

I am sitting with a colleague in the café on our campus. We both teach difficult material in optional modules on our undergraduate degree. She asks me how it feels to repeatedly return to the North, to violent texts, to home, year after year. I tell her that there are texts I struggle to re-read and that sometimes I teach writing by people I know well that feature horrific proximities to the conflict, and struggle to keep my distance. I start talking to the students as openly as I can about my own background while trying not to veer into the oversharing lecturer cliché. Opening up can be a way of shutting other people down – of claiming an unassailable ownership over the material. It is not mine. I want to keep the focus on my students' discovery. They are mostly born after the Good Friday Agreement. They tell me about their uncles and grandfathers who frequent the suburban Irish clubs that dot Manchester and Salford. They talk about their squaddie relatives who have done tours of duty, or their Granny who makes them listen to the Wolfe Tones. One of them plans an impromptu weekend in Belfast during the course and asks me to help her drop pins on a map for places that have featured in the texts we've studied. I wish I could bring the spirit of my students into these combative academic seminars – they are so curious, so interested, so empathetic, so funny.

### **Collective Forms**

I want to refuse for myself, and for this chapter, the status of authority – this is a long-established principle of feminist and anti-racist activism and organising. I want you to think of this instead as an invitation to reflect on our work and audiences and who is included and excluded. It is common practice in academic criticism to diagnose a problem in criticism, set yourself up as an authority and propose that you alone have the solutions to what ails the field. But there is no shortage of people working on the North, even as we wish in the abstract that there might be more scholarship on whichever subject we favour. The easiest way to claim one's own authority is to propose a lack, whether it exists or not. My own area of interest is voices that were not central to initial accounts of the Troubles – women, non-combatants and anyone who does not conform to traditional ideals of family life. But this is, of course, marked by my own experiences. I am drawn to scholarship that gives voice to these experiences. A whole ecosystem has developed that it would be impossible to justice to, but I am excited by new work on women's writing from Sophie Anders (2022), Katie Barnes (2020), Orlaith Darling (2021), Eli Davies (2021), Alison Garden (2021), Stefanie Lehner (2020), Patricia Malone (2021), Dawn Miranda Sherratt-Bado (2018) and Aimee Walsh (2021). This developing body



of scholarship draws on powerful intellectual lineages North and South – rarely have we ‘discovered’ a ‘neglected’ writer or topic but rather we are building on our foremothers, who often did this work at great personal and professional cost. In the coming years, this research will blossom exponentially North and South to attend to the astonishing variety and quality of writing. The Writing the Troubles<sup>iii</sup> project offers a venue for emerging and established scholars to try out new ideas. The Contemporary Irish Literature Research Network (CIL)<sup>iv</sup> is an exciting new postgraduate-led research group is producing not only responses to new texts but also engendering solidarity at a difficult time for emerging scholars.

In his introduction to *Queering the Green*, Paul Maddern notes that the most powerful issues for the writers in the anthology were ‘how Ireland deals with Brexit, climate change, the marginalisation of working class and women’s voices, the legacy of institutional abuse, the influx and treatment of refugees and migrants, and how Ireland meets the needs of its people of colour and its queer communities’ (2021, xxv-xxvi). The act of anthologising can be described as a form of gatekeeping – again, here, I think of Ezra Pound as my third year Modernism module is evidently on my mind. But, in the case of Maddern’s anthology, it is a wonderfully imaginative and creative act. When the volume landed with a thud on doorsteps, it changed something quite profound to have more established and emerging queer poets in dialogue with each other. We can learn so much from the queer community where models of scholarly activism sit alongside methodological rigour and care. It arrived alongside a pamphlet from Scott McKendry (2019) – further proof that *The Lifeboat* is a vitally important part of Belfast’s literary ecosystem. The creative acts in both this writing, and in recent writing by Jan Carson (2019), Lucy Caldwell (2022), Susannah Dickey (2020), Wendy Erskine (2022), Nandi Jola (2022), Louise Kennedy (2022), Gail McConnell (2021) and Padraig Regan (2022), should inspire academics to take leaps of imagination against the disciplinary forms we have been raised with. I used to think we just had to push our subject matter, but it becomes clearer that we need new forms of writing.

My wish for Northern Irish Studies (if, indeed, that’s a thing) is more than just a form of methodological pluralism but a comfort in ambivalence. Bernstein and Malone describe ‘a space where one both knows and does not know’ (2021, 137) – I would like to advocate for more not knowing within the field, more uncertainty, and more undercutting of one’s own authority. Female academics are often encouraged to attend workshops where they are taught to imitate behaviours and rhetorical conventions traditionally considered masculine, but I prefer instead spaces of collectivity, unknowing and uncertainty. Turning to different forms of writing offered me something that academic criticism did not – a tolerance of ambiguity, a plurality of voices, a sense of humour and a gesture towards a

kind of imaginative futurity. The well-turned conclusions of the academic journal article appeared unsuited to the task. They presumed kinds of authority that none of us have, at least on our own. Thinking together allows us to tolerate uncertainty together. Collective forms seem the only way forward to dealing with the ambiguities and complexities of the North – but putting into practice non-hierarchical spaces is more easily said than done. Into this calculation must come our capacity to take on additional kinds of work alongside our paid jobs, job-hunting, caring responsibilities and need for rest.

### **Unfaithful Scholars**

I want to think about how we put this in practice. We might begin with other forms – creative writing, memoir, and blog writing among them. Our thoughts and ideas do not always slot evenly into an article length, a book length, a 45-minute invited talk. Bernstein and Malone, writing about the Academics Against Networking project, argue for the zine as a form which ‘acts as an ideal textual vehicle by which to circulate complaints that reveal structural inequalities without individualising these complaints’ (2021, 135) and can be a way to ‘put your ideas out into the world without the gatekeeping of peer-review, torturous publication schedules, or nepotistic school-tie bonds’ (2021, 136). This must be a continual process of negotiating, navigation, resistance, and survival. For, as Sara Ahmed says: ‘Knowing the difference between bonds that are sustaining and those that are not is a challenge.’ (Ahmed 2016). Models already exist in our field and beyond for collaboration outside of the governance of research prestige and income. I broke away from my disciplinary background through the work of Sara Ahmed (2010, 2016) and Judith Butler (2004) who balance theoretical rigour balanced with politically important work and through them, I came to bell hooks (2000), Audre Lorde (1984), and Lauren Berlant (2011). I admire the model developed by Anne Cvetkovich (2012) and her colleagues in the Public Feelings project which sought to link personal and textual experiences of depression with the national mood during the Bush era and following 9/11. They espoused collaborative, embodied scholarship alongside the recognition that we bring our embodied selves everywhere and that scholarship is not produced in isolation. We need more expansive citational practices than footnotes and acknowledgements pages. We also need to consider the changed climate conditions in which we do our work and how we might attend to this reality.

What I want to gesture towards then, is towards a change of practices that I’m not sure I’m ready for. Experimenting with writing practices is more possible with job security – I am in perpetual admiration of those who take risks with forms of scholarship while precariously employed. More

established scholars need to be comfortable not having all the answers. We need to pass on opportunities to the next generation. Presently, the closest I can get is the ideal of the Unfaithful Scholar, having an affair with more experimental and collaborative practices while still performing the duties and occupying the social role of the spouse. I seek what Sara Ahmed calls ‘a community of killjoys’ (2016). I want us all to cheat on our jobs and our disciplines while still being able to our bills.

The problems and inequalities facing the sector may seem insurmountable and this influences every aspect of the study of Northern Ireland. The problems are not to be solved by individuals but rather a combination of collective action borne out of solidarity and a mixture of compassion and advocacy at a local level. Join a Union. We can think critically about who we give the keynote lectures to or rethink the hierarchical idea of the keynote itself, who we ask to sit on our panels, the venues in which we choose to publish. I might be asking for something here that our institutional systems are not set up to reward. But the stakes – understanding of the complexity of the North, caring for our emerging and established researchers and writers, producing creative ways of relating to a difficult past and an uncertain future– are too high.

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<sup>ii</sup> The aims and objectives of the association, along with updates and it's current Council, can be found here <https://bairishstudies.wordpress.com>

<sup>iii</sup> Website: <https://writingthetroublesweb.wordpress.com>

<sup>iv</sup> Website: <https://contemporaryirishlit.wordpress.com>