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“This Is a Female Text”:
Embodiment in Contemporary Irish Women’s Poetry

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“This Is a Female Text”:
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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of
James T. Laney Graduate School of Emory University
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Abstract

"This Is a Female Text": Embodiment in Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry
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This thesis explores the concept of embodiment and portrayals of women's bodies within post-1950 Irish women's poetry. Chapter 1 of this thesis explores the Mother Ireland symbol that permeated Irish literature for centuries and the ways in which one poet, Eavan Boland, pushed back against this passive portrayal of women in canonical Irish poetry. Boland's poems convey women who are representations of the shift in the Mother Ireland tradition, a shift toward women who are more realistic but who are nonetheless still symbols of Ireland and generalizations of Irish women. In Chapter 2, I argue that Boland portrays an alternative representation of womanhood through artifactual women. I also examine the artifactual positioning of the women in Seamus Heaney's bog body poems, noting the fact that the bog bodies, by virtue of their preservation, are already artifacts and thus not capable of being embodied. In Chapter 3, I turn to another alternative portrayal of women: the mother herself. As portrayed by Eavan Boland and Sinéad Morrissey, mothers can be speaking, active women with a realm of bodily experiences. I complicate this idea of the embodied mother, however, by exploring the ways in which poetic mothers can also be disembodied through a focus on the artifactual representation of the Virgin Mary and the cruel mistreatment of pregnant women and single mothers in Irish society through various depictions of the death of Ann Lovett. In Chapter 4, I explore a final, alternate method for the poetic embodiment of women. Through an analysis of *A Ghost in the Throat* by Doireann Ní Ghríofa, I argue that writing itself can be an act of embodiment. Through archival expansion and critical fabulation, Ní Ghríofa excavates a woman that was once lost within the Irish tradition and simultaneously learns more about herself and her own body. This thesis is an exploration of the myriad of methods through which contemporary Irish women portray themselves and their bodies in poetry, noting the ways in which Irish women inscribe poetic embodiment into the Irish tradition as they search for and create spaces for themselves and other women.

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Table of Contents

Preface ……1

Introduction …… 2

Chapter 1: Eavan Boland's Critique of Mother Ireland ……..…… 13

Chapter 2: Women's Bodies as Artifacts in the Poetry of Eavan Boland and Seamus Heaney....36

Chapter 3: The Complex Nature of Embodying the Poetic Mother……..……....62

Chapter 4: The Body as Archive in Doireann Ní Ghríofa's *A Ghost in the Throat*……..87

Conclusion…….…..115

Works Cited ……123

I don't have *a body, I* am *a body.*

— Christopher Hitchens, *Mortality*

Preface

This thesis, which is the second rendition of this project, is the culmination of two years of work. The project originally began during the second semester of my junior year of undergraduate studies, during which I partook in Dr. Geraldine Higgins's course Irish Literature in the Archive. It was in this course that I first learned about Mother Ireland and immediately became interested in the trope. It was also in this course that I first engaged with Maud Gonne as a figure in the archive of W. B. Yeats, as I became fascinated with the way she and other women persisted in the shadows of the early twentieth-century Irish archive. The intersection of these topics, which I read as women creating through own archives and poetry, became the inspiration for my Honors thesis, "From Anna Liffey to Ann Lovett: The Search for Female Embodiment in Contemporary Irish Poetry," which I wrote during my senior year of undergrad. After having been accepted into the 4+1 BA/MA program in English at Emory University, I knew that this Honors thesis would become the basis of my master's thesis, and it has— large portions of Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis, "'This Is a Female Text': Embodiment in Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry," come from Chapters 1 and 2 of my Honors thesis, with revisions made for clarity and development of thought. During this year of graduate studies (also known as my +1 year), I have written this master's thesis in fulfillment of my Master of Arts degree in English. I hope that, through its two present renditions and throughout any future developments, this project serves as a worthy contribution to the realm of Irish Studies.

Introduction

> *Kathaleen ni Houlihan! Why*
> *Must a country, like a ship or a car, be always female,*
> *Mother or sweetheart?*
> Louis MacNeice, Autumn Journal, "XVI"

For centuries, Ireland has been constructed in literary consciousness as Mother Ireland or the Sean Van Vocht (the poor old woman)— a figure juxtaposed by the masculine and powerful Britain. The first image of Ireland as woman written in the English language appeared in an eighteenth-century pamphlet by Jonathan Swift entitled *The Story of the Injured Lady*, published in 1746. Its contents, "written in the form of a letter from the lady (Ireland) to a male friend" in which the lady "complains of her betrayal and ill-usage by a gentleman (England)," serve as a foundation for the passive portrayal of Irish women for centuries to come (Innes 10). This gendering of Ireland as female stems from an eighteenth-century "racist pseudo-science of ethnography" which "characterized the Irish as a feminine people" associated with the "passivity, excitability, and inefficiency manifested by […] conquered people as evidence if their need for a firm 'masculine' ruler" (Cullingford 61). The recurring portrayal of the feminine Ireland in need of the masculine savior Britain resulted in conceptions of Irish hyper-masculinity, particularly in Irish literature; the hyper-masculine Irish man "naturally demands that his woman be hyper-feminine," leading to "social stereotypes of the Irish woman as pure virgin or equally son-obsessed mother" that pervade Irish literature to this day (61). Ireland is a mother, a virgin, and a symbol without a voice, but due to the obvious fact that Irish women are people, not symbols, they can never live up to the expectations which Mother Ireland sets forth for them in poems such as "The Mother" and "Mise Éire." This thesis aims to explore the ways in which contemporary Irish women poets engage with these passive portrayals of women, starting with

the Mother Ireland trope, in an attempt to uncover how women have stretched, altered, and re-formulated female literary representation over the past half of a century.[1]

W. B. Yeats and Patrick Pearse, two male figures who highly influenced not only Irish poetry but also twentieth-century Irish nationalism, epitomize early twentieth-century male poetic tradition in Ireland; these two writers engage directly with the Mother Ireland trope in their work on various occasions. W. B. Yeats was an Irish poet, playwright, and prose-writer, as well as a 1923 Nobel prize winner and one of the most widely known writers of English-language poetry. In his play *Cathleen ni Houlihan,*[2] co-written by Lady Augusta Gregory, the titular character appears as an old woman who, representing Ireland as a whole, requires that young men follow her and die for her sake. At the end of the play, the old woman transforms into a beautiful "young girl" with the "walk of a queen" (*Yeats's Poetry, Drama, and Prose* 140). Such a transformation combined with Cathleen's call for martyrdom, heard by the character of Michael, a young man who was set to marry in the near future, "endorses patriotic sacrifice as the highest sublimation of sexual love": the sacrifice of Michael's body to Cathleen replaces the devotion of his body to his betrothed (Cullingford 68). Cathleen entices Michael not only with her beauty but also with her refrain, which guarantees glory in exchange for the blood of young Irish men: "They shall be remembered forever, / They shall be alive for ever, / They shall be speaking for ever, / The people shall hear them for ever" (*Yeats's Poetry, Drama, and Prose* 139). Through the character of Cathleen ni Houlihan, Yeats thus intertwines sex with death, womanhood with nationhood, and nationalism with sacrifice.

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[1] For the purposes of this thesis, I define "contemporary" as post-1950 writers. At the onset of this thesis, I defined "contemporary" as living writers, but Eavan Boland sadly passed away on April 27, 2020.

[2] *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (written 1901) is often credited to Yeats alone and published under his name. See "'Our Kathleen': Yeats' Collaboration with Lady Gregory in the Writing of Cathleen ni Houlihan" by James Pethica (*Yeats Annual*, Vol. 6, Pg. 3, 1988) for more information on the collaborative relationship between Yeats and Augusta Gregory.

In another controversial portrayal of womanhood in the poem "A Prayer for My Daughter," Yeats argues, "An intellectual hatred is the worst," so he prays that his daughter "think opinions are accursed" (*Yeats's Poetry, Drama, and Prose* 78). Yeats's unrequited love, Maud Gonne— "the loveliest woman born / out of the mouth of Plenty's horn"— betrayed her own beauty, according to Yeats, "because of her opinionated mind" (78). Such opinionated women can only cause destruction, as Yeats questions if "there was another Troy" for the strong-willed and politically active Gonne, "to burn" (37).Women, to the speaker Yeats's poem, best fulfill the roles of their gender when they keep quiet and do not engage in political matters (although Yeats ironically never failed to fall in love with "opinionated" and intellectual women, including his wife George Hyde-Lees). Even as he collaborated with Lady Gregory, one of his dearest friends, Yeats did not give her full credit for her contribution. As James Pethica proved, through an analysis of the manuscripts of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Lady Gregory wrote major segments of the play— a play which became one of the most successful of his career (Pethica). With W. B. Yeats as one of the foundational poets of the Irish literary canon, women poets face a poetic precedent in which they are either passive metaphors or violent goddesses. In both cases, poetic women are symbols without individual voices or unique perspectives.

At the forefront of the Irish nationalist movement, Patrick Pearse, teacher, writer, and a leader of the Easter Rising of 1916,[3] wrote poems in which the nation explicitly "influences the perception" of women, perpetuating the tropes of Ireland as mother and woman as symbol (Boland, *Object Lessons* 136). His poem "The Mother," for example, simplifies its speaker, a mother whose two sons have died for the nationalist cause. The speaker grieves for her sons but believes they have died in "bloody protest for a glorious thing," "grudg[ing] them not" but

[3] Republican rebellion against British rule in Dublin in 1916. Led to the deaths of the Rising's prominent leaders, including Pearse himself. Inspired Yeats's poem "Easter, 1916."

"hav[ing] her joy" because her "sons were faithful, and they fought" ("The Mother" 4, 14-16). In this poem, Pearse "appropriat[es] … the maternal voice" to suggest that "women are venerated only to be marginalized as producers of sons for slaughter, ungrudgingly offering men to death for the cause" of nationalism (Cullingford 69). Similarly, in his poem "Mise Éire," which translates from the Irish as "I Am Ireland," Pearse "evokes the maternal figure" of Ireland, gendering the land as a woman and a mother (68). She is an "old woman," "older" and "lonelier than the old woman of Beare,"[4] mother to "Cuchulainn the valiant,"[5] and victim to "the irreconcilable enemy" of Britain ("Mise Éire"). Ireland's importance is not within herself but in her purity and in the sons she bears who fight for her. Without regard for any type of feminist argument, the idyllic and misogynistic symbols of what Irish women should be persist in the work of Pearse and Yeats, instilling the Irish canon with inaccurate portrayals of womanhood.

The exclusion of real, active women from Irish literature is ingrained in the tradition, with Yeats serving as only one example of a larger problem which continues to exist almost a century after his death. *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry* by Elizabeth Butler Cullingford is recognized as the first full-length feminist treatment of Yeats and serves as a major influence in this thesis. The book traces portrayals of gender in Yeats's poetry, exploring various themes from general conceptions of Irish masculinity to erotic desire. Moreover, Cullingford's essay "Thinking of Her as Ireland," which examines the portrayal of Mother Ireland in Yeats's poetry, along with that of Patrick Pearse and Seamus Heaney, provides the initial foundation of my research in this project. This thesis, "This Is a Female Text: Embodiment in Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry," starts at the point where Cullingford's essay ends— as she traces conceptions of Mother Ireland from the end of the nineteenth century

[4] Mythic Irish goddess also known as the Hag of Beara.

[5] Legendary heroic figure in Medieval Ireland whose story appears in the Ulster cycle.

into the middle of the twentieth century, this thesis picks up the continuation and alteration of the trope, starting in the latter half of the twentieth century with poet and essayist Eavan Boland.

Eavan Boland's work critiques Mother Ireland and the inaccurate representation of women in the Irish literary tradition. She writes herself into the canon of Irish poetry, claiming that her work is not in some separate realm of Irish *women's* poetry but "is *Irish* poetry" ("Irishwoman's Diary," emphasis added). This thesis centers the work of Eavan Boland, examining the most relevant poems and essays from her prolific writings, to establish her as a poet whose work is representative of the themes of Irish women's post-1950 poetry. As Laura O'Connor claims, "Like Heaney, Boland makes a double-gesture of self-differentiation from, and filiation to, Yeats: she invokes her status as a representative minority voice for women to validate her entitlement to assume the bardic authority to speak for, and to, the nation," and thus on behalf of women poets in the Irish tradition (O'Connor 269). Though Boland is at the forefront of much of the analysis of this thesis, the project is not necessarily *about* Boland, but engages in conversations with her work to explore a variety of themes across the contemporary Irish poetic tradition. Informed by the theoretical frameworks of third- and fourth-wave feminism and feminism's engagement with theories of embodiment, this thesis includes Boland and her work as a means to explore what it means to include women, to portray women, and to have a woman's body, as understood through literature. This thesis searches for the poetic spaces in which women's bodies are not merely vessels through which a poem is created, not merely the vehicles of flowery metaphors, but are actively and accurately conveyed and *embodied*.

Embodiment is the focus of this thesis because "despite several decades of feminist activism and scholarship" and work for representation by Irish poets within the Irish tradition, "women's bodies continue to be sites of control and contention both materially and symbolically;" this symbolic control is most apparent within the Mother Ireland trope (Fischer

and Dolezal 1). “Issues such as reproductive rights and technologies, sexual violence, objectification and normalization, motherhood, sexuality, and sex trafficking, among others, continue to be pressing concern for women’s bodies in our contemporary milieu,” and the narrative is no different for Irish women (1, emphasis added). This thesis engages with the ways women seek to overcome these challenges through various modes of poetic representation, addressing vulnerability as a prerequisite for embodiment. Vulnerability, in feminist scholarship, is defined as “constitutive openness characterized by the simultaneity of and continuity with and divergence from other beings, fundamental and shared potentiality that is both ambivalent and ambiguous, and a diversity of expressions” (Gilson 141). This thesis attempts to locate the diverse spaces of vulnerability through which Irish women portray themselves and engages with the idea that such a vulnerability can in some instances, be a space for empowerment and in others, a space of oppression.

In *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice*, Erinn C. Gilson posits that vulnerability is a necessary facet of the human experience:

> Vulnerability is something fundamental; it is an unavoidable feature of human existence that is present from the stature and never goes away. [...] the centrality of vulnerability to ethics demonstrates that vulnerability carries with it some normative force; it calls for response and, moreover, for particular kinds of response. Our vulnerability prompts us to try to prevent vulnerability from being turned into harm or unequally distributed or addressed. (Gilson 15-16)

But, as Gilson acknowledges, vulnerability is often thought of within social and political discourse as something to be minimized or avoided because it can lead to bodily harm or exploitation. Contemporary feminist discourse, within an intersectional framework which acknowledges locales for vulnerability within race, gender, and class, works to reexamine vulnerability as a space for potential embodiment by “revalu[ing] and call[ing] attention to previously neglected or devalued aspects of human existence” (17). Contemporary Irish women

poets, too, seek to revalue vulnerability as a potentially expressive and feminist space in which they can explore those concepts of gender which had been previously excluded from the poetic tradition. Shani D'Cruze and Anupama Rao's essay collection *Violence, Vulnerability, and Embodiment: Gender and History* engages with the idea that "gender can be profitably explored as a specific form of vulnerability that is often socially and politically embedded with masculine forms of power," indicating that gender, therefore, can be explored as a realm for embodiment (D'Cruze and Rao 4). Focusing specifically on womanhood, I drew on collections of critical essays such as *Belief, Bodies, and Being: Feminist Reflections on Embodiment*, edited by Deborah Orr et al. (2006), and *New Feminist Perspectives on Embodiment*, edited by Clara Fischer and Luna Dolezal (2018), to highlight contemporary feminist understandings of embodiment, supplementing the foundational theories of major critics such as Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray. With these critical underpinnings in mind, this thesis delves into theories of the feminine in ontological, philosophical, historical, literary, and real, current spaces.

In the first chapter of this thesis "Eavan Boland's Critique of 'Mother Ireland,'" I focus particularly on the ways in which Boland both departs from and feeds into the male tradition against which she writes, closely reading poems such "Mise Eire" and "Mother Ireland." When Boland does "feed into" the tradition, she does so in an attempt to depart from it; in criticizing the trope of Mother Ireland as a silent symbol (woman as poem, not poet), Boland establishes new symbols of Irish womanhood. At times, as critic Edna Longley claims in her essay "From Cathleen to Anorexia," Boland perpetuates the representation of women as symbols of the nation: "her alternative Muse turns out to be the twin sister of Dark Rosaleen," yet another national symbol (Longley 188). I expand Longley's argument by depicting how Boland creates not merely a new or inverted symbol for nationhood but one for womanhood and femininity. Through readings of Boland's final volume *The Historians*, I argue that her search for a new

national symbol never ended but became a cyclical, inevitable theme throughout her poetic career.

In Chapter 2, "Women's Bodies as Artifacts in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney and Eavan Boland," I evaluate the ways in which each author moves past symbolic representations of women toward what I have termed the *artifactual positioning* of female bodies. I explore especially the bog bodies in Seamus Heaney's collection *North*, drawing on the most well-known feminist critique of Heaney's bog poems, Patricia Coughlan's "'Bog Queens': The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney." Extrapolating from Coughlan's argument about the "representation of femininity" in Heaney's work, I raise the essential questions of what it means for Heaney to observe a female body through his male gaze (Coughlan 41). The bog bodies, I argue, by virtue of their preservation, are already artifacts and thus not capable of being (fully) embodied. I delve into the ethics of looking, what it means to be an observed object versus an observing subject, attempting to understand how and if respectful exhibition and observation is possible. I juxtapose readings of Heaney's female bog body poems with Boland's poems which portray women as artifacts, analyzing the ways in which objects such as dolls and statues cannot be embodied. Instead, through emotional exploration and self-reflection, Boland's speakers embody themselves and not the artifacts upon which they gaze.

In Chapter 3, "The Complex Nature of Embodying the Poetic Mother," I argue that Irish mothers in poetry, as portrayed by Eavan Boland and Sinéad Morrissey, can be speaking, active women with a realm of bodily experiences, contrasting the passive, silent symbol of mother as understood through Mother Ireland. Both Boland and Morrissey write poems across a range of motherly experiences, with Morrissey's poems including the bodily changes of pregnancy and Boland's poems touching upon themes of aging and becoming a grandmother. I complicate the idea of the potentially embodied mother, however, by exploring the ways in which poetic

mothers can also be disembodied; to construct this claim, I focus on the cruel mistreatment of pregnant women and single mothers in Irish society. Having explored the Mother Ireland trope in depth in Chapter 1 and the artifactual woman in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 examines artifactual representations of a symbolic mother found in poetic representations of the Virgin Mary. I closely read poems dedicated to and based upon the death of Ann Lovett by Paula Meehan, Caitríona O'Reilly, and Annemarie Ní Churreáin, which all engage with statue representations, supplementing my reading with theoretical understandings of the relationship between motherhood and the Virgin Mother as expressed by Julia Kristeva and Marina Warner. This chapter analyzes the ways in which motherhood, particularly in the Irish state, can be an embodying or disembodying experience depending on circumstances, as explored through a variety of poetic representations of vulnerability.

In Chapter 4, "The Body as Archive in Doireann Ní Ghríofa's *A Ghost in the Throat*," I explore a final, alternate method for the poetic embodiment of women. Through an analysis of *A Ghost in the Throat* by Doireann Ní Ghríofa, I argue that writing itself can be an act of embodiment. I draw on the fact that Ní Ghríofa's work is both about herself and a prominent Irish writer of the past, Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, to discuss an alternative method to writing oneself into the tradition, as Eavan Boland did in the late twentieth century. I argue that through alternative forms of knowing, Ní Ghríofa finds herself within the tradition and excavates a woman that was once lost within it; this journey of self-reflection serves as an embodying experience for Ní Ghríofa as she attempts to embody Ní Chonaill. This chapter finds foundation in feminist archival theory, which notes the ways in which "archives are not just sources or repositories as such, but constitute full-fledged historical actors as well. This is in part because of the ways in which the colonial archives served as technologies of imperial power, conquest, and hegemony;" as Antoinette Burton argues in *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of*

History, "imagining counter-histories of the archive and its regimes of truth in a variety of times and places" is essential to a feminist understanding of the archive (Burton 7). This chapter also relies on the work of Saidiya Hartman, specifically the concept of *critical fabulation* as defined in her 2008 essay "Venus in Two Acts," as I argue that Ní Ghríofa engages with critical fabulation as an alternative form of knowledge-making. Hartman's expansion of the concept of reading "against the grain" of history and the "official accounts" is also foundational to this chapter (*Scenes of Subjection* 10-11).[6]

The ultimate goal of this thesis is to track the ways Irish women portray themselves, engaging with various modes of poetic representation. No singular narrative or experience of womanhood exists within the Irish poetic tradition, and this thesis does not attempt to engage with every single possibility of womanhood, such as queerness, racial intersections, and diasporic experiences. Instead, it engages with those forms of representation which recur and appear, in this contemporary moment, to be most frequently expressed within the literary conversation. Literary representations of Irish womanhood will continue to evolve and continue to be various, and it is through determination and resistance that Irish women poets are able to establish such varying, diverse forms of representation for themselves. Through the work of poets discussed in this thesis and beyond it, "over a relatively short time— certainly no more than a generation or so— women [moved] from being the objects of Irish poems to being the authors of them" (Boland, *Object Lessons* 126). As Irish women expand and stretch the Irish

[6] In "Venus in Two Acts" and *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman writes specifically about the relationship between female chattel slaves and absence in the historical archive. She coins terms such as *critical fabulation* and *fungibility* as an attempt to reinsert and bring to light the lives of these forgotten Black women. This thesis does not engage with ideas of slavery or the intense oppression that these women faced on the basis of *both* their race and gender. However, it touches upon Hartman's term *critical fabulation* and the theme of absences in the archive as a means of understanding new, feminist approaches to the archive and historical representation.

tradition through their authorship, their various representations and self-portrayals serve as evidence of a “momentous transit” (126).

Chapter 1: Eavan Boland's Critique of "Mother Ireland"

Mother Ireland, get off our backs.
Mairead Farrell, *Mother Ireland* Documentary (1988)

It has taken me
All my strength to do this.
Becoming a figure in a poem.
Usurping a name and a theme.
Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons* 231

In the BBC documentary *Mother Ireland*,[1] IRA volunteer Mairead Farrell claimed that Mother Ireland "didn't reflect what we [Irish women] believe in, and it just doesn't reflect Ireland. […] We've moved away from that, and we're not going to move back, we're moving onwards" (*Mother Ireland* 49:56-50:06*)*. Shortly after this documentary was filmed, the British Special Air Services killed Mairead Farrell later in Gibraltar for her participation in a bomb planting,[2] resulting in the silencing of her voice and the censorship of her words; when *Mother Ireland* finally aired on the BBC in 1991, Farrell's voice was dubbed. In the film, although Farrell's critique of Mother Ireland was expressed, British anti-terror laws passed by Margaret Thatcher's administration in 1988, which banned the broadcasting of the voices of representatives from Sinn Féin and various republican loyalist groups alike,[3] meant that her voice could not be heard. Farrell thus became another symbol for the continued misrepresentation and silencing of women in Irish culture, mirroring the silent and unvoiced Cathleen ni Houlihan

[1] For more information on the BBC's 1988 banning of the *Mother Ireland* documentary directed by Anne Crilly, see Anne Crilly "Banning History" (*History Workshop Journal,* vol. 31, no. 1, 1991).

[2] For more information on the death of Farrell in Operation Flavius, see https://www.thejournal.ie/gibraltar-killings-30-years-3885830-Mar2018/

[3] See http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4409447.stm

figure which Farrell herself condemned. However, Farrell was not the only one who wanted to move past the figure of Mother Ireland. She was not the only one to speak out against her or look toward a new symbol or alternative representations of women. She was certainly not the only woman who refused to remain silent. Many voices have critiqued and continue to critique Mother Ireland and the portrayal of Irish women in popular culture, and one of the most powerful voices was that of Eavan Boland.

In 1995 Irish poet Eavan Boland (1944-2020) published a collection of essays entitled *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time*. These essays include Boland's perspective on her life thus far, from her childhood as the daughter of a diplomat to her adulthood and work as a poet. In *Object Lessons*, Boland reveals her critique of the popular portrayal of Ireland in which the country is "allegorized as a woman, and the allegories are ones in which family or gender relationships are metaphors for political and economic relationships with a male England" (Innes 10). Boland laments this representation because it results in an Irish heroine who is "utterly passive. She was Ireland or Hibernia. She was stamped, as a rubbed-away mark, on silver or gold; a compromised regal figure on a throne. Or she was a nineteenth-century image of girlhood, on a frontispiece or in a book of engravings," an object, a representation as opposed to a woman with a body, individuality, emotions, or a story of her own (*Object Lessons* 66). The "identity" of Mother Ireland "was as an image. Or was it a fiction?" (66). The woman in the male-dominated field of poetry throughout Ireland's history is not merely a symbol for Ireland; she *is* Ireland, a poetic move which Boland problematizes for its silencing of women:

> Once the idea of a nation influences the perception of a woman, then that woman is suddenly and inevitably simplified. She can no longer have complex feeling and aspirations. [...] Irish poems simplified women most at the point of intersection between womanhood and Irishness. […] The idea of the defeated nation's being reborn as a triumphant woman was central to the kind of Irish poem. Dark Rosaleen. Cathleen ni Houlihan. The nation as woman; the woman as national muse. (136)

Eavan Boland worked throughout her career to undo and alter the image of women in the Irish tradition, to re-write womanhood in a way which contrasts and refutes Mother Ireland.

In this chapter, I analyze Boland's poetic reworkings of femininity and womanhood in Ireland, her search for a poetic subject beyond that of an overarching, passive, centuries-old symbol. But as Boland inserts herself into the poetic tradition, I argue, she creates a new symbol for Ireland and womanhood, as opposed to doing away completely with the need for a national symbol. In the words of Edna Longley, Boland's "alternative Muse[s]," the female symbols which replace Mother Ireland in many of Boland's poems, "[turn] out to be the twin sister of Dark Rosaleen" and "[look] remarkably like the Sean Bhean Bhocht,"[4] the symbol which Boland supposedly wants to remedy and alter (Longley 188). Through an analysis of Boland's poems which explore the role of women within Ireland and within poetry in various ways, I expand upon Longley's critique and interrogate Boland's new Muse. Beginning with poems from the middle of Boland's career, including "Mise Eire," "The Achill Woman," "Anna Liffey," and "Mother Ireland," this chapter evaluate the ways in which Boland first alters and re-shapes the Irish poetic tradition through new symbols of motherhood. Then, turning to Boland's final poetry collection *The Historians* (2020), I argue that Boland's search for a new national symbol of womanhood was never truly complete but instead perpetuates a cycle of symbol creation. In my close readings of these poems throughout Boland's career, I display the ways in which Boland transforms the Irish national symbol into an active one, as opposed to the "passive projection of a national idea" which permeated the Irish literary canon prior to Boland in the works of male authors (*Object Lessons 136*). At the same time, I focus on the fact that Boland creates new

[4] "Rosaleen" is a symbol for Ireland meaning "little rose." "Dark Rosaleen" appears in a poem of the same name by James Clarence Mangan (1803-1949). "Sean Bhean Bhocht," Irish for "poor old woman," appears in a traditional Irish ballad from the Irish Rebellion of 1798. See *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society, 1880-1935* (The University of Georgia Press, 1994) by C. L. Innes for more information on the origin of these terms.

symbols for womanhood in these poems to argue that Boland does not write *embodied women subjects*— women who have voices, thoughts, and physical presences, and who, as is integral to contemporary feminist understandings of embodiment, act as "sites of vulnerability"— and that it was not her necessarily her intention to do so (Fischer and Dolezal 3).

Because canonical Irish poems before the twentieth century displayed women in a passive manner, Boland felt that a disconnect existed between womanhood and poetry: "the word woman and the word poet inhabited two separate kingdoms of experience and expression" (*Object Lessons* 114). Boland expresses the need for women poets, especially herself, to overcome the symbolization to which male poets subjected them for centuries, to find and listen to the voice that "had been silenced, ironically enough, by the very powers of language [Boland] aspired to and honored" (114). In "Subalternity and Gender: Problems of Postcolonial Irishness," Colin Graham argues that this silencing of women through language occurs as a facet of nation-building in a postcolonial space in which Irishness occluded and superseded womanhood; women did not speak about their womanhood or subvert the ideas of Mother Ireland because their status as Irish defined their identity (Graham 157). It thus becomes Boland's goal to create a new symbol in which women are able to be multi-faceted— both Irish *and* women— and to open up the literary tradition to allow space for herself and other women. At the same time, Boland admires and cherishes the poets and poems which preceded her: "her admiration for W.B. Yeats and other Irish male poets persisted," but "she could not help noticing the gap between the idealisations of women described in poems such as W. B. Yeats's 'Red Hanrahan's Song About Ireland'[5] […] and her own personal reality" (Miquel-Baldellou 129). Boland's goal

[5] W. B. Yeats, "Red Hanrahan's Song About Ireland" from his 1903 collection *In the Seven Woods*. The poem includes the lines "But purer than a tall candle before the Holy Rood / is Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan" (*Yeats's Poetry, Drama, and Prose* 33).

was to refute and critique the depictions of Mother Ireland that came before her while not shying away from the previous poetic tropes, resulting in a new depiction of women that fosters a new type of Irish symbol. Such an attempt is perhaps most explicit in her poem "Mise Eire," a direct response to Patrick Pearse's 1912 poem of the same title.

Boland begins her poem "Mise Eire," published in her 1987 collection *The Journey*, with a blunt statement: "I won't go back to it — // my nation displaced / into old dactyls" (*New Collected Poems* 128). The speaker, from the first line, combats the tradition of minimizing the country into a poetic form as opposed to a place inhabited by living people. Previous poetry and "songs / [...] bandage up the history, / the words / [...] make a rhythm of the crime / where time is time past," glorifying Ireland and ignoring its history (128). The speaker thus calls for a revisionist historical-type perspective, a re-evaluation of history which includes and apologizes for all of Ireland's faults, "to challenge the rigid, handed-down concepts of nationhood, to seek newer dispensations of that condition that would widen its boundaries, extend its definitions" (118, Smyth 284). The poem then presents two different women as Ireland, overthrowing the old symbol of Mother Ireland in favor of a more inclusive, modern representation of women. The first woman is "a sloven's mix / of silk at the wrists, / a sort of dove strut / in the precincts of the garrison — // who practises / the quick frictions, / the rictus of delight / and gets cambric for it;" she is not a passive virgin but a prostitute (*New Collected Poems* 118). Through this figure, the speaker argues that a woman with this non-traditional, non-conforming, and even criminalized profession can represent Ireland, can *be* Ireland. So, too, can "the woman / in the gansy-coat / on board the Mary Belle, / in the huddling cold / holding her half-dead baby to her / as the wind shifts east / and north over the dirty / water on the wharf" (118). Though she has to leave Ireland, this woman can represent Ireland. This mother reveals the flaws of Ireland— the country's failure to protect her and provide for her needs. She "neither / knows nor cares that / a new

language / is a kind of scar," one which makes her as flawed as the country she leaves behind (118). She cannot know the impact her emigration will have on her, but she does what she must do to survive, opening herself up to the possibility of vulnerability. This act of survival and strength, though it could end in death, is the new Ireland toward which Boland works, combining her love for the tradition of Ireland's resilience with the idea that Ireland is not one person, one woman. She is many different women who make decisions for themselves and work towards a better life in the same way that Boland works towards a poetic tradition that is more reflective of the wants and needs of Irish women. At the same time, however, by not naming these women or giving them individual voices, Boland reduces them to symbols; Edna Longley notes this problematic in how the poem "destabilises Mise but not Eire — 'my nation displaced / into old dactyls.' There is some reluctance, partly for fear of further division, to re-open the ever-problematic, ever-central issue of 'Nationalism and feminism'" (Longley 173). Because Boland does not fully move away from the idea of a national symbol of Ireland but merely reframes who or what it should be, figures such as the prostitute and the mother in "Mise Eire" interrogate the idea of Mother Ireland without abolishing it entirely. These are not real, embodied women but are representations of and symbols for Irish women.

Boland works toward a new Irish poetry which critiques the image of women as passive beings, personifications of the nation who have no worth in and of themselves. Yet, in this effort to establish a new type of woman in poetry, Boland does not fully overcome the symbolization of woman or even the woman as the nation. But it was not her intention to do so; rather, she chooses "to make the figure of the woman more representative, and in a complexly human rather than a demeaningly emblematic way" (Clutterbuck 290). Boland "assert[s] her position as a non-separatist," feeling it unnecessary to completely break free from the work of the male poets that had come before her (Miquel-Baldellou 130). This attempt to shift the national symbol— as

opposed to destroying or eliminating it— is most apparent in Boland's description of "the Achill woman," who appears first in Boland's 1989 essay "A Kind of Scar," then in her 1990 collection of poems, in which "The Achill Woman" poem is the first part of "Outside History: A sequence." The Achill woman appears a third time in a reprinting of the essay "A Kind of Scar" under the title "Outside History" in *Object Lessons* in 1995. In all of the Achill woman's appearances, she is an incomplete, flawed attempt by Boland to invent a new Irish symbol only a few years after the creation of the representative women in "Mise Eire." Boland admits to knowing and seeing the Achill woman for "less than a week" when she stayed in a cottage in Achill, an island off the west of Ireland ("A Kind of Scar" 5). This woman, like the Sean Bhean Bhocht, is an "old woman," who "would carry water up to" Boland during her stay (5). Boland writes about the woman, "I can see her still. She has a tea-towel round her waist — perhaps this is one image that has become all the images I have of her," confessing that she remembers less about the woman herself and more about the idea of her existence (5). The two women talked to each other, and Boland was surprised at the woman's earnestness, her ability to speak with vulnerabity and "force about the terrible parish of survival and death which the [famine] had been in those days" of the Achill woman's ancestors (5). Boland "sensed a power in the encounter," one which later allowed her to understand "this woman as an emblem" for Ireland and for the nation (5). Boland recognizes and welcomes her own symbolization of this woman as she writes:

> When [the Achill woman] pointed out Keel to me that evening when the wind was brisk and cold and the light was going; when she gestured towards that shore which had stones as outlines and monuments of a desperate people, what was she pointing at? A history? A nation? Her memories or mine? (6)

As Boland allows the woman to point to a history, to a nation, to a memory, the woman transforms into the history, the nation, the memories. She is no longer an individual woman with

experiences of her own but an alternative symbol in Boland's mind whose emblematic experiences— ancestral famine, physical labor, rural living— come to represent all that Mother Ireland previously had, and more.

Boland's essay "A Kind of Scar" and her poem "The Achill Woman" share remarkable similarities in Boland's description of and hopes for the woman. In the poem, the woman comes "up the hill carrying water" and wears "a half-buttoned, wool cardigan, a tea-towel round her waist" (*New Collected Poems* 176). She does her work against the backdrop of "fluid sunset; and then, stars" (176). The speaker notes the "cold rosiness" of the woman's hands, perhaps drawing more parallels to Dark Rosaleen (176). The speaker reveals herself as "all talk, raw from college— / week-ending at a friend's cottage," a young woman out of place in the countryside, a place which she does not call her home (176). Yet, because she talks to this woman, "putting down time until / the evening turned cold without warning," she feels she has the authority to put her in a poem, to allow her to become a national symbol (176). The speaker "went / indoors … took down [her] book / and opened it and failed to comprehend // the harmonies of servitude" which she associates with both the woman and Ireland (177). She falls "asleep / oblivious to // the planets clouding over in the skies, / the slow decline of the spring moon, / the songs crying out their ironies" (177). The speaker of the poem could not have known, at the time, that this Achill woman would become an icon to her, a remembrance of the countryside, a memory that propels her career forward. But the woman becomes exactly that— a memory and then a symbol, without a voice or response.

Boland justifies her symbolization of the Achill woman by contrasting it with previous tradition. Previous male poets "had continued to trade in the exhausted fictions of the nation; had allowed these fictions to edit ideas of womanhood and modes of remembrance;" such portrayals lacked meaning "at the deepest, most ethical level" because they did not include "the suggestion

of any complicated human suffering" ("A Kind of Scar" 13). Thus, Boland warrants her portrayal of the Achill woman through the inclusion of her suffering, her vulnerability. Boland's writing about her is not full of "hollow victories, the passive images, the rhyming queens" but recounts the woman's work, her strife, her familial oral history of the famine (13). She feels that she includes this Achill woman's story of defeat, writing, "I knew that the women of the Irish past were defeated. I knew it instinctively long before the Achill woman pointed down the hill to the Keel shoreline. What I objected to was that Irish poetry should defeat them twice" by not including their histories, pains, or stories (13). Yet, the Achill woman herself does not speak in the poem; though the prose piece centralizes these stories, the poem does not mention the famine or the Achill woman's specific sufferings, which might have allowed her some space for poetic embodiment, but merely suggests that she must work to survive. Further, Boland's attempt to portray womanly suffering is not so far from the tradition as she might have intended it to be. Pearse, in his play *The Singer,*[6] claims that "to be a woman and to suffer as women do is to be the highest thing," a claim which "ensures that women keep on serving and suffering" (Cullingford 69). The Achill woman becomes, through Boland's essay and poem, not a woman in a poem but a metaphor for suffering, for the difficult lives of the previous generation who lived through the famine and survived. In "The Achill Woman" "the 'real women of the actual past,'" represented by the likes of this unnamed woman from Achill, "are subsumed into a single emblematic victim-figure: 'the women of a long struggle and a terrible survival', 'the wrath and grief of Irish history'" (Longley 188). According to Longley, "by not questioning the nation, Boland recycles the literary cliché from which she attempts to escape," creating a new symbol for the Irish woman who looks eerily similar to the representations of the past (Longley 188).

[6] Patrick Pearse, *The Singer*, first performed in 1917. See *Patrick Pearse - Collected Plays / Dramai an Phiarsaigh*, edited by Roisin Ghairbhi and Eugene McNulty (Irish Academic Press 2013).

While Boland's new national symbol mirrors Mother Ireland in various ways, her work does subvert the tradition in various other ways. The poem does not suggest that the Achill woman is a mythical type of woman, nor a passive one, as might have been suggested were this poem part of the larger patriarchal Irish canon. Boland critiques past poets for "availing themselves of the old convention […] using and re-using women as icons and figments […] evading the real women of an actual past: women whose silence their poetry should have broken" ("A Kind of Scar" 24). Still, the Achill woman remains a silent figure, a woman who is written about as opposed to doing the writing, one who does not have a deep relationship with the speaker. Boland requires that the poem and the speaker of the poem do not exoticize or mythologize the Achill woman, the new national symbol, yet the poem somehow moves from the concrete images of the natural world, buckets, and casual conversations to questions of "planets," "the spring moon," and "songs crying out ironies," as if the purpose of the Achill woman's existence and work is to create a space for Boland to find meaning, a life about which Boland can write and through which she can self-reflect (*New Collected Poems* 177).

Whether she fully achieves her goal or not, Boland seeks to subvert the poetic construction of women and the relationship between womanhood and the land that has come before her. As Elizabeth Cullingford claims in *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry*:

> This tradition reflects the patriarchal opposition between male Culture and female Nature, which defines women as the passive and silent embodiments of matter. Politically, the land is seen as an object to be possessed, or repossessed: to gender it as female is to confirm and reproduce the social arrangements that construct women as material objects, not as speaking subjects. (Cullingford 56)

Yet, Boland's work oscillates between a critique of the association between the woman with land and a preservation of it; "in many of her poems Ireland is what Eavan Boland *thinks with*, but more particularly Dublin is what she thinks with and does so with striking feeling for the

particulars of place" (Smyth 275). She plays into the traditional and archetypal use of the land as metaphor, displaying her own personal connection to the place in which she lives.

The land is a relevant subject in many of Boland's poems, and her own take on the gendering of the land arises in the poem "Anna Liffey," from her 1994 poetry collection *In a Time of Violence*, her next published collection after *Outside History* (1990), which includes "The Achill Woman." The poem personifies the River Liffey, the river which runs through Dublin, as a woman, as is done by James Joyce through the character Anna Livia in *Finnegans Wake*.[7] Boland writes, "The river took its name from the land. / The land took its name from a woman" (*New Collected Poems* 230). When discussing the poem, Boland finds it necessary to write the River Liffey's feminine perspective not only because she herself "had known for a long time about Anna Liffey, and of course for a very much longer time, had loved the Liffey as a river as most Dubliners do," but also because the River Liffey "is one of the very few feminine incarnations of a river. Most rivers … are male. Only very few [...] are thought of as female, feminine, incarnated-by-the-feminine in place" ("Eavan Boland talks about 'Anna Liffey'"). Boland does not feminize the land herself but works within the perspective that the river already possesses a gender, and she speaks as if the river declared itself to be female.

Boland refers to the poem as a "long, almost structureless, conversation" ("Eavan Boland talks about 'Anna Liffey'"), as it "serves multiple purposes. It is a poem about becoming a poet, a poem about the cycle of motherhood, and a poem about a divided Irish nation. It pays tribute to Joyce" and "presents a starkly different heroine, one unfettered by myth and the nationalized conflation of woman as nation-builder" (Dinsman 182-83). Once again reimagining a canonical trope proposed by an important Irish male figure, Boland writes "Anna Liffey" with the female

[7] James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, Faber and Faber, 1939.

poet in mind. The poet-speaker sees the Liffey out of her window, a "source" of both water and inspiration (*New Collected Poems* 230). She "praise[s] / the gifts of the river," how it moves as "One body. One spirit. / One place. One name" (230). The speaker reflects upon her own life, how she "came [to Dublin] in a cold winter" and had children (230-31). Gazing upon the river, she questions what it means to be a nation— "Make of a nation what you will / Make of the past / What you can–"— and acknowledges her own role as a woman within the poem: "It has taken me / All my strength to do this. // Becoming a figure in a poem. // Usurping a name and a theme" (231). This moment of self-reflection fully encapsulates Boland's mission as a female poet to continue the tradition of Irish poetics while critiquing the tradition, to make a place for herself inside a tradition which has previously excluded her. In "Anna Liffey," the poet-speaker proclaims that "a river is not a woman" in the same way that Ireland is not a mother; still, "a woman is a river," with "patience" and "powerlessness," embodying the same traits which the passive woman in the Irish poetic tradition always possesses (231-32). In previous poetry within the male-dominated tradition, women could supposedly "assume the roles of" only "mothers, nurses, and mourners of dead male heroes" (Cullingford 68). In Boland's "Anna Liffey," women can also be poets. Yet, by equating herself with the River Liffey, the speaker remains a projection of the land, not an embodied figure. The Achill woman and the River Liffey merge as similar attempts to subvert the idea of Mother Ireland— when the speaker, referring to herself, states, "the body of an ageing woman / is a memory," she calls back to the Achill woman, and her purpose within Boland's poetry (*New Collected Poems* 233). She, too, is a memory which Boland capitalizes on to discuss the ideas of womanhood and nationhood.

In "Anna Liffey," Boland implies that the women and the land should still be equated, that they are inseparable as before, but that this comparison serves a different purpose than it did in previous generations. Now, when the woman and the land become one, the woman is not a

fragile being but a powerful force and a poet. By equating not merely the woman herself to the land as she did in "The Achill Woman" but to the *female poet*, Boland inserts herself as poet into the national tradition, the national symbol. Yet, when the speaker proclaims, "In the end / it will not matter / that I was a woman … The body is a source / Nothing more," she contradicts her own femininity. Instead, what is important is that she is a poet whose lines will be remembered and whose symbolic women will be understood as the national symbol for generations to come, mirroring the refrain of Yeats's Cathleen ni Houlihan: "They shall be remembered forever" (235-6, *Yeats's Poetry, Drama, and Prose* 139). Thus, Boland, the poet whose goal is to establish a poetic tradition which includes women, their histories, their stories, and their voices, becomes an inconsistent advocate for women in poetry. It is not the speaker's womanhood but her roles as poet and symbol which triumph. At a young age, Boland had found herself disappointed when she realized that in order to "weep or sing or recite in the cause of Ireland," she would "have to give up the body and spirit of a woman" (*Object Lessons* 66-7). Though the speaker in "Anna Liffey" remains female, she is not an embodied woman. Indeed, by proclaiming that her womanhood "will not matter," the speaker appears to commit the very action which Boland feared in her youth: like a river in Ireland "en route to / [its] own nothingness," she allows "everything that burdened and distinguished" her, including her womanhood, to "be lost in this: [she] was a voice" (236).

In her subsequent collection, *The Lost Land* (1998), Boland continues to explore similar themes of the connection between the land and nation, between women and symbol. Her most overt poem on this topic in the collection is "Mother Ireland," another direct response to the feminization of the land. The poem gives voice to the land, with the speaker being the country itself: "I was land" (*New Collected Poems* 261). From this first moment, Boland's "Mother Ireland" speaks to Seamus Heaney's poem "Act of Union," published in his 1975 collection

North, which portrays the colonial relationship between Ireland and Britain through Britain's predatory perspective. Heaney's poem feminizes Ireland, whose "back is a firm line of eastern coast / and arms and legs are thrown / beyond your gradual hills" (*Selected Poems: 1965-1975* 204). Boland's Ireland, similarly describing the anatomy of the country, "lay on [her] back to be fields / and when [she] turned / on [her] side / [she] was a hill" (*New Collected Poems* 261). In the past, Boland's speaker "did not see" but "was seen," a passive mass upon which "words fell," referring to the poems which were written about Ireland by men, such as "Act of Union," in which she herself did not speak (261). In Heaney's poem, Britain is "imperially / male," "the battering ram" which "caress[es] / the heaving province" of Ireland in an act of rape, leaving Ireland "with the pain … like opened ground" (*Selected Poems: 1965-1975* 204-5). Ireland is a passive symbol for Britain's colonialism, left without a response, a victim of an act of violence. Heaney perpetuates the Mother Ireland tradition in his 1975 poem, and Boland's poem, though it continues to perpetuate women as a symbol for the land and the nation, opposes the way in which men have written about her in the past.

Mother Ireland remains the traditional symbol of passivity at the beginning of Boland's "Mother Ireland." A transformation begins, however, in Boland's poem; Ireland is no longer merely the mother of a baby with "parasitical / and ignorant little fists" which "beat at [her] borders" when "Seeds. Raindrops. / Chips of frost." fall upon her (*Selected Poems: 1965-1975* 205, *New Collected Poems* 261). She overcomes her past of forced silence and "learn[s] her name," allowing her to "tell [her] story," her own story (*New Collected Poems* 261). When she begins to speak for herself, the story "was different / from the story told about [her],"— the story that she is passive and submissive, as conveyed by Heaney— mirroring Boland's own poetic vision in which she begins to write and speak for herself within a tradition which previously allowed men to speak for her (261). Mother Ireland distances herself from the land, separating

woman from the earth, from the world which previously left "her raw," so that she is able to see, think, and feel for herself (*Selected Poems: 1965-1975* 205, *New Collected Poems* 261). She "look[s]" at her land "with so much love / at every field" knowing that "they," the male writers of her story in the past, "misunderstood [her]," that they cannot speak for her or force her return to the old narrative (262). When "they" say, "*Come back to us*," Mother Ireland refuses to surrender her own freedom (*New Collected Poems* 262). She opposes the call in Heaney's poem for a restoration to pre-colonial days, something to "salve completely [Ireland's] tracked / and stretchmarked body" (*Selected Poems: 1965-1975* 205). She, on a more general level, refutes "the *aisling* poems of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in which Ireland is personified as a *spéirbhhean*, a visionary young woman who having been 'ravished by the aggressive masculine invader' prophetically calls for her restoration to her pre-colonial condition" (Auge). She, like the speaker in *Mise Eire* who "won't go back to it," refuses to return to the past and traditions which hurt her. Instead, the speaker-Ireland whispers, "*Trust me*," with the knowledge that all will be better once she— and all of her "daughters"— has the freedom to speak for herself (*New Collected Poems* 128, 262).

"Mother Ireland," published eleven years after "Mise Eire," reveals Boland's continued engagement with the trope of Mother Ireland, and with her critique of its flaws. These flaws do not outweigh the national value of the symbol for Ireland, however, as Boland continues the tradition while also criticizing it. "Mother Ireland," more blatantly than Boland's previous poems, admires Mother Ireland and her strength, finding fault not in her but in those who "misunderstand her" (*New Collected Poems* 262). Boland does not reject Mother Ireland as a whole but wishes to represent her accurately. In doing so, Boland imposes "her own personal reality" upon Mother Ireland, her perspective on the symbol which Boland felt, whether fair or not, "could also be extended to all other Irish women of her time" (Miquel-Baldellou 129).

Throughout the late eighties and into the early nineties, Boland explored where and how she fit into the Irish poetic tradition, focusing in multiple cases throughout multiple poetry collections on the idea of women as new symbols for Ireland and the symbol of Mother Ireland herself. In 2011, in her collection of critical essays *A Journey with Two Maps*, Boland explains her purpose and intentions in creating a new national symbol as she ends her book with a section entitled "Letter to a Young Woman Poet." In this letter, she presents a call to action to young female poets, entreating them to understand that "the past needs" women poets (*A Journey with Two Maps* 254). She continues her letter:

> The very past in poetry which simplified us as women and excluded us as poets now needs us to change it. […] And we need to do it. After all, stored in the past is a template of poetic identity which still affects us as women. When we are young poets it has the power to make us feel subtly less official, less welcome in the tradition than our male contemporaries. If we are not careful, it is that template we will aspire to, alter ourselves for, warp our self-esteem as poets to fit. Therefore, we need to change the past. Not by intellectualizing it. But by *eroticizing it*. (254, emphasis added)

To Boland, this idea of eroticizing the past and the Irish poetic tradition derives from "the erotic object" of the poetry of her male predecessors which was often a woman viewed through "the sexualized perspective" of the male writer (*Object Lessons* 230). Boland argues that women should eradicate this erotic aspect of the tradition but should "disassemble" it through means of changing poetic perspective, allowing poets like herself to write about objects "which might bring [them] closer to those *emblems of the body*" (*Object Lessons* 230, emphasis added). In this way, Boland explicitly calls for a re-representation of the female body and a reoriented poetic gaze as she works within the pre-existing tradition not to destroy or dismantle it but to rearrange it and recenter it so that the female body is not an object of male poetic desire but an expression of female poetic subjecthood. This idea appeared in her work as early as 1995 in *Object Lessons,* and more than fifteen years later, Boland echoes her own call to action for women poets with more confidence and clear direction, sharing her journey with other poets in *A Journey with Two*

Maps. She provides this letter so that these young women, too, can enter into the tradition, and maybe do so without facing those same internal struggles that Boland faced early in her career. She remembers the discomfort she felt in attempting to enter the male-dominated world of Irish poetry in her youth and becomes a voice, even an inspiration, for those wishing to do the same. She acknowledges the barriers that the tradition has put before young women and calls upon them to *change* the tradition, to alter the past. Boland clearly does so through her poetry in her work to establish a new— or, at the very least, different— national symbol and representation of women. Boland does not desire to erase the past or the male writers who have come before her because she acknowledges the beauty of the poetic tradition, though she recognizes how harmful it can be. Her desire throughout her career was to "[plot] those correlatives between maleness and strength, between imagination and power which allowed [her] not only to enter the story, but to change it" (*A Journey with Two Maps* 257). Her goal was to find a place for herself in the tradition, altering it to her story, to her experiences as a woman, and to an Irish history which includes and upholds women as historical participants and actors.

In her final collection of poetry *The Historians*, published in 2020, Boland directly engages with this idea of finding herself and her fellow women within historical narrative as she is again in conversation with the female national symbol in still new ways. By still encountering and re-writing the national symbol in *The Historians*, over thirty years after the publication of "Mise Eire," Boland establishes that the woman subject in poetry is not set or defined by one moment in time or even one author but must be reassessed so as to be understood in Ireland's current moment. The Norton publisher's blurb describes the volume as "the culmination of [Boland's] signature themes, exploring the ways in which the hidden, sometimes all-but-erased stories of women's lives can powerfully revise our sense of the past" (*Norton*, "The Historians").

The Historians, then, is yet another act of revisionist history, requiring the shifts in perspective and subjecthood which Boland declared necessary throughout her career and explicitly called for in *A Journey with Two Maps*. Through an analysis of two poems in the collection— "The Historians" and "Our Future Will Become the Past of Other Women"— I argue that Boland once again presents symbolic women to re-write and alter the national symbol of Mother Ireland. "The Historians," which explicitly posits women as history-writers, begins, "Say the word *history*: I see / your mother, mine" (*The Historians* 16). History is, to the speaker, a woman-dominated understanding of the past, one in which mothers control the narrative. These mothers' "hands are full of words," and history is thus guided by their memories (16). One of the mothers "holds your father's journal with its note / written on the day you were born," but she "will have burned" these memories "before the poem ends" (16). In this meta-type narrative in which Boland appears to acknowledge that poetry-writing is a form of history-making, one in which time is not static but changes from moment to moment and reader to reader, the speaker watches as her mother and another's mother burn those histories which do not suit their narratives or understandings of the past; the women establish their own narrative and pasts, "summon[ing] our island"— Ireland— to "tell a story that needed to be told" (16).

While the speaker of this poem could be Boland, and she could be speaking about her own mother and someone else's, Boland leaves the poem's subjects ambiguous to create emblematic women, a new type of historians who control the narrative of their beloved island. They are "record-keepers with a different task. / To stop memory becoming history. / To stop words healing what should not be healed" (17). These women are not "the patriots still bleeding" who fought for Ireland's independence nor are they the men who write history within patriarchal societies (16). They are the women who burn what men have written so as to give themselves the

opportunity to tell the story themselves. They are active participants in the refutation of "the enforced silence of women" throughout the dominant nationalist narratives of history which contribute to "the concept of the nation, indeed the whole discourse of cultural difference, as an assertion of 'control over women;'" they are, in Boland's own words, "refusing the passivity offered them by the inscriptions of a national literature" (Graham 154, "The Irish Woman Poet" 97). These women will not be controlled by such a history but choose to become part of their own nation's story by "put[ting] their hands close to the flame" and "lac[ing] their pages with fire" as the speaker "finish[es] writing" (17). As the women burn the old histories, the speaker creates a new one, and while the speaker is not Ireland herself, she represents the past of Ireland as written by women. This speaker becomes emblematic because, though acknowledging that Ireland must include women to tell her story like the women in "Mise Eire," she is representative of all women throughout history whose stories have been forgotten or pushed aside in favor of male-written narratives. She is not Mother Ireland but an unnamed woman who claims Ireland's history, claims Ireland as her island. In this way, Boland opens up the past as something which can and should include women and as something to which she contributes as a poet. At the same time, the subjects of "The Historians" remain symbolic and emblematic as they, Boland seems to claim, could be *any* Irish women. These mothers who choose to control history by fire are not specific women but could be "mine," could be "your[s]" (16).

In "The Historians," the speaker watches two women burn history in order to re-write it, but throughout her career, Boland argues that the male tradition should not be forgotten or destroyed. Instead, it should be altered, stretched, re-written, so as to not ignore the symbols, styles, and works which allowed men like Yeats and Heaney to become great Irish poets. Juxtaposing "The Historians" with this viewpoint, a contradiction arises in Boland's writing, but

it is one of which Boland is aware. This contradiction articulates the complexity of the role of Irish women in poetry, the way which female poets might find a place in the tradition while still finding their own female poetic voice. To dissect such a complexity, Boland explains through a metaphor in *A Journey with two Maps*: "We can, and should draw two maps for the right and difficult art of poetry. […] We can and should entertain even conflicted ideas to find a path through contradiction" (*A Journey with Two Maps* 26). Boland thus justifies her own contradictions as a path through which women poets must follow to enter the tradition, to "make the critique at the same time as we are making the work for which the critique is fitted" ("The Irish Woman Poet" 98). In "The Historians," the speaker watches the mothers burn history, burn the tradition. But as they do so, the speaker documents what they burn as they burn it and actively creates her poem as a response to this destruction, as a response to this tradition, thus engaging with it even as she watches it burn. Thus, Boland draws two maps, allowing her speakers to burn history, to gender the Liffey, to symbolize the Achill woman, acknowledging these moments as inconsistencies. Such contradictions, according to Boland, are necessities for entering into a tradition which excludes her and has excluded many women throughout history.

Boland refuses to let history exclude her in her 2020 poetry collection. In the same way that women control history and re-write the dominant narratives in "The Historians," women are active participants in Irish history and memory in "Our Past Will Become the Future of Other Women."[8] As understood by the title of the poem, history is unending and cyclical. The speaker speaks to the women of the past in this poem, referring directly to the suffragists who earned the vote for women in Ireland in 1918: "Show me your hand. I see our past," the past of Irish women

[8] This poem was "commissioned by the Government of Ireland's Permanent Mission to the United Nations and the Royal Irish Academy to commemorate women winning the right to vote and casting their first ballot on December 14th, 1918" (*The Historians* 61).

who “pull[ed] a crop out of the earth” and “lift[ed] a cauldron off the hearth” (*The Historians* 63). The speaker claims to know and understand the stories of these past women— “that was your world”— and their suffering, referring to historical Irish women as “ghost-sufferer[s], our ghost-sister[s]” (63). She is able to understand and empathize with these women because history “belongs to us, to all of us;” in this line, the speaker inundates all women into historical memory and requires that all women participate in it so as to “not leave [the suffragists] behind” (63). At the same time, the speaker claims a knowledge and an understanding which she cannot possibly know, as she does not have the lived experience of these women, though she claims the past as something that is shared by all women. But, because is not the same for all women— not even all Irish women as the speaker claims it to be— Boland creates yet another symbol for Ireland: the suffragist, the woman of history. This symbol comes to represent all women and all women’s rights, regardless of race, class, or circumstantial differences. Boland appears to move beyond the symbolic in this poem as the speaker “honor[s] all” of the names of the suffragists, naming individual women, including “Louie Bennett / Cissie Cahalan [...] Louisa Todhunter / Jenny Wyse Power,” in a move which does not appear in any of her other poems (64-5). Still, she does not provide individuality to any of these women, does not include the stories of how each of these women altered history or fought for women’s rights. Though she names various women, they merge into a singular category and become one symbol for the work done by each individual. They are all “ready to enter / history,” all ready to become emblems for the fight for gender equality (65). The speaker claims, “Our future will become / the past of other women;” contemporary women will, in the cycle of history-making, become the national symbols of future women, will one day become representative of the Irish past and Irish women’s history. Symbol creation, Boland appears to argue in this poem, is inevitable. It is dynamic, as new women and

new movements enter into history, establishing the need for new national symbols, but it is integral to history-making, poetry, and the Irish consciousness. Women will continue to write and create history, and as they do so, will become names in the mouths of future women, subjects in the poems of future writers, and maybe even inspirations in the hearts of future leaders. But they will not necessarily be embodied, vulnerable, emoting individuals. They will be representatives for what Ireland is and what Irish women can do.

Boland's poems which include symbolic women are responses to the male Irish poets of the past, oftentimes keeping various elements of their archetypes of women while altering large portions of the female portrayals. Boland criticizes the poetic tradition while still admiring it and advises that others do the same: "If women go to the poetic past as I believe they should, if they engage responsibly with it and struggle to change it […] then they will have the right to influence what is handed on in poetry, as well as the way it is handed on" (*A Journey with Two Maps* 265). To Boland, it is women poets' responsibility to change the past, to break from tradition, to struggle. Through this struggle women will be able to influence the poetic canon and establish themselves within it. At the same time though, Boland "believe[s] words such as *canon* and *tradition* and *inheritance* will change even more" as women continue to write, to modify the boundaries and break down the barriers which men have placed upon them (265). Boland was one of the most influential Irish female writers in this effort, this struggle, and she arguably helped create a path for other women to follow. Yet, she calls for women not to directly follow in her footsteps or those of the famous male writers but to find their own path within the poetic past. Women's poetry in Ireland continues to require new representations of women, new truths, new symbols, and new women writers. Though Boland's poems discussed in this chapter do significant work to redefine the boundaries for women and women subjects within poetry, these poems represent symbolic, and therefore disembodied, representations of women. In order to

move past the symbolic to uncover where embodiment exists within the contemporary Irish women's poetic tradition, I turn in the next chapters to alternative representations of women. By uncovering these alternative portrayals, I engage with multiple modes of poetic womanhood, which Boland herself refers to as the work of the contemporary poetic tradition: "a woman in Ireland who wishes to inscribe her life in a poem has a better chance now to move freely around within that poem, to select its subject and object at will, and to redirect its themes to her purposes," whether that be to create a new national symbol or to write an embodied woman ("The Irish Woman Poet" 107). This ability for the woman poet to portray herself and her subject is an expression of "artistic freedom," a freedom which, until the last few decades, was not readily available or accessible to many Irish women (107). Throughout the next chapters, I hope to explore and express the ways in which this artistic freedom leads to various and multiplicitous portrayals of women, ultimately searching for the ways in which these portrayals may or may not embody their subjects.

Chapter 2: Women's Bodies as Artifacts in the Poetry of Eavan Boland and Seamus Heaney

Write us out of the poem. Make us human
in cadences of change and mortal pain
and words we can grow old and die in.
Eavan Boland, "What Language Did," *In a Time of Violence*

Seamus Heaney is regarded as one of the most important and influential figures in Irish poetry, regardless of his gender. Eavan Boland, on the other hand, is often viewed as one of the most influential *women* in Irish poetry, with her gender referenced and her early work most often found in anthologies of Irish *women's* poetry. Close in age, these two figures share a connection in their contributions to the Irish literary tradition and the evolution of Irish poetry, with Heaney at the forefront of the canon and Boland finding her place within it throughout her career. As stated in the previous chapter, "Boland laments her displacement from the predominantly male tradition that Heaney comfortably finds a place in" and works to alter the position of women within the tradition (Conboy 193). In Chapter 1 of this thesis, I argue that the two poets are in conversation with each other as they work within and against the same symbolic trope of Mother Ireland. In this chapter, I argue that Boland and Heaney also share an interest in exploring an alternative portrayal of women's bodies, which I coin the *artifactual positioning* of those bodies. Both authors, specifically in the bog poems of Heaney's *North* and in various poems of Boland's collection *In a Time of Violence* and one from *The Historians*, portray women's bodies as and through artifacts, objects to be admired and beheld— and sometimes even touched— by the speaker, who doubles as observer of the artifacts. The male observer of female bodies in Heaney's poems often reveals the complexity of the male gaze despite the fact that this male gaze leads to a partial or total disembodiment of the women about which he writes. Heaney also complicates the male gaze by acknowledging the ethics of looking and what it means to be an

observer. In her poetry, Boland's female gaze and subject matter are less controversial than Heaney's male gaze and political parallels. Boland, through this female gaze, partially embodies the women and female speakers described in her poems through allowing them moments of vulnerability. Nevertheless, the artifactual positioning in Boland's poems of those women's bodies which are described through objects such as statues inevitably eclipses the potential for true and total embodiment.

Heaney's poetry collection *North* was published in 1975. In the years surrounding the publication of the collection, Heaney made various explicit statements about his understanding of the relationship between gender and poetry. One such statement in a passage from Heaney's 1972 essay "Belfast" reads

> I have always listened for poems, they come sometimes like bodies out of a bog, almost complete, seeming to have been laid down a long time ago, surfacing with a touch of mystery. They certainly involve craft and determination, but chance and instinct have a role in the thing too. I think the process is a kind of somnambulist encounter between masculine will and intelligence and feminine clusters of image and emotion. I suppose the feminine element for me involves the matter of Ireland, and the masculine strain is drawn from the involvement with English literature. ("Belfast" 34)

Here, Heaney alludes to the connection between women and the "matter of Ireland," as clearly manifested in "Act of Union," which explicitly portrays Ireland as feminine and Britain as masculine. But this connection and gendering is also deeply ingrained in *North*, Heaney's 1975 collection in which the "bog body poems" appear. The bog poems arise through Heaney's fascination with the photographs of bodies preserved in bogs in Northern Europe included in P. V. Glob's 1965 book *The Bog People*; Glob theorized that these bodies were sacrificed by their societies to a fertility goddess[1] (Alexander 220). Heaney studied and viewed the photographs of the bog bodies in Glob's book, alongside Glob's research and speculation as to who the bodies

[1] Nerthus is a pagan goddess associated with prosperity and fertility in Germanic regions.

might have been, and wrote poems about them, some as an observer of the bodies and others from the perspective of the bodies themselves. When describing the earliest bog poems in his collection *Wintering Out*, Heaney associated this gendering of the land and the ideals of modern Irish republicanism in a 1972 interview in *The Listener*:

> The early Iron Age in Northern Europe is a period that offers very satisfactory imaginative parallels to the history of Ireland at the moment … You have a society where girls' heads were shaved for adultery, you have a religion centering on the territory [sic], on a goddess of the ground and of the land, and associated with sacrifice. Now in many ways the fury of the Irish Republicanism is associated with a religion like this, with a female goddess who has appeared in various guises. *She appears as Cathleen ni Houlihan in Yeats's plays; she appears as Mother Ireland.* ("Mother Ireland" 790, emphasis added)

Heaney establishes a personal and national connection between the bog bodies and present-day Ireland. The ritual sacrificing of these bodies in ancient Denmark created a parallel in Heaney's mind between the victims sacrificed to a fertility goddess centuries ago and those who suffered in acts of "political martyrdom" for the sake of Ireland in the guise of Cathleen ni Houlihan and the nationalist cause (Foley 63). Thus, Mother Ireland and the passive portrayal of women pervade Heaney's bog poems from the outset, a passivity that is complicated by Heaney's actual depiction of the female bodies.

Heaney views the bog bodies as artifacts, especially the female ones, as if he is an observer of them in a museum and their deaths find meaning in his observation. The best-known essay on Heaney's gendered depiction of the bog bodies is Patricia Coughlan's "'Bog Queens': The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney." Coughlan argues that Heaney "tends to two opposing and possibly complementary representations of gender interaction. One constructs an unequivocally dominant masculine figure, who explores, describes, brings to pleasure and compassionates a passive feminine one;" this argument is especially relevant to "Punishment" and "Bog Queen" (Coughlan 51). The other mode of

gendered representation "proposes a woman who dooms, destroys, puzzles and encompasses the man, but also assists him to his self-discovery: the mother stereotype" (51). This latter tendency encompasses the argument of my previous chapter, which explores Boland's movement away from and conversation with the Mother Ireland stereotype. For the purposes of this chapter, I focus on Coughlan's description of Heaney's representation of gender roles, as it is particularly relevant to the construction of the female body in the bog poems. Moreover, I expand upon her argument that the women of the bog poems are not only passive women explored by a male observer; they are in fact artifacts, in the eyes of the speaker, meant to be observed by the "dominant masculine figure" (51).

In her influential essay "For This Sex Which is Not One" Luce Irigaray states that female sexuality "has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters" (Irigaray 23). Heaney perpetuates such a conceptualization of female sexuality in his poem "Bog Queen," the first of the bog poems which explicitly explores a female bog body. The poem is in the first-person, explicitly written from the perspective of the preserved Bog Queen herself, the only one of the bog poems to feature such a speaker. The Bog Queen in this poem speaks for herself, as Heaney attempts to give voice to a woman who has been turned into a museum artifact. Previously, her existence had only been spoken for by her observers, her studiers, the curators of her artifactual existence. The poem begins with the first-person: "I lay waiting," commencing with a statement of readiness, possibly for sexual acts but at the very least for the eyes of the masculine observer (*Selected Poems: 1965-1975* 187). The second stanza begins with another statement by the female speaker: "My body was braille / for the creeping influences" (187). This line explicitly calls out to "creeping influences" as the woman is exposed and her body is something to be touched (187). The line "invokes a sensuality" which Coughlan argues is typical of Heaney's bog poems, while the later line in the poem "'stitchwork / retted on my breasts' nods

to the dissolving of clothing to reveal the flesh underneath" revealing a "'sadomasochistic linking of sexuality with violence'" in Heaney's bogs poems, and as referenced in the introduction of this thesis and alluded to in the previous chapter, this allows for sexuality to be blamed as the source of political and even nationalist violence (Walsh 3-4). I argue that this ability to equate such violence with sexual description arises not from mere objectification and sexualization of the female body but on the more explicit formulation of the female body as an artifact. When the female body reduces to "the crock of the pelvis," "breasts," a "wet nest of … hair … a slimy birth-cord / of bog" contrasted with a "diadem," "gemstones," a "sash … wrinkling," and a "swaddle of hides," Heaney invokes not only the sexual but also the artifactual (*Selected Poems: 1965-1975* 188-89). This body is not only female and not merely an object; it is historical and preserved, something which can be placed in a museum so that observers can claim to gain a semblance of understanding of the past, simultaneously admiring her womanly features and her sensuality. As Julia Kristeva notes, the corpse is somewhere between life and death "and therefore no longer symbolizes anything;" even more immediately, the corpse is "death infecting life" ("Approaching Abjection" 69). The result of viewing a corpse is pure abjection, an ultimate horror that leads to a separation from self, an Othering,[2] a "real threat" that "beckons to us and engulfs us" (69). But as the bog bodies have been preserved for thousands of years, they lose the immediacy of abjection that a corpse requires. The body of the Bog Queen "remains unnamed in an unmarked grave while her physical body slowly disappears to nothing […] The result of this is that women are removed from historical and literary narratives" (Walsh 3). Now, in "Bog Queen," the body of the woman as preserved artifact comes back to life. At

[2] The Other, as understood through Lacan's "The Mirror Stage," is the conception of something that is outside of and different from oneself. For postcolonial contextualization of the Other and how the Western World Others non-white, non-male peoples, see "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives" by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (*History and Theory*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 1985).

the same time, the Bog Queen's status as artifact renders her "imagistically static," and through his insertion of himself and his speaker into the Bog Queen's memory, Heaney doubles the woman's artifactual positioning: she is no longer merely human remains, one type of artifact, nor a photograph of a body, another type of artifact (Gregson 131). She is a figure in a poem, and it is through Heaney's speaker's male gaze that she will be remembered. Heaney thus partially embodies this artifact, this dead body, by giving her a voice while simultaneously disembodying her through describing her body as an archaeological curiosity, a space in which readers investigate the ethics of excavation: when the body "was barbered / and stripped / by a turfcutter's spade" accidentally, the turfcutter "veiled [the body] again / and packed coomb softly / between the stone jambs / at [her] head and [her] feet" (*Selected Poems: 1965-1975* 188). But then "a peer's wife bribed" the turfcutter for her hair so that he cuts it again. In this moment, Heaney appears to question the turfcutter's treatment of the body and, through the voice of the Bog Queen, criticizes the removal of her hair. Though she is an artifact, she has certain rights, Heaney seems to argue, and it is not the turfcutter's (or the peer's wife's) place to determine what to do with this body. Heaney's voicing of the artifact thus allows a space for empathy for this victimized woman whose voice was originally stripped away from her in death thousands of years ago, but as most explicitly understood through Heaney's next bog poem "Punishment," empathy is more contentious and self-serving than it might seem.

The next poem in *North* which portrays a female bog body is "Punishment." This poem also creates an artifact out of a female body but does so in a more explicitly political way. Through an exploration of Heaney's drafts of "Punishment,"[3] I argue that Heaney nuances his

[3] I viewed digitized versions of the "Punishment" drafts from the Seamus Heaney Literary Papers in the archives of the National Library of Ireland. In "The Archive," *Seamus Heaney in Context*, Rand Brandes argues that these papers are, in themselves, direct artifacts of Heaney's life, having "literally passed through Heaney's hands" because

positioning of female bodies as artifacts by positing himself as the "artful voyeur" (*Selected Poems: 1965-1975* 193). The earliest drafts of the poem, like "Bog Queen," detail the physicality of the bog body under scrutiny, including the "nape / of her neck," her "naked front," and her "nipples" which resemble "amber beads" (NLI, MS 49, 493/36). As Alexander argues, this action of "meticulously" detailing the "corpse's physicality, giving careful weight to each descriptor" even from the first draft of the poem "never [lets] the audience forget for a moment that the bodies being pulled from the bog are just that: physical bodies, with all the foibles and delicate vulnerabilities that such embodiment details," signaling that these bog bodies might have a possibility for embodiment through their intimate exposure but lose this possibility in their artifactual state (Alexander 222). The speaker of the poem is aware of his position as outsider as well as the exposed state of this bog body, yet he complicates this awareness by proposing a connection with the body, empathizing with her through the empathetic phrase "I can feel" from the beginning of the earliest drafts (NLI, MS 49, 493/36). Such empathy appears to be in service of the bog body and the woman who once possessed the body, but while empathy, according to Saidiya Hartman in her book *Scenes of Subjection*, "is a projection of oneself into another in order to better understand the other," it can also occlude the experiences of those with whom a viewer empathizes because the empathizer "begins to feel for himself" (*Scenes of Subjection* 19). The empathizer's emotions and needs may soon surpass those of the person with whom they empathize, though, in the case of the Heaney's speaker, that which is being observed is already an artifact. "Moreover," Hartman argues, through empathy, a body becomes "a vessel for the uses, thoughts, and feelings of others" which "[exploits] the vulnerability" of the body or person with whom the empathizer empathizes (19). In this moment

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"the Emory and NLI archives were assembled by the poet himself" (Brandes 339). Seamus Heaney Literary Papers, MS 49, 493/34-39, National Library of Ireland.

of empathy, the speaker displaces the emotions of the punished woman, though he purports to connect with her— "*I* can feel"— paradoxically disembodying the woman through a first-person exploration of her vulnerability, an avenue through which the speaker reflects on his *own* role as observer (*Selected Poems: 1965-1975* 192, emphasis added).

This empathy, which turns out to be in part a mode of self-reflection, persists throughout the drafts of "Punishment." The most notable facet of one of the early drafts that complicates the meaning of the speaker's empathy is a change of title. Heaney originally titled the poem "Shame," which suggests the guilt that the dead woman feels at having betrayed her community's ideals as well as the shame of the community itself in the face of the woman's actions. At the same time, this title implies shame on the part of the speaker, indicating the shame he feels as a viewer of the results of this dead woman's punishment (NLI, MS 49, 493/36). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, American critical theorist and specialist on affect theory, notes that "one of the strangest features of shame" is the second-hand shame of an observer:

> the way bad treatment of someone else, bad treatment *by* someone else, someone else's embarrassment, stigma, debility, bad smell or strange behavior, seemingly have nothing to do with me, can so readily flood me— assuming I'm a shame-prone person— with this sensation whose very suffusiveness seems to delineate my precise, individual outlines in the most isolating way imaginable. (Sedgwick 36-37)

Not only might the title "Shame" reflect the shame which the speaker assumes the young woman's society inflicted upon her for her sexual crimes, but it also implies the shame that the speaker, as onlooker, experiences as he posits his gaze on a body which has been embarrassed and Othered in the most violent way by her society. The speaker cannot change the shame which the body might have experienced but instead *empathetically* posits the experience onto himself. Heaney crosses out this title, however, changing it to that of the final form, "Punishment," and the implications of the speaker's nuanced empathy are lost (NLI, MS 49, 493/36).

In another draft, Heaney writes the poem as a sonnet. In this version, Heaney amplifies his insertion of self into the poem by speaking directly to the body— "I almost love you," – and then proceeds to ask, "Whose righteousness / is preferable? The groomed proconsul's / civilized disdain for you and yours / or the tribe's exact and intimate revenge?" Heaney, by including "the groomed proconsul," who does not appear in the final poem, references the role of an ancient Roman governor, drawing a parallel to patriarchal colonial Britain as a so-called "civilized" authority which, in the eyes of the speaker, should starkly contrast the uncivilized governing body of the ancient woman's tribe, but, he implies, it does not (NLI, MS 49, 493/38). He thus questions if modern judgment of this ancient action would be more ethical than the tribal judgment of the women's sexual crimes which led to her death. This comparison is even more glaring in yet another draft, in which Heaney states, "Senate and althing / would both condemn you," again juxtaposing ancient Roman 'civilized' society with the 'uncivilized' society of the bog woman (NLI, MS 49, 493/35). As he begins to involve his country's own political circumstances more explicitly in this version of the poem— "We all might cast / the stones of silence"— he explicitly equates for the first time the ancient women whose bodies the bog has preserved to the women of his own time period, referencing the tensions between Northern Ireland republicans and loyalists (NLI, MS 49, 493/35). In the final draft of "Punishment," Heaney compares the bog girl's punishment to the punishment of Northern Irish women who dated British soldiers, who were tarred and feathered[4] for their sexual acts. By comparing bog bodies to modern women, Heaney creates artifactual positioning for both, as if the bog women are something to be understood through modern allegory and the modern women are soon to

[4] See *New York Times* article November 11, 1971: https://www.nytimes.com/1971/11/11/archives/ulster-women-tar-2-girls-for-dating-british-soldiers-two-girls.html

undergo a similar fate: to become victims, shameful political sacrifices, and artifacts preserved by tarring and feathering.

Heaney complicates the matter in the drafts by providing a moment of understanding of his own oppression and complicity. In the handwritten notes on the side of a draft, the speaker's pity for the girl comes across more strongly. Heaney writes in messy handwriting with a black pen, "Your atonement / the long oppression"—oppression replaces the crossed out "humiliation"— "of your loins / your weak gaze / little collaborator" (NLI, MS 49, 493/35). Merely recognizing complicity does not necessarily absolve Heaney of his own complicity. Even in this moment that might be understood as an apology or a concession, he further sexualizes the body, observing and noting her genitalia and convicting her for the "crime" which led to her death. The speaker's complicity in the woman's punishment becomes more explicit as Heaney nears the final form of the poem. In one of the later drafts, Heaney refers to the speaker as a "cowardly spy," acknowledging that he plays a role in the girl's punishment by observing and admiring her without doing anything to stop it (NLI, MS 49,493/37). In yet another draft, Heaney changes his role from poet-observer to contemporary (though still distanced) participant, saying he "would [have] connived / in civilized outrage" if he were to witness such acts (NLI, MS 49,493/37). These words, handwritten once again in black pen on the side of a draft, appear in the final form of the poem. But in the final version Heaney chooses to refer to the speaker not as a "cowardly spy" but as an "artful voyeur": "I am the artful voyeur // of your brain's exposed / and darkened combs, your muscles' webbing / and all your numbered bones" (*Selected Poems: 1965-1975* 193). This change alters the tone of the poem and shifts the speaker's potential for culpability from an unknown observer to a poet who will write down this woman's history, create a poem out of it, and compare it to his contemporary period, allowing the poem to be the mode through which the speaker participates in "civilized outrage."

Although Coughlan argues that "the speaker […] does to a certain degree interrogate his own position," particularly apparent in the decisions that Heaney makes in his earlier drafts, she argues that the use of the words "artful voyeur" apply not to the speaker's position as observer but to "his sense of political ambiguity: he would 'connive / in civilized outrage', but *understand* the 'tribal, intimate revenge' being exacted" (Coughlan 55, emphasis added). The poem is thus, at times, less about complicating the Lacanian concept of the gaze— in which Lacan states that "in the initial relationship to the world, something is given-to--be--seen to the seer," a narcissistic desire to know one's self through the conception of the Other— and more about his own role and the role of his readers in the contemporary political moment (Quinet 139). Though the speaker is aware of the gaze, he participates within it and allows the bog body to become a projection of himself, an artifact through which he can self-reflect on his own political moment. This projection is what the speaker complicates, placing his own historical moment within his conception of the Other, naming himself as a "*subject* forced to be covert" by the greater oppressor: Britain (Coughlan 55).

In the eyes of the speaker of "Punishment," who lives during the Troubles[5] in Northern Ireland, Britain is the oppressor of the passive and feminine Ireland, as in Heaney's "Act of Union," discussed in Chapter 1. When Northern Irish women had sexual relations with British soldiers during this period or were even suspected of speaking with British soldiers, they were traitors to their country, to the Irish republican cause. "Punishment" "details the barbaric attack of tying a woman to a lamp-post, pouring liquid tar (or black paint to give the visual effect of tar) over her head, and covering her body in feathers," serving as "a form of humiliation and intimidation, but further the act is a didactic spectacle aimed to control" women (Walsh 4). Such

[5] A period of sectarian conflict (loyalists to Britain versus republicans, in the most simplified terms) in Northern Ireland that began in the late 1960s and ended with the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

control over Irish women, as briefly discussed in Chapter 1 through Colin Graham's essay "Subalternity and Gender," is a facet of nation-building (Graham 154). As an observer of such acts of control, the speaker discloses a partial sense of responsibility, as he has "stood dumb" at the punishment of these women (*Selected Poems: 1965-1975* 193). Even still, this guilt is fleeting, for the speaker refers to these Irish women as "betraying sisters," ultimately deciding to place the blame upon the victims (193). Throughout the drafts of "Punishment," the speaker enacts the male gaze upon a female body as he describes the body in detail. Heaney attempts to complicate this male gaze, however, by showing that the speaker understands that he is an observer and debates his role in the violence inflicted upon not only this bog body but also the women within his own society.

In "Publishing the Troubles," Nathan Suhr-Sytsma further complicates the speaker's complicity, arguing that the poem might "be less about condoning 'intimate revenge' than about the speaker's discomfort with assuming a position of journalistic impersonality from which to condemn such revenge," a discomfort with the "cowardly spy" who reports on the death of those tarred and feathered during the Troubles as opposed to the "artful voyeur" who attempts to understand that he himself is an observer of this predicament (Suhr-Sytsma 193). Readers of "Punishment" thus become "voyeurs of— or eavesdroppers on— its own exposure of victims," complicit not only in the death of the girl but also in the acts of violence against Northern Irish women who, too, become immortalized as artifacts in Heaney's poem (Suhr-Sytsma 194). Further, the fact that the speaker "almost love[s]" the girl "unsettles the cool detachment of the [male] gaze," implying that he cares for the body and memory of this girl in a way that an unbiased observer could not (Gregson 131). The speaker is, on the one hand, complicit in the girl's punishment, an observer of an artifact, an Other; in the words of Cixous, she is the "Night to his Day," as the preserved body is "the repressed that ensures the system's functioning," the

patriarchal system in which woman are the ones who are gazed upon and men the ones doing the gazing ("Sorties" 67). On the other hand, the speaker ensures that the systems of looking and observation are functioning, that the artifacts are the ones observed and readers, as artful voyeurs, are the ones who do the observing. Heaney thus requires that readers question their own complicity in the violence surrounding them, creating an artifact out of a preserved body.[6]

The parallels that Heaney creates through this artifact, this dead body, this corpse, allow for the same sense of abjection to apply to ancient, "tribal" societies and to his modern moment. In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler discusses the societal establishment of "boundaries" that serve "the purpose of instating and naturalizing certain taboos regarding the appropriate limits, postures, and modes of exchange that define what constitutes bodies" (Butler 497). These boundaries that "govern various bodily orifices presuppose a heterosexual construction of gendered exchange, positions, and erotic possibilities," and anything which falls outside of this heterosexual construction is perceived as the Other (498). Because the boundaries of Ireland's national character at the time of Heaney's publication of "Punishment" establish women as passive, virgin mother figures, and more specifically Northern Ireland's role in the Troubles placed a firm boundary between Northern Irish women who stray from Republican ideals and their communities, any stray from this societal boundary not only allows the women to become the Other but also to be deserving of punishment. Furthermore, these tarred and feathered "criminals" are to be held up as examples, in the same manner as the bog woman, to become artifactual evidence of this historical period and the political atrocities that the people,

[6] When choosing how to most accurately and ethically include Heaney's bog poems in an exhibition in Dublin titled *Seamus Heaney: Listen Now Again*, Geraldine Higgins hoped to re-iterate Heaney's idea of complicity of the exhibition viewer through material means: "By exhibiting not only the drafts of the poem but also Glob's photograph of the Windeby girl, and newspaper cutting of a tarred and feathered girl found amongst Heaney's papers, we highlight the mediated textures and contexts of the poem and invite viewers to consider their own voyeurism" (Higgins 332).

specifically the women, of nationalist communities in Northern Ireland faced. The speaker suggests that just as he observes the body of the "murdered corpse and presents it like it as a natural phenomenon" which can and should be at once commemorated, shamed, and memorialized, so, too, will the punished women of Northern Ireland become observable artifacts to be viewed by future "artful voyeurs," (Coughlan 56, *Selected Poems: 1965-1975* 193). Viewers of the bog bodies and the tarred and feathered women alike are thus left asking themselves, "Are we witnesses" to the enacted violence, "or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance? What does the exposure of the violated body yield?" (*Scenes of Subjection* 3-4). While the observation of these bodies as artifacts might allow for what Clémentine Deliss refers to as the "reembodiment of the spectator" through moments of self-reflection, the re-exposure of the violence enacted upon these bodies in their moments of ultimate vulnerability in "Punishment" serves to confirm these bodies as artifacts and obscure nearly any possibility for the embodiment of both the Northern Irish and ancient, 'tribal' woman (Deliss 10).

The final bog poem in *North* that analyzes a woman's preserved remains is "Strange Fruit," which draws from Glob's image of a woman's severed head, as opposed to a woman's entire body. The poem even from its title might be read as contentious, referencing the Billie Holiday song[7] which, in turn, "is indebted to a poem by Abel Meeropol, a Jewish man who had been 'haunted ... for days' on seeing a photograph of a lynching in which the bodies of two black men hang from trees above a crowd of spectators" (McConnell 432). In Heaney's context, however, the "strange fruit" has less to do with racialized violence and more to do with sexual violence and retribution for the breaking of social standards. While Holliday's "Strange Fruit"

[7] Billie Holiday's 1939 "Strange Fruit," written by Abel Meeropol and recorded with Commodore Records.

refers to a photograph of identifiable lynched bodies, Heaney's "Strange Fruit" refers to a singular ancient head. Through an analysis of the drafts of "Strange Fruit" housed in Emory University's Rose Library, Gail McConnell discovers another layer to this sexualized bog body: the head, to the speaker, might also be read as a religious symbol. The original title of the poem is "My reverence," which then changes to "RELIQUARY" and "TETE COUPEE" before Heaney finally settles on "Strange Fruit" (434). One of the earlier drafts compares the head to "an after-image// Of Veronica's napkin," referencing the woman who wiped the face of Jesus as he carried the cross (434). Even more explicitly referring to the Catholic Mass, "the beheaded girl appears as Christ … 'This was her body / This was her blood'" (438).[8] This draft also includes the lines, "the spongy fleece/ of the lamb had stained/ and we unswaddled its heavy kernel," and McConnell argues, "That Heaney imagines the sheepskin as a lamb's fleece demonstrates the initial endeavour to represent the beheaded girl using Christ-like imagery. […] Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (437). These drafts of "Strange Fruit," particularly the one entitled "My reverence," reveal a line of Othering by Heaney which does not allow for him to know the other: the beheaded artifact becomes not a symbol for the life that once was but is a symbol for religious reverence, a sacred relic,[9] a Christ-like body of a saint to be revered. However, in the final, published draft of the poem does away with this explicit comparison to Christ, and in the final version he must acknowledge that the embodiment of this object was never possible: "Here is the girl's head" (*Selected Poems: 1965-1975* 194). While

[8] Reference to the Liturgy of the Eucharist in Catholic Mass during which bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ through transubstantiation.

[9] In the Catholic tradition, in which Heaney grew up, a relic, ranging from "the body or fragment of the body of a deceased person" to "articles of clothing … or pieces of personal property," "is not a mere symbol or indicator of divine presence, it is an actual physical embodiment of it, each particle encapsulating the essence of the departed person, pars pro toto, in its entirety" (Walsham 11-12). The preserved state of the relic itself increases its value and holiness: "durability and resistance to decay are frequently defining features of the relic: in medieval Europe the incorruptibility of a corpse was regarded as a certain sign of sanctity and a seal of divine approbation" (11).

time and distance and the unknown history of the Bog Queen and the girl in Punishment made an artifact out of their bodies, the head of the girl in "Strange Fruit" is an artifact for the same reasons but even more so because she is not a full person but a severed head— an object, a part of a whole, unable to be understood as a whole person.

To understand the implications of Heaney's poem, I turn to Judith Butler's theory of embodiment, which purports an understanding of one's own body through "a shared susceptibility to and dependence on others and attempts to construct an ethics on the basis of 'primary human vulnerability'" (Petherbridge 57).[10] Butler acknowledges, however, the dangers of this necessity: "as she also notes, our interdependence makes us vulnerable to the unpredictability of others and the risk that a form of ethical responsiveness in the face of suffering might be withheld" (57). Such a vulnerability that leads to understanding of self cannot be fulfilled if those who view the vulnerable body are unable to recognize its humanity; "one has to recognize the other as 'a life' before they can be recognized," and this "primary level of acceptance [that] is required before being able to 'know'" and thus embody another (61, 69). However, the severed head's humanity was never in question, was never possible. Heaney and viewers can never recognize this head as "a life" because it, in its preserved form, is not a life but a head. The existence of the head implies the existence of the women, a "murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible / beheaded girl, outstaring axe / and beatification, outstaring / what had begun to feel like reference" (*Selected Poems: 1965-1975* 194). In this sonnet version of the poem, Heaney does away with the relic-like imagery that impairs any analysis of the head's humanity and instead attempts to insert her back into the poem. He does not, as in "Bog Queen," attempt to give voice to an experience which might partially embody the once-living woman. Instead, he

[10] From Judith Butler's *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso 2004) as cited in "How Do We Respond? Embodied Vulnerability and Forms of Responsiveness" by Danielle Petherbridge (2018).

parallels the death of the head in “Strange Fruit” to modern deaths through the title of the poem as he does in “Punishment,” albeit more subtly, to create a sense of empathy. But the first-person “voyeur” is not present in this poem. Instead, it is an outsider, the historian Diodorus Siculus, who “confessed” that repeated readings of violence lead to a “gradual ease” with which he was able to handle and observe such acts (194). The speaker acknowledges within himself this desensitization, which he experiences while viewing the head— the eyes of the head stare and stare, unmoving, until “beatification” and “what had begun to feel like reverence” dissipates (194). In this way, Heaney appears to re-evaluate the position of the viewer of the artifact, disclosing that the longer one gazes upon an artifact, the more disembodied and distant that artifact becomes from its historical moment. Heaney’s role as observer of the bog bodies is thus a complicated one, one with various ethics of looking ranging from empathetic observer and self-reflecting artful voyeur to desensitized historian. Through close readings of “Bog Queen,” “Punishment,” and “Strange Fruit,” Heaney re-inscribes the bog bodies as artifacts, but he questions and struggles with what it means to ethically observe such artifacts and in what manner it is best to engage with them as both poet and human.

Boland, like Heaney, creates certain representations of women’s bodies as artifacts, but, I argue, she complicates and inverts the position of observer-speaker by establishing a potential female embodiment throughout her consideration of such artifacts in ways that Heaney does not, as Heaney focuses less on the bodies of the bog women and more on the ethical observation of the bodies as artifacts. In part, this potential for embodiment arises out of Boland’s mere position as a female observer of other women and representations of women. Kristeva writes that feminists in Boland’s contemporary period in the eighties and into the nineties “are primarily interested in the specificity of feminine psychology and its symbolic manifestations” as they “seek a language for their corporeal and intersubjective experiences, which have been silenced

by the cultures of the past" (*New Maladies* 208). One way Boland explores this corporeal experience is through the artifactual position of women in various poems, allowing her and her speakers to "[return] to an archaic (mythic) memory" in which she explores temporality and what it means to have or to have once had a body (208). While some of Boland's poems, as discussed in Chapter 1, engage with womanhood and women's bodies through symbolic means, others, explore themes of womanhood as expressed not through symbols or real people but through artifacts: representations of women which have the appearance of women and are based in the reality of what a woman is but are not real women.

In her 1994 collection *In a Time of Violence*, "The Dolls Museum in Dublin," the fifth poem in "Writing in a Time of Violence: A sequence," Boland explores the explicit representation of women's bodies as artifacts. Boland, like Heaney, becomes a viewer of artifactual women, but her representation of these artifacts is different from Heaney's bog bodies. In the poem, the speaker observes old, tattered dolls that sit in a museum in Dublin, considering the time period in which they were made and in which their owners lived. The dolls represent explicit, standard-definition artifacts, which are not only placed in a museum but also possess and retell a history through their physicality. Boland's dolls imply "another silenced event in Irish History;" their "terrible" wounds and the "cracks along their lips" suggest both a silencing of women and their role in Ireland's nationalist strife as the dolls "recreate Easter in Dublin" (Raschke 137, *New Collected Poems* 208). The poem itself is a reference to Yeats's poem "The Dolls," in which the dolls in a doll-maker's house complain that an imperfect child, "a noisy and filthy thing," has arrived to replace the perfect objects "being kept for a show" (*Yeats's Poetry, Drama, and Prose* 52). By nodding to the author who is well-known for his

poem "Easter, 1916,"[11] "The Dolls Museum in Dublin" requires further association with the events and the violence of that Easter (Raschke 137). Boland uses a version or model of the female body that is removed from an actual female body in order to reflect upon a past historical moment. She does not compare the history witnessed by these dolls to the current moment in Ireland but focuses on the dolls' creation, history, and decaying state— these dolls had existed for three quarters of a century before Boland published her poem about them in 1994— imagining the owners of these dolls to be "children walking with governesses, / looking down, cossetting their dolls" (*New Collected Poems* 208). Boland refers to these dolls as what they are— artifacts in a museum, which thus represent the historical moment in which they once belonged to children. The dolls remind Boland of the silencing of women and the violence in 1916, allowing the speaker to reflect on a specific historical moment as she engages with the artifacts.

Though not actually women, the dolls do resemble the characteristics and clothing of feminine figures. Referring to these dolls as representations of womanhood calls for recognition of "the way the female body is represented, and how these representations are influenced by and produced within normatively gendered institutions (e.g., the media)" which require that "we address the body as a material, visible thing" (Jansen and Wehrle 38). In these manifestations of womanhood, Boland is an observer of the female body presented in artifactual form. The poem provides a description of the dolls' physicality: "Shadows / remain on the parchment-coloured waists, / are bruises on the stitched cotton clothes, / are hidden in the dimples on the wrists" (*New Collected Poems* 209). In no way does Boland sexualize these dolls— these children's toys that take the form of women's bodies— as Heaney did when he described the female bog bodies

[11] W. B. Yeats, "Easter, 1916" published in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921). Commemorates the Easter Rising of 1916.

twenty years earlier. She does, however, project a historical past onto them, and this projection explores a poetic memory as considered through a museum exhibit. Though Boland is an observer of female-like bodies, her womanly gaze considers not the female body itself but the historical challenges through which the owners of these dolls lived. Their owners are long dead, but these dolls "have survived" and, for a moment, take upon human qualities as they "infer the difference" between present and past "with a terrible stare," which might, as in Heaney's "Strange Fruit," come to outstare the history which they represent, if the viewer is not careful (*New Collected Poems* 209). The dolls straddle the boundary in the final lines of the poem between living and never having been alive, between embodiment and disembodiment. But "human embodiment is characterized by an internal differentiation: I must *be my body* and, at the same time, *have this body*," and though the dolls stare and appear to possess the ability of discernment, they ultimately do "not feel it. And [do] not know it" (Jansen and Wehrle 38, *New Collected Poems* 209). Boland thus differentiates between human and doll, between woman and object, between past and present. These dolls, like the bog bodies in Heaney's poems, are not alive, and though they possess something of the history in which they were made, they are not the women themselves who lived the history.

In the same collection of poems, Boland's speaker finds herself analyzing another artifact, another physical representation of a woman's body that is not, in fact, a woman's body. The speaker in "The Art of Grief" views a statue of "a veiled woman … up on a pedestal" which brings her to a memory of her grieving mother. In an essay written under the same title, "The Art of Grief," Boland explores the ways in which twentieth century literature separate art and artist:

> Whereas in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" [T. S.] Eliot had argued, "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates," Boland points out that the separation of the suffering self from the creating self had "too often led to the denial of the first by the second." (Randolph 93)

In “The Art of Grief” poem, Boland explores how the speaker “saw [her] mother weep once” and realized that weeping is “unrhythmical” and “unpredictable” before her mother “dried her tears” (*New Collected Poems* 240-41). In this expression of an experience of grief, Boland ensures that her role as an artist does not require that she deny herself personal experience, the experience of suffering. In this manner, Boland explores vulnerability as expressed through her mother’s human body. Such a replication of her mother as human and as having a body which can cry, which can allow her to “put one hand up to her throat and [pull], / between her thumb and forefinger, / the rope / of light there,” replicates the one sense of human embodiment which requires that humans “be material, visible, and subject to the physical laws that govern causality” (241, Jansen and Wehrle 37). As the speaker’s mother cries in front of her daughter, she reveals that “having a body” further means being “finite, exposed, and dependent on others and external forces, and thus vulnerable, as Butler emphasizes;” as “living (human) being[s],” the speaker and her mother “live, feel (and suffer through) [their bodies], in virtue of which [they are] not only vulnerable, but also open to the world” (Jansen and Wehrle 37). Grief is thus an expression of vulnerability, and in the theory of Judith Butler, directly related to being embodied— to being a human who has a body. Boland explores this concept, this “art,” of grief and thus the art of embodiment in “The Art of Grief.”

But the speaker and her mother are not the only subjects of the poem, and thus do not possess the only bodies which warrant exploring. The poem opens with the description of a statue, an artifact, which, like the dolls in “The Dolls in a Museum in Dublin,” is an artistic representation of a woman. Unlike “The Dolls in a Museum in Dublin,” however, the speaker does not compare the womanly artifact to a historical moment; instead, she compares the statue to herself: “I stood there, caught by surprise … both of us women in our middle years, / but hers were fixed, set and finished in / a mutton-fat creaminess” (*New Collected Poems* 239). The statue

is an artifact before the arrival of the speaker and is an artifact after the departure of the speaker. She observes the statue for what it is— a depiction of a woman— and seeks meaning from the statue, noticing herself within its features. The speaker further investigates her role as a viewer of artifacts. The speaker "could not ask her, [the statue] could not tell [the speaker] / why something had once made her weep. / Had made her cover up her mouth and eyes" (241). Though the statue is in a vulnerable position and appears woman-like, she is a mere representation of a woman— a grieving, vulnerable woman— and is not an embodied woman herself. The speaker can thus compare herself to this object without the possibility of objectifying a woman; this "woman" is already an object. Still, the speaker contemplates the position which the statue is in, the woman who the statue represents as she notes that what the woman-turned-statue "knew was gone and what [the speaker] / wanted to know she had never known: / the moment her sorrow entered marble—" (241). The woman's knowledge and memory are gone; she is now merely an artifact for passerby to view and contemplate, as the speaker does. The speaker, in a way, employs the statue and the woman behind the statue as objects for meaning-making as she imposes the memory of her own mother crying on the crying statue. At the same time, however, she contemplates the ethics of the statue itself, "the act of definition / which had silenced her" (240). Unlike Heaney who attempts to voice the deceased woman in "Bog Queen," writing a poem from her point of view and telling her history, Boland acknowledges in "The Art of Grief" that this woman cannot tell her own story, and neither can Boland. But Boland mirrors Heaney in that she allows an artifact to become a mode for self-reflection and even personal embodiment. This statue does not, however, expressly represent an act of violence as the bog body does in Heaney's "Punishment;" Boland does not know for what the statue of the woman weeps and she does not feign to know. She merely contemplates the fact that a once embodied woman becomes a mere representation that makes "no sound. Not one" (240).

Boland contemplates an artifactual representation of a woman in yet another poem— the final poem of the collection *In a Time of Violence* "A Woman Painted on a Leaf." The speaker reveals that she "found [the leaf] among curios and silver, / in the pureness of wintry light" (*New Collected Poems*). The speaker knows she is gazing upon a face which is not her own, and "neither did [she] draw it" (241). As she describes the physicality of the woman painted on the leaf, she names merely "cheekbones" and "eyes," providing no value judgment about the looks of the woman represented on the leaf, nor does she sexualize or demean the woman (242). Instead, as the speaker of "The Art of Grief," she inscribes a meaning upon the artifactual woman. She labels the inscription of the woman as "not death. It is the terrible / suspension of life" (242). The speaker knows that this face, contrasting the statue in "The Art of Grief," will not live forever because it is a "dried-out face" that will soon come to an end (242). The speaker yearns for the same destiny, "a poem / she can grow old in. [She wants] a poem [she] can die in," as Boland "enunciat[es] the desire that poetry allow women to grow old and die" instead of remaining static tropes of youth (242, House 111).

Through this external representation of a woman, Boland contemplates her own physicality, her own age, her own role as a poet, her own legacy and timebound existence. In this manner, Boland once again embodies not the artifactual woman represented in the leaf but *herself*, the speaker. In an embodied state, the body "is not merely passively, externally constructed, but also *enables us to distance ourselves from ourselves and to critically evaluate our experiences*" (Jansen and Wehrle 39, emphasis added). The speaker of this poem is an observer who bestows her gaze upon the face of a woman. Yet, this face is not an actual woman but a representation of one, one which the speaker sees herself in and is thus able to contemplate herself. Unlike Heaney, whose bog poems observe artifacts which were once bodies, Boland views artifacts which are wholly that and always have been. Further, Boland, as a woman, feels

that she is able to relate to the silencing of these represented women. Boland, like Heaney, tries to understand these artifactual women and particularly seeks not to speak for the women but to speak for herself, refusing to be silenced as the artifacts are silent. Though the artifacts might not be alive or human, Boland's speakers are able to understand something about themselves, their own physicalities, vulnerabilities, minds, histories, and bodies.

As in Chapter 1, I end this chapter by turning to Boland's 2020 collection *The Historians*. In Chapter 1, I focus on the poems in the collection which uncover Boland's need to search for a symbolic portrayal of woman which might represent Ireland, even at the end of her career; in this chapter, I choose to explore Boland's poem "Statue 2016" to argue that Boland engagement with the artifactual positioning continues through the end of her career. The poem begins with a location, "Stephen's Green" in Dublin, then depicts the subject of the poem: "a half torso. / Her head and shoulders framed / by the coarse flowers of the boxwood shrub" (*The Historians* 49). This half torso represents Constance Markievicz,[12] depicting her likeness to Boland as observer in 2016, exactly a century after Markievicz's participation in the Easter Rising.[13] In this poem, as in "The Art of Grief," Boland engages explicitly with a statue and notes its role as an artifact, again allowing the artifact to become a space for the speaker's own thoughts. The speaker reflects on the fact that she came to adulthood in Dublin: she was once "young here" in Stephen's Green, "in those years" when her "children slept, worn out by play," yet she

[12] Though Boland does not explicitly name Markievicz in "Statue 2016," her inclusion of the year 2016 alongside a previous conversation she had with Paula Meehan reveal Markievicz to be the subject of the poem. In this interview with Meehan recorded in *A Poet's Dublin* (2016), "in talking [...] about her experience of the city of Dublin, Boland said, 'It's still striking to me that the statues of male writers and orators in Dublin are official, named and legible. […] But the women statues are women out of a song […] or out of a place myth […] or anonymous.' [...] However, in response Meehan cites in particular the 'fine bust of Constance Markievicz […] in St Stephen's Green'" (Taylor-Collins 200).

[13] "After the general surrender" of the participants in the Easter Rising, Markievizc "was arrested and imprisoned. Though many women had participated in the uprising, Markievicz was the only one to be court-martialed; she was sentenced to death, but the sentence was commuted to a lifetime of penal servitude on account of her gender" (Eldridge).

acknowledges that such thoughts and memories "cannot matter now / to the woman raised above [her] on a plinth" (49). She turns from self-reflection to lament, contemplating the fact that memorializing people into history as artifacts takes away their humanity. "A scalding alloy of tin and copper once" erased Markievicz as an individual woman, turning her into a statue to be observed as part of the commemoration of the Easter Rising (49). "Molten bronze poured away her name," memorializing her in a specific moment of time and in a specific way, effacing "whatever else of memory / might have been there," those moments and memories that might have embodied her as a woman, such as the memory of "the apple blossoms of her native Magherlow" (50). The "fixed look" that the statue-maker gave to Markievicz is what Markievicz has become— a "set" and "necessary" moment in history (50). The statue seems to say to the speaker, *This is all that is left of Markievicz*, but the speaker knows that this artifact does not represent the woman. She "will never be convinced" of such a fact (50). As Boland writes in one of her previous poems entitled "Re-reading Oliver Goldsmith's 'Deserted Village' in a Changed Ireland," "The first loss" of memory "is through history. / The final one is through language" (*A Poet's Dublin* 95). By placing this poem in the volume *The Historians*, Boland expressly acknowledges the way in which artifacts are representations of history and memory, how they control the narratives of what is remembered. And, in the same way that Heaney appears to complicate and contemplate the ethics of such artifactual positioning and observation in the final female bog body poem "Strange Fruit," Boland in "Statue 2016" considers the way in which artifacts cannot tell the whole story and explicitly concludes that artifactual representations cannot embody the women they portray. Women, she argues through "Statue 2016," are more than what history remembers or purports them to be, and artifactual positionings serve to minimize and obscure those aspects of womanhood which should be celebrated.

In this chapter, I have explored the ways in which the poetry of both Seamus Heaney and Eavan Boland presents women as artifacts, particularly through Heaney's feminine bog bodies in *North* and in multiple poems in Boland's *In a Time of Violence*, ending with an analysis of a poem from Boland's final collection "Statue 2016." Heaney's representations of the feminine body in the bog body poems historicize, politicize, and sexualize women in various ways, raising questions about the male gaze and the ethics of looking, with which Heaney's speakers strive to come to terms. Boland's poetry similarly questions what it means to be an observer as her speakers view artifacts which represent women's bodies. Through close readings of Boland's poetry, I argue that her artifactual positioning of women reaches towards embodiment through expressions of vulnerability but inevitably conclude that artifacts cannot be fully embodied, since they cannot be vulnerable, though the female speakers of these poems are vulnerable, contemplative, and thus possibly embodied women. A body, a person, a woman is not "reducible to its vulnerability, but rather constitutes a positive experience of corporeal agency in response to vulnerability" (Weiss 30). Agency and vulnerability are interconnected, and a person reduced to an artifact does not possess agency or vulnerability. Symbolic and artifactual representations of women, as displayed through the poems analyzed in Chapters 1 and 2, ultimately are not fully embodying portrayals of their subjects. In the next chapters, I continue to turn towards alternative modes of the portrayal of women in contemporary Irish poetry to seek and uncover additional spaces in which poets might embody themselves.

Chapter 3: The Complex Nature of Embodying the Poetic Mother

As my children woke, as they slept, a visionary landscape scrolled around me. It was not made by my children [. . .] It was made by my body.

Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons* 219

With the symbolic gendering of Mother Ireland permeating the Irish literary tradition and Irish general consciousness as discussed in Chapter 1, motherhood is a defining characteristic for women within the Irish state. In the literary world, where women were often construed as voiceless symbols and artifacts subject to patriarchal voyeurism, motherhood is a poetic theme through which women might attempt to reclaim their voices and bodies. At the same time, however, with unjust stigmas surrounding unwanted pregnancy, single motherhood, and sexual liberation, motherhood remains a difficult realm through which women might find an embodied voice. Through an analysis of the work of Eavan Boland and Sinéad Morrissey,[1] this chapter examines motherhood as a possible route towards poetic embodiment, as the two poets create mother-speakers who are active, feeling subjects. This chapter then complicates the idea of embodied motherhood through an analysis of poems about Ann Lovett, a fifteen-year-old girl who died alone in a grotto in her hometown of Granard, Co. Longford in 1984, after giving birth in the open air by herself at the foot of the statue of the Virgin Mary, and the artifactual representation of the Virgin Mary as poetic subjects. Through these poems, I explore the ways in which motherhood and pregnancy can be disembodying experiences which can function as spaces of exploited vulnerability and lack of agency.

[1] Sinéad Morrissey is a poet from Northern Ireland, now living in England. While in this chapter I mention the Republic of Ireland's laws regarding divorce, abortion, and women's rights, I recognize that there are significant legal and cultural distinctions between Ireland and Northern Ireland, particularly in reference to the violence Northern Irish women endured during the Troubles. However, as my focus is on an "Irish poetic tradition" which encompasses literature and poets from the entirety of the island, I will similarly talk about Irish women's relationship with motherhood as a matter that affects women throughout the island.

As explored in Chapter 1, Eavan Boland attempted to rewrite the bounds of womanhood and femininity throughout her career. After the birth of her daughters, Boland focused on motherhood as a possible aspect of womanhood in her poetry, proclaiming the "powerful necessity of honoring" the experience of motherhood "in language, in poetry," an experience she felt "wasn't really sanctioned at that time in Irish poetry – it was thought of as merely domestic," instead of a topic that might be discussed and explored as an acceptable and necessary facet of the Irish literary canon (Brown). In the same way that reorienting and reclaiming Mother Ireland was a goal of Boland's throughout her career, so, too, was normalizing and integrating motherhood within the Irish poetic tradition. In portraying the ways in which she is *both* a poet and a mother, Boland destigmatizes and de-symbolizes motherhood it in the same way she does with womanhood more generally. She inscribes herself as a woman who is not the perfect mother but is "the best [she] can be" (*New Collected Poems* 92). She is a human mother with human daughters with human needs; in "Night Feed," she brings a bottle to her daughter at dawn, watching her "wriggling / in [her] rosy, zipped sleeper" and noting "how [she] suckle[s]" (92). Motherhood is, in this poem, a normalized aspect of the speaker's daily life, yet one about which Boland feels it is necessary to write a poem, simultaneously romanticizing this Edenic experience through her language and grounding the moment in the realities of waking up to feed a child. It is in these supposedly dull moments through which Boland reveals the truths about her experience of motherhood, those truths which she believes were not talked about enough. She writes about menstruation in "Menses" in her 1980 short collection "In Her Own Image" (possibly coincidentally) around the same time that women participated in the No Wash Protests[2] in Armagh County Jail in Northern Ireland. While "Menses" is not a nationalist political

[2] No Wash Protests were a form of protest during the Troubles in Northern Ireland in which political prisoners refused to leave their cell to shower or use the bathroom.

statement, unlike the No Wash Protests, it might be read in tandem with the horror the public experienced surrounding "the fluid, leaky, unruly deviant female body" which "became dangerous, dirty, and in need of control" when participating in a protest (Wahidin 115). By normalizing that which is "deviant" and meant to be private, Boland demystifies the bodily function of menstruation, an experience without which motherhood would not be possible. She writes, too, about the messier aspects of motherhood, such as dirty nappies and the "polar drab / of the suburb" and the dullness of her "late tasks / [which] wait like children: / milk bottles, / the milkman's note" (*New Collected Poems* 101). Motherhood, in these early Boland poems, is about exploring such mundane aspects of life, about finding home to be "a sleeping child," about teaching her daughter, though "what / [she doesn't] exactly know" (91, 106).

As her daughters grew older, Boland reflected their growth as well as her growth as a mother within her poetry, allowing her speakers moments of vulnerability. In "On Holiday" from Boland's 1987 collection *The Journey*, the speaker realizes that her daughter, though still young, no longer blindly accepts everything that her mother tells her. The speaker recounts that her daughter "know[s her] a's and b's / but there's a limit now / to what [she]'ll believe" (*New Collected Poems* 143). In "The Blossom," published in 1998, the speaker wonders, "How much longer / will I see girlhood in my daughter?" (262). She describes the daughter's physical self as the girl "holds out a dawn-soaked hand to [the speaker], / whose fingers [she] counted at birth / years ago" (263). This small moment between mother and daughter portrays the inner thoughts of a mother watching her daughter's youth slip away; she considers the fact that, in this singular moment, her daughter could be touching her hand "for the last time" (263). The daughter, in this poem, symbolizes the inevitability of the passage of time but, even more so, might symbolize the mundanity of daily life with children— children do not suddenly pass into adulthood or achieve it with a certain action or milestone. They do not truly "[fall] to the earth" (263). Instead, a

mother, the speaker seems to suggest, notices within particular, often bittersweet moments— even one as simple as washing the dishes— the growth that her child has made in spite of herself. She becomes aware that, once her child is an adult, her daughter will inevitably "fall to the earth," and the speaker must let her. Through her recollection of motherhood in both its mundanity and its grandiosity, Boland creates representations of her daughters which are emblematic; nostalgia for her daughters' youth and reflections on her growth do not embody her daughters as individual, speaking characters. At the same time, however, Boland-as-speaker engages with her own vulnerability, allowing herself to experience some semblance of embodiment through an expression of her fears and desires.

The experience of changing relationships between child and mother, which serve as personal, self-reflections, continues from Boland's early career through to her later work. In her penultimate poetry collection *Woman Without A Country*, published in 2014, Boland titles a poem "Talking to My Daughter Late at Night" in which the speaker drinks tea with her daughter whose "childhood ended years ago," and, as the speaker of "The Blossom" was beginning to realize, "there is / no path back to" her childhood (*A Woman Without a Country* 5). The speaker's motherhood is not over in this poem but changes and evolves— daughter and mother speak on equal terms, and while a sense of nostalgia surrounds the adulthood of Boland and her daughter, in the continued mundanity and ordinariness of growth, the apprehension surrounding the future appears to dissipate. And, Boland reveals in her late work, motherhood continues into grandmotherhood. "Without End" explores a visit from Boland's grandchildren "Jack and Ella," who "came to play, finding / things to throw and dig up / in our garden, whatever two / year olds could manage or / four make use of" (*The Historians* 32). The speaker discerns that her grandchildren are standing in the same place, the same garden that "their mothers, our daughters, / once did [...] the same lilac / bending towards them" (33). Being a grandmother, then, is

creating new memories in old places, finding new faces in the same garden. At the end of the poem, the speaker considers a "story / that had no ending" (33). Her grandchildren in this moment are a retelling and reconstruction of the same life her daughters once had, and life, the speaker appears to understand, is a cycle. She, a grandmother now, feels like a mother once again, and, as time becomes almost circular, she realizes that motherhood is a story that never ends. Boland pushes back against the ending of her own story, proclaiming that, even when she is old and even now that she is gone, her journey as a mother and a woman poet is "Without End." Motherhood, an ever-changing role, is a space through which Boland allows herself to reflect on her own life and her relationships, ultimately allowing for Boland to experience vulnerability. Still, these experiences for Boland have more to do with personal emotions than with bodily experience and physical aspects of motherhood, creating some semblance of embodiment while not completely engaging with the body. Boland's objective was to instill motherhood in the Irish poetic tradition, and she did so; whether these representations of mothers were symbolic or embodied was less important to Boland than their mere inclusion and normalization.

Sinéad Morrissey, a Northern Irish poet, who began her career in the generation succeeding Eavan Boland, also writes about motherhood, though Morrissey focuses in particular on the relationship between motherhood and the body. Morrissey explicitly writes about pregnancy, focusing on descriptions of her own physical state. Writing about the body in this way, as Lucy Collins argues, is "both 'an important way for Irish women poets to initiate new forms of self-representation' and 'a way of investigating the link between actual experience and metaphorical understanding,'" and the experiences of motherhood upon the body, specifically within pregnancy, allow Morrissey to embody herself through her poetry (Haberstroh 296). In

"Found Architecture," from her 2009 collection *Through the Square Window*,[3] Morrissey writes, "These days are all about waiting;" inferring from the chronological narrative presented in the poetry book, one might read this "waiting" as her period of pregnancy, a waiting for the birth of her child Augustine (*Through the Square Window* 19). The speaker attempts to describe the feeling of waiting near the end of her pregnancy: "What would you say / if I tried to explain how my single true activity / this wet and shivery May is 'found architecture'?" (19). She, seemingly harkening back Boland's "Monotony," writes about a state of waiting, though Boland's poem was about the monotony of having young children while Morrissey's is about waiting around for her child to arrive in the world. Morrissey's speaker describes what she did within this waiting period as "found architecture": she is forced from her prison-like period of waiting into the outside world, where she looks through a kaleidoscope which transforms any object that nature has created. A swamp becomes "the Aboriginal outback;" a tree turns into a canoe; a dead branch sits up "like the head of an otter" (18-19). The speaker cannot escape her body, but she can escape her surroundings through these architectural structures that the landscape has created, turning "any light" she finds into something "instantly mystical" (18). At the end the poem, the speaker describes how she has "been [her] own kaleidoscope," her singular activity her own escape "from blood and the body's / inconsolable hunger" (19). As the pregnancy carries on, the speaker is "acutely conscious of human beings' inability to rid ourselves of the bodies which frame our subjective views," but she "still invites readers to jump out of the frame;" the speaker describes the experience as "five winter-bleached girls on a diving board, ready to jump—" (Toraiwa 63, *Through the Square Window* 19). The speaker questions her body's role in her own existence, knowing that she cannot force a child out of her body but must patiently wait for his

[3] "The title alludes to a feature of the former British TV show for children *Play School* (in which the presenter prompted viewers to glimpse what was through a round, square, or arched window)" (Homen 294).

arrival. Still, she searches for a comfortable embodiment— or, at least, a body which in which she feels comfortable— and listens to her body's needs in an imaginative manner, finding an activity which brings her joy and occupies her mind and body, upkeeping the health of the fetus and herself on her long walks in the outdoors. In this need for escape, the speaker does not dismiss her body but experiences it in a period of limbo. As Julia Kristeva describes it, "Pregnancy is a dramatic ordeal: a splitting of the body, the division of coexistence of self and other, of nature and awareness, of physiology and speech" (*New Maladies of the Soul* 219). Pregnancy is, in many ways, a difficulty, which Morrissey, in vulnerable poetic form, depicts in "Found Architecture."

Kristeva, alongside her description of pregnancy, describes "the arrival of the child" as an experience which "guides the mother through a labyrinth of a rare experience: the love for another person, as opposed to love for herself, for a mirror image, or especially for another person with which the 'I' becomes merged. It is rather a slow, difficult, and delightful process of becoming tender and self-effacing" (*New Maladies of the Soul* 219-20). Such growth of maternal instinct is present in Morrissey's poetry, specifically in "'Love, the nightwatch…'" in which the speaker, after months of waiting, gives birth. Morrissey depicts the speaker's body as a "haystack the children climbed / and ruined [...] in a flood-plain of infinite stains" in this moment of ultimate vulnerability (*Through the Square Window* 28). She describes the "rare experience" of giving birth, the moment she "cav[ed] in spectacularly as [her child] stuttered and came" into the world (28). She experiences the state of being exposed not only physically, her body open for doctors and her husband to see, but also emotionally, as she immediately expresses "love for another person" which is completely separate from the love of herself (28, *New Maladies of the Soul* 219). The process of giving birth is not an enjoyable experience, and Morrissey does not

feign that it is so to protect her readers from discomfort. Her husband held her hand, which she squeezed so tightly in pain that it was "bruised / and for days afterwards wore a green and purple coverlet" (*Through the Square Window* 28). It was not a natural, at-home, painless birth but one that required "stopwatches, clip charts, the distant hoof beats of a heart / [...] and a beautiful fine white can, / carved into a fish hook" (28). The child came out not beautiful but "crook-shouldered" and "blue," and the ordeal consisted of "a thunder of blood" (28). Morrissey does not shy away from pain in order to create beauty but instead portrays the pain as a method through which beauty is created. This, Morrissey seems to argue, is how children come into the world, and this experience, though not poetic in itself, is something about which she should write poetry, and embody herself through this ultimate vulnerability. Without the bloody, painful, exposing birth, there would be no motherhood.

Though Sinéad Morrissey discusses the physicality of pregnancy and childbirth more explicitly than Eavan Boland does, her writing about motherhood after giving birth follows a similar trajectory to that of Boland. She incorporates her experiences of being the mother of a baby into her poetry, reminiscent of Boland in "Night Feed," and having curiosities about her baby's future, as if to parallel "The Blossom." In "Augustine Sleeping Before He Can Talk," the speaker explores the quasi-subjectivity of a child who is constrained by the limits of his inability to speak the English language; she begins, "The only places he can dive to are the senses" (*Through the Square Window* 31). An infant who has not yet discovered his sense of self or object permanence, he admires "the Christmas lights" on his ceiling (31). The speaker knows that these objects "will be committed to memory" for a short period, "and then written over" (31). The child has no sense of danger or fear, has "not yet [been] disappointed / with the mean-spirited vanishing act of an ink-black horizon" (31). The baby knows his own name— "(as

though summer's / hottest month had a feminine ending)"— and recognizes "the purring / of cats and cars and the howling of dogs and fireworks" (31). In one sense, the poem focuses on the innocence of childhood, the way that everything is a new experience when a baby cannot remember any of his past experiences. In another sense, however, this poem serves as the speaker's opportunity to explore and share in these firsts with her child, these firsts of motherhood that she is able witnesses. Waking "when he was one" was "a slow, alert surfacing towards the morning, the clock's face, / the seagulls and the sea's address, all clamouring to be experienced" by a child who does not yet understand time or what it means to experience, who does not yet remember or realize the repetitive cycle of waking each morning (31). The speaker, though not a first-person "I" speaker in this poem, serves as a third-person inquisitive narrator; if read as the mother witnessing her child sense the world around him, the speaker cannot be omniscient but places her understandings of child psychology and basic biology to interpret what she believes her son to be experiencing. In this way, the poem is more about the mother than about the son, serving as an outlet for a mother to articulate what she thinks or even knows her child to be experiencing before he can articulate it himself. And, like "Found Architecture," this poem is about finding wonder in the daily experience, finding wonder in the waiting— in this case, waiting for her child to be able to speak. "Augustine Sleeping Before He Can Talk" reiterates that motherhood can be a poetic experience. By looking at the world through the eyes of her son, Morrissey creates in *Through the Square Window* what Eric Falci refers to as "a double lyric memoir" as mother entwines life with son, creating "an overarching lyric subject—a clear 'I' who is, more or less, the author," who watches her son perceive the world, centering him as subject within the poem (Falci 30). Morrissey allows her readers into her and her son's world as she explores motherhood and the relationship between mother and child in the early

stages of a child's life. In this way, similarly to Boland but perhaps in a more intentionally intimate manner, Morrissey embeds motherhood within the Irish poetic tradition.

Like Eavan Boland, Morrissey continues writing about her relationship with her child as he grows. In "Lighthouse," from her 2013 collection *Parallax*, Morrissey reflects on her "very small and very wakeful" child when they lived in the Belfast Lough house in which he "came to consciousness" ("A Reading from *Found Architecture*" 19:57-20:06). Continuing on the double lyric memoir path in this collection, the speaker— who is Morrissey herself— looks into the mind of her son as he remains "awake at ten, stretched out along / his bunk beneath the ceiling, wired and watchful" (*Parallax* 51). The boy stays up late because he can see "across the Lough [...] a lighthouse start[ing] its own nightlong address / in fractured signalling," and he "thinks it just for him" (51). The child believes the lighthouse keeper is communicating with him through "each creamy loop [...] each well-black interval," that they are having a "boy-talk conversation / no one else can hear" (51). The speaker thinks to herself, "I've been there," been in that world where everything is a wonder and where everything revolves around her (51). "Lighthouse" and "Augustine Sleeping Before He Can Talk" are equally about both mother and son. They present motherhood as a witnessing of sorts, in which a mother watches a son grow and notices how his mind works then interprets it in poetry. Morrissey's poetic motherhood, at least in these poems, appears to be a more of an experimental experience than an embodying one— she witnesses her child come to terms with his own subjectivity as he undergoes a type of Lacanian mirror phase, and, instead of embodying herself through reflecting on the impact of this consciousness on herself as Boland does in "The Blossom," she explores what it means for her son. She is, similar to Heaney in his bog body poems in Chapter 2, an observer creating a subjectivity for another through her own gaze. Significantly, she is much closer to those she attempts to portray in her

poems than Heaney was in his, and she does not create emblematic or possibly political claims about the observations she makes about her own child. Still, her poetry does not necessarily embody her speakers in the double lyric memoir poetry— and embodiment is likely not Morrissey's goal in these poems— in the way that one might argue poems like "Found Architecture" and "Love, the nightwatch …" portray vulnerability and agency for the speaker.

It is likely that no poem with a double subject can embody its speaker, as they experience and witness the experiences of another. In poems about her daughter, however, Morrissey appears to create less of a double lyric memoir and more of a poetic narrative. In "Daughter," she writes that her young child "wakes at 7am" and believes breakfast with her brother to be "the best and purest / portion of her day" (*Parallax* 33). The mother-slash-poet making meaning out of her daughter's subconscious is less present, as she discusses the clothes the girl "harries / off and leaves in heaps / on stairs and sofas / so she can flash / about the house / with nothing on" (33). But the speaker-slash-mother is ever present: these amassed clothes "recall whiskey: / layered, earthy [...] / I cannot tell the strands / of it apart" (34). Similar to the poems about Augustine, Morrissey's positions as speaker, poet, and mother are clear, and these roles cannot be distinguished from one another, making a claim about the importance of including her children and her role as mother within her poetic work. This indistinguishability of roles leads to a persistence of the theme of motherhood in Morrissey's work, resembling the consistency of Boland's recount of motherly experience throughout her career. "The Rope" explores Morrissey's children's relationship both to her and to each other; she cannot participate in the bond of "sibling-tetheredness" that her children can, cannot be part of the "umbilicus" that binds them together (*On Balance* 63). And though she has participated in raising the siblings into the "obedient // children that [they] are," only they can remember their experiences together of being

"little again inside [their] oversize coats and shoes" (64). They will continue to grow older and closer to each other, but, in a manner similar to Boland's "The Blossom" ending line of epiphany, they will do so, she says, "without me watching" (64). Thus, Morrissey's poetry portrays the various revelations that she experiences as a mother, only more deeply instilling motherhood as a canonical subject in Irish poetry, an inevitable topic as more women enter into the poetic tradition. In some spaces, motherhood connects Morrissey to her own body and to herself, as in the case of "Found Architecture," while in others, she feels more disconnected from her children and self, as in "The Rope." Morrissey's poems about pregnancy and childbirth cement an important and necessary theme within the Irish poetic tradition, normalizing the vulnerabilities of such an experience.

Boland and Morrissey transform the representation of motherhood within the Irish poetic tradition, ranging from the mundanity of waiting for the milkman to the inexplicable pain of giving birth. While both Boland and Morrissey embody themselves through certain poems about motherhood, other poems appear more symbolic or voyeuristic in nature, revealing that motherhood is not inevitably a means of poetic embodiment. Pregnancy and motherhood remain complex avenues for embodiment across the Irish poetic tradition, and the symbol of Mother Ireland, as discussed in Chapter 1, is a pressing example of a passive, even disembodied mother.

Yet, no discussion of the complexity of embodied motherhood in Irish poetry would be complete without considering the role of the Virgin Mary in the Irish Catholic tradition. As the Mother of God, the Virgin Mary is a symbol of the ideal mother, although she is yet another symbolic, unspeaking woman, serving as a stifling force for some Irish women and an imaginatively freeing force for others; for Eavan Boland, she is both. In her 1995 essay "When the Spirit Moves," Eavan Boland references the implicitness of religion within Irish poetry,

framing the essay around a wave of so-called apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Kinsale in 1985.[4] While Boland herself does not believe that the apparitions were the Mother of God and refers to them as guided by "unreason," she believes it unfair to completely dismiss the events. She herself "was still in some degree affected by what had happened" because of the undercurrent of religion and Catholicism in Irish culture ("When the Spirit Moves"). Though "the twentieth century had produced a literature in Ireland which kept a tense distance from the sources of faith," Boland saw flaws in the idea that this new way of being was somehow inherently better, "more rational, less prone to the hysterias" than the faith-based ideals ("When the Spirit Moves"). While she does not purport to believe that religion should be at the center of Irish life— after all, this unclear line between church and state has led to censorship, an "Irish attorney general [who] would not allow a teen-age girl, who had been raped and was pregnant, to leave the country two years ago to have an abortion," and "killings […] in the various names of faith, for twenty-five years in Ireland"[5]— there is a type of imagination that Boland finds necessary within literature that calls for a certain level of "unreason," or reasoning that goes beyond secular understanding ("When the Spirit Moves"). It is in this "raw hunger for certainty and grace and escape" that Boland believes literature is produced— in the same raw hunger that leads people to believe in and seek the intercession of the Virgin Mary, to see her in places where she may or may not be ("When the Spirit Moves"). Thus, even when the Virgin Mary is not at the forefront of a poem or work of art in Ireland, the imagination that produces her, Boland seems to argue, is, and her influence— whether positive or negative— remains present.

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[4] See a clip from RTÉ's documentary *The Summer of the Moving Statues,* https://youtu.be/-avjdiIihpI, and a 2007 radio broadcast on the events, https://www.rte.ie/radio/doconone/646048-radio-documentary-the-summer-of-the-moving-statues

[5] Referring to the Troubles in Northern Ireland from the period from the Battle of the Bogside in Derry in 1969 until the ceasefire in 1994.

Though Boland herself did not believe that the statue of the Virgin Mary in Kinsale moved, the faith of the rural townspeople stuck with her— so much so that she wrote a poem about the events twenty years after "When the Spirit Moves." The poem from her 2014 collection *A Woman Without A Country* entitled "The Moving Statue" focuses more on the change of the seasons and the effect of the possible apparitions on the townspeople than on the apparitions themselves. The poem begins, "There is always a first garden" where an apparition appears, as if faith in a higher being and in the Virgin Mary is inevitable, as if there will always be claims of apparitions in Ireland (*A Woman Without A Country* 45). It is in this garden "in a tangle of spruce, / pine, sycamore" where "a statue of the Virgin stood / back from a balustrade / the crown of her head haloed / with small electric bulbs / while concrete letters / under her feet spelled out / *I am the Immaculate Conception*" (45). The speaker states these events matter-of-factly, not questioning whether they happened but instead recounting the apparition as it was said to have occurred. Modern faith "upstaged" what the speaker refers to as "the familiar news" during this period, this long "warm summer [...] starved of rain" (46). The Virgin Mary, whether truly there or not, "harvested the longing / seen on warm evenings / in every upturned face," what Boland refers to in her 1995 essay as "an old wound [which] had broken open: some human longing for faith and need" in the heat of the summer (46, "When the Spirit Moves"). In this time of excitement, the "town abandoned / its fields and supper tables" to "[perfect] / its discipline of yearning," its search for faith that reaches back centuries through Irish history (47). Without mention of hysteria or lying or blasphemy, the speaker tells the story of a summer in which an Irish town in contemporary times placed their faith and hope in a mother. And though by October, "the Virgin's hands were still," Boland felt the force of such an imaginative faith when she published "The Moving Statue" over three decades after these events took place (47). The 2014 publication of this poem reveals a continuing curiosity within the poet about the Virgin

Mother, an inability to shake her presence, or at least the impact she made within the hearts of an Ireland which proclaimed, at least within the literary world, to be beyond the forces of religion.

Within Boland's own childhood and upbringing, Catholicism and the Virgin Mary were an ever-present force. In her 2020 poem "Complicit," Boland remembers enjoying Saint Brigid's[6] Feast Day on February 1; she and her classmates "gave [Brigid] credit for / the end of [their] island winter," as Saint Brigid's Day traditionally signaled the arrival of spring (*The Historians* 51). The speaker initially credits the celebration of this Catholic-cum-folkloric feast day to her "innocence" but then comes to the conclusion that it was her Catholic upbringing which was so embedded in her school life that led to her belief in such a tradition: "I think we were the Angelus"— a Catholic devotion commemorating the Incarnation of Jesus, the conception of Jesus within Mary by the Holy Spirit (51). The students were not only reciting the Angelus but *were* the Angelus, the prayer she "heard when she was still at boarding school" (51). The speaker thus transforms herself and her fellow students from observers of the faith to participants in it and thus participants in the narrative of the Virgin Mary. Their participation in these acts of faith is so ingrained within their knowledge of the world and their understanding of history that faith and fact become "inseparable," so much so that the speaker is "complicit" in these worldviews (51). The ubiquity of the Virgin Mary and Church dogma within Irish ideals of motherhood and womanhood uncover the reality of the continued impact of Catholicism, the ways in which the new and modern are not so far removed from the old, how history continues within the present. The Virgin Mary, like Mother Ireland, becomes the ideal, loving mother to which no living, breathing woman can live up— only a symbol or an artifact can. In Boland's

[6] Brigid's role as one of the patron saints of Ireland draws parallels to the symbolic role of Mother Ireland; both are women who (more than likely, in Brigid's case) did not actually exist but became symbols of nationalist, religious pride.

last volume of poetry *The Historians*, she reflects upon how history is written and for whom, and in this poem, she reveals the ways in which she herself became part of the Virgin Mary's narrative, doing little to overcome or alter it at this point in her life— possibly even indicating a complicity of herself and the entirety of the Irish people in the death of a young woman named Ann Lovett.

Before her death, Lovett's family refused to acknowledge the pregnancy, and, in turn, the town did the same. In the 1984 article "On the Death of Ann Lovett," Nell McCafferty points out the absurdity of the widespread apathy of Granard's townspeople that led to the "crazy idea" that a "young girl might persuade herself that she could get away with" carrying a pregnancy to term and giving birth alone without a single acknowledgment from anyone in her town (McCafferty 1439). The teenage pregnancy was so taboo, McCafferty claims, that an entire town would rather let a girl go through a pregnancy and birth alone than to do anything to help her. Motherhood and pregnancy were not an embodying experience for Lovett but a fatal one. Termination of the pregnancy was illegal in this period,[7] and the fact that she died at the feet of the Virgin was, according to Lovett's boyfriend at the time Ricky McDonnell,[8] not an accident but a "protest" (R. Boland). Though Lovett's pregnancy supposedly went unnoticed by her town, her death was widely acknowledged. In the chaotic aftermath of her death, McDonnell recalls, "Everybody was screaming. It was just horrific. Everybody was screaming and crying; everybody who was on the

[7] Abortion was illegal in The Republic of Ireland until 2018. When abortion was illegal in Ireland, any "doctor who perform[ed] an 'unlawful' abortion or a woman who [had] a backstreet abortion in Ireland, or attempt[ed] self-abortion, face[d] up to life imprisonment under British Offenses Against the Person Act" (McAvoy 43). Further, contraceptives were illegal until 1985, although "contraceptives that were illegal in the Republic of Ireland could be legally purchased across the Border in Northern Ireland" (Muldowney 129). In the period preceding Ann Lovett's death and into the 1990s, "Irish school-based sex education provision ranged from comprehensive programmes in a few Irish schools to limited or no provision in many other schools" (Kiely 110).

[8] Ricky McDonnell first spoke about the death of Ann Lovett in an interview with Rosita Boland for *The Irish Times* in 2018, thirty-four years after Lovett's death.

main street, and that's probably half the town" (R. Boland). Though her pregnancy went unnoticed, her death spurred strong reactions throughout Ireland, and Lovett, along with the Virgin Mary, became the subject of three Irish poems in particular which question the Irish people's relationship with pregnancy and motherhood.

In her 1991 poem "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks," Paula Meehan recounts the story of Ann Lovett from the perspective not of the pregnant girl but of the statue of the Virgin Mary in the grotto. Julia Kristeva describes the significant role the Virgin Mary plays in the Church as a "humanization of Christianity through the cult of the mother," a human mother with a body; yet "the humanity of the Virgin mother is not always obvious" because "in her being cleared of sin, for instance, Mary distinguishes herself from mankind" (*The Kristeva Reader* 172). In Meehan's poem, the Virgin Mary is not the perfect heavenly figure the Catholic Church purports her to be. Instead, she complains of being "stuck up here in this grotto, without as much as / star or planet to ease my vigil" ("The Statue of the Virgin"). In "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks," Meehan gives the Virgin Mary— who, like Mother Ireland, is an unspeaking symbol— a chance to speak, harkening back to the paradoxical nature of the voiced, almost embodied artifact in Boland's "The Art of Grief," as discussed in Chapter 2. In this way, Meehan pushes back, like Boland, against the tradition of the passive, silent woman in male-dominated Irish poetry:

> In the course of the Statue's melancholy soliloquy, traditional expectations and representations surrounding the image of the Virgin Mary are subverted. Throughout the poem, the statue is endowed with profoundly human feelings. (Schrage-Früh 132)

Meehan re-writes the story from the Virgin's perspective, but as she does so, completely leaves Ann Lovett— the girl who did not live to be a mother and was forced to carry out a pregnancy in silence by her complacent townspeople— out of the story. The Virgin Mary, a mere representation of a woman who lived two thousand years ago, speaks, but she is a statue. Ann

Lovett, a real girl who dies in 1984, has no voice at all, reflecting the reality of the girl whose pregnancy was not talked about. The Virgin, like the people of Granard, disregards "the child / who came with fifteen summers to her name, / and she lay down alone at [the Virgin's] feet / without midwife or doctor or friend to hold her hand" ("The Statue of the Virgin"). The statue of the Virgin proclaims, "though [Ann Lovett] cried out to me in extremis / I did not move, / I didn't lift a finger to help her, / I didn't intercede with heaven, / nor whisper the charmed word in God's ear" ("The Statue of the Virgin"). Instead, she cries out, "O sun, / centre of our foolish dance, / burning heart of stone, / molten mother of us all, / hear me and have pity," knowing that there is little room change as the death of Ann Lovett abides by the laws of nature ("The Statue of the Virgin"). The Virgin Mary is thus a representation of the society which favored hiding the shame of an unwed mother, a symbol of all those who failed Lovett. When the people of Granard were asked how Ann Lovett could have possibly been left unsupported, time and time again they responded, like Meehan's Virgin, "No comment" (McCafferty 1438). In a moment of forced vulnerability, a fatal experience of shame and derision, Lovett is cast to the side and left to die.

Ann Lovett's death continues to be impactful years after her death, and various poems by contemporary Irish women writers reflect on the avoidable tragedy. A common theme within these poems is the Virgin Mary herself, with a statue of the Virgin serving as a common starting point for them all. "Nineteen Eighty-Four,"[9] a 2001 poem by Caitríona O'Reilly, retells the story of Ann Lovett from a slightly different perspective— that of a young girl living in contemporary Ireland who knows about Lovett's death— but still revolves around a statue of the Virgin, though it is not the one in the grotto in front of which Ann died. The speaker of this poem attends Mass inside a church, where she chooses to sit on Mary's "side of the altar," the side of the

[9] The title is an allusion to Orwell's 1949 dystopian novel of the same name.

church in which a statue of Mary resides, because the statue "wore lipstick and no shows" and "wasn't frightening at all" (C. O'Reilly 1385). Like Meehan's poem, O'Reilly's poem focuses on a statue of Mary and brings to light, from the perspective of her young speaker, the ways in which pregnancy is an undiscussed topic— the speaker notes that the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God herself, "appeared ignorant / of her swelling middle," and though Mary's pregnancy is meant to bring salvation to the world in the eyes of Catholicism, pregnancy itself, as in Ann Lovett's case, often signifies sin (C. O'Reilly 1385). As Kristeva notes, "sexuality implies death and vice versa," but sexuality is a necessary "evil" to bring about procreation in the case of every human with the exception of the Virgin Mary, whose Virgin Motherhood leads to her idealization ("Stabat Mater" 103). In a society "'which supposedly venerates motherhood within marriage yet denigrates it outside marriage,'" and refuses to talk about the sex and pregnancy which leads to motherhood, Ann Lovett gives birth in front of a statue of Mary, hoping "for protection and aid from the Virgin Mary, who represents maternal love and who functions as 'intercessor on behalf of sinful humanity'" (Schrage-Früh 131-32). But the speaker of "Ninety Eighty-Four," calling back to the refusal of Mary to intercede on behalf of Lovett in "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks," does not present such an optimistic vision of Mary as intercessor for sinners. Instead, she "knew or guessed why — / the worst thing a schoolgirl could do / was to give birth alone and die // under Mary's hapless supervision" because Ann Lovett, in the eyes of her society, was quite the opposite of the sinless, Virgin Mother (C. O'Reilly 1385). The statue of the Virgin Mother in O'Reilly's poem "politely averted her eyes" so as to not cause discomfort or cast blame among Massgoers, and she did them a service in that her slightly protruding stomach "never got bigger" (1385). Ann Lovett, on the other hand, was the topic of "common gossip" and she "had attracted a lot of attention in her short lifetime" (E. O'Reilly 1436, McCafferty 1438). Ann "was a little wild" with the occasional habit of drinking and

smoking with friends and at least one instance of unmarried sex. And there can be "no apparitions in grottoes / or wingéd babies with cradle-cap / for the likes of those" (1385).

Like both Meehan's statue-speaker in "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks" and O'Reilly's young girl speaker in "Nineteen Eighty-Four," the speaker of Annemarie Ní Churreáin's 2017 "The Secret" reflects on the conditions that led to the young girl's death. The poem opens with a speaker driving "on the hill above Granard" when she spots a lamb "prong-legged and stray in the road" (Ní Churreáin 42). The speaker stops for the lamb and "watch[es] it scuttle off / across the edge of a black sky" (42). Later, she sees "crows gather and swirl, crying out / an endless syllable: *Ann! Ann! Ann!*"[10] while a statue of the Virgin "yields her chipped eyes / to empty nests" and "holds still" in its stone form (42). Like in Meehan's poem, the Virgin Mary does nothing to help Ann, but, in Ní Churreáin's poem set in the present day, the speaker appears to reveal that there is nothing a statue of Mary ever could have done for the girl: "stone remains stone" (42). Instead, the speaker laments the inactivity and uselessness of the people of Granard for Lovett's sake, the way in which they ignored her to protect their "secret." The speaker claims, "Every town has a shame so turned in / upon itself that the creatures begin / to live it out" (42). Over three decades after Ann Lovett's death, the people of Granard, according to Ní Churreáin's speaker, have not forgiven themselves for what they have done (or did not do). The memory of Ann's death is so ingrained in the place that even the ecosystem reacts with anxiety and grief, and the speaker knows that it is too late for any type of resolution. She is only left with questions: "What can I do? Who to tell?" (42).

Written over the span of nearly three decades, Meehan's "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks," O'Reilly's "Nineteen Eighty-Four," and Ní Churreáin's "The Secret" serve as

[10] Possibly a bilingual pun: the Irish translation of the word "there" is "ann."

persisting critiques of the societal conditions that led to the death of a young, pregnant girl. While they are not poems about motherhood, per se, they question the constructions of idealized motherhood that Irish society holds to be true, in which the Virgin Mary is held up as the perfect mother, though no human woman can ever fully emulate her due to the obvious biological impossibility of Virgin birth. If the ideal mother is one who becomes a mother by miraculous circumstances, all other mothers, in turn, must be lesser than. At the same time, these poems highlight the fact that, while motherhood is a saintly task, sex and thus pregnancy are not. Marina Warner, in her exploration of the roles of the Virgin Mary in *Alone of All Her Sex*, notes, "Populous as the Church pantheon is, it is nevertheless so impoverished that it cannot conceive of a single female saint independently of her relations (or lack of relations) with men" (Warner 235). Sex with men is, Warner argues, at the center of womanly sainthood, with the Virgin Mary's perpetual virginity on one pole and Mary Magdalene's repentance for her prostitution[11] at the other, with little to no room in between (235). While it can be argued that various saints within the Catholic Church were themselves married, non-virginal mothers, Warner's argument is true in the sense that sexuality is both a contentious and forbidden topic in Catholic-centered societies, and various Irish poets explore this relationship between this symbolic mother and true motherhood and the ways in which it can be disembodying. Through an exploration of the Virgin Mary as artifact and symbol, Meehan, Ní Churreáin, and O'Reilly portray the relationship between motherhood and Irish cultural stigmatizations surrounding pregnancy and motherhood which, in 1984, led to the death of the young Ann Lovett, who was subject to ultimate shame and disembodiment through her death at the feet of the Virgin.

[11] Though Mary Magdalene's history of prostitution is still a widely accepted story by many Christians, "a close scrutiny of the Gospels refuses to yield Mary Magdalene's identity, and challenges the traditional assumption that she was a woman of great beauty and amorousness, indeed a prostitute, who repented of her evil life after she encountered Jesus Christ and learned to love him instead" (Warner 226).

Irish culture upholds the Virgin Mary as the ideal mother whose holiness and chastity should be emulated. But even as the Church spoke out against promiscuity (as well as abortion and contraception) in the twentieth century, it did little to help mothers who gave birth to unwanted or unintended children. These mothers were stigmatized by the fact that they did not live up to the ideal of Mary, an "exceptional" woman who was "wholly free [...] from the 'incentive to sin,' and therefore unburdened by a single sinful desire," and the Irish state and Catholic Church were left with questions about what to do with those whose sin and shame seemed impossible to hide (Warner 236-7). In some cases, the Church in Ireland managed, like the town of Granard, to hide this unconcealable shame; a 2021 report from the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, institutions run by Catholic nuns that housed unwed mothers and their children to whom they gave birth in secrecy during the middle of the twentieth century, not only revealed that many of these women were pressured into giving up their children for adoption but also uncovered mass, unmarked graves and around 9,000 child deaths (A. O'Reilly 5, Specia). Ireland is scarred and marked by these atrocities, the traumatizing abuse of women and children that occurred into the 1960s. Poets like Boland and Morrissey, who conceived their children within a married relationship, portray motherhood as a potentially embodying and empowering experience. But for many Irish women, having been told that motherhood must be achieved in a certain, specific manner at a predetermined place and time, motherhood can only be disembodying.

Mother and baby homes are now institutions of the past, but their atrocities— the extent of which was only uncovered in 2021— are long from being forgotten. When Minister Katherine Zappone announced on March 3, 2017, that hundreds of human remains were found at the Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, County Galway, "it was a very chilling and a very public

indictment of both the Church and the Irish state – and, if truth be told, of the Irish people" (A. O'Reilly 5). In her 2017 collection *Bloodroot*, Annemarie Ní Churreáin explores this indictment in a chilling poem about the ways in which the abuses of the mother and baby homes went unnoticed for centuries. Ní Churreáin writes "Six Ways to Wash Your Hands (Ayliffe, 1978)" in the form of a medical report, referencing the 1978 article by Ayliffe et. al entitled "A test for 'hygienic' hand disinfection." The first way to wash your hands, the speaker claims, is to "*wet hands, apply soap and rub palm to palm* / until a white lather forms like the spit and rage of women, / who, having lain among waves, were dragged back up again, / by their hair and stripped of their names to pay for the wrongs / in their bellies" (Ní Churreáin 43). Ní Churreáin angrily criticizes the fact that single women were punished for their pregnancies in a state which did nothing to help them prevent such pregnancies, then were stripped of all agency— even the simple agency of naming— in both life and death. The second way to wash hands is to "*rub right palm over left dorsum and left palm over right dorsum*" to rid of the "scent of sin [which] can cling for years [...] the scent of a child in an unmarked grave may get in beneath / your fingernails and cause all sorts of problems in later life" (43). She creates a poem which encapsulates all the senses, forcing her readers to see what the culpable, willfully ignorant public refused to see, to smell what they refused to smell. The next way is to "*rub palm to palm*" because "the fathers are no more;" though the fathers are equally culpable in the pregnancy of these unmarried women, they received no punishment for their so-called sin, bore no responsibility for their child or the mother of your child. The "fathers" continued living their lives while the mothers were hidden away to suffer and even die. The fourth way to wash one's hands is to "*rub backs of fingers to opposing palm*" to loosen the joints after the hard, physical labor these women have been forced to do in the homes for which they received no reward, only

"hungry, swollen" bodies (43). The next step is the "*rotational rubbing of right thumb clasped in left palm and vice versa* / to disimprint the memory of files. Wash clean the data" until no trace of the abuse committed against both mother and child by those who claim to be holy is left (44). The final way to wash one's hands is "*rotational rubbing backwards and forwards with clasped fingers*" and to remember never to speak of what you have found out about these institutions: "Do not remunerate. Do not let / the wounded woman or her child speak in a bare tongue. / Wash in this way and ride your hands of Mother, Baby, Home" (44). Forget the indictment, Ní Churreáin's speaker sardonically posits, and there is nothing for which the Irish people or the Church must be forgiven. If these women continue to be stripped of agency, decades after the abuse and, for some, even in death, Ní Churreáin argues through her poem that these women can and will continue to be forgotten. In this way, she castigates a society of the past and seems to present options to the society of the present— forget and let the women stay buried, nameless, and forgotten, or remember and face the crimes for which many are culpable, for which institutional change is necessary in order to be forgiven. The mothers that Ní Churreáin presents— the real, once alive and some still living mothers— are the definition of disembodied mothers. They, with no right to make choices for their own bodies or own children, were susceptible to nearly every kind of abuse and misogyny in the name of retribution for their sins. Will there be a day, Ní Churreáin's speaker seems to ask, in which a nation and a culture can reform and restructure so that such abuses will never happen again? So that motherhood is a place for embodiment for *all* women who choose this path instead of only for those whose motherhood is deemed acceptable?

Motherhood is a complicated means of embodiment and agency within the contemporary Irish poetic tradition. On the one hand, mother-poets such as Eavan Boland and Sinéad

Morrissey find connection with themselves and their bodies through motherhood. On the other hand, poems about the deaths of Ann Lovett, her newborn, and the hundreds of children in mother and baby homes unmask the difficult, forced vulnerability that many women experience in pregnancy and motherhood. As the Irish poetic tradition continues to change and evolve, poets like Boland and Morrissey share their experiences of motherhood and posit it as an acceptable and necessary literary topic, one through which mothers might share their experiences and voices. But, as poets such as Meehan, Ní Churreáin, and O'Reilly disclose, the cultural influences that led to the death of Ann Lovett and the abuses of single mothers in mother and baby homes will not fade in the space of a generation. And, knowing that an atrocity so widespread as the mother and baby homes came to full light only last year, it is clear that the days of disembodied motherhood are not so far removed from the present. Still, motherhood, as portrayed in Boland's "Without End," will never cease to bring lives into the world, will never cease to be a source of embodiment for some Irish mothers. Thus, motherhood remains a nuanced and complex avenue for embodiment in contemporary Irish women's poetry as poets reveal that motherhood— and womanhood— is a dynamic and individualized experience that is not one-size-fits-all. Irish woman poets have done powerful work to articulate true experiences of motherhood across a range of circumstances. As Ireland continues to accept its past and move forward, and with the Irish poetic tradition moving past the symbolic and artifactual mother towards active, dynamic portrayals of mothers, the Irish poetic tradition might become a progressively more accessible avenue for embodiment for those who now have the choice to become mothers.

Chapter 4: The Body as Archive in Doireann Ní Ghríofa's *A Ghost in the Throat*

> *Is there in all of Ireland any woman*
> *having spent sunsets*
> *stretched next to him,*
> *having carried three calves for him,*
> *who wouldn't be tormented*
> *after losing Art Ó Laoghaire … ?*
>
> – "The Keen for Art Ó Laoghaire" by Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, translated by Doireann Ní Ghríofa (*A Ghost in the Throa*t 295)

Within the practice of poetic composition, a historical event or a situation an author witnesses might serve as a poem's inspiration. While some authors feel the need to differentiate between what "factually" happened and what did not in the events that inspired them, many poets feel the blurring of these boundaries is essential to their craft. In her poem "Eviction" from the 2020 collection *The Historians*, Eavan Boland, for example, provides some evidence of historical context while allowing herself to fill in the gaps to construct a larger narrative. The poem opens with the speaker's grandmother, who "finds an eviction notice on her door" (*The Historians* 14). Boland uncovers this eviction notice in "*Drogheda / Argus and Leinster Journal*, 1904," as she researches her own grandmother's life via archival materials (15). Because she was not alive in this period and was not told the story by her grandmother directly, Boland does not have the details of the eviction notice at her disposal when she writes this poem; the only evidence she has that this event occurred is the newspaper from 1904 that she holds in her hands. The speaker is thus left questioning, "Was the notice well served? / Was it served at all? / Is she a weekly or a monthly tenant?" (14). Boland does not have answers to her own questions but chooses to write the poem in order to glean meaning from the small fragment of information which she does have, as her contemporary Seamus Heaney refers to it in his 1979 poem "The Harvest Bow," "gleaning the unsaid off the palpable" (*Opened Ground* 175). It is unlikely that

Boland knows for sure that her grandmother "[left] a courtroom in tears," but whether or not this fact can be proven is unimportant to the narrative which Boland chooses to tell (14). Instead, she focuses on the fact that Ireland was "rising to the light" at the same time that her grandmother was being forced out of her home, and the speaker's "rage" is what she stresses in the last line of the poem (15). If Boland can write a poem which blends historical fact and her own best guesses as to what might have occurred, what, then, is a poet's responsibility to truth and historical evidence? Is an archive such as a newspaper the only means through which a story can or should be told as fact? And how can a poet embody her subjects if she is unable to discern the truth of a story? In this instance, Boland might be at least partially embodied herself, as she (in the form of the speaker) expresses her personal emotions regarding the eviction. Her grandmother, however, so far removed from the present, is more difficult to embody, appearing only as a weeping subject in the poem. In this chapter, I move away from Eavan Boland's poetry to discuss a work that I argue embodies both writer and subject. In Doireann Ní Ghríofa's *A Ghost in the Throat* (2020), I read evidence of a literary embodiment that evades the bounds of archival and historical knowledge to create a fuller picture of the life of one woman of the past and how this life intertwines with a contemporary poet.

"This is a female text" begins Doireann Ní Ghríofa's memoir cum speculative fiction cum essay *A Ghost in the Throat*. Serving as poet Ní Ghríofa's prose debut in book form, the book explores the trials of motherhood and womanhood as the author reaches back into history to attempt to uncover the life of the writer of Ireland's most famous lament or "keen" (in Irish, caoineadh), Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill. Having grown up with Ní Chonaill's keen as an integral part of the Irish curriculum, Ní Ghríofa was familiar with the work from a young age. Yet, years later, after marrying and having children and publishing poetry collections, Ní Ghríofa invites Ní

Chonaill back into her life and finds that "the voice of another woman [haunts her] throat" (*A Ghost in the Throat* 10). Soon, Ní Chonaill is not only a poet three centuries dead to this contemporary woman author; she is the "only [...] voice who never leaves [Ní Ghríofa's] side; Eibhlín Dubh is with [Ní Ghríofa], close as ink on paper and steady as a pulse" (55). Throughout *A Ghost in the Throat*, one woman explores what it means to be completely overcome by poetry and a poet and begins to understand the incredible undertaking of recovering a past which has been long buried.

Though Eibhlín Dubh's *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* or *Lament for Art O'Leary* is well-known, variously translated, and widely read, little information exists about the author herself, and this fact is what Ní Ghríofa seeks to rectify in her book. However, Ní Ghríofa is not the first to notice the disparity between information regarding poem and poet; as discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis, Eavan Boland explores this disparity in *A Journey with Two Maps: Becoming a Woman Poet* as she considers what it means to enter the Irish tradition as a woman and a poet. Boland references the fact that Ní Chonaill's keen became a lens through which the Irish upheld their art and culture to the British as a means to defy and counteract the idea of Irish inferiority during the reign of the Penal Laws. Through this narrative, "Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill," Boland writes, "begins to disappear":

> *The Lament for Art O'Leary*, as it came to be known, is pushed, and turned, and re-made in the shape of other conventions. Its origins are obscured by contemporary interpretations, most of them British or Anglo-Irish. It is romanticized, glamorized, pulled out of shape. [...] Gradually the real woman, the flesh-and-blood aunt of Daniel O'Connell, the young and desperate widow in her late twenties who knew the old arts and availed of them in her grief, vanishes. [...] And so, piece by piece, a young woman disappears. A vital clue to our past and our poetry fades out. Like a figure cut out of a photograph, she becomes a missing space, replaced by more comfortable images. (*A Journey with Two Maps* 54-55)

This act of disappearing was tragic and unacceptable to Ní Ghríofa, who, through a sort of revisionist history driven by personal research, attempts to create a new biography and new narrative through which history might read Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill. As she does so, Ní Ghríofa explores various forms of embodiment, particularly finding vulnerability in her own connection to a long dead woman, whose keen she re-translates from Irish into English. In this chapter, I argue that Ní Ghríofa seeks to embody Ní Chonaill through alternative forms of knowing, including body-centered knowledge, connection with landscapes, and sporadic acts of critical fabulation. Through these various, unorthodox methods, Ní Ghríofa is able to reinsert a woman into the Irish poetic tradition, centering the woman who wrote the keen instead of the keen itself, finding parallels between Ní Chonaill's life and her own to establish a mutual, almost shared experience between two women writers.

Ní Ghríofa expresses herself as an embodied subject throughout her career, refusing to cower before the taboo and under-represented. While the personal embodiment is especially evident in *A Ghost in the Throat* because of the first-person narrative memoir aspect of the 2020 book, Ní Ghríofa depicts similar embodied experiences earlier on in her career in her collections of poetry. From her 2015 collection *Clasp*, "In the Post Office" expresses the urgency of sexual desire, as the speaker "can't look away" from a person whom they observe "press[ing their] tongue to a stamp" (*Clasp* 22). The speaker proclaims, "I want to feel you press against me, / tongue and thumbs / sticking to my skin," explicitly expressing her sexual intentions and desires (22). Similarly, "In IKEA" portrays the ways in which desire permeates the mundane, the everyday. As she shops with her lover in IKEA, the speaker cannot help thinking about what it would be like if the displays in IKEA were her actual home; there, she would "take [her lover] to pieces" as she thinks to herself, "I could slip this key between your collarbones [...] I could

unlock all your sockets. / Come behind this cupboard," she tells her lover, "Open your buttons. / Let me unpack you" (24). Desire, Ní Ghríofa appears to argue through her poems, is not something from which to shy away but something which should and can be expressed. In "Aubade in a Tumble Dryer," Ní Ghríofa writes, through an extended metaphor from the perspective of laundry in a dryer, about another mundane experience which is often deemed too taboo, or even too crass, for poetry: a night out. Ní Ghríofa depicts the "drunken stumbling," the "elbows and grins," and the shouts of "*Tequila! Tequila!*" by the laundry in the dryer, as if a night in the club is akin to spinning in a laundry machine for hours then waking up "rumpled and thirsty" (50). In the aftermath of drunkenness, the laundry items "wake tangled up in old lovers, / damp arms around each other [...] finding [themselves] creased into each other's curves" until morning, when they will "be ironed and tucked away" by their wearers, paralleling the return of partygoers after a night out to the responsibilities of daily life (50). A night out is worthy of not only poetic reflection, as evidenced by Ní Ghríofa in "Aubade in a Tumble Dryer," but also the forms of poetry, including tercets, repetition, and extended metaphor.

Clasp not only expresses the naturalness of sex, drinking, dancing, and desire as functions of the body but also reflects on pregnancy and motherhood as bodily experiences. "I carry your bones in my body" considers the literal growth of a human body inside of a mother during pregnancy: "I carry you in my body / [...] / — nobody — nearlybody — my small someone" (*Clasp* 32). After birth, a major shift in the mother's body occurs, but so, too, does something major shift for the baby as a human, a body, a separate entity. In "Jigsaw," the speaker talks to her newborn: "For months, all I knew of you / was a jumble of limbs" until "you slid from me," "to me" (33). Now the mother and baby are no longer one, but "the arch of [the baby'] foot / fit[s] the hollow of [the speaker's] palm," the baby's "head nestle[s] / into the curve

of [the speaker's] neck" (33). The baby is a "familiar stranger" to the mother, someone she is just beginning to know, the "unknown made known" (33). The collection brings readers through all steps of Ní Ghríofa's journey with her new baby; in "Birthburst," Ní Ghríofa writes from the perspective of a child who is literally and physically entering into the world, reflecting on what it means for a child who was once a part of her to become an individual, embodied being. The baby "surges" forward during the labor process until she becomes part of the world amidst "the caesasrean slice," her "mother's girl-cries," and the "hospital light" (44). Afterwards, "they scorch and stitch [the mother's] flesh," and the baby and mother become two separate entities (44). Now, the newborn baby thinks, "I must become / I, / I am, / I" (44). Focusing on her own body after enduring the pain of a C-section, the speaker in "Inventory: Recovery Room" views her reflection: "pale face, blue gown," and breasts "funnelled into plastic cups" (34). She attempts to breastfeed but "nothing happens / until [she] think[s] of milk, of beestings squeezed from a cow's udders" and "within [her] chest, an itch begins to stir. [...] a single drop of yellow liquid" becomes "Another. / Another" (34). Breastfeeding is a normal, natural, and sometimes even painful part of motherhood in the same way that desire and sex are often integral aspects of womanhood. When Ní Ghríofa is finally able to bring her daughter home from the hospital, the speaker in "From Richmond Hill" watches her new baby "doze in [her] arm, milk-drunk, / all eyelashes, cheeks and raw umbilical, swaddled" in the sights and smells of the town which will be the baby's home (35). Ní Ghríofa not only crafts a collection of poetry in which her speakers are aware of their own bodies and their bodily functions but also normalizes these experiences as facts of life, simultaneously reflecting on what it means to be a body which can and does drink and have sex and give birth but is also the body of a poet. Ní Ghríofa continues and expands the exploration for embodiment through bodily experiences begun by her predecessors such as

Eavan Boland and maintained by contemporaries such as Sinéad Morrissey and Annemarie Ní Churreáin. But, as Ní Ghríofa does so, her search for herself as a writer and for Eibhlín Dubh as a woman seeps into her poetry, before finally culminating into the complete work, *A Ghost in the Throat*.

Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill was on Ní Ghríofa's mind years before the manifestation of her book and its publication in 2020. While the book recounts a reconnection between the living and the dead poet as early as 2012, the year in which Ní Ghríofa passed a sign for Kilcrea and remembered the poem she read in grade school, Ní Chonaill first appears in Ní Ghríofa's poem "The Horse Under the Hearth," first published in 2015 by *The Irish Times* and appearing later that year in her poetry collection *Clasp*. The second poem in the collection *Clasp*, "The Horse Under the Hearth" not only directly references Ní Chonaill's life as written in her keen but actually presents her as the speaker of her poem. Eibhlín is not the voiceless, "one-dimensional Victorian heroine" that Boland claims society transformed her into but is once again, though this time through words that are not her own, at the center of the narrative (*A Journey with Two Maps* 55-6). The poem recounts the moments after Art O'Leary's death, the known legend as described in Ní Chonaill's keen, in which O'Leary's horse ran to Ní Chonaill to inform her that something was wrong, that O'Leary had been murdered. In Ní Ghríofa's version of events, the female horse ran to Ní Chonaill "saddle bloody," and "when her eyes found [Ní Chonaill's], [Ní Chonaill] knew" that O'Leary was dead (*Clasp* 12). Ní Chonaill then "took three leaps: the first over the threshold, the second / to the gate, the third to [the horse's] back" (12). Here Ní Ghríofa's poem directly mirrors Ní Chonaill's three-century old lament, in Ní Ghríofa's own translation from the Irish: "Three leaps I took – the first to the threshold, / the second to the gate, /the third to [O'Leary's] mare" (*A Ghost in the Throat* 291). Ní Ghríofa then continues Ní Chonaill's

narrative, focusing in particular on Ní Chonaill's relationship with the horse itself. "Everyone knows what happened then," Ní Chonaill, as speaker, thinks to herself, because she "versed it strong / and spoke it often" through her keen (*Clasp* 12). "But what of her?" the speaker asks, hoping to articulate the story of the animal whose bravery has been long forgotten (12). The horse, the animal with "sunken, unseeing" eyes, becomes the center of the poem, as her loss magnifies the speaker's grief, but her continued existence grieves the speaker even more (12). The speaker "couldn't leave her with them," could not leave the mare with the men who had murdered O'Leary when he had refused to sell her (12).[1] "And so," the speaker orders the death of the horse: "her head came back, in a wet sack that leaked in my lap /and reddened my skirts" (12). Though she has ordered her death, the speaker has a proper burial for the mare, in which she "watched them / shelter her in dirt and stone," reflecting on the "slow change" the horse's corpse will undergo "from muscle and mane to bone and dirt" (12). In this poem, though the speaker is clearly meant to be Ní Chonaill, O'Leary's mare becomes the focus of the woman's grief, as O'Leary's pride in her led to his death. O'Leary remains present in the poem, though he is not mentioned by name: when the speaker dances, "each ankle tap, each heel rap brings [her] back // to those fast moments before [Ní Chonaill and the horse] found him" (12). In this journey, "it is only us two," the speaker thinks, "and we are galloping / and galloping and never reaching him" (12). Ní Ghríofa establishes a relationship between the author of the famous keen and an animal in this poem, drawing upon minor details within Ní Chonaill's larger work to magnify and interpret the story of a lesser-known, non-human character. Ní Ghríofa, through this poem, attempts to explore the nuanced emotions of a woman who ordered the death of her

[1] According to the Penal Laws in eighteenth-century Ireland, Catholics could not own a mare worth more than 5 pounds. When O'Leary's mare beat Morris's mare in a race, Morris ordered that O'Leary sell his mare. O'Leary refused and went on the run. Morris then proclaimed O'Leary an outlaw, and he and his soldiers shot O'Leary.

husband's beloved horse. Ní Ghríofa engages with the complexity of the situation surrounding O'Leary's death, moving beyond the words which Ní Chonaill left behind in her keen in order to excavate the woman herself, who existed both before and after the death and lament for Art O'Leary.

The next mention of Ní Chonaill in Ní Ghríofa's work appears in *Poetry Ireland Review* in April 2018. The issue, edited by none other than Eavan Boland, "contains," Boland writes, "first of all, the continuing vitality of new voices and recent poems" ("Editorial" 5). Ní Ghríofa's poem, entitled "At Derrynane, I Think of Eibhlín Dubh Again," clearly centers on Ní Chonaill as does "The Horse Under the Hearth". But this poem brings into light Ní Ghríofa's *personal* relationship with the centuries' old poet and reveals the almost nagging insistence of Ní Chonaill's presence on Ní Ghríofa's life; from the title of the poem, Ní Ghríofa highlights that thoughts about Ní Chonaill do not originate in this poem or in the speaker's present but have arisen again and again. Surrounded by "the bog myrtle" which "begins to flicker in the thickets," Ní Ghríofa imagines Ní Chonaill as a girl living in Derrynane House ("At Derrynane" 38). She thinks of the activities Ní Chonaill may have participated in, pondering the fact that she might have been in the exact same spot as the speaker centuries previous, though the rooms of the house in which Ní Chonaill once lived have been demolished. Ní Chonaill, the speaker thinks, could have been "running through bramble and bracken" at Derrynane, a young girl "laughing over her shoulder, to a home // that waits steady in stone" (38). The speaker cannot know for sure, however, because little is known about who Ní Chonaill was or what she actually did, save write a keen for her murdered husband. Even the location of her grave is unknown, a fact which the speaker laments. The speaker of the poem directly addresses Ní Chonaill, though she is long dead, telling her, "If I could find your gravestone, // I would bring you no rose, Eibhlín" (38).

Instead, the speaker "would carry a fistful of myrtle stems," a plant native to Ní Chonaill's hometown, insinuating a bond between the speaker and Ní Chonaill, as if she knows something about who Eibhlín once was, as if she wants Ní Chonaill to know that she is not— nor will be— forgotten (38). The speaker would place the "small bundle / tied tight and neat," implying that the speaker picked and bound the myrtle stems from Derrynane together herself and is bringing them to Ní Chonaill's grave, wherever it might be, "to place at [her] feet" (38). "At Derrynane, I Think of Eibhlín Dubh Again" serves as the first publication by Ní Ghríofa to evidence the fact that this contemporary woman longs to know and be with Ní Chonaill, that Ní Chonaill's life is a place of curiosity and even one of possibility.

In the version of "At Derrynane, I Think of Eibhlín Dubh Again" that appears as part of Ní Ghríofa's 2021 collection *To Star the Dark*, this intimacy is even more explicit. The speaker tells Ní Chonaill, "I'd bring [...] / only a fistful of myrtle stems / [...] tugged tight // and neat, to be placed, / gently, at your feet" (*To Star the Dark* 44). Though one might argue that the largest difference between the two versions is a slight shift in meter, the word "gently" adds to the image of the myrtle stems that the speaker likely herself collected from Derrynane to highlight that this is an act of respect for the dead woman. Though the speaker will never know Ní Chonaill, through acts of archival retrieval and emotional labor, she tries to find the spirit of this woman, to pay her the respect that she believes is owed the woman behind what Peter Levi claimed to be in 1966 "the greatest poem written in these islands in the whole eighteenth century" (*A Journey With Two Maps* 53). Through this poem, Ní Ghríofa is reclaiming the woman behind the keen as she searches, both figuratively and literally, for the remains of Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill.

This search culminates in *A Ghost in the Throat* as Ní Ghríofa excavates historical documents and physical landscapes for the remains of Ní Chonaill's life. As Ní Ghríofa performs this excavation, she realizes how little there is to be known about Ní Chonaill and who she was as a woman, a mother, and a person. Every biographical sketch the author finds is "always some lazy variant of the same two facts: *Wife of Art O'Leary. Aunt of Daniel O'Connell.* How swiftly the academic gaze," Ní Ghríofa laments, "places [Ní Chonaill] in a masculine shadow, as though she could only be of interest as a satellite to male lives" (*A Ghost in the Throat* 70). Much of the information that Ní Ghríofa is able to glean about Ní Chonaill besides these two well-known, shallow facts comes from an 1892 publication by Mrs. Morgan John O'Connell entitled *The Last Colonel of the Irish Brigade*, in addition to correspondence between Ní Chonaill's brothers Maurice and Daniel. From these texts, Ní Ghríofa participates in an approach that she deems "an act of wilful erasure" as she "whittl[es] each document and letter until only the lives of women remain" in order "to lur[e] female lives back from male texts" and "reveal [...] the concealed lives of women, present, always, but coded in invisible ink" (*A Ghost in the Throat* 76). What Ní Ghríofa finds in this experiment is that female texts are few and far between, but the lives of women reveal themselves when Ní Ghriofa pulls them out from the male texts and makes them present.

Female texts, Ní Ghríofa discovers, are more prevalent than they appear at first glance. Although work must be done to find and reveal them, female texts are in a variety of forms and places. An unexpected example of one such "female text" is that of Art O'Leary's horse. In Ní Ghríofa's poem, "The Horse Under the Hearth," O'Leary's horse "was a female being," another forgotten and minor character hidden in the depths of Ní Chonaill's keen (*A Ghost in the Throat* 148). Although she remains unnamed, she is not unimportant. Ní Ghríofa writes, "We never

learn this horse's name. I cannot bring myself to invent one. Instead, I honour her among The Unnamed, a further absence among all other female absences that are missing from this tale" (148). Through the simple act of recognizing that a horse is unnamed and female, Ní Ghríofa turns to the silences of women to reveal that absence is, as Jacob Gaboury argues in "Becoming NULL: Queer relations in the excluded middle," *indeterminacy*, not proof of nonexistence (Gaboury 153). And by pulling the horse from archival fragments, from silence into poetry, not naming her but "laboring to paint as full a picture of the lives" of the women she excavates from the archive "as possible," Ní Ghríofa focuses on silences and absences to embody those who do not have a voice within the historical archive (Hartman, "Venus" 11).

Silences, such as the lack of information regarding Ní Chonaill's life outside of her relationship to Daniel O'Connell and Art O'Leary, "enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments," according to Michel-Rolph Trouillot in *Silencing the Past*: "the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history*)" (Trouillot 26). History, as argued by Trouillot and reclaimed by Ní Ghríofa in *A Ghost in the Throat*, often has less to do with "fact" than it has to do with power dynamics and who has the opportunity to produce narratives. Thus, in the case of Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, who lived in the eighteenth-century during the existence of the Penal Codes, men— often British colonialist men— wrote the dominant narratives of history, leaving women like Ní Chonaill to exist outside of the realm of knowledge and historical production. In order to find and reinscribe Ní Chonaill's life, Ní Ghríofa must turn to what Hartman refers as "forms of knowledge and practice not generally considered legitimate objects of historical inquiry or appropriate or adequate sources for history making" in order to "[attend] to the

cultivated silence, exclusions, relations of violence and domination that engender the official accounts" (*Scenes of Subjection* 11). Ní Ghríofa, realizing that she must "veer away from the scholarship [she has] accepted thus far," goes beyond the archive of correspondence and looks inward, toward both imaginative and physical experiences, to encounter Ní Chonaill (*A Ghost in the Throat* 75).

Ní Ghríofa participates in what she calls "daydream[ing]" the gaps of Ní Chonaill's story "to life" (*A Ghost in the Throat* 230). I argue that these "daydreams" are in fact instances of what African-American and slavery studies professor Saidiya Hartman coined *critical fabulation*.[2] In her 2008 essay "Venus in Two Acts," Saidiya Hartman coined the term critical fabulation to describe a theoretical approach to recovering information about the lives of the forgotten through fragments as small as single lines from archival history:

> By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done. ("Venus" 11)

Such acts require "narrative restraint," as Ní Ghríofa displays in her own efforts by choosing not to name O'Leary's horse, as well as "exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive," choosing speculative forms such as *might have* as opposed to declarative forms such as *did* (11). Though

[2] For information about the intersection of Irish Studies and African Diaspora Studies, see *The Black and Green Atlantic: Cross-Currents of the African and Irish Diaspora* (2009), edited by Peter D. O'Neill and David Lloyd. While similarities exist between the two diasporas (O'Neill and Lloyd's blurb claims, "For centuries, African and Irish people have traversed the Atlantic, as slaves, servants, migrants, exiles, political organizers and cultural workers"), allowing for the disciplines to be read in conversation with each other, it is important to acknowledge the risks in reading the two studies as equivalent or comparable in all instances. I read Hartman's contributions to (Black) archival theory as a potential gap-filler for the dominant narratives of British colonial rule within Ireland (as well as eighteenth-century oppression of women), but we must not read Irish ethic oppression by British colonial rule or violence enacted during the Troubles as equivalent to the slavery and racial subordination which Black and African peoples faced throughout the United States and Europe for centuries. Nor should we equate the systemic racism against Black people which still exists in contemporary Western society to Irish Catholic oppression, as Irish people do not face racism in this way, since the Irish have, over the last century, "become" white. See *How the Irish Became White* (1995) by Noel Ignatiev for more information.

Ní Ghríofa does not claim critical fabulation as the basis of her project, the underpinnings of this theoretical approach are constant throughout her recovery of Ní Chonaill's biography. When recounting Ní Chonaill's life, Ní Ghríofa places what is deemed to be historical "fact"— "On 25 August 1768, Eibhlín's body howled open and her first son was born"— in conversation with speculation of what Ní Chonaill might have done or how she might have felt— "I imagine the twins [Eibhlín and her sister Mary] spying on the crews' comings and goings" and "he [O'Leary's killer Abraham Morris] must have wept through fever dreams and repeated infections and agonies" (*A Ghost in the Throat* 116, 138, 176). Through such a combination of historical record and small but calculated authorial imposition, Ní Ghríofa excavates the lives of humans from historical records and data instead of regurgitating what is claimed as fact. Through this effort, Ní Ghríofa embodies the humans she portrays, focusing on what made them individuals. Though "there are many moments in Nelly's [Eibhlín's] life that [Ní Ghríofa] won't let [herself] sketch in the absence of evidence, because to do so would feel like trespass, or theft," she can speculate based on the evidence she does have and create a narrative that is both in conversation with and contradictory to the dominant, male-driven accounts (126). As described in "When I Visit Derrynane, I Think of Eibhlín Dubh Again," though Eibhlín is no longer present in the space, Ní Ghríofa combines the memories of the landscape with her own fabulation of what might have occurred there. So when Ní Ghríofa encounters "tenacious vines of wild strawberries at Derrynane," she "see[s] them in that moment, then, twin girls [Eibhlín and her sister Mary], one dark, one fair, their lips blushed with strawberry juice" (89). And when Ní Ghríofa sits at home by herself, knowing that since she entered the archive with Ní Chonaill, their two bodies are connected in some way, she "imagine[s Ní Chonaill's] belongings into being. [She] give[s] her a large, sturdy chest with a clasp of polished brass. Within, the ordinary treasures of a life: a

locket, a favourite cup wrapped in a blanket, a shell, a quill, [...] a necklace, and a clutch of letters neatly ribboned together" (128). Though none of these items truly exist, they could have, and these imaginings make Eibhlín a woman, expanding the possibility of her archive and her life, who she might have been and what she could have touched.

When Ní Ghríofa visits not just Derrynane but the Derrynane House for a tour, she finds that Daniel O'Connell is all that remains of Ní Chonaill's childhood home. Eibhlín, at Derrynane House, again vanishes from history.[3] Because Ní Chonaill is not there, nor her mother nor sister, Ní Ghríofa must reimagine them into the space, as well as the rooms they lived in which have since been demolished. She writes, "I let the gravel become a kitchen floor and make the room around me busy with women. I charm the air until it fills itself with steam, gossip, and the smell of warm bread. [...] In the old parlour, my palms linger on an imagined windowsill" (*A Ghost in the Throat* 200). Ní Ghríofa connects with the land in front of her to engage with her bodily senses to perceive that which is no longer there; through a combination of fact-retrieval from Mrs. O'Connell's book and critical fabulation, a world reveals itself, and Ní Ghríofa is able to transport herself into the eighteenth-century, to excavate Ní Chonaill out of the shadows and place her into Derrynane House, a museum and memorial to history which excludes her. She "scour[s] every one of those immaculate rooms for any remnant of the women [she] seeks[s] – a single button, say, a nib, a candlestick, or an earring – any trace at all of their existences" but "find[s] nothing" (204). No physical memory remains except for that which Ní Ghríofa imagines and experiences through her own body, abstractly and without the ability to physically touch what she perceives. She finds some serenity in the fact that *she* is a woman in that room, and

[3] The Derrynane House website does not mention that Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill was once a resident of the house and does not include her on the "Family" page nor on the extended family tree provided on the website via hyperlink.

through her connection with Ní Chonaill, Ní Ghríofa remains as a memory of the keen writer's life, a shadow in the form of "a female body stretched by light" (204). When she is about to give up on finding any fragment of the physical outside of herself and her fabulations of the space, she spots "a fragment of delph, painted with a sliver of some delicate flower" and takes it home with her (205). Though Ní Ghríofa has no evidence that this fragment was ever touched by Ní Chonaill or ever owned by any woman in the O'Connell family, the fact that she found it at the Derrynane House is enough for Ní Ghríofa. It becomes an "artefact symbolic of the female lives and thought and labour that belonged" at Derrynane House, and while it might not be proof of any historical fact in the Cartesian sense of knowing, its mere existence serves as a symbol and a reminder, a connection to the women of Ní Chonaill's family that, for Ní Ghríofa, is a way of knowing in itself (206). The object does not have provenance or provable origins, but, like the strawberries and myrtle, it is a physical reminder of the fact that Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill was a woman, a woman with a body. Ní Ghríofa thus engages with not only the imaginative but also the bodily in her search for Ní Chonaill. To do so, she visits the places in which Ní Chonaill once lived to encounter nature in the way she might have, as she describes in "In Derrynane, I Think of Eibhlín Dubh Again."

Through physical landscapes, Ni Ghriofa is able to access the memory of nature, recognizing physical spaces as they are now, but engaging with them and perceiving them through her senses to understand how Ní Chonaill might have engaged with them, might have perceived them. The land, in this way, is a type of archive, a means through which Ní Ghríofa creates a biography. Though she does not research the land through a traditional epistemological form within Western modes of understanding, such as archaeology, the land is a resource for Ní Ghríofa, a resource she can turn to when all others are scant, when the so-called factual

evidence— the male-dominated archives which remain and are often read as "history"— can tell her very little about Ní Chonaill. When Ní Ghríofa visits Kilcrea on a whim in 2015, she "stand[s] where Eibhlín Dubh stood" and "speak[s] some lines from the *Caoineadh*, [her] voice springing back from the stone walls that once witnessed her voice too" (*A Ghost in the Throat* 74-5). Though Ní Chonaill is no longer physically present in the space and has not been for centuries, the landscape, Ní Ghríofa argues, remembers her and the life she once lived. Ní Ghríofa embraces "the echo" of Ní Chonaill in this space and recognizes it as a legitimate and significant method of fact retrieval and knowledge making (75). By standing in the place Ní Chonaill once stood, the land reveals aspects of the woman's life; the walls remember the words she spoke that were later passed down through generations.

Ní Ghríofa later visits the Gearagh, where Ní Chonaill lived with O'Leary two centuries before it was submerged underwater through strategic flooding in the 1950s to construct dams,[4] and she encounters the memory that the place, the physical landscape holds: "the waters are low, allowing ancient stumps to splinter to the surface [...] I've heard that the old rooftops can sometimes be seen through the water, so I lean my body over those deep gardens" (196). Although Ní Ghríofa cannot see the houses, cannot catch a glimpse of the house in which Ní Chonaill and O'Leary lived during their marriage, she is able to "*feel* them" (196, emphasis added). She feels "the hidden rooms where women fed milk to infants and lambs, where candles were quenched by their weary breaths, where they called their lovers' names in rage, in desire, or in fear [...] they exist still, somewhere beyond the surface, even if no one sees them" (196-7).

[4] Ní Chonaill, in her lament for her husband, presciently predicts a nightmarish end for the Gearagh years before its destruction by humanity: "Last night, such clouded reveries / appeared to me, come midnight / in Cork as I lay awake late. / Alone, I dreamt / our bright-limed home tumbling, / the Gearagh all withering, / without a growl left of your hounds, / nor the sweet chirp of birds" (*A Ghost in the Throat* 311).

The land still possesses the memory, and through an encounter with the land, Ní Ghríofa is able to access this knowledge as she allows the space to reveal to her what no longer can be seen.

Through an act of physical remembering, an attempt to continue to recreate through alternative forms of knowing, Ní Ghríofa, "arrange[s her] body" at her own clothesline, mimicking the women of the Gearagh who would have "worked by bucket-handles [...] pinning clothes to lines, tossing grains to birds, feeding calves" (*A Ghost in the Throat* 194). When Ní Ghríofa looks up, "the clouds seem a flood, suspended far overhead," signifying that her own body can hold recollection, can encounter spaces and people that no longer exist through acts of speculation and excavation (197). Memory can be experienced simply by *being* in a place, through one's own body, through willful recollection and acts of imagination. "The act of imagination," Toni Morrison claims, "is bound up with memory" ("The Site of Memory" 98). Drawing on a similar understanding of the relationship between landscape and knowledge, Morrison, in 1987, drew on the image of flooding. Describing the way in which the Mississippi River floods after having been straightened via human interference, she writes, "All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was" ("The Site of Memory" 99). Writers, in turn, home in on this "emotional memory," focusing on aspects of what a landscape looked at in a certain period or how they perceived an event through their senses (99). "A rush of imagination" is the equivalent of "flooding" for a writer (99). Emotional memory is not, in Morrison's words or in Ní Ghríofa's creation of biography, less meaningful than factual knowing; in many ways, emotional memory allows for subversion and contradiction of the processes of history making, which revolve around relations of power and the repetition of dominant accounts (a repetition which allows other accounts to be forgotten or cast aside). The land and water, in the cases of both the Mississippi River and the Gearagh, hold traces of past

lives and existences. Though Ní Ghríofa's encounter with the land might not appear to reveal much to wider intellectual consciousness, the author allows herself to experience a collective, almost spiritual remembering, drawing on traditions of the past to connect herself to a woman who lived in a period in which collective memory and oral composition were not only legitimate forms of knowing, but often the only forms available to women.

Through her engagement with alternative forms of knowing and memory, Ní Ghríofa encounters Ní Chonaill's story through what twentieth-first century epistemology would term unorthodox avenues. But in many ways, Ní Ghríofa experiences Ní Chonaill through forms of the knowledge which Ní Chonaill herself would have recognized as legitimate because, in eighteenth-century Ireland, "literature composed by women was stored not in books but in female bodies" which served as "living repositories of poetry and song" (*A Ghost in the Throat* 74). The body and the senses were the means through which "Lament for Art O'Leary" would have been known and shared. However, one might argue that Ní Chonaill is an exception to the argument that women were excluded from Western forms of history-making and remain only as absences in the archive because her keen is well-known and well-read. Has Ní Chonaill not thus participated in the construction of Irish history and literary canonical production? This argument holds some weight, as "Lament for Art O'Leary" remains integral to Irish education and scholarship three hundred years after its composition; what does *not* remain, Ní Ghríofa claims, is Ní Chonaill herself, the physical body which once performed the keen. Still, there is an argument to be made that Ní Chonaill embodied herself through the physical, bodily involved act of keen-making. The keen, which "was not written" but "composed," survived a century of oral tradition to eventually find its way into written records (Boland, *A Journey with Two Maps* 53). "Lament for Art O'Leary" is part of a wider tradition of female lamentation which was often

communal in nature and an avenue for women's expression of not only grief but a wide range of emotions.

Angela Bourke, in her important essay "More in Anger than in Sorrow" discusses what a keen is and its various uses:

> The Irish lament is called *caoineadh*, the origin of the English word keening. It was performed loudly and publicly and was regarded as essential to the honor of the dead person. Using a traditional meter and verbal formulas, the lament poet— always a woman— lavishly praised the dead person's character, family, and home in a poem that could be remembered and quoted for generations. (Bourke 160)

Further, keens were a method of catharsis for both performer and audience, as the "'blood-curdling,' 'horrible,' and 'hideous'" cries of the lamenting woman provided a space for uninhibited emotion, no matter the nature of the emotion (165). While loss and mourning were at the center of the keen, primarily because keens were composed and performed in the wake of death, Bourke argues that keens also served to "make memorable public statements about her own [the woman performing the keen] and other women's lives" (165). Ní Chonaill thus was able to perform her intense grief at the loss of her husband, drinking his blood to signify her desire to be one with his body, but also was able to shame and criticize those who wronged her, including O'Leary's killer and Ní Chonaill's own brother-in-law. Through this act of lamentation, Ní Chonaill participated in a communal, woman-led exercise in which her own body and own desires were at the forefront of the lament. As modern readers experience the lament in its written form, they still understand Ní Chonaill's grief, desire, and anger but cannot come close to understanding the embodying experience of catharsis. In fact, Bourke claims, "it matters little whether the lines [...] were actually spoken by Eileen O'Connell or only later attributed to her," though Ní Ghríofa contrastly asserts that Ní Chonaill *is* the keen's sole author (173). What matters to Bourke is that these lines "clearly […] were part of the currency of lament poetry" and contributed to the wider experience— the embodied, communal, womanly

performance— of the *caoineadh* (173). The oral nature of the keen and the facade of "madness" that allowed a woman to express her sincerest emotions allowed this form of expression (which only later became a written work of literature) to be a likely space for embodiment and true vulnerability for Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill.

A critical facet of this argument is, of course, that the oral keen had to be retained throughout generations before its eventual transferal to written artifact. Ní Ghríofa describes this passage from person to person as a reverberation "through a succession of female bodies, from female mouth to female ear, over years and years and years," "entwining strands of female voices that were carried in female bodies" (*A Ghost in the Throat* 37, 74). Women held this keen in their memories and passed it along via their bodies and through their physical senses, reproducing another site for communal exercise. Through this keen, like other orally maintained expressions of art and memory, those who maintained and passed down the words reveal that "a body holds so much beyond the visible" (*A Ghost in the Throat* 37). The body, as exemplified in the case of the retention of "Lament for Art O'Leary," is, in itself, an archive. Though often considered, to reiterate Hartman's notion, an archive that is outside of the realm of legitimate knowledge, the body is "a nonblank slate, on which many histories are inscribed and ready for exploration. [...] Knowledge exists outside Cartesian rationality and is made available through muscles, bones, energy, and physical motion specific to individual bodies" (Hoffbauer 183). Not only is the body a space of memory, but when the body is taken out of the equation, as is often done in post-Enlightenment forms of knowledge acquisition and epistemology, much of the memory is lost. By writing down Ní Chonaill's keen and turning it into a poem that became part of the national tradition, "we [lost] our opportunity to look into the age-old relation between the formulaic part of an art form and the extempore parts made up by its speaker" (Boland, *A*

Journey with Two Maps 54). An unrestrained performance turned oral tradition turned legend becomes words on a page; an embodied, emotional experience becomes casual classroom conversation. In order to fit Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill's keen into the Irish tradition, Ní Chonaill herself— and the bodies which produced the keen's archive— had to be forgotten. If the woman can be taken out of the picture, body, memory, and all, can the post-Enlightenment archive be a space in which women themselves are welcome? Is it a space in which women can be seen or embodied? Is it ultimately a space in which women want to make room for themselves?

As Ní Ghríofa searches for Ní Chonaill's remains, attempting to figuratively excavate biographical anecdotes while also searching for her literal grave, she contradicts the heteropatriarchal and, at times, colonialist viewpoint of the Irish canon in which the words supersede the body, in which knowledge can or should be known outside the senses, in which the imagined history is not history at all. Through these acts of contradiction, she develops a relationship of deeper understanding with both Ní Chonaill and herself. This act of embodiment through excavation is possible because of the dual-bodied nature of archival research: "The phrase 'body in the archive' refers to both the body of the researcher who enters the archive probing its contents as well as those bodies within the archive that the researcher seeks. Once the archive is entered, neither body is likely to remain unchanged" (Haviland 115). Ní Ghríofa, in her own words, is far from unchanged: "Of all that I desired in my own small life, the discovery of another woman's days had become what I wanted more than anything else. [...] *Inside me*, she was beginning to feel *more and more real*" (*A Ghost in the Throat* 122, emphasis added). Through this process of excavation, Ní Ghríofa creates a connection with a place, with a keen, and with a woman. The woman feels more and more real because Ní Ghríofa is slowly uncovering her, excavating her remains, and re-embodying the forgotten woman. Ní Chonaill, in

various ways, becomes a part of Ní Ghríofa of which the contemporary author cannot let go; she tries to "release" Ní Chonaill but finds herself "grip[ping] her nothing-hand" in her sleep "so hard that [she] wake[s] to find four red moons imprinted in [her] palm" (263). Ní Chonaill is so ingrained within Ní Ghríofa's brain that she cannot simply decide to abandon her biographical project when the sources grow scarce. When "the bolted entrance of Raleigh House," the home which Ní Chonaill shared with O'Leary "cannot admit," Ní Ghríofa, "nor can the demolished rooms of old Derrynane," she cannot drop the project, though she realizes there are few historical artifacts or remnants left to be explored (*A Ghost in the Throat* 227).[5] Every artifact has been "either erased or concealed, every brooch gone, every cup dropped, every door locked, every key lost. There's no evidence left of her life, nothing left to find," and, still, Ní Ghríofa feels the urge to learn more about Ní Chonaill (227). She continues to engage with her because of the effects that her connection with Ní Chonaill through the archival scraps she was able to access had on her body. Ní Ghríofa, in many ways, feels a sense of embodiment through her almost obsessive search for this woman, and, as she attempts to find and change the narratives told about Ní Chonaill, she herself changes. She *must* turn to alternative forms of knowing in order to continue the search which required her body to coexist in "doubled nature" with Ní Chonaill (Haviland 115).

Throughout and beyond her journey of excavating Ní Chonaill, Ní Ghríofa undergoes a change within herself as she connects with the dead woman, displaying that this process of historical and biographical excavation through alternative ways of knowing is an embodying process for both women involved. Ní Ghríofa reveals the ways in which she and Ní Chonaill

[5] Derrynane House opened as a museum in the 1960s to commemorate the life of Daniel O'Connell. "Restoration work, completed in 1967, concentrated on those parts of the house built during Daniel O'Connell's ownership," after the years Ní Chonaill would have lived in the house. "Much of the remainder was" deemed "structurally unsound and was demolished" before its opening to the public (derrynanehouse.ie/the-house).

become inevitably connected: “Through November dusk, I am pushing my sleeping daughter over the same city path Cornelius [O’Leary’s brother] once ran, when I hear starlings,” the birds that once served as an omen for the difficulties of her daughter’s birth (*A Ghost in the Throat* 185). Ní Ghríofa is uncertain if omens truly mean anything or are merely reinterpretations made through retrospective knowledge, “translation[s] of the past to fit a new form” (189). Still, such translations are significant to human understanding; without translations, Honoria Singleton’s spoken memory of “Lament for Art O’Leary” could not have been transcribed “from voice to text for the first time” before its translation into English to be published by Mrs. O’Connell (190). Through these passages and seemingly unrelated anecdotes, Ní Ghríofa welcomes her reader into her consciousness to map the ways in which Ní Chonaill constantly wiggles her way into her thoughts. When she enters a space to which Ní Chonaill was connected— something as simple as a path which her brother-in-law once walked— she is able to unfold more and more about Ní Chonaill’s story, to feel closer to this woman. Ní Ghríofa’s body becomes a vessel for Ní Chonaill’s story, for her memory.

Ní Ghríofa’s sense of embodiment deepens through her connection to Ní Chonaill as she realizes that her body is a space of memory, a mode through which she can obtain knowledge. When Ní Ghríofa looks at her own body amidst her search for Ní Chonaill, she notices her “milk-bottle thighs split by turquoise seams; [her] breasts, lopsided and glorious; the holy door of [her] quadruple caesarean scar, my sag-stomach, stretch-marked with ripples like a strand at low tide” and discovers, “*This is a female text*” (*A Ghost in the Throat* 216-17). The body is a space of knowing that can tell a story through the senses, through its emotions, through its scars. The body is a form of communication that can interpret and be interpreted. Ní Ghríofa’s body will tell of her experiences giving birth to children, the fact that she underwent surgery to do so,

that she nursed each child. The lumps in her left breast are also texts that a medical student might read when Ní Ghríofa's "body lies in a dissection room" to be studied after her death (225). So, too, will the student "read [her] tattoo, [her] caesarean scar, or [her] broken tooth, translating them" into meaning, whether accurate or mere guesses (225). Through this discovery that her body is a text, Ní Ghríofa refuses to look at any scar or supposed deformity or imperfection as such but as facts to be read, to be understood, to be translated; if the body is a means through which Ní Ghríofa can come to know about someone long gone like Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, connecting with the keen writer through her own body and its connection to landscapes and silences, so, too, is her body itself a text through which knowledge can be gleaned. In this way, through this method of reading one's own body, Ní Ghríofa extrapolates from Cixous's *écriture féminine* and discovers an alternative means of embodiment as discovered through Irish women's poetry (or keen): reading one's own body as a text.[6]

When Ní Ghríofa allows herself to read her own body as a text, no bodily action is taboo because every aspect of the body— including emotions, genitals, and bodily fluids— holds meaning. When she lets her body be a text, she exposes it to ultimate vulnerability, and thus, potentially, ultimate embodiment. Throughout her book, Ní Ghríofa explores and unfolds through her body's connection to Ní Chonaill the fact that connection to the body is a way of knowing, a means of embodiment. Thus, Ní Ghríofa does not simply create a narrative of the facts and figures she was able to uncover about Ní Chonaill's life but intersperses Ní Chonaill's story with her own, embodying herself amidst the process of excavating another. Such examples of vulnerability of the body include her experiences of childbirth and its aftermath. When her

[6] Cixous writes in "The Laugh of the Medusa," "A woman's body, with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor— once, by smashing yokes and censors, she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction— will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language" (885).

daughter in-vitro stops growing and Ní Ghríofa must go into labor prematurely, she "let[s] her body express intimate fears in such a public place" and processes her emotions in a NICU through communal crying, a "text" which, one might argue, can be read in a similar manner as the communal catharsis of a keen (*A Ghost in the Throat* 57). When she donates breast milk to other babies in NICUs whose mothers cannot nurse, Ní Ghríofa realizes she is participating in "a liquid echo," with nursing acting as a process of exchange of not only milk but also memory; in her book *The Borders of Dominicanidad*, Lorgia García-Peña argues that communal nursing, or donating breast milk in Ní Ghríofa's case, is an act of transfer, "transmitting social knowledge, cultural memory, and identities" through passing along the milk of the body, the body which is in itself a text which transmits memory and knowledge (García-Peña 133). Milk and nursing become such a large part of Ní Ghríofa's connection to communal memory and identity that when she realizes she must wean her last child, she questions, "What will become of me, in the absence of this labour, all this growing and harvesting? Without milk, how will I see? Without milk, who will I be?" (*A Ghost in the Throat* 215). Though nursing is an embodying experience for Ní Ghríofa as she participates in an act of exchange, it is ultimately one bodily text through which she comes to know herself, not the only nor the final one.

Ní Ghríofa, as in her poetry, chooses vulnerability over comfort, normalizing the female body as not only something that should or can be allowed into the Irish tradition but also as a text itself that is innately literary and readable. Desire, menstruation, and breast milk are objects of study that can be read as parallels alongside factual evidence and historical archives. For this reason, Ní Ghríofa intersperses her own experiences of "squeezing bright yellow colostrum from [her] breasts, drop by slow drop" and feeling "desire [which] flings [her] to [her] knees, makes [her] tremble and beg, makes [her] crawl and gasp in the dark" (*A Ghost in the Throat* 52, 34).

These moments of bodily struggle and bodily autonomy are both texts of Ní Ghríofa's body, both facets of her narrative. Without her body, Ní Ghríofa could never have come to know Ní Chonaill. Without her body, Ní Chonaill could not have grieved O'Leary in a cathartic manner that was so powerful, it persists through centuries. The body is at the center of literature for these women, and through encounters with their bodies, they compose literature and write history. Historical archives overlook these taboo or inelegant or unprovable forms of knowing; these texts survive, nonetheless. Through a connection with the body and the landscape and even her imagination, Ní Ghríofa came to know a woman whose body could not be found. And she came to know herself, embodying herself and finding a space within the Irish literary tradition along the way, continually contradicting the forms of knowledge which excluded Ní Chonaill in the first place.

Ultimately, Ní Ghríofa chooses not to write a biography of Ní Chonaill because she cannot construct a thorough, evidence-based narrative of the life of Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill. Instead, she writes *A Ghost in the Throat*, including new facts about Ní Chonaill's life while enacting critical fabulation to fill in some gaps and connecting with the landscape to uncover the silences of others. Near the end of her book, Ní Ghríofa admits, "Some parts of Eibhlín Dubh's life, I know now, will always remain hidden to me, no matter how closely I look" (*A Ghost in the Throat* 280). Although Glissant's notion of the "right to opacity" does not neatly apply here, in that Ní Ghríofa is not unable to translate Ní Chonaill's life due to necessary cross-cultural difference, the acceptance of unknowability remains (King 7-8). Through all of her efforts of attempting to know Ní Chonaill, Ní Ghríofa can never fully know the lost woman or attempt to know everything about her. She displays narrative restraint in her critical fabulation, "learn[ing] to hover over" the "gaps" in Ní Chonaill's narrative "in awe. *My attempt to know another woman*

has found its ending not in the satisfaction of neat discovery, but in the persistence of mystery," in her unknowability, in her ultimate opacity (280, emphasis added). Though Ní Chonaill cannot be fully known, she teaches Ní Ghríofa about alternative forms of knowing, about contradicting dominant narratives and orthodox approaches to history through connecting with one's own body. Ultimately, in her unknowability, Ní Chonaill allows Ní Ghríofa to look inwards, to be vulnerable, to be embodied.

Conclusion

This thesis, "This Is a Female Text: Embodiment in Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry," engages with a variety of poetic portrayals of women to explore which allow for embodiment. As Irish women poets write about more embodied subjects in these various portrayals, it is worth questioning whether anyone can find true embodiment through poetry. Regarding the possibility of linguistic embodiment, Judith Butler writes in her 2001 essay "How Can I Deny That These Hands and This Body Are Mine?":

> I think it must be possible to claim that the body is not known or identifiable apart from the linguistic coordinates that establish the boundaries of the body— without thereby claiming that the body is nothing other than the language by which it is known. [...] Although the body depends on language to be known, the body also exceeds every possible linguistic effort of capture. It would be tempting to conclude that this means that the body exists outside of language, that it has an ontology separable from any linguistic one, and that we might be able to describe this separable ontology. But this is where I would hesitate, perhaps permanently, for as we begin that description of what is outside of language, the chiasm reappears: we have already contaminated, though not contained, the very body we seek to establish in its ontological purity. The body escapes its linguistic grasp, but so, too, does it escape the subsequent effort to determine ontologically that very escape. ("How Can I Deny" 20-21)

While embodiment is not possible through pure linguistic means, language is an essential aspect in the human understanding and articulation of the body. Because all poems about bodies are intrinsically representations of bodies through words on a page, it seems embodiment cannot be fully achieved in poetry. But when women write about their own experiences and their own bodies, they are able to achieve the utmost linguistic vulnerability and explore the knowability of the body through their poetic language. Moreover, Ní Ghríofa, in *A Ghost in the Throat*, was able to approximate embodiment because she not only expressed her body through language but read her body *as* language. When the body transforms from a form through which a writer expresses an idea to the expression of the idea itself, the body *is* a text and thus guides the language

through which an author writes. The only challenge that remains, then, as Butler concludes in her essay, is how to uncover the language that most adequately expresses the body's textual nature.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I begin with the portrayal of women in contemporary Irish poetry through the use of symbols. I argued that Boland's critique of the passive Mother Ireland trope in poetry was a necessary and powerful mode of entering the tradition. Yet, the poems discussed in Chapter 1, such as "The Achill Woman" and "Mother Ireland," do not allow for the vulnerability and individuality of their subjects in a manner which embodies the women about which they were written. Instead, these women serve as new symbols for who women are and what their role in Irish literature is. The women of these poems are representations of the shift in the Mother Ireland tradition, shifts toward women who are more realistic but are nonetheless symbols for Ireland and generalizations of Irish women. Boland thus expands upon the work of her male predecessors in her unending search for a new national symbol, seeking not to embody women but to uncover a new emblematic expression of womanhood.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I argued that some of Boland's poems do not engage with this particular portrayal of womanhood but with depictions of artifactual women, and I juxtaposed Boland's portrayals of artifactual women with those of Boland's male contemporary, Seamus Heaney. Heaney's artifactual positioning of the women appears most prominently in his bog body poems, and I argue that the bog bodies, by virtue of their preservation, are already artifacts and thus not capable of being embodied. I complicate this argument about Heaney's disembodied subjects, however, through looking towards his speakers. These speakers gaze upon the bog bodies as a means of self-reflection, ultimately turning towards questions of what it means to be an ethical observer of artifacts. In Boland's poetry, I engage with less contentious artifacts, such as dolls and statues to argue that such artifacts remain representations of women,

not renditions of women themselves with physical bodies and active participation in their representations. In the same way that I complicate the argument about disembodiment through Heaney's speakers, I turn toward Boland's speakers to argue that their displays of vulnerability allow for a semblance of embodiment within these poems.

In the third chapter of this thesis, I turn to yet another mode of portrayal of women in contemporary Irish poetry: the figure of the mother herself. Beginning with Boland's depictions of motherhood, I sketch the ways that she normalizes motherhood in order to weave it as a poetic theme within the Irish tradition. At the same time, I find partial embodiment within Boland's poetry on motherhood as her speakers explore the vulnerable moments of motherhood. Turning to Sinéad Morrissey as a representative of the generation of Irish poets succeeding Boland, I portray the ways in which Morrissey's speakers engage with the bodily difficulties of motherhood as well as the wonder of its first-time experiences. However, embodiment is not possible for every Irish mother, as I argue through poetic responses to the death of Ann Lovett by Paula Meehan, Annemarie Ní Churreáin, and Caitríona O'Reilly. Finally, I discuss the disembodiment that the mothers in Irish mother and baby homes experienced through Ní Churreáin's poem "Six Ways to Wash Your Hands (Ayliffe, 1978)" to cement the idea that poetic representations of motherhood can and do portray *dis*embodiment.

In the fourth and final chapter of this thesis, I engaged directly with Doireann Ní Ghríofa's recent publication *A Ghost in the Throat* to claim that proximity to embodiment is possible through poetry and writing. As Ní Ghríofa seeks to uncover the biography of Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill and thus embody the eighteenth-century woman, she does so through alternative forms of knowing, such as engaging with her own body and the land. Ní Ghríofa further enacts Hartman's idea of critical fabulation to imagine and encounter the scenes Ní

Chonaill might have lived. I argue that through her attempts to embody the dead poet, Ní Ghríofa, in the form of an authorial subject and through a recognition and establishment of her textual body, embodies herself as she comes to understand the relationships between her own body, life, and writing throughout her journeys to Derrynane and Kilcrea. Embodiment is thus most nearly achieved in this chapter, I argue, as Ní Ghríofa realizes that she must delve beyond the reaches of language in order to encounter her body as a text within itself.

In the first rendition of this thesis, entitled "From Anna Liffey to Ann Lovett: The Search for Female Embodiment in Contemporary Irish Poetry" and written in fulfillment of Emory University's requirement for undergraduate Honors, I similarly traced the spectrum of ways in which contemporary Irish writers portray women. However, in my explorations of various Boland poems that depicted real women and real bodies, I did not find any examples of a more holistic and truer embodiment. I argued that some of her poems could not embody their subjects because she fabricated their stories. Significantly, what I did not realize as I made this argument was that these poems, too, might be read as acts of critical fabulation. For example, in *Object Lessons* Eavan Boland writes about her grandmother, similar to the manner she does in her 2020 poem "Eviction," in a chapter entitled "Lava Cameo." She recounts how her grandmother died in the National Maternity Hospital decades before. Boland did not know her grandmother, but it is important to her to tell the story as it has been passed down through family memory. Boland extrapolates from the memory, adding her own thoughts, her own presumptions and guesses about who her grandmother was and what she might have been thinking: "she may also have noticed a trick of light peculiar to that time of year [...] she may not have come that way" (*Object Lessons* 4). In this way, Boland partially embodies her grandmother by putting herself in the grandmother's position, wondering who she was and how she might have felt, differentiating

between the "fits and starts of oral recollection and memory" that exist as her grandmother's history and the past itself, which Boland can place herself into and attempt to exist within (*Object Lessons* 13-14). In the undergraduate version of this thesis, I argued that such moments are mere projections and estimations, that Boland cannot assign vulnerability to her grandmother, to a memory. Now, I might argue that Boland was attempting to undo the historical silencing of her grandmother, creating possibilities through the knowledge she does have for the knowledge which she does not. She creates a new archive for her grandparents, who "will never even be / sepia," will not be remembered (*New Collected Poems* 228). Boland herself must "put down / the gangplank now between the ship and the ground" to immortalize these two forgotten people, must imagine their memory into history (228). In this way, and in this rendition of this thesis, I might go so far as to argue that poetry, when it tells a story in this way, is and can be critical fabulation. As Boland states, "And where does poetry come in? Here, as in so many other instances, it enters at the point where myth touches history" (*Object Lessons* 166).

I discussed throughout this thesis that Irish women's literature has made great strides since and through the work of Eavan Boland, who wrote various, complex portrayals of women throughout her career and worked as a major advocate for Irish women writers until her recent death in 2020. As Boland's poetry and essays portray, women were and continue to be excluded from the Irish literary canon, indicating that pushback is and continues to be necessary. In her 1994 poem "What Language Did," Boland explores the harm which the male patriarchal tradition has done to and against Irish women, depicting a "shepherdess, her smile cracked, / her arm injured from the mantelpieces / and pastorals where she posed with her crook" (*In a Time of Violence* 63). Women, weighed down by repeated and repressive tropes, cannot survive in this manner. They cannot even "sweat here. Our skin is icy. / We cannot breed here. Our wombs are

empty. / Help us to escape youth and beauty," the cycle in which Cathleen ni Houlihan traps all her daughters (63). Boland's career establishes a refusal to live within this medium. Her speaker declares: "Write us out of the poem. Make us human / in cadences of change and mortal pain / and words we can grow old and die in" (63). As Boland writes Cathleen out of the poem, she simultaneously transforms her and adores her, creating poetry which is unfalteringly Irish and unfailingly female.

Eavan Boland inevitably became the thread which I strung through this entire thesis. Through an analysis of her poetry, it became clear what hardships and challenges Irish women writers face, what work there still was and is to be done. As I considered what it means to be an embodied woman in poetry, I turned to Boland as a starting point. She laid the groundwork for future generations of Irish women, and, through her poetry, a new tradition forms and the barriers of patriarchal oppression begin to come down. Boland's poetry requires her readers to take this continued struggle into their hands. Just as Boland speaks to the suffragists in 2018, the feminists who have come before her, so, too, does she speak to the women who will succeed her:

> I wish I knew you. I wish I could stand for a moment in that corridor of craft and doubt where you will spend so much of your time. But I don't and I can't. And given the fact, in poetic terms, that you are the future and I am the past, I never will. [...] My first habitat as a poet is part of your history as a poet. [...] My present is your past, [...] my past is already fixed as part of your tradition. (*A Journey with Two Maps* 249-250)

Boland writes this "Letter to a Young Woman Poet" when she is past middle age, when her experiences and knowledge can be passed on so that her successors are already one step ahead of where she began. Throughout this thesis, I displayed the spectrum of ways in which women portray themselves in poetry, and I reiterate here that one form of portrayal is not inherently superior to another nor are they mutually exclusive. Boland, in many ways, serves as the

foundation for that spectrum and allows for the possibility of various and diverse depictions of women to exist.

When Boland did the work of writing herself into the tradition early on in her career, leaning on the work of Yeats and Heaney, she opened the space for other women, such as Morrissey and Ní Ghríofa, to portray women and their experiences of womanhood in the ways that they found most comfortable and most true. These women have stood on the shoulders of other women, slowly filling in the silences and gaps of the past so that Irish women are no longer passive or voiceless but can exist as loudly or as quietly as they might like. In her poem "Female Silence: Nine Types," from her collaborative collection with artist Alice Maher *Nine Silences*, Ní Ghríofa documents the ways in which women both choose to be silent and are forced to be silent. Such silences include when a woman is "in the eyes of another: Stern. / Taciturn. Bitter. Firm" (*Nine Silences*). Yet another is when "a teenager grits her teeth / when a stranger sneers: Cheer up / love, give us a grin" (*Nine Silences*). But sometimes, silence is a choice, as when "examined by soldiers, she won't speak," or when she works in "the silence of knives [...] Slice. Slice. Slice" (*Nine Silences*). But forced silence, unlike peaceful quiet, is an "inheritance: each female / syllable is bitten, held imprisoned" (*Nine Silences*). The pressure to be silent, to Ní Ghríofa's speaker, is inescapable for women, "*until it isn't*" (*Nine Silences*, emphasis added). In this way, Ní Ghríofa calls upon the likes of Irish poets whose work it has been to give Irish women a voice. She, like many of the poets discussed in this thesis, acknowledges the hardships that women have faced and the silencing to which they have been subjected. But, she argues, this cycle *can* be broken. To end the silencing of women, she turns to a woman like Ní Chonaill, whose voice appears to be beyond salvaging, and translates her a voice to reveal that silence will no longer be an option. We must, Ní Ghríofa seems to argue, continually question the past and

the information provided to us in order to re-embody and excavate those who have been silenced. In this way, embodiment is not only a poetic theme searched for within this thesis; it is a necessity, an imperative, and a call to action.

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